On Conceptualising African Diasporas in Europe

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Abstract

The article argues that there are three senses of the term African diaspora – a continental, a cultural and a racial sense – which need to be distinguished from each other when conceptualising Black African diasporas in Europe. Although African Diaspora Studies is occupied with African diasporas in a racial sense, usually it has conceptualised these in terms of racial and cultural identities. This is also true of the past decades of African Diaspora Studies on Europe. This article makes an argument for a socio-political conceptualisation of Black African diasporas in Europe that includes, but goes beyond, matters of identity and culture.

Résumé

L'article démontre que le terme de diaspora africaine renvoie souvent à trois sens – un sens continental, un sens culturel et un sens racial – qu'il est nécessaire de distinguer lorsque l'on conceptualise les diasporas africaines noires en Europe. Alors que les études sur la diaspora africaine s'intéressent à cette diaspora dans un sens racial, elles l'ont généralement conceptualisé en terme d'identités raciales et culturelles. C'est également vrai pour les études de la diaspora africaine menées en Europe lors de ces dernières décennies. Cet article plaide pour une conceptualisation socio-politique des diasporas africaines noires en Europe qui inclue, mais dépasse, la question identitaire et culturelle.

Mots-clés

diaspora africaine – Europe – Black Studies – théorie – race

How should we conceptualise African diasporas in Europe? Since its beginnings in the 1960s and 70s, African Diaspora Studies has primarily focused on Black African diasporas, while usually understanding these in terms of racial and cultural identities and communities. However, as I argue in the first section of this article, we should distinguish between continental, cultural and racial conceptualisations of African diasporas – not least when studying and understanding these in Europe. Although so-called Old African Diasporas in the New World, that were created out of the Middle Passage, developed overlapping racial and cultural identities, in contemporary Europe the situation is more complicated. Here we largely find so-called New African Diasporas with more immediate backgrounds in Africa. In the subsequent two sections, I give a rough outline of two waves of African Diaspora Studies on Europe – that both have expanded our understanding of African diasporas to include Europe, but insisted on conceptualisations of African diasporas in terms of racial and cultural identities. The first wave, represented by the works of Stuart Hall and Paul Gilroy, is marked by an anti-nationalist and anti-essentialist expansion of African Diaspora Studies beyond the US and the New World to also include Black political culture and identity making in the UK, Europe and across the entire 'Black Atlantic' as Gilroy famously termed it. A second wave, represented by the works of Michelle Wright, Gloria Wekker, Fatima El-Tayeb, and others, have called for an expanded understanding of African diasporas in Europe – beyond a focus on those that resulted from the Middle Passage – to include New African Diasporas and a greater multiplicity of Black identities. In the fourth and final section, I make an argument for a (re)conceptualisation of African diasporas in Europe towards a racial and socio-political sense that includes, but goes beyond, matters of identity and culture.

1   Three African Diasporas

There are at least three broad ways in which one can speak of African diasporas: a continental, a cultural and a racial sense.

    In a broad *continental* sense of the term, African diaspora refers to all people who have an origin on the continent, irrespective of race, cultural, ethnic, national, or religious background, including North African Arabs, Berbers, and

others too. In a European context such a continental sense of the term could be meaningful, for example, when speaking of overlapping social positions of racialisation and identity making of African youth with a background in north, central and western parts of Africa in the segregated Banlieues around French cities. For instance, in pointing out their joint diasporic conditions of not being (fully) part of the French nation, how they tend to be stereotyped and discriminated against in similar ways in French society, live and interact with each other in the same communities, have joint cultural identifications with hip-hop music, and so on (e.g. Slooter 2019; European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights 2017; El-Tayeb 2011).

There may be several conceptual advantages of employing such a broad sense of the term. Treating the entire continent of Africa as a single unit transcends geographically dubious – and in other ways conceptually fraught – distinctions between 'Sub-Saharan' and 'North' Africans in terms of history, geopolitics, demographics, the broad range and overlaps of physical appearances of people, ethnic groupings, or cultural expressions on either side of the Sahel. Such a concept of an African diaspora in Europe may encompass the racialised, community- and identity-building overlaps between a wide-range of groups with an immediate or distant background in Africa at large and similar situations in Europe. For example, people with a background in the Mahgreb, Senegal, Swahili Coast, and the Antilles, living in proximity to each other in France. It may serve to ascriptively and analytically 'queer' the African diaspora by acknowledging that the situations, experiences, cultural expressions, and identifications of people with an African background in Europe may not fit neatly into such categories as Arab, Berber, or Black African (El-Tayeb 2011). It may also serve to trouble notions of Black as a category with fixed racial and/or cultural boundaries and conjoined nationalist frameworks that treat such boundaries as descriptively and politically absolute (Gilroy 2000, 1993, 1987). In addition, it may act as a geopolitical term – such as the continental Pan-Africanism that became dominant in Africa post-WWII and for decades has informed the politics of the African Union as well as its predecessor the Organization of African Unity – which includes all peoples of Africa and then tracks their lives, conviviality, political community-building or lack thereof in Europe (cf. McEachrane 2020; Drake 1975: 10).

Although, using the term African diaspora in this broad continental sense may be useful, it may also lack a need for specificity with respect to cultural, ethnic, linguistic, national, political, religious identity, and race. It may lack the conceptual precision to speak of the diasporic relocations of distinct cultural groups from Africa, such as African Pentecostalism, Senegalese Muslims, Eritrean refugees or Yoruba in Europe. It may also lack the conceptual preci-

sion needed to name, describe, analyse and understand the racialised social, cultural, economic, political, legal, historical, and continuing conditions of Africans and people of African descent who may broadly be designated as Black.

In a *cultural* sense of the term, African diaspora refers to members of cultural, ethnic, linguistic, national, political, or religious groups from Africa in other places than their places of origin. Typically, this will mean places outside of Africa. However, it may also refer to other places on the African continent. For example, in Morocco the ethnic group the Gnawa, whose members self-identify as from the Sudan (not the country, but as in the Arabic phrase *Bilad al Sudan – land of the blacks*), are renowned for their spiritual prowess, healing and ceremonial call-and-response music played on large lute-like instruments called Guinbri and who over centuries have become a distinct presence in Moroccan culture and Islamic Sufism (Becker 2011).

A cultural sense of the African diaspora is tied up with a genealogical sense of the term diaspora as the dispersal of an ethnically or otherwise culturally defined people from its homeland. Historically, the term was mostly used for Jewish diasporas. However, today it is widely used for ethnically or other culturally based diasporas. In Diaspora Studies since the 1950s, this understanding of the term has translated into a focus on the ethnic and cultural survival, transformations, hybridity, identities and experiences of diasporas, their relations to their places of origin as well as their places of residency (Cohen 2008).

In a cultural sense of the African diaspora, the emphasis is on the specificities of cultural groups, identities and processes. In this sense, it is relevant to speak of diasporic connections to cultural groups in Africa in terms of continuity, retention, survival, tradition, interconnectivity, networks, exchange, dialogue, translation, hybridity, transformation, and/or identity. Examples of studies on cultural African diasporas in Europe are how Maghrebi Jews and Muslims in the neighborhood of le Sentier in Paris interact, identify with and through each other in a shared sense of 'North-Africanness' via dynamic historical interactions in the Maghreb and postcolonial France (Everett 2020); how African Pentecostal churches in Belgium reproduce and transmute Pentecostal theology from Congo, Cameroon and other African countries in a secularised European context (Bangura 2018); or how African diasporas of artists, students and activists in the neighbourhood of Matonge in Brussels kindled decolonial consciousness in Africa and Belgium while occupying an ambiguous cultural space of not fully belonging to either (Arnaut 2018).

Among the advantages of speaking of African diasporas in terms of cultural groups is that this may allow us to remain true to the subjectivities and identities of diasporic Africans and people of African descent. For example, the

identities of members of so-called New African Diasporas in Europe with a relatively recent first- or second-generation immigrant background in Africa, who may retain strong African cultural, ethnic, linguistic, national, political and/or religious ties, connections and identifications (Okpewho and Nzegwu 2009). This may also be concomitant with a subjective point of view among members of New African Diasporas that – although people of African descent may be exceedingly racialised in Europe or elsewhere and the surrounding society may be largely ignorant of their cultural backgrounds – being 'Black' may mean little or nothing to them, be perceived as an alien imposition and reduction, whereas being 'African' may carry with it rich cultural tapestries, meanings and identifications (e.g. Tsri 2016; Fearfull et al. 2010; Okpewho and Nzegwu 2009; Williams 1999).

Among the possible drawbacks of conceptualising the African diaspora in terms of culture is that it could serve to reify its cultural groups and identities into more fixed, monolithic, essentialising or bounded categories than what they are (e.g. Hall 2017; El-Tayeb 2011; Gilroy 1993). Moreover, it could underplay the socio-political significance of race in shaping African diasporas, or presume race as an implicit premise for the sort of African diasporas that are being considered while failing to draw out the rationale and implications of this. In addition, it may fail to consider the ways in which the physical appearances and notions of biological ancestries and kinship of people in fact may play a role in African and African diaspora community building, and self-conceptions of who is and is not African and/or of a specific ethnic or other cultural group.

This brings us to the third, *racial* sense of the term African diaspora. This use of the term refers to people of African descent in the diaspora who may broadly be designated as Black. Here the term Black should be understood as referring to (notions of) physical appearances and ancestry and may be interchanged with alternative terms such as Africans and people of African descent (i.e. when understood in a racially exclusive sense). Since its beginnings in the US academy in the 1960s and 70s, African Diaspora Studies have largely been premised on such a racially conscribed sense of Africa and its diasporas (Falola 2013; Gomez 2005). An advantage of this conception is its focus on the major socio-political and other significances of race, being Black and the presence of Black people in history. Furthermore, it has the conceptual precision needed to name, describe, analyse and understand the racialised social, cultural, economic, political, legal, historical and continuing conditions of Black Africans and people of African descent.

Possible drawbacks include reducing Africa and its diasporas to Black Africans and people of African descent and excluding parts of Africa, Africans and African diasporas who are not Black. Moreover, it may reify race as a biologi-

cal and/or cultural category and source of identity beyond what is metaphysi-cally or scientifically plausible, as well as ethically or politically appropriate or advantageous.

The racial sense of the African diaspora as Black is largely borne out of New World experiences. Old African Diasporas of the New World became premised on Blackness and race as a result of the targeted trafficking of espe-cially West and Central Africans to the plantations and the racialised economic, legal, political, social and cultural ordering of people of African descent – in the words of Eric Williams (1994/1944: 7), "Slavery was not born of racism: rather, racism was born of slavery" (see also Gomez 2005). For instance, it is no coincidence that it was primarily the descendants of enslaved Africans in the New World (for example, Edward Wilmot Blyden, W.E.B. DuBois, Amy and Marcus Garvey) who brought racial Pan-Africanism to Africa and the rest of the world. They were the sons and daughters of communities in the New World who, stripped of African ethnic and cultural particularities and systematically subjugated as Black Africans, had built communities, solidar-ity, resistance and a quest for liberation on that basis (e.g. Boukari-Yabara 2014).

In African Diaspora Studies, often a racial conception of the African diaspora is used in conjunction with a cultural one. A pioneer of the field, St. Clair Drake, saw the concept of the African diaspora as operating in the "cultural sector" of Pan-Africanism "toward maintaining and reinforcing black consciousness" and "the goal of fostering understanding, solidarity, and cooperation through-out the black world" (Drake 1982: 343). To Drake, African Diaspora Studies was the study of cultural communities, their cultural expressions, experiences and Black consciousness (Drake 1975). Another pioneer, Joseph E Harris – convener of the first and second African Diaspora Studies Institute conference at Howard University 1979 and Nairobi 198 – stated that the African diaspora concept "embodies the essence of the historical connection between Africans and peo-ple of African descent," including "their settlement in adopted lands without the loss of their African identity" and "the physical or psychological return to the homeland – Africa" (Harris 1982: 18).

It is fair to say that the prevalent conjunctions of racial and cultural senses of the African diaspora in African Diaspora Studies largely grew out of a US horizon and the standpoint of the significance of race and culture to enslaved Africans and their descendants in the US and elsewhere in the New World.

Collective identities as Black, African descendant, and having a shared cul-ture, are characteristic of Old African Diaspora communities in the New World as the result of histories and processes of the Middle Passage (e.g. Gomez 2005). These include, for example, the Raizal in Colombia, Afro-Trinbagonians,

Haitians, African Americans, or Òrìṣà devotees in Brazil and Cuba. Such identities may have developed out of a multiplicity of African, European, Indigenous American, Asian, and other influences as well as much creativity. Yet, these groups are often with distinct cultural identities, which in turn are African derived and Black. This means that many of these communities, such as African Americans, at least those who are descendants of enslaved Africans to the US, may be accurately described as at once racial, ethnic, and cultural communities.

Furthermore, the politicised US academic milieu in which Black and African Diaspora Studies arose in the 1960s and 70s, made focusing on the cultural expressions of Black people a critical corrective to a social tendency to dismiss, exclude, and inferiorise the humanity and subjectivities of Black people. This was and still is critical especially when considering the forced cultural assimilation of Africans and people of African descent into brutalising racial regimes of chattel enslavement, followed by the racial apartheid of colonialism and the racial stratification and segregation of postcolonial European settler societies throughout the Americas (e.g. Araujo 2017; Mbembe 2017, 2019; DuBois 1992/1935). Streams of Africans to the New World naturally had an impact on the cultural and identity-formations of African diasporic communities there (e.g. Gomez 2005; Bennett 2003, 2009). However, the forced acculturation of these communities and the near obliteration among them of distinct and intact ethnicities from the African continent, makes such contentious questions as their degree of cultural retention, continuity, hybridity, and creativity inevitable (Beckles 2018; Aondofe Iyo 2006; Morgan 2006). With such contexts in mind, the need to focus on the cultures, subjectivities, and identities of Old African Diasporas in the New World, and the need to develop theoretical frameworks that centres and are truthful to their agency, are critical matters (Asante 2007; Beckles and Shepherd 2007).

Still, when situating African Diaspora Studies in Europe there is an argument to be made that a racial sense of the African diaspora needs to be untangled from a cultural one for a broader socio-political understanding of what it means to be Black in the diaspora.

2 First Wave of African Diaspora Studies on Europe: Politics of Culture and Identity

The trajectory of African Diaspora Studies from the US to Europe is characterised by similar conceptualisations of the African diaspora in terms of race, culture, and identity (e.g. Nassy Brown 2005; Wright 2004, 2015; Hall 1990;

Gilroy 1987, 1993). This may seem like an obvious state of affairs. If we are speaking of Black African diasporas and given the idea of diasporas as cultural communities, then it may seem obvious to conceptualise Black African diasporas anywhere in terms of race, culture, and identity (which is also both racial and cultural). This could then serve as a comparative framework for African Diaspora Studies, as it has since its inception into academia in the 1960s (e.g. Ashraf 2009; Harris 1996).

Although the socio-political dimensions of Black African diasporas always have been a part of African Diaspora Studies, they have not been foregrounded, neither in conceptualising African diasporas nor as subject matters. For instance, African Diaspora Studies pioneer St Clair Drake had a keen understanding of the socio-political dimensions of African diasporas and thought that the academic study of them could be put in service of Pan-Africanism. The study of African diasporas in the New World, he thought, should be based on a socio-political understanding of the societies out of which Africans had come, the work settings of the New World, as well as the responses of the New World diasporas to "those structures of world capitalism and of the world religious and political movements that condition the black experience" (Drake 1975: 11). Narrative treatments of Africa and the peoples of the diaspora could be placed within a single unified frame of reference as part of a history of the Black World, within which the geographically scattered peoples of Africa and the diaspora could be referred to as a potentially organisable "Pan-African Aggregate" (Drake 1975: 11). Still, Drake ended up conceptualising African diasporas as communities with distinct cultures and identities.

Similar may be said of African Diaspora Studies on Europe. It too tends to place Black African diasporas in socio-political contexts, yet mostly conceptualise them in terms of culture and racial and cultural identity (e.g. Nassy Brown 2005; Wright 2004, 2015; Gilroy 2002/1987, 1993; Hall 1990).

This is true of the pioneering work of Paul Gilroy and Stuart Hall, who may be characterised as belonging to a first wave of African Diaspora Studies on Europe. Both of them contributors to the development of Cultural Studies, they view culture as imbued with politics, including ethics, and vice versa – especially when viewed against the background of racial identity politics, ethnic nationalism, nationhood, and the modern nation-state as a political community. Moreover, they view Black racial and cultural identities as both products of socio-political economic relations and perhaps more importantly sites of political agency, contestation and mobilisation (e.g. Williams 2013; Farred 2009; Gilroy 2002/1987, 1993; Hall 1980, 1993). This is reflected, for instance, in Paul Gilroy's (2002/1987: 206) understanding of Black music around the Atlantic as "built up across the imperial networks which once played host to the triangular

trade of sugar, slaves and capital" while serving as a vehicle for Black political culture and consciousness.

For both Hall and Gilroy, much of the socio-political relevance of how they conceptualise the African diaspora stems from their anti-essentialist and anti-nationalist views on it. They both elaborate on the African diaspora in ways that puts the cultural, ethnic, racial, and political boundaries of the modern nation-state into question as well as similarly perceived boundaries of African diasporas.

This is not least true of their anti-essentialist understanding of race and its socio-political trappings. In their view, racialist assumptions of discrete human types with innate psychological and/or cultural characteristics are not merely false. More importantly, they are also morally destructive, when used as grounds for socio-political group-identities and community-building – as shown by modern history of white European identity-making, nationalism, systemic racism, colonialism, enslavement, Nazism, and fascism. It fixates human beings in unequally valued categories to be socio-politically protected, promoted, and institutionalised (e.g. Gilroy 2000a; Hall 1996c, 2017).

Both Hall and Gilroy are principally as well as metaphysically opposed to essentialising racial and cultural identifications as they may arise in Black cultural expressions and identities. Such identifications offer their own entrapments of group-based exclusivity, encampment, and reproduction of categories that are integral to problems of racism (e.g. Gilroy 2000a; Hall 1996b, 2017).

Hall asks us to be mindful of how racialist assumptions may be alive and well in everyday commonsense discourse on racial difference, calling for the end of the innocent notion of the essential Black subject and a recognition that "Black" is a politically and culturally constructed category (Hall 2017: 36, 76).

Gilroy goes as far as to warn against fascist expressions of Black identity-making – including, in the ideologies and styles of such iconic figures and movements as Marcus Garvey, the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) and the Nation of Islam (NOI) – and calls for anti-racist Black political cultures that demand liberation from more than white supremacy, but "all racializing and raciological thought, from racialized seeing, racialized thinking, and racialized thinking about thinking" (Gilroy 2000a: 40, 2000b).

Likewise, both Hall and Gilroy are anti-nationalist. Hall points out that notions of national culture, which are central to the political identities of modern Western nation-states, confine political community and equality to cultural community, belonging, sameness, and identity, whilst simultaneously misidentifying cultures as geographically bounded, essentialistic and fixed (Hall 1996c, 2017: 90–92, 134–137). Gilroy is not merely fiercely critical of political and cul-

tural nationalism, but of methodological nationalism too. For example, ethnocentric English Cultural Studies that excludes reflections on race and Black agency, confines culture to national borders and indulges in morbid celebrations of Englishness or African Diaspora Studies in the US for being overly limited to the ethnic perspective of African Americans and the cultural and national borders of the US (Gilroy 1993).

Gilroy and Hall's anti-essentialist understandings of race, culture and the nation come together in their conceptualisations of the African diaspora. To them both, the nature of African diasporas offer metaphysical as well as normative challenges and correctives to essentialising notions of race, culture and the nation.

For Hall (2017: 172), diasporas metaphysically and normatively disrupt essentialising notions and politics of culture by being "composed of cultural formations which cut across and interrupt the settled contours of race, *ethnos*, and nation". While bearing "the traces of particular histories and cultures," they are also the "product of several histories, cultures, and narratives" and "belong to several homes, most of them at least in part symbolic" (Hall: 173). Hence, though their cultural identities are always *something* they are never just *one* thing and open up to an understanding of culture as "always open, complex, under construction, taking place in an unfinished game" (Ibid: 173–174).

Gilroy has offered the 'Black Atlantic' as a model for Black African diasporas that defies any notion of Black diasporic culture and identity as bounded by ethnicity, territory, and national borders. Instead, the cultures and racial identity making of the Black Atlantic are governed by complex networks of movement, cultural exchange, and solidarity crisscrossing the Atlantic. These networks have nationally situated 'nodes', as it were. However, ultimately they are informed by transnational modern Atlantic histories of racial terror and exclusion as well as of Black political struggle, solidarity, imagination, and cultural creativity. It is a model that defies how territory and nature "are being engaged as a means to define citizenship and the forms of rootedness that compose national solidarity and cohesion" (Gilroy 2000a: 111). It serves to untangle political community from ethnicity and the modern nation-state and is antithetical to any form of what Gilroy has termed "ethnic absolutism" – that is, notions of cultures as pure, natural, exclusive, or bounded as a basis for political community, identity, and mobilisation (Williams 2013: 27–28; Gilroy 2002/1987: 206, 1993;).

Although both Hall and Gilroy contextualise Black African diasporas in socio-political and ethical terms, they still end up conceptualising them in terms of culture and identity. From a socio-political and ethical point of view, it may seem to make sense to do so. After all, racial, ethnic, cultural, and

national *identities* – and their *cultural* representations, mediation, and circulation – may seem to cut to the heart of group-based distinctions, behaviors, and regimes. It may seem difficult to make sense of the social phenomena of racial distinctions, discrimination, and regimes without reference to racial identities. For example, the modern nation-state with its notions of peoplehood, the real and imagined borders of Europe, the racial exclusivity of European colonialism, or the evolution and institutional embeddedness of modern Eurocentric racism would not be what they are without a basis in group-based identities. Therefore, not only from a metaphysical, but from a normative point of view too, it may seem obvious to conceptualise Black African diasporas in Europe and elsewhere in terms of identity.

However, the limitations of conceptualising Black African diasporas in terms of culture and identity should come into view by examining Hall's and Gilroy's own conceptualisations. These have evolved from the vantage point of the Black African diaspora in the UK, in particular as it arose from the post-WWII 'Windrush generation' of Caribbean migrants. Both Hall and Gilroy take interest in how circulating cultural representations and expressions – not least those of popular culture – inform Black identity making in the UK. Their emphasis is on overlapping racial and cultural identifications of the African diaspora, which mostly have grown out of the New World experiences of Old African Diasporas. So-called New African Diasporas of postcolonial African migrants or the great diversity of mostly New, but also Old African diasporas in Europe, do not play any major role in their conceptualisations. For instance, although Gilroy (1993:1) opens his classic book, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, with the words, "Striving to be both European and black requires some specific forms of double consciousness," his study of Black Europeans may be said to mostly concern the UK.

Given the history of Black cultural formations and identity-making in the New World, and the cultural circulation of African American and Caribbean instances of Black culture and identity, through struggles for liberation from enslavement, Pan-Africanism, civil rights, Black Power, Rastafarianism, poetry, fiction, public intellectualism and not least popular music such as jazz, Blues, soul, reggae and rap, it may make sense to think of the African diaspora in Europe as a corner of the 'Black Atlantic' (Gilroy 2002/1987, 1993). In addition, it is critical that we understand both Hall and Gilroy as responding to an understanding of diasporas as cultural groups, and especially Gilroy for wanting to expand a US-centered African Diaspora Studies to also include Europe. On the other hand, in expanding African Diaspora Studies to include all people of African descent across Europe, the Black Atlantic or even assumed common denominators of Black identity and culture, may not offer the most inclusive model.

3   The Second Wave of African Diaspora Studies on Europe: Beyond Middle Passage Epistemology

For the past two decades, a growing number of scholars (including, Michelle Wright, Paul Tiyambe Zeleza, Gloria Wekker and Fatima El-Tayeb) have questioned the centrality of the Middle Passage and the Black Atlantic to the African diaspora in Europe (e.g. El-Tayeb 2011; Wekker 2009; Zeleza 2005; Wright 2004, 2015). For instance, Michelle Wright has introduced the term 'Middle Passage Epistemology' to describe a stance that tends to give preference to Middle Passage-, African American-, US-, often heterosexual male-centered, totalising and homogenising perspectives on Black identity-formations – a wholly unsatisfactory stance for understanding the African diaspora in Europe (Wright 2009, 2013, 2015).

A common argument against making the Middle Passage and the Black Atlantic central to understanding the African Diaspora in Europe is the large presence in Europe of so-called New African Diasporas – that is to say, more recent migrants from Africa, who in contrast to Old African Diasporas are not descendants of enslaved Africans, for instance via the Middle Passage to the Americas (Okpewho and Nzegwu 2009; Koser 2003; Akyeampong 2000; Elabor-Idemudia 1999). Though New African Diasporas in Europe may be shaped by postcolonial experiences, they do not have the shared histories of the Middle Passage of the Black Atlantic. On the whole, Black African Diasporas in Europe are the result of a variety of historical processes and do not share the same confluences of racial, ethnic, and cultural identities as may be found in the New World.

Although no country in the European Union keeps statistics on race, based on what we can glean from statistics on country of origin it seems fair to assume that the great majority of the African Diaspora in Europe have a first or second-generation background in Africa (e.g. McEachrane 2014a, 2021). In most countries of Europe, we find relatively recent communities with a background in Africa and with a wide variety of cultural, ethnic, linguistic, national, political, and religious backgrounds and identifications. Especially in the UK, France, and the Netherlands, we also find large African diasporas from the Caribbean and other parts of the diaspora (Keaton et al. 2012; Hine et al. 2009).

A critical difference between Old and New African Diasporas is that especially first generation New African Diasporas tend to have less prominent racial identifications and in general no developed cultural or ethnic communities based on race. Characteristically, the first generation of New African Diasporas come with their own cultural, ethnic, linguistic, national, regional, political, and religious identifications that often do not foreground identities as Black. In

the words of Handel Kashope Wright (2015: 87–88), oftentimes Africans on the continent are "not particularly Black nor particularly African"; "it is upon leaving Africa and arriving in the diaspora that the supposedly 'Black' African is in fact most urgently interpellated into Blackness and Africanness." It is in the diaspora that the Mende woman from Bo becomes sutured to those identity categories and emerges as "Black and African, a black African woman" (Wright 2015: 87–88). Yet, in many, maybe even most parts of Africa identifications as Black in phenotypical and especially cultural terms tend not to resonate – albeit principally as a taken-for-granted backdrop – and few African languages even have a term for 'Black people' (Wright 2005).

Among other things, this means that when conceptualising the African diaspora in Europe we cannot presume the presence of cultural communities based on identifications as Black or even communities with widespread, shared identities as Black. Given the large presence of New African Diasporas in Europe, the ethnic, cultural, and even racial diversity of African Europeans, with diverse backgrounds and histories as well as their recent presence in relatively large numbers in European countries, mean that we cannot assume to find self-identified national Black communities in Europe and especially not in any cultural sense. Somali's from Somalia, Akan from Ghana or Wolof from Senegal in Norway, Belgium or Italy – though they may recognise commonalities among each other as being phenotypically Black and from Africa – are not likely to see themselves as part of the same Norwegian, Belgian, or Italian Black community, especially not the same Black cultural community. For example, in Sweden, where the majority of people of African descent belong to New African Diasporas, mostly with a first- or second-generation background in the Horn of Africa, there is no widely shared African Swedish racial, ethnic, cultural, historical, social or political identification (McEachrane 2021).

The pronounced heterogeneity of racial, ethnic, cultural, and national identities among Black people in Europe as well as their divergence from the US norm of having a historical background in the Middle Passage, is seen by second wave scholars such as Michelle Wright (2004, 2015) and Fatima El-Tayeb (2011) as a lesson to be learnt about Black homogeneity as a myth. It offers a telling counter-example to notions of Black people as having a natural and cohesive Black identity, being an extended biological and cultural family and/or belonging to an inherent Black African nation – not seldom combined with ideals of heterosexual, cis-gendered Black males as models of Black authenticity and at the helm of Black families, communities and political struggles (El-Tayeb 2011; Wright 2004, 2015).

For Fatima El-Tayeb (2011), the heterogeneity of Black Europe – which to her importantly often includes living in spaces and forming communities with

other people of color – offers a healthy challenge to African Diaspora Studies and US-centric assumptions of what it means to be Black as well as racialising perceptions of Europe as white, with narrow ethnic and cultural lenses on its communities of color (El-Tayeb 2011).

For Michelle Wright, the heterogeneity of Black Europe calls for a depiction of African diasporic identity that simultaneously incorporates the diversity of Black identities while connecting them to each other "to show that they indeed constitute a diaspora rather than an unconnected aggregate of different peoples linked only in name" (Wright 2004: 2). While exploring how Black may be defined when there is no one shared quality that justifies the frequent and assured use of the term, Wright points out that in countries like Germany a sense of belonging to a Black community is still being forged (Wright 2004: 185, 2015: 2). It is a sense of community that is simultaneously based on overlapping experiences such as the refusal to understand Afro-Germans as Germans and their location as 'outsiders' to the nation, while recognising its diversity and itself as inherently diasporic, counter-nationalist, and constituted by an open-ended dialogic process of identity-making (Wright 2004: 134, 185, 188, 191, 194–196, 202).

While what may be called a second wave of African Diaspora Studies on Europe has further emphasised the heterogeneous nature of African diasporas in Europe and included a questioning of 'Middle Passage Epistemologies', nonetheless it has remained wedded to an idea of diaspora as constituted by identity and culture.

4   African Diaspora Studies on Europe beyond Identity and Culture

In conceptualising African diasporas in Europe, three critical distinctions need to be made. First, as previously outlined, when speaking of African diasporas we need to parse out whether it is in a continental, cultural or racial sense. This is not least critical for conceptualising the heterogeneity and lived realities of African diasporas in Europe. Given the tendency of African Diaspora Studies from a New World horizon to conflate racial and cultural senses of the term, we need to be especially meticulous in distinguishing between racial and cultural conceptualisations of African diasporas. We should not take for granted that Black African diasporas in Europe have anything in common in cultural terms and can be conceptualised in such terms.

Second, in addition we need to give up presumptions that Black African diasporas in Europe have any shared identities as Black, African or African descendants. Although the terms 'Black', 'African' and/or 'African descendant'

may be used – albeit with caution – in a descriptive sense of African diasporas in Europe, such uses should not be premised on any shared racial, cultural or continental identities (or *identifications*, to emphasise that it is primarily subjective self-identities that we have in mind here). A race-based understanding of African diasporas in Europe, presupposes references to populations with similar physical appearances and continental origins. Arguably, the term Black is the most precise term to single out a certain race-based segment of African diasporas. However, it is also a term that may be contested as overly racialising, homogenising, reductive, and charged with negative connotations (Tsri 2016). In addition, especially members of the first generation of New African Diasporas in Europe may reject the term Black as a foreign imposition with little or no meaning in Africa, as a self-designating term and a racial or cultural identification (e.g. Okpewho and Nzegwu 2009, Fearfull et al. 2010). Hence, in conceptualising African diasporas in Europe in a racial sense, we should not assume any joint racial or cultural identities nor that 'Black', 'African', or 'African descendant' are appropriate terms.

Third, though it makes sense to continue making a racial sense of diaspora the center of African Diaspora Studies on Europe – given the social salience of race compared to ethnicity or culture more broadly – it should be conceptualised in socio-political terms. It will make for a more cohesive and comprehensive conceptualisation, frame of reference, and common denominator of Black African diasporas in Europe than the current commonplace conceptualisations in terms of identity and culture. Even where people of African descent in Europe do not share a joint identity or culture as Black, Africans, or people of African descent, they will still share similar or overlapping socio-political conditions. For example, having physical features that take on similar social meanings of being racialised as Black with all the connotations that this entails in Europe, including being excluded from, marginalized, or ambiguously included in European nationhood.

Conceptualising Black African diasporas in Europe in terms of social and political meanings and contexts will mean that what is at stake is not social identities per se, but rather social positions. Similarly, members of the diaspora need not have any culture or identity in common to enable us to speak of them in socio-political terms as collectives with shared histories, situations, interests, rights, and/or fates. Such socio-political conceptualisations and analyses will be decidedly structural or systemic by pointing to ways in which societies in a broad sense are organised. Furthermore, they will, implicitly or explicitly, evaluate the contexts, situations and positions of African diasporas in political (and ethical) terms such as equality, dignity, freedom, justice, and rights. Moreover, in contrast to conceptualisations in terms of identity and culture,

socio-political conceptualisations will allow for a broader and more inclusive comparative framework for people of African descent across the diaspora. For instance, it may point to how Black people as Black share similar socio-political conditions or circumstances across countries and continents, that their similar physical features and continental origins take on similar meanings and result in similar socio-political positions of subordination and disempowerment (cf. Patterson and Kelley 2000). Or how Black people as Black in the diaspora as well as in Africa, due to similar histories of colonialism, imperialism and transnational racial stratification, may live in similar socio-political (including, socio-economic) formations or systems with international as well as national dimensions (cf. Itzigsohn and Brown 2020: Chapter 2; McEachrane 2020).

It should be noted that such a socio-political conceptualisation of Black African diasporas in Europe does not exclude racial or cultural identities. For example, it may include considerations of how young African Europeans form Black identities – say, based on a mixture of social positionalities, a sense of being 'African', stylised senses of being 'Black' borrowed from popular culture such as hip hop and Afrobeat, a sense of connection with Black cultural expressions around the world and identification with Black freedom struggles. To a socio-political conceptualisation of Black African diasporas such identifications may be relevant to, for instance, understanding how a sense of belonging to a Black community may arise in practice and what this means in a wider social and political context. Nonetheless, it will not treat such identifications as common denominators, necessary or defining conditions for Black African diasporas in Europe.

Although socio-political conceptualisations of Black African diasporas in Europe are rare and not articulated as such, there are a few examples that may be construed as such. Kwame Nimako and Stephen Small have offered theoretical frameworks for Black Europe that suggest an underlying socio-political conceptualisation (Small 2018; Nimako and Small 2009). Instead of focusing on the racial and cultural identities of Black Europeans, they have sought to outline social and political conditions of Black African diasporas in the EU, including their collective socio-political statuses at the national and EU levels (Nimako and Small 2009). Stephen Small (2018) has sought to define what similar experiences Black people across Europe have by pointing to their similar social and political conditions. For instance, the ambiguous visibility and endemic vulnerability of being over-concentrated at the lower ranks of every major political, economic, and social hierarchy; living in countries where the predominant political and public explanation of such disparities is deficient skills and culture; the endemic othering and racialisation of Black people in

the face of mainstream views that race is not relevant to European societies;[1] a widespread denial of the relevance of colonial and imperial legacies; and having civil society organisations in their countries that mobilise Black people for Black empowerment and social justice (Small 2018).

There are some African diaspora studies on socio-political forms of Black European collective-making that are not defined by identity and culture, but joint socio-political conditions (e.g. McEachrane 2020, 2021; Thompson 2020; Mudimbe-Boyi 2012). For instance, Elisabeth Mudimbe-Boyi (2012: 21–22) speaks of a frequently self-designated "Black France," which is multinational, multicultural, transcontinental, even multicolor and does not represent a homogenous block, but instead an assemblage of micro societies. Still, "despite their diversity, [they] find themselves similarly positioned in this global orbit with respect to their origins, France, colonization, political domination, cultural assimilation, and even social marginalization and invisibility" (Mudimbe-Boyi 2012: 22).

Similarly, Vanessa Eileen Thompson (2020), describes a contemporary form of Black French collective solidarity – exemplified by the grass-roots activist group Brigade Anti-Négrophobie (BAN) in the outskirts of Paris. It is a Black collectivism, which seeks to escape both the pitfalls of identity politics and France's official abstract 'race-free' universalism, by recognising and embracing the multiplicities of Black experiences and identifications without subsuming them under a collective Black identity, while taking seriously lived experiences of anti-blackness and simultaneously providing a basis for interracial solidarity based on notions of urban conviviality and collective action (Thompson 2020: 31, 38–40).

Such socio-political Black European collectivism may be seen as a form of pragmatic Pan-Africanism, in line with the practical philosophy of common struggle of the canonical Pan-African conferences in Europe 1900–1945 (McEachrane 2020, 2021). It is a form of collectivism that sets aside caricatures of Pan-Africanism as wedded to racial and cultural essentialism and a joint Black African identity. It can allow for a person of African descent to feel an affinity with other Black people, for example, based on similar physical features, continental origins and social positions; to want dignity, equal rights and justice for Black people; that Black features be affirmed as beautiful and Black people as loveable; that African indigenous cultures and other Black cultural

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1 One could use the well-established expression 'colour-blind' here, although we should note that it is an ableist term in its association of blindness with deficiency and moral shortcoming.

expressions be celebrated rather than inferiorised or maligned; that the histories of Black people be told and from the perspectives and agency of Black people – without for a moment assuming that Black people have or should have any shared racial or cultural identities that sets them apart from other people.

5   Conclusion – from the Black Atlantic to the Black Mediterranean

From the perspective of studying African diasporas in Europe – be it in a racial, cultural or continental sense – a socio-political conceptualisation of Black African diasporas can allow for fuller and more inclusive pictures than insisting that diasporas are a matter of identity and culture. It can include the 'Black Mediterranean' as well as the 'Black Atlantic' (Progilio and Hawthorne et al. 2021). Although the outcomes of the Middle Passage vis-à-vis the Central Mediterranean Route differ with respect to their magnitude of racial horror as well as the racial and cultural identities of Black African diasporas – the socio-political outcomes are continuous. For example, being racialised as Black, finding oneself in socio-political systems based on the privileging and domination of white people politically, legally, economically, culturally and socially or in terms of belonging to the nation be it in the US, Brazil, Italy, or Sweden (McEachrane 2014b, 2018; Mills 2003, 2017).

Socio-politically, the African diasporic processes of the Central Mediterranean Route graft on to those of the Middle Passage. For instance, the racialising and perilous journeys of Eritreans, Somalians, Nigerians, or Senegalese to the coasts of the Mediterranean in Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, or Libya, where some make it onto ramshackle boats to cross the world's most deadly waterway for migrants. Thereafter, only to be detained in Spain, Italy, or Greece, not seldom becoming undocumented migrants trying to scrape by in informal economies or be lucky enough to achieve residency through asylum or otherwise and try to eke out a life from the margins of society. These journeys and their processes convey the global socio-political realities of Black African diasporas, including the public perceptions of Black lives in Europe and North Africa. They bring to the fore the position of the EU as a racialising system, and the contradictory European promise of universal human dignity and rights (Rutazibwa 2020; Zoppi 2020; Patterson 2019; Smythe 2018; Danewid 2017; Sharpe 2016).

Not only does a socio-political conception of Black African diasporas speak to their interconnected conditions. It also speaks directly to the need to understand, evaluate and address them politically.

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