

Introduction

Passages to (Be)Longing

In the Canadian author Lawrence Hill's 2007 novel, *The Book of Negroes* (named after a 1783 British military ledger), the African-born narrator-protagonist, Aminata Diallo, undergoes the Middle Passage as a child in the winter of 1756–57, spends her youth in South Carolina, escapes from her master during a trip to New York City in the revolutionary spring of 1775, participates in Black Loyalist migrations to Nova Scotia and Sierra Leone, and eventually spends the first years of the nineteenth century in London advocating for the abolition of the Atlantic slave trade. "We are travelling peoples," she remarks more than once in the novel's course, referring to Africans and their descendants.¹ This innocent-sounding word, "travelling," takes on a variety of meanings during her journey through life: the Middle Passage, escapes, evacuations, and voluntary migrations—in brief, a myriad of border crossings, geographical as well as psychological, involuntary as well as willed. Hill gives metaphorical expression to the theoretical concept and empirical reality of the African diaspora by always keeping his protagonist moving, always in a mental and geopolitical space that can never truly become "home" for her. Throughout her forced exile in the New World, Aminata suffers from severe homesickness for the village of her childhood, situated in present-day Mali.² However, even after her eventual, hard-won return to West Africa, she once again finds herself in a geographical and ethnic context foreign to her. The locals of Sierra Leone, whose language, ethnicity, and customs are different from hers, never accept her as a "native." After attempting in vain to find the village where she was born and raised (located in a region vastly altered by the slave trade since her childhood), Aminata finally leaves the continent of her origin again, this time voluntarily, in order to participate in the abolitionist movement in London. This turn of the plot, which forms one of the novel's

pivotal paradoxes, succinctly captures the diasporic individual's difficulty in defining, establishing, or returning "home." Poignantly, "home" is the novel's last word; yet home remains, even in the final scene, ephemeral and elusive.

Attentive to this diasporic elusiveness of "home," this book, *Precarious Passages*, thematically focuses on black movement and migration, on passages and routes, and on the diasporic longing of the dispersed to belong. On a level beyond thematics, it investigates how one type of cultural production, fiction written in English, participates in the ongoing transnational construction of black diasporic identity within the old Anglophone black Atlantic diaspora.³ The "old Anglophone black Atlantic diaspora," synonymous with the "old Anglophone African Atlantic diaspora," here denotes the English-speaking descendants, in the Western world, of those Africans who were enslaved in the Americas.⁴ This Atlantic group, a product of post-Columbian modernity, consists of most US African Americans, Anglophone African Caribbeans, also known as West Indians (including, in this study, those who have migrated from the Caribbean to other destinations in the Western world, such as Britain, the United States, or Canada, thus creating Caribbean "sub-diasporas" within the old Anglophone black diaspora), and those English-speaking black Canadians whose ancestors experienced perpetual servitude on Canadian soil, particularly as a result of the arrival of Loyalists in Nova Scotia after the American Revolutionary War.

In discussing "consciousness, community, and identity" as key elements of most definitions of diaspora,⁵ Aisha Khan notes that "diaspora refers to population movements and displacements and the creation over time of *literal and symbolic communities*."⁶ Maureen Warner-Lewis, furthermore, accurately observes that the dispersed communities of the African diaspora (unlike, for example, those of the Jewish diaspora) "are united around no venerable scripted text or texts, nor do they share codified and institutionalized religions."⁷ This being the case, secular culture, in its various forms, plays a major role in producing and reproducing the African diasporic imaginary—that is, in creating symbolic communities, in the sense suggested by Khan, and in keeping alive the sentiment that there *is* something that can be called a black diasporic community and something that can be called a black diasporic identity, however loosely and nonprescriptively defined. In order to examine one cultural form that reproduces this imaginary, this book analyzes eleven historically informed novels written by eight contemporary novelists of African or African Caribbean descent, reading these narratives as cultural mediators and interpreters of a collective (that is, African diasporic) memory.⁸ Taken

together, Charles Johnson's *Middle Passage* (1990), Hill's *The Book of Negroes*, Toni Morrison's *Sula* (1973) and *Tar Baby* (1981), George Lamming's *The Emigrants* (1954), Caryl Phillips's *The Final Passage* (1985), *A State of Independence* (1986), and *Crossing the River* (1993), Andrea Levy's *Small Island* (2004), Cecil Foster's *Sleep On, Beloved* (1995), and Edwidge Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (1994) give multifaceted expression to the cultural, socioeconomic, and psychological consequences that involuntary and voluntary migrations have had for black communities and individuals in North America, the Caribbean, and Britain during various stages of black Atlantic history. In so doing, they actively contribute to black diasporic identity formation, which this book understands both as a theme that these novels depict and as a constitutive process in which they participate as cultural products.

Transnational in scope, this study seeks to advance our understanding of contemporary black Anglophone diasporic literature by placing novels usually classified as "African American," "black Canadian," "black British," or "postcolonial African Caribbean" in dialogue with each other. Works falling into these categories are traditionally read, interpreted, and anthologized separately, but this book adopts an integrative approach: rather than, for example, pairing African American fiction either with black Canadian or with black British or with black Caribbean fiction, it reads samples of all these national/regional varieties of black Anglophone diasporic fiction together.⁹ This comparative reading strategy demonstrates that the concept of the African diaspora (adapted from Jewish thought and pregnant with the need to remember, mourn, and commemorate the original dispersal) points to a foundational common denominator among the varied cultural identities within the old African diaspora in the Western world—namely, to an awareness, throughout this diaspora, of its historical origin in an ur-event (the Middle Passage and black enslavement in the New World), the memory of which is passed on from generation to generation through education and other cultural practices and products, including novels. In other words, the fiction examined in this book indicates that if cultivating something called African diasporic identity is still a meaningful endeavor within the old black Atlantic diaspora (and they suggest that it is), then the Middle Passage and slavery continue to represent a "usable past" for the purposes of such transnational identity formation.

This book is not intended as a systematic, let alone comprehensive, literary-historical overview of black diasporic fiction. Instead, it demonstrates that the novels analyzed here (even if they focus on *current* imaginaries of "home," belonging, and unbelonging) contextualize black diasporic dilemmas of (be)

longing within the political and socioeconomic legacies of the original major propellers of the African Atlantic diaspora—the Atlantic slave trade, slavery, colonialism, and imperialism. *Middle Passage* and *The Book of Negroes* are set in the era of slavery, and sizeable portions of both books address the slave trade and its consequences. The other novels, primarily depicting later eras, include brief references to the Middle Passage and/or slavery in their fabric even when they describe contemporary migrations that do not fit the familiar “from West Africa to the New World” pattern, such as moves from Barbados or Trinidad to Britain or from Jamaica to Canada. That is, even when they discuss antiblack racism in post–World War II and present-day societies, they subtly link their depictions of black diasporic identity formation to the foundational, tragic developments of the history of the black Atlantic, covert as such linkages and allusions may be. Of course, not every single black-authored novel published in the contemporary Anglophone Atlantic world uses the strategy of referencing the Middle Passage and enslavement to depict present-day structural antiblack racism. However, the novels analyzed in this book do, and in employing this method they exemplify a larger trend¹⁰ and call attention to their shared self-understanding as novels of the African Atlantic diaspora.

To elaborate, four interrelated arguments inform this book. First, I claim that as my selected novelists reimagine the lives of uprooted groups and individuals in various stages and settings of black history, they actively contribute to the ongoing transnational formation of black diasporic identity. (I understand “black diasporic identity” fluidly and use the term nonnormatively. “Black diasporic consciousness” and “black diasporic awareness” would be equally appropriate lexical choices.) It is common knowledge that novels have, in many countries, significantly participated in shaping national identities. What is acknowledged less often is that novels can have a similar role in forming transnational identities as well. Transnational communities were not what Benedict Anderson had in mind when he famously called modern nation-states “imagined communities,”¹¹ but much of the logic that he articulated applies to transnational contexts, too. While national identities indeed are, in many ways, “product[s] of collective imagination,” as Arjun Appadurai elaborates in *Modernity at Large* (1996),¹² the same is also true of their transnational counterparts, as Martin Sökefeld emphasizes in “Mobilizing in Transnational Space” (2006).¹³ Black diasporic identity formation is a prime example of an ongoing, dynamic construction of a transnational awareness and self-understanding. Fiction—particularly historical fiction, broadly

defined—plays an important role in this process because it is, as a medium and genre, extremely well suited to portray the ambivalences that characterize the diasporic longing of the scattered and displaced to belong.

Second, in depicting black diasporic (be)longing and identity formation, my selected novels evoke (some quite subtly) slavery and colonial modernity, which ushered in the post-Columbian African Atlantic diaspora, and examine their oppressive legacies. By summoning the Middle Passage and enslavement as a past that is “usable” in the process of forging, maintaining, and developing a black diasporic identity, these novels place themselves in a continuum initiated by poetry and activist nonfiction written by African-descended Anglophone authors in the latter half of the eighteenth century. As Michelle M. Wright observes in *Becoming Black* (2004), black diasporic identity has, from the very beginning, “been produced in contradiction”¹⁴ because, as James Sidbury notes in *Becoming African in America* (2007), “[t]he terms ‘Africa’ and ‘African’ and the perception that the continent of Africa (or the sub-Saharan portion of it) comprises a unified cultural and/or ‘racial’ unit are European in origin.”¹⁵ As a result of chattel slavery in the New World, “African” quickly became a pejorative term, a *tabula* onto which Europeans and American-based white colonists started to project an essentialist—and tragically offensive—understanding of “racial” blackness.¹⁶ During the latter half of the eighteenth century, however, African-descended writers living in the West began providing Anglophone readers with an alternative understanding of black, or African-derived, identity,¹⁷ as Sidbury points out in discussing Phillis Wheatley and Ignatius Sancho:

Both [writers] were aware of the ethnic diversity on the [African] continent and understood that it undercut any notion of an indigenous “African” identity. Both responded by creating *a narrative of African identity that took its meaning from the diaspora* rather than from the conditions on the continent, a narrative that began with enslavement and the experience of the Middle Passage. Peoples of various ethnic backgrounds became “African” together by virtue of sharing the oppression of Atlantic slavery. The resulting sense of African identity was forged through the common experience of slavery and did not rest on a notion of an essential difference between “Africans” and other peoples.¹⁸

Similarly, my selected novelists’ allusions to the Middle Passage and enslavement speak to the choices that these authors make while participating in the continuing construction of black diasporic identity, regardless of whether

they belong to the civil rights generation of African American novelists, or to the cultural-nationalist generation of Caribbean authors, or to a later generation of contemporary transnational British, Canadian, American, or Caribbean writers.

My third argument is that much can be gained through a dually focused thematic approach that *both* examines black novelists' representations of diaspora *and* explores their depictions of more temporarily and loosely understood experiences of displacement or dislocation. The concept of diaspora reveals an awareness, across the old African diaspora in the West, of how and why Africans were scattered circum-Atlantically during post-Columbian modernity. It also facilitates reflections on the ever-complex relationship between transnationalism, national identity, and other modes of belonging. More fleetingly construed instances of temporary displacement, in turn, in diasporic fiction often illuminate, point to, or metaphorically represent predicaments that are, ultimately, diasporic in nature. That is, an inclusive approach to black novelists' treatment of uprootedness reveals that diasporic sensibilities frequently emerge at unexpected junctures, manifesting themselves in narratives of various types of black displacement and thus informing passages in which their presence might not be anticipated. Morrison's and Phillips's stories of African American troops' experiences overseas, discussed in chapter 3, illustrate this logic.

Another example of the same logic, from a novel that falls beyond the scope of this book, helps to clarify my point: Morrison's sixth novel, *Jazz*, which is mainly set in Harlem in 1926 but also offers flashbacks to the slavery era, ultimately casts the early-twentieth-century Great Migration of African Americans from the rural southern countryside to northern cities as an episode in the centuries-long and untraceably complex sequence of events propelled by the forced ur-migration of black people to the New World. Morrison's rendering of the Great Migration resonates, in other words, with time-transcending concerns about the multiple ways in which community and communality can be lost under the pressures caused by various "by-products" of modernity—whether such pressures are brought on by slavery and its legacies, by black participation in wars initiated by white Others and fought on foreign soil, or by early-twentieth-century forms of urban individualism.¹⁹ My discussion in chapter 3 addresses similar concerns in *Sula* and *Tar Baby* and in Phillips's *Crossing the River*, particularly from the angle of how Morrison and Phillips connect African Americans soldiers' experience of war as a temporary

traumatic dislocation with the diasporic ur-trauma of forced displacement and dispossession.

My fourth claim is that the novels discussed in this book reflect what I term, referencing W.E.B. Du Bois's intellectual and terminological legacy (and Paul Gilroy's and Samir Dayal's dialogues with it), a "diasporic double consciousness."²⁰ On the one hand, my selected novelists portray the possibility of belonging—of any uncritically embraced national belonging, in particular—as if it were, in itself, a "fiction" for them or their protagonists.²¹ In practice, this dilemma often translates as a character's sense of being caught, legally or emotionally, in a no-man's-land between diasporic identification and national citizenship. As Gilroy remarks, "Diaspora identification exists outside of, and sometimes in opposition to, the political forms and codes of modern citizenship."²² In fact, some scholars have experimented with the term "African diaspora citizenship," which seeks to elevate black diasporic belonging to the status of a metaphorically understood "citizenship."²³ On the other hand, my selected authors depict their geographically rerouted characters' desire to have a framework of identification transcending temporary, fleeting social roles as a fundamental human need that cannot be suppressed without incurring emotional or psychological damage. To the extent that it is possible at all to identify any shared dynamics characterizing the diverse body of contemporary black diasporic literature, such dynamics coalesce around this thematic duality: the dis-/relocated protagonists' sense of not belonging *and* their simultaneous yearning to experience fulfilling human connection and communion in a place they could call "home."

Language, Geography, and the Old and New African Diasporas

Five further remarks on language and geography will help to clarify the scope of this book and the limits of the claims that the text makes. First, I fully recognize, of course, the existence and significance of the old Francophone, Hispanophone, Lusophone, and Dutch-speaking African diasporas, as well as the presence of myriad new African diasporas in Europe and in the Western Hemisphere. However, these diasporas fall beyond the purview of this book (with the relative exception, explained below, of the inclusion of the debut novel of Haitian-born Edwidge Danticat, whose native context is Francophone). A single study could hardly do justice to the nuances of all these linguistic, literary, and intellectual traditions. Moreover, I do not possess a

universal definition of “the” black diaspora applicable to all diasporic populations of African descent, nor do I have much faith in the viability or usefulness of pursuing such a totalizing definition. Today, even the old Anglophone African Atlantic diaspora is characterized by considerable ethnic, national, socioeconomic, sociocultural, religious, and political diversity, as well as by markedly different interplays of race, class, and gender in different locations and microcontexts;²⁴ hence my interest in a common denominator that may supply the term “black diasporic identity” with *a* shared referent in the context of *this* diaspora but does not undermine this diaspora’s polyvocality, which is powerfully evident both in real life and in its literary representations.

Second, although this book investigates black diasporic identity formation within Anglophone parameters, my goal is not to try to inappropriately universalize the Anglophone experience. Rather, my focus on the English language and on the geographical triangle of North America, the Anglophone Caribbean, and Britain indicates that the former British Empire and its racial practices constitute the historical and geopolitical background for this book—as does, relatedly, the contemporary status of the United States, once an assortment of British settler colonies, as a neo-empire. As Michelle Ann Stephens argues in *Black Empire* (2005), “diaspora is precisely that space of blackness that has been shaped by empire’s international reach and global designs.”²⁵ Although the theoretical discourses and experiential realities of diaspora and empire are not identical, this book—while foregrounding diaspora—acknowledges their intersectionality.

Third, while Britain is only one of the former European empires relevant to the study of the past and present of the African diaspora, the role that the British had in shaping “the enslaved Atlantic” was pivotal, as James Walvin notes in *Making the Black Atlantic* (2000), because “at the height of the Atlantic slave system, the British shipped more Africans than any other nation; their slave colonies disgorged produce (and its associated prosperity) on an unparalleled scale, and Britain itself benefited from slavery to a degree which largely goes unrecognized.”²⁶ Indeed, despite the multidisciplinary attention that the English-speaking African diaspora and its cultures have already received, exploring how contemporary black Anglophone authors grapple with the complex legacy of the British Empire is still a relevant intellectual endeavor.

Fourth, even though black Anglophone novelists have traditionally originated from countries or regions that once were part of the British Empire, this situation is changing rapidly, or rather, has already changed. The United States, in particular, is now home to novelists of the African and African Caribbean