

## Chapter 19

# Cape Verdean Diasporic Identity Formation

*Gina Sánchez Gibau*

Diasporic communities traverse the two or more states to which they belong, which they influence, and which reproduce them. This bipolar identity is the cornerstone of the diasporic experience. (Laguerre 1998: 9)

The importance of the concept of ‘diaspora’ as an explanatory paradigm stems from its malleable qualities given that it can apply to diverse communities. Dissociated from the historical experiences of a defined group of people, it becomes a universal nomenclature applicable to displaced groups of people. (Barkan and Shelton 1998: 5)

The concept of the African diaspora has its intellectual roots in traditional Pan-Africanist activities conducted in the U.S., the U.K. and in the Caribbean during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Since that time, theories of the African diaspora include both support and criticism of the idea of Africa as the primary site of identity formation (Appiah 1992; Drake 1982; Gilroy 1993; Gordon 1998; Padmore 1956). The evolution of the literature ranges from past conceptualisations of the African diaspora as a conglomerate with traceable ties to Africa, to more recent attempts at de-essentializing this connection in order to analyze and emphasise the African diaspora as a dynamic process. The Cape Verdean diaspora population in Boston exemplifies both of these theoretical and political trends.

This chapter examines the concepts of diaspora, race, ethnicity and culture as intellectual frameworks through which to understand Cape Verdean diasporic identity formation. These concepts serve as analytical tools that reveal how Cape Verdeans define the parameters of their ‘racial’ and ‘ethnic’ identities while simultaneously constructing multiple ideas of what constitutes ‘Cape Verdeanness.’ This process of diasporic identity formation is complicated by the fact that Boston’s Cape Verdean diaspora community is decidedly fragmented at this moment in time. The community is divided, in generational terms, into Cape Verdean and Cape Verdean-American segments that have a limited amount of contact with each other. Situating Cape Verdeans within the

context of the larger African diaspora, as 'Black transnationals', illustrates their historical, social, political and economic experiences in the U.S.

### Defining diasporas

The concept of diaspora is often characterised in terms of the phenomenon of displacement. In the popular imagination, diasporas are conceived as communities that emerge as a result of forced expulsions from a particular place of origin. This place or 'homeland' is believed to remain ever present within the collective consciousness of the diaspora community. Theoretical work examining the formation of diasporas tends to focus upon the impact that dispersal, relocation, and historical memory have on the development of transnational identities (Brah 1996; Clifford 1994; Cohen 1996; Gilroy 1993; Gopinath 1995; Helmreich 1992; Safran 1991; Scott 1991).

Geographical dispersion as a defining feature of modern diasporas can be understood in terms of what Marshall Sahlins (1985) calls a 'structure of conjuncture', an historical event or moment that occurs which facilitates social change and alters the course of cultural history thereafter. For the African diaspora of the Americas, this defining moment has been identified as the tragic Middle Passage, the historical memory of which links people of African descent to a common experience of slavery and racial terror across space and through time. An emphasis on the processes involved in the formation of African diasporic populations is analytically useful in the study of identity politics, racial formation, and community, especially as it pertains to the Cape Verdean diaspora.

For the Cape Verdean diaspora, the event of physical displacement is multidimensional. Perhaps the most significant defining moments were the initial migrations that occurred via the whaling industry. Relocation was also predicated on the forced labour migrations to São Tomé and Príncipe. Finally, significant movements occurred during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries as Cape Verdeans sought to improve their socio-economic conditions by migrating to Europe, Latin America and the U.S. in search of employment. The common experience of relocation serves as a basis for solidarity among Cape Verdeans in different locations, and even different countries. They are conjured up in casual conversations and in traditional songs as a means of connecting one's life experience to that of all Cape Verdeans. The trope of departure – of leaving *nha terra* (my homeland) – is evoked as a defining moment in the development of Cape Verdean diasporic peoplehood.

The concept of diaspora also encompasses a myth of return to the homeland. The return is considered mythical precisely because it is an illusive prospect. Diasporic populations usually cannot return to the homeland due to the persistence of poor ecological, economic and political conditions. As a result, they are relegated to 'dwelling-in-displacement' within a particular 'host' society (Clifford 1994). Yet, modern diasporas are distinguishable on the basis of continued contact with and/or interest in the homeland (see Carling 1997; Laguerre 1998; Safran 1991). Michel Laguerre qualifies diasporas further, characterising those who maintain actual ties to the homeland as an 'active diaspora', and a 'passive diaspora' as one that maintains only symbolic ties (1998:8).

With respect to the Cape Verdean diaspora, there exist both active and passive components, with some descendants of earlier Cape Verdean migrants retaining a symbolic connection to the islands. Although they may not have been born there nor have ever visited, Cape Verde is still revered as an imagined homeland to be claimed. Similar to African-Americans visiting the continent of Africa for the first time, Cape Verdean-Americans, after experiencing the initial culture shock involving contact with a population from which they are several generations removed, often experience a homecoming feeling upon first visiting the islands. Other Cape Verdean-Americans have attempted to engage in social and economic development projects in the islands, albeit with great frustration. More recent Cape Verdean immigrants in the U.S., on the other hand, may speak to their relatives by phone on a weekly basis. Others send money 'home' on a monthly basis. Still others arrange to have their relatives flown in from Cape Verde at least once a year. Whether maintaining an 'active' or 'passive' connection, Cape Verdeans still conceptualise the Cape Verde Islands as a defining cultural symbol in their identity construction.

Given that the present state of international migration is dictated by economic trends within an increasingly globalised marketplace, the concept of diaspora can no longer be conceived solely in terms of ties to a homeland or geographical dispersion. 'Diaspora' must now be understood in relation to local and global phenomena, whereby the 'here' and 'there' are no longer mutually exclusive but are in constant dialogue. With the improvement of airline transportation and communications via telephone and the Internet, contemporary diasporic populations now have a greater opportunity to maintain actual ties to the homeland than their predecessors. Diaspora, then, is now conceived as including less-than static movements or relocations, such as that of migrant workers, immigrants, refugees, asylum seekers, exiles, deportees and other marginalised citizens (Safran 1991). Moreover, it does not

preclude a definite forced dispersal. It is at once a voluntary and involuntary formation.

Laguerre utilises the term 'dispersed nation' to define a diaspora as a transnational community – a nation of people constructed beyond the confines of a territorialised nation-state or homeland (1998: 8). Diasporic populations can therefore be understood as straddling both the home and host societies, as belonging and not belonging. The Cape Verdean diaspora is one among many populations who acquire this type of nationalistic 'double consciousness' (Du Bois 1903). This is the case not only for the newer arrivals but also for those born on the islands and who have been living in the U.S. for the past fifteen to twenty years. These Cape Verdeans are simultaneously attached to two societies. They are living and participating members of the American system and yet they still refer to Cape Verde as their home. Many Cape Verdeans, for example, have told me of their desire to return 'home' once they retire from their jobs here in the U.S. Laguerre refers to these more transnational migrants as 'sojourners' who often 'return home and use their money and social capital to help themselves and others in their homeland' (1998: 7). The U.S., then, is understood as a home-away-from-home in the minds of Cape Verdean-born members of the diaspora.

The commonsense understanding of the African diaspora has been criticised for essentialising a common African ancestry (i.e., African blood) and ties to an African homeland (i.e., the homeland). In actuality, the African diaspora is much more complex than mere geography and genealogy may dictate. Appiah (1992), Gilroy (1993), Clifford (1994), among others, offer alternative conceptualisations of the African diaspora that emphasise the historical and cultural processes involved in the formation of new and dynamic collectivities. This perspective of the African diaspora serves as a critical tool through which to explore globally and in historical perspective the mobility of labour, the development of transnational networks, and the social construction of identities among people of African descent.

Although postmodern critics do not give primacy to Africa as a site of imagination for the African diaspora, Africa, nevertheless, serves as an important aspect of diaspora consciousness for some African-descended groups. Emphasis on the role that Africa plays in historical memory also highlights the particularity of subjectivities and experiences, which can often be obscured by general conceptualisations of diasporic identity that privilege multiple identities and hybrid cultures. The African diaspora experience is very different from that of the Southeast Asian diaspora, for example. This revised model of the African diaspora is useful for theorizing Cape Verdean identity formation

as a contemporary Black social formation that takes place within the confines of the U.S.

### **Diaspora as an 'imagined community'**

In the last two decades, theorists have relied heavily on Benedict Anderson's (1991) concept of imagined community to understand the processes by which a social group becomes a community (Alonso 1988, 1994; Brow 1990; Brueggemann 1995; Cohen 1985; Gillis 1994). Anderson's imagined community is one in which a group of people share a sense of connectedness, yet 'may never know most of their fellow-members' (1991: 6). Although Anderson originally invoked the term in his interpretation of the nation as a politically derived, historically specific community, an imagined community is still useful as a concept through which to understand the dynamics of various communities enjoined by a sense of belonging together (Brow 1990: 1).

Defining diasporas as imagined communities involves the idea of a community sharing a collective, historical memory as embedded and embodied in social practice. Perhaps the best example that can be offered to illustrate this sense of connectedness in relation to Cape Verdeans is the Smithsonian's 1995 Festival of American Folklife. One of the featured programs that year was devoted to Cape Verdean and Cape Verdean American culture. Cape Verdeans from various parts of the world felt an overwhelming sense of nostalgia and euphoria as they converged onto the national mall and interacted with each other. Cape Verdean Americans cried as they hugged islanders who only spoke Kriolu. Although this scene may appear overly romanticised, it is nevertheless an unexaggerated example of how the Cape Verdean diaspora has expressed this sense of imagined community.

The marker of heritage itself plays a tremendous role in the construction of Cape Verdean identity. A person can be accepted almost automatically as a member of the community by virtue of his/her Cape Verdean parentage. Similarly, two Cape Verdeans from different states may experience an acute sense of connectedness upon meeting each other for the first time, especially if they meet in a locale where Cape Verdeans are in the minority. This was the case for my uncle who experienced a chance meeting with a Cape Verdean man who resembled his cousin at the airport in Amsterdam. After closely scrutinizing each other, the two men attempted to engage in a dialogue – my uncle speaking French and the Cape Verdean man speaking in Kriolu – about island ancestry. Indeed, this is a common practice among diasporic Cape Verdeans attempting to delineate (and often finding) kinship connections.

## The role of historical memory

For many diasporic populations, Cape Verdeans included, a sense of community has meant a belief in essentialised notions of common (biological) origin, homeland, language and cultural traditions that define the ties that bind. The commonsense aspect of communalisation is often manifested in cultural practices that evoke sentiments of the past in the present. The concept of diaspora illustrates the way in which the imagining of community is linked to the idea of that community sharing a collective, historical memory.

John and Jean Comaroff (1987) have focused on the unique historical, social, political and economic experiences of groups that aid in the reconstruction of individual and collective consciousness. The Comaroffs define 'practical consciousness' as 'an active process in which actors deploy historically salient cultural categories to construct self-awareness' (1987: 205). In other words, self-awareness is constructed through the commonsense recollections of the past upon which people rely to construct themselves as members of a present collectivity.

Historical memory, then, plays an integral role in the formation of a sense of peoplehood. Historical memory involves a reinvention of the past, 'mythical' or otherwise, through present reinterpretation. However, the past as grasped through memory 'is always subject to selective retention, innocent amnesia, and tendentious re-interpretation' (Brow 1990: 3). In reconstructing the past, many people tend to highlight certain aspects while obscuring others (Alonso 1988: 39). This is often referred to as 'selective amnesia' or conscious or unconscious remembering and/or forgetting (Frisch 1981: 12).

Commemorations, on the other hand, as practices that illuminate the intersection of history and memory, are considered to be conscious efforts 'to limit forgetfulness' (Fabre and O'Meally 1994: 7; see also Gillis 1994). Remembering the past involves not only conscious and unconscious selective amnesia, but also a degree of accuracy that is often altered by embellishment and fiction. As John Gillis notes, 'we are constantly revising our memories to suit our current identities' (1994: 3).

## The dispersed nation

The concept of transnationalism places the experience of immigration at its center, and has a particular relevance to African diasporic identity formation. In describing the Haitian diaspora of New York City, Laguerre employs the term 'diasporic nationalism' – 'the public or domestic patriotic expression of attachment that immigrants exhibit for the homeland' (1998: 60). Cape Verdeans in Boston also exhibit diasporic

nationalism in various ways. For Cape Verdean-Americans, this connection to Cape Verde is visually expressed through the 'I'm Cape Verdean' flag-embossed bumper sticker on their cars. For Cape Verdean immigrants, this transnational patriotism is illustrated in their listening to the local radio program that broadcasts the news from Cape Verde in Portuguese and/or Kriolu. The existence of diaspora populations in post-industrial states reconfigures the nation as comprised of multiple nations, or as irrevocably transnational.

However, self-identification is often complicated by the capacity of nation-states to construct social categories and identities for its citizens (Alonso 1988; Menchaca 1993; Woost 1993). Foster makes note of the way in which the state exerts its power as a natural condition of everyday life, thereby rendering individuals and groups as imagined constituents of a community or nation, 'even if their place [within that community/nation] is one of subordination and exploitation' (1991: 247). The same can be said of Portuguese colonial rule in the Cape Verde Islands and its other colonies for some 500 years.

Paulo Freire and Donaldo Macedo (1987) note how colonisation affects the worldview of subjugated peoples, defining what is acceptable behaviour, and how it fashions one's tastes in clothes, food and other social aspects of life. The internalisation of colonial oppression and simultaneous acquisition of upward social mobility led lighter-skinned, privileged Cape Verdeans, some of whom served as administrators in mainland colonies, to identify more with the Portuguese than with the Africans. While 'racial democracy' exalted racial miscegenation for obliterating racial distinctions, it simultaneously promoted whiteness as the social and physiological ideal. Thus, the colonial legacy of Cape Verde created a concomitant legacy of the promotion of one's Portuguese heritage over one's African heritage (Meintel 1984; Batalha 2004).

The resultant social hierarchy in Cape Verde during its colonial era delineated a myriad of social distinctions based on a combination of ancestry, phenotype, skin tone, social class status, and island of origin. Such distinctions were manifested in status-differentiating behaviours exhibited by various sectors of society. Internal differentiation is also evident in contemporary island stereotypes. People from Fogo are considered more 'hot-headed' or 'fiery' (*fogo* is Portuguese for fire). Brava, on the other hand, is lauded for its beautiful, light-skinned women and soft-spoken men. Yet, many Cape Verdeans still contend today that social class status is the main marker of difference on the islands. Several Cape Verdeans have indicated this to me, stating that racism does not exist in Cape Verde, but discrimination based on class is indeed a common phenomenon.

Since some Cape Verdeans today still refer to themselves as Portuguese, practice Catholicism as do Portuguese-Americans, speak Portuguese (in formal settings), and have similar cultural traditions as Portuguese-Americans, they are often defined as more culturally congruent with the Portuguese. Yet, the experiences of Cape Verdeans living in the U.S. reveal that their identities are often articulated as a composite of racial and ethnic categories.

Racialisation does not happen without some input from immigrant groups. Initially, there may be resistance to the system of racial classification ascribing them a particular label. In such instances, immigrant groups hold steadfast to their nationalist identity, and adhere to nationalist discourses. However, many others become racial conscious after spending a number of years in the U.S. These people may have experienced racial discrimination in one form or another, or they may have been exposed to the social conditions dictating the lives of people placed in a particular category in which they may find themselves. Yet, racial consciousness may not imply the subsequent acquisition of a proactive stance toward social oppression. It may simply indicate that one is now aware or conscious of the fact that one is ascribed a racial label, casually and institutionally, despite one's own efforts of self-identification.

### **Cape Verdeans in Boston: a fractured diaspora**

Immigration and migration have been used to describe the movement of people across geographic, temporal, and spatial borders. No longer limited to a matter of going to or coming from a specific place, immigration and migration can now be used to describe internal, circular, and return movements. Recent studies have focused upon the complexity of immigration and migration as linked to a global system of capitalist development that renders the relationship between sending and receiving societies dialectical and interdependent (Anthias 1992; Foster 1991; Basch et al. 1994; Sassen 1988).

Cape Verdean migration, forced or voluntary, constitutes a transnational movement warranting sociocultural adjustment upon settlement in a new locale. The Cape Verdean diaspora community of Boston can be described as a fractured or fragmented diaspora because it is at once emergent and constitutive of socio-historical events. Age, citizenship, and migration history are just some of the distinguishing features of this community. Within a single household, for example, one could find great-grandparents, grandparents, parents and children all living under the same roof. There are Cape Verdeans who came to the U.S. twenty years ago and others who have just arrived a few months ago.



Likewise, there are Cape Verdeans who were born in Boston fifty years ago and others just two years ago.

Perhaps the most outstanding feature, however, is a temporal split between Cape Verdeans who were born in the U.S. (Cape Verdean-Americans) and those born on the islands (Cape Verdean immigrants). The Cape Verdean-American sector of Boston was created from the internal migration from the smaller South Shore communities of Massachusetts, such as Taunton, New Bedford, and Cape Cod, since the 1950's. For Cape Verdean-Americans, Boston was the quintessential Big City. It became a place of refuge from the 'country towns' where the standard course of life was limited to graduating from high school, starting a family and working for minimum wage. Boston served as a place of transformation, a place where a person became conscious of the world and his or her place in it.

The Cape Verdean-American sector of the diaspora is linked by a shared historical memory of early immigration, the political economy of Cape Verdean labour history in the U.S., and by a common experience of racial and xenophobic oppression. Many members of the community who 'came up' during the 1960s became closely associated with the larger African-American community. In fact, many Cape Verdean-Americans in Boston have since identified themselves as Black and may not even disclose their Cape Verdean heritage upon casual meeting. The Mayor's cultural liaison to the Cape Verdean community confirms the difficulty in documenting Cape Verdean-Americans in Boston, many of whom have culturally assimilated and/or intermarried into the larger African-American community.

Contemporary Cape Verdean immigrants, although still witnessing the constraints of racism, assimilation and anti-immigrant sentiment, lead qualitatively different lives from their Cape Verdean-American counterparts. Indeed, the Boston community differs from the older Cape Verdean communities of New Bedford, Massachusetts, and Providence, Rhode Island, because of its large Cape Verdean immigrant population. There are more Cape Verdean immigrants living in the Boston area than second- and third-generation Cape Verdean-Americans, and a significant number of the immigrant population have not become citizens. Some are legally resident while others have overstayed a visitor's visas. This sector of the diaspora is linked to post-1965 and especially post-independence (1975) relocations to the area.

Most Cape Verdean immigrants are in close contact with their relatives on the islands. They send 'home' remittances on a regular basis. They speak with relatives by phone or in person when they visit. They continue to speak Kriolu in the home or when they patronize Cape Verdean-owned establishments. Each of these everyday practices, and the continuing influx of Cape Verdean immigrants into the area, contri-

butes to the manifestations of Cape Verdean diasporic identities that are created, revised and recreated in various social contexts.

Cape Verdeans in Boston, and the immigrant sector in particular, by insisting on identifying themselves as Cape Verdean, have challenged societal ascription that would categorise them as Black or African-American on the basis of physical appearance. This resistance to the forces of assimilation and ascription is similar to that detailed by La-guerre in relation to Haitian immigrants in New York City during the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Their complete assimilation [in]to the social life and mores of the U.S. could not be achieved because of their attachment to their countries of origin, their unwillingness to become completely Anglo-saxonised, and their desire to speak their native languages and establish schools, churches, and newspapers that maintained their cultural identities and traditions (1998: 5).

For Cape Verdeans, the idea of authenticity becomes pronounced as the immigrant community distinguishes itself vis-à-vis the older Cape Verdean-American population. Indeed, the contemporary coexistence of these two sectors results in claims of legitimacy and authenticity as both sectors vie for equal ownership of the label 'Cape Verdean'. This contention has created an intracultural gap between the two sectors of the diaspora, one often marked by animosity and distrust (Greenfield 1976). Janice (pseudonym) provides an example of how Cape Verdean immigrant perceptions of Cape Verdean-Americans have been interpreted as an affront to one's sense of Cape Verdeanness; she often speaks discontentedly of 'those Portagees' (Cape Verdean immigrants) who 'think they're better than everyone' because they speak Kriolu and cook Cape Verdean food different than the way she was taught:

They think... those who came from there know everything there is to know. And then it's like, you know, because we were born here and raised here and we're raised differently, it's like we're not really Cape Verdeans, you know, unless you *change up* and do this and do that.

By 'change up,' Janice invokes the conversations she has had with Cape Verdean co-workers who have urged her to learn Kriolu and to alter the culinary traditions that she learned from her parents. Indeed, the contestation over who is or is not authentically Cape Verdean is often played out against these specific cultural signifiers.

People of Cape Verdean descent living in Boston can be understood in relation to the larger U.S. African diaspora by the way they negotiate

their social identities. Both Cape Verdean-Americans and immigrants employ key themes from African diaspora theory in the social construction and maintenance of their identities. Some Cape Verdean immigrants, for example, draw on the imagining of Cape Verde as geographically, culturally, and politically part of continental Africa. Cape Verdean-Americans, on the other hand, stress their affinity with African Americans as rooted in a common experience of racial discrimination and of reclaiming the racial categories of Black or African American as positive self-designators.

However, one aspect of Cape Verdean diaspora identity formation that cannot be excluded is the impact of Portuguese colonisation. The Cape Verdean diaspora has maintained a love-hate relationship with the Portuguese. In response to Cape Verdeans calling themselves Portuguese, Portuguese-Americans have distanced themselves historically from the Cape Verdean immigrants to avoid being classified as non-White. This has caused a long-standing rift and deep-seated animosity between the two communities (Greenfield 1976). In addition, it has had an impact on how Cape Verdeans have since identified themselves, particularly for those who have lived under the conditions of both colonialism and independence.

## Conclusion

We have examined the concept of diaspora and how the discourses of 'diaspora', 'imagined community' and 'historical memory' have an impact on diasporic identity formation. The articulation of diaspora discourses has a particular relevance to the study of black immigrant groups. Theories of the African diaspora are particularly useful to this study in how they illuminate the processes through which Cape Verdean-descended people negotiate their identities as multiple and transgressive. In other words, the concept of the African diaspora highlights how Cape Verdean identities are manifested in diasporic and transnational experiences.

The concept of diaspora is useful as a means to effectively destabilise fixed notions of race and nation. It offers a more 'pluralised notion of race' that renders cultural difference 'multiple and complex' (Eisenstein 1996: 17). Moreover, it has the potential to de-essentialise and decenter claims to authenticity often equated with defining black subjectivities. Finally, given the fact that diasporic identities are often formed as a result of transnational movement, the concept of the African diaspora has the potential to serve as a critical tool to explore the processes of social, cultural and political (re)alignment related to Black immigrant settlement.

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