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Modernity's Shadow: The Black Transnation in Historical Perspective

Though we often think of globalization and black transnationalism as recent and contemporary phenomenon, it would be more truthful to say in a Platonian fashion that we are simply now remembering something we already knew. In the Americas, throughout the twentieth century and extending back into the nineteenth, black identities have had to find alternative frameworks than the nation for constructing peoplehood. From the outset, the nation-state in all of its early iterations was never conceived of as an institution for blacks and colonials. Rather, blackness has to some degree shadowed the nation form globally, revealing the very limits of the national imaginary.[1]

In *Black Empire: The Masculine Global Imaginary of Caribbean Intellectuals in the United States, 1914 to 1962*, I use the writings of three figures, Marcus Garvey, Claude McKay and C.L.R. James, to describe black transnationalism as a cultural and intellectual movement that first emerged from the political events that ushered in the twentieth century – World War I and the Russian Revolution.[2] In these early years of the twentieth century black New World intellectuals followed closely the debates between Woodrow Wilson and Lenin concerning nationalism and internationalism. As black colonial subjects without easily identifiable national homelands, men such as Marcus Garvey, Claude McKay, C.L.R. James and other black intellectuals like them, turned to imagining a de-territorialized black state – a »Negro Federation« as they termed it – as the alternative to either the idea of an African national homeland or even the independent West Indian states that would later become the political goal of decolonization. Rather, in the 1930s the focus was more on black transnational institutions and forms that could guide and shape a political and cultural identity for the diasporic community.

Beginning in 1916, both the modern »New Negro« and the »New World Negro« (terms used to describe African Americans and Afro-Caribbeans respectively) found themselves oddly situated within the prevailing debate over a colonized

people's right to self-determination. Cyril Briggs, a black Communist leader of the revolutionary organization the *African Blood Brotherhood*, was the first black New World figure to propose a specific kind of political government for the modern black subject, a racial federation that could operate transnationally outside of the bounds of the Western nation-state. Simultaneously, Briggs's contemporary Marcus Garvey held up as an alternative model the representation of a diasporic black political community through a world-wide Black Empire, similar to that of the Western imperial powers. Key African American intellectuals also contributed to these discussions throughout the century. In W.E.B. Du Bois's early *Pan-African Conventions*, Paul Robeson's sense of the radical politics of international travel and performance, and Richard Wright's interest in Pan-Asian and Pan-African movements of the 1950s, such as *Bandung* and *Black Power* on the continent, we see a symbolic geopolitics of the black transnational similar in orientation to that conceived of by their Caribbean contemporaries, Garvey, McKay and James.

The symbolic language used by these figures to mobilize the global imaginations of black subjects across the diaspora, included certain tropes such as the image of a »Negro ship of state,« a metaphor for the mobile and displaced populations of the Black Atlantic. Garvey made this metaphor literal by starting his own line of black-owned steamships, the *Black Star Line*, that transported his message of freedom through empire across the black and white worlds. In novels such as *Home to Harlem* and *Banjo: The Story Without a Plot,* the writer Claude McKay identified fugitive colonies of blacks living in Harlem and in Marseilles after World War I and cast them fictionally as communities of anti-nationalist drifters.[3] In C.L.R. James's writings mid-century, his vision of West Indian federation re-imagined the shape and borders of black political space. Recovering the Greek city-states as an alternative model to the nation James used the geography of the Caribbean archipelago, a landform he saw as the territorial epitome of the free movement of people and ideas across national borders, as the basis for a new vision of the democratic yet mobile black state.

The idea of a black transnation emerges in those moments when black struggle is represented along an internationalist rather than nationalist axis. The black transnation also emerges in the context of increasing efforts on the part of black subjects to define themselves in political languages and frameworks that were originally conceived to exclude them. At the very beginnings of the twentieth century, African American intellectual W.E.B. Du Bois, brought together his own American and European experiences (Du Bois spent some of his university years in Germany) to delineate a global color line, stating: »With nearly every great European empire today walks its dark colonial shadow […], [one] might indeed read the riddle of Europe by making its present plight a matter of colonial shadows.«[4] This observation still merits exploration, that the study of the black transnation, coloniality, and race

is simultaneously a study of the nation, modernity, and whiteness. The belief in a black transnation grows out of Du Bois's colonial world of shadows that, first stretching alongside modernity in New World forms of coloniality and slavery, continued to shroud European and American calls for self-determination during World War I with the colonial realities of the peoples of Africa and the West Indies. These worlds of color then became the shadow threatening the capitalist First World during the post-World War II era, the threat of the Third World »color curtain« described at the *Bandung* conference of the 1950s as a new third estate.[5]

The framework of diaspora has offered a way of recovering and charting the black transnation as a historical formation, one that travels along the maritime pathways of the transatlantic slave trade, paralleling the development of nation forms while somehow always exceeding their definitional capabilities. Some have argued that black transnational epistemologies also reveal a different conception of modern revolutionary struggle, one based not in nationalist or internationalist class ideologies, but rather, emerging organically across the Atlantic and across the contintents, out of the anti-slavery and anti-racist radicalism of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in both Europe and the Americas.[6] In this scenario the Haitian revolution serves as an important test case for theorizing anew modern revolutionary ideologies as represented by the French and American revolutions. To the degree that Toussaint L'Ouverture, the Haitian liberator, had a vision that included the emancipation of slaves throughout the New World and in Africa, his idea of the Haitian republic could be seen as the first attempt to imagine a black transnation with both territorial boundaries and a global, outernational reach.

Beyond these tropes of movement and the language of geography and politics, however, what interests me most about black transnationalism is its discursive and philosophical understanding of the impact of race on modern subject formation in both the New and Old worlds. Over time, black transnationalism has become more than simply the movement beyond or against notions of nationality. Rather, black transnational consciousnesses are now being recognized as embodying multiple forms of identity that exist within and alongside the national, a legion of ethnic, gendered, raced, classed, religious, et. al. commitments that shape the identity choices of modern human subjects at given historical moments. Most recently, black transnational interventions have been imagining much more complex forms of human subjectivity, where nationality rests along intersecting axes that include other modes of being and becoming.[7]

Current studies of black transnationalism and the idea of a black transnation also contain internal debates, a central one being whether new approaches to black Atlantic and transatlantic consciousnesses should be emphasizing blackness as a space where a multitude of racial identities come together, or whether contempo-

rary modes of blackness represent the reverse – the presence of centrifugal forces that differentiate and pull apart the various kinds of communities that could congregate under the sign of blackness – Afro-German, African, African American, Black British, Caribbean, Francophone, Latin American, the black Dutch and black Pacific Islanders, just to name a few. Is global blackness itself a site of intraracial and multiethnic difference, or is it a sign for the sameness of racially based cultural similarities and political solidarities?

A common understanding of contemporary blackness as a global sign is that its meanings are determined by the hegemony of African American cultural forms. But this observation alone is not sufficient: the question should be, how are other forms of blackness in competition with or insubordinate to these forms, and how are those differences related to larger geopolitical formations of power? Another question would be, how do different racial narratives develop simultaneously and in relationship to each other – for example the dialogue between Afro-German feminists and black Caribbean American feminist Audre Lorde – within the context of that black American hegemony, both enabled by it and by countering it? A third set of questions would ask, what does black globality tell us about the other racial formations it is in dialogue with, such as whiteness and alternative constructions of races and peoples ›of color‹? If within the study of blackness we hope to interrogate and ultimately dispense with the hierarchies that have organized our prior constructions of race and the self, then we need to learn how to study blackness globally and transnationally without over-privileging it – how to understand blackness itself as a site that has to be constantly subordinated to the other sites of identity and political formation with which it is in dialogue and interaction.

Notes

1 For historical discussions of the nation and nationalism's evolving forms, see Benedict Anderson, Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism, London (Rev. ed.) 1991; Etienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein, Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities, London 1991.

2 Michelle Stephens, Black Empire: The Masculine Global Imaginary of Caribbean Intellectuals in the United States, 1914 to 1962, Durham/North Carolina 2005.

3 See Claude McKay, Home to Harlem, Boston 1987; ibid., Banjo: A Story without a Plot, New York 1929.

4 W. E. B. Du Bois, The Negro Mind Reaches Out, in: Alain Locke, ed., The New Negro, New York 1992, 385–414, here 386.

5 See Richard Wright, The Color Curtain: A Report on the Bandung Conference, Jackson 1994.

6 See Sibylle Fischer, Modernity Disavowed: Haiti and the Cultures of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, Durham/North Carolina 2004.

7 See for example the work of Caribbean philosopher Sylvia Wynter, as introduced by scholars and students in Anthony Bogues, ed., After Man, Towards the Human: Critical Essays on Sylvia Wynter, Kingston/ Jamaica 2006.