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Diasporic Women's Writing of the Black Atlantic

(En)Gendering Literature and Performance

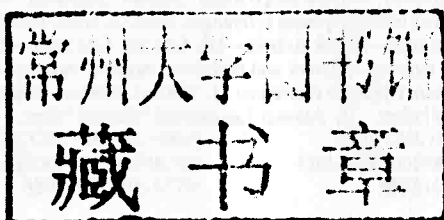
Edited by
Emilia María Durán-Almarza and
Esther Álvarez-López



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Diasporic Women's Writing of the Black Atlantic

This book brings together a complete set of approaches to works by female authors that articulate the black Atlantic in relation to the interplay of race, class, and gender. The chapters provide the grounds to (en)gender a more complex understanding of the scattered geographies of the African diaspora in the Atlantic basin. The variety of approaches displayed bears witness to the vitality of a field that, over the years, has become a diasporic formation itself as it incorporates critical insights and theoretical frameworks from multiple disciplines in the social sciences and the humanities, thus exposing the manifold character of (black) diasporic interconnections within and beyond the Atlantic. Focusing on a wide array of contemporary literary and performance texts by women writers and performers from diverse locations including the Caribbean, Canada, Africa, the US, and the UK, chapters visit genres such as performance art, the novel, science fiction, short stories, and music. For these purposes, the volume is organized around two significant dimensions of diasporas: on the one hand, the material—corporeal and spatial—locations where those displacements associated with travel and exile occur, and, on the other, the fluid environments and networks that connect distant places, cultures, and times. This collection explores the ways in which women of African descent shape the cultures and histories in the modern, colonial, and postcolonial Atlantic worlds.

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Emilia María Durán-Almarza and Esther Álvarez-López

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Introduction

(En)Gendering the Black Atlantic

Emilia María Durán-Almarza

Many women speak, have spoken, and are speaking but are rarely heard.

—Carole Boyce Davies,
*Black Women, Writing and Identity:
Migrations of the Subject* (1994, 20–21)

Women have . . . left their mark on the many silences that surround language—we must, therefore, learn to read those silences.

—Marlene NourbeSe Philip,
“Dis Place: The Space Between” (1994, 297)

In spite of the work done by women writers, performers, and scholars from various locations in and beyond the Black Atlantic in the last decades, the voices and experiences of women in black diasporas are still, in certain contexts, hard to hear. In the early nineties, at the same time that Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* came to light, authors like Carole Boyce Davies and NourbeSe Philip were already urging the academic community to explore the intersectionality of race and gender in order to unearth black women's experiences in colonial and postcolonial locales. However, as the twentieth anniversary of the publication of Gilroy's groundbreaking study is celebrated, the hegemonic masculinist and patriarchal foundations of both white and black Euro-American scholarly practices still work to obscure the interplay of gender, race, class, sexuality, age, ethnicity, and various other geopolitical locations in the production of cultural and academic knowledge. In this scenario, feminist contributions to creative and theoretical Black Atlanticisms are commonly ignored by the broader academic community.

As several scholars have pointed out, Paul Gilroy's otherwise significant work illustrates in various ways a certain disregard of gender issues, evincing the impact that this neglect has on the production of knowledge in and about black communities. On the one hand, the almost exclusive focus on the contributions of middle-class African American US male authors has contributed to the naturalization of male African American black intellectualism

as “universal and normative in the history of black thought and politics,” as Joy James (1997, 57) rightfully argues when she condemns Gilroy’s failure to discuss the works of African American women activists and intellectuals who “also crossed the Atlantic.”¹ Furthermore, given its focus on the routes of African American US intellectuals to Europe, Gilroy’s epistemology has also been criticized for being “both geographically and culturally exclusive,” as the contributions from other nodal points in the Atlantic such as the Caribbean, Africa, and Canada, as well as those produced in languages other than English, are frequently overlooked (Evans 2009, 258). Finally, the endorsement of the idea that travelling enables an illustrated and informed understanding of the world has been viewed as underpinned by a mindset that gives pre-eminence to experiences that, in the opinion of Annalisa Oboe and Anna Scacchi (2008, 5), “have been and are the prerogative of bourgeois men,” thus obscuring the impact of class—and gender—on patterns and differential experiences of migration (DeLoughrey 1998, 215).

However, in spite of the fact that this class and gender bias has been pointed out in many reviews and reworkings of Gilroy’s conceptualization over the years,² this lack of attention to the workings of intersectionality has not prevented this “flawed historiography and political analysis” (James 1997, 57) from becoming a paradigm for the study of circum-Atlantic African diasporas in European and US/Canadian academic settings. Oddly enough, other studies by prominent contemporaries of Gilroy that put forward a more nuanced understanding of the configuration of transatlantic cultural formations have been far less widely acknowledged. This is the case of, for instance, Carole Boyce Davies’s (1994) *Black Women, Writing and Identity: Migrations of the Subject*, published only a few months after Gilroy’s work and taking on some of the same issues. Her model, while being influential for the study of Afro-diasporic women’s literature, has not succeeded in crossing disciplinary boundaries, in part because women’s migrant/diasporic experiences are not regarded as “universal.”³

The consequences of applying Gilroy’s diaspora paradigm loosely to the study of black diasporic populations without taking gender and class into account are therefore far-reaching. As Tina Campt and Deborah A. Thomas (2008, 2) argue, privileging “the mobility of masculine subjects as the primary agents of diasporic formation . . . perpetuate[s] a more general masculinism in the conceptualization of diasporic community,” a situation that has very often led to the implicit—or explicit—assumption that it is men who travel or migrate whereas women stay at home.⁴ A close look at migratory trends and data in the last decades proves this premise to be wrong, as female migrants have accounted for 49 percent of migrant populations since at least the 1960s (Zlotnik 2003). Under these circumstances, the lives and experiences of women who migrate, and also of those who stay put, are often rendered silent and invisible.

Diasporic Women’s Writing of the Black Atlantic: (En)Gendering Literature and Performance is our effort to address these issues. The chapters

in the volume share a commitment to place women's diaspora experiences at the center of enquiry in an attempt to correct the "re-male-ing" (Davies 1994, 86) of African diaspora frameworks. This project seeks to engender a more complex, gendered understanding of the scattered geographies of the African diaspora in the Atlantic basin focusing on the study of contemporary women writers' and performers' literary productions and performative practices. In this volume, the Black Atlantic is conceptualized as a transnational and transcultural contact zone of colonial and postcolonial encounters that enables the re-examination of human cartographies of domination and resistance. In this sense, even though we agree with Gilroy (1993, 16) in his claim that "the history of the black Atlantic . . . continually crisscrossed by the movements of black people—not only as commodities but engaged in various struggles towards emancipation, autonomy, and citizenship—provides a means to re-examine the problems of nationality, location, identity, and historical memory," we consider that this goal cannot be fully achieved without a more nuanced and thorough gendered analysis of Afro-diasporic movements.

With all these concerns in mind, the chapters in this volume engage in a critical dialogue with Gilroy's model in a number of ways. First and foremost, placing women's experiences at the heart of the study of diasporic movements in the Atlantic region will necessarily redefine narrow interpretations of black cultures and experiences. As Agustín Laó-Montes (2007, 315) puts it, "[G]endering African diaspora discourses implies important epistemic breaks and political imperatives including revisiting and challenging the masculinist character of mainstream ideologies of global Blackness, centering women histories and feminist perspectives, and recognizing the significance of gender and sexual difference among the multiple mediations that constitute Afro-diasporic selves." In the same vein, the chapters in this volume, albeit in different ways, seek to disengage from the legacies of the colonial and patriarchal epistemologies, while taking up the challenge of addressing Donna Gabaccia's (2004, 18) call for the need of gender analyses of transnational phenomena.

Secondly, by incorporating into our analysis contributions from and about authors writing and performing from a wide range of geopolitical locations (Canada, Africa, Caribbean, US, Europe), it is our goal to map the multiple gender cartographies that emerge in what William Boelhower (2008, 86) has referred to as "the new Atlantic Studies matrix." Hence, the Black Atlantic is envisioned as a critical, rhizomorphic space of diasporic cultural exchange and production, deriving not only from travel, movement, or displacement but also from those "strategic and existential forms of borrowing that black communities imagine and construct transnationally" (Campt and Thomas 2008, 2). In this sense, our volume does not only acknowledge the contributions of the wealth of scholars that, over the past twenty years, have effectively expanded Gilroy's model into a much more complex, multiaxial articulation of Black Atlantic geographies, but also

seeks to contribute to moving it further. The variety of approaches displayed in the different chapters bears witness to the vitality of a field that, over the years, has become a diasporic formation itself. Contemporary Black Atlantic scholarship incorporates critical insights and theoretical frameworks from multiple disciplines in the social sciences and the humanities, thus exposing the manifold character of (black) diasporic interconnections within and beyond the Atlantic basin.

Last but not least, our conceptualization of Black Atlantic diasporas, in line with Carole Boyce Davies and Babacar M'Bow (2007, 14), seeks to broaden the scope of classical African diaspora studies so as to include the dispersal of Africans and Afro-descendant populations through *voluntary*, *forced*, and *induced* migrations, in an attempt to bridge the gap between colonial and postcolonial Black Atlantic geographies and materialities. It is worth noting that, even though some particularities of Afro-Atlantic diasporic formations coincide and intersect with those of other African diasporas, our conceptualization of the Black Atlantic is not necessarily synonymous with the broader African diaspora. If it is certainly true that, as Brent Hayes Edwards and colleagues (2000, 49) have noted, the term imposes certain hemispheric limitations to the interwoven and broad nature of black diasporic networks, in accordance with Analisa Oboe and Anna Scacchi's (2008, 1) view, we find the concept useful as it highlights "the specificities of black cultures, histories, arts, and ideologies against the larger background of diasporic movements" both around the Atlantic and within larger geographical spatialities. In our volume, the Black Atlantic, as a geospatial and socio-cultural ever-changing conglomerate, materializes at the intersections of local Atlantic geographies and cultural histories, past and contemporary black diasporic practices and communities, and larger global phenomena, all of them mediated by the play of differences—ethnicity, gender, age, class, sexuality, place. Aiming at providing a wide-ranging overview of Afro-Atlantic experiences, the selection of essays included here explore black diasporic cultural formations and articulations of identities in contemporary black Caribbean, Canadian, Southern African, British, and US Afro-diasporic communities, as well as the continuous interactions among them. For these purposes, the volume is organized around two significant dimensions of diasporas: on the one hand, the physical (corporeal and spatial) locations where those displacements associated with travel and exile occur; on the other, in the fluid environments and networks that connect distant places, cultures, and times.

"Diasporic Materialities" groups a series of chapters exploring bodily and spatial configurations of Black Atlanticisms. Under the "Body Politics" section, Fo Wilson's opening chapter "Seeing Black and the Color of Representation" examines the interpretations and uses of blackness—both as a color and in relation to the articulation of Africanness—in the works of European and African American artists. The first part of the piece traces the influences of African aesthetics (*l'art nègre*) in the works of Dadaist

artists, European and American modernists, as well as the role played by jazz music and Black Atlantic expressive impulses in the works of black and white artists in the New York School of Abstract Expressionism of the 1940s. By interpreting African and African American cultural artifacts as significant sources in the genesis and development of these art movements, Wilson places black aesthetics at the heart of twentieth century's American and Western European artistic practices. The second part of her chapter focuses on the various meanings that, as a result of these earlier representations, are currently ascribed to black bodies in the US psyche, paying particular attention to audience reactions to the presentation of black bodies in the works of contemporary African American artists. The last section is devoted to the discussion of her own artistic responses to the issues she has previously put forward, which include her series of diptychs titled *Seeing: Black Lamp, Black Table, Black Chair* (2006), where she seeks to explore "the collision of metonymous meanings and representations of the body, objects, color and gender in a single work," thus inviting critical inquiry into what is seen when looking at the color black.

In "i think i might be broken": The Reconstitution of Black Atlantic Bodies and Memories in Sharon Bridgforth's *Delta Dandi*," Ana-Maurine Lara delves into Sharon Bridgforth's performance piece in order to set forth a conceptualization of female reproductive organs as sites for the production of social bodies that go beyond the merely corporeal. Drawing from Hortense Spillers's (1984, 155) understanding of the womb as a "point of passage between the human and the non-human world," Lara traces parallelisms between this configuration and that of Gilroy's central metaphor of the slave ship inasmuch as both function as liminal spaces for the construction of "the black female body as the site for systematic and specifically located violence." As Lara contends, with its palimpsestic references to the Middle Passage, the Mississippi Delta, the slave trade and its physical markets, blues, Yoruba cosmologies, and southern African American social and geographic history—all of these intertwined with Bridgforth's personal experiences—*Delta Dandi* powerfully unearths the traumas and resiliencies among the descendents of the Middle Passage, thus revealing a new logic of history in which recovery and transformation are made possible.

In her "Black British Women's Literature and the Politics of Hair," Tracey Walters takes on the complexities of beauty politics and its effects on black women's lives, contributing new insights into a recurring theme that has figured prominently in the works, both fictional and non-fictional, of women writers of color.⁵ In 1970, Nobel Prize laureate Toni Morrison published *The Bluest Eye*, the poignant story of black and ugly Pecola Breedlove, an eleven-year-old living in Midwestern America in the early 1940s, who prays to get the blue eyes of popular young film star Shirley Temple and candy-model Mary Jane, in the belief that external appearance will earn her the love and acceptance of both family and society that she has lacked throughout her childhood. Several decades later, many young black

girls and even older women's lives are still dominated by white notions of beauty that they aspire to fulfill by erasing unwanted marks of otherness, a self-transforming process that will enable them to be/become fully acceptable. As one of the most troubling marks of alterity, and the most relatively malleable at that, kinky, wooly, or frizzy hair has been *the* physical feature to mold in order to gain both self-esteem and access to the larger world. Unsurprisingly, hair has turned into the physical marker over which issues of racial identity have frequently pivoted. Whereas some black women writers celebrate natural hair and indict those who go through painful chemical processes to straighten it, thereby dishonoring themselves, others, like bell hooks (1989) and cultural critic Kobena Mercer (1994), diminish the aesthetic and moral transcendence of hairstyles that imitate white hairstyles, considering them just a simple rite of passage (hooks) or a specifically cultural activity and practice (Mercer). Tracey L. Walters brings together some of these debates over hair straightening in Chapter 3, where she focuses on the complexities of hair and beauty politics as well as on the psychological impact that they have had on black women who choose to shape their (racial) identity in accordance to standards of beauty that exclude them. In her analysis of Andrea Levy's *Every Light in the House is Burnin'*, Bernardine Evaristo's *Lara*, and Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*, Walters explores the discourse on black hair and racial aesthetics of these British writers of Jamaican (Levy), Jamaican-British (Smith), and British-Nigerian (Evaristo) origins. She likewise highlights the significance of the beauty salon, an ambivalent space that both reinforces negative views of black beauty and functions "as an important cultural institution that provides the older generation of black women with a 'safe space' to fellowship with others who share their experiences." Challenging white standards of beauty and self-acceptance, these women strengthen their bonds to each other and to their Caribbean islands rather than straighten their hair, deriving a positive sense of (self-)identity and community that ultimately empowers them as black people and as women. According to Walters, the novels she studies also contribute to uncovering the lucrative profits of a hair/beauty industry "that serves black women as consumers rather than investors."

Mathide Mergeai's contribution provides a smooth transition between the "Body Politics" and the "Reconfiguring Space" sections as she frames part of her discussion of Dionne Brand's works around the articulations of land and women's bodies as spaces susceptible of being invaded and conquered in colonial enterprises. Her "Lyrical Cartographies: Redrawing the Boundaries of the Black Atlantic in Dionne Brand's *A Map to the Door of No Return* and *At the Full and Change of the Moon*" evidences not only the patriarchal underpinnings and practices of the modern/colonial regimes of power but also the many parallelisms in the discursive and material configuration of what she terms "the outer space (land) and the inner space (body)." Her careful analysis of the central role that the drawing of alternative physical and spiritual cartographies plays in Brand's fiction and

non-fiction points to the centrality of map-making in the process of imperial expansion, thus inserting her narratives in the realm of postcoloniality. Drawing from NourbeSe Philip's (1994) metaphor of "dis place," Mergeai moves to a discussion of the ways in which Brand addresses the convergence of forced productive and reproductive labor in enslaved women's bodies, notably by investing her characters with the agency to reappropriate their own bodies and minds outside the confines of Western rationality. The remainder of the chapter is set to explore what she sees as the "postcolonial spatial counterstrategies" in Brand's work. On the one hand, her "Door of No Return," symbolically emerging from the fluid, borderless spatialities of the ocean, is interpreted as a creative critical response to Gilroy's conceptualization of the Black Atlantic as a genderless geohistorical formation. Moreover, as Mergeai convincingly argues, the blurring of spatial boundaries is mirrored in Brand's tidalectic narrative technique and the fragmented lives of her characters, thus giving way to what she identifies as a new lyrical cartography.

Myriam Moïse turns to science fiction as a means to discuss the reconstruction of space in dystopian literature. In her "Diasporic Caribbean Women Transcending Dystopian Spaces and Reconnecting Fragmented Identities in Nalo Hopkinson's *Brown Girl in the Ring* and *Midnight Robber*," Moïse delves into Hopkinson's first two published novels in order to explore the effects of displacement in the lives of the female characters that populate her stories. Inhabiting dystopian worlds, Hopkinson's characters struggle to build safe diasporic spaces of expression. In this context, hybridity and transculturation processes prove to be particularly productive as it is only through the combination of physical and spiritual elements taken from different cultural traditions that her heroines are able to achieve full subjectivity and spatial agency in the postcolonial locales they inhabit. In Moïse's view, by combining elements from science fiction and magical realism, Hopkinson attempts at pushing up traditional boundaries in genre itself while at the same time reflecting the intense cross-culturality and intermediality that characterize Afro-Caribbean diasporic folk culture, language, and history.

In "The Black Atlantic and Home: Women and Migrations in Lauretta Ngcobo's *And They Didn't Die* and Yvonne Vera's *The Stone Virgins*," Carolyn Hart revisits one of the main locales in the diasporic imagination: the concept of home. Her approach takes an innovative look at the transformation of this socio-spatial setting in migrant narratives by focusing on the impact of migration not on the migrant subject itself but on the experiences of those who stay in place. In Hart's view, the privileging of transnational and transatlantic mobile subjectivities in Postcolonial and Diaspora Studies frequently results in a lack of attention to those who remain "at home," but whose lives are also necessarily affected by the migrations of other members in the family or community. Applying a diaspora framework to her discussion of Ngcobo's and Vera's novels, Hart vindicates the centrality of