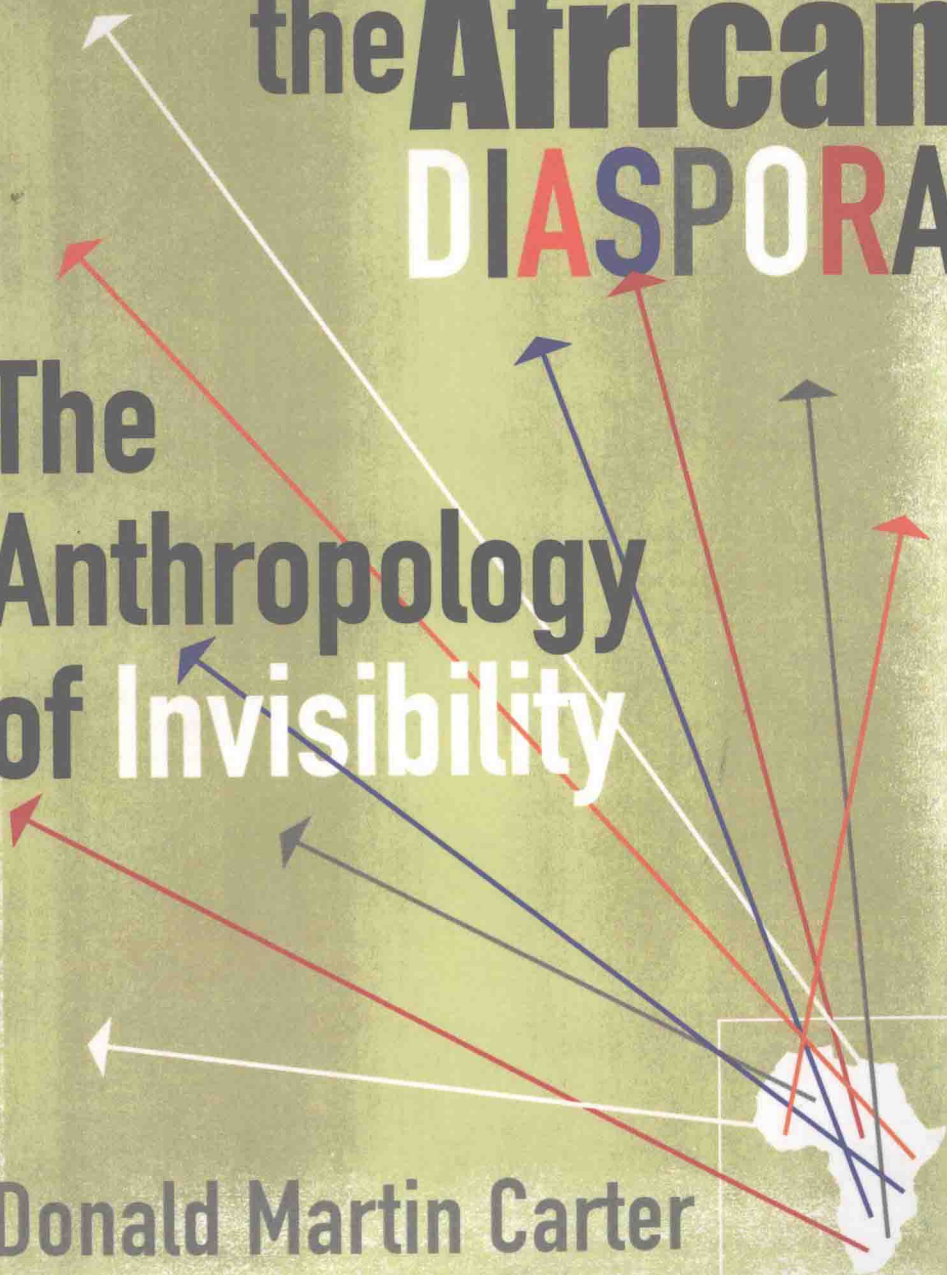


Navigating the African DIASPORA

The Anthropology of Invisibility

Donald Martin Carter



**NAVIGATING
THE
AFRICAN DIASPORA**
THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF INVISIBILITY



University of Minnesota Press

Minneapolis

London

Copyright 2010 by the Regents of the University of Minnesota

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the publisher.

Published by the University of Minnesota Press

111 Third Avenue South, Suite 290

Minneapolis, MN 55401-2520

<http://www.upress.umn.edu>

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Carter, Donald Martin.

Navigating the African diaspora : the anthropology of invisibility/Donald Martin Carter.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-8166-4777-4 (hc : alk. paper)—ISBN 978-0-8166-4778-1

(pb : alk. paper)

1. African diaspora. 2. Photography in ethnology—Africa. 3. Ethnology—Africa. 4. Senghor, Léopold Sédar, 1906–2001—Criticism and interpretation. 5. Senegalese—Italy—Social conditions. 6. Senegalese—Race identity—Italy. 7. Carter, Donald Martin. I. Title.

DT16.5.C38 2010

305.896—dc22

2009012485

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper

The University of Minnesota is an equal-opportunity educator and employer.

16 15 14 13 12 11 10 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2

Preface

They perceived arts in general to be a crack in racism.

— WILLIAM A. SHACK, *HARLEM IN MONTMARTRE*

The location of my anthropological imagination began in Oakland, California, where I spent my childhood in the peculiar mix of social exclusion, racism, and normal life that the city offered. One must acknowledge one's arrivals and departures, setting in this manner the basic structure of the trope of the voyage; for me it was a particular trajectory of black working-class life in Oakland, California, from which a life in the world of the mind was as likely as a walk on the moon.

Diaspora figured in my life from its very beginnings: I am the second son of parents from Louisiana who, along with other relatives, lived in a kind of suspended South in northern California. They never spoke much about their encounters with Southern racism to their children of the North, fearing that their experiences might teach us to hate; after all these years I still find this extraordinary. Every now and then a story would emerge through an aunt or uncle, but never from my parents. It is a quintessential experience of diaspora that the experiences of one generation may seem unimaginable to another. It is the kernel of lived experience and the history of complicated identities through time that draw us back to widening circles of displacement as black people in the Western world. Every circle eventually leads to considerations of the African side of the hyphen. Navigating diaspora is an integral part of my experience, and even if I trace my family back to Louisiana and to the Native American, African, and European roots I might find there, or to a French-speaking island in the Caribbean where some of my relatives are said to have originated in another black diaspora, or again to Africa,

the mystic source of all these wonderings, an element of mystery still remains, along with an uneasy cynicism that such will hold real meaning for me in the end. As James T. Campbell demonstrates in his book *Middle Passages: African American Journeys to Africa, 1787–2005*, African Americans returning to Africa, an imagined place of origin, have confronted the rich navigable waters of subjectivity in this distant homeland only to discover that little is revealed that will quell their sense of longing, while a great many questions arise that complicate the notion of belonging to this at times strange land (Campbell 2006). As a scholar I have devoted much of my life to making sense of the dislocation of others, but I am still trying to come to terms with my own location in diaspora. Like others I am navigating this experience. The nautical metaphor is not fortuitous, it is existential.

In his haunting book *Black Gold of the Sun: Searching for Home in Africa and Beyond* (2005) Ekow Eshun stands before the “Door of No Return” in Ghana, one of the many archways through which Africans pass on their way across the Atlantic Ocean, and acknowledges that this gateway had enacted a transformation of unfathomable power in one part of humanity: “I stood beside it and ran my hands along the stonework. I stepped through it as slaves had done, to the shoreline and the waves. As I did, it came to me that, in the wake of slavery, all of us black people born in the West are exiles” (Eshun 2005, 110). Indeed, this distant Door of No Return confronts each of us with our own experience as exiles in the African diaspora in different ways. Certainly the peculiar fate of the black subject in the West inaugurates an ongoing, seemingly perpetual struggle with social and political belonging on the other side of that door for the member of the black diaspora.

During the late 1980s I was conducting exploratory research in Turin, Italy. In the heat of the summer sun one morning I set out across the historic heart of the city, across the river Po and up into the hills to meet with Italian historian Giovanni Levi. Anthropologist Vanessa Maher arranged my introduction. Giovanni Levi was best known for his work in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century microhistory, most recently the history of young people. I was about to enter my own layer of migration as Levi ushered me into the lovely house that had once belonged to his uncle, Primo Levi. We spoke of sports, the rising anti-immigrant sentiment targeting blacks and Muslims, and the resurgence of anti-Semitism

in Italy. Levi's insights on the importance of sport, anti-immigrant sentiment, and religious intolerance in this period turned out to be one of the first acknowledgments of the early formation of what was to become a new right-wing movement among the youth, resulting some years later in the founding of future-premier Berlusconi's "Forza Italia" political movement. It was a beautiful time of day and the sun filtered through the typically long Italian windows, cascading into the room and over the bare wood floors; all was quiet in the quarter, as the sounds that were about to pour out of the city below had not yet begun to reveal themselves. The great warmth and openness of Levi was very winning; I was concerned that I might be imposing, for he was so generous with his time and so well informed on developments in the country that I might have talked for hours. His uncle was known to be generous with students and others who were struggling to grapple with contemporary events—indeed, he had been a kind of exemplary activist for human rights and tolerance, even volunteering in local schools. Primo Levi was a beacon of light for those who did not or could not fathom the most alarming threat to humanity lurking just below the surface. Before many other voices related the memory of the Holocaust in Europe, Levi taught new generations of its horrors but also (and perhaps this is the great power of his writing) its message of hope. Only twice that day did our talk turn briefly to Primo Levi, but the memory of the writer, scientist, and humanist filled the room as surely as did the morning light.

In 1945 when Primo Levi returned to Turin from his internment in Auschwitz, the full scope of Hitler's genocide and the new vocabulary of horror it introduced to the world was not yet widely known; it would take years before the true account was fully acknowledged. His experience speaks to us in part because every generation awakens too late to a human tragedy that might have been avoided. For our generation Darfur, the Congo, and certainly Rwanda ring in our ears. Immediately after his return Levi would recount his story to anyone who would listen, beginning with those closest to him. He also found himself telling his experiences to strangers on trains (Thompson 2002). He was struggling to make a world he had known visible to others, being true to those who could no longer speak for themselves. While the landscape still bore the open wounds of the war, Levi (like other exiles) became a storyteller-witness. As events would have it, his writings were among the first

accounts of the Holocaust to be widely circulated in Italy and Germany, introducing new generations to the horrors of the war years and awakening the living memory of others. Born of a generation steeped in classical literature, his account was shaped partly by the tutorials of his youth.

Contemporary poet Morri Creech in his collection *Field Knowledge* (2006) imagines Primo Levi in his home in Turin rereading the *Divine Comedy* of Dante. The poem "The Canto of Ulysses" was published in *The New Republic* some years ago, and Creech envisions Levi, book in hand in an easy chair, "nodding above the page where Ulysses/tells how his second journey ends" (Creech 2006, 22).¹ For Ulysses and for us all, life is a journey. "Drowsing, head propped above the eighth circle, he feels the present shifting like a keel": the metaphors of the "ship" on a voyage and of the Pilgrim or the author on an implied spiritual journey of the soul mark the poet's tribute as they shape a thematic in the work of Dante (21). In the tradition of nautical writing, the journey becomes a kind of metatext as the discourse of a ship was its route or itinerary and the pathway or narrative created by the writer for the reader is a route or journey of a different nature (Blackmore 2001, 29). I employ these different readings of passage in my understanding of navigating diaspora as both the individual experience and the representation of the collective experience of diaspora.

In *Navigating the African Diaspora* I explore the rich modalities of the journey in my own experiences as a scholar and in the collective experience of the African diaspora. Drawing on the work of postcolonial theorist Frantz Fanon, I interrogate the idea of visibility and invisibility, metaphors that David Theo Goldberg notes "pervade Fanon's body of work" (2000, 179).

In each chapter I take up aspects of the impact of invisibility on the lives of various categories of person, migrants, colonial soldiers, established Europeans, and newcomers. In chapter 1 I explore the meanings of invisibility for subjects caught in the power play of history. Chapter 2 discusses afrocentrism, race, and the making of an anthropological sensibility through my own experiences, training, and fieldwork. In chapter 3 I review stereotypes and other distinctions in the making of the contemporary crisis in Darfur, Sudan. I further analyze the photographic turn in the representation of Other cultures in chapter 4, where I examine the role of race in the Western photographic imaginary. I consider the play

of diasporic nostalgia and political longings for the future in chapter 5 by viewing the experiences and contributions of colonial soldiers through the work of a former Senegalese president, the late Léopold Sédar Senghor and in chapters 6 and 7 by studying the late Senegalese filmmaker Ousmane Sembene. Finally, the conclusion looks at our passion for exclusion in contemporary society through the experiences of people in diaspora who inhabit new and diverse subjectivities, making themselves known in creative ways against a conceptual constellation that often has no place for them (so-called Fortress Europe) or ability (or expansive cultural ideology) to consider them as equals sharing the same time and space. Throughout the book we consider an African diaspora in motion, at times driven off course only to return to it transformed, with renewed strength and vision for the journey ahead.

Acknowledgments

This project is the result of an itinerant scholar traveling the byways of academic life. The idea for this book came to me as I attempted to plow through the rapidly growing literature on diaspora and also through my exploration of the world that Senegalese migrants and others introduced me to in Turin, Italy. Anthropology is somewhat like a game of pick-up basketball: you play with those who show up and share with them the love of the game. For the anthropologist it is often the people who just show up who have the most lasting impact on one's understandings, perceptions, and research. I cannot adequately acknowledge all the people who assisted me along the way, but I will offer my thanks to some of them.

I began this manuscript while a fellow at the Stanford Humanities Center, where I was encouraged to explore the world beyond anthropology. I ventured into anthropological visions of film, poetry, and other aspects of visual culture that form the foundation of this project. I must thank a number of people for this productive push, including Mark Seltzer, Ruth Shklar Nissé, and Laurie Shrage, among my most steadfast interlocutors and instigators. I am grateful to associate director Susan E. Dunn for her kindness, encouragement, and introduction to the poetic imagination and the curious constellation of the avant-garde through her work on Mina Loy. I owe special thanks to Keith Michael Baker, who fought far beyond the call of duty for my ability to participate. I am grateful to the librarians and the archivists at the Hoover Institution at Stanford University for their kind assistance and access to the collections, and I thank the Stanford graduate students who attended my seminar on diaspora and sparked my imagination with the rich complexity of their work and experience.

Over my years at The Johns Hopkins University I have been continually educated by my students and encouraged and challenged by my colleagues. I thank many friends and colleagues for their generous comments on parts of this book; without the critical engagement of their efforts, this manuscript may never have seen the light of day. I am especially grateful to historian Sara Berry for her undying support, keen love of scholarship, and thoughtful critique and discussions of my work. Jane Guyer was a welcome interlocutor, helping me explore the nature of the postcolonial world and the entanglements of Western philosophical traditions in anthropological inquiry. Sonia Ryang I must thank for sharing her razor-sharp ethnographic sensibilities and humor. I am indebted to Michel-Rolph Trouillot for opening up for me the exploration of the black diaspora and its attendant philosophical and epistemological problems. I am grateful to Gyanendra Pandey and Deborah Reynolds for their comments and suggestions, and to Brakette Williams for helping me to recognize the curious play of violence, justice, and state ideology. I am solely responsible for any errors or misrepresentations that may remain.

I acknowledge the support and contributions of several institutions without which this book could not have been completed. Core concerns of the work emerged while I was a fellow at the Stanford Humanities Center. I began to elaborate on issues related to the study of diaspora while I was the Luce Distinguished Professor of Diaspora and Community Studies at Dickinson College, for which I thank the college and the Luce Foundation. Periods of fieldwork and writing were completed with support from The Johns Hopkins University and the Italian studies program I directed in 2004 at Villa Spellman in Florence, Italy. I'd also like to thank Hamilton College for their support in the final stages of the production process.

I thank my colleagues Shelley P. Haley, Nigel Westmaas, and Angel David Nieves of the Africana studies program at Hamilton College for the immeasurably supportive and nurturing environment they offered.

Working with the University of Minnesota Press has been a great pleasure. I thank former executive editor Carrie Mullen for her initial support and Richard W. Morrison for his many suggestions and contributions to the manuscript, as well as his continued support over the years. I would also like to acknowledge the loving attention to detail

of editorial assistant Adam Brunner and freelance copyeditor Nancy Kotary; without their fine work, this ship would not have set sail.

My greatest debt belongs to my family. I acknowledge the endless care, support, and intellectual collaboration of Heather Merrill, who helped to sustain this long journey and nurture a love of theory, philosophy, and social practice. To our children, Nicolas and Eliana, my great thanks for your endurance of untold dislocations and cultural shocks over the years. During the writing of this book my mother Julia suffered a stroke that severely compromised her cognitive abilities, a fact that deeply saddens me. She and my late father Charlie taught me to see the unseen, and I am forever indebted to both of them. This book is dedicated to my family.

Since the late 1990s I have conducted periods of research in Italy, continuing with many of the Senegalese from my fieldwork at the dawn of the immigration crisis in the country. I have interviewed, argued with, and been deeply informed and influenced by a host of scholars and activists in Turin. They helped to shape my understandings of the European social and cultural world, and I am forever indebted to them.

Contents

Preface	vii
Acknowledgments	xiii
Introduction: The Anthropology of Invisibility	1
1 A Nonracial Education: On Navigating Diaspora, Anti-Black Caricature, and Anthropology	35
2 Remembering Khartoum and Other Tales of Displacement	71
3 The Inexhaustible Sense of Exile: Other Cultures in the Photographic Imaginary	105
4 Crossing Modernity: The Journey from Imperial to Diasporic Nostalgia	143
5 Sites of Erasure: Black Prisoners and the Poetry of Léopold Sédar Senghor	173
6 Comrade Storyteller: Diasporic Encounters in the Cinema of Ousmane Sembene	209
7 Travel Warnings: Observations of Voyages Real and Imagined	241
Notes	271
Bibliography	307
Index	327

The Anthropology of Invisibility

No matter where on the current spectrum . . . anthropologists locate themselves, they have to find the “out there” by entering the land of anthropological “dreaming,” *the field*.

—BERNARD COHN, *HISTORY AND ANTHROPOLOGY:
THE STATE OF PLAY*

Journeys are an active engagement with the world, and are at the very least transformative and irreversible. Journeys have a sense of agency that we must keep alive through our explorations. Let me paraphrase the beginning of an old tale. It is a song of diaspora and concerns the people of the African diaspora and the twists and turns that have time and again driven people off course, transformed by the struggle to regain their way and dignity, with renewed strength and vision for the journey ahead. I invoke the spirit of the Odyssey because it is deeply rooted in the anthropological imagination—the structure of our ethnographic encounters so closely follows the notion of the journey that our discourse is marked by the journey’s sequence. My work is also influenced by my location in Western Europe on the rim of the Mediterranean, the porous host to the comings and goings of people from every corner of the world. I use the idea of navigation to focus on the agency and courage of those who must find their way in the aftermath of displacement. Some journeys are never completed, while others lead to unexpected destinations and leave their trace in the experiences of the traveler. I consider the nature and meaning of contemporary black subjectivity and presence through the notion of “invisibility.” The availability of invisibility often operates in tandem with ambiguous state practice or inaction, and there is a tendency to blame the individual migrant who clings to a makeshift boat and not the system of illicit labor

regimes, rigid immigration policies, and failed economic conditions that make such a voyage seem one of the only viable options for survival.

In contemporary Europe, immigration commands center stage as traditional notions of national and cultural belonging are challenged by the reconfiguration of notions of sovereignty, territory, and community in the making of the European Union. The notion of the coming of this postnational world raises illuminating dilemmas concerning European relations with others, especially postcolonial Africa (Carnegie 2002; Williams 1991a; Malkki 1995).¹ In the context of anxiety over the forms of belonging for members of the African diaspora, as race, gender, and historical legacy render blackness a marker of outsider status, it becomes increasingly difficult to navigate the waters of belonging.

On a very hot Turin summer evening in 2006, just minutes from the site of one the many Olympic villages (now a kind of tourist beacon) on the outskirts of the city, my friend Babacar—who has traveled to his homeland only a handful of times over the last ten years—turns to me and, after a brief outburst in Wolof to his sister and brother-in-law in the next room, shifts to Italian. “Now everyone is dancing,” he says. For the better part of an hour we have been watching an endless stream of music videos on Senegalese television, an experience made possible in part by the new world of African mobility and underscored by the Senegalese diasporic spectatorship enabled by new satellite links to Europe that connect the diaspora directly with the nightly parade of television programming back home. In one of the videos, the momentary flash of a multicolored traditional fishing boat or pirogue brightens the screen and unleashes another kind of response—an unexpected (for me) sadness. Babacar’s comment on dancing is a not-so-veiled reference to the lack of opportunity for young people back home “who look around themselves in their villages” and, finding no way to contribute to the lives of their families, then look out to sea. Young people increasingly comb the shores south of Dakar seeking out former fishermen that might captain a tiny wooden canoe with precious little hope of ever making European land-fall. This is not just folklore of the diaspora, as earlier that year in Thiaroye, a poor suburb of Dakar that is infamous as the site of a massacre of Senegalese soldiers by French troops in 1944, one of the countries worst navel accidents occurred, taking the lives of eighty-one young people from the village attempting to reach Europe in a converted fishing boat.² The migration is inspired by a kind of perfect global storm. In European

countries such as Italy, a quiet search has been going on for some time in an effort to continually replenish a declining and increasingly aging labor force. In addition, Italy has one of the lowest birth rates in the world. Despite official denials, Europe will be dependent on migrant labor for years to come.³

The dancing, at times a cross between elements of global hip-hop culture and traditional forms such as haunting contemporary rituals, signals the quiet desperation of a diasporic community that understands the hardships of displacement and economic decline. Across the satellite channels, having consolidated the direct window into Senegalese experience, more and more programs refer in one way or another to the exodus of a new generation and reflect back a dimension of its exasperation. Immigration is literally what everyone was talking about in the summer of 2006, from the local news reports to the sports commentators at popular wrestling matches—at some point all are preoccupied with the boats.

Babacar's sister calls out from the other room: "Many of them leave but where do they go—their families don't hear from them . . . their families don't hear from them." Babacar picks up the theme: "What has happened to all of these people?" he asks. "We know that they have left, but then no one has heard from them again, many, many of them and where have they gone? How can you travel to France in this?" he says, pointing the passing of a tiny multicolored pirogue. "They must be somewhere but their families never hear from them again—dead," he says at last, dropping and shaking his head, his voice now all but a whisper.

Long ago Michlet warned us of the sea's passion for erasure. The tiny pirogue in the video is a symbol of cultural pride; it is clear that it was never meant to attempt such an ambitious voyage. The waters surrounding some of the major points of arrival for foreign migrants by sea in such places as Sicily have come to be called "liquid tombs" by the local fishing people, who find the evidence of failed voyages so often in their nets that they now avoid vast tracts of these waters that are known to be frequented by the vessels of this human trafficking.

By now the conversation embraces everyone in the apartment with the weight of the human tragedy that daily touches the lives of so many. My son Nico, while keeping his sister Eliana entertained, now strains to follow the conversation across the room from where Babacar and I are sitting side by side. I catch my wife Heather's eye, acknowledging

the mood change and knowing somehow that the coming moments will require our full attention so that we might reconstruct events later. Babacar now turns to Nico and draws him directly in to the discussion: A young man Nico's age, what will he do to look after his family? The old people can do nothing; he needs to help them but has nothing in his pockets, not even enough to replace the jeans that he is wearing, only a few cents a day if that. He cannot live like that and there is no work in Senegal, so he takes to the boat. There are so many of them now. . .

While my family lived in a small apartment in Turin, Babacar's children lived in a compound in Dakar and rarely saw him. When I first met him almost twenty years ago, he had already been traveling between African and Europe for more than a decade. In the intervening years he has been joined by two sisters, a brother, and countless cousins and friends that he has in a sense "sponsored." Now he hopes to return for good, a hope he has been nurturing for years. There are always others, however, who wish to come, and they rely on the kindness of people like Babacar. Worsening conditions back home have kept him here, but as he gets older he can no longer get the relatively good contract factory jobs he enjoyed when he was younger.⁴ Now he must put together odd jobs, and, in his fifties, he waits for benefits and pension payments and, like so many migrants and Italians in the volatile labor market today, is caught up in litigation.⁵

Since the 1960s the population in Senegal has doubled, and a large portion of the increase is young people still dependent on their families. Despite improvements in the economy in recent years, some point to the lack of support for agriculture, slumping returns in the fisheries, rising prices, and taxation as factors contributing to the fact that so many young people are forced to leave (Riccio 2007, 47). Some of the highest rates of rural-urban migration come from the Mourid regions of the country and go quickly toward international destinations, following the well-worn path of cousins, brothers, sisters, and friends. This new movement has expanded to encompass an entire generation from diverse religious, ethnic, social class, and educational backgrounds. The slight turnaround in the Senegalese economy from 1995 to 2006 did little to stop the call of the sea. The factors causing this push and pull involve not only conditions in Senegal but the presence of a stable Senegalese diaspora in Italy and the shifting nature of European immigration practices.

In some societies, the survivors of shipwrecks were summarily executed in order to save other members of society from the potentially contagious nature of their misfortune; the incomplete journey was an ominous portent for the future. In the Canto of Ulysses in Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Ulysses calls out to his shipmates and exhorts them to "follow the path of excellence and knowledge," pushing on farther than others might dare. Modern mariners do no less in seeking a promised land heralded in their childhood textbooks, in the media, in the stories returning through the diaspora, and in the exaltation of a global economy rising up in the emergent European Union and its expanding economic realm. Robert Harrison notes that "erasure does not mean disappearance only; it means that the site of disappearance remains unmarkable. There are no gravestones on the sea. History and memory ground themselves in inscription, but this element is uninscribable. It closes over rather than keeps the place of its dead, while its unbounded grave remains humanly unmarked" (2003, 12). The disappeared become the index by which to measure what is happening in a global social order that cannot account for their loss. In Senegal the discussion of this lost generation is everywhere in popular discourse and reverberates throughout the diaspora. In some ways, to be marked by erasure, by the inability to inscribe or account for traumatic, often forced social disappearance is an integral part of the African diasporic experience.

Toward an Anthropology of Invisibility

When I conducted fieldwork in Turin, Italy, I found that rendering migrants invisible took many forms, from municipal officials refusing to register their numbers in official census records to informal policing and exclusion from public spaces. Constructed as culturally remote outsiders, the Senegalese and other migrants face social exclusion particularly during their time away from the world of work. My world of anthropological dreaming has always been complicated by this specter of invisibility. It is not the mysterious protective invisibility granted by the gods to Aeneas, cloaked in mist and descending into an ancient city. Rather it is a corrosive social erasure, insinuated into living memory, that shapes the contours of social imagination and relegates the newcomer to the margins.

As Charles V. Carnegie has pointed out, the contemporary nation-state is at once the primary enforcer of the human rights needed by