gendering diaspora: transnational feminism, diaspora and its hegemonies

What does it mean to theorize diaspora through an explicitly feminist frame? What does it entail to raise the question of hegemony in relation to diasporic formations? How does one most productively engage the tensions among individuals and communities situated very differently within a given diasporic formation? And what does feminist transnationalism offer such an analysis? These are difficult and provocative questions that are anything but obvious or straightforward. They are questions that the editors of this special issue posed to a diverse, interdisciplinary group of feminists assembled as part of *Diasporic Hegemonies*, an ongoing research and curricular project we initiated at Duke University (North Carolina) in the spring of 2005. The essays collected in this volume provide a window into the rich dialogue that emerged from our attempts to think through these issues collaboratively and creatively in ways that keep open the question of what constitutes both diaspora and feminist analysis.

As feminist scholars trained in multiple disciplines, our conversations at the three *Diasporic Hegemonies* conferences held in 2005 at Duke University, in 2006 at the University of Toronto, and in 2008 at the University of Pennsylvania were fuelled by the diversity of our perspectives and areas of expertise. The scholars involved in the project are located institutionally at universities in the US, Canada, and Europe, and represent a broad spectrum of ethnic and cultural backgrounds, as many hold dual or multiple citizenships, and share allegiances and connections to a range of locations across the global North and South. Our collaboration was facilitated by three points of intellectual commonality: a commitment to feminist analysis and a keen awareness of the mutual constitution of gender, class, race, and sexuality; a common interest in the dynamics of racial and cultural formation in the diaspora at different generational moments; and a desire to explore the vexing tensions of difference and inequity that characterize the internal relations of diaspora. We entered these conversations with a strong investment in understanding the effects of contemporary processes of globalization on diasporic formations – an investment inspired by the insights

of feminist transnational studies. Indeed, the central impetus for the *Diasporic Hegemonies* project was to bridge feminist transnationalism and feminist scholarship on the African Diaspora, through an emphasis on their common concern with how communities in different cultural and geographic sites establish and maintain links, and how these links are shaped and transformed by powerful internal and external social, political, and material forces.

African Diaspora Studies has historically attempted to theorize both material links of kinship, community, and culture that people maintain (i.e., existing links and concrete modes of exchange between people in sites of origin and settlement), and the strategic and existential forms of borrowing that black communities imagine and construct transnationally (i.e., the creative modes of exchange through which individuals 'borrow' or 'seek inspiration' from other communities by making use of cultural, political, and intellectual resources unavailable in their own communities). The tension between a conception of diaspora as a formation that is solely or primarily the direct result of migration, and a more expansive notion of diaspora as a phenomenon that exceeds any causal link to travel, movement, or displacement is a defining component of contemporary diaspora scholarship. Yet scholarship on the African Diaspora in both the humanities and social sciences often privileges the rubrics of travel/migration and Middle Passage/common origin as formative and defining elements of diaspora in ways that, at times, reify binary frameworks of analysis like home/host or displacement/homeland. Such analytic formulations often deploy notions of origin and authenticity that impede a deeper appreciation of the more complex dynamics that undergird diaspora. Moreover, such frameworks can privilege the mobility of masculine subjects as the primary agents of diasporic formation, and perpetuate a more general masculinism in the conceptualization of diasporic community.

One of the primary tasks of *Diasporic Hegemonies* has been to productively engage with these tensions using the insights of a transnational feminist analytic. While the initial point of departure for the project was a focus on the African Diaspora in particular, the essays that have become *Gendering Diaspora* elaborate the social, political, and discursive implications of diaspora well beyond any single diasporic formation. This special issue aims instead to stimulate critical reflection among feminist scholars about the formation of diaspora as a site of political aspiration and solidarity, and as a social, cultural, and political rubric. Rather than focusing on the transnational as the site of global flows and transformation shaped primarily by capital, our aim in this special issue is to foreground the role of racial and gendered formation in the circulation of global capital. The essays included here do so in a manner that allows for an internal critique of the limitations of each of these dimensions of diaspora. Contributors emphasize the ways diasporic dialogues are never truly equitable, for the politics of transnational exchange are thoroughly embedded in

the same material and ideological networks of power from which they emerge. These asymmetrical relations of power structure the dynamics of diaspora not only *externally* through the pressures that produce movement and migration, but also *internally* through the ways they configure complex relations of settlement, and racial and gendered formation within diasporic communities.

This emphasis on intra-diasporic differences, asymmetries, and the limits of diasporic relationality implicitly ask us to consider whether there are hegemonic formations within the diaspora, and if so what the concept of 'diasporic hegemonies' forces us to confront. The responses offered by contributors to the volume do not attempt to establish the dominance of one national formation over another. Instead, their analyses examine the uneven circulation of specific cultural logics that are privileged by particular routings of global capital and that produce important contests over the meanings of blackness, race, Africa, and diasporic belonging itself. In this context, diasporic hegemonies names the taken-for-grantedness of such cultural logics – logics that are nevertheless vigorously resisted, navigated, and contested in multiple and creative ways. By engaging with these issues the contributors to *Gendering Diaspora* encourage us to relinquish any claim to a universal or shared definition of diaspora.

The essays themselves raise a number of common themes, yet each highlights individual aspects of them to underscore how sustained attention to performances of gender and sexuality expose the limits of diaspora – both as a concept and as a rallying call. In different ways, each essay asks us to interrogate how the dominance of US-based cultural and intellectual discourses on diasporic relations, origin stories, and authenticity narratives can privilege paradigms that stress community solidarity at the expense of analytic attention to key differences within and among populations that might be understood as diasporic. As such, many of the essays explicitly advocate various kinds of epistemological reformulation.

One aspect of this reformulation involves the framing of diasporic time and space. This special issue begins with two essays that take this as their explicit goal. Jemima Pierre initiates this conversation by noting that within diaspora studies, Africa has consistently been positioned as a timeless cultural and/or political baseline rather than as a coeval space of the production of black identities in the present. Arguing that 'we cannot speak of Black identity and community formation without recognizing and interrogating the mutually constitutive positions of continental African and African diasporic populations', Pierre advocates a repositioning of Africa that places the continent within global discourses of racialization and identity formation. She contends that doing so would encourage diaspora theorists to confront continental Africa as an active, modern space, and would bring postcolonial Africa into dialogue with analyses of race, processes of racialization, and the transnational construction of black identities.

Meg Wesling's essay also seeks to interrogate our temporal and territorial emphases by posing questions about the relationships between geographic mobility and the construction of gender and sexuality. In 'Why queer diaspora?' she probes the tendency in literature on queer globalization to position queer subjects and diasporic subjects as 'theoretical twins' – subject positions that subvert both the normativities of gender and geography, and the presumed relation between them. Through a reading of two documentaries, she demonstrates that the analogy between gender/sexual mobility and global mobility actually mystifies the material and psychic relations of post-Fordist modes of production and reproduction. Ultimately, she argues that the most important intervention of queer diasporic criticism is not the assertion that queer subjects problematize the certainty of nationalist geographies of gender and sexuality, and thereby represent a liberatory position in relation to contemporary processes of globalization. Their more salient intervention is the fact that these seemingly natural categories are actually produced through labour and the labour relations generated by the global political economy.

The relationships between labour and community formation, as well as the modes of production and consumption that arise from particular kinds of labour, are equally central to the epistemological reformulations suggested in the work of other authors in this issue. Essays by Kesha Fikes, Deborah Thomas, and Lena Sawyer each emphasize the importance of situating diasporic 'calls and responses' in relation to specific contexts and a changing global political economy. All three contributors foreground the relationships among labour, identity, and community constitution, and thereby challenge theorists who would exclude labour as a site of subject formation based on the assumption that black people have only ever experienced labour as oppressive.

Kesha Fikes engages with issues of labour and work through the lens of her ethnographic research among African immigrant women in Portugal, in particular Cape Verdean fishmongers who sold in markets (now defunct) in and around Lisbon. Focusing on disciplinary practices, she uses Foucault's notions of biopower and governmentality to theorize diaspora 'as the process by which a certain group subjectivity emerges in dialogue with the law and the institutions that enforce it in daily practice'. She notes that while African immigrant women did not generally participate in the kinds of public cultural and political expressions that are typically seen as means to forge and perform diasporic community, they nonetheless recognized themselves and each other as a racialized community. This was due in part to the heavy police presence within these markets and their continued regulation by state authorities. But it was also the result of Portugal's changing position in relation to both its former African colonies and the European Union. Analysing their expressions of this recognition in terms of 'silence' and 'consent', Fikes shows that not only did these articulations occur among African immigrants who did not share a common

language or know each other's ethnic-national backgrounds, but also among members of the same ethno-national or family group who understood the commonality imposed upon them as resulting from their marginalized status in Portugal.

Whereas Fikes focuses on what might be called the 'infrapolitics' of diasporic recognition, Deborah Thomas is interested in how, where, and when solidarity is imagined or refused. She draws on ethnographic research among Jamaican women contracted for seasonal work in US hotels to explore how the concept of diaspora emerges in two registers – that of worldwide black community and a transnational migrant community, respectively. Thomas examines the logics of US capital travel and how these logics are picked up and transformed by communities elsewhere by focusing on the expectations hotel workers and their families have regarding 'America', and the consumer products hotel workers buy during their temporary sojourns in the United States. She uses hotel workers' responses to Hurricane Katrina to explore one of the ideological hegemonies of diaspora in its second register – namely, the idea that an individual's capacity to affect their own social mobility always outstrips the 'locals' in diasporic elsewheres. Thomas' essay, therefore, suggests that as much as diaspora might be imagined in terms of communal liberation, it can also be seen as a historically contingent strategy to advance particular interests.

Lena Sawyer also attempts to delineate how transformations in a global political economy shape the formulation of diasporic subjectivities, focusing specifically on how hierarchies 'are enacted and negotiated between different black/African diasporic communities positioned in specific nations'. Like Pierre, she argues that the US context within which much diaspora scholarship is produced has led not only to an overrepresentation of studies on the Americas, but also to the reproduction of US notions of the experience of 'race' to community formation in other locales. Throughout the essay, she specifies how popular conceptions of 'race' (as politics, as experience, as embodied materiality, as blood quantum) are embedded in calls to community articulated by differently positioned Swedes of African ancestry. Moreover, she examines generational and gendered perceptions of black identity in Sweden in order to highlight the ways notions of community, citizenship, and rights change over time in relation to transformations in broader political economies of labour, migration, and national belonging.

As with several other essays in this volume, Sawyer's contribution raises the issue of how media, and in particular North American television and films (and even more specifically, representations of African-Americans within these media) serve as important 'diasporic resources' that help to reformulate normative Swedish ideals of femininity and masculinity. For the Afro-Swedes, Africans, and white women who are the subjects of her research, racial identity and community are indexed and performed through stylistic interventions. Indeed, performativity – specifically, how diasporic masculinities and femininities are performed, and

how sexualities are racialized – is the third epistemological intervention made by the contributors. Here, the performative nexus of race, gender, and sexuality that constitutes subjectivity is engaged in several essays in ways that destabilize static notions of racial, gendered, and sexual selves and at the same time, highlight the transnational dimensions of subject formation over time.

Denise Noble's article focuses on popular culture and cultural production, examining the consumption of dancehall among youth in Britain and Jamaica as a practice through which racialized and generational norms of masculinity and femininity are negotiated and performed in relation to idealized gender roles and sexual subjectivities. As in Lena Sawyer's essay, Noble explores how the cultural capital gained through popular cultural literacy can serve to challenge normative and generationally inscribed notions of gender roles not only among black populations, but also in relation to the production of new white ethnicities. She views dancehall as one of many circuits of black globality, and shows how despite its challenge to notions of respectable citizenship among earlier generations, it reinforces the dominance of heteronormative masculinism. Echoing Fikes, Thomas, and Sawyer, Noble also argues for the importance of analysing postcolonial black cultures through their embeddedness in differently configured local, global, and diasporic regimes of power, privilege, and oppression. Her essay critically engages with both the ethical limits and political uses of 'race' and nation in African Diaspora identifications, and the continuing relevance of the African Diaspora in shaping black counter narratives of emancipation and freedom.

Freedom, or alternatively narratives and performances of liberation, is also a theme addressed by Michelle Stephens, whose essay positions the performative utterances of black men – in this case, the blackface performances of Bert Williams – as expressive acts that invent and create notions of black masculinity. For Stephens, the lens of performance is critically important because it forces us to think about racial politics in terms of an audience, and in terms of what the expectations of particular audiences might be at different times. She uses the notion of a 'signature act' to think through the distinction between performer and actor, between actors and audiences across diasporic terrain, and between black masculinity and both colonial and anti-colonial modernities. In doing so, she contends that embedded in the narrative of a black diaspora is a specific performance of the race's historical struggle for freedom against bondage, leading her to ask more specifically whether 'the race story' is better conceptualized as comedy or tragedy.

The essays included in this special issue reflect the wide range of interdisciplinary foci, methodologies, and approaches generated by the productive encounter between transnational feminist studies and African Diaspora studies. They interrogate the status of race in the diaspora in an explicitly transnational frame that questions any positing of race as an implicit or transparent source of solidarity or unity for the constitution of individuals or collective subjects,

communities, or political formations. At the same time, they propose complex ways of understanding the differential stakes and investments of diverse groups in the concept of diaspora and diasporic community, and unpack how and why individuals are strategically hailed by such invocations of community in a variety of places.

Adopting a transnational feminist analytic for the study of diasporic formation and the tensions of difference and inequity within those formations offers a way to more directly engage with how certain (masculinist) understandings of the diaspora and diasporic culture circulate; how key sites in the transmission of diasporic culture (e.g., literature and performance) function in uneven ways; as well as how and why particular models of diasporic relation and articulations of black identity become dominant or hegemonic, while others are suppressed or marginalized. These essays' critical interrogation of the category of diaspora also raises important questions with respect to feminist methodology. While they attempt to probe the internal complexities of diasporic invocation, relationality, performativity, and the conceptual limits of each of these, they also enact one of the central tensions of feminist studies at this current historical moment of its institutionalization. For these pieces also ask us to think about what it means to do feminist work and participate in a project of feminist critical analysis in contexts where the central object or focus of that analysis is neither necessarily nor exclusively women or gender. In other words, they ask us to think about what to call scholarship where gender is not the explicit focus, but feminism is the explicit mode of analysis. As scholars whose training and activism has been shaped in formative ways by feminist methodologies from our own respective disciplines as well as others, the work of each of the contributors uses a feminist analytic to unpack how race and diaspora are deployed in the mutual constitution of social subjects – a dynamic that has been a central concern of feminist theory and the field of Gender and Women's Studies more generally.

Tina Campt and Deborah A. Thomas

acknowledgements

The *Diasporic Hegemonies* project was made possible by the generous funding provided by multiple organizations and institutions. We gratefully acknowledge the financial contributions of Duke University (Office of the Vice-Provost of Interdisciplinary Studies, Program in Women's Studies, Departments of Anthropology and African American Studies, Franklin Humanities Institute, Institute for Critical US Studies, Centers for European Studies, International Studies, International Development Research, Comparative Area Studies and the Kenan Institute for Ethics), the University of Toronto (Institute for Women's and Gender Studies, Centre for the Study of the US, Diaspora and Transnational Studies, Caribbean Studies, Office of the Provost and Dean of Faculty of Arts

and Sciences, Sexual Diversity Studies, English, Sociology and Equity Studies, and Office of the Vice-President of Human Resources), the University of Pennsylvania (Center for Africana Studies, Department of Anthropology and the Alice Paul Center for Women Gender and Sexuality), and the Center for the Study of Race, Politics and Culture of the University of Chicago. We also acknowledge the tireless labour of our co-organizers at the University of Toronto, D. Alissa Trotz, Rinaldo Walcott, M. Jacqui Alexander, and Ato Quayson, whose efforts were critical in sustaining the ongoing work of the project.

editor biographies

Tina Campt is Associate Professor of Women's Studies and History at Duke University. An interdisciplinary scholar by necessity, her work theorizes gender, memory and racial formation among African Diasporic communities in Europe, and Germany in particular. In addition to article publications in *New German Critique*, *Radical History Review*, *Meridians* and *Callaloo*, she is the author of *Other Germans: Black Germans and the Politics of Race, Gender and Memory in the Third Reich* (2004), which examined the mutual constitution of racial and gendered formation among German Blacks in the Third Reich. Her new project, Imaging Black Europe: Archive, Photography and the African Diaspora, is a study of how two different Black European communities – Black Britons and Black Germans – used photography as an expressive cultural practice to create forms of identification and community in the first half of the twentieth century in Germany and the UK. Together with Deborah Thomas, Campt is co-convener of the scholarly and curricular project 'Diasporic Hegemonies: Gendering the Diaspora and Racing the Transnational'.

Deborah A. Thomas is an associate professor in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Pennsylvania. Her first book, *Modern Blackness: Nationalism, Globalization, and The Politics of Culture in Jamaica* (Duke University Press, 2004), focused on the changing relationships among the political and cultural dimensions of nationalism, globalization, and popular culture. Thomas also co-edited the volume *Globalization and Race: Transformations in the Cultural Production of Blackness* (Duke University Press, 2006) with Kamari Clarke, and a special issue of the journal *Identities* entitled 'Caribbeanist Anthropologies at the Crossroads' with Karla Slocum. Prior to her life as an academic, she was a professional dancer with the New York-based Urban Bush Women. She was also a Program Director with the National Council for Research on Women, an international working alliance of women's research and policy centres whose mission is to enhance the connections among research, policy analysis, advocacy, and innovative programming on behalf of women and girls.

doi:10.1057/fr.2008.41