

Crèvecoeur

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THE FUNAMBULIST

Politics of Space and Bodies

September — October 2022

N°43
DIASPORAS

**POLITICAL IMAGINARIES OF
AFRO-DIASPORIC, INDENTURED,
EXILED, AND LANDLESS COMMUNITIES**

SITES OF DIASPORA INCLUDE

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ARTWORK BY INÈS DI FOLCO

the air around a recently turned off petrol lamp. A fly spins, relishing in the heat of what once was, albeit invisible.

“Diasporic markers acquire purpose not because of their essence, but because of their use in the context of local meaning making.”

(Adam Ewing, “Lying Up a Nation,” 2014).

in which case dislocation cannot be dislodged from space; and meaning, being contextual, must remain fragmentary. Here, I briefly mark diaspora: the air around a recently turned off petrol lamp—some heat, some matter, something so close to being held. For a moment, meaning is made. What just was so evident re-becomes fleeting after its local use; and while it does not hold the meaning, the site of diaspora holds the promise that meaning may be re-made.

Sites of diaspora include

A hotel room—
“Aren’t you proud,” the woman in it asks, “to be a part of the culture that made this?” Sun rays fall through the window onto the beige carpet. The hotel room is in the USA, where much of Blackness was made. That’s certainly why it feels so real here, and good, and like a green screen, a surface for diasporic projections. “Aren’t you proud to be a part of the culture that made this?” *This is jazz music, of the sort that makes you shake hips, weeping. I am a cross-legged Afro-European sitting right here, on a beige carpet so soft, in a coastal city in the US of A, in this production site of contemporary global Blackness. I say: I wish I knew that—pride; I wish I was that—a part. I cradle myself; look at the sun setting onto buildings behind the window and, with Brent Hayes Edwards, murmur that *the African diaspora relies on translations and even misrecognitions which shape it and make its existence possible* (*The Practice of Diaspora*, 2009).*

Sites of diaspora include where the salt lays dry on the reddened earth,

a few kilometers before the beach of Ouidah, Benin. I paid a man to guide me all the way from the center to the Door of No Return, last stop before the Ocean. We are not there yet; for now, he points to a wall painted with portraits and says “This is the wall of the diaspora” and asks: “Do you know what diaspora means?” I don’t get to brag and say yes, obviously I do. I get to hear him state: “Diaspora is the name given to those who return.” He has a name that invokes *justice*. Justice does not say that diaspora is the name *he* gives to those who return. He does not say: *we*. As in: *we give*; neither do I say, *we return*.

I hear myself asking: Wait, do I not feel like kin? “Diaspora was really just a euphemism for stranger” (Saidiya V. Hartman), and in some places this seems true whether your history is that of the African American diaspora in Ghana, which is also the history of the West African diaspora worldwide, and the history of the Black diaspora in the Atlantic, and the history of those born in Paris and raised with dead prez. That history is documented. It can hold a needy diasporic subject for a moment, when said subject is told that it was nonexistent before returning. Do I not feel like kin, I ask in that moment of neediness and spite, of everyone, but in particular of the earth—“*terres sanguines, terres consanguines*”—of the earth—“*diaspora. Exile seed of / comrade trouble*—of comrades and further sharers of blood (Aimé Césaire & Philipp Khabo Köpsell).

There, on the path made for memorial tourists, I want to say: that’s not actually... Catch a breath and explain that the framing of people of African descent throughout the world as a diaspora is a relatively new phenomenon. That it appeared in the political sphere in the mid-1950s, in U.S. Black internationalist discourse (says Brent Hayes Edwards) and in academia in 1965 (according to Dominic R. D. Thomas and Madeleine L. Letessier). Which is to say that I know what diaspora means, and that it’s not... I want to speak of truth, but remember I am violent. Remember I am violent, too. I think of diaspora as a place on which scars expand. Other Black folks’ scars feel real here, and it works like a green screen: more a projection of myself than of anything else.



Fig.1



Fig.2



Fig.3

Justice says *diaspora* means shadows sketched on the walls of the courtyards in which enslaved people were held—Martin Luther King is there, Louis Armstrong is pinned, too. Perhaps he knows the returnees as ghosts.

Sites of diaspora include: the haunting, an empty path so full.

On some days I want to be the haunted offspring, far away but anchored, at least, by the closeness of my African origin; I sigh. On other days I just want to be there, no questions asked. Africa, I think, but then I must be more specific because I don't want to sound like a European. That's longing, say some, that's romanticized, say others. That's fiction, says one, and another says that's just problematic. I leave it up to them to decide, experts in suffering and legitimate killjoys, and run off to the city in which the market burnt some years ago.

Would you, perhaps, let me grieve a root for a minute? I promise I will return, right after, to the unshakable knowledge that the clarity which I desire is rooted in the morbidity of borders, the execution of nations. Still, softly, I must ask, will you let me grieve a root for a minute, here, in the city in which the market burnt some years ago? That city is Lomé—what is this longing for discretion? This coy disposition: is it of poetry or of the postcolony? Is it of the oppressor or of the oppressed? Am I one?

Sites of diaspora include the space between two mouths speaking of the same place, figuring out if their parents' political exiles concur or collide.

It's a diasporic variation of *but where are you really from*, this inspecting look, that carefulness with trust. It's protection—there's something about a name full of spikes on a branch that leads somewhere unknown. But I hold the spikes in my mouth. The needy diasporic subject has a propensity for metaphors. It allows for the vagueness of a belonging. To return to the starting point: there is no starting point. This is diaspora, you fool. We don't start, we just are. The back side of this medal, close to the heart, speaks the equivalence: we don't arrive, either, and “[m]aybe *that's the*

irony of many a second-generation immigrant; it's your parents who ran, but it's you who continues running long after they have come to rest” (Musa Okwonga).

Sites of diaspora include white powder, forcefully diluted.

Fufumix troubles the boiling water on an electric stove. In Berlin, where I live, only the luckiest diasporic subjects know the taste of fufu mashed and stomped in a backyard. Plus points if the backyard is of one's very own grandmother, plus points if one can understand the language she speaks, plus points if she is alive. Minus points: the hunger for fufu is not stilled by its afroshop substitute.

Sites of diaspora include the place—can you name it?—where longing and looking are sisters, and don't come with no preposition. There is no “for,” no goal, no nothing. A place where no one holds your hand through history, but someone, I promise, tells you how to braid your hair eventually.

Sites of diaspora include: the gray bedsheet neatly spread across the bed of a patient youtuber.

Sites of diaspora include my neck around it a python.

I visit the next tourist attraction in Ouidah, and let the guide wrap a python around my throat, like he does with all visitors to the Python Temple. The urge to leave grows thick, to leave a lot, really to go back, to Europe, to Whiteness, to the place where the absurdity of my made-up lineage—some families, the guide says, descend directly from the python—is bearable. When I leave the temple, I can hear the screams of the next needy afrodiasporic subjects, pythons 'round their necks, their Southern US accents unfamiliar. Another python: around my finger. I buy it at the gift shop, wear it back in Europe, wear it for years, throughout the better part of the UN International Decade for People of African Descent, past the creation of the EU People of African Descent Week. The ring starts turning green and I spend many months writing messy notes about the tensions between the singular of *the African diaspora* and the acknowledgment of plural *communities*; between the historical and geographical diversity and the common origin.

I wear the ring and barely ever take it off—the green taints my finger—and I think of this strange descendance from a migration history. The ring begins to slowly break. The metal splits open, a piece routinely cuts into the skin. To descend from movement, I think, changes the way we move and the way we stay. Both become frantic. One morning, the ring breaks. Months later, the green mark on my finger has disappeared. I don't wear anything on that hand anymore. I have taken to keeping it quiet, this body that speaks beyond me, says that I come from Blackness, says that I come from movement. There are days where the lack of a python ring approximates lightness: *born in babylon / both non-white and woman / what did I see to be except myself?*, Lucille Clifton speaks. Then: at the ethnographic museum of a German harbor town, a python made of bronze, ready to be restituted soon, its provenience finally deemed unquestionable. The museum owns, aside from the python, ancient boats, which have been kept in the attic. Boats. In the attic. They have dried out. I used to be jealous of people who had them—not boats, but attics. Places to store lineage and children's drawings; places for family furniture and a language you speak that all your grandparents spoke. That was before I noticed that attics seemed to lend themselves to boat theft and python hoarding.

When I get tired of retracing the colonies on my body—for I have learned from Warsan Shire that *“men will not love her / if she is covered in continents, / if her teeth are small colonies, / if her stomach is an island / if her thighs are borders”*—I stare at my bare hand and leave the museum behind.

Sites of diaspora include

where we converse, and no, it's not a Nike commercial, forget about weeping, not even for Serena; and it isn't about one diasporic condition but about a diaspora of condition, of always repeated, exclusionary looks and of endless vibration; and diaspora is, then, the experience of infinity, isn't it? Debris, that which remains, which has crossed or survived. We speak of ourselves in terms of leftovers. Most of the exercise is to sit in marvel, to point a finger and say: four hundred years of slavery, colonialism, exploitation, and here we are, and here's all that's been saved. We speak of what's been saved, which means we speak in the tongue of loss, the matrix of dis-possession, of dis-location. But to consider this: debris, of the stellar kind, something long dead that keeps coming, the heat yet to be released.

I hear Olumide Popoola: *“I do not know / what relentless means.”* And I say I don't either, but here goes infinity, here it goes, fleeting, and draws exhaustion from our minds, if only for a moment, if not from our bodies. And can you imagine? To only with a word, to only with a nod, swiftly break open solitude, and acknowledge a shared condition without explaining what it is. To fill ourselves like wells, to dry out like them too. To be because we are, to be metaphorical, not to be afraid of it. To speak of something you can't grasp, with bravery, with joy, to speak about it often. To invent a word for something that is in pieces, but not broken. ■

Raphaëlle Red is a writer and literary scholar. Her current research at Freie Universität in Berlin focuses on the roles of narration in the construction of the African diaspora as a community. Her narrative work spans across genres and media to explore the complexities of contemporary identities in relation to heritage and histories. Her writing in French, English, and German has appeared in *Bella Triste*, *Jef Klak*, *L'Humanité*, and *gal-dem* among others.

Inès di Folco was born in 1993 in Paris. She graduated from the Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts de Paris in 2018. Her art is built around narratives charged with the power of the tumultuous Ocean. From shore to shore, narratives emerge in the swell, inebriated with the shimmering water, memories drift away, moved by a new meaning, by a new imaginary.

All artworks by Inès di Folco for *The Funambulist* 43 (2022).
Fig.1 *Tamarindo, Sudan & Khôl*, watercolor on paper, 21 x 29.7 cm.
Fig.2 *Archipel* (Archipelago), watercolor on paper, 21 x 29.7 cm.
Fig.3 *Nos mondes* (Our Worlds), watercolor on paper, 21 x 29.7 cm.