Introduction: the romance of diaspora

> *Romance offered writers not less but more; not a narrow a-historical canvas but a wide historical one; not escape but entanglement.*
> Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark*

In August 1920, the Universal Negro Improvement Association held its first convention in New York City. Led by Marcus Garvey (1887–1940), its members held meetings, sessions, and ceremonies for a whole month, as UNIA officers dressed in full regalia, with the Black Star Line band and choir, the African Legion, the UNIA Motor Corps, and the Black Cross Nurses, along with contingents of delegates from the United States, Canada, the Caribbean, Central America, and West Africa, paraded down the streets of Harlem. A mass meeting at Madison Square Garden, with attendance estimated at 25,000, capped it all off, as Garvey declared: "The other races have countries of their own and it is time for the 400,000,000 Negroes to claim Africa for themselves, and we mean to retake every square inch of the 12,000,000 square miles of African territory belonging to us by right divine."[1] Garvey, the most spectacular leader of the back-to-Africa movement in the first few decades of the twentieth century, offered a potent combination of religion, politics, militarism, and fantasy, as his marches in Harlem showcased a peculiar blend of spectacle and theatricality, discipline and determination. There is perhaps no better way of gauging Garvey's impact than recalling W. E. B. Du Bois's amused and yet perplexed description of his contemporary and rival: "When Mr. Garvey brought his cohorts to Madison Square Garden, clad in fancy costumes and with new songs and ceremonies, and when, ducking his dark head at the audience, he yelled, 'We are going to Africa to tell England, France, and Belgium to get out of there,' America sat up, listened, laughed, and said here at least is something new."[2]

Garvey's novelty lay not just in the militancy of his message, evident in his speech at the convention, where he warned white Americans that "four hundred million Negroes were sharpening their swords for the next world

war."[3] Rather, it derived from his ability to tap into deep-seated feelings of disaffection from the failed promise of American democracy and in his promise of a black nation that could embody the desire for autonomy and freedom. He posed a pertinent question when he asked, "Where is the black man's government? Where is his king and his kingdom? Where is his President, his country and ambassador, his army, his navy, his men of big affairs?" He concluded, "I could not find them, and then I declared, I will help to make them."[4] Whether we view Garvey's meteoric rise as an expression of a growing urban consciousness, or as fed by "empty and silly fictions" (as one critic charged), the power of his movement is undeniable, as his historic cry, "Africa for the Africans, those at home and those abroad," resonated across the black world.[5] Though the back-to-Africa movement he heralded fizzled out fairly quickly, his impact across the diaspora and on the continent was phenomenal albeit still little understood, especially in academic accounts of black history and intellectual life.

In part, this neglect may be explained as an inability to account for the spectacle, the theater, the extravagance – in a word, the romance – of Garveyism. After all, not only did Garvey imagine a line of black-owned ships readying for a journey to Africa, he went so far as to declare himself the Provisional President of Africa, and bestowed several equally grandiloquent titles on his UNIA officers, turning them into the nobility of his envisioned empire. And so the UNIA had Knights of the Nile, Knights of the Distinguished Service Order of Ethiopia, Dukes of the Niger and of Uganda, Earl of the Congo, Viscount of the Niger, and Knight of the Distinguished Service Order of Ashanti. In other words, his pan-Africanism, if we can call it that, was not just a loosely defined vision of solidarity among all African-descended peoples. Instead, he envisioned an African empire that would both mimic and rival European imperialism. To do so, Garvey derived inspiration from a variety of sources, including the British empire, Zionism, the "supergovernment" of the Pope and the Catholic Church, and even the example of European colonization of Africa. Thus Garvey thundered, "It is only a question of a few more years when Africa will be completely colonized by Negroes, as Europe is by the white race." Claiming a right to Africa on the basis of race, he insisted that there was no difference between continental and diasporic Africans, that they were all part of "one common family stock," and refusing to accept existing forms of political communities, he declared, "I know no national boundary where the Negro is concerned. The whole world is my province until Africa is free."[6] As this announcement indicates, Garvey's vision was resolutely global. Starting with "a nucleus of thirteen in a dingy Harlem

lodge room," he went on to imagine Harlem as a provisional capital of his African empire, a world capital for the race.[7] Even before coming to the United States from Jamaica in 1916, he had traveled through Central and South America and Europe, and formulated his critique of colonial power that would interact with his experience of racialized being in the United States to form a potent – and deeply contradictory – brew of imperial might and racial pride. "The question may start in America, but [it] will not end there," Garvey promised.[8]

Of course, Garvey himself never managed to set foot on African soil. Realism, it seems, played no part in Garvey's grandiloquent ceremonies and schemes. Indeed Du Bois argued that "no dependence could be put upon his statements of facts." "Not that he was a conscious liar," Du Bois concluded, "but dream, fact, fancy, wish, were all so blurred in his thinking that neither he himself nor his hearers could clearly or easily extricate them." Garvey's detractors often emphasized his lack of common sense, highlighting the distinction between the practical and prophetic nature of Garvey, which is my central concern here. Garvey's movement was clearly visionary, emotional, showy even, and yet scholars find few ways of assessing it other than noting its historical impact. Even Du Bois admitted that Garvey was a historical symptom, a "type of dark man whom the white world is making daily" and wondered if his rise meant that he was the harbinger of a "type of a mighty coming thing." And certainly, Garvey's historical impact on Africa and elsewhere may well be greater than that of his more illustrious rivals.[9] Still, rather than assessing the historical contours alone, we also need to comprehend the romance of Garvey – the spectacle, the myth, the drama – to account for the longevity, but also the meaning, of his extravagant platform. That Garvey takes up historical and political questions and reframes them for his audience in the language of prophecy means that he can promise at once both utopia and apocalypse, or even an apocalyptic understanding of history, a sense of crisis and catastrophe reimagined as the promise of a utopian transformation. Thus he can infuse a realist sense of injustice with the fantasy of a grander destiny. As Robert Hill and Barbara Bair put it, "in the transfiguration of Garvey in popular memory, historical time has been replaced with mythical timelessness," and through songs circulated in popular memory Garvey has emerged as the race's prophet, the Moses who will lead his people out of the wilderness. Garvey's wife concurs with this assessment, pithily stating that "Garvey was temporal, but Garveyism was eternal."[10]

Some forty years later the iconic figure of Third World liberation, Frantz Fanon (1925–1961), also imagined a pan-African army, an African Legion,

which would lead from Ghana to Algeria through the desert. In his capacity as a member of the Front de Libération Nationale (FLN), fighting to free Algeria from French rule, Fanon visited the newly decolonized nation of Ghana to attend the All-African People's Congress held in Accra in December 1958. There, as part of his advocacy of violence as the means to liberate Africa, Fanon imagined an African Legion, which could open up a second front within Algeria through troops based south of the Sahara. In his subsequent stay in Ghana, and travels through Ethiopia, Cairo, and Kinshasa, Fanon refined his plans for an African Legion, tapping into the swirl of excitement around the pan-African ideas and movements that were characteristic of the Bandung era. In 1961, the African Legion became a matter of actual planning as well. Fanon took a secret, mysterious, and dangerous trip through Mali and even wrote some rhapsodic poetry about an Africa awakening to revolution. His vision encompassed the entire continent, as he declared:

> Having taken Algeria to the four corners of Africa, we now have to go back with the whole of Africa to African Algeria, towards the north, towards the continental city of Algiers. That is what I want: great lines, great channels of communication across the desert. To wear out the desert, to deny it, to bring together Africa and to create the continent. Let Malians, Senegalese, Guineans, Ivoirians and Ghanaians flood into our territory from Mali, and men from Nigeria and Togo. Let them all climb up the slopes of the desert and pour into the colonialist bastion. Take the absurd and the impossible, rub it up the wrong way and hurl a continent into the assault on the last ramparts of colonial power.[11]

Invoking a geography of the revolution continental in scope, and hopelessly audacious in its reach, Fanon thus imagined an Africa rising as a single entity to overthrow colonialism in an upsurge directed not only at the colonizer but at nature and history itself. No such Legion ever marched through the desert and it is easy to think of plenty of historical and political reasons that testify to the fundamental impossibility of the project. Fanon died soon after the trip, and the dream was lost to history.

It may seem immediately obvious that one would need to turn to scholarly accounts of pan-Africanism, diaspora, or transnationalism to begin to understand Fanon's dramatic vision. But in what way is Fanon's life and work to be understood as diasporic, internationalist, or black Atlantic? Alienated from French culture because of racism, estranged from native Antillean culture as a result of the French colonial policy of assimilation, and an outsider in the Algerian nation he died to help secure, Fanon's rootlessness is certainly evident throughout his numerous journeys and

migrations. Born in Martinique, he received a French colonial education, of which he later said, "the black schoolboy in the Antilles, who in his lessons is forever talking about 'our ancestors, the Gauls,' identifies himself with the explorer, the bringer of civilization, the white man who carries truth to savages – an all-white truth." It helps to remember too that as a black Martinican, Fanon was first taught to regard himself as French: "What is all this talk of a black people, of a Negro nationality? I am a Frenchman . . . What have I to do with a black empire?"[12] In 1944, he even joined the French Army, fought on the European front, was wounded and disabused of his notions of belonging to European civilization. When he moved to Algeria to work at a psychiatric hospital in 1953, it only took him three years to resign from the post and join the FLN, as he came to recognize that under colonialism "everyday reality is a tissue of lies." In this way, while Fanon first located his self through appellations of "we Frenchmen" or "we Martinicans," from the mid-1950s, he began to speak of "we Algerians" and "we Africans," and by the end of his life, he even imagined a "United States of Africa."[13]

Even a quick glance at these biographical details evidences Fanon's transnational or black Atlantic coordinates, but it is in his challenge to the very concept of diaspora as it is usually theorized that Fanon proves most compelling. Significantly, in contrast to accounts of diaspora that prioritize the memory of slavery, Fanon turns away from the past, and focuses on the moment of revolutionary transformation in anti-colonial struggle. Famously, he is harshly critical of calls to revere tradition, critical of *négritude*, and far removed from notions of returning to the source, or of ancestral veneration, as he declares that he is "not a prisoner of history" and keeps his gaze on the present and the future.[14] Refusing to accept any romance of past greatness, any notion of a mystical black being, Fanon articulates his platform in the language of realism, rationality, and social justice. Fanon's commitment to the nation is further difficult to assess through conventional accounts of nationalism, as it is founded neither in race nor ethnicity, but rather imagined as a form of political will, as the dynamic creation of the people's struggle, and as the route to a more genuine humanism. Though I will discuss Fanon's nationalism later in the book, I want to point out his commitment to political realism, even though several scholars assume his status as (to use Albert Memmi's words) "a prophet of the Third World, a romantic hero of decolonization."[15] Unconcerned with turning to the past for validation, refuting any notion of redemption, Fanon imagines the nationalist revolution as wholly new, as a path to true internationalism.

Both Garvey's and Fanon's plans could be called quixotic instances of pan-Africanism, messianic dreams of black redemption, complicated interminglings of racial despair and hope. Both died early, one exiled in Jamaica, the other of leukemia in an American hospital (a land he didn't want to come to and once called a "nation of lynchers"), and went on to enjoy posthumous reverence across the world, but especially in black power movements. And yet the two could not be more different. One was imperial, the other committed to revolutionary anti-colonialism; where Garvey asked for race purity, Fanon stood against all racial or ethnic forms of nationalism. Garvey also adopted wholesale the logic of romantic nationalism of Europe, equating race with nation, while Fanon offered a stinging condemnation of Europe and the Enlightenment. Finally, where Garvey wanted to conquer Africa, Fanon wanted to liberate it by making it the staging ground for a new humanism. In effect, then, Garvey eschewed realism to call for the overthrow of white domination, articulating a political vision that could not be expressed through an appeal to the real in his historical moment, but required the turn to romance. He not only mobilized the pomp and spectacle of romance to render himself appealing, he offered, in fact, a fundamentally romantic world view, where history could be redeemed to a former, primal glory, and space could become the ground for imperial conquest, thus imagining a future African empire as a return to a primal black destiny. Fanon, meanwhile, may well be synonymous with revolutionary romanticism (as Memmi charged), but his works also evince pragmatism and realism, deeply involved as he was in the minutiae of freedom, revolution, and governance. His commitment to freedom, and to the nationalist revolution as the vehicle of that freedom, was grounded in realism and in a rejection of romance.

These two figures are key to any history or theory of black Atlantic exchange. The dreams and fantasies of these two thinkers testify to the historical fact of the intense cultural traffic among black diasporic intellectuals over much of the twentieth century. Both reveal the inextricable intermingling of nationalist and transnationalist visions, as they invoke – in unexpected, even startling fashion – tropes of scattering and return that are at the heart of notions of diaspora. They thus evidence a tension between racial nationalism and universalism, a tension that will prove at times to be an opposition, at others to be dialectical. Garvey's race-based nationalism and Fanon's non-racial, non-ethnic anti-colonial revolution simply cannot be understood through received understandings of either nation or diaspora. Moreover, both men make Africa a central, even constitutive, part of their transnational visions. Africa powers their imagination,

their political dreams, and their theories of modernity. Finally, both create a peculiar mix of political ambition and wild fantasy, what I will call realism and romance, where we find writ large all the contradictions of modernity. Garvey's imperial romance and Fanon's nationalist one, though equally apocalyptic in scope, could not be more different in their political import. This book is written in the belief that the differences between Garvey's dream of a black army and Fanon's of an African Legion matter, and that such differences have something to contribute to modern scholarship on diaspora. To grapple with the differences between Garveyism and Fanonism, the historical reasons for their formations, and their aesthetic agendas, it is necessary to excavate a larger tradition of diasporic debate over Africa. The three distinct features of their imagination – the synthesis of national and transnational concerns, the centrality of Africa, and the significance of romance and realism – form the subject matter of this book.

BACK TO AFRICA

To understand Garvey's and Fanon's visions, we clearly have to turn to what we have come to call the black Atlantic, following Paul Gilroy's path-breaking book of the same name. Over the last fifteen years, the field of black Atlantic studies has emphasized racial formation globally, nationally, and locally, with an emphasis on the circulation of ideas, material artifacts, bodies, and cross-cultural negotiations over meaning and ownership. A range of scholars – historians, literary critics, and anthropologists, among others – have seized on the transnational circuits to reveal the exciting possibilities released by such patterns of mobility and exchange. And yet Africa is curiously absent in these vibrant and exciting discussions and debates, as the Atlantic continues to be thought of as primarily referring to the movement of ideas, peoples, and objects between Britain and the United States.

Romance, Diaspora, and Black Atlantic Literature explores the place of Africa in the writings and arguments of black diasporic writers and thinkers. Tracking literary representations of Africa by African-American, African, and black British writers, the study suggests that a mapping of Africa within diasporic discourse helps rethink existing models of nation and diaspora. Whereas Africa exists as the "dark continent" in conceptual constructions of the black Atlantic or is relegated to some timeless past as a mythic origin for a diasporic culture, this book shifts the center of black diaspora studies by considering Africa as constitutive of black modernity.

At the heart of concepts of race and nation in black diaspora literature, the sign of Africa speaks as directly to dreams of redemption and return to a lost homeland, as it does to the politics of fighting racism and imperialism. Africa is not just a static marker of lack, or of a non-modern tradition – the sign of modernity's erasure or its negation. To be sure, this is not to focus on good or bad models of representing Africa, but to reveal the discursive function of the phantasmatic Africas these writers produce to code other cultural conflicts, Africas of the mind that are neither unrelated to the landmass of the continent nor reducible to it. As Valentin Mudimbe has shown, the idea of "Africa" is an invented one – a concept, a political event, a sign of alterity, an imperial construction of the "other" that reaffirms the identity of the self; in other words, it is always a discursive construction and a locus of competing ideological interests.[16]

To track the lively transnational conversation on Africa among black intellectuals, the book moves from the late-nineteenth-century African-American magazine fiction of Pauline Hopkins to the late-twentieth-century black British novels of Caryl Phillips, engaging along the way such writers and thinkers as W. E. B. Du Bois, Joseph Casely Hayford, Edward Blyden, Marcus Garvey, Chinua Achebe, Richard Wright, Frantz Fanon, and Ama Ata Aidoo. Read together, the writings of these intellectuals comprise what I call a black Atlantic canon. Such a canon includes not only texts that highlight transnational mobility across various locations of the Atlantic triangle, but also those that take up the conceptual core of the idea of diaspora: the loss of home, the meaning of memory, and the struggle to find a usable past. Further, as Gilroy has suggested, an exploration of diaspora necessarily involves a meditation on the legacy of slavery and colonialism, as well as a consideration of the relationship of blacks to the modern West and its traditions of thought, particularly those that have been defined in relation to an African other: Reason, Enlightenment, and modernity.[17]

Romance, Diaspora, and Black Atlantic Literature suggests that these questions can be fruitfully thought through by an analysis of literary form. Accordingly, I map current debates about nation and diaspora onto the literary genres of realism and romance. Drawing on Fredric Jameson's suggestion that the choice of genre sediments social contradictions that the text then tries to resolve, I contend that black Atlantic fiction gains its energy from the friction of two competing modes – nationalist realism and diasporic romance. Jameson suggests that the genre of romance, understood as a literary institution that can mediate between a formal analysis of an individual text and the larger history that enables it, implies

a salvational or redemptive perspective of some secure future from which we can recreate the past as myth. Recalling Walter Benjamin's musings on the angel of history, Jameson tells us that genres not only emerge from specific historical situations, but carry that ideology in themselves as a ghostly after-effect. In this way, Jameson makes possible a historicist method at the level of form.[18]

The connection between the novel and the nation is well documented in cultural studies. Drawing from the work of Benedict Anderson in *Imagined Communities*, we are accustomed to thinking about the inextricable relation between the modern nation and the realist novel.[19] Realism has been thought of as the perfect analogue for the project of producing a modern nation, along calendrical, clock time and faith in ideas of progress. On the other hand, the question of the literary form of diaspora narratives is more open-ended. (As Gilroy suggests, in black Atlantic narratives time stops and starts: there is no clear faith in progress, rather the coordinates are the void of the Middle Passage and the horizon of the Jubilee.) In this study, I suggest that diaspora is commonly tied to a break in the form of the realist novel and may be linked to the genre of the romance, implying a non-linear, messianic temporality. Black Atlantic literature expresses both the teleological, modernizing impulse of nationalist realism and the recursive logic of diasporic romance. To imagine a community that is characterized by both national and transnational concerns, black Atlantic texts constitute an eclectic genre, where the realist narrative of the nation is interrupted by the romance of the diaspora. The peculiar nature of black nationalism – its necessary constitution in diaspora – entails such complexity of form.

Reading romance as a mode of representation across twentieth-century black Atlantic novels, my study argues that romance provides two potentially contradictory understandings of diaspora. On the one hand, romance allows black Atlantic writers to imagine diaspora as a utopian horizon, one that breaks away from existing forms of social organization such as nation or ethnic group. On the other hand, romance – as a form that can harmonize seemingly irreconcilable opposites – helps black Atlantic writers collapse distances of time and space to imagine a simultaneity of experience. While the first mode theorizes diaspora as difference, the second mode implies a certain wholeness of vision that refuses to accommodate any sense of difference at all (spatial, temporal, historical, or geographical). Instead of identifying texts as belonging to either one approach, I suggest that they inhabit the two modes in constant tension, offering varying fictional or (what Jameson would call) magical resolutions. My point is not

to argue for the essentially escapist or subversive quality of the romance form, but to excavate its precise contribution to the construction of a global black imagined community. Thus, I suggest that romance enables black Atlantic writers to create certain partitions of space between the domestic and the foreign, and partitions of time between the modern and the primeval. Instead of accepting the binary opposition of romance and realism, and coming down on one side as for or against romance, I wish to inhabit and stretch to the breaking point the oppositions romance helps these writers to construct, dismantle, or otherwise perform. To render what such writers see as real, magical, or mythic, or to try to change reality by using romance to posit alternatives, or to disturb the boundaries between the real and the fictional, romance becomes an infinitely malleable form. Thinking of genre as the presence of the past in the present, my study highlights constant transformation, as earlier forms are constantly returning, being displaced, inverted, or reproduced. Impure at its very origin, romance inevitably implies a repatterning and rebeginning, rather than the birth of something wholly original, as the writers of diasporic romance compose narratives that function both as a recovery and as an imaginative projection. In this respect, romance allows these writers to collapse time and space to give us a whole, or to shine a beam of light onto one moment, or even to give us a progressive history read backwards from a future point of redemption.

In *Playing in the Dark*, Toni Morrison has written eloquently of the centrality of romance to American literature, urging scholars to decipher its racial coding and the significant work romance is called upon to perform in imaginings of the national community. Morrison insists that an "American Africanism" haunts American literature, figuring blackness as a blank empty space, always available for carrying out the duties of exorcism, reification, and mirroring. "Through the simple expedient of demonizing and reifying the range of color on a palette," Morrison argues, "American Africanism makes it possible to say and not say, to inscribe and erase, to escape and engage, to act out and act on, to historicize and render timeless."[20] Extending her insights in a global frame, this study investigates the ways in which romance produces Africa in the diasporic imagination. Certainly, for African-Americans and others in the diaspora, Africa occurs not just as a dark mirror but as a more complicated sign, which has the power to give or withhold meaning – to return value to the past and to give shape to the future.[21] In excess of common colonial and imperial constructions of Africa as well as of American ones of blackness in general, black diasporic writers turn to Africa to garner cultural solace,