Introduction

Our current century is becoming increasingly characterized by persons of varying ethnic and racial and cultural backgrounds living together in societies all over the globe. The United Kingdom, France, and Germany, together with the United States and Brazil in the Americas, are only the better-known examples. How communities of common derivation maintain their sense of connectedness in lands of destination, while also forming ties with new groups and thus giving rise to novel social formations, is a primary facet of contemporary life. But such diversity is also a major challenge, often leading to tensions arising from ignorance and fear of the unknown. The formal inclusion of the histories and cultures of everyone in the society is therefore critical to resolving misunderstanding and conflict.

This book attempts to make a contribution to that effort, as it concerns people of African descent who found (and find) themselves either living outside of the African continent, or in parts of Africa territorially distant from their lands of birth. It is also a book about critical ideas that have had a profound impact upon the African-descended, and as such the book is a history of experiences, contributions, victories, and ongoing struggles, centering mass movements and extensive relocations over long periods of time, resulting in dispersals of persons and ideas throughout much of the world, a phenomenon often referred to as the African diaspora.

To be sure, there have been other historical redistributions across land and sea. European and Asian populations (among whom the

Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and Pacific Islanders feature) have long been in motion, as have Jews, Muslims, and other religious communities. This fact underscores that persons could simultaneously belong to multiple communities, and that the African dimension is by no means the only such community. Even so, the present volume maintains, for reasons to be explored, that the African diaspora is entirely unique. It is a story, or a collection of stories, like no other.

Stories are fundamental to how we understand the human condition. It is by way of stories that we assemble information (and sometimes fictions) to make sense of our experiences, both individually and collectively. It is by way of the narrative that nations recount histories, usually emphasizing collective triumph over tribulation. And it is in the story of triumph that communities find validation and purpose. What we make of our past experience, how we fashion our collective stories, is critical to how we interpret and respond to the present.

The story of Africans and their descendants conforms to neither the popular nor official narratives of the nation-state, as their experiences are often overlooked, misrepresented, or caricatured, if not erased entirely. This is not only because those experiences are less studied and poorly understood; it is also because the black experience complicates the dominant narrative, rendering it far less flattering.

As an undergraduate text, this book is written at a time of considerable perplexity, anxiety, ambiguity, and contradiction. People of African descent – black people – can be found in all walks of life. In ancient and medieval times their achievements were in instances unparalleled, while their economic contributions to the modern world have been extensive and foundational, having introduced agricultural forms and mining techniques while providing the necessary labor. They have contributed to the sciences and the arts in spectacular ways, while their cultural influence, with individuals achieving extraordinary heights in literature, theater, painting, sculpture, dance, music, athletics, and religion, has long been celebrated. Global in scope, black musical production has featured jazz, calypso, blues, soca, reggae, and hip-hop, as just a few examples. Even so, contrasts between the individual of distinction and the popular perception of blacks as a group could not be more striking. Throughout Europe and the Americas, blacks are collectively and disproportionately associated with crime, poverty, disease, and educational underachievement. It is a perception paralleled by the view of Africa itself, a continent

brimming with potential but waylaid by war, poverty, disease, and insufficient investment in human capital.

The study of the African diaspora is distinguished from the study of African Americans in the United States, or any other African-descended community in a particular country, in that the diasporic lens is concerned with at least one of two issues – and frequently both: (1) the ways in which African cultural, social, or political forms undergo transformations, yet continue a relationship with African antecedents while influencing new environments that include Europeans, First Nationers, and Asians; and (2) connections between geographically separated and/or culturally distinct communities of the African-descended.

When placed into conversation, studies of black communities reveal certain elements in common, suggesting related, even parallel conditions, if not a unified experience. These include: (1) Africa as land of origin; (2) enslavement and colonialism; (3) cultural efflorescence; (4) reifications of color and race; (5) ongoing citizenship struggles; and (6) open-ended interrogations of Africa's ongoing significance in lands of destination.

As such, the diasporic condition is often an unsettled (and unsettling) experience in which the question of "belonging" is unresolved: Africa, as land of origin, is in many ways unrecoverable; whereas it is a challenge to fully regard an oft-hostile host environment as "home." Under such circumstances, diaspora is experienced as a continuum of liminality, along which communities and individuals – linked as much by common experience as by genetic makeup – are located at various points.

Fundamental to the approach of the present study is that global watershed moments serve as the critical mechanism by which the African diaspora is progressively knitted together. That is, key historical developments, such as the 1896 Battle of Adwa in Ethiopia, serve to trigger a collective black consciousness that is, in turn, largely predicated upon such antecedent, parallel experiences as slavery, colonialism, and regimes of racialized oppression.

The present volume posits three movements or phases that comprise the Africa diaspora. The first unfolds in antiquity, and rather than the forced relocation of large numbers of Africans, begins with the dissemination of ideas that flow from Africa to other parts of the world, especially the Mediterranean. New ideas would on occasion be accompanied by substantial physical relocations to other parts of

Africa, as well as to destinations outside of the continent. But in contrast to a subsequent movement in chains, many of these Africans were moving in conquest and triumph. Yet another distinctive aspect of this first wave is that it unfolds in a period to which certain influential ideas about Africans are ascribed – even though these ideas have often developed long after antiquity's end. These concepts would prove to be both prescriptive and proscriptive in the lives of millions of Africans.

The second wave begins in the middle of the fifteenth century, with the onset of the transatlantic slave trade, and ends in the middle of the twentieth century and the Second World War. As will be explained, this periodization concurs with modernity, for which the exploitation of African labor was key. The third wave or movement, in turn, began with ever-increasing levels of immigration following the Second World War and, continuing into the present, features a series of interactions between African-descended and African-born communities. The implications of these developments are highly significant, and will be explored.

This book is therefore divided into three parts, with chapters proceeding in more or less chronological fashion. Part I: "Old" World Dimensions and the First Wave, begins with Chapter 1, "Antiquity," a discussion of ancient Egypt, Nubia, and Greece and Rome, where and when the African diasporic story factually begins. Chapter 2, "Africans and the Bible," locates the African presence in sacred text and examines the critical role Judeo-Christian traditions have played in the African experience. Chapter 3, "Africans and the Islamic World," centers Africans, sub-Saharan and otherwise, in the formation and expansion of Islam as a global force.

Part II: "New" World Realities and Diaspora's Second Wave (to 1945), begins with Chapter 4, "Transatlantic Moment." After initially treating Africans in medieval Europe and Renaissance Europe, it shifts to the transatlantic slave trade as a watershed moment for both Europe and the Americas. Chapter 5, "Enslavement," brings together similar and dissimilar experiences of slavery in the Americas. The response to the disorientation of displacement and enslavement, the various strategies of resistance and reconstitution, and the ambiguities of economic, political, and juridical conditions in the post-slavery period are the subjects of Chapter 6, "Asserting the Right to Be." The rise of global capitalism during the first half of the twentieth century would feature substantial migrations throughout the

Caribbean, the American South, and Europe, and Chapter 7, "Reconnecting," argues that such large-scale relocations also facilitated the mutual introduction of diverse populations, leading to such cultural and political developments as Pan-Africanism, the Harlem Renaissance, and Négritude.

Part III: Empire's Dismantling and The Third Wave (since 1945), consists of two chapters: Chapter 8, "Movement People," spans the period of the Second World War into the 1970s, exploring the interrelated nature of decolonization, civil rights, black power, music, sports, and literature. Chapter 9, "Global Africa in the Era of Mandela and Obama," follows the African diaspora's unfolding into the twenty-first century, focusing on how freedom struggles in southern Africa became the center of diasporic activity, followed by a discussion of increased African immigration into the northern hemisphere and its connection to the rise of Barack Obama.

Threading throughout the text are questions whose answers are not always apparent. These include: Who qualifies as a member of the African diaspora? Is such membership biologically determined? Is it culturally acquired? Is it better understood as a political statement? Can there be multiple responses to the question, and/or the answers depend upon location and/or context? If biologically premised, just how much African ancestry is required, and is phenotype a reliable measure? Is acknowledgment of African ancestry necessary to be considered part of the diaspora? Who is qualified to determine who belongs and who does not, and what in turn qualifies a person to render such judgment?

In exploring the many dimensions of the African diaspora, *Reversing Sail* issues a number of challenges. To begin, it calls into question spatial conventions, especially the nation-state, as the most useful context within which to understand the black experience. It rejects imperial privilege insofar as whose story gets to be told. It seeks to trouble cultural chauvinism, in particular of the European variety, as well as the meanings of such concepts as "the West" and "Western culture." Standards of beauty and aesthetics are interrogated, and in the discussions of race, slavery, gender, religion, capitalism, imperialism, colonialism, and the postcolonial, the study locates polarities of impoverishment and wealth within periods and formations of deep historicity.

As an interpretive history, this book is far from an exhaustive treatment of so vast a set of topics. Originally envisioned to

complement a series of short introductory books to African history, *Reversing Sail* was written within those constraints, so that it is not possible to afford any geographic location the attention and detail it truly deserves. Rather, in identifying key moments within which the African diaspora unfolds, spatial emphases shift from chapter to chapter. Furthermore, and in keeping with the original series format, suggested readings rather than endnotes follow each chapter, recommending materials of most immediate assistance with undergraduate research. As such, *Reversing Sail* can be used not only for the study of the African diaspora, but as a complementary resource for African history as well.

I

"Old" World Dimensions and the First Wave

CHAPTER 1

Antiquity

Scholars of history and society have long understood that discussions of the collective black experience must begin with people and cultures and developments in Africa itself, before the rise of American slavery and the transatlantic slave trade, in order to correct, or at least debilitate the firmly entrenched view that black folk, prior to their experiences in the Americas, had no history worthy of the name, that their history begins with slavery.

Long before the rise of professional historians, black men and women were invested in uncovering Africa's deep history, and connecting it with the challenges of subsequent global displacements. Facing slavery's withering assault, independent thinkers as early as David Walker and Frederick Douglass were careful to mention the glories of the African past. When circumstances all around suggested otherwise, they found evidence of the potential and ability of black people in the achievements of antiquity. Rather than conforming to divine decree or reflecting the natural order of things, the enslavement of black people, in a context of thousands of years of African accomplishment, was but an aberration. From this perspective, black suffering and subjugation could hardly have been anticipated.

These early intellectuals, as yet uninformed about West and West Central African civilizations, invariably cited those of ancient Egypt, Nubia, and Ethiopia as exemplars of black distinction and creativity. In so doing, they presaged the subsequent writings of scholars like W.E.B. Du Bois, Carter G. Woodson, and St. Clair Drake, who

similarly embraced the idea that ancient Egyptian and Nubian societies were somehow related to those toiling in American sugar cane and cotton fields. This view was not limited to black scholars in the Americas; the Senegalese scholar Cheikh Anta Diop, leader of the "Dakar" school of African historical inquiry, likewise argued for links between Egypt, Ethiopia, and West Africa. The "Afrocentrists" of the last quarter of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries further developed these claims, but whatever the particular school of thought, certain of their ideas resonate with communities in both West Africa and the African diaspora, where the notion of a connectedness to either Egypt and Nubia or Ethiopia resides in the cultural expressions of the common, not necessarily lettered people. Whether one accepts these views or finds them extravagant, there is no avoiding the conclusion that Africans and their descendants have long pursued a conversation about their relationship to the ancients. Such intergenerational discussion has not been idle chit-chat, but rather has significantly influenced the unfolding of African American art, music, religion, politics, and societies.

A brief consideration of ancient Africa, especially Egypt, Nubia, and Ethiopia, remains important for at least two reasons. First, it contextualizes the discussion of subsequent developments that include massive trades in African captives. Antiquity reminds us that modernity could not have been predicted: that Africans were not always under the heel, but were in fact at the forefront of human civilization. Second, antiquity reminds us that the African diaspora did not begin with slave trades. Rather, the dissemination of African ideas and persons actually began long ago. In this first diasporic phase, ideas were arguably more significant than the number of people dispersed. The Mediterranean in particular benefited from Egyptian and Nubian culture and learning. This initial phase was further distinguished by the political standing of the Africans in question; Egypt was a veritable regional power, imposing its will on others, rather than the reverse. This was therefore a very different kind of African diaspora than what would follow many centuries later.

As Egypt, Nubia, and Ethiopia were powerful, illustrious states, this chapter focuses on what some regard as "high" civilizations. This is entirely appropriate in bringing attention to the fact that African societies achieved levels of exceptional distinction. But at the same time, placing the inquiry into a diasporic framework is a reminder that these societies were in mutual contact as well as with others, and

that cross-cultural exchange was at times extensive. In attempting to understand these interactions, it may be that contemporary social registers do not have an equivalent in antiquity, especially within its African sector. This should be borne in mind when exploring the possible meaning of "race" among the ancients, and to the extent that it may have mirrored current notions, its overall significance may have been negligible.

Egypt

The study of ancient Egypt is a discipline unto itself, involving majestic monuments, mesmerizing religions, magnificent arts, epic wars, and the like, all of which lie beyond our purpose here. Rather, our deliberations are confined to Egypt's relations with its neighbors, especially to the south, as it is in such relations that contours of an ancient African diaspora can be demonstrated.

Ancient Egypt, located along the Nile and divided into Upper and Lower regions, exchanged goods and ideas with Sumer (in Mesopotamia, between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers) as early as 3500 BCE, and by 1700 BCE was connected with urban-based civilizations in the Indus valley, the Iranian plateau, and China. Situated in Africa, Egypt was also a global crossroad for various populations and cultures, its participation in this intercontinental zone a major feature of the African diaspora's opening chapter (see Map 1).

Just who were these ancient Egyptians? While none can reasonably quibble with identifying them as north-eastern Africans, the discussion becomes more complex when the subject turns to "race." Race, as it is used currently, may be commonly understood, but attempts to arrive at a precise, widely held definition can actually prove elusive, as its meaning is sensitive to shifting contexts. In this study, race refers to placing human beings within hierarchical categories that seem to align with phenotypic difference, supposedly reflecting fundamental distinctions as well as respective levels of ability and beauty. This concept of race lacks scientific value or basis, but as a sociopolitical concept it carries decided import and gravity.

Our understanding of ancient Egypt is therefore complicated by our own conversations about race, and by attempts to relate modern ideas to ancient times. Much more a contemporary preoccupation, race may have been of scant significance in ancient Egypt, if the