

Msia Kibona Clark, Phiwokuhle Mnyandu and Loy L. Azalia, *Pan African Spaces, Essays on Black Transnationalism*, Lexington Books, Lanham, 2019, ISBN 978-1-4985-8192-9, 322 pages

Review by Simona FER

This collection of studies, organized into seven sections, with 26 studies of contributors from all over the world, provides details and experiences of being bicultural, so different from experiences of being biracial or a second-generation immigrant. The book analyzes Black identity from multiple perspectives, presenting impressive genuine life stories written by the contributors themselves. Each of the essays arises from remarkable personal viewpoints, focused on bicultural African/Black experiences. As the book editors mention, for many bicultural Blacks, the moving between identities and the integration of those identities has produced many ways in which people identify themselves. Since 1999 a great number of people of African descent have found themselves in multiple Black cultural spaces, documented stories being provided by social media, besides other official or authentic documents. Some of these stories present evidence of tensions between African Americans, African immigrants, Black South Africans and migrants from other parts of Africa. All this situation generates problematic relationships in the economics, education and geographical areas.

The book uses a Pan African lens to examine the meaning of being Black or African, and in this respect the editors explain that this supposes to inhabit Black or African racial identity, but to inhabit multiple Black or African cultural identities as well. In the introduction we are presented three sections providing an overview of Black migration in three regions and countries: The United States, Europe and South Africa.

The United States section offers personal stories of the multiple experiences of being Black in America, second-generation Caribbean and African migrants in America, second-generation migrants with parents from different countries and individuals with parents from the Diaspora and Africa. Therefore, a complex way to

conceive and understand Black identity in America.

As concerns the Europe section, the editors explain that European countries continued to maintain postcolonial power and control over their former colonies, with many countries imposing strict immigration laws and Black Europeans fought to dismantle racist ideologies. The majority of Black migration to Europe falls into a few categories, but most of Black people migrating as part of the colonial experiences. The other three categories include Africans emigrating to Europe as refugees, labor migrants and as students, approximately 1.8 million Black Caribbean and Black Africans living in the UK. Out of the 60 million people living in France, about 2.5 million are Black. In Germany there live about 168,000 Sub-Saharan Africans, in Italy around 200,000 Black people and about 150,000 African immigrants in Portugal (p.14).

Black Europeans have endured physical attacks, verbal assault, police brutality and discrimination for the color of their skin, but young Black people living in Europe have been taking up the task of changing perceptions of Blackness in Europe, by using different digital platforms such as blogs and social media. In this way, they have created communities around these platforms, sharing their experiences all over Europe.

In order to add a wider complexity to the book, the editors also mention and debate the migration into South Africa from other parts of the continent. A Black person on the continent of Africa is not born an "African citizen" as such, but an African who is a citizen of, for instance Tanzania or Nigeria, or any other member-country of the African Union (p.17). It was in 1994 when every South African, including Black-African citizens, voted in one election for the first time, when liberation came. Apartheid (the system of racial separation to strict strata in all areas: economic, political, academic and all other privileges) classified South Africans into four groups according to the relative privilege they enjoyed: Europeans, Coloreds (mixed race), Indians and Africans. But the post-apartheid era saw the emergence of a two-tiered classification: White and Black South Africans.

The contributors hope is to find a way by which engagement may take place that does not seek an imposition of choice in culture, but an embrace of its potential to help Africans better understood themselves and be understood by the world.

Section 1 deals with the issue of Changing the Paradigms on Migration and Immigration in the African Diaspora. Speaking about Afropolitanism, Nenelwa Tomi outlines that social media has helped Black youth find a space where they can drive

conversations and examinations about what it means to be black. The author also mentions that Black people create unifying spaces that they want to be part of, where individuality is welcomed and celebrated and does not have to juxtapose itself to a dominant culture (p. 26), and considers that Afropolitanism and its proponents have done insufficient work to mobilize Blacks (p. 28).

Tolulope F.Odunsi, Esq, in her study related to the racism experience and racist treatment, reveals the increasing number of Black immigrants who are deported from the United States, at a much higher rate than immigrants from European, Asian and Middle Eastern countries. The author explains that, in 2002 there were 8,921 total deportations of Black immigrants, whereas there were only 3,090 total deportations for Whites and 4,317 total deportations for Asians and Middle Easterners (p. 32). The author also states that Black people face challenges that can include the stigma associated with speaking with a foreign accent, the stress of being in a new environment and an unfamiliar culture and the difficulty of developing supportive relationships within the education system, the conclusion being that Black immigrants and Black Americans experience racism in the United States similarly.

Section 2 approaches The Perspectives on Black Transnationalism and Identity Formation, from personal experiences points of view, giving a complete overview of life moments and happenings, privileges and responsibilities lived by the authors themselves. They sadly recount events closely related to their families and home countries. Carolina Nve Diaz San Francisco, one of the book contributors, encountered inquires about her identity, Spanish or African, while people were gazing at her skin: "Are you Spanish?" Consequently she had to justify her existence, answering back: "Yes, my mother is Spanish, and my father is from Equatorial Guinea. I was born in Salamanca. You know, my father migrated...then he met my mother" (p. 55). Therefore, she explains she could see obvious physical differences among people. She was the only dark skinned person in her city and discussions based on "black skin" were out of context, considering her case was invisible. But in Madrid things were slightly different, because there exists black population. It is a sensitive and moving life story in which years have passed, but she can smile now and she is satisfied that she is able to perceive herself differently, her life having changed for better.

Section 3 provides an overview of Crioulo Culture and Pidgin Music: American Experiences and West African Identities, the studies pointing out personal

experiences and development within communities where the contributors note in their studies the way they had to understand their identities and to accept and recognize the two cultures, the native's and the immigrant's. In Nana Afua Y. Brantuo's study, very suggestively titled *Music of My Flesh*, we read about the joy and happiness the African music provides, functioning as an essential medium for understanding and affirming the complexity of author's multinational, multiethnic West African identity. Nana concludes that African music, for the children of the Diaspora, is essential to their cultural retention and survival, and used for celebrations of life, African music serves as teacher, archive, healer, weapon and tool as they enter new lands and integrate into new societies (p. 109).

Section 4 comprises studies on *Diverse Identities and Representations* among second-generation Ethiopian Migrants in America, where readers will be delighted to navigate, alongside the authors, authentic childhood memories with positive or negative aspects of being Black. Overcoming different unpleasant situations, Yelena Bailey, a contributor to the section mentioned above, wonders what will happen with the forms of anti-Blackness, with the future of Black identity and social engagement: Will it fracture the Black community even further? But, as an educator, she hopes that others like her will look back and realize that her story is not a new one. Black people in America have continually negotiated their identities and belonging while simultaneously embracing a sense of community (p. 134).

The editors titled Section 5 *Class and Citizenship: African American and African Migrant Experiences in South Africa*, and not by chance, but because we will discover again, as in the previous sections, living experiences and life trajectories as African migrants, genuinely described by four of the book contributors. Gabriel Peoples, in a touching story *On Being African...American*, tells that his culture and body as an African...American unfortunately too often only gains value when it becomes iconic, and regardless, it remains illegible to those who do not embody it. The author also emphasizes he encounters a wall, a barrier of understanding between those like him who live in a break and those who do not refuse to acknowledge that they too live in an incoherent space between coherent homes that they refer to as their cultural identity. He also stresses that this wall allows them to look at the same fact, but arrive at different conclusions or truths (p. 157).

For Sayuni Brown, a contributor born in Uganda, but South African too, painful memories remain over time, acknowledging that Black South Africans cannot understand that she is able to project the correct cultural norms when dealing with

each cultural group and that she does not have dual identities or move between them, because she is with different cultures and understandings, being culturally fluid (p.161). Eugene M. Bope provides a historical overview of international migration and the diversity of migrants in South Africa, describing relations of Black African migrants among different groups and their relations with Black South Africans. The contributor also explains the importance of maintaining the home languages when a migrant leaves the country of origin and settles in a new country. When migrants relocate in their new countries, the first waves of migrants usually bring their cultural identity with them, maintain their home languages and also tend to learn the relevant languages of the host country. Therefore, the second part of the study is dedicated to the migration effects on the language repertoires of Congolese migrants in South Africa, the third part approaches the importance to retain a Congolese identity in South Africa and the last part of the study analyzes the maintenance and the loss of Congolese languages in South Africa.

The 6th Section presents Two Interesting Diasporas: Caribbean and African American Communities in America, where four documented and detailed studies highlight Afro-Caribbean experiences from bicultural perspective (Shelvia English, Dayne Hutchinson and Kat J. Stephens), the meaning of Blackness (Cassandra "Dr.Cass" J. St.Vil), racial and ethnic identity of Haitian Americans in Chicago (Courtney Pierre Joseph) and about being Afro-Trinidadian in the United States (Keisha V. Thompson). We will distinguish different approaches related to the study of the African diaspora and immigrant assimilation processes, the diasporic experience involving the constant interaction between the homeland and the hostland. Some findings assert that Afro-Caribbeans are able to separate their ethnic identities based on situational contexts and audiences, particularly when it might be most beneficial for them. In some instances, Afro-Caribbeans place a significant amount of value on the maintenance of their language (dialects) and accents when negotiating their adaptation to their US environments. Although their adoption of a racial identity is likely to increase over time, Afro-Caribbeans are still able to maintain a strong ethnic identity (p. 201).

Dr. Cass, clearly states, in her study, *The Meaning of Blackness*, that Blackness does not belong to one particular country or continent, practice or language. It is not solely athleticism or genre of music. To her, Blackness means the wealth of diversity that the Black socio-political group holds and the opportunity to share this richness with the world.

Courtney Pierre Joseph's study explores the experiences of Haitian Americans in Chicago for a better understanding of the process of Black bicultural identity formation. The author concludes that Haitian Americans built their own identity via a difficult multi-step process: a rejection of Haitian identity and an exploration of American identity. By connecting both influences, Haitian and American, in a constant conversation, these individuals redefine the boundaries of African American identity and highlight the various ethnic cultures that make up modern day Blackness in the United States.

Keisha V. Thomson evokes her grandmother's words: "Always remember Black is beautiful", which are moreover embodied in the title of her study. These words were told to her one night when her family gathered to wish them farewell before leaving Trinidad and Tobago for the United States. Since then she has been taking her grandmother's words everywhere with her and acknowledges now that the most powerful tool is the ability to learn the nuances of a culture, while still maintaining her strength and identity. Her bicultural Blackness is complex, it is storied, it is resilient and it is beautiful.

Section 7 analyzes *The Relationships between Color and Race in Afro Latinx Identities*, in five essays, reflecting the own experiences and their impact on the emotional development, social behavior, action tendencies and goals. Ryan Mann-Hamilton confesses in his essay that although he presented an individual story, many share similar experiences that add to the complexity of the Black experience and that their identities are never complete: they are constantly expending. He also mentions that they arrive at these identities through different experiences, at different times and through varied locations. The contributor is certain that as long as they uncover their stories they will embrace a wider definition of the Black experience and the right ways to their dignity and smile (p. 254). Anthony Curtis Polanco shares the same struggle for discovering his identity and explains that his Afro-Latino identity was not an overnight process but a lifelong process that helped define the person he is. The author outlines that his struggle with identity helped him build his character, find his passion and contribute to the recognition of visibility of Afro-Latinos and all African descendants.

Ariana A. Curtis is an anthropologist, contributor to this book and writes in her essay that her father is Panamanian, mother-African American and she feels balanced in her biculturalism. Over the years, people around her considered the author more Latina than African American, but she clearly explains she is always both

and she embraces the nuances of her positionalities on the continuum of African American and Latinx identity. She is the first curator of Latinx studies at the National Museum of African American History and Culture, where she feels empowered and valued precisely because of her expertise, sensitiveness and biculturalism. Therefore, her professional, academic and personal proficiencies align every day, irrespective of external ideations (p. 268)

Krista L. Cortes analyzes, in a thorough interview, the boundaries of identity among Puerto Ricans in reference to their Blackness. The contributor mentions that Black is a visible characteristic, but she wonders about its visible iterations? What does it mean to be culturally Black and historically Black? Throughout the interviews participants oscillated between "Black" or "Blackness" and "African" or "Africanness" as identity descriptors. Selections of interview data are analyzed to understand how self-identified Puerto Ricans living in California make sense of Black/ness and African/ness. Among the conclusions we may read that the interviewees highlighted the importance of the visual in the classification of people within the Puerto Rican community and what is visual becomes constituted in the ways that language and the body work together or against each other to create an image. The variety of the interview responses demonstrates a lot of perceptions and beliefs that exists among those who consider themselves Puerto Ricans. The contributor underlines that the existence of a racial hierarchy in America is unquestionable, for it exists and it matters.

Briefly considering each study, we may conclude that their high quality and vibrant reflection can be easily noticed in their original traits, unique attitudes, instances and values, provided by the contributors. The strength of the Black tradition seems not to have given up. On the contrary, for many bicultural Blacks, moving and navigating between identities and the integration of those identities has produced multiple ways to discover themselves, widen their experiences and define their beliefs.