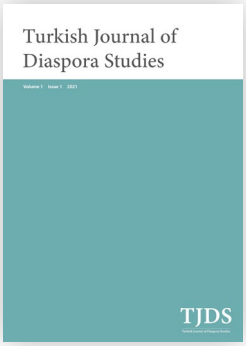

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Interview

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Q1. *The concept of diaspora is used to define almost any community who has a distinct identity tied with an imagined or territorialized nation outside the resident country. Nationalization of the concept of "victim" diaspora seems no longer prevailing but communities beyond the territory of a nation generally fill the picture. Migration or exile is not the only cause to form diasporic communities. To some studies, socially, culturally, religiously, ethnically, linguistically, and/or geopolitically amalgamated communities are also deemed to form diaspora. Having said that, what do you think about the impact of the proliferation of the usage on the conceptualization of diaspora? And/or, how would you conceptualize diaspora?*

A1. The proliferation of the practices of diaspora runs parallel to transnational encounters and exchanges. While displacements and dispersals remain foundational to the formation of diasporas and diasporic communities, migrations and migratory experiences have resulted in the continued evolution of the concept of diaspora to suit the needs and demands of ever-changing im/migrant communities. This flexibility and adaptability of diaspora accommodate the exchange of goods and services, for example, remittances, the transfer of funds by migrants to their home countries, which has become one of the largest financial inflows to these receiving countries. Gustavo Segura, a consultant of the Office of International Organization for Migration Regional Office for Central America, North America and the Caribbean, reminds us, "Remittances in the Caribbean [is] more than just money."[1] Alongside economic transnational practices, participation in transnational political activities is integral to the theorization of diaspora. Hence, migratory flows are not only limited to movements and migrations of individuals (the exchange of ideas), but also encompass the flow of money between home and host countries. These migratory experiences transcend national borders and boundaries.

In my most recent book, *African Diasporic Women's Narrative: Politics of Resistance, Survival, and Citizenship*,[2] I argue that transnational ties engender diaspora and diasporic relations, resulting in the obvious challenge to ideas of fixity and fixedness and the embrace of flexible (diasporic and transnational) identities, or "flexible citizenship," what Aihwa Ong refers to as the "flexibility [derived from] social and geographical positioning."[3] Responding to global migratory flows of people and resources, Ong's coinage, "flexible citizenship" underscores the need for a reconfiguration and reconceptualization of the definition of citizenship to accurately and adequately reflect transnational exchanges and movements. Thus, diaspora is not conceptualized in terms of permanent settlement. Opposing the regulation of the flow of information, resources, and people, flexible or diasporic citizenship gives rise to multiple sites of belonging, multiple conceptualizations of home/spaces. This expansive and inclusive refashioning of diaspora engenders borderless communities that are inclusive of the state. For

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example, the sizable Haitian diaspora in the United States has resulted in its categorization, or more poignantly, its amalgamation, as the eleventh department, otherwise referred to as the "floating homeland," an extension of the existing ten departments in the home country, Haiti. Due to the impact and influence of diasporic communities, many nations are reimagined as inclusive of their diasporas.

The configuration of the floating homeland lends voice to the complex reality of navigating and belonging to multiples spaces/places. This ability to be in circulation in multiple spaces takes on literal and figurative characteristics. Fittingly, Guyanese poet, Grace Nichols, reminds us that the sense of journey, whether real or imagined, is always in one's imagination.[4] Although Nichols specifically references Caribbean people, these journeys that place on an existential level in the imaginary, facilitate diaspora identity and consciousness. My conceptualization of diaspora is both real and imagined, not limited to geography or physicality. While home and host countries manifest as specific locales and destinations, diaspora also evokes the imaginary; functions as an imaginative space engendered through myths, memories, cultural practices, and rituals.[5] In other words, these communities are bound to their original geographical locations by a common vision, memory and myth about their homeland. Drawing on Benedict Anderson's concept of imagined community in which he calls attention to the sense of communion individuals of the smallest nation share in spite of never having met, I draw a parallel with Morrison's concept of the "neighborhood" in which she suggests that there exists an unspoken kinship, to underscore transnational alliances between communities. The theme of movement and migration is central, intrinsic to the work/field of diaspora.

Q2. *States are increasing their efforts all around the world for diaspora engagement; however, they still lack in giving efforts in internationally debated policies. This does not mean that states do not have diaspora policies of their own but we don't see the diasporic issues discussed among states perhaps due to political and socio-cultural sensibility. Is it possible for states to consider debating diaspora internationally beyond assimilation or nationalization policies?*

A2. It comes as no surprise that states are increasing their efforts for diaspora engagement as these participating states realize the invaluable contributions that diaspora makes to their ongoing development. As mentioned earlier, remittances that established a socio-spatial relationship between sending states and diasporas are important, often accountable for over 21% of some countries GDP.[6] A case in point, the Caribbean countries which Gustavo Segura dubbed "primarily receiving countries of remittance," are heavily reliant on remittances.[7] This heavy reliance equally speaks of heavy dependence on the host countries, tipping the scale or balance in favor of the latter. While these exchanges are paradigmatic of the globalizing effort, globalization does not operate equally across the globe. Filmmaker's Stephanie Black searing documentary, *Life and Debt* in which she exposes the exploitative politics and policies of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank, and other aid organizations, that proved detrimental to the Jamaican economy, comes to mind. The structural adjustments—analogous to neocolonialism, that Jamaica, and by extension other dependent countries, was required to make compromised its sovereignty. Consequently, many scholars and theorists have argued that globalization promotes and incorporates in its agenda continued dependency, rendering

precarious countless lives and livelihoods. Along these lines, it is fair to conclude that the policies of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank target remittances, whether directly or indirectly, that aid in reducing poverty in receiving states. Suffice it to say, this is the extent (or the most documented evidence) of the sending states' engagement.[8]

We bear witness to diaspora engagement in the areas of science, technology, entrepreneurship, medicine, and engineering. However, I would argue that for the most part, this engagement is lopsided as countries involved in strengthening the workforce of the receiving country (namely the United States) by sending migrants as guest workers are disadvantaged, resulting in a brain drain of those sending countries, and economic and political gains to the receiving countries.[9] Embedded in this narrative of engagement is forced loyalty, of both the individual migrant and the sending country, to America, which can stymie efforts to remain connected to the politics back home; the attendant result is endorsing being embedded in American politics. Some may argue that there exist policies to counter this brain-drain, but I have not encountered any significant data to assess the success of this counter discourse. Immigrant roots of many nationals or citizens are part of the national narrative, yet the paucity that characterizes their inclusion, or lack thereof, in this narrative, is cause for pause, for the discourse often does not move beyond assimilation or national policies and politics.

How do we regulate these diaspora engagements to benefit equally or at least fairly, receiving and sending countries? How do we avoid exploitation of the so-called "lesser" countries? What kinds of regulatory practices must be put in place to ensure shared governance, to keep in focus the original purpose of diaspora engagements—that were initially sought in the name of shared culture? Coordination and engagement of the states and its migrants and diaspora groups abroad are paramount, i.e. better coordination and cohesion between state and non-state (or multiple-state, multiple-passport holders) actors. There is also a fervent need for regional and geo-political cooperation and coordination, a necessity to bridge the gap between the formal and informal economy. The remittances are categorized within the informal sector as are the migrants characterized as members of the informal economy, and therefore are subjected to marginalization and invisibility. Thus, it is incumbent that we do not rely exclusively on empirical discourse but rather integrate grassroots (non-state) practices and involvement as a viable form of diaspora engagement.

Q3. *Since the world entered into the nation-state system, territorial states have not been able to contain nations, rather led to increasing diasporas. So how do globalized nations and governance impact on territorial state and diaspora relations?*

A3. This question requires contextualization to address the various forms and formations of diaspora and the impetus for these diaspora, such as victim diaspora, labor diaspora. My response to the previous question about global diaspora engagement and the ability and willingness of the state to engage the diaspora beyond assimilationist and nationalist politics attend to some relevant issues, namely the negative effects of globalization, brain drain, the limitations placed on the engagement with domestic policy, the paucity of diasporic relations if the home state's national interest threatens the host state. As articulated, diasporas are important as they aid in the construction and development of nation-states. Diasporas should be inclusive of voluntary

and forced migration; consequently, people migrate in search of better opportunities so as to ameliorate their socio-economic condition. In many instances, the deplorable living conditions at home, in the home country, is exacerbated by the imposition of foreign policies, in the likes of the IMF and the IDB. In the promotion of globalization and implementation of state policies on diasporic communities, state representatives or actors endorse policies that are inherently biased and consequently, benefit the "greater" countries, while disenfranchising the "lesser" countries. This interaction between state and non-state actors is imbalanced; subsequently there should be a call for a more balanced agenda premised on shared governance. As I demonstrated earlier, we witness the racialization and politicization of certain policies that affect specific countries disproportionately. For example, while the Cuban diaspora in the United States is welcomed, granted citizenship with relative ease, the same treatment is not meted out to the Haitian diaspora that is ostracized and regarded as second-class citizens. So we witness the drawing of borders within the diaspora that engenders the politics of un/belonging. Thus, one can surmise that Haitian migrants, members of the "victim" diaspora, endure a double victimization of sorts. Both diasporas (Cuban and Haitian) are the result of "forced migration," despite the U.S. immigration policies that frame diaspora differently leading to the inclusion and exclusion of different population groups, and as a consequence the articulation of different approaches of strategies regarding diasporic populations. In this highly-charged politicization of certain diasporas, the contribution to the nation-state of these marginalized groups are overlooked.

Q4. *In general, diaspora studies are not at their peak values. A small number of scholars dedicate their time to diaspora issues. For those who are eager to study this subject, what are the fundamental approaches to studying the concept of diaspora? Why is it important to study and how do you see where diaspora studies are heading to or need to go?*

A4. I'm not sure what barometer is used to measure "peak values" of diaspora studies. In short, it is difficult to conceptualize when the peak is attained or what constitutes "peak values" of diaspora. Notwithstanding, I would say that diaspora studies is a burgeoning field that is determined and constantly re-defined by the ever-changing dynamic of immigrant communities and the steady influx of migrants. A significant number of scholars are invested in the field of migration and diaspora studies which is vast and wide-ranging, as there are several diasporas beyond the ones, African/Caribbean diaspora, inclusive of the Indo-Caribbean Diaspora, I am invested in. Whereas I see globalization as a one-dimensional enterprise where "greater" countries exploit the resources of smaller, lesser developed countries, diasporic or transnational relations allow for a more equal participation and exchange of ideas and goods. The nation-states should capitalize on this unique opportunity, the distinctive interstitial space that diaspora inhabits, for I believe that the diasporic community has and plays a unique role in bridging cultural and political differences and fostering international and transnational ties and relationships; its in-betweenness, its hyphenated subject position permits diasporic subjects the privilege of being emotionally invested in both the home and host countries. To this end, the state should not occupy the role of sole actor and should encourage global diasporic participation. Attentive to the needs and demands of different diasporas, we need to develop strategies and policies to target different migrants differently, to meet them on their own turf, so to speak, in order to encourage full civic participation. Diaspora, as I have documented, is an extension of the homeland and the

non-state actors or ambassadors promote the homeland's national interest and are in a unique position to influence the foreign policies of the host countries. With an ever-changing world, with the emergence of a borderless and boundaryless world of free movement of persons, goods, capital and services, diaspora engagement is inevitable. Moreover, diasporas primarily function as agents of positive change, bridging cultural and political differences between host country and home country.

Notes

[1] https://rosanjose.iom.int/SITE/en/blog/remittances-caribbean-more-just-money?page=2

[2] *African Diasporic Women's Narrative: The Politics of Survival and Citizenship*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2014.

[3] Aihwa Ong, *Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logics of Transnationality*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1999.

[4] Nichols made this pronouncement while offering commentary on her film documentary of her book, *I Is a Long Memoried Woman*.

[5] For a more detailed discussion, see *African Diasporic Women's Narrative: The Politics of Survival and Citizenship*.

[6] Citing the World Bank, Segura cites that that the remittances received by Haiti, the Caribbean country most dependent on remittances, account for 21.1% of the country's GDP. https://rosanjose.iom.int/SITE/en/blog/remittances-caribbean-more-just-money#:~:text=The%20Caribbean%20countries%20are%20primarily,Haiti%20(USD%201.9%20billion).

[7] Ibid.

[8] Uncoincidentally, the IMF and World Bank are owned and directed by governments of member nation. "The People's Republic of China, . . . the most populous state on earth, is a member, as is the world's largest industrial power, the United States." https://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/exrp/differ/differ.htm

[9] Much of my analysis here is limited to the Caribbean and its diasporas, primarily in the United States.