

Navigating the African Diaspora: The Anthropology of Invisibility. By Donald Martin Carter. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010. 305 pp.

Donald Martin Carter is an anthropologist and professor of Africana Studies at Hamilton College, who specializes in areas including diaspora, visual culture, and transnational cultural politics. In his first book, *States of Grace: Senegalese in Italy and the New European Immigration*, Carter examined the experience of Senegalese immigrants in Turin, Italy, focusing particularly on their reception by the state. In his second and most recent work, *Navigating the African Diaspora: The Anthropology of Invisibility*, Carter returns to the migrant communities in Turin in order to consider more broadly the experiences of invisibility felt throughout the African Diaspora.

In the preface Carter states that “[i]n *Navigating the African Diaspora* I explore the rich modalities of the journey in my own experiences as a scholar and in the collective experience of the African Diaspora. Drawing on the work of postcolonial theorist Frantz Fanon, I interrogate the idea of visibility and invisibility” (x). Although these goals are broad and somewhat ambitious, overall this project is largely successful. Carter skillfully engages the spirit of the journey through his emphasis on movement in the conceptualization of diaspora and thoughtfully critiques the condition of invisibility as it manifests across a variety of circumstances. Despite shortcomings related to the lack of engagement with visibility and the absence of a thorough interrogation of the African Diaspora as the “collective experience” he suggests, *Navigating the African Diaspora* serves as an important intervention in contemporary scholarship, not only for the way it re-imagines diaspora, but also for its efforts to shift perceptions within the academy itself.

After outlining his project in the preface, Carter fleshes out the concept of invisibility and its relation to experiences of the African Diaspora in his introduction, noting that

[i]nvisibility is not a once-and-for-all event but is rather an ongoing, often occasional or flexible employment of power, politics, and social positioning that must be configured as a kind of routine practice capable of being reinstated into the flow of everyday events. It is a set of strategic social and cultural practices and an integral part of the process of signification; it is the power to instantiate or, as in the most ominous political intrigues, “to disappear” (6).

Carter then goes on to consider race, representation, and Blackness within the context of his own experiences and his work in anthropology (chapter 1). Next, he traces the intersections between diaspora and invisibility across a variety of themes, including genocide and refugee experiences in Sudan (chapter 2), stereotypes and racial representation of the Other in photography (chapter 3), and a concept he terms “diasporic nostalgia” and the transition to a postcolonial state (chapter 4). Chapters 5 and 6 build on this discussion of transition by considering the work of two prominent Senegalese figures, both firmly tied to this transitional period: Léopold Sédar Senghor and Ousmane Sembene. Finally, Carter concludes by returning to the contemporary Senegalese immigrant experience in Italy, revealing how identity formation in western nations is often reliant on paradoxical views of immigration and national hospitality.¹

¹ It is also worth noting that the outline provided in the preface is somewhat inaccurate, as the introduction is described as chapter 1, chapter 1 is described as chapter 2, etc. Although this discrepancy is somewhat indicative of

In *Navigating the African Diaspora*, Carter makes several important contributions to the field of diaspora studies. His efforts to understand the diasporic experience in relation to invisibility are undoubtedly the most significant, as they clarify a set of realities surrounding diaspora and migration that are easily applicable far beyond the boundaries of African Diaspora studies. In connection with this, he also engages important terms that encourage a more nuanced understanding of the diasporic experience. For example, he describes various groups as being “in diaspora,” which repositions the diasporan as someone in motion, thus transforming the diasporic experience into a process rather than a state of being. In addition, he also engages the term “diasporic nostalgia,” which he uses to describe “a desire for an imagined world that has not yet come into being” (18). Finally, Carter advocates for change within the academy, arguing that “[w]e can no longer write ourselves out of history, representation, or theory because we are all implicated in the politics of representation” (33). Although this call is directed toward the field of anthropology, his words easily translate to a number of other academic fields, encouraging scholars to strive for a more self-reflexive and self-aware intellectual approach, which is currently lacking in academia.

Despite these contributions, Carter’s project still leaves room for future scholarship through a number of imperfections. Most notably, it is not always clear how Carter conceptualizes the African Diaspora. Who is a part of it? And who remains outside? Particularly given the emphasis on movement and journey that is articulated throughout the text, how should we perceive those in Africa who have remained “at home?” This lack of clarity is most evident in Carter’s use of the term “in diaspora,” which he employs to describe African migrants living abroad.² Even if we were to overlook the difficulties of defining a single original “home” for Africans residing on the continent (for example, where would we locate the “home” of Liberians whose ancestors returned to Africa by way of the United States?), it is still difficult to disentangle this concept from related experiences of migration and exile, which makes it hard to appreciate fully the weight of Carter’s work.

The conceptualization of Africa in *Navigating the African Diaspora* is also problematic. This is especially true in relation to Carter’s use of the Senegalese experience, which he employs throughout the text as an illustration of the African Diasporic experience in general. However, because so much of his argument is rooted firmly in Senegal, it often leaves the reader to wonder about the extent to which the Senegalese experience is representative of other African groups. Although Carter does occasionally fold in other examples (such as the crisis in Sudan in chapter 2 and the more sporadic consideration of the African-American experience sprinkled throughout the text), he fails to address the cultural specificity of these examples, nor does he clearly explain how or why they are representative of a collective experience.

Overall, *Navigating the African Diaspora* is a worthwhile investment for any academic interested in issues pertaining to diaspora, migration, or the African diasporic experience. Although the text is slightly dense at times, it presents an updated and more nuanced approach to many of the concepts put forth in Paul Gilroy’s canonical texts and engages invisibility in the Fanonian sense to interrogate the experience of diaspora in a variety of contexts. Despite its flaws, Carter’s book is a noteworthy addition to the literature of diaspora studies and is commendable for its ambition to champion change within the academy.

other more minor editorial mistakes that make the text slightly unclear at times, in general these issues did not get in the way of a clear understanding of Carter’s argument.

² For example, when describing the realities of Senegalese life that have led to the country’s current trends in emigration on page 167, Carter writes, “Few families can survive without some members in diaspora.”

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