

The Paradox(es) of Diasporic Identity, Race and Belonging

Written by Benjamin Maiangwa

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BENJAMIN MAIANGWA, AUG 8 2023

“When you spend your whole life defining yourself in one way and that disappears, who are you now? This apt question posed by James Clear in *Atomic Habits* resonates with the crux of *The Paradox(es) of Diasporic Identity, Race and Belonging* (Springer 2023). In this collection that combines experiential insights, literary criticism, and scholarly analyses, the contributors invite the reader to think about their *being in place and time* and the existential questions they inevitably have to confront regarding their sense of (un)belonging and place(lessness). It is a contemplation of the things they carry with them and those they leave behind; about loss and rebirth, and particularly so for the diasporic citizen who straddles the intersections of various borders in search of self; to become what is better, to get to the promised land or remain what they “always were”. The book is essentially a discourse about our lives of ‘blackness’, ‘whiteness’, and everything else in between and outside these identities.

The book began by challenging the reader to introspect and ponder on what they would be if they were not a citizen or resident of their country, a member of their family, community, or racial category? In short, who will you be without any form of conjectured identity? These are questions I have continued to grapple with as I lose my bearings and find myself again. As a child in Nigeria, I had observed with much bewilderment how in a generally “black” nation, people are still condemned for how darker—hence ugly—they were compared to their lighter-skin or ostensibly more good-looking peers. Repulsed by the obsession with the skin colour or blackness at *home* and the indignity of it all, I realized that my identity as a “Black” man was also considered a *fait accompli* in other parts of the world. Among other things, I have been suffused with the celebratory idea that Black people have internalized about their beauty and strength, expressed in such trite slogans as ‘Black is beautiful’, or ‘Black is powerful’. I could not help but to think that such slogans are unnecessary defence of my humanity that disparage my own real and unchanging essence particularly in a continent that is partly established on African servitude.

As my journey wore on the razor edge of identity markers, I would ponder about the difference between being ‘Black’ at *home* and being ‘Black’ abroad and ask whether these are necessarily different appellations in which one denotes criminality and an obnoxious existential flaw at *home* and the other signifies a unique, even hubristic, identity marker of a triumphant people abroad. My conclusion was simply that whether I was Black at ‘home’ or ‘Black’ abroad, these epithets represent two sides of the same coin; and so often, both epithets are garbed in the subtleties of racial innuendos. I believe the nervousness I had observed among people who carry this imposed sense of self in my neighbourhood also shares some similitude to the situation of other groups or individuals in the postcolony and settler states such as the “Indigenous” peoples in Australia, New Zealand and North America. When transposed to Africa, notions like “Indigenous” or “Natives” take on a whole new meaning that borders on cultural essentialism and ignores the problematic arbitrarily drawn colonial borders which, oftentimes, mean little to the everyday life of the people.

Considering this nervousness of belonging that bestrides the diasporic citizens, we consider the question of home of utmost significance in the volume: What is home? What creates the feeling of belonging or (dis)connection to a place/space or other people? Is home a place, a feeling, other people, or an idea? Is it a destination or a spiritual entity or experience? These questions are invariably entwined with the migrants’ lived reality of constantly searching for a place to belong, to flourish, and escape precarity and invisibility within their environments and elsewhere. The need to feel at home in a specific or multiple spaces may entail some reimagination of socio-cultural ideas about self,

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others, and the distinctive politics of a place.

This volume explores how questions about home and belonging have been framed in different conflict and political science discourses on race, migration, and social relationships. It does this with the aim of envisioning alternative modes of living that question the legacy of colonization and constructed identities such as “blackness”, “whiteness”, and “people of colour”. It aims to exit these categories of difference (without denying the dignity of difference) and transform human relations beyond our materialistic political economy.

The contributions in the volume seek to expand the frontiers of research in the social sciences on the various processes of exclusionary violence—particularly as it affects diasporic and other minoritized populations—arising from our innate disposition to belong to something, someone, or someplace. It is essentially a compendium of conversations across the intersection of the racial, national, ethnic, spiritual, and sexual boundaries in which we live, an experience to which some dub “overlapping diasporas”.

Questions addressed in the volume include: In what ways are combative colonial identities of difference manufactured within our national and global spaces of encounter? How can we expel the racialized and tribalized political identities that seek to purify and deny the complexities and sacredness of being human? How do we embrace the notion that everyone we encounter is a mirror reflecting our fears of suffering and our desires for happiness?

The conversations in the volume draw on a variety of qualitative sources in Peace and Conflict Studies, Sociology, Migration Studies, International Relations, Political Science, Gender Studies, English and Literary Studies, and Environmental Science. This approach is corroborated with findings from classroom conversations and the experiences of the contributors in negotiating binary oppositions between the universal and particular identities on which their daily activities and wellbeing are sustained.

Most of the contributors have experienced various forms of physical and psychological migration as students or faculty at higher institutions of learning in Africa, North America and elsewhere. We bring attention to how people forge relationships and learn from others in their localities while recognizing their incompleteness. In so doing, we thrust our stories into the consciousness of the subalterns at home and onto the conscience of their *former* colonizers or enslavers abroad; only that in settler societies the colonists are physically still here with their “subjects”, still part of the land; “they belonged with the land the way the moose and the muskie belonged.” We underscore the importance of black storytelling in North America, particularly in Canada, which as Afua Cooper observes, “is a drama punctuated with disappearing acts.”

The Paradox(es) of Diasporic Identity, Race and Belonging is designed to be a research and personal resource for students and practitioners, and anyone working through conflicted bordered spaces. Those working through processes of decolonization, migration, and specifically the calls for the restitution of land in settler and postcolonial societies can have ready access to a body of practical academic and experiential work on the vagaries of human relations in an era where questioning pre-established power dynamics and the exclusion and inequities they normalize have become preeminent to the survival of our socio-political systems.

About the author:

Benjamin Maiangwa teaches in the department of Political Science at Lakehead University. His research focuses on the intersection of politics, culture, and society. His writings and other projects use storytelling to explore notions of contested belonging, mobility, and how people experience conflict and peace in everyday life.