

Book Reviews

The Black Diaspora

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by Ronald Segal

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It is this epic quality, of the commitment to endure and resist, surmount and create, and above all else to be free, that has informed the culture of the Black Diaspora. And it is the failure of so many blacks to value this culture in its integrity that in large measure keeps the Black Diaspora, and black America in particular, psychically so divided and subverted (p. 363)

This, according to Segal, is one of the most prevalent tragedies of African experience in the West.

In the preface to *The Black Diaspora*, Robert Segal makes it clear that his work is not intended for scholarship. The white Jewish South African scholar and activist argues that it is instead designed to catalyse interest in the study of African peoples amongst those with little knowledge of the subject or who are looking for a point of departure. The thirteenth of his twelve books (among them *The Race War*, *The Crisis of India*, and *The Americans*), it is decidedly

mainly a synthesis that has drawn on the scholarship of others, with observations, a compass, and an argument of my own.

In no way a definitive text, it was written to bridge the gap between 'scattered' collections of essays and articles written by various scholars who succeeded only in 'tracing African tracks'. His was to be an entire text devoted to the development of the Black Diaspora from its genesis in the Atlantic slave trade to the present day.

Segal argues that his reason for titling his text *The Black Diaspora* was his intention to study the history of the Africans South of the Sahara who were sold into slavery. Moreover the *blackness* that he discusses took shape as a result of diaspora in connection with the racism and other forms of subjugation that supported and sustained slavery.

This blackness came to include lighter complexions and any other features, such as lips, nose, and hair, which revealed traces of a black ancestry (p. xiii).

Part One is a discussion of the genesis of the Atlantic slave trade in sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle Passage, and the emergence of slavery in the Americas. Each chapter contains fragments that piece together the history of slavery in the new world. In a narrative that begins in Classical Greece and ends with the abolition of slavery in Cuba in 1886, Segal traces the history of slavery in the West leaning on the scholarship of Philip Curtin and Jan Vansina among others in his discussion. However, one is surprised not to see work by Caribbean historians such as Hilary Beckles, Barbara Bush, and Brenda Stevenson who have written extensively on the complexities of interracial sexual relations that existed between the enslavers and the enslaved.¹ In the chapter devoted to slavery in the North American South entitled 'Alienable Rights' Segal submits that though

[t]here were doubtless slave women who resisted inducements and were ready to risk being sold as sterile into harsher conditions rather than produce children for slavery, ... [t]he record suggests, however, that most bore children willingly, some of them influenced by the favor with which fecundity was rewarded (p. 61).

One is forced to question the notion of 'voluntary' procreation within an institution that punished refusal to bear children with beatings and the threat of being sold to other plantations. The willingness to bear children for slavery could also be understood as fear coupled with a lack of willingness to be torn away from kin. (Segal does argue that sexual relationships with slaves were 'overwhelmingly' rape—p. 59.) Segal also argues that comparatively speaking, Southern slaves were not driven as hard as slaves in other parts of the hemisphere, that they were taken better care of, and were provided with a better diet.

Section Two, 'The Insurgent Spirit' deals with the history of organised revolt against slavery and therefore colonialism. Once again Segal provides brief discussions of slave resistance in North and South America and the

For instance see Beckles's *Natural Rebels* and 'White Women and Slavery in the Caribbean', Brenda Stevenson's 'Distress and Discord in Virginia Slave Families, 1830-1860', and Barbara Bush's *Slave Women in Caribbean Society (1560-1838)*

Caribbean. Section Three, 'Chains of Emancipation' is an exploration into the circumstances surrounding emancipation in each slaveholding colony and the conditions that awaited free men and women of colour.² As has been argued by many scholars of diasporic history, the economic conditions that followed the abolition of slavery differed very little from those that existed prior. The chains of slavery merely became the chains of emancipation as free people were forced to continue working as plantation labourers. On the small island of Barbados, for example, the gradual move towards emancipation via the apprenticeship system at first entailed only the emancipation of children under the age of six. All other emancipated slaves were to continue working for their former owners as apprentices for a term of four to six years. The small flat island was all but covered with plantations, severely limiting the amount of available land for cultivation and escape into the hills. Segal carries his discussion of post-emancipation Barbados into the early 1980s. Subsequent chapters continue with brief chronological developments of slave colonies from emancipation to the recent present, including a discussion of Blacks in Britain from the sixteenth century to the present. (This is the only mention of the Black British in the text.)

'Travels in the Historic Present' (Section Four) is just that—Segal's own personal reflections of travels made throughout different regions of the diaspora. Generally sharp insights are marred by highly subjective generalisations of the peoples he encounters based on discussions with a few people in each of the regions discussed. The chapter entitled 'The Bajan Cage' bears in its title and content a disturbing relationship to highly exotic descriptions of the Caribbean and Caribbeans found in colonial travel narratives. Juxtaposed with a critical discussion of class stratifications on the island are confusing assessments of Barbadian culture. For example Segal writes:

Despite the reputation of Barbados for interracial accommodation, the reality is *bizarre* The working day brings black and white together and ends at 6 o'clock with their departure for effectively segregated residential areas. Social crossing of the border at private functions ... is said by some Bajans to be increasing but admitted by the same Bajans to be still rare. At least two white clubs are widely known to bar Bajan Blacks. A small group of visiting Jamaican blacks succeeded in gaining entry to one of them, but only after providing proof of their foreign identity. My informant, a prominent Jamaican journalist who was one of the group, was even more startled when she subsequently broached the

² See for instance *Black Reconstruction in America: 1860-1880* by W. E. B. DuBois, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* by Eric Foner and 'An Empire Over the Mind: Emancipation, Race, and Ideology in the British West Indies and the American South' by Thomas Holt.

issue with black Bajans. 'Why should we mind?' they responded. 'We don't want to mix with them' (p. 291).

Why is this phenomenon bizarre? Does it not exist in other parts of the atmosphere and world? If the bizarre nature of the phenomenon is located in the denial of Black entry into a night-club situated in the capital of an all Black republic, then his point is well taken. But given his earlier discussions of the history of the Black diaspora (slavery, colonialism, emancipation, decolonization) and the contemporary economic disparities and social and racial stratifications existent in Barbados and globally, why should Black refusal to integrate *into* spaces guarded by what George Lipsitz refers to as 'the possessive investment in whiteness'³ when they have their own spaces and institutions seem odd?

Segal endeavours to end the text on a triumphant note in the fifth and final section, 'Selections from an Anatomy of Achievement'. In it he celebrates the Black Diaspora's contribution to the world in the area of arts (namely music, painting), literature, languages, and sports. The chapter 'An Ear for Music' catalogues the variety of musical forms created by Black peoples as a direct result of diaspora from spirituals, to blues and jazz in the United States, the evolution of samba in Brazil, salsa in Afro-Latin New York, merengue in the Dominican Republic, calypso in the anglophone Caribbean, and zouk in the francophone Caribbean, and African based belief systems. 'The Innocent Eye' examines painting and sculpture. In 'Voices' Segal explores the Black diasporic conquest of colonial languages by chewing up that which was force fed and spitting out entirely new languages into the face of the coloniser. His discussion of Black participation in sports in 'The Outstretched Arm' lapses into back-handed complement:

Sport should essentially be a measure of individual human striving and achievement. Yet it is not altogether irrelevant to consider what it is that accounts for the disproportionate dominance by Diaspora blacks. The question is certainly asked. One answer, which does not descend to Hitler's explanation of a 'primitive' and 'jungle' ancestry, nonetheless argues that there is a decisive genetic element involved. that slaves were selected from the physically strongest Africans, and that it was mainly the strongest of slaves who survived the tribulations of the ocean crossing and the subsequent ill-treatment and excessive labor demands (p. 425).

Though this statement does not descend to a Hitlerian level, it is merely a few notches above.

³ See George Lipsitz's 'the Possessive Investment in Whiteness: Racialized Social Democracy and the "White" Problem in American Studies'.

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It is quite interesting to note that Segal's first choice of an author for the text refused the offer with the comments 'such a book needs a hundred scholars working for twenty years'. Segal's response was that such a venture would 'end up with a directory, doubtless with its own value', when what he had in mind was 'the adventure of a single mind' (p. xii). This exchange calls to mind the incredible amounts of time, scholarship, and energy the late sociologist and Pan-Africanist thinker W. E. B. DuBois invested in the compilation of the *Encyclopedia of African History*, which to this day remains unfinished. Too important a task to leave to just one scholar, DuBois instead called on some of the best writers and thinkers the Black Diaspora had to offer in this massive undertaking. Segal, however, claims that he himself has the knowledge at his disposal and enough love for the Black Diaspora (p. xv) to embark upon the writing of this much needed text.

When Segal presented the synopsis of *The Black Diaspora* to one publisher in New York City, the publisher expressed enthusiasm for the subject matter of the text but promptly told Segal that the only problem was that Segal is white. As a friend to the late African National Congress leader Oliver Tambo and publisher of *Africa South* (an anti-racism and anti-apartheid international quarterly), who was subsequently expelled from his country and forced into exile for his anti-apartheid activities, Segal was deeply offended. Segal is also the founder of the Penguin African Library. Though it can be argued that racial identity does not inhibit one's ability to competently write and research history, one must bear in mind that no works, scholarly or otherwise, are ever written in a vacuum. The subjective realities in which authors live inevitably affect their relationships to the people, places, and histories represented in their texts. Segal's love for and commitment to retelling the story of the African diaspora do not preclude his racial, economic, and social location as a white South African Jewish male.

With the writing of *The Black Diaspora* Segal accomplished his goal, however flawed. Much of his well written text suffered from periodic generalisations, particularly in Section Four of the text. Also, his arguments might have been helped by a discussion of Black diasporic gendered identities (much of which has been written about by various scholars) in this section. Despite his love for the Black Diaspora and his desire to tell its story, his work falls prey to some of the politics which he had hoped to avoid.
