

ENG 338
INTRODUCTION TO THE LITERATURE OF BLACK DIASPORA

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LECTURE NOTES

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Background/Introduction

Diaspora is a term that refers to a segment of a race or clan which is scattered, extracted or forced out of their original environment and have settled in another place where they still maintain a sense of their community and culture. Originally applied to the Jews who fled from the Nazis government in Germany which sought to exterminate them, in this course, it refers to the Blacks who were forcibly extracted from Africa and taken elsewhere. The extraction came as a result of a major historical blight – the slave trade.

The slave trade was a dent on humanity in which people were sold as articles. It spanned 400 years and lasted from 1401 – 1808. During this period, three major countries: Britain, France and Spain were exploring the world for materials for Europe. Their exploration soon included the need for manpower to grow the industries in Europe, so, they exchanged some articles for some African ancestors who were then taken as slaves to work in European industries and plantations (cocoa, sugar, etc.). The aboriginals (natives) in those parts of Europe were not strong enough to work in the plantations, so they were exterminated and the blacks were brought in to work. As a result, the Blacks dominated New England (America) and the Caribbean Islands.

The major means of transporting the slaves was on ships through the Atlantic; this was quite a distance. Places like Badagry and Ghana served as ports from which slaves were transported. Some of the African ancestors also aided the whites, reason being that slavery existed in parts of Africa before the coming of the whites, however, slaves were not used anyhow in Africa before that time. So, when the ancestors sold their brothers and sisters to the whites, they were ignorant of the philosophy of the whites.

Slave trade was all about mercantilism (money making), therefore, the white slave trader needed to purchase a lot of slaves to maximise profits as the journey from Europe to Africa was not a simple and easy one. Thus, they bought able-bodied men and beautiful ladies that would attract buyers over there in Europe. They bought so many that human beings were stacked like sardines in ships, with their hands and

legs tied.

Along the line, people fell sick, contracted diseases and so as not to jeopardise the lives of the other slaves, the sick ones were thrown into the sea. Later on, as many as survived the voyage were lined up for sale in America, the Caribbean Islands, etc. where people who needed slaves would come to buy them. This travel from the ports in Africa to the ports in Europe is called **the Middle Passage**.

America is divided into two: the South and the North. South America is largely agrarian and has a lot of plantations, whereas, North America does not have so many plantations but is closer to the sea. Thus, the South needed more hands and possessed a large number of slaves. The Caribbean Islands are tiny islands between North Africa and Central America. These islands also had plantations owned by the whites where the black slaves were taken to.

One justification by the whites for selling blacks is that the blacks were savages and needed to be treated as such – as animals. So, they made them work like animals in the plantations, even locking their mouths with padlocks.

Later on, when the white merchants saw the high cost of transporting slaves, they began to organise sexual relations between the slaves to produce children or in some cases, white men take slave women as mistresses of which after the slave woman gives birth, her children won't be allowed to enjoy the benefits of the whites.

These continued until some events began to happen later on, one of which was the American Civil War. In Britain, the Americas and the Caribbean Islands, some slaves began to rebel, even right from the ships. In the plantations also, some blacks who felt their dignity assaulted began to revolt. Slaves began to rebel at the risk of their lives and started forming gangs, from which the word 'maroon' originated. What the gangs did was to train one another on warfare skills to attack plantations and rescue willing slaves. In some other quarters, some whites began to see no reason in enslaving other humans. This group of whites was known as the 'abolition group' or the 'abolitionists'. Therefore, the move for the abolition of slave trade began.

However, for abolition of slave trade to happen, both South and the North America needed to come together. The North, which was not in greater need of slaves to work, was the first to agree to the abolition, however, the South, where there were a lot of plantations refused because of their need for slaves and so, they opted to secede. This lack of agreement led to the American Civil War of 1861. Some slaves joined the North, increasing manpower there and in the end, the South lost the war.

During the war, some blacks who thought the whites were superior and were civilising them began to see that the same blood flows in both whites and blacks and

a 10-year-old black child is set free even after he says in his defense, "I didn't notice the size or nothing else/only the color". This implies that the killing was done based on racism and even the woman, a black woman, who is most likely the judge could not do anything but let the culprit go freely. This black woman here surrenders herself by aligning with the whites; she has power but has given up that power – 'until she let go the first real power she ever had/and lined her own womb with cement/to make a graveyard for our children.'

Towards the last line, a teenager is presented speaking in anger and by using an electric image ('teenaged plug'; 'nearest socket'), Lorde portrays this teenager as hoping to avenge the killing of the 10-year old black child by 'raping an 85-year-old white woman/who is somebody's mother'. This is not all, though, this teenager also hopes to 'beat her senseless and set a torch to her bed'. Later, 'a greek chorus will be singing in 3/4 time/"Poor thing. She never hurt a soul. What beasts they are"', that is, the whites would have forgotten about what the policeman did and call the black race 'beasts' instead. The idea of racial violence is clearly evident here.

In this poem, the poet has indicted the judiciary for supporting racism and the teenager thinks that if the law is not on their side, then he will take laws into his own hands.

'The House of Yemanjá' by Audre Lorde

The Yoruba myth of the goddess, Yemoja, is used here. Yemoja is known to be the goddess of the ocean and is believed to be fair and beautiful.

Three girl children are presented in this poem: one perfect daughter who is later seen to be black, 'dark and rich and hidden', suggesting Africa; another who is believed to be Europe, suggested by how it is hungry for ivory – 'in the ivory hungers of the other'; then, there is the speaker who is 'the sun and moon and forever hungry/for her eyes'. This third daughter, being the 'sun and moon' suggests a mixture and is therefore a metaphor for 'African-Americans'. So, these three daughters represent Africa, Europe and African-Americans.

Using the Yemoja myth, the poet has discussed the question of race and a yearning to be black, 'hid out a perfect daughter/who was not me/I am the sun and moon and forever hungry/for her eyes.' The persona here, the African-American, also complains about how these sisters are cruel to her, that is, the native Africans do not even care about their race in Europe, just as the Europeans are treating their sister, the African-American badly. So, this daughter says, 'I have no brothers and my sisters are cruel.' The poem ends on a note of yearning for blackness, where the voice of the African-American daughter cries out to Yemoja, saying, 'I need your blackness now/as the august earth needs rain.'