

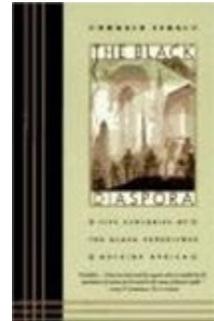
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Ronald Segal. *The Black Diaspora: Five Centuries of the Black Experience Outside Africa*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1995. vii + 477 pp. \$27.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-374-11396-4.

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Towards A Diasporic Present

Ronald Segal's recent book exploring the African, or as he calls it, "the black diaspora," attempts to provide us with a comprehensive narrative tracing black political, economic, and cultural history over the past five centuries. Segal characterizes *The Black Diaspora* as a project of synthesis, and, as such, he draws upon the research of other scholars of the diasporic experience to create one grand narrative of that history. He charges himself with that duty because of his identification with peoples whose histories are marked by oppression and prejudice. He writes that they have a special duty "to redeem the past with a creative meaning; to recognize and insist that we must treat one another as equally human, beyond differences of race or nationality, religion or culture" (p. xii). Segal attributes his own sensitiveness to this because of his South African Jewish upbringing and his work with the African National Congress (ANC). Segal's scholarship ranges across the globe with works on Africa, the United States, and India. His primary historical lens is an analysis of the effect of economic factors on social relationships.

While not providing any new historical facts, *The Black Diaspora* is useful for the attention it brings to the fundamental link between peoples of African descent, slavery, and the development of what we consider the modern world. Segal appropriately interprets black experiences within the context of global history without insisting upon excavating traces of an essential African-ness in black people who have been dispersed throughout the world. Divided into five sections—"From Africa to Slavery," "The Insurgent Spirit," "Chains of Emancipa-

tion," "Travels in the Historic Present," and "Selections from an Anatomy of Achievement"—the book explores the historical and political trajectories of various countries, including Jamaica, Trinidad, Guyana, Brazil, Barbados, and Cuba, as well as Britain and the United States. In all of the sections, Segal makes a concerted effort to read the specificity of the place he is discussing, serving to give us a grounded view of black diasporic experiences as they converge and diverge.

The first section, "From Africa to Slavery," looks specifically at the effect of the Atlantic slave trade on the development of the global economic system. Segal takes us through the internal and external dynamics of the slave trade, its overwhelming inhumanity, and its concomitant European colonization of Africa, the Americas, and the Caribbean. It is in this section that Segal articulates the racialization of trade and how it is that African people and (as the institution of slavery continued into the nineteenth century) people of African descent, continued to be understood as a species, rather than as human beings. One example of this is the ways in which slaves were seen either as a replenishable supply and used until they dropped, or were seen as cultivatable sources of labor and, as such, were bred and husbanded for productive purposes. The second section, "The Insurgent Spirit," provides us with a compelling survey of slave resistance in the "New World". Resistance took the various forms of slave revolt leading directly to the abolishment of slavery, as in Haiti, maroonage, as in Jamaica and Brazil, and dispersed acts of rebellion in the United States. Segal pays attention to the fact that the racial de-

mographics of each individual place contributed to the effectiveness and form of slave resistance. "Chains of Emancipation," the third section, is where Segal speeds through the nineteenth century to the twentieth century to discuss the contemporary political past of these former slave societies. His primary argument is that because these countries were unable to develop diversified and sound economies, their political instability, governmental ineffectuality, and often consequent military rule were the result, the most vivid example being Haiti.

This leads then to the fourth section, "Travels in the Historic Present," where Segal changes his narrative voice, taking on the role of cultural critic through explanation of his experiences in the various countries he visits. This shift in voice is quite disjointing in that Segal abruptly drops his work of synthesizing the history of the black diaspora and instead introduces the people of these countries through his readings of them as personalities—how the slave past influences contemporary cultural production in Jamaica, the dilemma of identity in Martinique and Guadeloupe, the mulatto elites of Haiti, and culture of color in Brazil. The final section of the book is "Selections from an Anatomy of Achievement." Here Segal focuses on what he calls the soul of the diaspora, to explore what connects the cultures of the diaspora. Beginning with music (which he suggests is perhaps the one thing which dispersed and enslaved Africans did not lose and which continues to connect black people in the diaspora), he then moves very cursorily through the visual arts, literature, sports, and ends with religion. This treatment collapses culture and politics and generates facile assessments of the meaning of contemporary black cultural production and practice throughout the diaspora. While he doesn't try to trace an essential Africanness, he does try to make an historical and implicitly biological

argument regarding the relationship between those who were enslaved and those who remained on the continent.

Though Segal makes an important argument regarding the significance of race and the historical legacy of slavery to contemporary political, economic, and social situations throughout the globe, he fails to make a compelling argument regarding the cultural history of black people in the diaspora. He concludes, "... surely, five centuries of distinctive experience cannot be without some underlying meaning, some redeeming force, a very principle of identity that may be called the soul ... This soul is freedom. It was in slavery that the Diaspora was born, together with the longing and struggle for freedom ... The Diaspora, indeed, has still to free itself ... Only then can the Black Diaspora proceed to a great purpose, for which its history has prepared it: to speak not only for its own freedom but for the cause of freedom itself, against all those who, in the name of the state, the nation, the race, this god or that god, would deny it (439-440)." Segal falls back upon a moralizing response to this history, emphasizing that black people have the duty to speak to the meaning and nature of freedom because of their enslaved pasts and suggesting that black people have failed to transcend this history by not rising to the challenge of making meaning of that past. Segal thus fails to provide a substantial definition of the meaning of "diaspora" or of social and cultural identity. Perhaps if Segal had better incorporated cultural history alongside political and economic history, we would be left with a more constructive narrative of the black diaspora.

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