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Response to Davies

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Response

Pamela R. Gozo

I. Introduction

In recent years, it has become popular to say one is “living with AIDS” rather than to say one is “dying of AIDS.” This analogy is appealing and well suited to the two processes that are invariably associated with globalization: integration and fragmentation. Optimists would say we are “living with integration” while pessimists would argue that we are “dying of fragmentation.” Neither one is incorrect or complete. In our time, these processes are inextricably linked.

Political scientist Walt Anderson described the nature of this age as follows: “It is a world coming together—a global civilization, the first that has ever existed, emerging into being before our eyes — but one that seems to be, at the same time, in the process of falling apart.”¹ There is no doubt that we are in a state of transition, but few seem to fully understand what is going on around us. On the eve of an information superhighway, most of us are overwhelmed by the remarkable technological advances in communication. Many questions surrounding the implications of these developments remain unanswered. Consequently, now is the time for us to explore the links between “literature, the creative imagination, and globalization.” A lack of certainty and a high level of anxiety about the future call for such a forum. The world has become so small that it is increasingly difficult to focus on issues in one part of the world without seeing a connection with what is happening in another area. This increased contact has resulted in a process that some call “globalization,” a process that simultaneously involves closeness and distance and produces both negative and positive energy. Such a process will undoubtedly shape and maybe even collide with literature and the creative imagination.

Dr. Boyce Davies’ essay deals with the Afro-diaspora, which is composed of communities of African origin living in various locations around the world. The paper is divided into three sections: the first deals with Afro-diasporic culture, the second con-

cerns transformational discourses, and the third presents ways in which these ideas have been articulated by literature and the creative imagination. Dr. Boyce Davies frames her response in what she terms three Afro-diasporic forms — namely *candomblé*, *quilombismo* (or maroon settlements), and liberatory movements in literature — forms that express the “translocational” and “transformational” aspects of Afro-diasporic culture. Dr. Boyce Davies explains that *candomblé* is an Afro-Brazilian belief system that deals with the “movement from the daily circle of life, work, and struggle to one of emotional and spiritual possibilities.”² *Quilombismo* refers to the Afro-Brazilian settlements that “existed as an alternative space, and as a space of resistance to slavery.”³ My response takes the following form. I begin by presenting a brief critique of Dr. Boyce Davies’ paper, then I express some personal thoughts on the Roundtable theme. Following this, I pose several questions that evolved as I contemplated Dr. Boyce Davies’ argument, and, finally, I present a few concluding remarks.

II. Critique

I would like to highlight several of the positive aspects of the essay. Dr. Boyce Davies has carried out extensive research on Afro-diasporic culture, particularly the Afro-Brazilian variant, and uses examples from this context to illustrate and underscore her main points. A clear explanation of the significance of diaspora memory in the Afro-diaspora is also provided. The essay clearly highlights the historical role of literature in the Afro-diaspora, making it easier for the reader to speculate on how that role may now be changing. Dr. Boyce Davies makes ample reference to the importance of the liberatory movements in literature associated with the struggle for political freedom, movements that are deeply rooted in diaspora memory. In the end, she shows how Afro-diasporic culture is transformational and thus sets the stage for a discussion of the implications of globalization. The use of excerpts from Afro-diasporic literature also serves to strengthen her argument and allows the reader to connect personally with the subject matter.

I have a few problems with the essay, however; the first of which is the issue of clarity. My major difficulty is that I felt lost

at times. Although after several readings I am able to grasp what Dr. Boyce Davies thinks, it is my sense that the beginning of the discourse is somewhat convoluted and, in the end, inaccessible. I believe strongly that Dr. Boyce Davies is presenting a perspective that is of utmost significance to the discussion of literature and globalization and, as such, the essay's communicative force is especially important for novices like myself whose interest the subject has captured. Further clarification of terms that may be commonplace for those professionally engaged in the discourse would have been helpful. For instance, I am not sure what exactly Dr. Boyce Davies means by such concepts as "translocational" and "transformational." Here, my discomfort with the text is not so much with the ideas, which I find to be very interesting and well annotated, but with the form of presentation and the purpose of the arguments.

A second concern is that the essay does not directly and specifically confront the Roundtable questions. Although Dr. Boyce Davies sometimes alludes to the theme when, for example, she refers to the translocational and transformational nature of Afro-diasporic culture, one is tested again and again to link the arguments to the Roundtable. In the end, Dr. Boyce Davies spends too much time on detailed descriptions of different aspects of Afro-diasporic culture and barely addresses the meaning of globalization and its implications for Afro-diasporic communities.

III. Personal Thoughts

I will now discuss some of the thoughts triggered by my reading of the essay. Dr. Boyce Davies does offer some insight into why she did not specifically address the question of globalization. Early in the paper she says, "Afro-diasporic culture has already lived the transnational because of forced migration and the politics of liberation." I would take this one step further and ask: With this history, would the prospect of globalization not offer new challenges to Afro-diasporic culture? Furthermore, Dr. Boyce Davies refers to "social processes thrown forward by . . . some of the manifestations of late capitalism."⁴ For her, the nature of these times and those to come offers nothing new to the already transformational Afro-diasporic culture. I would

venture to say that the implications of globalization will cut across more than just the familiar social processes. From my perspective, the term “transformational” refers to the double consciousness associated with diasporic peoples. It is a way of thinking and living that involves two cultures and a psychological and social migration between them in an effort to create a viable reality. Globalization will profoundly impact the transformational discourses that Dr. Boyce Davies speaks of as the already marginalized people of the periphery become even more so in the current process of economic and social fragmentation. My fear is that with globalization, the Afro-diasporic discourse will be left out of the mainstream even more since the politics of the metropole and periphery are also a part of the literary world. Just as we have countries that dominate others militarily, in the literary world there are traditionally dominant discourses which threaten to become more supreme if diasporic discourses are further enfeebled.

In addition, Dr. Boyce Davies says that the term Afro-diaspora “presupposes a global...relationship between various communities of dispersed Africans without suggesting that everyone shares identical frameworks and histories.”⁵ Here, I fear that she does not make use of the full meaning of globalization. Globalization does not mean uniform communities around the world, although it does refer to some commonalities, which could be in forms as simple as the Internet or Shakespeare’s texts taught in high schools around the world. Instead, I feel the term “global culture” seeks to explain the effects of the extensive and widespread cultural contact that every region of the world has entered and will continue to experience as a result of increased trade, communication, and travel. The full impact is both physical and intellectual. In other words, globalization means more than, as Dr. Boyce Davies writes, a “‘global village’ that seeks a boundaryless world in order to create more space for capitalist markets and international communication dominated by the West.”⁶ Indeed, if she is saying that ongoing changes are really nothing more than a campaign by the West to increase its domination, then the concept is merely a euphemism for a new age of imperialism. I disagree; I believe that in reference to literature and the creative imagination, the globalist view is a way of thinking that acknowledges the interconnected-

ness of the world and seeks to deal with its complexities by including and integrating myriad ways and approaches. Assuming that such an interpretation is valid, perhaps diasporic cultures can lead the way and instruct others how to be transformational. Perhaps the tables could be turned and the formerly marginalized Afro-diasporic literature become central in the new world literary perspectives. In fact, by stressing the transformational nature of Afro-diasporic literature and creative imagination, Dr. Boyce Davies may have provided us with the locomotive that will drive Afro-diasporic discourse into the future. At a time when many are rejecting traditional perspectives in favor of more encompassing and flexible strategies, Afro-diasporic discourses may finally take their honorable place in history.

Dr. Boyce Davies speaks at length about the concept of diasporic memory. For her, diaspora memory is “the ancestral memory as well as the received history of the Middle Passage, a basic vocabulary often articulated in song, mood, style, [and] dance.”⁷⁷ I think that now, as much as during slavery and the colonial epochs, there is a desperate need to retrieve diasporic memory as a coping mechanism for both the Afro-diaspora and other marginalized communities. The impact of globalization cannot be underestimated. In that regard, works in the vein of Toni Morrison in literature and of Julie Dash in independent film—works that express the liberatory and almost magical nature of diasporic memory—may soon proliferate. Afro-diasporic memory provides a channel for connecting those in the diaspora with their communities of origin. No one is completely isolated anymore; for those who are literate, information is easily accessible. As Dr. Boyce Davies points out, even the idea of originality is challenged. A writer’s experience cannot truly belong to him or her alone; we are constantly affected by the lives of others in this increasingly open environment where the exchange of ideas at high frequencies is the norm.

Indeed, the role of Afro-diasporic literature in the past is underscored by a quote chosen by Dr. Boyce Davies from Edward Said’s *Figures, Configurations, Transfigurations*. Said underscores how literature is not only partially enmeshed in the mundane but is, simultaneously, a creative art toward the articulation of our dreams and aspirations. Langston Hughes put it

well when he wrote, “the wonderful world in books—where if people suffered they suffered in beautiful language, not in monosyllables, as we did in Kansas.”⁸ But, who reads? Do the people who are really marginalized read? Who is the audience? Although one would like to think that literature and creativity are for everyone, one cannot ignore the Brahmin-like world that surrounds literature. In Afro-diasporic communities, only a few have the opportunity to sit down and read a novel by Toni Morrison; most are too busy with the daily struggle for survival. As the gap between rich and poor continues to grow, will the results of such creative and imaginative talents become less accessible?

IV. Questions

The complexity of globalization, with its intense and contradictory processes of integration and fragmentation, is bound to raise difficult questions. Since these forces of change affect the domestic affairs of countries as well as their international relations, a number of specific questions to diasporic peoples arise. For instance, could globalization undermine their identities and cultural roots? Will these communities become more isolated, resulting in groups with one very parochial meaning? Will such an isolation lead to communities that are bereft of any direction and historical purpose? Will globalization lead to further hybridization of already hybridized cultures? Is there room for genuine localization? In an era of globalization, can any group really isolate itself and survive? Perhaps Dr. Boyce Davies has these concerns in mind when she writes that oppressed communities will create “‘another world’ outside of the given definitions of reality at that time”⁹ and in so doing establish a separate and local meaning for themselves. If this is the case, as globalization further marginalizes those people who are already on the periphery, will their realm of imagination continue to create “other worlds” through diasporic memory? Or is there a limit to the optimism of the creative imagination? These are some of the puzzles triggered in my mind by Dr. Boyce Davies’ essay and the theme of the International Roundtable.

V. Conclusion

I stated earlier that two symbiotic forces are at work in our epoch: coalescence and dispersal. Currently, the balance between them is precarious, and I wonder how long it will be before this dialectic crashes. Or will this be the order of the world for a long time? The questions raised by this discussion are intimidating. More than anything else, they require a sophisticated understanding of the sources and dynamics of the factors at work in the world today. It is my sense that these special historical circumstances present us with both great possibilities as well as menacing probabilities. The challenges confronting literature and the creative imagination will rise out of this paradox of globalization.

Notes

1. Walt Anderson, *Reality Isn't What It Used To Be: Theatrical Politics, Ready-to-Wear Religion, Global Myths, Primitive Chic, and Other Wonders of the Postmodern World*, 1st. ed. (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1990): 232.
2. Carole Boyce Davies, "Transformational Discourses, Afro-Diasporic Culture, and the Literary Imagination," *Macalester International* 3 (Spring 1996): 200.
3. *Ibid.*, 202.
4. *Ibid.*, 199.
5. *Ibid.*, 205.
6. *Ibid.*, 205.
7. *Ibid.*, 207.
8. Langston Hughes, *I Wonder As I Wander: An Autobiographical Journey* (New York: Reinhart, 1956; New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1986): xii (page citations are to the reprint edition).
9. Carole Boyce Davies, "Transformational Discourses, Afro-Diasporic Culture, and the Literary Imagination": 202.