



## The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism

By Brent Hayes Edwards

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A pathbreaking work of scholarship that will reshape our understanding of the Harlem Renaissance, *The Practice of Diaspora* revisits black transnational culture in the 1920s and 1930s, paying particular attention to links between intellectuals in New York and their Francophone counterparts in Paris. Brent Edwards suggests that diaspora is less a historical condition than a set of practices: the claims, correspondences, and collaborations through which black intellectuals pursue a variety of international alliances.

Edwards elucidates the workings of diaspora by tracking the wealth of black transnational print culture between the world wars, exploring the connections and exchanges among New York-based publications (such as *Opportunity*, *The Negro World*, and *The Crisis*) and newspapers in Paris (such as *Les Continents*, *La Voix des Nègres*, and *L'Etudiant noir*). In reading a remarkably diverse archive--the works of writers and editors from Langston Hughes, René Maran, and Claude McKay to Paulette Nardal, Alain Locke, W. E. B. Du Bois, George Padmore, and Tiemoko Garan Kouyaté--*The Practice of Diaspora* takes account of the highly divergent ways of imagining race beyond the barriers of nation and language. In doing so, it reveals the importance of translation, arguing that the politics of diaspora are legible above all in efforts at negotiating difference among populations of African descent throughout the world.

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### Editorial Review

#### Review

There are any number of quite impressive issues and approaches in Brent Edwards's *The Practice of Diaspora*. Seemingly familiar, apparently over-played, categories are archivally reworked--or else finely spun out--into webs of instructive relationship. A good and timely work, as much for its particulars on (post-)coloniality and writing "race" as for Edwards's legitime defense of diaspora. The conceptual and socio-historical fluency with which this work re-positions Paris and its noirs is especially welcome. Recall of this sort has been somewhat overdue. (Lemuel A. Johnson, Professor of English at the University of Michigan)

This is a magnificent study. *The Practice of Diaspora's* contribution to scholarship is made in at least four areas: African-American studies (generally speaking), African-American literary studies, modernism, and literary theory. The combination of its theoretical adeptness, its rigor, and its depth of scholarship is quite remarkable. I don't recall having seen this mixture of theory, textual interpretation, cultural history, intellectual history, and diaspora scholarship before. Edwards's study is quite ambitious but I think he more than delivers on those ambitions. I think its importance does not rest simply in the depth of its scholarship or the mixed mode of its argumentation, but in how much it will encourage others to return to these areas with a rigor that does not depend upon a demonstration of "discursive mastery" in particular areas but upon cross-area attentiveness. (Wahneema Lubiano, Professor of Literature at Duke University)

*The Practice of Diaspora* is nothing short of a masterpiece. By looking at the way black life, thought, struggles and quite literally, words, are translated across the black Francophone and Anglophone worlds, Edwards reveals how Paris became a locus for the development of black modernism and internationalism during the crucial interwar years. Rather than search for some essential unity, he explores difference, creative tensions, misapprehensions and misunderstandings between key black intellectuals. The result is a spectacular interdisciplinary study that will profoundly change the way we think about the African diaspora. (Robin D. G. Kelley, author of *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination*)

A remarkably precise feat of scholarship which illuminates the exchanges between the Harlem Renaissance and the Negritude movement, achieves a transnational, mapping between Harlem and Paris, the Caribbean and Africa, and suggests a new vision of diasporic modernism. (Michel Fabre, author of *From Harlem to Paris*)

*The Practice of Diaspora* is so deeply rooted in the specifics of history, biography, and astute textual analysis that it amounts to nothing less than a new understanding of that old term "African Diaspora." Because of Brent Edwards' imaginative research, subtle questioning, and acute powers of synthesis, this book succeeds from start to finish. It is beautifully written, consistently entertaining, and compelling as both an argument and a scholarly narrative. (Arnold Rampersad, author of *The Art and Imagination of W.E.B. DuBois*; *The Life of Langston Hughes*; and (co-authored with Arthur Ashe) *Jackie Robinson: A Biography*)

In detailed, meticulously researched, fresh and surprising accounts of various crucial points of contact and of difference among black intellectuals from the United States, the Caribbean, and Africa in Europe, Brent Edwards offers a new understanding of their linguistic, cultural, and political boundary crossings, as these intellectuals developed contending models of black internationalism in the interwar period, often in response to each other.

Any reader interested in the intellectual and political issues represented and discussed by René Maran, Alain Locke, Jessie Fauset, the Nardal sisters, Claude McKay, W. E. B. Du Bois, George Padmore, or Tiemoko Garan Kouyaté, anyone concerned about the semantics of racial terms, the debates in francophone and anglophone journals, about the significance of Nancy Cunard's *Negro: An Anthology*, or about diasporic writing will find this book indispensable. *The Practice of Diaspora* makes a major contribution to the much-needed internationalization of American Studies.

(Werner Sollors, author of *Neither Black Nor White Yet Both*)

An exciting, innovative and extremely important study of black internationalism between the two World Wars of the Twentieth Century. Brent Edwards is a fine literary critic and historian as alert to the tensions and anxieties of difference and distance as to the yearnings for affiliation and solidarity. *The Practice of Diaspora* is a stunning excavation of the transnational sites and circuits of modern black culture. (Hazel Carby, author of *Race Men*)

Brent Edwards's wide-ranging *Practice of Diaspora* really does just that. From the vantage point of Paris in the 1920s and 1930s, he looks across to Harlem and surveys black internationalist thought from the Caribbean, Africa, and the United States. This utterly fascinating book traces the circuits of intellectuals engaged in a truly diasporic struggle for the Race. Edwards's care with issues of gender and translation are particularly welcome. (Nell Irvin Painter, author of *Southern History Across the Color Line* and *Sojourner Truth, A Life, A Symbol*)

Edwards argues that African-American culture and literary expression is just one piece of a larger diasporic movement of 'Black' cultures across the globe...*The Practice of Diaspora* is a phenomenal shift in thinking about the foundations of African-American culture, one that gives a global dimension to the study of American literature. (Leslie Antonette *MultiCultural Review* 2004-05-01)

As Brent Hayes Edwards succinctly states in his magisterial monograph, *The Practice of Diaspora*, "certain moves, certain arguments and epiphanies can only be staged beyond the confines of the United States"...The book stunningly refigures our understanding of the Harlem Renaissance and its consequences. (*Year's Work in English Studies* 2006-01-01)

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## About the Author

Brent Hayes Edwards is Professor, Department of English and Comparative Literature, Columbia University.

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