



PROJECT MUSE®

An Interview with Sylviane A. Diouf

Howard Dodson

Callaloo, Volume 39, Number 4, Fall 2016, pp. 878-886 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/cal.2017.0023>

Callaloo



Journal of the
Black Caucus | Volume 39, Number 4 | Fall 2016 | Johns Hopkins University Press
Editor: Bruce L. Wilson | Editor: Patricia L. Williams | Editor: Leanne Brown
Editor: Robert M. Levine | Editor: Robert M. Levine

➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/678985>

AN INTERVIEW WITH SYLVIANE A. DIOUF

by Howard Dodson

Sylviane A. Diouf is an award-winning historian of the African Diaspora. A native of France, she has lived and travelled extensively in Europe, Africa, Asia, and the Americas. She has been a *New Yorker* since 1989. In addition to publishing pioneering scholarly works on African Diasporan themes, she has written black history children's books, curated gallery and online exhibitions, lectured widely on the global black experience, and appeared as an expert in documentary films. Dr. Diouf has served as a curator at the world-renowned Schomburg Center since 2001. She is also the Director of the Schomburg Center's Lapidus Center for the Historical Analysis of Transatlantic Slavery. In this interview with Howard Dodson, Director Emeritus of the Schomburg, Dr. Diouf discusses her unique journey into the field of African Diasporan studies. This interview was conducted October 26, 2016, in New York City.

DODSON: I want to thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview for *Callaloo*. I noticed from your resume that you have established yourself as one of the leading scholars on slavery and on the African Diaspora itself. When did you choose this focus for your scholarship and why?

DIOUF: I know it definitely matured before college. But to go further, I think it all started when I was growing up in the 1960s. I saw the Civil Rights demonstrations on TV and the dogs particularly horrified me. The idea of sending dogs after people was unconscionable. It was so far from my own experience, growing up in a quiet Parisian suburb. I think this is where my interest in trying to understand other worlds came from. I grew up in a mixed family. My father, who was Senegalese, was the only black person in Noisy-le-Sec; and after we children were born there were four. My world was totally dissimilar to what I was seeing on TV. I frankly didn't know what racism was and I didn't have any kind of "race consciousness." I did not feel different from anyone in school and I was not made to feel different. By the same token, I did not feel a personal connection to the black people I saw mauled by dogs; it was more about the inhumanity of it. Like my parents I was an avid history reader and, logically, as I grew older I wanted to understand why this could have happened and I discovered slavery. It was literally a discovery because this history was not taught in school. I researched and learned entirely on my own.

DODSON: So your interest in slavery and the diaspora was inspired in part by the Civil Rights movement in the United States as opposed to something that was going on in France or the decolonization movement in Africa itself.

DIOUF: I was too young to even be aware of the independence movement in Africa. Except for the war in Algeria, which was very close to us because our next door neighbor was a right-wing member of parliament and my parents were worried that the Algerian nationalists could bomb his house—we were very close to him and his family—or, by mistake, bomb ours.

DODSON: You mentioned your father and your mother. Say a little bit about them and your family background.

DIOUF: My father came from a very long line of Muslim scholars. One of our ancestors, Khaly Amar Fall, founded the Islamic school of higher learning, Pir, in 1611. It trained many of the elite Islamic scholars in the sub-region, including the Almany of Futa Toro Abdel Kader Kane, who mounted a vigorous opposition to the slave trade in the late-eighteenth century. My father studied in Qur'anic schools for several years before going to the French school and then attending the most prestigious school in French West Africa, the Ecole Normale William Ponty, which educated the West African elite, including some of the first presidents. He was then conscripted during World War II and after Algeria and Germany, arrived in France where he continued his studies and got married. He was a physicist and my mother was a school principal.

DODSON: You have research and scholarship in your DNA.

DIOUF: My maternal grandfather was also influential on my intellectual development. He enrolled in the Navy during WWI and found himself among the Mutineers of the Black Sea as they were known. France was supporting the tsarists during the Russian civil war, and some of the sailors supported the Bolsheviks. They even floated the red flag on a naval vessel and sang The Internationale. When Andre Marty, the only officer who sided with the mutineers, was arrested, he told them, "Don't you worry, lads." And it made an impression on my grandfather because he knew Marty was going to be shot. He did get the death penalty but was eventually pardoned and joined the Communist Party. My grandfather was politically conscious and very interested in other countries. I used to read his books on explorations and far-away travels. So on both sides of the family there was something that I grasped.

DODSON: There's an academic or intellectual part that's coming from your father's side of your family and a political part that's coming from your mother's side. Were you political?

DIOUF: I was, beginning in high school. The family was definitely on the left. My relatives voted Communist although they were not members of the party. It was very common in France at the time. But my parents stopped after the invasion of Hungary in 1956, they voted Socialist thereafter.

DODSON: Yes, that was a major kind of break point for a lot of people who were affiliated with the Communist party at that time. That's interesting. And did you get your doctorate at the University of Paris?

DIOUF: I wanted to do research on slavery and I did it the only way it was possible then. I enrolled in Denis Diderot University in Paris, in the English Department. I studied American history, which enabled me to work on slavery and the slave trade. This is how I maneuvered to be able to write my dissertation on resistance to slavery in the Americas.

DODSON: That, too, is interesting because of the different ways our academic institutions are set up and the paths that one had to follow to study the black experience in the academy. Until recently colleges and universities were not set up to support scholarship and research on black people.

DIOUF: That was decades ago, but there are still scholars in France today who enroll in English Departments in order to work on African American history and the African Diaspora—historical and contemporary—using African American history as a basis for comparative studies. The movement for Black Studies in the United States in the 1960s changed the academic landscape, but France has a long way to go, especially because this country is extremely reluctant to confront its slavery and colonial pasts. But the reality is that there are increasing numbers of French people of Caribbean, African, and Asian origin in France and a mounting alienation and marginalization of people of color who face discrimination, unemployment, and police harassment there. The slave trade, slavery, and colonization that have marked their history is a counter-narrative to the French ideals of freedom, equality, and fraternity that many of them have a hard time seeing as part of their own experience. Small steps have been taken. In 2001 France was the first nation to officially recognize slavery and the slave trade as crimes against humanity. Senegal followed in 2010. But like Black Studies here, the French reckoning came in response to the demands of the black community. On May 23, 1998, during the commemoration of the 150th anniversary of the abolition of slavery, 40,000 descendants of slaves from Martinique, Guadeloupe, French Guiana, and Reunion marched silently in Paris to honor their ancestors and to demand that slavery and the slave trade be recognized as crimes against humanity. Christiane Taubira, then a representative in the French Parliament from Guiana, introduced a bill that passed in May 2001. Since then a consultative National Committee for the Memory and History of Slavery has been established to promote research, to promote inclusion of this history in school curriculum, and to promote actions and places of memory, but very little else has been achieved. As far as local or national initiatives are concerned, the focus is on abolition. In contrast, for the black communities, the focus is on the people's experience.

DODSON: Well, I actually had an interest in doing African American studies when I went to do my master's and basically no one at the university was qualified to teach it. So I did a dual major in US history and political science. Even then, I ended up taking only one course that had anything to do directly with black people. Interestingly enough, it was a political science course around the decolonization of Africa that was going on at that time. This was like 1962, 1964. So as late as 1962, 1963, a major university basically didn't have anyone qualified to teach anything about black folk. So anyone who wanted to get into the field really had to work to create a path. So, did you have any career intents when you decided to pursue your doctorate? Were you planning to become a university professor?

DIOUF: I did teach. However, when I was an undergraduate student, I became a freelance writer for a number of African publications, which helped me pay for my studies and my travels. It opened up a world of possibilities for researching and writing beyond academia. In the early 1980s, I worked as a full-time journalist for two years for the weekly magazine *Jeune Afrique*. I traveled to several African countries and did investigative reportage. Theophile Obenga, Iba Ndiaye, Ahmed Ben Bella, a leader of the Algerian independence and the first president of Algeria, Sembene Ousmane, and even Bob Denard, the infamous mercenary who ravaged Africa, were all people I interviewed. I became very close to Cheikh Anta Diop, who knew my father from their student days. And Cheikh Anta and I remained friends until his death in 1986; I was living in Dakar by then. Having to write for a diverse audience proved to be quite helpful later on. When I write academic books, I do it in a way that is accessible to a public outside of academia because my goal is to create work that not only will advance scholarship but will also raise awareness and historical literacy in the general public.

DODSON: So, if I can sum this up in some respects you are a living example of an African Diasporan in the sense that your initial impulse to get into this field was not local but diasporan. And you have, over the course of your career, found your niche in the connections between yourself, the diaspora, and the migrations that have created it. I know that at the time you started studying and working, there was no such thing as African Diasporan studies. But, as a practitioner, what do you understand the African Diaspora itself to be and what is African Diasporan studies as a field?

DIOUF: The African Diaspora for me is basic. It is the dispersal of Africans forcibly or willingly, and I am not concerned with the subtleties of other definitions, which I find restrictive. What I am interested in, perhaps more than anything else, are the differences within the African Diaspora not so much the similarities. I know and recognize the connections, but I am fascinated by what is different and why it is different. The African Diaspora for me is about diversity, the diversity that started in Africa, and the diversity that emerged through various circumstances, eras, migration modes, geographies, social and political systems, including slavery systems. To give you an example, the two African countries I know best are Senegal and Niger. Both are overwhelmingly Muslim, yet several of their religious practices are different. It is the diversity among African descended people that gave us, to make an easy analogy, the ability to create tango, reggae, blues, and gnawa music, or candombe. I find richness in diversity.

DODSON: And what do you think are your most important contributions to the field of African Diaspora studies?

DIOUF: Let me start by explaining why I write about what I write. I do not write about what I know. When I write a book, it's not because I have this wonderful knowledge that I want to share. I write about what I don't know. I have questions and I think, "Let me find a book that will focus on this topic because I don't know anything about it." And since I don't find anything that satisfies me, the next step is, "If a book doesn't exist on this topic,

then I have to write one." Take, for example, *Servants of Allah*. I was fascinated by this idea of African Muslims in the Americas, and there was nothing on the entire story, not only in one place let alone in a hemispheric perspective. Using sources in English, French, Spanish, and Portuguese, I covered twenty countries and was able to show how Muslims maintained their faith and practices, how they used their literacy, created communities, and were sometimes able to return to Africa. I had the same approach for the people who were on the last slave ship to the United States, the *Clotilda*. The episode had been denied, turned into a hoax. Once I started digging, I found a trove of invaluable documents, not only official federal summonses that enabled me to ascertain the date of the ship's arrival, not 1859 as previously believed, but precisely July 7, 1860; but also interviews of the Africans; extended memories of an African American who had been enslaved on the same plantation as some of them; and a lengthy manuscript by Zora Neale Hurston held at Howard's Moorland-Spingarn Research Center that had never been exploited as a primary source on this story. It is a 1928 interview of Cudjo Lewis, the last known survivor of the *Clotilda*, who died in 1935. By recouping with a variety of sources I could ascertain the veracity of this incredibly rich document. It was important because Hurston had been dishonest about the story before. In a 1927 article for *The Journal of Negro History* she had plagiarized a 1914 book written by a white woman from Mobile based on her conversations with twelve survivors. *Dreams of Africa* is the most detailed account of the experience of a group of Africans from their places of origin in Africa to the United States, from freedom to slavery and to freedom again, this time under Jim Crow. Thanks to numerous and varied sources, it is also the best documented story of the entire slave trade not only here but throughout the Americas. A few years ago I wanted to learn about maroons in the United States and I ended up writing *Slavery's Exiles: The Story of the American Maroons* because there was nothing comprehensive that answered my questions. But there again, I found misinterpretation and even denial about their very existence. I demonstrated that indeed there were maroons, but also that we needed new language to understand their experience beyond petit and grand that do not reflect their reality. I forged the concepts of borderland maroons and hinterland maroons and brought to light the detailed experiences of American maroons that had never been explored before. My contribution, as a social historian, may be the uncovering of essential stories and topics that were overlooked or negated, but which actually offer new insights into the experience of the African Diaspora. A scholar said my work re-shapes and re-directs our understanding of this history; it shifts our attention, corrects the historical record, and reveals hidden and forgotten voices. I hope he is right, because this is exactly what I try to do.

DODSON: When I met you, you were working on a project at Rutgers University in Newark, NJ.

DIOUF: One of the things that I was interested in but knew very little about was the resistance of Africans to the slave trade. I started to write a book but then decided a conference would do a better job. It ended up being an international conference at Rutgers in 2001. I edited the book, *Fighting the Slave Trade: West African Strategies*, wrote the introduction and a chapter about the previously overlooked strategy of redeeming captives held in the

barracoons either by paying for their release or by offering other people in their places. It was a strategy that, perhaps better than anything else, encapsulates the complexity of resisting and fighting the slave trade. *Fighting the Slave Trade* is still the only book on that topic with contributions from major historians. I think the conference and the book made a seminal contribution to a part of history that is extraordinarily important but still poorly understood as we can see almost every time someone, including well-known scholars, makes outlandish generalizations about this very complicated history.

DODSON: When did you start working at the Schomburg?

DIOUF: I started working at the Schomburg in December 2001. For many years, I had been writing on migrations for a French journal. As you wanted to develop a digital exhibition on migrations, we were introduced, you hired me, and that's how I came to curate the digital exhibition *In Motion: The African American Migration Experience*. In a nutshell, it is about 400 years of African American history through the prism of thirteen migrations. Two of which, the transatlantic and the domestic slave trades, were coerced; the others were voluntary. It is a dynamic, people-led approach of presenting history, far from the "what was done to black people" archetype. It was a 3-year, \$2.5 million endeavor with lots of moving parts and it also included a large exhibition, a traveling exhibition, and a book. Being the curator of such a huge project was something I had never done before, and I kind of created my tools as I was going along. It was about putting things together to make a consistent, accessible, well-documented whole. Commissioning and editing papers by major scholars, maps, a glossary, lesson plans, writing captions as well as the chapter on the contemporary African immigration was a lot of exciting work as were researching and selecting images, books, book chapters, and articles. It was public history at its best. I had always been very aware of the gigantic gap in knowledge between scholars and the general public, and this was the kind of project that was bringing expertise in an attractive way to millions of people.

DODSON: Let me share this with you. I was looking through some of my files at home last week, and I came across a memo from a woman who was the head of the digital unit at the New York Public Library. It had been written a day or so after the press conference announcing the release of the *In Motion: The African American Migration Experience* website. Her memo said the site received over three million hits on the first day it was released to the public. And for comparative purposes—this was her reporting—that was more than the average number of hits that the entire New York Public Library site had received on an average each day of that previous year. And on that day, over three million hits on the *In Motion* site alone. You'll recall that it crashed the entire site. A subsequent report showed that from February through August, the *In Motion* site received over twenty-one million hits. It was amazing. People from all over the world—Europe, Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean—were checking it out. It continues to have a large global user base after eleven years. The *In Motion* project is testimony to the potential that this kind of intellectual orientation that you and I share has. I mean, I've never had a real deep interest in writing for an academic and scholarly audience. That has never been my personal interest. But finding ways of building intellectual bridges between the scholarship and as broad

a public—specifically African, African Diasporan public—as possible has been my own sense of mission and vision, and that’s how I approached virtually everything we were doing at the Schomburg. The aggressive educational, exhibition, and public programs were all done with that in mind: the people need to know. There’s a wonderful quote from my mentor, historian Lerone Bennett, Jr., that actually was one of the inspirations for me beginning to think this way. Lerone said that, “The challenge of the day is to get the books off the shelves and out of the stacks and into the minds and muscles of the people.” That became a guiding principle for everything that I ended up doing at the Schomburg Center.

DIOUF: I agree. This is my guiding principle too. A few years ago I thought it was time to expand the borders of the African Diaspora as most people in the United States envision them. I curated a digital exhibition, *The African Diaspora in the Indian Ocean World*, with essays on the historical African presence in twelve countries, including Oman, Yemen, Arabia, India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Palestine. It has generated an immense interest in over seventy countries and it is one of the most visited exhibitions of The New York Public Library. In 2013 I curated the on-site exhibition *Africans in India: From Slaves to Generals and Rulers* with my friend and expert collector Dr. Ken Robbins. The response was overwhelming. Visitors were astounded. They didn’t know that Africans had lived in India for centuries, that “elite slavery” and the Islamic slave system enabled many not only to become free after a few years of army service but also to rise through the ranks with some becoming prime ministers and rulers as early as the 1500s. It was a revelation to people who thought that American slavery was the norm. Since then the exhibition has been travelling to over twenty countries in five continents with texts in Arabic, Hindi, Spanish, French, and Portuguese. It has been at the UN in New York and at UNESCO headquarters in Paris. Everywhere, the reception has been extraordinary. For the Indian version, which is much larger, I changed the title to *Africans in India: A Rediscovery*, because this is really what happened. Africans were a common sight in some parts of the country especially from the 1500s on, but they and their contributions have been forgotten. The Ethiopian Malik Ambar, de facto ruler of Ahmednagar and an implacable enemy of the Moghuls until his death in 1626, is mentioned in school curricula but his ethnicity is not stated. The exhibition has been touring India for the past three years and has even reached small Sidi—Afro-Indian—communities in the south. It has also gotten a lot of media coverage, including because the historical reality contrasts so much with the racism, hostility, violence, and discrimination many Africans encounter in India today. It is the first exhibition in India about Africans in India, and it had to come from Harlem! What we’re seeing with this and other exhibitions like *Africana Age* is that there is a huge interest, throughout the world really, for credible information on and interpretation of the history of the African Diaspora. And it’s something you can hardly do with a book. Your book is not going to be sold in 160 countries, but you can reach millions worldwide with digital exhibitions.

DODSON: I curated the original *Africana Age* gallery exhibition in 2001 as part of the Schomburg’s 75th Anniversary celebration. It was conceived as an attempt create a historical and interpretive narrative on the global black experience in the twentieth century. It took as its point of departure the fact that all people of African descent in the world, except those in Liberia, Ethiopia, and Haiti, were under some form of European coloniza-

tion at the beginning of the twentieth century. But by the end of the century all of them had gained some modicum of independence. It is a narrative that the online exhibition that you curated actually embellishes and enriches because it's now accessible around the world. African people throughout the globe can now appreciate how interconnected the global black experience has actually been over the last century.

I want to shift gears and, very quickly, go through some of your other activities at the Schomburg. Because one of the things that is very clear is that you do things that traditional academics and traditional historians do, but you manage to do a lot of other things that they don't do. One of the questions that is asked almost daily these days is, what does one do with a degree in black history or a degree in history, period. Most people ask that question on the assumption that the only thing you can do with it is teach [*laughter*]. I have a degree in history and have taught occasionally, but that has never been my principle work and in a very real sense it has never been yours.

DIOUF: Teaching has never been my calling. What I really love is to research and write and if I can do it without the teaching part, then all the better. Outside of my 9-to-5 job, I write scholarly books, which means that for the past fifteen years, I've been working at least eighty hours a week. Curating online and on-site exhibitions is researching and writing but using another media to reach a much larger public. What I do at the Schomburg Center is exploring and interpreting the African Diaspora, and my contribution reaches people who are no longer in the classroom, people who are going to be in the classroom, and people who would never be in the classroom. However, I wouldn't be able to do only that. I need the public history side and the academic history side. They complement each other. Public history is based on scholarly works; it makes them accessible to a larger public. There are a million things that still need to be discovered, explained, and interpreted in the history of the African Diaspora and the digital world is helping us as scholars and as public historians to do so. Increasingly scholars are using digital humanities to bring forth hidden patterns, map trends, or movements that bolster new interpretations. This work is all the more essential because "black history" has been so distorted, ridiculed, or negated. We've come a long way since the days of Arturo Schomburg, but I am stunned at the ignorance that is still out there. When I look at the various things I do I see my work as discovery, affirmation, and dissemination. I produce scholarship, but because I see the limits of academia in terms of access I try to bring knowledge and interpretation to a general audience; I also help to educate college students who will become scholars. It's a kind of non-traditional intellectual career, one that I thoroughly enjoy.

DODSON: Your work at the Lapidus Center is another example of the non-traditional nature of your career. Please say a little bit more about the Lapidus Center.

DIOUF: In 2014, Sid Lapidus, a collector of rare books, gave over 450 books—he continues to add to the collection and close to one hundred books and documents are now available online— and \$2.5 million to open the Lapidus Center for the Historical Analysis of Transatlantic Slavery at the Schomburg Center. Its mission is to generate and disseminate scholarship about the slave trade, slavery, and abolition. As the director, I put in place a plan of activities that encompasses long-term and short-term fellowships; a series of public

programs, “The Lapidus Center Presents,” which include book talks, panel discussions, and documentary film screening; “Talks @ Noon,” a series of scholarly works in progress; podcasts; the annual Harriet Tubman Book Prize whose reviewing and selecting committees are made of scholars and librarians; an annual teachers workshop; and a biennial conference, the first of which, “Reckoning with Slavery: New Directions in the History, Memory, Legacy, and Popular Representations of Enslavement” will take place this November. I received 111 submissions from fourteen countries on five continents. The quality and number of these submissions show the vitality of slavery studies worldwide as well as the reach of the Lapidus Center and the esteem it is already held in within its two-year existence. Since 2015, the center has been exploring the African Diaspora in the United States, Haiti, Barbados, Arabia, Brazil, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Spain, Colombia, Surinam, Portugal, Cuba, Argentina, Uruguay, and the Spanish and British Caribbean in general. We have a newsletter and a very active website and social media feeds. Between the online and on-site viewership, each of our public programs reaches about 1,200 people. The website and social media reach tens of thousands of people every month. All this shows there is a real interest in and need for credible information and interpretation about slavery, not only here but also around the world. Given the importance of its mission and its success, I hope that in the future the center will grow from just one staff—the director (I’m supposed to work five hours a week but I do much more)—to a full-time team.

DODSON: Finally, could you tell us about the Mellon Summer Institute that you also direct. How old is it basically and what does it do?

DIOUF: Since 2005, the Schomburg-Mellon Humanities Summer Institute has been such a resounding success that the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation has recently renewed its funding for another three years. The goal of the Institute is to inspire undergraduate students of color and others with an interest in African American and African Diaspora studies to pursue graduate education in the humanities. Each year, the institute offers a six-week program to ten rising seniors from across the nation. Over the summer, these fellows are immersed in intensive periods of study with leading humanities scholars. They also conduct research using the Schomburg Center’s collections. Each prepares a prospectus or a longer research project and presents it to the class. It’s a very selective and very demanding program. Our alumni have stressed how much it prepared them and helped them navigate graduate school. As of 2016, thirty-nine students have pursued master’s degrees and twenty-eight are currently enrolled in PhD programs. Four graduates are now assistant professors in history, philosophy, English, and literary studies, and two have post-doctoral positions. Five of these six PhD graduates did their undergraduate studies at HBCUs.

DODSON: Wow! That is indeed a remarkably successful program. And I must say that yours is a remarkably successful career. Let me say two things in closing. Number one, you obviously don’t have time to do interviews or anything else with all the other things you have on your plate. So thank you for taking the time to do this one. Second, the kind of work that you’ve managed to carve out for yourself and do is the kind of work that will make our efforts to understand and promote knowledge of the African Diaspora much stronger intellectually and more widely accessible to the world. So thank you for that work.