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Perspectives from the Cape Verde Islands
and Their 550-Year Diaspora¹

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The island-dwelling population that became “Cabo Verdean” drew in part from a combination of continental Africans from, especially, the Atlantic rim of West Africa—regions now part of Senegal, Guinea-Bissau, and the Gambia, as well as further inland (into Guinea, for example). The early peoples who were (largely) kidnapped from the mainland and brought by European slave traders to the Cape Verdean archipelago included many Mandinga, as well as Mande-influenced peoples such as Biafada, Cassanga, and Cocoli (a.k.a. Landuma), along with members of other groups.² These Africans were largely brought as enslaved populations by Europeans most of whom, in turn, came from Portugal (which colonized nine of the previously uninhabited Cabo Verde islands in the mid-15th century), though some were from Spain, France, Italy, and the Netherlands. The children of this phenotypically, linguistically, and spiritually mixed group in effect became the first “Creolized” population that would characterize the new era of the “modern” world.

Although largely unknown beyond the scholarly world of Portuguese history, Cabo Verde produced the first African diaspora, even before the infamous “middle passage.” From their outpost in the Atlantic, the inhabitants of this archipelago of nine strategically located islands—some 380 miles west of the African mainland, and only 1,600 miles east of the South American coast and 1,700 miles south of the European coast—have looked beyond their shores ever since the previously uninhabited archipelago’s rediscovery by European mariners in 1460. For some five hundred and fifty years, residents of and visitors to the islands embarked on oceangoing

voyages for purposes that included trade in a variety of local and international goods—and for some eras, trafficking in human cargo. For good or ill, the accumulation of these oceangoing voyages emanating from these seemingly isolated, small islands produced a remarkably global outlook in what became, essentially, a traveling nation.

Given the conjoined factors of an inextricably “mixed” population from the outset, combined with a perpetually itinerant outlook, historian Tobias Green makes the provocative claim that, against all odds, the remote Atlantic archipelago of Cabo Verde is the place where the world became modern.³ That Mande peoples constituted a significant component of this early and enduring global diaspora suggests the timeliness of including Cabo Verde in serious scholarly inquiries into the Mande world, past and present.

Despite their residents’ uniquely early itinerant outlook, the Cabo Verde islands have remained all but invisible in much of the scholarly anglophone literature. The past thirty years of rethinking African studies from the conjoined perspectives of globalization and diaspora would seem a natural space for building on Cabo Verdean scholarship, yet this has not been the case. In these essays we suggest that this surprising lacuna forms part of a silent/silenced lusophone African Atlantic that spans historical trajectories largely ignored in much of the anglophone literature. In that sense, these essays aim to counter what we perceive as a peripheralization of lusophone scholarship within mainstream anglophone scholarship. We do so by proposing Cabo Verde as an island nation that ought to be front and center, at the cutting edge of contemporary scholarship of our globalized and diasporic world.

The Cabo Verdean diaspora is, in effect, permanently evolving across time and place. Moreover, over the past five-and-a-half centuries, it has intersected with other diasporas at multiple ports of arrival and departure across five continents (Africa, Europe, North America, South America, and [South] Asia). At the same time, and perhaps even more remarkably, this insistently diasporic population nevertheless retains remarkably strong ties to family and community despite the many miles, and continents, that often separate them.

Our repositioning of the production of knowledge of the African Atlantic through this lusophone lens includes several perspectives that allow us to pursue diverse themes across time and space. At theoretical levels, the essays address questions such as the following:

- How does the Cabo Verdean diaspora in any of its historical or current spaces around the globe speak to the production of knowledge within anthropology, history, and other key disciplines in African studies?

- Does Cabo Verdean scholarship entail distinctive epistemological foundations, assumptions, or theoretical paradigms?
- How might lusophone scholarship on Cabo Verde inform anglophone scholarship on globalization and diaspora within anthropology?
- How might Cabo Verdeanist scholarship inform critical race theory, feminist theory, creolization theory, Jewish Studies, and intersectional perspectives, to name a few richly adjoining disciplinary links?

Each of the five essays included in this special addresses a subset of these perspectives from distinctive research foundations. Their topical diversity echoes the diversity of the five authors' nationalities. **Isabel P. B. Fêo Rodrigues'** essay ("Grammars of Faith for Unruly Speakers: Creolization and the Transmission of Portuguese in Cabo Verde") focuses on the earliest trajectories and movement of the language that became Cabo Verdean Creole. Taking an ethnohistorical approach, Rodrigues boldly proposes a new paradigm for creolization studies that is destined to change the way linguistic anthropologists approach the formation of creole languages. **Alma Gottlieb** ("Crossing Religious Borders: Jews and Cabo Verdeans") explores the conjoined Jewish-Cabo Verdean diaspora, discussing how this largely unknown yet historically significant dual diaspora is now being re-evaluated among contemporary Cabo Verdeans (both on and off the islands) who have Jewish ancestry. **Elizabeth Challinor** ("Cape Verdean Students in Northern Portugal: Living with Contingency") explores how the experiences of Cabo Verdean students in northern Portugal push us to stretch the boundaries of anthropological inquiry in analyzing how Cabo Verdeans are both included in and excluded from Portuguese society; along the way, she destabilizes traditional analytical dualities such as "student" and "laborer," "legal" and "illegal" migrant, and "cosmopolitan" and "local." **Wilson Trajano Filho** ("On Colors and Flags in the Hinterland of Cape Verde's Santiago Island") offers an arresting analysis of ritual parades of Cabo Verdean *tabanca* flags to the houses of their patron saints; Filho argues that the pageantry of these processions—which includes national flags and sports team flags of other countries, as well as syncretic banners mixing icons of global mass culture such as Michael Jackson and Bob Marley—constitutes an assertion by peasants who occupy lands that are seemingly remote from the centers of world power, that they are "coeval" with all of us in this world, and that present-day life can be pleasant, despite poverty and other material deprivations, thanks to the blessings of religious figures ("patron saints"). **Gina Sanchez-Gibau** ("Telling Our Story, Because No One Else Will: Cabo Verdean Transnational Identity Formation as Knowledge Production") explores recent scholarship and situated

standpoints produced by educated Cabo Verdeans with a vested interest in exploring Cabo Verdean transnational identity as a means of making their truths known and expanding awareness of the diasporic Cabo Verdean experience, although she concludes by signaling the urgent need for ongoing scholarship by others as well, given the uniqueness of the Cape Verdean diasporic community.

Collectively, these five essays offer a powerful argument for the centrality of the all-too-frequently ignored Cabo Verde islands and their global diaspora in any historical or contemporary discussion of migration and modernity.

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Notes

1. Earlier versions of the essays presented in this special issue were first presented in a panel at the Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association (Washington, D.C.), December 6, 2014, organized by Alma Gottlieb and Isabel P. B. Fêo Rodrigues.

2. Fonte Felipe, "Top 20 Ethnic Roots," Cabo Verde Raizes na Africa: Specifying the African Ethnic Origins for Cape Verdeans. Tracing African Roots: Exploring the Ethnic Origins of the Afro-Diaspora. Blog: http://www.cvraiz.com/?page_id=18.

3. Tobias Green, *Masters of Difference: Creolization and the Jewish Presence in Cabo Verde, 1497–1672* (unpublished dissertation, Department of History, University of Birmingham, 2007).

References

- Felipe, Fonte. "Top 20 Ethnic Roots," *Cabo Verde Raizes na Africa: Specifying the African Ethnic Origins for Cape Verdeans. Tracing African Roots: Exploring the Ethnic Origins of the Afro-Diaspora*. Blog: http://www.cvraiz.com/?page_id=18.
- Green, Tobias. *Masters of Difference: Creolization and the Jewish Presence in Cabo Verde, 1497–1672* (unpublished dissertation, Department of History, University of Birmingham, 2007).