

Home as Horizon: Rethinking Return in the Diaspora



Begin with a ship on the horizon.

Its sails are full, catching wind that blows from the direction of home. Its course is set toward the coast that once took it away - Africa, the original shore from which the family was scattered. It is a beautiful image. One that has carried generations. Marcus Garvey dreamed it in the 1920s, ordering black-starred vessels to sail from America back to Lagos. Aimé Césaire imagined it in Parisian cafés, poetry rising like smoke toward a continent he had never touched. Nelson Mandela saw it from Robben Island - a homeland that remained real even when locked away behind stone walls.

But here is the truth the image cannot hold: the ship cannot turn around.

Those who were born on distant shores have never stood on that original coast. Their feet have never known that soil. A child born in Kingston has never walked the beaches of Ghana. A descendant of Angolan captives born in Bahia has never drunk water from the Niger. A third-generation Londoner whose grandfather arrived from Jamaica has never felt West African rain. So where is their home? And if home is not a place behind them, what is it?

For generations, the language of return has carried a single, aching image: a ship turned around, a people restored to the coast from which they were taken. It is a beautiful longing, and it holds

real truth. But if home were only a place, then the family born on distant shore - in Kingston and Cartagena, in Brixton and Bahia - would be forever homeless, forever exiles from a soil they never touched. And that cannot be the whole of it. A people this alive, this rooted in the lives they have made, cannot be defined only by what was lost.

So, we must ask: if return cannot mean sailing backward, what else could it be?

The History of Return Longing

To answer this question fairly, we must first honor the movements that tried to answer it. They were not wrong to feel the pull of return. They were right to seek it. But their maps were incomplete, because the geography they worked from was already distorted by the very machine that scattered the family in the first place.

Marcus Garvey's Black Star Line remains the most famous attempt. Launched in 1919, it promised steamships that would carry Black Americans back to Africa, establishing trade, repatriation, and independence. The vision was grand. The execution faltered. Ships were overpriced, poorly maintained, caught in legal disputes. Many critics called it a fraud. But to dismiss it as mere failure misses what Garvey understood: the return had to be literal because the scattering had been literal. If a people were carried across the ocean against their will, justice demanded they could carry themselves back. The moral intuition was sound. The geography was impossible.

Because there was no single coast to return to. The transatlantic trade touched dozens of kingdoms, hundreds of languages, thousands of villages. To say "Africa" was already to flatten what the trade had fragmented. To pick one nation - Ghana, Nigeria, Senegal, Angola - was already to choose among wounds that were all equally real. Garvey sensed this, which is why he named his vision Liberia, which was not African soil so much as land purchased for the return. But Liberia itself was founded on contradictions - returnees imposing themselves upon those who had never left. The dream contained its own complications.

Then came the Pan-African Congresses. Paris, 1919. London, 1921. Brussels, 1927. Manchester, 1945. Here the diaspora gathered in conference halls to speak as one body to the empires that had carved up the continent. W.E.B. Du Bois presided over early gatherings. Kwame Nkrumah attended the Manchester congress and left with the blueprint for Ghana's independence. The vision shifted from migration to political alignment - from "go back" to "stand together." The return became not a journey but an orientation. The homeland was not a place to reach but a position to hold: facing Africa, speaking for Africa, becoming Africa's voice in European capitals.

This was wisdom, though it too had limits. Political solidarity requires representation, but representation can become substitution. When the diaspora speaks for Africa, who speaks for the diaspora? The council became necessary, but the distance remained.

Then came Négritude. In 1930s Paris, Aimé Césaire, Léopold Sédar Senghor, and Léon-Gontran Damas wrote poetry that named the homeland they had never visited. “Négritude,” Césaire wrote, was “the simple recognition of the fact of being black, and the acceptance of this fact, of our destiny as blacks, of our history and culture.” Senghor spoke of “civilization of the universal” rooted in African values. They had never stood on the soil they celebrated. They wrote it into existence.

This is the paradox of return: it can be both real and impossible. Real as longing, as orientation, as political practice. Impossible as literal journey, because the family is no longer located where it began. And perhaps it was never meant to be literal at all.

The scholar Sylvia Wynter has written against what she calls “the geocentric man” - the idea that human identity is bound to place, that the meaning of a people depends on where they stand. What if the diaspora’s genius was learning to be human without geographic guarantees? What if return was never about going back, but about moving forward in a direction that reconnects?

Return as Orientation

What if return is not a journey backward across the ocean. What if it is a compass carried within—an inner and collective orientation toward wholeness, toward one another, toward a home still being built.

A horizon is not a place you arrive. It is a bearing you face. The walker who keeps the horizon on the right side of the eye will eventually gather others walking the same way, even if their paths differ. The ship seeks a port. The compass seeker walks toward a direction. And directions can be shared even when routes diverge.

This is what the collection argues: the return was never only a journey backward. It is a compass. And we are the hands that read it.

Home is not found - it is built. Every act of mutual care, every exchange of knowledge, every resource shared across shores lays another brick. The elder who mentors youth across an ocean, the organizers who trade hard-won lessons between movements, the communities that lend one another courage when resources run thin: these are not merely acts of kindness. They are the compass in motion, a scattered family finding its way home by walking toward one another.

The scholar Robin D.G. Kelley has written of “freedom dreams” - the imaginations of liberation that arise from conditions that seem to make freedom impossible. These dreams are not fantasies. They are political tools, blueprints for futures that do not yet exist but could be built. The diaspora’s return dream is one such freedom dream. It names what is possible even when what is necessary cannot be physically enacted. The dream does not fail because it cannot be realized in the way imagined. It succeeds by pointing toward something else that can be built in its name.

A compass does not tell you where you have been. It tells you which way to walk.

Ma'at as True North

But if the compass exists, where did it come from? Did something survive the crossing to guide us?

The answer is yes. Not a physical object, but a principle. **Ma'at** - the ancient insistence on truth, balance, and right order - is the needle that always swings back toward true north.

Ma'at holds that the world is meant to be whole, and that wholeness can be restored. The scattering of the family was a rupture in that order, not its fulfillment. Ma'at insists that repair is not fantasy but rightful direction. The needle always swings back, no matter how far the crossing carried us from it.

This is not metaphor. It is philosophy. Maulana Karenga, in *Maat, The Moral Ideal in Ancient Egypt*, describes Ma'at as seven principles: truth, justice, righteousness, propriety, harmony, balance, and order. These are not abstract virtues. They are the fabric of a world that works as it should. When violence tears that fabric, Ma'at is the assurance that it can be mended. When falsehood distorts reality, Ma'at is the measure by which falsehood is judged and found wanting.

The ledger lied. It called personhood property. It called theft transaction. It called scattering fate. Ma'at names each of these lies and says: this is not order. This is rupture. And rupture can be repaired.

In the diaspora, this means that the separation of families across waters was not the world's natural state. It was a violation. The family scattered is not a family dispersed - it is a family ruptured. And the work of reunion is not invention but restoration. The compass points not to a new direction but to the original north, the one that existed before the lie was written.

This makes hope rational, not naive. Despair says the world is chaos. Ma'at says chaos is disruption, not order. Repair is not wishful thinking - it is alignment with what the world was meant to be. When the family recognizes itself across waters, it is not creating new kinship. It is restoring old order. When communities share resources, they are not performing generosity. They are enacting right relation. When coalitions form across shores, they are not building something novel. They are rebuilding what was torn.

Whether in Lagos or London, Bahia or The Bronx – Ma'at names the same north. A lie is a lie in every tongue. The rupture was the same. The repair is the same. The needle swings back. It always has.

The Family Learning the Same Bearing

And a compass is useless without someone to read it. Who reads it together?

When communities recognize each other as kin, they discover they share the same north. The recognition is not just emotional - it is directional. The hand that reached across the water in

Collection Three becomes the compass needle in Collection Four. The family learns to face the same horizon.

Consider the Pan-African conferences again - not just as political meetings but as moments when scattered communities aligned their bearings. When Du Bois met with Nkrumah, when Césaire debated Fanon, when activists from the Caribbean gathered with organizers from West Africa, they were doing more than exchanging ideas. They were reading the same compass. They discovered that their struggles, though situated in different soils, faced the same horizon.

Consider the anti-apartheid movement, as described in the closing essay of Collection Three. Black communities in the United States, Britain, and the Caribbean organized boycotts, divestment, sanctions - not because the struggle was South African alone, but because the family recognized the struggle as its own. The family was answering a call. The family was lending its strength. The compass was being read together.

Consider contemporary climate justice coalitions, where Caribbean island nations and African coastal cities share vulnerability data, organize joint lobbying at UN summits, and build mutual aid networks for disaster response. These are not charitable arrangements. They are reciprocal circuits - kin helping kin, each shore lending what it has and receiving what it needs.

The strategic insight is this: when communities align their direction, their scattered strength becomes gathered power. Coalitions form. Knowledge travels. What one shore learned through struggle becomes a gift to every other. To find the homeward compass together is to discover that the future is not something we wait for. It is something we are already building, hand over hand, across the water.

Different shores may walk different paths - but the same horizon guides them. The Afro-Caribbean path is not the Afro-Latin path is not the Black British path. Each carries its own terrain, its own pace, its own particular horizon. We trace the shared compass without pretending the roads are identical. Many paths, one true north. Difference and direction rest together in the same open hand.

For Those Who Build Toward Home

But facing the horizon is only the beginning. The work of building awaits.

This essay has done one task: it has set the bearing. Without a direction, construction is aimless. You can lay bricks forever and never raise a house. So, this work clears the ground for the next essays, which will trace the surviving compass itself and the labor of construction.

For organizers and community leaders: your coalition work is reading this compass. Every partnership across shores, every knowledge exchange, every resource shared is the family walking toward the same horizon. You are not waiting for home. You are laying bricks.

What alignment looks like in practice: shared goals coordinated across borders. Resources flowing in both directions - not charity, but circuit. Knowledge transferred from those who have learned through struggle to those who are still learning. Courage lent when one shore faces fire. Strength received and lent again in a cycle that has no end because the family has no end.

This is where Collection Three's covenant becomes operational. The hand extended across the water was recognition. The direction toward home is the same hand transformed into movement. Recognition becomes action. Action becomes construction. Construction becomes home.

The next essay follows the compass itself - what survived the crossing to keep pointing true. Because the family did not arrive with nothing. It carried wisdom in memory, sacred systems in ritual, kinship in choice. That inheritance is the compass. And understanding it is what allows us to walk straight.

For now, the bearing is set. The horizon is visible. The needle swings back. It always has.

Toward a Home Still Being Built

Return now to the ship on the horizon.

It fades. The sails grow dim. The compass needle steadier in its place. The ship was always a metaphor that broke when tested. The compass is what remains.

The horizon is not a destination. It is a direction we face together. Some will walk paths through Caribbean heat, others through London rain, others through the humid streets of Salvador or the highlands of Johannesburg. The roads are not the same. But the horizon is one.

Home is not behind us. It is ahead of us, and we are building it as we walk.

The cloth is still being woven, and your thread is already among the many.

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