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Dreams of home in expanding diasporas

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In the recent Dialogue discussion on nationalism and transnationalism in contemporary art in and out of Africa, Sidney Kasfir makes a reference to El Salahi's dreams of home from afar (p. 10). Steven Nelson identifies El Salahi's nostalgic reflections on a distant home as a "psychological longing, one that is part of exile and diasporic experience" (p. 11), hinting at a more expansive diaspora experience than that which is discussed in the essays. This diaspora includes the voices of contemporary artists who have moved outside the continent and who therefore build new relationships to constructs such as "home" and "nation." These voices enter an ongoing dialogue underway in the dynamic diaspora that was initially created by the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Neither diaspora is a closed system; both of these constructs are endlessly expanding and growing, subject to definitions and redefinitions by individuals and groups who have emotional and political investments in determining the meanings of home, nation, and citizenship. The question emerges, then: where do these two diasporas, which are often teased apart from one another in scholarly dialogue and in experience, meet each other? And how can this discussion of nationalism and transnationalism bring together these two diasporas without erasing the complexities of each?

The work of African-Cuban-American artist Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons comes to mind. Campos-Pons, born in 1959 in Matanzas, trained at the Instituto Superior de Arte in Havana in the 1980s; by 1991 she had moved to the United States where she has lived and worked consistently since then. Campos-Pons, who is partly of Yoruba descent, has used her work to construct and reconstruct her relationship with the African continent. The series titled *When I Am Not Here/Estoy Alla* explores in abstract terms notions of ritual, slavery, forced migrations, and hazy dreams of a past through evocative photographs. At the center of it is the complicated notion that diasporic identity calls for one to be both here and there, but also denies the possibility of being here and there at the same time.

Campos-Pons's 2008 piece titled *Dreaming of an island* consists of nine large-format Polaroid photographs, grouped together in a three-by-three grid. In the upper right panel, we view the artist from behind, seated on a rock, looking out over the water much like Casper David Friedrich's romantic wanderer gazing over a sea of fog. Campos-Pons reveals her dreams of a place that is ultimately inaccessible and perhaps even fading from sight in the distance; the island referenced in the title is a tiny slice of fading land and trees, taking up only a fraction of the space of the overall work. The composition is dominated by the sea and the abstraction created by a rope of hair expanding into the water. The arrangement of Polaroids in a grid, a signature of Campos-Pons by now, here works to reinforce the notions of fragmentation of identity and memory that are in keeping with the diaspora experiences of artists who migrate from Africa as well as artists who move from one part of the historical diaspora to another. I argue that Campos-Pons works illustrates the overlapping notions of homeland and diasporic identity at stake in these discussions. Many of the artists of the two diasporas, although their voices are not often brought together, in fact speak to overlapping issues about place, memory of a homeland and newly constructed identities in the transnational context.