

12-1-2008

Africa and Trans-Atlantic Memories: Literary and Aesthetic Manifestations of Diaspora and History

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Recommended Citation

Opoku-Agyemang, Naana Jane; Lovejoy, Paul; Trotman, David D.; and Gijanto, Liza (2008) "Africa and Trans-Atlantic Memories: Literary and Aesthetic Manifestations of Diaspora and History," *African Diaspora Archaeology Newsletter*: Vol. 11 : Iss. 4 , Article 32. Available at: <http://scholarworks.umass.edu/adan/vol11/iss4/32>

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December 2008 Newsletter

Book Review

Naana Jane Opoku-Agyemang, Paul E. Lovejoy, and David D. Trotman, editors. *Africa and Trans-Atlantic Memories: Literary and Aesthetic Manifestations of Diaspora and History*. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2008, 468 pp., \$34.95 (paper), ISBN 1592216331.

Reviewed for the African Diaspora Archaeology Newsletter by Liza Gijanto, Syracuse University

This text is the result of discussion held during the 2002 conference on “The Trans-Atlantic Construction of the Notions of ‘Race,’ Black Culture, Blackness, and Antiracism: Towards a New Dialogue Between Researchers in African, Latin America, and the Caribbean” held on Goree Island, Senegal. The editors state that they “recognized the need to consider the importance of literature and literary expression in examining the African Diaspora, precisely because literary forms are key in understanding the uses of memory” (p. 1). This text moves beyond the initial recognition of literature as an important medium for interpretation to encompass all perceived forms of art, including cinema and music, as well as written essays and non-fictional works produced during and after the Atlantic era. The overall size of the text, number of contributors, and variety of subjects attests to the complexity of the trade, identity, survival and memory.

The volume contains twenty-four chapters and is divided into four major thematic sections focusing on the nature of the Atlantic slave trade and slavery in Africa and the Americas. A few chapters address older themes such as ‘African Survivals’ and the reinterpretation of African traditions in the Americas directly (i.e., Akinwumi’s discussion of scarification among the Saramaka in Suriname and Stanley-Niaah’s chapter on Limbo and Dancehall), though the majority address a broader range of analysis. Though it is not practical to discuss each chapter individually, it is possible to address a number of themes present in each

section. In the first, *The African Voice in the Diaspora*, the various authors' analyses of contemporary works written by both enslaved laborers and those working with them demonstrates the complexity of the slave experience. The analysis of texts presented by Lovejoy and Rucker are particularly insightful. Both authors demonstrate the survival of memory amongst the enslaved in addition to the complexity of the trade and slavery in Africa.

The second section *Aesthetics and the Performing Arts of the Diaspora* moves beyond the traditional analysis of text and examines the diaspora in terms of a variety of sources including music, film and body art, as well as more traditional forms of poetry and art history. Of note is Sotiropoulos' chapter discussing the political critique of emigration by African American vaudeville performers in the early twentieth century. Through the Williams and Walker Company's attempt to further the rights of African Americans they created a paradoxically negative image of West Africans. This act, rather than furthering their agenda, caused strife within the African American community. Sotiropoulos demonstrates that the duo was trapped in the times, and their critique of the Africa that served as a repatriation destination was not the same as their portrayal of Ethiopia. A second chapter addressing this theme of a 'vision' of Africa by descendants of the enslaved is seen in Trotman's chapter on Calypso in Trinidad. Kafewo's chapter takes this examination from the stage to the cinema, examining two films (*Amistad* and *Sankafu*) and their depiction of slavery from the critical perspective of the victor versus victim (i.e., a caucasian American director and Ethiopian filmmaker).

The third collection of essays, *Pedagogy of Homecoming*, specifically addresses the African view of the Atlantic slave trade and slavery. Both Law and Keren's chapters present opposed views of the role of Europeans and their impact on the African continent during this period. While Keren addresses this in Ghana's history textbooks, Davis discusses the issue of teaching the slave trade in American college classrooms and the often traumatic impact of this on African American students, particularly when popular misconceptions are challenged. The concept of memory is at the forefront of Richards' chapter on African American tourism in Ghana through videos depicting these homecomings and again highlights the conflict between perspective from the Americas and West Africa.

The final section, *Identity and Memory Confronted*, deals directly with literature and poetry to address the notion of memory and interpretation of the diaspora on both sides of the

Atlantic. What is common throughout the pieces selected, the authors highlight the sense of longing for a connection, or a restlessness that the characters often feel when confronted with the idea of Africa. By ending this collection of essays without a formal summation, it appears as though the editors have gone back to their original point that literature provides a unique and untapped avenue of inquiry for the study of the trans-Atlantic slave trade.

Numerous themes prevail throughout the entire text and are supported by the above divisions. One theme that transcends all, though, is stated most obviously in Rucker's and Keren's chapters is the notion of 'blame' for the trade and the affect of this on Africa -- namely the negative result of contact with Europeans who are overwhelmingly viewed as the principal players in the trade. Law's chapter is perhaps unique because his analysis of writings on Ouidah in Benin demonstrates a favorable view of French trade in contemporary writings as bringing prosperity and civilization to the local settlements, a view which was tied to local politics. Also tied to this is the apparent evidence in texts from the Atlantic era of the economic complexity of the region and the dominance, or at least the active role played by several African societies in the trade with Europeans, and the subsequent denial of this in the twentieth century by African nations as well as scholars and artists on both sides of the Atlantic. The representation of slavery within Africa through both fiction and non-fiction is prevalent throughout the majority of the chapters. The variety of sources used by the authors to attest to the memory of those impacted by the slave trade and its legacy in modern representations of these events highlights the strong emotions still attached to this period. A final, though more subtle theme throughout the four sections is the attention paid to 'point of view.' This is most obvious in Kafewo's chapter addressing the identity of filmmakers and their interpretations of slavery.

Overall this is an informative text, demonstrating the strength of memory in modern times, specifically its constant negotiation and recreation in modern politics and scholarship. Also noteworthy is the geographical scope of the work, encompassing North and South America, the Caribbean (including Spanish, English, and French colonial spheres) and various parts of West Africa. The diversity of sources and places utilized reveals the immense wealth of information available to those interested in the legacy of the diaspora. What should be taken away from this collection of essays is the need to view the past critically aided by the immense

variety of resources that are used in the creation, perpetuation, and silencing of memory in the present.

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