

African Diaspora Archaeology Newsletter

Volume 12
Issue 1 March 2009

Article 36

3-1-2009

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

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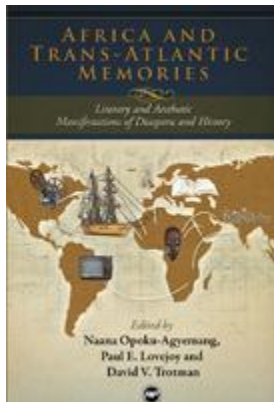
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Recommended Citation

Opoku-Agyemang, Naana Jane; Lovejoy, Paul E.; Trotman, David D.; and Mandel, Sara (2009) "Africa and Trans-Atlantic Memories: Literary and Aesthetic Manifestations of Diaspora and History," *African Diaspora Archaeology Newsletter*: Vol. 12 : Iss. 1 , Article 36. Available at: <https://scholarworks.umass.edu/adan/vol12/iss1/36>

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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 Archeology Newsletter by Sara Mandel, Indiana University

Review Editor's Note: Observant readers will note that the December 2008 issue of the newsletter carried a review of this volume by Ms. Liza Gijanto, Syracuse University. The Newsletter was fortunate to receive two copies of this book from the publisher, and so in the interest of multivocality, commissioned two independent reviews, the second of which is presented here. -- John McCarthy

Africa and Trans-Atlantic Memories, a volume of twenty-four essays edited by Naana Opoku-Agyemang, Paul Lovejoy, and David Trotman, examines various aesthetic forms and interdisciplinary approaches to history and memory in the African Diaspora. In contrast to titles on singular themes, this volume addresses an assortment of literary, visual, and performative cultural practices from early slave narratives to contemporary film, with works touching a broad geography including West Africa, North and South America, and Caribbean islands. The editors bring together a group of mature and emerging scholars from Africa, the United States, England, the West Indies, Canada, and Israel who tackle diverse materials, approaches, and perspectives, and provide a refreshing collection of essays on collective memory. A brief introduction precedes four parts: *The African Voice in Diaspora*, *Aesthetics and the Performing Arts of Diaspora*, *Pedagogy of Homecoming*, and *Identity and Memory Confronted*.

The first part, which is the volume's strongest section, includes essays that draw from the stories of enslaved Africans in the Diaspora to provide new insights into the earliest periods of Trans-Atlantic slavery. Lovejoy uses narratives in an interesting comparison of two enslaved Muslims that highlights how individual social status and experiences of slavery on the continent informed the narratives of slavery and freedom that followed. Walter Rucker's analysis of narratives, a strong complement to Lovejoy's essay, refutes histories of Middle Passage that deny ethnicity. Rucker nuances acculturation in an essay that reinforces concepts Michael Gomez explores in his book *Exchanging Our Country Marks*. Manuel Barcia scrutinizes the manuscript of Spanish surgeon Francisco Barrera y Domingo, who attended enslaved Africans on Cuban plantations for almost two decades, to argue that the doctor was more humane than expected and advocated better treatment for better health. In his linguistic study, David Wheat reveals how people of African descent would have spoken Moberly Jargon in colonial Alabama, which also relates to Gomez's *Exchanging*. These essays, in their recovery of history and critical assessment of it, offer

significant contributions and prove that more research needs to be done on even the most obscure traces of the African presence in the New World.

Part two contains essays that explore visual art, body art, music, dance, film, and literary arts. Ikem Stanley Okoye's long and complex essay may have been better at the end of the section because it questions epistemological connections between twentieth-century novels on slavery and twentieth-century African art. As the rare essay that draws from material culture, it is unfortunate that the images were poorly reproduced. In an essay on body art, Tunde Akinwumi links Saramaka cicatrization in Suriname with Yoruba culture through form and naming of form. This iconographical analysis would have also been strengthened by higher quality images, but the text and tables help demonstrate interconnections. Karen Sotiropoulos's essay on Burt Williams and George Walker is jam-packed with cross histories of Diaspora from enslavement, to colonialism, to ideas of home combining cultural and social history. Sonjah Stanley Niaah's essay on limbo and Jamaican dancehall practices is strongest where it discusses rites of passage and spatiality. Two essays on film in this section assess how filmmakers remember Africa. Samuel Ayedime Kafewo rebukes the effectiveness of *Amistad* while he celebrates *Sankofa* for representing "slavery from the perspective of the oppressed" (154). Foluke Ogunleye shows how *Daughters of the Dust* and "Mother of the River" use magical realism to suggest and preserve Yoruba culture. Lyrics are also a source of history and memory in Mathias Röhrig Assunção's reading of *capoeira* and David Trotman's analysis of calypso. Assunção links the marital art to Africa, slavery, and abolition in repeated performances of Afro-Brazilian cultural memory while Trotman examines how Trinidadian verse helped form political ideals towards freedom and Africa through eras of colonialism and independence.

The third part seems to be a little less cohesive as it explores approaches to pedagogy and learning about Africa in the Diaspora. Essays by Ella Keren and Robin Law address the education of African history. Keren compares the absence of the slave trade in pre-2000 West African history textbooks to Ghanaian textbooks published after the ministry of education introduced a new syllabus in response to criticism. Focusing on histories written in Ouidah, Law identifies changes in perception regarding the trade's economic and political rewards. Essays by Andrea Davis, Sandra Richards, and Naana Opoku-Agyemang attempt to understand how African Americans respond to Africa as a homeland. Literary theory helps Davis connect three novels to other fictional works that attempt to reconcile Diaspora with concepts of Africa as home, even as the continent changed over time. In a hearty article, Richards looks at discourses of memory-making in an amateur documentary of a visit to and a professional video of a celebration in Ghana, two works facing "the challenge to remember productively" (298). Opoku-Agyemang's essay champions one fictionalized female protagonists' interaction with Africa over a comparative story, and might benefit from a discussion of authors' motives. Louise Bennett in Jamaica is Mark Campbell's primary example as he effectively argues that local vernacular can preserve African roots and create an African home in the Diaspora. Chima Anyadike hopes readers can learn alternatives to essentialist and hegemonic identities through the analysis of African and American Indian literature. The final essay in this section, by Jahlani Bongo-Niaah, returns to a specific case study of pedagogy in a fascinating investigation of musical lyrics as a teaching tool for Rastafari ideals, values, and traditions.

Part four deals with memory in a way that seems to return to themes explored in the first section of the volume: using literature as a source for studying the Trans-Atlantic slave trade -- something Liza Gijanto also noticed in her review for the December 2008 ADAN. Mawuli Adjei's close reading of Ghanaian poetry demonstrates the deep insight of two African poets into experiences of Diaspora and memories of Africa and slavery. In a soulful essay useful for undergraduates, Muiyiwa Falaiye reveals the way Langston Hughes verbalized physical memory of Africa. Benaouda Lebdaïn expertly perceives the ubiquity of water in Ayi Kwei Armah's stories as explicit and implicit expressions of Middle Passage. Finally, Lorrie Smith connects the ghosts of Middle Passage to the tropes of the black spirits that float through Diasporic improvisational literary traditions.

Most of the essays in *Africa and Trans-Atlantic Memories* are concise and easy-to-read, making them useful for course development. The book is well organized, covering a variety of topics arranged in a way that the essays often inform each other. As a whole, the volume does a nice job illuminating the central theme from various perspectives. Most of the authors include a sentence summarizing their main points, which help make the essays accessible to a variety of academic levels. While some of the longer, denser, or more theoretical essays disrupt the flow and rhythm of the volume, they all provide insightful contributions following a format like the conference that enabled the book to happen. An index at the back of the book helps scholars locate specific information and ample footnotes and a substantial bibliography contribute to the academic acumen.

Given that the essays came from a conference and may be reports on current research projects, it makes sense that many of them could have delved deeper into the material they examine. This format leaves room for more incisive questions such as, how does poetry written in local vernacular relate to other performances of Diaspora as home? What does the construction of cultural memory and pedagogical practices in African textbooks mean for the relationship between Africans and Europeans? What can we learn about the perceptions expressed in the Williams and Walker performances regarding continued Western attitudes towards Africa during colonialism and the post-colonial era? How can we re-imagine the victims of Middle Passage and where should that discussion lead us?

With so many chapters, a more substantial introduction may have weighed down the already heavy volume, but could have artfully synthesized continuous themes and deeper issues explored in various chapters. Although it is broad in geographic scope, the volume falls short in its promise to "represent the truly global dimensions of the African Diaspora" (4), because, despite its focus on the Atlantic, there is little or nothing on Southern Africa, Western Europe, or the United Kingdom. A major flaw with this book is careless editing. Typos, inappropriate punctuation, and incomplete and awkward passages not only distract from the content, they sometimes compromise it. In addition, the few illustrations could have been included in the table of contents.

Over all, *Africa and Trans-Atlantic Memories* is an important contribution to Africana studies with engaging and significant essays. It is a volume that will be useful to scholars of African, African American, Afro-Caribbean, and Afro-Brazilian culture. Following Paul Gilroy's call in *Black Atlantic*, this volume truly presents "an explicitly transnational and

intercultural perspective." This group of scholars, and their excellent research, will shape how we consider the importance of Diaspora and as Liza Gijanto stated in her review, "attests to the complexity of the trade, identity, survival and memory."