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Book Review: Shadows of the Slave Past: Memory, Heritage, and Slavery

BOOK REVIEW / BOOK REVIEW / NEWSLETTER ITEM

Araujo, Ana Lucia. *Shadows of the Slave Past: Memory, Heritage, and Slavery*. New York and London: Routledge, 2014. 250 pp.; endnotes, 45 black-and-white images, bibliography, index. Hardback: \$148.00; Paperback: \$44.95

Review by Renée Ater, University of Maryland

In recent years, historians of the Atlantic World have examined the memorialization of the slave trade and slavery through historical documents, public monuments and memorials, museums, heritage sites, and cultural tourism. These studies often focus on a single country and a small group of memorial forms. In *Shadows of the Slave Past: Memory, Heritage and Slavery*, Ana Lucia Araujo employs a transnational and comparative approach, looking at

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a range of examples from Ghana, Republic of Benin, Senegal, France, Brazil, and the United States. In this ambitious book, she proposes a broad examination of and approach to the slave past: "I retrace the different stages of the Atlantic slave trade and slavery including the enslavement in Africa, the process of confinement in slave depots, the Middle Passage, the arrival in the Americas, the daily life of forced labor, and the fight for emancipation and the abolition of slavery" (7). She is interested in the ways in which the slave past is often associated with the memory of the Holocaust.

Focusing on a range of historical actors, including peoples of African descent, white elites, and national governments, Araujo looks at how these groups "appropriated the slave past by fighting to make it visible in the public space of former slave societies—or conceal it" (7). These various special interest groups often understood the slave past in fundamentally different ways, opening up the memorialization process to conflict and contestation. Rather than historical accuracy or accountability, the memorial process often ends up focused on particular political agendas, ideas, and sentiments of individuals, elites, and national governments. In the end, Araujo argues that most of these engagements in the public sphere are unsuccessful because they desire to tell a one-dimensional story about the Atlantic slave trade and slavery rather than understanding this historical moment as multifaceted and complex. She is not the only scholar to come to this conclusion regarding the problems inherent in memorial processes and competing understandings of the past. Dell Upton in *What Can and Can't Be Said: Race, Uplift, and Monument*

Building in the Contemporary South (Yale University Press, 2015) came to a similar conclusion regarding monuments to the civil rights movement and African American history in the southern United States, arguing that many of these monuments are abstracted representations that fail to deal with the mundane activities of the civil rights movement and that they operate within rather than resist dominant narratives of the white nation and continued systemic racism.

Araujo defines public memory as “a process of memorializing” (9) and as a “process of remembrance” (211). She states, “in this book memory is conceived not as a unilineal process but rather as a multidirectional dynamic activity, involving different places and times” (7-8). The idea of multidirectional memory is at the heart of her comparative study. Araujo treats memory as metaphor and conceptual framework not as cognitive processes and structures in the brain by which individuals store and retrieve information. This, of course, allows her great flexibility in understanding how social actors engaged collectively in thinking about and memorializing the Atlantic slave trade and slavery. In understanding public memory as a process of memorialization, she presents a range of visual images as well as written narratives that have shaped or concealed the understanding of the slave past in the public sphere.

In six chapters, Araujo takes us on a wide-ranging journey across the Atlantic World in pursuit of the memorialization process of the slave past. Chapter one examines eighteenth-century and nineteenth-century images and written

narratives of enslavement with a particular focus on warfare and kidnapping. In selecting these comparisons, she highlights both European and West African participants who were engaged in the slave trade. Although such accounts often stressed the violent role of Europeans in the slave trade, she notes that many of these images and written narratives continue to “place the populations of African descent in a position of absolute victimhood, denying them any kind of agency” (42).

Chapter 2 and Chapter 3 are intertwined in that they focus on two important aspects of the slave trade: sites of deportation and places of disembarkation. In Chapter 2, Araujo investigates former slave depots that are now present-day heritage sites on the coasts of Ghana, Republic of Benin, and Senegal. She discusses how the memorialization efforts at these locations are directly linked to representations of the Holocaust, including the use of structural elements such as gates that can be seen at Holocaust concentration camps as well as the raw emotional experience of visiting such sites. She provides a fascinating discussion of President Barak Obama’s visit to the Cape Coast Castle in Ghana in July 2009. In an interview at the site, Obama linked his feelings of mourning and loss at this site to a similar experience he had at Buchenwald concentration camp with Elie Wiesel. After a discussion of African American and Afro-Caribbean tourists’ visits to other West African slave trade heritage sites, Araujo turns to Gorée Island (Senegal) and Maison des esclaves (House of Slaves). She reveals how national and local leaders have linked this

former slave port to the Drancy internment camp located in the northeastern suburbs of Paris, France. This chapter raises important questions about the need to interpret the Atlantic slave trade and slavery through the lens of the Holocaust. Araujo argues that it is the difficulty of reconciling the slave past, its historical presence, and its representation in the public sphere that leads to this use of the Holocaust “as a way to legitimize the memorialization of slavery” (72). Chapter 3 continues this analysis with a careful evaluation of the disembarkation narratives that are memorialized in museum exhibitions and heritage sites in Brazil and the United States. Central to this chapter is the way in which black communities in both Brazil and the United States have forced difficult conversations and public recognition of the complicity of these governments in the Atlantic slave trade.

Chapter 4 engages with the idea of the invisible sites of slave labor. Araujo explores how slavery is acknowledged or neglected in public spaces in the United States and Brazil. She sees that the brutality of slave labor and the abuse of enslaved laborers are often ignored at heritage sites in the United States in order to focus on slave owners and their lifestyles on plantations. In Brazil, which does not have a plantation tourism industry, museums and heritage sites take a different tack, highlighting the victimization and punishment of enslaved persons. She writes that although these are different methods for apprehending the role of slave labor, they achieve the same thing, “these two

approaches divert the various audiences from the crucial role of slave labor in the construction of these two countries, either by concealing its existence or by denying agency to enslaved individuals" (113).

The final two chapters emphasize white emancipators and black freedom fighters. Chapter 5 examines public representations of President Abraham Lincoln and Princess Isabel Cristina of Bragança and Bourbon as the great emancipators of enslaved persons in the United States and Brazil respectively. Araujo avers that the celebration of Lincoln and Isabel led to a "paternalistic vision of emancipation," (147) that displaced black emancipators from public memory. Chapter 6 engages with a new image of slave rebels that came into prominence during the 1960s during a time of transnational civil rights movements, the development of new nation states in Africa and the Caribbean, and the growing number of scholarly studies on slave resistance and agency.

Transnational and comparative studies are worthwhile endeavors. They allow us to see important processes and outcomes across nations and cultures. In the context of the Atlantic slave trade and slavery, transnational and comparative studies point to the ways in which hard conversations in relation to the slave past are taking place in former slave societies in various parts of the globe. Such studies allow us to ask and answer important causal questions. Other scholars such as

Charmaine Nelson in her recent book *Slavery, Geography and Empire in Nineteenth-Century Marine Landscapes of Montreal and Jamaica* (Routledge, 2016) use a similar comparative approach as Araujo in *Shadows of the Slave Past*. One risk of the comparative approach is the sheer volume of comparisons and the generalizations that invariably surface. On occasion, I desired that Araujo provide a deeper engagement with the images and monuments of the Atlantic slave trade and slavery, to contemplate and pull apart the visual relationships of her disparate sources. For example, Chapters 2 and 3 are rich with visual material about how the United States and Brazil have wrestled with the processes of memorialization and public representation of the Atlantic slave trade: these two chapters would make an excellent stand-alone book. Overall, this is an important book because it allows us to see how peoples of African descent, white elites, and national governments in the Atlantic World have promoted, commemorated, and concealed the memory of the Atlantic slave trade and slavery in public space. Araujo encourages us to think about the complex process by which memorialization and remembrance takes place amid “conflictual perspectives regarding this past” (215).

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