

# H-Net Reviews

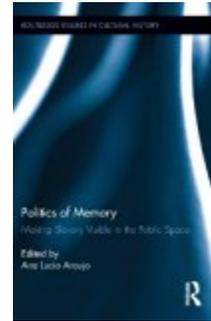
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Ana Lucia Araujo, ed. *Politics of Memory: Making Slavery Visible in the Public Space*. New York: Routledge, 2012. viii + 296 pp. \$125.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-415-52692-0.

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## Navigating Slavery's Memories

Ana Lucia Araujo's introductory essay to *Politics of Memory* begins with a simple question: "How is the public memory of the slave trade and slavery shaped, displayed, and reconstructed in the public arena?" (p. 10). The work collected in *Politics of Memory* aims to answer such queries through focusing on the various ways that the transatlantic slave trade is represented and commemorated in the countries that had some engagement with the system. The geography that these essays map is one of the larger—to use Paul Gilroy's term—"Black Atlantic." We take in Africa, Europe, and the Americas (North, Central, and South). Assembled here are essays that span a very large set of terrains, some that have rarely been brought into such close proximity. In having essays that move from America to Mauritius to Gambia, for example, *Politics of Memory* actively shapes and charts a geography of slavery that we cannot afford to forget. As various places are brought together, and their histories shown to be mutually-informing, overlapping, and even synthesized, slavery is cemented as being forged in a middle space of complex cultural identity. The essays here exemplify this, illustrating the ways in which memories of slavery are rich, diverse, plural, and multifaceted.

*Politics of Memory* is split into two sections. The first set of essays is concerned broadly with the notion of slavery as part of a national narrative. Thus, they look to the ways certain places deal with this historical legacy and assimilate it (or not) into their collective and cultural memories. The second section has essays that look specifically to museum practice in relation to slavery. In

moving from a more general sense of slavery memory, then, to a very particular version of public remembrance, Araujo's collection offers substantial grounding in the field. The work on museums in the second half is interesting and useful to us as memory scholars as it scrutinizes a wide selection of public institutions across the world. The International Slavery Museum in Liverpool is comprehensively studied in Richard Benjamin's "Museums and Sensitive Histories," New York's often buried slave history is successfully unearthed in Kathleen Hulser's "Exhibiting Slavery at the New York Historical Society," and the complications innate to remembering difficult aspects of American slavery is addressed by Regina Faden in "Museums and the Story of Slavery." I have glossed over these essays briefly if only because museum scholarship is, I think, already abundant in the field and what is actually most important and exciting in Araujo's book is the harnessing of new modes and topics of analysis.

Complementing the museum analyses are essays here that stimulatingly assess the role of historical objects and monuments in public remembrance. Margot Minardi's "Making Slavery Visible (Again)" traces the uses of objects, such as furniture, dolls, and teapots, in New England's memory of slavery. Quito Swan's "Smoldering Memories and Burning Questions" examines a monument in Bermuda to Sally Bassett, a slave who was burned to death for supposedly poisoning her granddaughter's master. Swan unravels the various public responses to the monument and the ways in which it is interpreted in the public space. The question for Swan is how, with

such conflicting views of the memorial, Bermudans can engage with it as a representation of the slave trade in their country. Similarly, Renée Ater's "The Challenge of Memorializing Slavery in North Carolina" looks to two contemporary memorials that very differently remember slavery. Both, in their own ways, have been viewed as problematic memorials, in aesthetic and ethical terms, and both, for this reason, are necessarily investigated by Ater for their potency and efficacy in helping North Carolina commemorate a tragic part of its cultural past. Swan and Ater contribute not only to this collection's focus on the visibility of slavery in public forms, but they join and complement other rich work on memorials in the field by the like of scholars such as James Young and Kirk Savage.

Swan's essay particularly alerts us to another central thread of insight that connects these essays: the ways in which a nation, in its collection of multiple races and cultures, will obviously have multiple responses to slavery. A black member of society might (and probably will) have an entirely different outlook on the memory of slavery than a white person, for instance. While not inherently problematic, this split in understanding is manifested in the competitions and ruptures of public representations of memory. In this way, Mathieu Claveyrolas's excellent essay looks to the conflicting memories of slavery in Mauritius and how different parts of this country's culture wish to remember the collective history of slavery and indentured labor. He tells us that "the main mechanism behind competing memories of slavery" ultimately concerns "[d]eny[ing] or accept[ing] the past" (p. 54). The competition and conflict of such commemorations and monuments hinges, as cultural memory studies has taught us, on the impetus of remembrance in the present. It is our contemporary moment that ultimately shapes memory and to what ends it is put. But, if the present moment is different for different members of society, memory-work will long be contested and challenged.

This collection could, in fact, be accurately titled "Navigating Memory," not least for its geographical reach. One of the most successful aspects of the collection is the continued focus on the complexities and ambiguities of memory. Many of the essays chart the ways that countries and societies must "navigate" memory: that is, understand the often conflicting and competing versions of the past. A nation's dominant memories, and the host of marginal ones that must, and always do, complement them, become intertwined—often precariously. In the face of such discrepancy over what

memories are worth holding on to and representing, cultures have to confront the very nature of what we call cultural memory: the dense, layered, inharmonious, and definitively plural collection of remembrances.

Attendant to (and sometimes because of) this notion, and also a major concern of this book, is the absence of slavery memory; or the ways that forgetfulness might be a driving force in shaping public remembrance. Renaud Hourade's "Commemorating a Guilty Past" and Nelly Schmidt's "Teaching and Commemorating Slavery and Abolition in France" offer two interventions into France's overwhelming memory loss (strategic or otherwise) about its implication in the slave trade. Both are necessary additions to the field, but there are other more interesting works on this topic. The essays on Brazil, for example, are richly detailed and work to counter the amnesia that has, at times, taken hold in Brazil, especially in relation to the African legacy in the country. Kimberly Cleveland's essay "The Art of Memory" on São Paulo's AfroBrazil Museum (Museu AfroBrasil) charts the complexities of this museum to slavery and the African heritage in Brazil. The museum, she tells us, reinstates African identity and culture into the national narrative which has often gone unmentioned. With the largest population of people of African heritage outside Africa, Brazil's cultural fabric is necessarily intertwined with that of Africa, and thus slavery. Cleveland's essay subtly points to the difficulties and successes involved in the AfroBrazil Museum's attempts to come to terms with this aspect of the nation's history. Similarly, Francine Saillant and Pedro Simonard's essay "Afro-Brazilian Heritage and Slavery in Rio de Janeiro Community Museums" on Afro-Brazilian heritage—particularly in Rio de Janeiro—successfully adds to Cleveland's more particular focus.

These two essays work well together, and there are other implicit pairings in the book that look at two aspects of a country's memory work. But, in light of this, I come to my main (perhaps unfair) criticism of the collection: in the book's wide geographical reach, it nonetheless has major gaps and omissions. I am not faulting Araujo's worthwhile project of collecting disparate nations together in attempting to understand the multiple ways in which the memories of slavery are represented in the public sphere. However, in fostering such a range, the book necessarily lets the reader down by certain absences. I would have loved more essays about countries that we as yet know little about in the world of memory studies. Especially considering the importance and significance of Africa in the slave trade, there

is only one essay in this collection that focuses solely on African remembrance and commemoration. While this essay, it must be said, is one of the best in the book, Alice Bellagamba's analysis of Gambian memory needs other work to complement it. Additionally, in light of the large role Portugal or Holland played in slavery, we would expect academic work about these countries' memory practices. This lack, while not fatal to the collection as a whole, cannot but be conspicuous in this otherwise coherent book.

Bellagamba's essay also brings me to another criticism of the book as a whole; glossing the essay will help show this. Her astute analysis of collective remembrance in Gambia relies not only on a deft use of critical theory, but more pertinently on fieldwork. Rather than (as many of the other essays do) unpack certain examples of memorials or museums, Bellagamba uses testimonials and interviews to ground her argument. Speaking over a number of years to local people, she provides us with a very nuanced and deft sense of how societies in Gambia respond not only to the history of slavery, but the way in which a traumatic past works through the present moment. "Reasons for Silence" looks to the ways in which the notion of remaining silent on an issue—"not all should be said" (p. 42)—can limit and block cultural memory. The "dynamics of silence," Bellagamba tells us, can "keep pushing the vicissitudes of a part of Gambian history, that of former slaves and slave descendants, into the shadows of the past" (p. 49). For this reason, it is only in her interviews with Gambian people that this silence might be broken, thus offering an intervention into the overwhelming dynamic of this country's way of remembering a dark and troublesome past. I linger on the workings of "Reasons for Silence" because it is this dimension of public, collective, or cultural memory that often gets sidelined in favor of more theoretical analyses. In fact, it is in Bellagamba's carefully constructed conversations (self-aware, respectful, challenging) with local people that so assuredly make the case for her essay and, more-

over, addresses the larger concerns of this book's project: how memories are dealt with, and made (in)visible in the public space or sphere. Other essays in this collection would have been vastly improved had there been further fieldwork and investigation of public response to the museums, monuments, and ideas under consideration. This is a missing dynamic of cultural memory that Bellagamba foregrounds; we would do damage to the futures of slavery memory in ignoring this.

Because, as Marcus Wood has famously put it, the memories of slavery are "*not over and evolving*" (original emphasis), we are nudged into seeing the necessity of understanding them in the contemporary moment.[1] Moreover, Astrid Erll succinctly tells us that "Memories do not hold still—on the contrary, they seem to be constituted first of all through movement." [2] Thus, collections such as *Politics of Memory* contribute to the sense in which we see memory as always, fundamentally, moving and transforming. Memory is subject to the concerns of the present: who is doing the remembering and why? Memory, further, cannot always remain in place. While there is the need to read and identify memory in its local contexts—and the essays here do that—there is simultaneously a requirement of us to note its outward reach. If memories vibrate internationally, then it is our job as practitioners and scholars of memory to keep mapping—in both local and global senses—the ways that slavery is represented, contested, complicated, understood, ignored, and commemorated in the public space. *Politics of Memory* is a wonderful beginning to this shamefully overdue project.

#### Notes

[1]. Marcus Wood, *Blind Memory: Visual Representations of Slavery in England and America 1780-1865* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2000), 11.

[2]. Astrid Erll, "Travelling Memory," *Parallax* 17, no. 4 (2011): 11.

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