

Solimar Otero. *Afro-Cuban Diasporas in the Atlantic World*. Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2010. 247 S. \$80.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-58046-330-0.



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Afro-Cuban Diasporas in the Atlantic World presents a fascinating account of the cultural connections between the Yoruba in Havana in the era of British abolitionism and Cubans in contemporary Lagos. Author Solimar Otero takes the reader on multiple journeys across the Atlantic. She uses these voyages to piece together the transnational networks forged by Afrocubanos as they searched for “home”. The book participates in the growing body of scholarship on Afro-Latin America. While a wealth of scholarship on people of African descent in Latin America has emerged in the last 20 years (see the works of historians such as George Reid Andrews, Herbert Klein, among others), recently the topic peaked popular attention in the form of Henry Louis Gates Jr.’s documentary series “Black in Latin America.”

Central to Otero’s account of this transnational community is the concept and cultural construction of “home” by Yoruba people in their journeys back and forth across the Atlantic. Otero begins by using a “traditional Yoruba proverb” to interpret Yoruba conceptions of dispersal and home. The Yoruba in Havana and the

Afrocubanos in Lagos experienced Diaspora according to the Yoruba concept of the marketplace: “a public space full of possibilities, danger, and wonder” (p. 1). People enter the marketplace at birth, thus beginning their dispersal and entrance into Diaspora, and return home after negotiating the marketplace. Otero explores this marketplace by examining the ways in which Afrocubanos created new homes and re-imagined old homes in both Havana and Lagos.

The book is structured in two main parts. The first part centers on the Yoruba in Cuba. At the core of this section are eight short narratives of Lagosians in Havana, taken from interviews published in the *Anti-Slavery Reporter* in 1854. The second part turns to examine the Aguda, a community of Afro-Cubans and Afro-Brazilians in Lagos, Nigeria. This section is based in part on several interviews conducted by the author with the descendants of Hilario Campos, an Afrocubano who settled in Lagos at the turn of the twentieth century. Otero claims that her two-pronged approach helps her to piece “together the innovative

notions of diaspora that the narratives of the Aguda seem to suggest” (p. 5).

One of the most noteworthy contributions of this book is its explicit focus on non-U.S. sites of Diaspora. Otero rejects the assumption “that Africa and the United States are the only viable starting points for the exploration of the African Diaspora” (p. 6). More than decentering the traditional narrative of Diaspora, she bridges the history of British anti-slavery and colonialism in West Africa with the multiple Atlantic journeys of African descended people between Havana and Lagos. In so doing, Otero joins a small but growing body of literature that traces the complex transnational trajectories and interactions of people of color across linguistic and imperial lines. Frank Andre Guridy, *Forging Diaspora: Afro-Cubans and African Americans in a World of Empire* and Jim Crow, Chapel Hill 2010.

This approach simultaneously presents the most significant challenge in the work. The author chooses to examine the experiences of the Havana Lagosians and the Aguda separately. Consequently, the book presents a somewhat disjointed narrative tracing two distinct groups of people, rather than a seamless integration of both sets of experiences in an analysis of the connections between them. For example, the life histories recounted in the first half of the book are truncated by a lengthy discussion of the secondary literature, and recapitulation of political history of Yorubaland (Chapter 2). The second half of the book presents an entirely new narrative based on the life of Hilario Campos. Though interesting, his story bares no explicit relation to the experiences of the eight individuals introduced at the beginning of the book (Chapter 4).

Another conceptual problem that arises from the ambitious structure of the book is the rather rigid conceptualization of each group of people, in which her main evidence does not necessarily fit. For example, the author chooses to focus on Havana-Lagosians, but does not consider that Lagos

may not have been “home” to many of the individuals who were sold as captives from that port, or who eventually settled there. Moreover, her choice to focus on the repatriation of Yoruban descendants from Havana to Lagos does not match her main source of evidence based on the life of Hilario Campos. Indeed, Campos was not a Havana-Lagosian at all; the son of an enslaved Yorubaman, Campos was born in Matanzas, Cuba.

The ethnographic fieldwork centering on the family of Hilario Campos also brings the reader to another set of methodological questions. How exactly does contemporary ethnographic fieldwork in Lagos cast light on historic processes of Diaspora? The problem is most pronounced in the author’s discussion of identity. Interviewing Mrs. Ola Vincent, one of the grandchildren of Hilario Campos, Otero asked her if Hilario “felt a sense of being Lagosian [while in Cuba]” (p. 101). She answered emphatically in the affirmative. From this ethnographic excerpt, Otero argues that there was a definite Lagosian identity in Cuba, and this extended to include a sense of Cuban-ness in Lagos. The reader is left to question if self-identity can ever be inferred by asking a third party, no matter how close the blood relation. The temporal gap seems too great to project a contemporary opinion of one woman onto the historical experience of a man who lived in a completely different time and set of places.

Much like Otero, scholars of the African Diaspora have become increasingly disposed to transcend the boundaries of the nation-state. This transnational approach has facilitated a better understanding of the complex processes that gave shape to the African Diaspora over more than four centuries and across four continents. Yet, in expanding the temporal and spatial scopes under study, it is ever more important to zoom in on a specific subject to guide the narrative and research. Some scholars have accomplished a coherent transnational narrative by focusing on specific individuals or families, and tracing them

through time and space. Rebecca J. Scott / Jean M. Hébrard, *Freedom Papers. An Atlantic Odyssey in the Age of Emancipation*, Cambridge, MA 2012. Another way of achieving this is to trace the flow of ideas and discourses. Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic. Modernity and Double Consciousness*, Cambridge, MA 1993. One of these strategies might have been productive in this work.

Afro-Cuban Diasporas in the Atlantic World makes a noble attempt to expand contemporary scholarly understandings of Diaspora. Otero investigates the fascinating trajectories of African-descended peoples between Havana and Lagos. Yet, she falls short of her exalted goal because of certain structural and methodological challenges. While this volume offers a unique combination of ethnographic field work and historical sources, an overreliance on secondary literature impeded an original approach to Diaspora. Despite some shortcomings, Otero does succeed in encouraging the reader to explore more innovative perspectives and approaches to Diaspora, albeit with a more critical approach to methodology and an eye toward cohesive narrative structure.

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