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Embodying the Middle Passage

A Review of

Alexander, M. Jacqui. 2005. *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory, and the Sacred*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Baucom, Ian. 2005. *Specters of the Atlantic: Finance Capital, Slavery, and the Philosophy of History*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Tettey, Wisdom J. and Korbla P. Pupilampu, eds. 2005. *The African Diaspora in Canada: Negotiating Identity and Belonging*. Calgary: University of Calgary Press.

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The acknowledgement of the violent intimacy between the middle passage and modernity came into the mainstream of cultural studies with the publication of Paul Gilroy's influential text *The Black Atlantic*. In spite of the currency of the "black Atlantic" as an umbrella term to describe a growing field of interdisciplinary inquiry, the routes and roots of this field are still heterogeneous and draw upon distinct discourses and interlocutors. These range from the political-economic explorations of Eric Williams, to Atlantic histories-from-below of Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker to the poetic and autobiographical experiments

of Dionne Brand, Derek Walcott and Aimé Césaire. Nonetheless, similar themes arise in these discourses—from the relationship between the past and the present, to the loss of historical accounts/testimonies, to the need for a reconstituted sense of embodiment in the light of these losses and erasures.

The three books under review examine aspects of the black diaspora with equal heterogeneity. Ian Baucom's *Specters of the Atlantic* follows Walter Benjamin's historical methodology in the latter's analysis of the Paris Arcades. To Benjamin, the commodification of 19th-century Paris repeats and intensifies the motifs of 17th-century Baroque allegory. Baucom takes this notion of oscillating history to draw parallels between the 18th and the 20th centuries. In this instance, the defining event of both centuries is the massacre in 1781 aboard the slave ship *Zong* in which the captain threw 440 slaves from the West coast of Africa overboard during a storm to recover the money that they were insured with. The epistemology that justified the annihilation of these men and women in the service of speculative capitalism returns at the end of the 20th century with greater intensity in the dominance of finance capitalism. In both Benjamin's and Baucom's configurations, the emergence of the event or motif in the earlier century creates an epistemology that enables its dominance as a defining characteristic in the latter.

Pedagogies of Crossing, a collection of M. Jacqui Alexander's essays written over the span of a decade, discusses a variety of interconnected issues: interdependence of heterosexist and state violence, corporate tourism and "gay capital;" pedagogical issues; the implication of the academy in an era of rampant neo-imperialism; and the erosion of spaces and knowledges of women of colour. Her compelling analysis aligning heteronormativity and whitening with the project of modernity is accompanied by another set of concerns that address the problems that arise within communities of women of colour. The complexities of exile and diaspora make history a fragmented object that is recovered differently and perhaps acrimoniously in different communities. As a response to this, Alexander presents the notion of re-memory as a healing and spiritual alternative that links the past with the present and the proximate with the distant. It is in this context that the central motif of this collection, the middle passage, is grounded: "pedagogies that are derived from the Crossing fit neither easily nor neatly into those domains that have been imprisoned within modernity's secularized episteme" (Alexander 2005: 7). In other words, the event and experience of the middle passage persists in the present, throughout the project of modernity and disrupts its tidy categorizations and epistemological divisions.

Focusing on first- and second-generation African immigrants into Canada, *The African Diaspora in Canada* is a collection of essays that explores empirically and conceptually the complex and heterogeneous processes of identity formation among recent immigrants and refugees. *The African Diaspora* looks at various

issues that go into identity formation like the editors Wisdom J. Tettey and Korbla P. Puplampu's two essays: one on the relationship between the formal (state level) and the day-to-day (experiential) negotiations of ethnic identity, and the other comparing the contemporaneous peripheralization of black immigrants to migration in the 1960s. *The African Diaspora* also looks at issues of curriculum development and cultural exclusion (in an article by Henry M. Codjoe and George S. Dei), manifestations of discrimination in the workplace and instances of underemployment of women and immigrants with credentials outside of Canada (Samuel A. Laryea, John E. Hayfron and Adenike O. Yesufu). The central concern of this collection of essays is more spatial than temporal, focusing on what the editors call "translocal positionality." In other words they look at how distance from the homeland creates both continuities and discontinuities in the definition of culture and self and the shifting terrain of what constitutes the local:

The spatio-psychological fluidity that accompanies these interactions suggests that, far from being disassociated from their places of origin, diaspora communities need to be seen as constantly evolving communities ... not only in the context of their host societies but in relation to their societies of origin. (Tettey and Puplampu 2005: 17-18)

Though aligned in their interest in the African diaspora, each of these three texts responds to different fields and conversations. For example, Alexander describes the problematics of community-building, organizing within the academy and in sites of struggle, the necessity of a feminist and anti-heterosexist analysis of the operation of capitalism. At the centre of this project and discourse is the privileging of embodiment and a materialist analysis as a pedagogical and situated response to the violent erasures of transnational capital.

Tettey and Puplampu's collection pays equal attention to the problem of the material, accessed through both qualitative and quantitative data. The aim of the work is at the level of the quotidian: to focus on the complexities of day-to-day identity formations within the African diaspora. Consequently, unlike Alexander's analysis that calls into question the very structure of the state, Tettey and Puplampu argue that

[t]he chapters not only provide a critical examination of the Canadian state's role in determining the conditions of entry of continental Black Africans and other immigrant groups; they offer ideas on how to make that role enabling, rather than constraining, for these groups. (20)

This difference in focus mediates rather than questions the relationship between the state and the migrant. However, discussions such as Martha Kumsa's study of Oromo youth that used focus group research to describe different negotiations with racism and identity is an example of the subtle insights that can come

from this focus, highlighting shifting tactics of negotiating racialized identities, histories and tactical belonging.

Finally, Baucom's *Specters of the Atlantic* argues that the Zong massacre is at least as pivotal an event as the French Revolution in the development of modernity. To this end he applies the work of Kant, Badiou and Žižek to account for the shift generated by the Zong in which a new kind of event and a new kind of subject-witness was created. Baucom's project is largely epistemological, arguing for the centrality of the trans-Atlantic slave trade within the Western imaginary and the global economy, and its proximity to the basic operation of imperial management and finance capital. Baucom recalibrates Giovanni Arrighi's description of different historical cycles of capital accumulation and flow. According to Arrighi, each cycle is characterized by an initial period of circulating capital (M), an accumulation of commodities (C), leading to a return to a period of augmented circulation (M'). The transition between these cycles Baucom states, is characterized by what he calls a "flight of capital" from one financial centre to another, at the peak of the ascendancy of finance capital (represented as M-M') (Baucom 2006: 26-30).

According to Baucom, Arrighi's characterization of the contemporary period (British and U.S. cycles of hegemony) dating from the 18th to the 20th centuries needs a fundamental reconfiguration in light of trans-Atlantic slavery. The epistemological, moral and economic premises enabling and justifying the massacre aboard the Zong are paradigmatic of the long 20th century. More specifically, the Zong tragedy marks the successful abstraction and absorption of the slaves' bodies by the quantifying impulses of capital. As an example, Baucom describes the minutiae of imperial management in the form of The Lord Commissioner of the Admiralty's 1783 ledger documenting the compensations for injured naval workers and pensions for their widows. The ledger reads as a macabre compendium of injured bodies and severed body parts, each accompanied by a monetary value. To Baucom, this ledger speaks to the victory of imperialist micromanagement or "monetizing anatomization of the body ... over an embodied knowledge of history, of something like double entry bookkeeping" (Baucom 2006: 7). Baucom states that the successful translation of these body parts into precise amounts of monetary compensation is a "grotesque parody" of the epistemological and moral premises that led to the Zong massacre and, consequently, within the imperialist imaginary there is a denial of the link between the two. Yet it is the former method that enables the erasure of the embodiment of the slaves in the latter instance.

In this formulation, a key question that remains somewhat nebulous is, what becomes of these bodies after this erasure? Not at the level of testimony or of a project trying to recover the humanity that is lost in this archive and epistemology, but rather, what does finance capital do after it segments these bodies into items of exchange value? What reifying practices does capital use to deal with the messy reality of these bodies? A hint that perhaps Baucom is bypassing this important

proviso is twofold. The first is the agency he confers to finance capital when he speaks of its “flight.” The use of this term is complicit with the language of reification: for it is never capital that takes flight or has movement, it only has this dashing appearance when the real wheel-turners—labour—are not factored into the account. Finance capital does not fly from economic centre to burgeoning metropolis: it is the product of fundamental shifts in and of labour and conditions of production, a factor that cannot be elided, especially when looking at the middle passage.

Second, although Baucom indeed does mention the problematic emphasis on demand in Eric Williams’s configuration of the triangular trade (Baucom 2006: 52) he neglects to take a significant aspect of Williams’s work into account: his description of the actual circulation of goods, rather than of capital, within the very same period that he posits the peak of “high finance” at the time of the Zong massacre. Within the Atlantic economy there was a complicated exchange of slaves and goods, not of money, that implicated England, the West coast of Africa and the Americas. Such a circuit would be better described as C-C’. The adaptation of Arrighi’s model is compelling, but fails to account for what is happening outside the swirl of high finance or take into account the circuits of the Atlantic *economy* when privileging Atlantic ethics and epistemics.

A possible route toward thinking about embodiment in this context requires a move away from the abstraction of bodies into the discourse of capitalism, toward the control of real bodies in the production of capital. This perspective resonates with Laura Brown’s description of the ascendance of the fable in the 18th century as a coalescence of the anxieties and hopes of a period where the fable was at once textual and a manifestation of reified knowledges. Brown configures the fable as an ideological subtension of collective anxieties and hopes that (unlike ideology) form thematic threads across texts. One example is the prevalence of the figure of “Lady Credit.” Brown points out how high finance is figured as female, where capriciousness and hysteria are both used to anthropomorphize finance capital and as a lens with which to control and conceive of women at the time:

The potent, changeable Lady who dominates the feminized representation of modern finance in the early eighteenth century... takes many forms—sister, mistress, bride, wife, mother, whore, goddess, creator; she is an object of desire and revulsion, of transport and despair; her character and her fate implicate contemporary attitudes towards virtue, society, culture, aesthetics and history; and her narrative describes the threat of change and the potency of creation. All these meanings have their point of reference in the female *body*. (Brown 2001: 97, emphasis added)

This return to the body moves in the opposite direction from abstracting tendencies of finance capitalism. This matches the direction of Alexander’s approach to periodization and disciplinary violence. Alexander draws links between

the traditionally separated epochs of colonialism, neo-colonialism and neo-imperialism. She argues that, rather than seeing them as succeeding eras in the progression of a linear history, these three epochs should be examined in their common strategy of positing modernity as necessarily violent. The inevitability of the violence of these three eras arises out of the invisibility of heterosexist violence that disciplines and segregates errant bodies.

Alexander contends that the privileging of a linear conception of history justifies the positing of distance, both temporal and cultural. Consequently, in her cyclical histories of colonialism, neo-colonialism and neo-imperialism, Alexander attempts to highlight the “ideological traffic” between them and argue for their inextricability:

Bringing neo-colonialism into ideological proximity with neo-imperialism has made visible the different ways in which ideologies and practices traffic within the two spheres, making visible, as well, the different investments in the simultaneous mobilization of tradition and modernity, not as fixed constructs, but as profitable political currency. (2005: 246)

In this context Alexander draws comparisons between Balboa’s massacre of cross-dressing soldiers in Quarequa, Panama in 1513, the debates over sexual preference in the U.S. military in the 1990s, morality laws in Trinidad and Tobago, the 1996 Defence of Marriage Act and the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (to name a few) to describe how some forms of violence serve the interest of the state by inventing types of subjects like the patriot and the welfare queen.

Alexander links what she calls heterosexualization to globalization, neo-colonial and neo-imperial state management. This is manifest in the expropriation of land and the defining of good citizenship (and consequently of national boundaries), by rewarding the heterosexual family structure and hierarchies of race, gender and class and penalizing their antitheses through specific laws and sanctions. In other words, defining and creating boundaries that control errant bodies and errant actions, creates national and transnational spheres of hegemony, where the control of bodies is central to the functioning of the ideology of the state.

The multifaceted control of bodies makes the ground level negotiation of identity multifaceted. As Kumsa explores in her essay on Oromo youth in *The African Diaspora*, the notion of belonging is a situational and contextual self-categorization that is constantly shifting—as Black, as Canadian, as Oromo. Following her focus group studies, Kumsa found that these identities were instrumental, for example privileging citizenship over nationalism. However these identities are not arbitrary. Rather they follow from the complex intermingling between the present and the past:

...the past is deeply ingrained in the rolling present and anticipated future. Not only the discontinuities of the refugee facet, but also the continuities of the slave facet of African globalization, shape their negotiation of belonging ... as they negotiate be-longing in the interface of diasporization and globalization, territorialization and deterritorialization, placement and displacement.... This accounts for the ghostly return of the slave in the everyday racialization of their belonging. (Kumsa in Tettey and Puplampu 2005: 196)

This interpenetration between past and present is what gives the three texts under review a common ground, where what persists is the lack of stability of the identity of the subject of diaspora whose constitution shifts with the colonialist imperatives of the imperialist state. At the centre of these texts is the problem of how movement is effected between state-level imperial management and the bodies it attempts to control on the one hand; and the bodies that resist absorption into the abstracting tendencies of finance capital and imperial control on the other. As Alexander states in her discussion on her choice of her book's title:

Since the central metaphor of this book rests on the tidal currents of the middle passage, we should want to know why and how this passage—The Crossing—emerged as signifier. If here I am concerned with embodied power, with the power derived from the will to domination, I am simultaneously concerned with the power of the disembodied and the stories that those who forcibly undertook the Middle Passage are still yearning to tell, five centuries later. (Alexander 2005: 6)

It is necessary, perhaps, that such stories extend over several disciplines and languages, as the span of trans Atlantic slavery ranges from present permutations of aggrandizing state policy, to the intensified liquification of localities and labouring bodies in the service of capital, and to the erasures enforced by the state above and the resisting bodies that stubbornly remain below.

References:

Brown, Laura. 2001. *Fables of Modernity: Literature and Culture in the English Eighteenth Century*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.