

REVIEW: *African Diasporas: Ancestors, Migrations and Boundaries*. Robert Cancel and Winifred Woodhull, eds. *African Literature Association Annual Series*: 14. Ousseynou B. Traore, General Editor. (New Jersey and Eritrea: Africa World Press, Inc. 2008) PB \$34.95.

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Robert Cancel and Winifred Woodhull's edited collection *African Diasporas: Ancestors, Migrations, and Boundaries*, a compendium of presentations given at the 2002 African Literature Association conference, is rich in breadth, voice, and methodological variation, but uneven in quality, intellectual and theoretical sophistication, and editing. Aside from the extensive proofreading errors, the larger editorial issues are to do with the selection of essays in terms of tone, disciplinary orientation, and method. Additionally, three contributions are written in French without translation, which effectively forecloses access to 1/9 of the volume for those who cannot read French. This could certainly be a legitimate editorial choice, particularly given the field of African literary study which encompasses Angolophone, Francophone, and Lusophone texts, in addition to those written in local African languages; however, the decision is not situated by the Editors in terms of a particular position on translation and comparative or scholarly method, and other essays in the volume (for instance, Alain P. Ngangang's piece on French colonial cinema) quote extensively from French texts but also provide English translations.

The volume is divided into four sections: Reflections on Diaspora; Local African Sensibilities Reaching a Global Community; Racial and Intercultural Dynamics in Subject-Formation and Social Relations; and Rethinking Religion and Politics in Africa Today, for a total of 27 essays. The essays are diverse in form and method, including personal reflective narrative, literary criticism, archival research, theoretical reflection, field research, and reception studies, and the topics are equally varied. For this reason, the section headings feel somewhat arbitrary—particularly the first section, in which “Reflections on Diaspora” runs the risk of being a catch-all—and if one reads the book from cover to cover the experience is dizzying. This impression could easily have been avoided by including brief section Introductions that would articulate theoretical

underpinnings for the theme and its selected essays as well as how those essays contribute to building that theme.

This issue becomes more problematic given the complexity of “diasporic studies,” and of the volume as situated within that field. The fact that these essays were presented at one meeting of the African Literature Association organized around that theme does not provide enough glue to make this a coherent contribution to a vast field; rather, the Introduction might have situated the volume historically and theoretically, and within existing debates in the field. What, for instance, is the relationship between the postcolonial and the diasporic? Between the diasporic and the global? Between the global and the postcolonial? Some authors use the terms nearly interchangeably, glossing the profound political, historiographic, and theoretical differences among them. Or, then, how might the editors situate the volume within longstanding debates that consider the salutary effects v. the material deprivations and/or discriminations attending the experience of migration, of diasporic living? The Introduction by Winifred Woodhull, essentially an annotated list of the essays in the volume, misses the opportunity to offer a theoretical and/or historical statement about the field and the place of the volume in it.

Still, there is some powerful work represented in the collection. The strongest contributions are those that take up issues of identity and identity formation in the context of diaspora with special attention to the mediating role of culture—such as Mary Jane Androne’s reflections on Julie Dash’s *Daughters of the Dust*; Aaron C. Eastley’s reading of character names in Derek Walcott’s *Omeros*; Ben B. Halm’s study of relations among Africans and members of the diaspora; and Jonathan Eccard’s analysis of Ben Okri’s work in relation to various African historiographies.

Both Eastley and Halm resist essential ideas of identity—particularly of originary African identity—in diasporic cultural formations. Eastley’s reading of Walcott’s *Omeros* theorizes the creation of a hybrid identity as original, new, authentic in a way that has yet to be fully recognized, at the same time showing how attempts by Caribbean subjects to (re)claim an originary African identity would be as objectionable as the internalization of a colonialist British one. Eastley’s thoughtful attention to reciprocity in the construction of identities in the new global landscape shows how diasporic groups will help to invent that new landscape in tandem with “natives,” and how the literary and cultural texts of both “home” and “host” will participate in that construction. Inasmuch as it

illuminates the power of syncretic identities within “the regimes of multiplicity which are increasingly the global condition” (79), Eastley’s essay comments on the important issue that the editors suggest is one new line of inquiry identified by the volume as a whole: “to address the inequalities perpetuated or spawned by economic globalization, and the ways in which various modes of cultural expression do or do not rise to the task of challenging those inequalities” (4).

Ben B. Halm concludes his essay about alienation among Africans and members of the diaspora on the same note, addressing globalization as a material proposition marked by uneven distribution and arguing (provocatively) that too many African people today are “slaves to commodities, market economy, technology and cybernetics, and to the conjunctive fantasy called globalization, that beast lumbering toward points between Accra and Cairo ‘to be born’” (141). While certain to invite strong responses, Halm’s essay is clear-eyed and well supported, asserting refreshingly bold claims about alienation among African people occupying a variety of positions on the continent and in the diaspora that reminds one of the best work of writers such as Caryl Phillips. For Halm, as for Eastley, progress out of paralyzing binary identities (native and returnee or diasporic) will also be reached through the realm of culture, “reorienting African mind and imagination (the basis of all culture) so as to create a personality that is more attuned to present circumstances without being enslaved by them” (141).

Another penetrating interrogation of authentic notions of African identity in the diasporic context can be found in Orathai Northern’s stunning reading of diasporic operations and connections in what she calls the “recent explosion of popular photo essays, video documentaries, how-to books, and multi-media collections by scholars, cultural critics, artists, and historians dedicated to black hair” (276). In addition to the incisive commentary about the textual materials in question, Northern’s is one of the few essays in the volume that truly seeks to *theorize* diaspora, to interrogate critical assumptions and warrants about the concept, in her case by deftly weaving theories of diaspora (James Clifford) with ideas about representation (Kirschenblatt-Gimblett) into her own reading of multiple visual texts.

Other strengths in the volume include essays that investigate genre and history, such as Alain P. Nganang’s careful study of French colonial films and their images of travel and movement, in which, rather than analyzing them as historical representations, Nganang situates the films within the genre “travelogue,” deftly showing how they inscribe while also obscuring colonial

power relations. Readers stand to learn a great deal about language, poetic genre, scripture, and translation from Philip A. Noss on Kiswahili Tenzi verse translations of the Bible; about the centrality of cultural and spiritual texts to the progressive Sudanese Republican Movement led by Mahmoud Mohammed Taha in a robust contribution by W. Stephen Howard; and about reception to Zimbabwean film in Katrina Daly Thompson's painstaking study of viewer response to two films launching the industry in that country.

In his essay "Ngugi's 'epistemological break' & Sacred scripture Translation in African Languages: Two Sides of the Same Coin," Aloo Osostis Mojola advances a well-argued, strongly grounded claim about the paradox at the crossroads of Ngugi wa Thiong'o's ideas about language and translation, on the one hand, and about Christianity as an imperial force, on the other. Mojola points out how Ngugi's commitment to writing in Gikuyu and to resisting the Englishization of the world as a matter of anti-colonial principle might be balanced by a deeper understanding of the role of Christian missionaries in translating the Bible into local African languages, an activity that throws into relief the many national governments who do not support literature, publishing, and teaching in such languages. As Mojola points out, "It is...no exaggeration to state that the Bible Societies and partner agencies are on the forefront of developing and promoting literacy and writing in local African languages" (370). What's more, as he notes, "It is an open secret that many of the leading voices, intellectuals, pioneers and opinion leaders in present-day key African institutions were graduates and beneficiaries of African missionary institutions, among these are those who would express the most inimical opposition and unfriendly criticism of these very institutions and the faith which motivated them" (366). In other words, sometimes the master's tools *can* dismantle the master's house, and perhaps the very idea of "master's tools" v. "authentic," local, native ones gives short shrift to the nuance of human histories and interactions. Mojola's thoroughly researched and historicized contribution illuminates the ironies of the ideological positions of many postcolonial thinkers and writers in terms of the politics of language, religion, and imperialism. It comes, then, as rather a surprise that the essay concludes with the essentialist Christian statement that, "Languages were given to us by our Creator and contribute to our being human" (372). When Mojola goes on to attribute "the destruction of linguistic diversity and pluralism" to "the marauding amoral forces of globalization," one cannot help but wonder where the complexity and nuance he encourages with regard to

Ngugi's contradictory ideological positions has gone.

Similar puzzles regarding voice and disciplinary orientation abound in the volume. For instance, Teresa N. Washington's otherwise deeply illuminating genealogy of the cultural retention of African spiritual practices and philosophies across time and place in spite of radically oppressive circumstances is compromised by claims that myths, legends, and cosmologies of flight are empirically "true." Statements like "Physical flight was not undertaken in secret and was not exclusive to any one group or region" are offered with no further development or explanation, aside from a well-earned disclaimer that they may seem more like science fiction than truth (45). Even the most receptive reader may find it difficult to accept the claim that "Far from engaging in slight [sic] of hand...spirit workers simply have greater capacity than others to harness natural and cosmic forces" (49).

Such assertions are made more problematic by the juxtaposition of Washington's work with the next essay in the volume, on Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust*, in which Mary Jane Androne also discusses the flight legend transported from Africa to America, but shows how Dash negates the legend by replacing it with the "second, *historically accurate* version" (64; emphasis added) recounted in the film by a slave brought from Sudan: "Some say the Ibo flew back home to Africa Some say they all joined hands and walked on top of the water But, Mister, I was there Those Ibo, men, women, and children, a hundred or more, shackled in iron...when they went down in that water, they never came up Ain't nobody can walk on water" (qtd. in Androne 64).

It could be argued that the juxtaposition of these two essays represents a useful tension between differing viewpoints; however, without deeper grounding in disciplinary perspectives and research that would support the claims in Washington's piece in particular, the reader may be left simply feeling the indecipherability of the contradiction Drawing attention to and highlighting such contradictions as productive scholarly tensions, rather than as aporias of knowledge production (particularly for potential student readers), is precisely the kind of work that a more fully developed Introduction could have done

Such issues point back to choices of selection, organization, and commentary by the Editors, choices that at times are nearly unfathomable The lead article in the important third section on "Racial and Intercultural Dynamics," for instance, is so full of generalizations and sarcasm that it becomes difficult to read Susan Arndt's "You are not born White, you become

White. Conceptions of Whiteness and Africa in German Society and Literature” asserts, for instance, that, “Germans cling to their stereotypes of Africa as if someone were trying to take away their favorite toy” (236) Innovation in tone and level of formality in an academic essay is one thing; however, mockery and derision are quite another, and the generalization about “Germans” is as egregious as any of the racisms that Arndt accuses “Germans” of perpetrating Arndt goes on,

This [clinging to stereotypes] may be one explanation for the fact that few Germans have ever read a book by an African author, while Africa-books by White Germans or Swiss writers are to be found on the bestseller list. Obviously, there is an interest in Africa, but being afraid of texts which might challenge their conceptions of Africa; Germans prefer to satisfy it through the eyes of White authors who confirm their own images of Africa. (236)

While there may be “truthiness” in the claims that German people (or Europeans more generally? Or Americans? Or white people?) have difficulty facing their own racisms, is the claim that “few Germans have ever read a book by an African author” empirically defensible? In order even to attempt such a claim, studies of book sales, reading lists, book clubs, curricula and much more would have to be undertaken in earnest. Can the author base legitimate assertions about what “Germans” prefer, or about what Germans’ “own images” of Africa are, upon an analysis of two bestsellers about white women engaging with black people in Africa These queries do not yet approach the problematic assumptions about race and nationality in the article (what about black Germans Or white Africans?), which would greatly benefit from engaging with the complex body of scholarly work on whiteness, or on the non-monolithic, constructed nature of race more generally.

The problem of tone in this essay is echoed in other essays throughout the volume, such as Matthew Snyder’s report on “Franz Fanon’s Sister-Bashing in the Marriage Masque.” The essay’s attention to textual and archival research on Fanon and Mayotte Capécia is significant; however, its gifts are compromised by the consistently flippant tone, particularly with regard to feminism. Snyder reveals gender bias in statements such as “It’s difficult to labor with reason under the rifled assault of feminist hyperbole, when it is more than fashionable to lay claim to a certain mode of sheep think” (265) Aside from the stereotypical attribution of a kind of violence (rhetorical or otherwise) to feminism, Snyder

also replicates the longstanding attribution of the ability to reason to men and the lack thereof to women, who inevitably fall prey to the hyperbolic hysteria that is feminism. Whatever virtue there is in Snyder's reading of Fanon's work and that of Mayotte Capécia, the "sister" Fanon most famously "bashes" in *Black Skin White Masks*, it is undercut by a tone that, perhaps meant to be informal, conversational, engaging, or creative, simply reads as pugnacious.

In the end, encountering *African Diasporas* is, like most things in life, a matter of expectations. In this case, the reader may best use the volume as a particular kind of research tool. Rather than encountering a cohesive volume that pushes the field of diasporic studies to a new level of theoretical and historical depth, one must instead engage with essays on the subject of interest and then, in some cases, read with considerable discernment.