
After decades of research and debates on the history of slavery and the slave trade and on the cultural links between Africa and the Americas, and fruitful theoretical developments on memory, remembrance, the invention of traditions, and public history, the time was ripe for a discussion on the public memory of slavery. Ana Lucia Araujo, Associate Professor of History at Howard University, chose Brazil and Benin to demonstrate the potential of the topic.

The theme is developed in broad terms and in long descriptive sections. The first chapter is dedicated to an overview of the Atlantic slave trade and slavery in the Americas. However, the ambition to cover such complex and frequently renovated fields resulted in simplification and failure to connect to the theme of the book. The second chapter deals with the emergence of memory of the slave trade and slavery by surveying the intellectual and social movements against racism and the initiatives to memorialize the past in the twentieth century. Some commonplace statements are mixed in with interesting insights. The discussion of the use of Gorée island as a “lieu de mémoire” explores quite well the contradiction between its relative insignificance during the slave trade and the attention it receives now. One complex question is missed: why did communist regimes in Africa choose to ignore race and slavery in their otherwise elaborate public memory construction? At this point, readers will realize that the questions driving the book emerge largely from the Anglophone debate on race and fail to take into account local—Beninese, Brazilian—perspectives that would render the discussion more complex and authentic. The third chapter surveys the historical links between the Gulf of Benin and Bahia using largely secondary sources. The result is uneven, heavy on descriptions, and light on interpretation. Little space is devoted to the migration of freedpersons back to Africa, a subject that is central to the connection between the two regions under study.

In the fourth chapter the theme of public memory takes center stage. Araujo focuses on the memorialization of slavery and the slave trade in Benin in the 1990s by recounting the local efforts to create events and spaces that could appeal to individuals from the diaspora and thus benefit
the tourism industry. She highlights the tensions between the interpretations advanced by UNESCO and those advanced by public memory initiatives in Benin. The “perpetrators” (as Araújo calls the descendants of the slave traders) and the “victims” (the descendants of the enslaved) are not at ease dwelling on the history of the slave trade and slavery. Both groups prefer to emphasize general cultural connections to the people of the diaspora. The reasons for that, central to the issue of public memory, remain undiscussed. Rich descriptions of the museography of the Ouidah Museum of History, located at the old Portuguese fort, and the Slave Route Memorial in Ouidah are among the highlights of the book. Yet one begs for more analysis of the choices made by the people responsible for those initiatives. The Brazilian parallel promised in Chapter 5 is left unfulfilled: after surveying the abolition of Brazilian slavery and the antidiscrimination initiatives of the twentieth century, Araujo reduces the manifestations of public memory of slavery in Brazil to Rio de Janeiro Carnival, soap operas, and a few public monuments and museum collections. To be consistent, a detailed treatment of Bahia would have been in order, since that region’s links to Benin are addressed throughout the book. But if it were to treat Brazil as a whole, why shouldn’t the Museu AfroBrasil in São Paulo receive the same attention as the one in Ouidah? Considering its extensive collection and professionally organized displays on the slave trade, slavery, and “contributions” of African descendants to Brazilian society, there is no reason for leaving it out.

The last two chapters, dealing with the way three élite Beninese families have dealt with the memory of the slave trade, move from overviews and general impressions to the stuff public memory is made of: people and the mementos they gather or create and expose, and the power relations involved. The renewed power of Francisco Felix de Souza, the slave trader who enjoyed benefits from his close relations to the Dahomean king, and the constructed power of the Vieyra and da Silva families, built on their returnee status, are truly remarkable. Pierre Verger, Michael Turner, Manuela Carneiro da Cunha, and Milton Guran, among others, have written about them. Araujo contributes to this scholarship a discussion of the artifacts, the cults of remembrance, and the public spaces the descendants of “perpetrators” and “victims” created, both for their own internal politics and responding to an external demand.

Without clearly acknowledging it, the book highlights “the making of Afro-diasporic heritage,” a counterdiscourse to a Eurocentric perspective