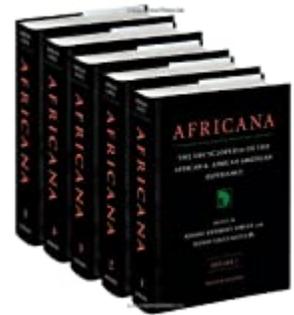


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Kwame Anthony Appiah, Henry Louis Gates Jr., eds. *Africana: The Encyclopedia of the African and African American Experience*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005. xxviii + 3900 pages. No price listed (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-517055-9.



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A Feast for Scholars

In over three decades of reviewing books and manuscripts, this is the first time I have considered thanking an editor for giving me an assignment. This lavishly illustrated, capacious multi-volume encyclopedia of all things African ineluctably inspires such praise.

Of course, like any ambitious project, it is far from flawless. However, in completing the vision that brought the African-American scholar W. E. B. Du Bois to Kwame Nkrumah's Ghana in 1961, the editors of these volumes merit not only the thanks of budding students but the congratulations of seasoned scholars as well.

Africana focuses mostly on individuals and, it must be said, these are mostly men. (Yes, this may not be the fault of the editors but a consequence of the course of history, but it is jarring nonetheless.) Still, the well-known Brazilian political figure, Benedita da Silva, wrote the entry on women of African descent in her South American homeland (v. 5, p. 439). Strikingly, the U.S. celebrity Andre Charles RuPaul, billed here as the "first openly gay cross-dresser," asserts: "when I'm dressed up as this goddess... people trip over themselves to give me things. But as an African American male, I can walk into an eleva-

tor and have people clutch their handbags" in fear (v. 4, p. 622). As so often occurs in these pages, this comment raises profound questions about the construction of race and gender, particularly masculinity.

The volumes range from the ancient to the present, though the past century receives the most attention. However, our species is not the exclusive topic to be found in these pages. There is also flora and fauna and more. "Some 180 species of gladiolus exist, mostly native to southern Africa" (v. 3, p. 2). "Giraffes have a keen sense of smell and hearing and an outstanding sense of sight" (v. 3, p. 1). Lions are "polygamous" (v. 3, p. 591).

There is a sizeable entry on the HIV-AIDS plague that has bedeviled peoples of African descent in particular. Like this informative entry, there are others that compel the reader to stop and reflect, including the assertion that 30 percent of the world's languages are spoken only in Africa (v. 3, p. 245).

There is also an expansive definition of who and what belongs in such a work. This is not an easy question; thus, some people in ancient Georgia "had black skin and

woolly hair” and could easily be mistaken as Africans (v. 4, p. 624). Similarly, there is an entry on Cheddi Jagan, former leader of Guyana (a nation in South America), who happened to be of South Asian origin (v. 3, p. 335). Intriguingly, the scholar Ali Mazrui writes that “Egyptians and Algerians are Africa’s children of the soil. Sub-Saharan blacks are Africa’s children of the blood” (v. 1, p. 51). Interestingly, in an excess of ecumenical thinking, former apartheid leader F. W. De Klerk receives a surprisingly non-judgmental entry despite the profound misery that characterized his misrule (v. 2, p. 352).

There is a conscientious effort to dispense with what are perceived to be myths. Thus, we are told that, contrary to popular belief, the first leader of independent Malawi, Hastings Banda, was not an “American imposter.” “Rumors have circulated that the real [Banda] died in the United States and that Malawi’s ruler was in fact an imposter, perhaps one Richard Armstrong, a roommate of Banda’s during medical school.” (Yes, “imposter/imposter” is spelled both ways on one page—which I do not think is some sort of semiotic or post-modern signal to the reader.) Because Banda’s “fluency” in his “native Nyanja” had “diminished,” this rumor was given credence (v. 1, p. 352).

Perhaps because Professor Gates is a well-known literary critic, there is considerable attention paid to creative writers. The entry on Peter Abrahams, the South African novelist—“son of an Ethiopian father and a mother of French and African descent”—is useful (v. 1, p. 16). The Nigerian poet and dramatist, John Pepper Clark, attended Princeton University, but left with bitterness over his unpleasant experience, described in detail in a memoir (v. 2, p. 113). The father of the Nigerian writer, Buchi Emecheta, was killed in Burma while fighting on behalf of Great Britain (v. 2, p. 536). The “first Anglophone novel published in Africa by a black African” was written by a Liberian, J. J. Walters (v. 2, p. 636). There are lengthy entries on the literature of Africa and the Diaspora.

Walters attended Oberlin College and there too hangs a tale. For, in reading these volumes, what jumps out at the reader is the number of prominent individuals included in these pages who attended this small Ohio college. This eminent and lengthy list also includes John Langaibalele Dube, the first president of what became the African National Congress of South Africa; the premature feminist Anna Julia Cooper, who was African American (v. 2, p. 229); Shirley Graham Du Bois, who became Director of the television network in Nkrumah’s

Ghana (v. 2, pp. 458-459); and the sculptress Edmonia Lewis, who like so many “African Americans” listed in these pages also was of Native American—or “Indian”—descent (v. 3, p. 563). Such origins and Oberlin ties also characterize the poet Georgia Johnson (v. 3, p. 382).

Another notable point that leaps from these pages is the number of entries devoted to those who toiled as sailors. Naturally, these volumes concern not only Africa but the considerable Diaspora in the Americas and it is easy to speculate that this sense of displacement—not to mention the horrendous oppression endured by these “Americans”—compelled many to look elsewhere for contentment, which led them to sailing ships. This list includes Joseph Ranger, a key participant in the revolution that overthrew British rule in North America (v. 4, pp. 514). It also includes James Forten, another eighteenth-century African American who initially supported the idea of repatriating his fellow Africans in the Western Hemisphere to Sierra Leone (v. 2, p. 687). Nor should we neglect to note the Cuban national hero, Jose Q. Banderas y Betancourt, who too was a sailor (v. 1, p. 353). The importance of sailors comes up in interesting ways. For example, the contemporary South African pianist, Abdullah Ibrahim, acquired his moniker, “Dollar Brand,” because of his penchant as a youth for carrying this U.S. currency, so he could more readily purchase music albums from visiting sailors (v. 3, p. 279). Unfortunately, there is no entry for Ferdinand Smith, who was born in Jamaica and migrated to the United States, where he became a powerful and influential trade union leader as second in command of the National Maritime Union. He was later deported to his Caribbean homeland, due to his membership in the Communist Party (as the Cold War was unfolding), where he then became heavily involved in the struggle against British colonialism.

Consideration of the pivotal role played by sailors also adumbrates another point that is easy to infer from these volumes: the movement of peoples of African descent, particularly in the wake of one of the largest displacements in world history, namely the unlamented African Slave Trade. Jean Jacques Dessalines, the hero of the Haitian Revolution that sent shockwaves across the planet, was born in Haiti of Congolese parents (v. 2, p. 367). Boukman, a principal instigator of the Haitian revolution, was born in Jamaica (v. 1, p. 591). John Chilembwe, who spearheaded a revolt in Malawi that was of similar significance, studied at the Virginia Theological College in the United States (v. 2, p. 61). The Ethiopian actor, Tesfaye Gessesse, was trained at Northwestern University in the United States (v. 2, p. 567).

Edward Blyden, progenitor of Pan-Africanism, was born in the Virgin Islands, and then resided in Venezuela before spending decades in Liberia and Sierra Leone (v. 1, p. 556). The South African patriot, Albert Luthuli, was born in what is now Zimbabwe (v. 3, p. 662). The pre- and post-revolutionary hero of Cuba, Antonio Maceo, lived for years in Costa Rica, while his father was Venezuelan (v. 3, p. 670). Joseph Merrick, who saved souls in Cameroon, was born in Jamaica (v. 3, p. 803). George McGuire, who was born in Antigua, saved souls in the United States (v. 3, p. 783). The Kenya writer, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, has lived for years in the United States and taught for a while at Northwestern University, which, like Oberlin, has done yeoman service in educating people of African descent (v. 4, p. 225). Kwame Nkrumah studied at Lincoln University in Pennsylvania, an institution founded to educate U.S. Negroes, which like so many of its counterparts, went on to educate legions of Africans (v. 4, p. 246). The great African-American actor, Ira Aldridge, who studied in Glasgow, died in 1867 in Poland, where he is buried (v. 1, p. 154). The African American, Luis Pacheco, evidently fought with the Seminole Nation in their lengthy conflict with the U.S. government in Florida (v. 4, p. 311). (Interestingly, a significant number of the prominent African Americans in these pages were also of Native American-or "Indian"-descent.) Troops from Haiti helped overthrow colonial governments in South America, which was an analogue of the heroic Cuban troops who helped to bring down the rule of apartheid South Africa in Namibia (v. 1, p. 517). This crossing of borders is also reflected in creative writing. Abdulai Sila, Guinea-Bissau's first native-born novelist, had an African-American protagonist in his first novel (v. 3, p. 622).

At the same time, these volumes also allow for the tracing of continuities. Samory Toure, who fought valiantly against encroaching French colonialists more than a century ago, was also the "great-grandfather of Sekou Toure, the first president of modern Guinea" (v. 4, p. 670).

Africana also stands up rather well when grappling with the controversial issues that inevitably attach when writing about the planet's poorest continent. Though it is deemed heresy to acknowledge so in the North Atlantic, Ali Mazrui writes candidly that "the former members of the Warsaw Pact as a socialist voting bloc used to be on the side of African aspirations on most issues in international forums. The end of the Cold War has deprived Africa of major socialist allies in world affairs" (v. 1, pp. 48-49). Later we are informed that "no other country of-

ferred blacks such opportunities," as did the former Soviet Union (v. 4, p. 626).

On the other hand, some readers may quarrel with other assertions. Reflecting a line that has been quite common in Washington, *Africana* says of Eritrean leader Issaias Afwerki: "since assuming office, he has been widely praised for his pragmatism and modesty, and for maintaining a regime free of corruption. Like Rwanda's Paul Kagame, Uganda's Yoweri Museveni and Ethiopia's Meles Zenawi, Afwerki belongs to what has been called Africa's 'new generation' of leaders" (v. 1, p. 136). Currently Eritrea is bogged down in a bloody border conflict with neighboring Ethiopia, an extended episode that has tarnished the reputation of both leaders, but whose seeds were evident when these misleading words were published. Ethiopia's leadership is under siege by its own citizenry in the capital, Addis Ababa. Uganda's leader has jailed his major opponent, yet he too is accorded undue praise (v. 4, p. 116).

Notably, Kagame studied at Fort Leavenworth, in the United States, as did Sudanese leader, Gaafar Muhammad al-Nimeiry (v. 3, p. 426; v. 4, p. 243), which suggests that an entry on the United States and Africa would be welcome in a third edition of this encyclopedia.

There are also questionable assertions. For example, why is the Pan-Africanist Congress considered to be "more radical" than its South African counterpart, the African National Congress (v. 4, p. 332)? Moreover, it is simply not accurate to assert that Cuba abandoned the tiny island of Grenada before 1983 (v. 3, p. 73). Nor is it accurate to say that both Cheddi Jagan and Forbes Burnham of Guyana were "elites who were isolated from the masses." Since both were elected President and both were the dominant figures in this nation in the second half of the twentieth century, then what leader would the editors deem to be not "isolated from the masses" (v. 3, p. 109)?

These volumes often continue the unfortunate trend of providing an elastic conception of the "Black Power" era that was initiated in the United States in the 1960s. We are told: "these Anglophone Caribbean intellectual leaders of Black Power had their counterparts among politicians and writers such as Haitian novelist Jacques Roumain ... [and] Cuban poet Nicolas Guillen" (v. 1, p. 523). There has been a tendency in the Western Hemisphere to re-define retrospectively any expressions of militancy, by any people of African descent, as somehow reflective of "Black Power," which during its heyday had a very particular meaning that certainly was not intended

to encompass Communists like Roumain and Guillen.

Balance is also an issue in this encyclopedia. Why so much attention to the Pare of Tanzania, only three hundred thousand strong, who receive almost a full page (v. 4, p. 343)? Yet the Manyika of Zimbabwe and Mozambique with a population of almost a million get two sentences—though the latter ethnic group has played a huge role in African history (v. 3, p. 724)? Why no entries for Ben Davis Jr., the Harvard trained lawyer who was the first African-American Communist to be elected to office, nor his father, Ben Davis Sr., who was a top leader of the Republican Party? This would be easier to accept but for the lengthy entry on the contemporary singing group, the Pointer Sisters, whose sell-by date has long since expired (v. 4, p. 409). Why is the entry for an editor, Gates, comparable in length to that of Jamaica's Marcus Garvey, one of the few in these volumes who had true transnational reach (v. 2, pp. 770, 767-768)? The entry for Garvey should be considerably longer.

Then there are the errors. The bibliographic entry for the militant Communist James Ford is instead grouped with the entry for the moderate U.S. Congressman Harold Ford—which no doubt is causing the latter a severe case of apoplexy (v. 2, p. 681). Charles Rangel is listed as “legal council,” instead of “counsel” (v. 4, p. 513). The actor Ossie Davis is wrongly listed as performing in the movie, *Green Pastures* (v. 3, p. 62). Why is there

no illustration when readers are informed that certain Ethiopian “craftsmen ... created a style unknown elsewhere in the country” (v. 3, p. 15)?

Somehow, a number of prominent U.S. nationals—the actor Samuel L. Jackson; the scholar Shirley Ann Jackson; and the member of Congress, Sheila Jackson-Lee—are placed in the wrong volume (v. 1, pp. 333-334). Cynics may complain that this is just further evidence of the preponderance of African Americans in these pages, that there are so many included that inevitably they were misplaced. To be sure, this may not be unalloyed cynicism. Influential South Africans like Jacob Zuma—not to mention Ethiopians and Nigerians too numerous to mention—are nowhere to be found in these pages, while virtually every minor African-American politician and celebrity one can imagine receives extensive treatment. Typically, Muhammad Ali, the African-American boxing champion gets his full due, but not Muhammad Ali, the great Egyptian leader whose impact may have been greater—with all due respect—than the fighter who carries his name.

Nevertheless, such qualms amount to quibbles when considering the grandness of this project. A U.S. foundation or a U.S. agency should seriously consider placing a set of this encyclopedia in every library in Africa and the Diaspora. The editors are to be congratulated for conceiving and producing volumes that amount to a major intellectual contribution.

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