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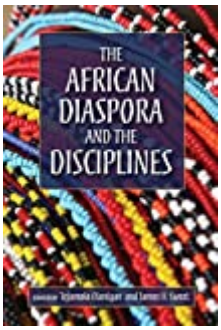

Tejumola Olaniyan, James H. Sweet, eds. *The African Diaspora and the Disciplines.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010. viii + 363 pp. $75.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-253-35464-8; $27.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-253-22191-9.

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Understanding the African Diaspora Across Disciplines

This book is a compilation of essays that stem from an international symposium, âAfrican Diaspora Studies and the Disciplines,â held at the University of Wisconsin-Madison in March 2006. This symposium was followed in 2008 by the University of Wisconsin-Madison Postcolonial, Migration and Transnational Studies (Part of Worldwide Universities Network International Network in Colonial and Postcolonial Studies) International Conference on Diaspora and Cosmopolitanism. In 2010, the same institution organized the âAfrican Diaspora, Genetics and Genealogy: A Symposium.â This alone shows the commitment to understanding the African diaspora by the host institution and its faculty. The present volume, then, represents an important attempt to define the African diaspora as an area of study using a multidisciplinary approach. The editors should be commended for this effort even though the approach, which lends itself to intradisciplinary complexity that can impede its objectives, should be seen as a work in progress.

The editors began with the proposition that little effort had been made to clearly situate, delineate, and reflect on the practice of African diaspora scholarship. This is a commendable effort meant to bring together varied perspectives on the same subject. To avert the somewhat inevitable separations that are likely to result from a multidisciplinary approach, the authors sought to have the essayists for this volume address the following five areas: the differentiation of the diaspora within their field, the methods used to study the diaspora, the controversies associated with studying the diaspora, any multidisciplinary approaches that are used, and discipline-specific impact by diaspora studies. With these criteria, what emerges is that slavery and colonization are the main running themes in much of what is discussed regardless of discipline. The varied disciplines that are included in this book include history, anthropology, biology, geography, archaeology, sociology, political science, philosophy, theater, music, and language. The varied citation standards used by the authors give the necessary allusion to the multidisciplinary nature of the work even if one does not focus entirely on the substantive matter that is addressed.

At the outset, Kim Butler puts forward the comprehensive definition of the âAfrican diasporaâ by Colin Palmer (1998), who stated that ââthe modern African diaspora, at its core, consists of the millions of peoples of African descent living in various societies who are united by a past based significantly but not exclusively upon âracialâ oppression and the struggles against it; and who, despite the cultural variations and political and other divisions among them, share an emotional bond with one another and with their ancestral continent; and who also, regardless of their location, face broadly similar problems in constructing and realizing themselves. This definition rejects the notion of a sustained desire to emigrate to Africa by those of its peoples who currently live outside of that continentâs boundariesââ (p. 31). Although there is a genuine attempt at the outset to define the diaspora, that definition remains ambiguous since the racial-ethnic issues are only marginally addressed. The editors point to the fact that the starting point is the African continent, and yet there is no discussion of those from the Maghreb and the rest of the North Africa region. There are reasons that are sometimes proffered for this oversight and they always seem to border on the idiosyncrasies that Western scholars are often criticized for having. Jayne Ifekwunigwe makes the very same argument when discussing the few intellectual contributions from Francophone Africa and African descendants situated in Europe.

Richard Price struggles with the origins and development of the African diaspora and what it means. It is remarkable that Price does not address the irony that in anthropology (his discipline) scholars consider the concept of race, in which the concept of the African diaspora is deeply rooted, to be an antiquated relic. This supposition is supported by the essay from biologists Fatima Jackson and Latifa Borgelin. They state that even with the specificity and positivistic nature of genetic data, heritage cannot simply be reduced to genotype.

These questions aside, there are episodic moments of real revelation in the essays. In a piece on how the history discipline engages the African diaspora, Butler makes the inference that the âAtlantic tradeâ was specifically referencing the Euro-American connection. It was only after the use of the term âAtlantic slave tradeâ that Africa was recognized as part of the enterprise. Judith Carney argues that the Atlantic presented Europeans with new opportunities for wealth. For enslaved Africans, of course, this was not the case. They faced a life of toil in lands that resembled those that they were forced to leave. Cheap labor is often the key factor in explaining the benefits of slavery, but Carneyâs explanation adds the notion that European settlers benefited from the tropical farming acumen of both Amerindian and African peoples. Robert Fatton Jr. presents a counterintuitive argument in political science in which he suggests that there is a general tendency to study separately issues pertaining to the African diaspora even though there is a recognition that diaspora politics cannot be dissociated from the Western world.

And yet, for all that these insights bring to the table, this work leaves one with a sense that it was meant to inform the academy and not engage the general public in a discourse about the viability of studying the African diaspora from a multidisciplinary perspective. There are pluses and minuses to this methodology. A major advantage of this method is that those already familiar with the subject matter can identify the gaps in knowledge that need to be addressed. A major disadvantage to this method is that, while the full promise of the multidisciplinary approach is only realized when scholars engage as many peers as possible in an area deemed important, sometimes when scholars insist on its relevance, they apply it too broadly. In some instances, the multidisciplinary approach is arguably not even necessary, as in the case of those fields in which the explanations have been universal, and demographic differences are already part of the discourse (biology and geography, for example). In other cases, where the effort is to situate a discipline in the double context of its development alongside the subject it examines, the essays can become laden with potentially obfuscating, discipline-specific terminology and arcane language, which can actually trap their meaning in intradisciplinary reflections and severely limit the audience for this sort of work.

Viewed from this latter standpoint, the least multidisciplinary essay in the book is by Grant Farred. The essay seeks to engage, as its title suggests, in âThinking Cultural Studies Diasporically.â Instead, it succeeds in presenting a dense essay that calls more attention to its linguistic complexity than the cross-disciplinary and cross-cultural worlds it seeks to examine. The following excerpt from the first sentence of the second part of the essay is a prime example of the approach: âThe traces of this unexpected disarticulation, this displacement of the discourse of dislocation from the familiar, the subaltern black body, to the unfamiliar, this rendering of the diaspora as âout of context,â is encountered most saliently in the fiction of white, diasporic African novelist J. M. Coetzeeâ (p. 268).

These reservations aside, what is apparent in this body of work is that it is difficult to tell the story of the African diaspora. However, this should not dissuade researchers. In the end, most of the essays raise the same issues: the viability of studying a complex diaspora as a single entity and the usefulness of creating this category in understanding discipline specific issues. The story is complex and its telling will no doubt prove equally so.

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