

# H-Net Reviews

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**Amanda Carlson, Robin Poynor, eds.** *Africa in Florida: Five Hundred Years of African Presence in the Sunshine State*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2013. 528 pp. \$79.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8130-4457-6.

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## Coming to Light: The Spiritual and Material Legacies of African Cultures in Florida

*Africa in Florida* is one of two University of Florida publications timed to coincide with the quincentenary of the arrival of the first Africans in Florida. The stimulus for the two ambitious publications is understandable, given the surprisingly early arrival date of 1513 and, importantly, the fact that the two Africans accompanying Ponce de Leon on this initial voyage to the new world were free men. The book under review, *Africa in Florida: Five Hundred Years of African Presence in the Sunshine State*, is edited by two art historians, Amanda B. Carlson (University of Hartford) and Robin Poynor (University of Florida). It originated in an exhibition curated in 2001 by Carlson and her University of South Florida studentsâ€œBehind the Mask: Africa in Tampa.â€ The twenty-three chapters in the anthology expand on this initial project and cover a wide range of visual and material cultures. The second publication, *Kongo Across the Waters* (2013) is the scholarly catalogue accompanying the exhibition of the same name organized by Susan Cooksey (curator of African art at the Harn Museum), Hein Vanhee (curator, Royal Museum of Central Africa, Tervuren, Belgium), and Robin Poynor. Although both books would seem to address the broad topic of the cultural influences of the African diasporas, *Africa in Florida* examines the complex and varied legacies of African culture in the state, whereas *Kongo Across the Waters* connects (West) African and (Southeastern) American histories and art. What initially appeared to me (as someone from the Northeast) as a rather marginal topic reveals it-

self instead to be so rich as to generate two substantial scholarly publications with very little overlap.

The sheer breadth of scholarly literature in this area is also somewhat unexpected. The bibliography in *Africa in Florida* runs to twenty-five pages, making clear that this topic has generated considerable academic investigation. Given its length, I would have appreciated its being organized by topic. Judging from the works cited in the essays, key contributions to the literature include Joseph M. Murphy and Mei-Mei Sanford, eds., *Osun Across the Waters: A Youba Goddess in Africa and the Americas* (2001); Richard Price, ed., *Maroon Societies: Rebel Slave Communities in the Americas* (3rd ed., 1996); Paul Arnett and William Arnett, *Souls Grown Deep: African-American Vernacular Art of the South* (vol. 1, 2000); Thomas A. Britten, *A Brief History of the Seminole-Negro Indian Scouts* (2000); Canter Brown and David Jackson, eds., *Go Sound the Trumpet: Selections of Florida's African-American History* (2005); Lydia Cabrera, *Anaforuana: ritual y simbolos de la iniciation en la sociedad secreta AbakuÃ* (1975); David R. Colburn and Jane L. Landers, eds., *The African American Heritage of Florida* (1995); Jack D. Forbes, *Africans and Native Americans: The Language of Race and the Evolution of Red-Black Peoples* (1993); and Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy* (1984).

The wide variety of topics in *Africa in Florida* makes summarizing its content challenging. Nonetheless, Carl-

son and Poynor provide a solid introduction in chapter 1, "Mapping Africa in Florida: Into the Lushness of History." Broadly speaking, the project is twofold: to chart the various waves of African influence in Florida throughout its history, and to understand how Africa has been "recalled, imagined and brought into being" (p. 5). The narratives related subsequently consistently emphasize the positive contributions of the various diasporas to Florida's culture. The negatives, such as the fact that Florida long held the distinction of lynching capital of the United States, are mentioned only in passing; instead, the complex dynamic between blacks and their European, Native American, American, or Caribbean counterparts is brought to the fore as Florida moves from Spanish to English, back to Spanish, and finally to American governance. Another focus is on a re-examination of the concept of diaspora itself and "the multiple ways in which Africa becomes manifest in Florida" (p. 9). Indeed, the texts' authors do succeed in establishing "a new sense of cultural geography dependent upon looking beyond established categories of knowledge that separate the histories of Africans, Europeans, and Native Americans" (p. 29).

In order to map this complex mental and physical space, the editors cast a wide net that includes theorists, historians, anthropologists, poets, and artists, resulting in differing approaches that deliberately avoid coherence or closure. No definitive map to Africa in Florida is provided; only a variety of maps the reader will navigate on her own. Fortunately, the four sections of the text, "Seeking Freedom in and out of Florida: Slaves and Maroons," "Forging New Identities: African American Culture in Florida," "Connecting across the Caribbean," and "(Re)making Africa in Florida," prevent the reader from losing her way.

If the introduction marks a clear starting point from which to begin, chapter 2, "An Overview of Florida's Black Past," by Nathaniel Miller, assistant professor of history at St. Louis University, maps the main historical route off of which the rest of the essays will branch. As he points out in his introductory paragraph, after 1513, "the Spanish would return to Florida time and again, and every subsequent expedition or effort at settlement would include Africans or their descendants. Blacks would play a vital role in Florida's economy, culture, politics, and defenses during the First Spanish Period (1565-1763), the British Period (1763-84), the Second Spanish Period (1784-1821), and after the American annexation in a process that continues today" (p. 31). The vital role of free blacks—the first Atlantic Creoles—contrasts markedly

with the slaveholding provinces to the north, and is a source of tensions found throughout Florida's history. It was not until the end of the Second Seminole War and the granting of statehood in 1845 that Florida's slave-based plantations, first established under British rule, began to resemble the rest of the Deep South. A century later, beginning in the 1960s, the black population exploded with the immigration of blacks from the Bahamas, Cuba (after 1959), Haiti, South America, and elsewhere in North America, creating a truly global diasporic culture.

The essay that opens section 2 on the complex dynamic between slaves and Maroons (escaped slaves) provides equally indispensable historical background information for the reader. Jane Landers, professor of history at Vanderbilt University and the author of *Black Society in Spanish Florida*, provides an incisive summary of the various African ethnic groups that settled in Florida in order to clarify their specific cultural contributions. Because the Spanish kept careful records of births and deaths, including those of escaped slaves from the Carolina border who were freed as long as they converted to Catholicism, the Kongos appear to have been the dominant group at Gracia Real de Santa Teresa De Mose, a town established for free blacks in 1738. A handcrafted St. Christopher medal found at Fort Mose is resonant of the Euro-African culture that was taking root at that time. As Landers points out, St. Christopher is the patron saint of travelers and is crossing the water; on the other side of the medal, the compass pattern can be interpreted as a variation on the Kongo cosmogram depicting the cycle of life. The importation of slaves begun under British rule continued apace under the second Spanish period, and Landers argues that their social and cultural patterns were retained long after the end of slavery. The material culture artifacts she uses to support this argument include a mahogany African-style drum found in a riverbed, as well as conch-shell decorations on gravestones and homes. Although only the undated drum is illustrated here, a later chapter by art historian Kara Ann Morrow, "African American Cemeteries in Florida" (chapter 12), provides a thorough discussion of gravesites. Her argument is of special interest as she demonstrates that the use of shells and Kongo cosmogram motifs on African American graves have influenced the decoration of the graves in once segregated white communities.

Chapter 6, "African Influences on Seminole Beadwork," is even richer in visual evidence, if more speculative in its argument. In the latter half of the seventeenth century, runaway slaves apparently served as tenant farmers after gaining safe haven with the Seminole

group. A second wave after the departure of the British led to communities of Black Seminoles, which historian Thomas E. Larose argues retained their traditional dress and language. Although some evidence of African design was evident in early Seminole beadwork, the major influence seems to have occurred after 1821, when Spain ceded Florida to the United States. The slaves Spain had imported in the early 1800s were primarily Yoruba, and it is their tradition that Larose argues caused a shift in Seminole beaded bandoleer bags both in style and function: from geometric to curvilinear motifs and from utilitarian purse to carriers for power objects. Although the visual affinities between Yoruba and Seminole beadwork are strong, the fact that there is little evidence of the Black Seminoles carrying these bags unless they were diviners weakens his case. As Larose concedes, "Individually each piece of evidence is perhaps tenuous and, at this point, impossible to document, but collectively they provide a strong argument" [that] opens new avenues of investigation for post-contact Native American art (p. 105). Anthropologist Rosalyn Howard's survey of Florida's Maroon towns in Seminole territory charts the history of Seminole and black conflict and alliances that provides further context for their cultural exchanges and strengthens Larose's argument. The influence of Seminole culture on black communities is not addressed directly, however.

What does become clear from the essays in this second section is that the diaspora continued throughout the period of African settlement in America, as shifting alliances and wars led to constant movement both within Florida and across its borders to the north, south, and west. By contrast, anthropologist Antoinette T. Jackson's account of the Kingsley Community, founded as a slave plantation by the Scotsman Zephaniah Kingsley in the early 1800s, provides a rare example of continuity. Kingsley married one of the slaves he imported from what is now Senegal; Anna proved to be a very competent manager of his various holdings, and their descendants rose to prominent positions in Florida society. (The descendants include Dr. Johnnetta Betsch Cole, current director of the National Museum of African Art.)

Unlike Anna's, the life of another African female leader, Mother Laura Adorkor Kofi, as told by historian Vilbert White Jr. in the third section, "Forging Identities," has a less positive outcome. Mother Kofi, called the female Marcus Garvey, was either from the Gold Coast/Ghana or, according to a footnote, Athens, Georgia. A powerful advocate for black independence during the mid-1920s, she was assassinated in 1928 at the age of

35 by members of Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) while delivering a lecture in Miami. After her death, Eli Nyombolo, who according to the author was "a member of the Zulu Nation in South Africa and the Xhosa people" (p. 216), continued to build on the New Age/African beliefs of the African Universal church she had founded. Beyond introducing the reader to this remarkable story, little attention is paid to the larger ramifications of the internecine struggles for power and accompanying gender issues in the pre-civil rights era.

Nonetheless, one of the pleasures of this book—and what would make it an ideal supplementary text for a graduate seminar—is the discovery of illuminating narratives in what might appear to be trivial topics. In Andrew Warnes's "Barbecuing the Diaspora: Jerked Pig and Roast Hog in the Writings of Zora Neale Huston," the young scholar from the University of Leeds provides a solidly researched history of barbeque and its Native American origins, which, while it undercuts Huston's depiction of barbeque as African in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, provides a thoroughly satisfying gustatory read.

Huston resided in Eatonville, Florida's first incorporated black town, and later in Fort Pierce, and her legacy is honored in a series of paintings by Fort Pierce-based artist Ade Rossman. In analyzing the series, created in 2006, Robin Poyner argues that by researching Huston's life, and her own imagined connections to Africa, Rossman was able to connect with his own African roots. (He was born in Trinidad). Unfortunately, the illustrations of Huston's life in the paintings—all of which are reproduced in full color—are quite mundane and, further, Rossman's claim that he connects with African culture through "doing what you do under the sun" (p. 245) stretches the concept of diasporan culture rather too far for this reviewer. Rossman is one of several Floridians studied in this book who reconnect with Africa via the former trope of "elective affinity." The self-identification with imagined roots has not resulted in fruitful outgrowths, at least in terms of the quality of the paintings or installations.

This imagined reconnection with and reinterpretation of African culture is the focus of the last section in *Africa in Florida*, where it receives a sharper focus. Of particular interest is cultural historian Ivor L. Miller's essay, "Abakuá Communities in Florida: Members of the Cuban Brotherhood in Exile," which traces the mutual aid society from the "Àkpá" (leopard) society in West

Africaâs Cross River basin to Cuba, and then, after 1959, to Florida. The two subsequent chapters also examine African spirituality, or âSoul Force,â and the role it continues to play in several black communities in Florida. In her essay âIgbo Masquerades in the Sunshine State,â Amanda Carlson notes that the influx of Africans to the United States since the 1970s has led to the rise of numerous organizations, in this case Igbo ones, each with their own evolving masquerade traditions. In contrast, the following cautionary (and final) chapter, also by Carlson, âAfrica Attractions: Florida Tourism Gone Wild,â demonstrates how the African theme parks in Florida âprovide us with some of the most persistent, troubling images of Africa â| [and] we need to consider why visi-

tors continue to desire these storiesâ (p. 405). Although some of the manifestations of Africa by contemporary black Floridians documented in this section seem to be based more on nostalgia or wish fulfillment than manifestations of indigenous African spirituality, the jungle tourism in the Busch Gardens and Disney World parks are an insidious phenomenon, as they continue to erase the history of Africa in Florida that the majority of the authors of this text have so carefully reconstructed.

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