

December 2015

Cultural Production and the African Diaspora: Vanessa Valdés's *The Future is Now: A New Look at African Diaspora Studies*

Sobeira Latorre

Southern Connecticut State University, sobeira.latorre@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarlyrepository.miami.edu/anthurium>

Recommended Citation

Latorre, Sobeira (2015) "Cultural Production and the African Diaspora: Vanessa Valdés's *The Future is Now: A New Look at African Diaspora Studies*," *Anthurium: A Caribbean Studies Journal*: Vol. 12 : Iss. 2 , Article 9.

Available at: <http://scholarlyrepository.miami.edu/anthurium/vol12/iss2/9>

This Review is brought to you for free and open access by Scholarly Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Anthurium: A Caribbean Studies Journal* by an authorized editor of Scholarly Repository. For more information, please contact repository.library@miami.edu.

Cultural Production and the African Diaspora: Review of *The Future is Now: A New Look at African Diaspora Studies*

Sobeira Latorre
Southern Connecticut State University

Vanessa K. Valdés, editor. *The Future is Now: A New Look at African Diaspora Studies*. (Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012), 223 pp.

Edited by Vanessa K. Valdés, *The Future is Now: A New Look at African Diaspora Studies* is an interdisciplinary collection of essays, which explores and celebrates the rich cultural, literary and artistic production of the African diaspora. As the editor announces in the introduction, the project originated in the conference, *Let Spirit Speak! Cultural Journeys through the African Diaspora*, which took place at The City College of New York in 2010. The volume's contributors represent various fields and academic departments including Art History, Anthropology, Literature, and African-American and Africana Studies. The compiled essays, which adopt various theoretical and methodological approaches, underscore the diversity of the field and constitute a notable effort to broaden readers' knowledge of the cultural production of people of African descent from various parts of the Americas and Europe.

The book is divided into nine chapters, an introduction, an invocation, and a conclusion. In the very brief introduction the editor defines the term African diaspora, by which she means "the descendants of enslaved Africans brought to the Americas in the sixteenth, seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries" as well as "those who have lived in Africa and who have left their countries to make their homes in Europe and the Americas" (1). Despite its reference to African Diaspora Studies in the title, the collection as a whole is less about defining the parameters of the field than it is about the practice of this interdisciplinary area of studies. *The Future is Now* aims to give readers a "glimpse," as the editor notes, of the wide range of cultural practices articulated by writers and artists of African descent. The collection also showcases current research trends from established and emerging scholars and artists engaged in the study of the African diaspora. The introduction does a good job delineating the scope of the project, which centers exclusively on music, literature, and art and almost entirely on people of African descent in the Americas. A limitation of the brief introduction, however, is that it does not address explicitly the underlying impulse behind the collection beyond the conference from which it emerged. Readers may have benefitted from a discussion of how and why these particular essays were selected for inclusion in the volume.

Despite its focus on cultural production, the book remains wide in scope, covering various historical periods, countries, theoretical approaches, and languages, namely Spanish and English. The book is loosely organized by geographical region. The Caribbean is well represented in the first part of the book with the invocation and first few essays focused on the cultural production of Afro-descendants from Haiti, Trinidad and Tobago, Puerto Rico and Cuba. These works address different areas of Caribbean cultures and artistic expression and engage questions of gender, sexuality, religion, and blackness, to name a few. The last part of the book deals with essays that cover Brazil, the United States, and parts of Europe and Africa, which offer scholars a broader context on which to situate the cultural production of the African diaspora. As a whole, the collection addresses a wide range of themes among which religion, invisibility, marginalization, and resistance play a key role.

Two of the nine chapters address religion within the Caribbean context. The first is a fascinating analysis of the Haitian documentary film, *Des hommes et des dieux* and the second explores the music and performance of Trinidadian musician David Rudder, paying close attention to Trinidad's rich religious history. In "Mistè a Gatem': Deploying Ezili and Queering the Haitian Religious Experience in Anne Lescot's and Laurence Magloire's Film *Des hommes et des dieux*" Sophie Saint-Just offers a provocative analysis of the pioneering 2002 documentary directed by Lescot and Magloire. In her analysis, Saint-Just explores how the documentary, which follows the lives of several "openly gay men" in their twenties, "portrays working-class Haitian gay men's resistance to marginalization" (14). In particular, the essay evinces the connections that the documentary's subjects draw between their sexual identities and "key elements of Haitian religious and cultural identity" (15). Through a thoughtful analysis of the film, religious practices, and Haitian social and gender norms, the author offers valuable insights into the ways in which gender, sexuality, class, and religion intersect in contemporary Haiti. The author argues convincingly that, "as practitioners of the Haitian Afro-Caribbean religion, some Haitian gay men, such as the group of men in the documentary, strategically use Vodou to come out and legitimize their sexual preference" (23). Saint-Just concludes by highlighting the value of film, particularly in the Caribbean, as a medium conducive to the articulation of complex identities. As a whole, the essay offers important keys to understanding the strategies of self-affirmation and resistance available to marginalized Caribbean subjects.

Alison McLetchie's "The Holy Temple of Soca: Rev. Rudder in Attendance" explores the ways in which Trinidad's "complex religious history" (91) informs David Rudder's music and reflects Trinidad's diverse population. The essay engages in a thorough exploration of Rudder's music and performances to argue that the performer "transforms calypso and his performance of it to a

spiritual experience” (87). The author explains how Rudder challenges notions about the profane nature of carnival and contends that his “music converts the profane into the sacred and makes an important political statement about the sanctity of carnival and the people who produce and participate in it while offering a critique of the carnival detractors—particularly from the mainstream religious leadership” (88). Saint-Just’s and McLetchie’s essays highlight the complex function of Caribbean religion (s) within specific socio-cultural and historical contexts and the potential impact of religion (s) on people’s cultural practices and everyday lives.

Resisting invisibility and marginalization through historical recovery is a key objective in essays by Heather Shirey, María Elba Torres-Muñoz, Vanessa K. Valdés, and Katya Ysayev. As the editor writes in the introduction: “In the collective memory of many artists of the African diaspora there remains an insistent need for the circumstances under which many Africans were brought to these shores to be recognized” (1). The first two essays focus on the cultural production of Afro-descendants in the Spanish-speaking Caribbean (Cuba and Puerto Rico), while the last two essays address the literary corpus of Afro-Brazilians and the history and visual representation of the banjo, respectively.

Shirey’s essay, “Meticulous Production and the Embodiment of History: María Magdalena Campos-Pons’s *My Mother Told Me I Am Chinese Series*,” challenges traditional representations of Cuban identity. Through an analysis of Campos-Pons’s multimedia art works, the essay examines the Cuban artist’s recovery of her Chinese ancestry, which she interweaves with her African heritage. The essay brings attention to the ways in which the Chinese presence in Cuba has been historically obscured by focusing on the artist’s reconstruction of her layered cultural identity and personal history through art. Shirey argues that Campos-Pons’s culturally and historically grounded installations move beyond “autobiography to address the complex history of transnational migration in the African Diaspora” (28). The essay offers a necessary historical overview of the Chinese immigration of contract workers to Cuba, which began in 1847, and provides a sustained critique of the ways in which the Chinese presence in Cuba has been excluded from the dominant racial and ethnic discourses of the Cuban nation. Shirey’s analysis of the ways in which the history of Chinese people intersects with that of peoples of African descent makes a valuable contribution to the fields of Cuban, Caribbean, and African Diaspora Studies by complicating the foundation of Caribbean racial identity and cultural legacies.

Whereas Shirey’s essay deals with the interplay of Chinese and African heritages in Cuba from an artist’s personal history, Torres-Muñoz’s contribution to the volume, “El arte como resistencia: lo afropuertorriqueño,” privileges the gaze of artists whose works reveal a commitment to and engagement with Puerto Rico’s African heritage. The essay points to the ways in which the African

heritage in Puerto Rico has been marginalized from official, dominant narratives of *puertorriqueñidad*. Paying close attention to historical and political changes on the Island, the essay examines the African elements in the artistic production of painters José Campeche, Rafael Palacios, Juan De'Prey, and Rafael Tufiño, among others. Torres Muñoz argues that Afro-Puerto Rican visual artists have offered alternative ways of representing and imagining Puerto Rican cultural and national identity. Torres-Muñoz's engaging study calls for a revision of Puerto Rico's art history to include the voices of resistance of Afro-Puerto Ricans. Muñoz's essay makes a significant contribution to Puerto Rican and Caribbean Studies by recognizing and validating the influence and impact of Afro-Puerto Ricans in this important area of Puerto Rican cultural production.

Valdés's piece turns its focus onto literature to highlight the significance of the literary production of Afro-Brazilians. In "Afro-Brazilian Literature from the Periphery to the Center," Valdés offers a historical overview of the contributions of Afro-Brazilians to the Brazilian literary landscape. Valdés argues that a defining characteristic of Afro-Brazilian cultural production is its "refusal to be marginalized, ignored, looked over, or disregarded as contributors to the national literature" (107). The chapter focuses on a wide range of texts and writers that represent various historical periods and literary genres. Despite historical and stylistic differences, many of the writers share a preoccupation for Afro-Brazilians' "continued marginalization by the mainstream Brazilian literary establishment" (126). Particularly insightful are Valdés's observations about the pressures placed upon contemporary Afro-Brazilian authors and artists to "engage in representational politics" (126). Valdés's essay is well-researched and should be of interest to anyone engaged in the study of Latin American literature and in the role that race and identity politics have played in literary canon formation.

Turning the focus to African American culture, Katya Ysayev's essay "Decolonizing the Banjo: Cultural Memory and a (Re) presentation of Slave Performance 1700's-1863" challenges the notion of the banjo as "America's instrument." Tracing the geographical route of the banjo and its historical representation through various types of images, the author calls for recognizing the complex history of the banjo and reading it not just as a "folk instrument to accompany dances" (158) but also as one, which is intricately connected to the cultural practices and representation of slaves in the Americas. From a postcolonial lens, Katyeve's essay analyzes multiple images of slaves playing the banjo from the Caribbean and the American South in order to "expose the limits of representation by recuperating modes of resistance within the images" (133).

Other contributions to the volume focused on specific writers and artists from throughout the African diaspora offer engaging and innovative readings. In "Afirmación étnica y estética en la ensayística y poética de Jorge Artel," Luisa García Conde examines Colombian poet's Jorge Artel's writings to offer a better

understanding of his personal aesthetic and perspectives on race. The essay also analyzes three editions of Artel's poetry collection *Tambores en la noche* to show how close examination of each edition reveals the poet's increasing engagement with Colombia's African heritage. Also focused on literature, Ashley David's essay "The Challenge of Toni Cade Bambara's *The Salt Eaters*" suggests that Bambara's 1980 novel has been poorly understood and proposes that the novel offers clues on how to interpret it, which require "a complete overhaul of our conceptual frames" (162). The book's last chapter, "Performing the Archive: Photography and the Africana World" moves away from the Americas and explores the work of three African photographers, George Adéagbo, Samuel Fosso, and Barthélémy Toguo within a transnational framework. Photography scholars and aficionados will no doubt find this chapter engaging, informative, and theoretically grounded.

While the *The Future is Now* does not aim to define the field of African Diaspora Studies, the aptly titled conclusion, "Where do we go from here? The Future of African Diaspora Studies," offers insightful observations about the challenges faced by researchers and students in African Diaspora Studies and related areas including Caribbean and Ethnic Studies. For instance, Valdés observes that the field needs to be more attentive to issues of exclusion and difference. While the field is "interdisciplinary and necessarily transnational, if only because of the inherent nature of dispersals of peoples, irrespective of the cause," (215) Valdés contends that some geographical areas, theoretical approaches, and languages receive more scholarly attention than others. She argues more explicitly that the African diaspora in Latin America and the Spanish-speaking Caribbean is poorly represented in US African Diaspora/Africana Studies Departments. Moreover, as she points out, Caribbean Studies, which is an area where fruitful dialogue about the African diaspora can and does take place, is still divided across geographical and linguistic lines. One of the goals of the text then is to challenge scholars engaged in the study of the African diaspora to "step out of our disciplines" (217), to "become fluent in a variety of fields" (218), and to "educate and train across linguistic lines" (218). As a whole, the volume illustrates the need to embrace these challenges by exposing readers to thematic, historical, geographical, and linguistic diversity.

Particularly inspiring is the book's linguistic richness, which reflects the vastness of the African diaspora. For instance, two of the book's nine chapters are written entirely in Spanish. While this fact may alienate readers who lack proficiency in the language, it serves as an important reminder of the linguistic plurality of the African diaspora in general, and of the Caribbean region more specifically. Training across linguistic lines would be particularly useful for Caribbean scholars, especially for those engaged in literary studies in the US academy and who are often dependent on English translations to engage in

meaningful and necessary transnational analysis. While Valdés does not offer solutions to every challenge she poses in her conclusion, the collection itself shows that dialogue across national, disciplinary, and linguistic lines is not only necessary, but also possible. Collections such as *The Future is Now: A New Look at African Diaspora Studies* challenge us to broaden our scholarly repertoires and to more fully engage “the breadth and the scope of the African Diaspora here in the New World” (219).