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Book Review

Ana Lucia Araujo, *Slavery in the Age of Memory: Engaging the Past*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021. Pp. 272. $95.00, hardcover, $26.95, paper.

On the annual celebration of Martin Luther King, Jr. in January of 2022 Professor Nikole Hannah-Jones of Howard University was invited to give a speech. Professor Jones made a critical change immediately prior: "I scrapped my original speech and spent the entire first half of it reading excerpts from a bunch of Dr. King's speeches, but without telling anyone that I was doing so, leading the audience to think King's words were mine."[1] The portions of Dr. King's speeches used by Professor Jones included "it was in the year 1619 that the first BLACK [*sic*] slave was brought to the shores of this nation," and that "Republicans and Democrats from the Midwest and West who

> *were given land by our government when they came here as immigrants from Europe… [and] were given education through the land grant colleges are the same people that now say to black people, whose ancestors were brought to this country in chains and who were emancipated in 1863 without being given land to cultivate or bread to eat; that they must pull themselves up by their own bootstraps.*[2]

Professor Jones' purpose was to demonstrate the ways that time and political agendas, among other contributors, obfuscate collective memory, sometimes to the point of comical ignorance. The construction and uses of memory are fraught, therefore, with the temptation of dilution in a way that misses a radical impact on our understanding of the past, diverting the opportunity to engage in meaningful change in the process.

History often wrestles with slavery's role in contributing to the West's rise to the top of the global economic and political hierarchy. Less often has history inquired into the relationship between how slavery is remembered and memorialized, and how memorial activities are influenced by the socio-political contexts those memorials arise within. *Slavery in the Age of Memory: Engaging the Past*, by Ana Lucia Araujo, a Professor of History at Howard University, steps in to remind us that to what and for

whom we consider ourselves responsible is an effect of the way our shared history has been memorialized and passed down to us.

For Araujo, the defining characteristic of slavery's memory is the influence of white supremacy. "Collective memory," says Arujo, "is racialized, gendered, and shaped by the ideology of white supremacy" because of how intrinsic slavery was to the development of American society (13). So intrinsic was slavery to the development of Western political economy broadly, and so uniformly did slavery's benefits accrue to white citizens, that none can escape white supremacy's reach into how slavery is memorialized in these same places today. For Araujo, three distinct spheres contribute uniquely to how slavery and its lessons are memorialized: the family, religious traditions, and the memories of the enslaved themselves. Each sphere produces its memory according to its interests, and many of those interests serve to entrench institutions conducive to white cultural hegemony. According to Arujo, for example, the use of St. Francis of Assisi in a French memorial to the slave trade "implies that practicing Catholicism and selling human beings were not conflicting activities" despite the obvious contradiction between the two (18). Families similarly serve as a site of memorial contestation. By passing forward narratives of activities that the family benefitted from that are no longer acceptable, such as slavery for the descendants of slave owners, the beneficiaries of the activity are allowed to undermine the lessons of that activity by memorializing it in a way that renders its origins and effects inconsequential.

Araujo makes ample use of the evidence of Thomas Jefferson's relationship with his slave Sally Hemmings to illustrate the latter lesson on familial distortions. Jefferson's descendants influenced and reshaped the narrative of slavery at Monticello because they wished for Jefferson's slave ownership to be rendered inconsequential to the administration of Monticello. Yet contemporary historians have determined otherwise, insisting that the public reckons with the dissonance between Jefferson's apparent ideals and personal actions. Nonetheless, the desire to undermine Jefferson's history of slave ownership to shape a complementary narrative between Jefferson and the ideals he propounded in the Declaration of Independence resonates due to the Constitution's eventually dissonant silences on slavery. As Araujo concludes, "collective memory was therefore marked by meaningful silences" (24).

Inevitably, studies of memorialization must consider how memory is influenced by their physical embodiment. Araujo narrows her focus to how cultural memories of slavery are racialized through commemoration activities and the common "wall of names" memorial. In Araujo's analysis, the latter is a site of more obvious racialization; the former illuminates the complex ways memorial activities further racialization and, ultimately, narratives conducive to the thriving of white supremacy.

The push for civil rights in postwar America by Black Americans was, among other things, an explicit demand for recognition in spaces that often sought to eliminate

or ignore the presence of Black culture. Advanced by the increasing presence of Black actors in social and political movements, burial grounds soon became sites of memorialization that advanced a larger public awareness of the invisibility of Black suffering as a result of the Atlantic slave trade. Both Brazil and America saw rituals reinterring the remains of Black slaves carelessly strewn into often unmarked mass burial sites. "The unearthing and reinterpretation of the African burial ground," says Araujo,

> *contributed to bringing to light race and identity issues that were not directly related to the historical past of the site but to the persisting racial structures that maintained the city's past slavery, generally invisible in the public arena" (42).*

By insisting on the respectful and spiritually dignified reinternment, activists brought into awareness the ease with which society ignores and erases the presence of cultures misaligned with the narratives it seeks to advance.

The more common "wall of names" memorial is also more confrontational to the narratives slave societies prefer to construct. Dehumanizing a slave included the quite common practice of renaming them because by renaming a slave their past and the right to represent themselves as an agent of the culture and history they represent is extinguished. The act of memorializing a slave by the name they were forced to accept, therefore, further advances a supremacist mindset: even in memorializing a slave they cannot escape their physical, psychological, and cultural oppression. Yet the wall of name monuments, Araujo says, is an important evolution in the drive to acknowledge the uses of slavery and its contemporary ramifications: "these initiatives emerged as a response to social actors who demanded to make slavery and their enslaved ancestors visible in the public space" (53). A public space, to be clear, that often works to erase that very visibility.

Yet the wall of names memorial is not free from erasure tendencies. Araujo notes, for example, that Mount Vernon's own attempt to acknowledge the presence of slaves maintained by George Washington is at the center of such a memorial. In doing so, says Aruajo, Mount Vernon advanced the "typical persistent invisibility of bondspeople whose names are not discernable because the panel is translucent" (64). The attention remains, in other words, on George Washington and obfuscates the names of his slaves despite the exhibition's title "Lives Bound Together: Slavery at George Washington's Mount Vernon."

Mount Vernon's struggle to honestly center slavery in the life of George Washington is illustrative of many other examples of the same struggle throughout the West. Araujo points her audience toward the various port cities in Europe whose economy was inextricably bound to the slave trade. These port cities, including Bristol and Liverpool in England, and Boston and Charleston in America, witness forthright

struggles over how slavery should be memorialized, if at all. In each port, group interests emerge and push agendas for or against a proposed memorial. Araujo's contribution to understanding these struggles lay in her framing of each struggle as a window into just how entrenched the larger issues of political economy come to play in how those debates and negotiations amongst interested groups play out. Araujo illuminates, for example, how the austerity government of Margaret Thatcher exacerbated the divergent employment outcomes between White and Black citizens of Liverpool (81). The ensuing increase in crime and attendant increase in the policing of Black and working-class communities lead Black citizens to protest by pulling down a statue that they believed to be of a slave trader (it was not). The projection of grievances that emerge from the divergent socio-economic experiences of Black citizens in places where slavery played a significant part illustrates the knife's edge of slavery's remittance: inheriting slavery is also an inheritance of discrimination.

Thus, the public memorialization of slavery is dynamic, changing with the political, social, and cultural contexts of the communities erecting their memorials. Araujo points to the divergence in French communities to illustrate her point. For its part, Nantes' memorialization cut against a larger national trend to distance itself from France's relationship with slavery and builds a movement that culminates in a "national day of memories of slavery" by 2006 (97-98). In Bordeaux, however, the response to the 2006 day of memories invokes resistance. As Araujo observes of Bordeaux's memorial, "the words 'slave,' 'slavery,' or the term 'slave trade' are not mentioned and consequently, no connections are established between the city's increasing wealth and the use of slave labor in the French colonies of the Americas." For Araujo, slavery's inconspicuous absence from the Bordeaux memorial reveals how "France shapes its version of [an anti-communitarian] white supremacy" (107-108).

Public history efforts to acknowledge slavery ultimately suffer from the same antagonisms amongst interested parties. In contrast to memorialization and the effort to produce a more accurate collective memory, Araujo understands public memory efforts on behalf of slavery as generally committed to historical accuracy (132). The history of Mount Vernon and its attempts to preserve itself and its role in contributing to Washington's myth demonstrates to Araujo that the accuracy of any public history project cannot help but fall prey to the context of its historicization. The Civil War and the Thirteenth Amendment to emerge from it, for example, made preserving Mount Vernon an ultimately precarious endeavor for Washington's memory because of the recognition that slaves were as intrinsic to Mount Vernon's upkeep as Washington was to the American founding's narrative. With a stake in advancing their ancestor as the latter without the former, Washington's descendants and inheritors antagonize efforts to recognize slavery at Mount Vernon. Instead, Mount Vernon's preservers benefitted from the slavery of their forebears, and believed slavery to be a part of the Southern heritage that the Civil War enflamed. "Discursively erased slavery," says Araujo

> *Remained an uncomfortable topic that was constantly avoided in Mount Vernon's heritage interpretation. During the Jim Crow era, Washington's home remained a nostalgic representation of the South that contributed to the promotion of a benevolent image of slavery (137).*

Despite Mount Vernon's efforts, slavery was too consequential to American history to erase. Because slavery was so essential to the development of America's political economy, and therefore so prevalent in most facets of American life, the evidence of slavery's presence and impact can never be completely hidden. Public memory, in other words, embeds with its artifacts of a truth that collective memory finds easier to ignore or clean up.

Thus is the lesson for slavery's memory and we teachers concerned with its truths. Araujo's scholarship alas contributes to our collective teaching endeavor to do so ideally. Araujo makes clear how teachers of slavery in any form and for a variety of audiences are provided with many opportunities to advance an honest confrontation with slavery for the learner. So too, however, does Araujo demonstrate how fraught such an opportunity has traditionally been, perforated with opportunities to bias the outcome and obfuscate the contemporary import of the learning experience. That nuance between the teaching and learning poles is important if one is to fully appreciate the collective endeavor readers are being introduced to. Araujo's book is therefore best suited for audiences in higher education or scholars engaged in public memory. Araujo's insights are dense with material for burgeoning undergraduate or graduate students in history, political economy, or other sub-disciplines. Araujo's focus on micro examples that inductively inform her larger conclusions are best engaged and appreciated by readers with an experience in critical historical contextualization and evidentiary discernment, without which many of Araujo's strongest points may be lost. For the secondary student and the public largely, therefore, Araujo's important work does thus exceed the bounds of what many such students and readers may be reasonably prepared to understand.

Despite efforts to the contrary, slavery, and its long-term impacts, cannot be ignored or suppressed. Slavery must instead be confronted; slavery's inheritance observed. Araujo makes clear again how slavery's confrontation is undermined by memorials to Jefferson as they were for Washington at Monticello (148). A generation of scholars, journalists, and activists nonetheless press on in their Promethean-like battle against the demons of a comforting national narrative. So too must we teachers soldier on in solidarity with them.

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Record, has published essays in *The Philadelphia Citizen*, *Economic Questions*, *CLIO: Newsletter of Politics and History*, *The World History Bulletin* and *Political Animal*, and was an original contributor to *Harvard and Slavery: Seeking a Forgotten History*. Mr. Harbour lives in Philadelphia and can be reached at justinharbour@gmail.com.

Notes

[1] Hannah-Jones, Nikole (@idabaewells). "So, I scrapped my original speech and spent the entire first half of it reading excerpts from a bunch of Dr. King's speeches, but without telling anyone that I was doing so, leading the audience to think King's words were mine. And, whew, chile, it was AMAZING." *Twitter*, January 7, 2022, https://twitter.com/nhannahjones/status/1483187472276328449

[2] Hannah-Jones, Nikole (@idabaewells). "The crowning achievement in hypocrisy must go to those staunch Republicans and Democrats of the Midwest and West who were given land by our government when they came here as immigrants from Europe. They were given education through the land grant colleges. These are the same people that now say to black people, whose ancestors were brought to this country in chains and who were emancipated in 1863 without being given land to cultivate or bread to eat; that they must pull themselves up by their own bootstraps." *Twitter*, January 7, 2022, https://twitter.com/nhannahjones/status/1483187472276328449