Public Memory of Slavery
Victims and Perpetrators in the South Atlantic

Ana Lucia Araujo

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This book examines the public memory of the Atlantic slave trade and slavery, encompassing what is modern-day Brazil and the Republic of Benin—two countries connected for more than three centuries of Atlantic slave trade. Brazil imported more than 5 million enslaved Africans (the largest number in all the Americas) and was the latest to abolish slavery in 1888.

Over the last twenty years, Brazil and Benin witnessed the development of official and unofficial projects promoting the memory of slavery and cultural tourism, most of these supported by UNESCO. Official projects largely relied on the promotion of African arts, culture, and religions. Both the Brazilian and the Beninese governments encouraged the restoration and the conservation of historical sites, as well as the construction of new monuments, museums and memorials that would contribute to the reinvention of “Africa” in Brazil and of “Brazil” in Africa.

In Southern Benin, descendants of slaves and descendants of slave merchants—most of them seeking political prestige—appropriated the official discourses that insisted on the duty of memory. Although historically slave ancestry was associated with a sentiment of shame, some prosperous families descended from former slave returnees have become more candid and open about their heritage. These elites actively participated in the creation of monuments and memorials, and they also helped in the development of festivals and other commemoration activities to celebrate the Atlantic slave trade and African cultures.

In Brazil, the public memory of slavery is expressed through the fight of Afro-Brazilians to redress the past wrongs and the social inequalities of the present. At the same time, Afro-Brazilian cultural assertion movements are based on the reinvented and reconstructed links with Africa.
Description (continued)

However, until very recently, the public memory of slavery remained confined to very specific dates and places, such as the Carnival and the Afro-Brazilian religious festivals. Though some public monuments and commemoration activities related to the slave past were created in recent years, the absence of permanent public places in remembrance of slavery indicates that Brazil’s slave past is still difficult to deal with.

In this book, Ana Lucia Araujo argues that despite the rupture provoked by the Atlantic slave trade, the Atlantic Ocean was never a physical barrier that prevented the exchanges between the two sides; it was instead a corridor that allowed the production of continuous relations. Araujo shows that the memorialization of slavery in Brazil and Benin was not only the result of survivals from the period of the Atlantic slave trade but also the outcome of a transnational movement that was accompanied by the continuous intervention of institutions and individuals who promoted the relations between Brazil and Benin. Araujo insists that the circulation of images was, and still is, crucial to the development of reciprocal cultural, religious, and economic exchanges as well as to defining what is African in Brazil and what is Brazilian in Africa. In this context, the South Atlantic is conceived as a large zone in which the populations of African descent undertake exchanges and modulate identities—a zone where the European and the Amerindian identities were also appropriated in order to build its own nature.

This book shows that the public memory of slavery and the Atlantic slave trade in the South Atlantic is plural; it is conveyed not only by the descendants of the victims but also by the descendants of perpetrators. Although the slave past is a critical issue in societies that largely relied on slave labor and where the heritage of slavery is still present, the memories of this past remain very often restricted to the private space. This book shows how in Brazil and Benin social actors appropriated the slave past to build new identities, fight against social injustice, and, in some cases, obtain political prestige. The book illuminates how the public memory of slavery in Brazil and Benin contributes to the rise of the South Atlantic as an autonomous zone of claim for recognition for those peoples and cultures that were cruelly broken, dispersed, and depreciated by the Atlantic slave trade.

Public Memory of Slavery is an important book for collections in slavery studies, memory studies, Brazilian and Latin American studies, ethnic studies, cultural anthropology, African studies, and African Diaspora.

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