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“Revised Commemoration” in Public Art: What Future for the Monument?

État des lieux de la « commémoration corrigée » en art public : quel avenir pour le monument ?

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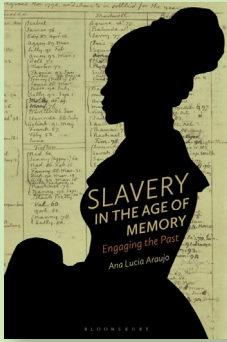
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Ana Lucia Araujo
**Slavery in the Age of Memory:
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those debates at another vital cultural moment, where critical discussions about the influences and impacts of monuments and memorials on our understanding (and often misunderstanding) of American histories are needed to help us find our way through the national struggle for social justice. ¶

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1. On May 13, 2021, the removal of the sculpture was approved and there will be no replacement sculpture. Rather, more steps will be added and the entry plaza left open. See Sarah Lewin Leibold, "Removing and Replacing the Roosevelt Statue," *Ilovetheupperwestside.com*, May 14, 2021, <https://ilovetheupperwestside.com/removing-and-replacing-the-roosevelt-statue/>; and Maya Mau, "Board Takes First Steps to Remove Theodore Roosevelt Statue from Museum Entrance," *Westsiderag.com*, May 15, 2021, <https://www.westsiderag.com/2021/05/15/board-takes-first-steps-to-remove-theodore-roosevelt-statue-from-museum-entrance>.
2. Carol Tangeman, "Arts Beat: Proposed SLO monument raises questions about public art," *KCBX.org*, April 25, 2019, <https://www.kcbx.org/post/arts-beat-proposed-slo-monument-raises-questions-about-public-art>.
3. Tyler Pratt, "San Luis Obispo officials say no to public monuments of people," *KCBX.org*, July 17, 2019, <https://www.kcbx.org/post/san-luis-obispo-officials-say-no-public-monuments-people#stream/0>.
4. *Ibid.*
5. "Harriet Tubman Monument Finalists," *May 26, 2021*, <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/45af9aa62184a4290d1a7d6d50e71f6>
6. *Ibid.*
7. Erika Doss, *Memorial Mania: Public Feeling in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).
8. Kirk Savage, *Monument Wars: Washington, DC, the National Mall, and the Transformation of the Memorial Landscape* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).

In *Slavery in the Age of Memory: Engaging the Past*, the Brazilian interdisciplinary historian Ana Lucia Araujo dives into a brave historical study of memory in relation to the Atlantic slave trade. Over the course of the book, the author analyses a vast range of colonial memories that deal with public and genealogical spheres from the sixteenth century onwards, as well as the impacts of racism's legacies in contemporary societies. Geographically, Araujo selects the United States, France, and England, countries that were directly involved with the Atlantic slave trade and that have tended to suppress or attenuate these legacies in official discourses, at least until recently. Brief historical case studies from Brazil and the Republic of Benin are also incorporated into her analyses. The author shows the complexity and hardship of dealing with memories of colonial slavery times, especially since histories of slavery have been always fueled by colonial distortion of facts, which has helped to maintain oppressive hegemonic structures. With that in mind, Araujo opens her research to the devastating memories handed down by the descendants of Black bondspeople to expose the falsehoods of official histories and make the point that history and memory have always been biased (16).

In the introduction, Araujo begins by reminding readers that the history of the Atlantic slave trade continues to affect Black lives today, citing the ongoing reality of racially

motivated hate crimes and killings in the United States and the consequent demands of Black communities to remove statues and rename streets that honor slave traders and pro-slavery individuals (52). Memory, when associated with the public sphere, is "conceived as a political space between the individual citizen and the state, where social agents engage in debates on a variety of public issues" (57). As the author investigates the historical arc of the Atlantic slave trade, she affirms that shared memory is built through intergenerational transmission between individuals, depending on social frameworks "such as the institutions of family and religion" (11) and ultimately enabling these frameworks to channel the common experiences that constitute shared identities, such as blackness and whiteness. In this sense, public memory is closely linked to collective memory, serving as a "political instrument to build, assert and reinforce collective identities" (12). However, public memory relies on power relations. The book presents six chapters in which a diverse array of case studies contributes to the argument that collective memory is not only racialized, but also "gendered, and shaped by the ideology of white supremacy" (16).

In the course of the first chapter, entitled "Weaving Collective Memories," the author brings to attention how the official memory of once-colonial countries is often managed by white heirs, while the descendants of slaves continue to be racialized and framed in "disadvantaged social and economic positions" (13). Black writers, artists, activists, and other allies of the Black struggle for social justice keep confronting this contaminated public history. Statues, monuments, and street names are aspects of this history and must not be seen as trivial presences in cities' landscapes, but rather as echoes of an atrocious colonial past that must be somehow revised. The author describes the trajectories of

several families that were or still are entangled with the Atlantic slave trade past. The life of the Brazilian slave-trader Francisco Félix de Souza (1754–1849) was characterized by unscrupulous business deals and political alliances with the royalty of Dahomey (now the Republic of Benin), even while he was officially recognized as a defender of human rights and good morals. The author, reinforcing her point about contemporary legacies of colonial histories, notes that his family continually plays down the slavery attached to his bloodline in order to recast him as a benevolent and successful businessman. Souza's story could be easily confused with that of several white slaveowners from the USA, France, and England whose histories are detailed by Araujo. This includes the former presidents of the United States George Washington and Thomas Jefferson.

In the second chapter, "Shrines of Cultural Memory," Araujo shifts her attention to the twentieth century to highlight two fundamental disruptive turns regarding Black invisibility in worldwide public history: first, the end of the Second World War, which contributed greatly "to the decolonization of Africa and the Caribbean and the rise of the Civil Rights Movement" (29), and second, the end of the Cold War, which "propelled a new visibility of historically excluded groups who started asserting their identities, encouraging international exchanges and increasing global connections among black organizations and populations of African descent" (29). In this sense, Araujo affirms that the creation of cultural memorials to commemorate the lives taken in atrocious moments of the Western modern era, such as the Holocaust, Apartheid, and the Vietnam War, also directly impacted the ways that pre-modern memories gained more attention in the public sphere, including those of the Atlantic slave trade period.

The author points out the rise of the public tradition of the "wall of names" as a consequence of the creation of Yad Vashem, a 1951 memorial in Jerusalem to the martyrs of the Holocaust and the Second World War, and the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, inaugurated in 1982 in Washington D.C. Araujo notes that such walls of names are now common in the USA, especially in former plantation sites. However, few Black communities have actively participated in their creation (36) either in heritage sites, or in memorials and museums. In this chapter the author also offers an important recap of the historical trajectory behind the creation of the New York African Burial Ground, in 2006, as a way to remember the lives of the several thousand Black people who were buried in this colonial cemetery in the 1700s. The Burial was an important marker "to address the necessity of publicly recognizing the contribution of Africans and peoples of African descent to the making of the United States" (31).

In the third chapter, entitled "Battles of Public Memory", the author focuses on cases in France and England, mainly on the previously suppressed histories of some ports involved in the slave trades, such as those of Liverpool, Bristol, London, Nantes, and Bordeaux, by way of demonstrating the "long-lasting deliberate denial, of the European nations involved in the Atlantic slave trade" (46). She also discusses museums and galleries that have, since the 90s, attempted to address the history of the Atlantic slave trade in the United States, such as the Georgian House Museum, the Slave Lodge Museum on Heritage Day, the Whitney Plantation Museum, and the National Museum of American History.

In the fourth chapter, entitled "Setting Slavery in the Museum," the author continues to debate colonialist reflexes in the museological field. The author goes through exhibitions that aimed to expose their nations'

colonial past in institutions such as the National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington D.C., the International Slavery Museum in Liverpool, and French institutions such as Nantes History Museum (Musée d'histoire de Nantes) and the Museum of Aquitaine (Musée d'Aquitaine). However, Araujo argues that the majority of these museums' slavery-themed exhibitions did not succeed in escaping white supremacism, instead reaffirming the slaveholder's centrality and maintaining the invisibility or reaffirming the distortions of Black legacies. In the fifth chapter, "Memory and Public History," Araujo exposes the concealed histories of two huge plantation complexes that were owned by US patrons: George Washington's Mount Vernon and Thomas Jefferson's Monticello. According to the author, these heritage sites have gendered collective memories as they were conducted by white women that upheld white supremacy (82), herein referring to both the colonial times of Mount Vernon and Monticello plantations and the continuation of racist logics in the present-day curation of these heritage sites. The author also highlights how the tourist exploitation of these sites began to gain currency in the twentieth century and continues to demonstrate racial tension between the majority white audience and the few Black guides and actors that reincarnate these narratives, even today.

Like museums and plantation sites, academia is historically structured as a colonial institution. In this direction, Araujo makes room to ask: will historical books such as hers still fail to move beyond the issues she raises if they are read by a predominantly white audience? (106). As a Brazilian woman racialized as white, she takes a position based on her extensive academic background as a professor of racial studies to explicitly criticize the racial inequities behind hegemonic narratives and spaces. Throughout

the book, she cites, however briefly, important contemporary Black writers including Achille Mbembe, Frantz Fanon, and W.E.B. Du Bois for grounding the racial and social threads of her historical journey. The book also resonates with Araujo's own writing trajectory. Since 2008, she has published several books¹ that connect her interests across history and art and are also relevant to subjects discussed here, such as public memory of slavery, artistic ventures in colonial Brazil, and colonial heritage; *Slavery in the Age of Memory: Engaging the Past*, is an organic result of this long path of interdisciplinary investigation. Looking at the author's bibliography, her interest in the mutability of representations of the past (28) becomes clear, but I wonder, in the midst of such traumatic memories: "what if colonization and trans-Atlantic slavery had never occurred?"² I do miss an approach that attends to non-linear perceptions of time, which are all so present in African and Afro-diasporic approaches to memory: Afrofuturism could have contributed much to this study. This Afro-centred movement that was born in the twentieth century sheds light on fundamental agendas for Black liberation, as it rescues ancient traditions while "wielding the imagination for personal change and societal growth."³

Nevertheless, in the sixth and final chapter, "Art of Memory", Araujo presents an excellent set of anti-colonial contemporary artists that deal with similar inquiries. Cyprien Tokoudagba, Romuald Hazoumè, William-Adjeté Wilson, Rosana Paulino, Nona Faustine, and François Pique all originate from territories involved in the Atlantic slave trade and have artistic practices that relate to these memories. The author situates their artworks in relation to the colonial memoirs that keep haunting our contemporary times, hindering Black lives and perpetuating racism. Through the (re)vision and (re)construction

of Afro-diasporic and African memories, Black contemporary art has been "probably the most comprehensive instrument to engage with the various dimensions of the slave past" (95). In this sense, Araujo resonates with important contemporary thinkers who elicit Black futures through art, such as Rinaldo Walcott, who believes Black art has the potential for disrupting a global grammar of Black suffering.⁴

Finally, in the epilogue there is a brief recap of the book's main ideas, leading to the affirmation that "memory activates the past in the present. In its range of modalities (collective, cultural, public, and official)" (105), memories of slavery vary, or have many dimensions, "depending on whether the group is composed of slave traders, slave owners, or enslaved individuals, and whether these men and women relate to each other" (105). This affirmation triggers an intriguing perspective in which collective memory deriving from "slavery and the Atlantic slave trade is multi-dimensional" (105). The author's effort to rescue layers of erased Black memories and to uproot distorted white narratives initiates many necessary confrontations with white supremacist legacies, resulting in an assertive and provocative compilation of previously concealed histories.

The book is an important contribution to the analysis of Atlantic slave trade memory and its continued implications in current social contexts, especially regarding historic public spaces and memory institutions. Ana Lucia Araujo's writing foresees a new iconoclastic turn of our contemporary times, with crescent waves of destruction of historical monuments linked to the colonial slavery past that are happening now in the collapsed pandemic scenario, worldwide. By engaging the past as a way to dissolve hegemonic memory, the book adds force to the urgent recognition of Black public history and to international

efforts to promote human rights and a more equitable collective memory. ¶

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1. Her more historical endeavors, connecting the Atlantic slave trade arc with the debates on public memories, include *Living History: Encountering the Memory of the Heirs of Slavery* (2009), *Public Memory of Slavery: Victims and Perpetrators in the South Atlantic* (2010), *Politics of Memory: Making Slavery Visible in the Public Space* (2012), *Paths of the Atlantic Slave Trade: Interactions, Identities and Images*, (2011), *Crossing Memories: Slavery and African Diaspora* (2011), *Shadows of the Slave Past: Memory, Heritage, and Slavery* (2014), *African Heritage and Memories of Slavery in Brazil and the South Atlantic World* (2015), and, more recently, *Reparations for Slavery and the Slave Trade: A Transnational and Comparative History* (2017). Her mostly art historical approach can be found in *Romantisme tropical: l'aventure illustrée d'un peintre français au Brésil* (2008) and its subsequent English and Portuguese versions: *Brazil through the French Eyes: A Nineteenth-Century Artist in the Tropics* (2015) and *Romantismo tropical: Um pintor francês nos trópicos* (2017), respectively.

2. Joana Joachim, "SPECULATIONS," curatorial essay (Montreal: Artexte, 2019), https://e-arte.ca/id/eprint/30941/1/Speculations_v3_EN.pdf

3. Ytasha Womack, *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-fi and Fantasy Culture* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2013).

4. Rinaldo Walcott, "The Black Aquatic: On Water, Art and Black Movement," webinar, Women and Gender Studies Institute of the University of Toronto speaking series, 2020, <https://wgsi.utoronto.ca/the-black-aquatic-on-water-art-and-black-movement/>

Federico Bellentani
The Meanings of the Built Environment: A Semiotic and Geographical Approach to Monuments in the Post-Soviet Era
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Julie Deschepper

Federico Bellentani's first monograph, *The Meanings of the Built Environment. A Semiotic and Geographical Approach to Monuments in the Post-Soviet Era*, focuses on the contemporary meaning-making of monuments and memorials in one Post-Soviet