

Politics of Memory – Making Slavery Visible in the Public Space. Edited by Ana Lucia Araujo. New York, London: Routledge, 2012. Pp. 296. US\$125.00 Hardback.

As I write this review, two films dealing with slavery are showing in cinemas – Quentin Tarantino's *Django Unchained* and Steven Spielberg's *Lincoln*. Both have sparked debate about how slavery is, and has been, represented in the public sphere. They appear as part of a recent resurgence of the memory of slavery, particularly in former slave societies in Europe, Africa and the Americas.

In recent years the remembrance of slavery has taken new forms in public commemorations, national narratives, monuments and museums as it moves from collective memory to historical memory. This groundswell has involved important political contests around the recovery of memory. As the editor of *Politics of Memory – Making Slavery Visible in the Public Space* Ana Lucia Araujo asks, just 'how is the public memory of the slave trade and slavery shaped, displayed, and reconstructed in the public arena?'(10)

Politics of memory emanated from a workshop of the same name held during the American Historical Association annual meeting in Boston in 2011. It is divided into two parts – the first looks at slavery and slave trade in national narratives and the second at the interpretation of slavery in museums.

Essay collections can be somewhat eclectic, but this is not the case here. The essays in the section 'Slavery and Slave Trade in National Narratives' all engage with the history of slavery and its representation over time, and how this has transformed since decolonisation and the civil rights movements of the late twentieth century. They provide comprehensive case studies of the mechanisms and sites of the politics of remembering slavery in the present.

The essays look at a variety of sites where the politics of this recovery are being played out – not just in North America but in South America and the 'source' countries in Africa. Ana Lucia Araujo looks at the politics of the representation of slave merchants as either 'founding fathers' or perpetrators in Brazil, Benin and England. Alice Bellagamba notes the legacies of silence and social status of descendants of slaves in Gambia, while Mathieu Claveyrolas analyses the history of slavery, indentured labour and subsequent Indian migration to Mauritius.

Historical revisionism is a common theme here. Quito Swan's study of the politics of remembering Sally Bassett – a slave who was burned at the stake - unsettles 19th and early 20th century claims that slavery was comparatively benign in Bermuda. So too, Margot Minardi's contribution on the lack of slavery in the history of the northern United States region of New England highlights the historical amnesia surrounding slavery in areas where it was not prominent, but nonetheless existed.

Renee Ater looks at the politics of establishing a countermonument near the site of a monument to Confederate soldiers at the University of North Carolina between 2001 and 2011. Her case study raises questions of whether monuments to the oppressed should equal or even surpass the monumentalism of the slave-owning 'founding fathers' of the past, or can they still be powerful sites of memory in different forms?

The other essays in this first section look to the global 'centre' - the ex-slave trade societies such as Britain and France who may not have many descendants of slaves in their populations, but were at the heart of the Atlantic slave trade system. Renaud Houcade and Nelly Schmidt analyse how France has avoided, even erased, slavery as part of its history, but note how certain local politics at sites of slavery have recently forced its inclusion in the national narrative.

The second section of the book 'Slavery and slave trade in the museum' shifts from historical overviews to interpretive practices –how the museum might operate in reformulating historical sensibilities. Geoffrey Cubitt looks at the surprising nationwide surge of interest in slavery that occurred around the 2007 bicentenary of the formal end of Britain's participation in the

transatlantic slave trade. Cubitt argues the varied and sometimes cursory responses nonetheless did make slavery at last visible as part of Britain's historical landscape.

The International Slavery Museum was formed as part of National Museums Liverpool in this bicentenary milieu. Richard Benjamin traces its generation and how this museum reacted to past silences of slavery and became active in contemporary campaigning on issues of human-trafficking and bonded labour.

Kimberly Cleveland, Francine Saillant and Pedro Simonard look at the AfroBrazil Museum and community museums in Rio de Janeiro. Although Brazil has the highest number of people of African descent outside the African continent, this has not been reflected in the country's cultural institutions and their history has been quarantined to an aesthetics of African influenced aspects of Brazilian culture. Since opening in 2004 the AfroBrazil Museum has thrived and other museums have been able to highlight previously ignored Afro-Brazilian cultural heritage that now includes the history of slavery in Brazil.

Kathleen Hulser writes about how from 2004 to 2011 the New York Historical society moved slavery from the bowels of its collection to the centre of the museum's narrative. She notes the dramatic effect this had on the interpretation of wider New York history; it became known again that Wall Street was founded as the financial heart of the slave trade and trade goods derived from the work of slaves. In the final chapter Regina Faden looks at the challenges of interpreting historical language that is offensive to African Americans today.

Most contributors to *Politics of Memory* agree that there has been a groundswell of engagement with the history and legacy of slavery and slave trade in recent years that has largely had a positive effect on the memory of slavery. But this early twenty-first century scramble to commemorate the slave past has not by any means been free from political resistance and has a way to go in restoring slavery to its proper historical context, let alone its representation in popular culture.

For example, Spielberg's *Lincoln* is ultimately disappointing as agency in the film is in the hands of white politicians granting 'freedom' to black Americans. However in some ways it is a remarkable film in that it is the first mainstream Hollywood film to specifically work against those white historical sensibilities that still deny that the American Civil War was in fact about slavery at all.

While it is unfortunate that none of the essays look explicitly at film – an area where the construction and reconstruction of contemporary historical sensibilities are increasingly played out – the politics are essentially very similar in museums, monuments and commemorations that deal, or don't deal, with slavery.

Further analysis of the legacies of indentured labour – which in some societies was slavery by another name – would have been an excellent addition. In societies generally outside the Atlantic slave trade such as Australia and the Pacific Islands, the memory of slavery is still largely silent and has its own set of political debates. The links between the use of the Australian Indigenous population as cheap labour and the introduction of South Sea Islanders to work the sugar cane fields in northern Queensland need further exploration. In 2013, perhaps as we approach the 150th anniversary of the first indentured labourers to arrive in Australia we may see a similar round of commemorative events and museum exhibitions.

While there has been much work on re-discovering the historical accounts of slavery, this book is an important addition to scholarship that analyses the reasons for this – the call by descendants of slaves and those with collective memory of slavery for their histories to rank in the national and global story of slavery. *Politics of memory* is an excellent account of this.

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Australian National Maritime Museum