

The Middle Passage in Black Expressive Culture

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Wilker, Frank. *Cultural Memories of Origin: Trauma, Memory, and Imagery in African American Narratives of the Middle Passage*. Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2017. 302 pages. ISBN 9783825361921. Hb. \$49.05.

Cultural Memories of Origin analyzes the representation of the Middle Passage—the second leg of the triangular slave trade, where enslaved Africans crossed the Atlantic Ocean to the New World—in African American literature and art, focusing on how and what its literary, visual, and performative iterations mean for descendants of slaves in the US. The book focuses on the cultural memory of the image of the slave ship in works from the Black Arts Movement to the advent of the twenty-first century. Wilker investigates how the cultural memory of the Middle Passage has changed, particularly within the post-Immigration and the Nationality Act era.

The prime originator of racial slavery and terror for African captives in the Atlantic is the Middle Passage; hence the book's rich analytical framework utilizes theories of trauma. Wilker's conception of trauma as inaccessible memory foregrounds the paradox of the slave's subjectivity and objectification. The chapter develops a theory of the Middle Passage as cultural trauma manifest in transgenerational sensibility, permeating forms of Black expressive culture, identity, and politics.

The chapter demonstrates how the profound rupture and dislocation of the Middle Passage forged "holes of existence" in the memory of dehumanized captives, who were thrust into incomprehensible spatiotemporal realms, which could not be mapped with the assistance of oral memory techniques alone. Wilker goes on to suggest that the supernatural tales of cannibalism and witchcraft helped African captives make sense of the irreality and the collective trauma of slavery.

In the chapter on Olaudah Equiano's *Interesting Narrative* (1789), Wilker offers an insightful review of the Carretta debate, concluding that it is a reenactment of the ways in which imperial archives have imposed silences and uncertainties on captives. After a nuanced analysis of its multiple subject positions, historical and stylistic indeterminacy, Wilker reads the *Narrative* as a survivor testimony which functions as the foundational "African" diasporic narrative. Wilker argues that the *Narrative* epitomizes how oral memory techniques are inseminated by the imperial technology of the written word. For instance, he shows that the tropes of the talking book, white cannibalism,

and specters are expressions of incomprehensibility produced by the radical dislocation and dispersal of captives. Paradoxically, Wilker suggests, the cultural trauma of undoing the self is the backdrop against which Black diasporic identity is constituted (127).

Chapter 5 examines how the aesthetics of the Black Arts Movement grapples with the “unspeakable” horrors of the Middle Passage. According to Wilker, an examination of Black expressive culture demonstrates that the Middle Passage has become, in LaCapra’s formulation, a mythical “founding trauma” for Black identity (128). Throughout the book, Wilker examines the relationship between the Holocaust and transatlantic slavery, drawing on points of contact between Holocaust and Black Studies. One such promising instance of the comparative approach is his application of Michael Rothberg’s concept of “traumatic realism” to the representation of the Middle Passage in Black cultural production. Traumatic realism, according to Rothberg, is defined by the coexistence of the ordinary and extraordinary aspects of genocide (qtd. in 135). Wilker goes on to show the ways in which cultural memories of the Middle Passage sway between realist and anti-realist, mimetic and modernist approaches, in particular how the image of the slave ship comes to be articulated within the cultural memory of American slavery.

The section on Amiri Baraka’s play *Slave Ship: A Historical Pageant* (1967) claims that Baraka’s fusion of art and experience—through the undoing of the distinction between audience and actors, audience and stage, fact and fiction—produces a testimony of Black suffering grounded in the shared history of cultural trauma. As Wilker’s detailed descriptions demonstrate, Baraka’s staging and Gilbert Moses’s direction were influenced by the radical aesthetics of Black Power, transforming the history of the Black diaspora into a “total atmosfeeling,” a vicariously, physically, sonically experienced and embodied spectacle (145). Its denial of emotional catharsis and evocation of shame is supposed to trigger the revolutionary anger of Black spectators. This view of a repetitive and stagnant history of racial oppression, in Wilker’s view, is the Black Art Movement’s epitome of the Middle Passage memory (156).

In the section on Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987), Wilker critiques Walter Benn Michaels’s and Eric Sundquist’s reduction of what her novel terms “rememory” to a traumatic contemporaneity, situating it rather in the interstices between remembering and forgetting, collectivity and individuality, choicelessness and choice (qtd. in Wilker 160). In addition to melancholic fixation, the narrative raises the possibility of processing collective trauma. The ambivalence surrounding *Beloved*’s figure inscribes ambivalence into the very concept of cultural memory it metaphorizes. That is, while it performs

the atrocity and trauma of the Middle Passage referentially and narratively, it complicates its own referentiality and narrative project by way of aporias and ruptures. Therefore, through the centering of the unspeakable and the corporeal, Morrison enacts the ruptures in the representation of the Middle Passage as cultural memory.

The children's picture book *The Middle Passage: White Ships, Black Cargo* (1995) by illustration artist Tom Feelings has not received enough attention by Black studies scholars so far. In this original section, Wilker contends that Feelings's *Middle Passage* serves as a poignant visual counter-memory of the Middle Passage, overwriting archival omissions and distortions. At the level of narrative, Feelings encourages spectatorial identification with the cultural memory of a mythical past; he re-narrates it because he wishes that the "Middle Passage could become, ironically, a positive connecting line to all of us whether living inside or outside of the continent of Africa" (qtd. in Wilker 201). At the same time, through his use of the tropes of rupture and unspeakability, Feelings obstructs viewers' narrative identification and emotional transference with the captives. Wilker concludes that Feelings's revision of the *Description of a Slave Ship*—the most familiar image of the Middle Passage commissioned by Abolitionists to campaign against the trade in 1788—is illuminating, as it shows how his manner of fracturing identification opens up the possibility of empathy, which respects the other(ness of the slave experience) (190, 192).

The last chapter argues that artistic and literary works in the 1990s "work through" the unspeakable horrors in accounts of the Middle Passage, challenging certain aspects of the aesthetic of the previous generation. Saidiya Hartman's critically acclaimed travel memoir *Lose Your Mother* (2006) documents a kind of reverse Middle Passage to Ghana and dispels nostalgic fantasies of Pan-Africanist belonging and homecoming. Her ethical refusal to reiterate what she calls "the grammar of violence" in contempt of its normalizing effect reproduces the archive's silences by rendering unspeakable the unrecorded experiences of captives (qtd. in Wilker 230). It is also a refusal to veil the ongoing dispersal and dislocation of the Black diaspora within the afterlives of slavery. In the next section, Wilker shows the ways in which, by provoking her audience with scandalous transgressions of an unwritten memorial script, Kara Walker deconstructs the mythical value of the Middle Passage and confronts viewers with their racialized projections and desires. The last section on Charles Johnson's historical novel *Middle Passage* (1990) develops Wilker's argument about Walker, namely that the parodic treatment of the Middle Passage presents a major shift in the cultural imaginary of the transatlantic slave trade. Wilker asserts that the self-reflexive, double-voiced

narratives by Johnson and Equiano serve to destabilize notions of identity, authenticity, and genre. In Wilker's view, polyphonic Black expressive cultures of remembrance—associated with the never-ending negotiation of the self—contest Hartman's understanding of social death as a constitutive aspect of Black non-being.

One of the greatest merits of the monograph is that it illustrates the ceaseless oscillation of the Middle Passage memory between dual oppositions, which interweave it in ever-new constellations of meaning. As Wilker states, this memory “exists as an intermixture of silence and noise, resides in between the gap and the voicing of that gap and emerges via the variation between compulsory and strategic remembering and forgetting” (287). According to Wilker, the impact of the Black diasporic gaze on the Middle Passage memory can already be felt as a result of the changing demographic of the Black population in the US, for Afrodiasporic writers are critically interrogating the exclusive focus on the catastrophic legacy of the Middle Passage and shifting their attention to other concerns (288). Black Studies scholars should read Wilker's book; for art historians and scholars conducting research in the field of children's literature, the chapter on Feelings's *The Middle Passage* could be important, whereas the considerably innovative section on Baraka could be illuminating for academics in the performing arts.

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