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Cultural Memories of Origin: Trauma, Memory and Imagery in African American Narratives of the Middle Passage by Frank Wilker (review)

Tuire Valkeakari

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Reviews

Frank Wilker. *Cultural Memories of Origin: Trauma, Memory and Imagery in African American Narratives of the Middle Passage*. Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2017. 302 pp. \$53.00.

Reviewed by Tuire Valkeakari, Providence College

The experience of reading Frank Wilker's *Cultural Memories of Origin* raises a complex question about genre expectations and international scholarship: if a scholar writes in English but primarily follows European continental—in this case, German—conventions of academic writing, what is his envisioned target audience? Does the intended audience primarily consist of Anglophone scholars accustomed to the manners and mores of Anglo-American academic writing, or of German-speaking scholars used to German writing conventions, or of transnational readers for whom English is today's Latin or academic Esperanto? In *Cultural Memories of Origin*, fidelity to the writing conventions of German academia means that Wilker provides a discursive survey of his topic, the representation of the middle passage in select African American literary and artistic works, rather than offering and defending a succinctly stated argument. In lieu of a thesis, Wilker articulates his task: he sets out to “point out the usefulness of the language of trauma and to discuss its hermeneutic limits” and to “seek out the various terms upon which cultural memory manifests itself pertaining to the Middle Passage” (19-20). These goals are as commendable as the book's topic is important.

Yet, being a U. S.-based reader accustomed to the importance of argumentation, I cannot resist claiming that a more tightly thesis-driven approach would have been useful, for two reasons. First, a fair amount of scholarship on middle passage tropes and narratives in African American cultural production has already been published, including and following *Black Imagination and the Middle Passage*, the pioneering 1999 essay collection coedited by Maria Diedrich, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and Carl Pedersen. Second, virtually any analysis of cultural representations of the middle passage revolves around trauma and memory, and both trauma theory and memory studies are now veritable industries. A relatively concise articulation of Wilker's approaches to trauma and memory would therefore have been helpful early on. Wilker's prose is marked by sentences such as “[This work will] incorporate the concept of trauma as an analytical tool—a tool whose precision will be explored in the following chapter” (13). Cutting some of the circularity, repetition, and heavy signposting would have improved the text's flow and reader-friendliness throughout the monograph.

One important contribution that *Cultural Memories of Origin* makes to the existing scholarship on the cultural mediation of the middle passage is the multiplicity of genres represented by its primary sources, which originate in what Wilker calls “the post-Immigration and Nationality Act era” (18), that is, the post-1965 era from the Black Arts Movement to the present. They include Amiri Baraka's play *Slave Ship*, Toni Morrison's canonical neo-slave narrative *Beloved*, Charles Johnson's philosophically imbued postmodernist novel *Middle Passage*, Saidiya Hartman's genre-defying memoir and historical study *Lose Your Mother*, cartoonist and illustrator Tom Feelings's visual narrative *The Middle Passage: White Ships/Black Cargo*, and various installation pieces by visual artist Kara Walker. However, Wilker's initial commentary on his source selection does not articulate what is at stake, methodologically, in his choice

of this multigeneric and formally diverse material (15-18). To his credit, Wilker elaborates on the hermeneutic relationship between the textual and the visual across his sources in later chapters—stating, for example, that while Morrison and Hartman treat the middle passage “as an element of the ‘unspeakable’ . . . , as a void which resists representation . . . , Walker’s silhouettes materialize this void . . . , invit[ing] the viewer to fill the void of the silhouette” (263).

Wilker opens his monograph with a 120-page-long (from a U. S. standpoint, an extraordinarily long) introductory segment consisting of four chapters. Chapters two and three provide well-researched overviews of trauma theory and of the challenges of culturally “remembering” the traumatic experiences of those violently uprooted Africans who historically underwent the middle passage. However, these chapters, which do not analyze Wilker’s primary sources, offer few original insights. Wilker’s nuanced and historically grounded reflection on Olaudah Equiano’s *Interesting Narrative* in chapter four, in turn—which does address the Carretta debate—is informative, current, and carefully crafted. It could stand alone as a useful and accessible introduction to Equiano’s text.

An omission that, in my opinion, stands out as a flaw both in Wilker’s extensive prolegomenon and in the two chapters dedicated to his primary sources (chapters five and six) is the absence of sufficiently substantive and up-to-date theorizing of the African diaspora. True, Wilker inserts the word “diaspora” into the book’s opening (10-11) and other occasional pages, dedicates one paragraph to surveying the term (53), evokes Paul Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic* and Stuart Hall’s “Cultural Identity and Diaspora” a few times, and eventually addresses diasporic horizons more attentively when analyzing *Lose Your Mother* (see especially 210-15, 223, 234). However, like trauma theory and memory studies, diaspora studies is now a sophisticated and expansive field in its own right, one that is extremely relevant to an analysis of the cultural memory of the middle passage. In my view, Wilker’s failure to engage diaspora studies substantively at the outset—that is, to place his work within this field in an informed and self-reflective manner—results in a significant conceptual and scholarly disadvantage throughout the book. Far too many pages therefore verbosely attempt to reinvent the basics, instead of dynamically contributing to an ongoing conversation. For example, Wilker’s references to the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 (14, 18) stem from his desire to highlight the presence of persons of African descent in the United States whose ancestors did not leave Africa on slave ships. However, his efforts to juxtapose middle passage blackness with the multifaceted internal diversity of U. S. blackness draw only minimally from the content and lexicon of diaspora studies, and his remarks on this issue therefore remain lamentably modest in the introduction and the conclusion alike (14-15, 288).

Wilker’s discussion of *Beloved* in one of the book’s two main chapters—an analysis focusing on Morrison’s narrative strategies in both obscuring and gradually unfolding the unspeakable trauma of the middle passage—is strong and effectively developed. One quibble, though: because a close reading of the character/ghost Beloved’s middle passage memories occupies a pivotal position in Wilker’s analysis (164-68), an explicit engagement with previous scholarly readings of the same passages would have been beneficial. For example, Elizabeth B. House, whose 1990 article Wilker cites but whose argumentation he does not evoke, arrives at rather different conclusions than Wilker does about what and how much can be known about Beloved’s identity and personal history. Why not converse with such readings? The most perceptive aspect of Wilker’s solid analysis of *Middle Passage*—Johnson’s quirky and hermeneutically titillating narrative of the emergence of black diasporic subjectivity in the context of the Atlantic slave trade—elaborates on the role of writing in the development of the protagonist Rutherford Calhoun’s sense of self. However, dialogue with existing scholarship on this much-discussed novel is almost nonexistent. Wilker’s contributions to the current body of knowledge are the most apparent in his analyses of works that have received relatively little scholarly attention

to date, namely, Baraka's *Slave Ship*, Feelings's *The Middle Passage*, and Kara Walker's evocations of the Atlantic slave trade and slavery. These works receive a thoughtful treatment in *Cultural Memories of Origin*, and Wilker's attention to the intersectionality of word and image not only enriches his discussions but also adds significantly to the book's scholarly value.

Finally, despite my criticisms, I have an autobiographical answer to the question of target audience that I opened with: when I was a student at a northern European university before moving to the United States for graduate study, I would have benefited from monographs in African American literary scholarship with 120-page-long introductions, in a manner of speaking. In an environment where courses solely dedicated to African American literature were not offered, acquiring introductory knowledge was an arduous task. Some advanced research was available in the form of monographs and journal articles, but large textbook-like surveys of the field's fundamentals were not; in their absence, extensive introductions to monographs would have been useful. Different readers have different needs, so I look forward to learning which audiences will respond most favorably to Wilker's book, the strongest sections of which are thorough and informative.

Paul D. Naish. *Slavery and Silence: Latin America and the U.S. Slave Debate*. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 2017.

Reviewed by Jeffrey F. Taffet, United States Merchant Marine Academy

The late Paul Naish argues that antebellum discussions about Latin America were a way to address slavery in the United States at a moment when intellectual and inclusive conversations about slavery were impossible. He suggests that despite extensive anti- and pro-slavery writings in this era, most this literature served, and was consumed by, people already committed to a particular view about human bondage. Authors, especially novelists and historians hoping for a broader audience, reflexively shied away from explicitly writing about slavery as a way of appealing to wider audiences. This was especially true, Naish contends, in the two decades preceding the publication of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852).

Writers in the United States obviously appreciated that slavery was the essential question of the era however, and their stories and narratives about Latin America provided opportunities to present their ideas. His strongest chapter considers historian William Hickling Prescott, the author of three influential books about the Spanish conquest of the Americas. Prescott castigated the Spanish for their harsh treatment and enslavement of indigenous Americans, yet also cautioned that rapid change might lead to social disorder. To make this point, Prescott celebrates the Dominican priest, Bartolome de las Casas, for his abolitionist-like work in the early Spanish empire, but he also argued that las Casas, though "strongly on the ground of natural right . . . like some of the reformers of our day, disdained to calculate the consequences of carrying out the principle to its full and unqualified extent" (159). Naish suggests that Prescott's approach neatly reflected his New England whiggish instincts about the depravity of slavery as well as a belief in the wisdom of a slow and orderly march toward change.

Naish also looks at slavery's defenders, carefully exploring the writings of a set of pseudo-Archeologists who proposed that Aztec cities and the extensive earthworks in the Ohio Valley were not built by indigenous peoples. Instead, Naish explains, they claimed that Europeans had arrived long before Columbus, and that Europeans were responsible for the construction of these grand projects. This argument