

Memories of Africa: home and abroad in the United States

by Toyin Falola

Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2023. Pp. 256.
\$99.00 (hbk), \$30.00 (pbk); <https://doi.org/10.14325/mississippi/9781496843494.001.0001>.

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Toyin Falola's *Memories of Africa: home and abroad in the United States* makes a significant contribution to a vast interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary field of literature under the expansive umbrella of African diaspora studies. Written with passion and commitment it is, as suggested in the acknowledgements, the culmination of years of thinking about, and working on, African memoirs and of Falola's fervent work on questions of memory and belonging. The depth and reach of this book are considerable. It offers lively insights and informed historical contexts for the contemporary and passionate themes of belonging and alienation in our times.

The conceptual and theoretical framing of *Memories of Africa* is eclectic invoking questions of diaspora; space, place and time; memory and belonging, tradition and modernity, while resisting recourse to having the stories told over-determined and domesticated by any one theoretical lens. The conceptual orientation throughout the text is organic, allowing for the storytelling of the memorialist to be the primary focus, often reflecting larger themes and other times contradicting them. The originality of the text lies in its focus on memoir to get at the soul and inner dynamics of an (diasporic) African identity that is multiplex and nuanced. Ultimately the book puts into question desires for a coherent and readily discernable 'African diasporic identity'. Memoir does what surveys and social science are unable to do, that is to get at the personal and the situational subjectivities that are made through movement and travel and the material and symbolic encounters and interactions through which self and other are continually made and re-made. Falola's analysis allows for a focus on difference while also gesturing to commonality. Indeed, this interplay of difference and similarity is one of the compelling features of the work. Throughout the text, seemingly incommensurate dynamics are brought together as dialectics as in, for example, commonality and difference; resonance and dissidence, roots and routes, belonging and alienation. These dualities are creative dialectics rather than pathological conditions in need of cure as is often prevalent in studies that insist on recourse to 'roots' as a way of stabilising identity and belonging. One result of this focus is that throughout the text 'culture' is treated as a dense idea. Culture emerges in

the everyday experiences of the memorialist as both process and entity. There are many moments when 'journeys' and 'crossroads' become metaphors for 'culture' and when memory may also be 'against' culture. Falola notes in his concluding chapter that migrations and migration stories have metamorphosed from being a social phenomenon to being a culture in the contemporary world (p. 198).

Falola's stated objective in writing this book is modest. He wants his readers to enjoy the stories as told by the memoirists about whom he writes. He wants the reader to feel and see the experience, insights and, ultimately, attain a keen sense of the subjectivities that emerge from the specific memoirs he focuses on. The introductory chapter is titled, '(Shifting) Spaces and (Fixed) Crossroads: the African Diaspora and the Imaginations of Africa'. The bracketing of 'shifting' and 'fixed' recalls both the symbolic and the real and physical nature of space and place and the interplay of the social and the political. Falola is acutely mindful of the politics, the histories of conquest and marginalisation and the racism that are together a collective backdrop to the stories told but agency prevails in the stories he tells and identities exceed simplistic reductionist thinking.

I appreciate the organisation of the text and the way each chapter title offers a clear guide to the emerging themes: culture and cultural politics (Chapter 2) in Njie's *Sweat Is Invisible in the Rain*; tradition and modernity in Emmanuel Babatunde's *Kelebogile* (Chapter 3); language, interpretation, orality and communitarianism are highlighted as important factors in Michael Afolayan's *Fate of Our Mothers* (Chapter 4); the density of culture is celebrated in Assensoh's *Journeys* (Chapter 5); alienation, universalism and global identity are championed in the memoirs of A.B. Assensoh and Cherno Njie (Chapter 6). The subtitles also provide useful signposts for the emerging themes. The penultimate chapter offers a more general analysis of 'old' and 'new' homes in the African diaspora and the final chapter is an engaging summative that brings home the depth and broad reach of the text, titled, *From Slave Narrative to Freedom Narratives: a genealogy of immigrant stories*. I especially appreciate how Falola takes us back, in the final chapter, to the formative works of Olaudah Equiano, Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs and Du Bois, respectively, by way of 'bridging the gap' between the contemporary and in particular the memoirs he focuses on in the text and these earlier memoirs rooted in the history of Black enslavement and freedom. This focus confirms the impressive depth and historical reach and the potential of a broad appeal of Toyin Falola's superb book, *Memories of Africa: home and abroad in the United States*.

doi:10.1017/S0022278X23000502