

## **Book Review**

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Christine Matzke and Osita Okagbue (eds.) *African Theatre 8: Diasporas*, Woodbridge: James Currey, 2009, ISBN 978-1-84701-501-3, pp.170, Price N/A

Since the late 1980s diaspora has been used as a cultural frame to account for the diversity of African experience across different historical settings, socio-cultural contexts and geographical locations. The appropriation of a critical term that was originally very closely related to Jewish political thought on dislocation and exile is not without its problems though meanwhile a largely accepted one. Whilst the classic diaspora model was founded on the notion of an original homeland and enforced expulsion, more recent debates seek to account for the cross-cultural dynamics of an increasingly transnational Africanist experience following the deconstructivist theoretical debates on postmodernism and globalization. Within performance studies, diaspora is now widely perceived as a performative praxis rather than critical discourse which shifts the overall analytic focus towards cultural performance, theatre and the media. Diaspora is henceforth regarded as a post-racial intervention and articulation of African identity which attempts to bridge the gap presented by the internal and transnational diversity of African-derived cultural groupings throughout the world.

The present volume broadens the perspective on these current debates by focusing on African diasporic theatre and performance. More specifically, it appears that the included contributions account for two major shifts in recent African diaspora studies: one, the conceptualisation of diaspora as a transnational articulation of identity and belonging and two, addressing the fact that diaspora is a performative in(ter)vention of black performance culture worldwide. Christine Matzke and Osita Okagbue in their introduction to the volume thus point out how 'African experience' accounts for a

'myriad of groups and communities with widely differing histories, cultural identities, dispersed nationalities, geographical origins and current locations' (xvi). They critically address the emergent complication evoked by such a widening of horizon which transcends earlier discourses of repatriation and internationalism. In fact, the editors argue that definitions of diaspora will significantly vary depending on the specifics of cultural, geographical, gender and class divisions. While such diversion of the concept may risk losing the critical edge of usefully applying its immanent critique, they also defend its critical value as a performative strategy of counter-discourse formation. Despite the recent proliferation of diaspora scholarship they ultimately uphold the value and distinctness of their critical approach towards the concept by arguing that African diasporic theatre serves as a 'site of cultural expression and elaboration' (xviii) that allows for the strategic renewal of a transnational diasporic community and political agenda.

The volume stands out for its rigorous attempt to bring together academic and practice based points of view as well as different formats that include Jane Plastow's interview with Lemn Sissay, as well as Mona Khedr's English translation of Khaled El-Sawy's satirical play *Messing with the Mind* (2008). It appears particularly noteworthy that its contributions widen the geographical horizon of African diaspora studies by including regional examples from as diverse places as Tasmania, Israel, Europe and the Americas. Astles' and James' essays on Afro-Cuban theatre and dance, for example, trace the importance of Yoruba influence in folk performance as these merge into playwriting and onto the national theatre stage. The African presence, James argues, may hence play out as a 'metaphorical bridge' (43) between religious beliefs and gender oppression in the instance of prevalent Cuban machismo. Similarly, migrant authors in Italy account for a largely transformative process of self-definition within the African community there. *Griot* forms such as song and story-telling become crucial examples of such performative strategies of renewal and assertion spurred by diasporic theatre performance and dramatic writing. At the same time, the volume also presents a more critical view towards this, when quoting Lemn Sissay who asserts that story-telling may be what diaspora performance does best but may also become 'bad therapy at its worst' (80).

Several contributions point towards the existing socio-cultural and historical linkages between the Caribbean, England and Ethiopia, and thereby contextualize an interesting shift with regards to the notion of exile as an empowering rather than oppressive condition for cultural resistance and theatre practice. Another interesting observation one may conclude from the selected essays is that Ethiopian dancers in Israel may encounter racial politics not dissimilar from the obstacles faced by black theatre practitioners

in black British theatre during the 1970s as pointed out by Yvonne Brewster. Overall, the volume presents its most fascinating perspectives via these cross-cultural comparisons as they problematize the neo-colonial assumptions that underlie the marketing of black cultural performances world wide. It also raises the important issue of contemporary African diaspora practice torn between world economic forces and ever increasing migratory movements, while at the same time not adding too many surprising insights to the already existing theories of diaspora and performance in the field.