

Julie Crooks (ed), *Fragments of Epic Memory*, New York: DelMonico Books, 2022. ISBN: 9781636810126 (cloth)

In this sense, we could consider one emergent formation of the intimacies of four continents as the variety of contacts among slaves, indentured, and mixed peoples living, working, and surviving together in the Americas. (Lowe 2015: 34)

Living, surviving, and working together in the Americas is what conceptually frames the volume, *Fragments of Epic Memory*, edited by Julie Crooks. This collection of interviews, essays, poems, and book excerpts was collated to accompany an exhibition at the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto in late 2021/early 2022.¹ The exhibition is named after Derek Walcott’s 1992 Nobel Lecture, titled “The Antilles: Fragments of Epic Memory”.² Interspersed with photographs, prints, and other visual images, *Fragments of Epic Memory* emphasises a plurality of Caribbean experiences that illustrate a complex ensemble and highlight what Lisa Lowe (2015: 175) has described, in *The Intimacies of Four Continents*, as “gaps, uncertainties, impasses, and elisions”. The collection disrupts Eurocentric histories and temporalities by centring black creative expressions that map an alternative political, spatial, and visual landscape of the Caribbean. The placement of photographs in *Fragments of Epic Memory* forms a constitutive part of the text and accounts for a black diasporic self-fashioning as an unfolding element of freedom that attends to both the vastness of the colonial archive and anti-colonial black expressivities.

In the essay “Seeing the Unseizable: Confronting the Past and Considering the Future”, editor and curator Julie Crooks explores the visual landscape of the Caribbean through photographs that seem haunted by a ghostliness that hovers in the aftermath of genocide and enslavement. The photograph that most captivates Crooks’ attention is one of “Boy with Optical

¹ See <https://ago.ca/exhibitions/fragments-epic-memory> (last accessed 20 February 2023).

² Read online at <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1992/walcott/lecture/> (last accessed 20 February 2023).

Device at Market”.³ The gaze of the young black man, photographed by an unknown photographer, reveals as much as it conceals. In this image, the young man gazes back at the photographer in a gesture that conjures bell hooks’ (2015: 115-131) “oppositional gaze”. In her essay introducing the text, Crooks notes that the artistic works exhibited in *Fragments of Epic Memory* “confront the ghosts of Caribbean colonial regime” (p.34) and thus establishes haunting as a trope that hovers around the enduring legacy of enslavement.

In an excerpt from *The Black Jacobins*, C.L.R James recounts the scheming and plotting that enlivened the uprisings on the plantations of San Domingo to illuminate the imperative of the revolution. Elsewhere, we are introduced to Derek Walcott’s uneasy interrogation of Antillean life and its entanglements with imperialism, and Kamau Brathwaite’s “Calypso”, which contains within it particularised difficult histories (“islands ruled by sugarcane”) and vivid musical references (“it becomes an island of dance”) to express a sense of rhythmic orientation to everyday life. The poem “The Cartographer Tries to Map a Way to Zion” is Kei Miller’s method of unravelling a different kind of encounter with space; Miller’s lyricism encapsulates the experiences of a Caribbean subject not beholden to Eurocentric categories and the attendant practice of knowing something or someone wholly and completely (cf. Glissant 1997). Miller’s poem confounds the logic of liberal subjectivity that is characterised through the ownership of property and adherence to Christianity and is beholden to individualism. Miller illuminates a relationality sustained by an understanding of space as alterable (McKittrick 2006). Mahadai Das’ poem “They Came in Ships”, acknowledges the critical connections between enslavement and indentureship. The inclusion of poetry in this volume is a crucial mechanism for articulating specificities in ways that mark the transformative and historical significance of trans-oceanic relations.

In Crooks’ analysis of Rodell Warner’s “Augmented Archive”,⁴ she posits that “vernacular photographs” (p.38) unsettle the surveillance and enclosure of the camera through

³ “Boy with Optical Device at Market, location unknown, c. 1915” can be viewed online at <https://ago.ca/agoinsider/seeing-unseizable> (last accessed 20 February 2023).

⁴ See <https://www.rodellwarner.com/Augmented-Archive> (last accessed 20 February 2023).

processes of self-affirmation that contest the totality of the imperial gaze. Similarly, Barbara Paca's investigations of the "epic creativity" of Frank Walter elucidate how African musical aesthetics are characterised by the weaving of "complex vibrations" and "deep tonal qualities" (p.103) that syncretise political willpower, spirituality, and poetry to reorder the landscape and heighten what Walcott called the "smell of refreshing possibility" (quoted on p.21). Paca's essay, inspired by Walcott's Nobel Lecture, highlights the economy of photographing racial violence while being attentive to the transformative power of Frank Walter's creative works in moving away from and beyond the former frame of reference.

In "Reimagining History as Narrative in Contemporary Art", Marsha Pearce writes of the historical breach instantiated by Indigenous genocide and African enslavement, which produced "a perpetual after-ness with no clear beginning and no end in sight" (p.159). At the root of these monumental events has been an obligation to reimagine the meaning of freedom and, through artistic practices, reject stasis in favour of what Tina Campt (2017: 10) calls a "modality of diasporic motion". Correspondingly, Melanie Newton's "'The Quintessential Caribbean People': The Garifuna of St. Vincent and the Grenadines and the World" signals the complicated histories of the afterlives of enslavement and the "economy of forgetting" (Lowe 2015: 3) that restricted Indigenous movement and alienated Garifuna people from their "language, land and traditions" (p.189).

Fragments of Epic Memory is akin to Audre Lorde's poem "A Litany for Survival".⁵ Both address the conundrum of living and surviving through the heavy residuals of colonialism. Survival is the vibrational tone of this collection of photographs, essays, poems, and book excerpts. Each entry invites the reader to consider the vastness of the Caribbean not as periphery but as transformative of our relations to space, place, and time.

⁵ Read online at <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/147275/a-litany-for-survival> (last accessed 20 February 2023).

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