

Book Review

Memories of Africa, Home, and Abroad in the United States

Publisher: University Press of Mississippi, 2023

Page count: 241 pages

Price: \$99

There are certain books that will continue to be relevant to contemporary discourse as it fashions itself out of history, Toyin Falola's book, *Memories of Africa, Home, and Abroad in the United States*, is one of those. In the abyss of 'remembering' and 'recollecting', Falola takes his readers through a seamless journey in the collection of essays and selected images that make up the entirety of his book by exploring the experiences of African migrants through a recount of their memoirs. Thus, *memoir* is the lens through which Falola challenges normative linear narratives of African history to provide a more complex understanding of the African continent through the creation of complicated stories of African migrants and their lived experiences.

Falola's play on the words 'memory and memoir' is not merely for intended pun but to see the ways in which both are interwoven terms that he deploys as concepts and perform as repertoires in the formation of the African diasporic identity. Memoirs are integral to this discourse because it demonstrates the emotions and interpersonal narratives as depicted by the memoirist who recounts the story from an unbiased position to exude tangibility and credibility. In the preface of the book, 'memory and memoir' are described to be closely intertwined with memoirs serving as the written records of personal memories and the reflection of a historical source to reveal how African migrants navigate themselves in psychological and physical spaces. Here, Falola makes a case for the importance of memory, arguing that the recollective of the past has an influence on the present and the future. It is worthy to note that while the book fills the gap in literature to honor African migrants since

the transatlantic slave trade through the twenty-first century, it stands out as a canonical text in the larger conversations of transnationalism, migration, and globalization. The 241-page book divided into seven chapters including a concluding segment teases out a deeper contextualization of identity politics, the relationship between the concept of diaspora and the notion of spatiality and the dynamics of contesting identities in contemporary societies.

The first four chapters of *Memories of Africa, Home, and Abroad in the United States* examine memoirs written by Cherno Njie, Emmanuel Babatunde, Michael Afolayan, and A.B Assensoh. However, before Falola negotiates the tropes of home, its nostalgia and culture, the first chapter titled “(Shifting) Space and (Fixed) Crossroads: The African Diaspora and the Imaginations of Africa”, introduces and also complicates the meaning of “diaspora” and the sensitive relationship between the African diaspora and the Black diaspora. Categorically, the focus here is on the interconnection between Africans in the diaspora, their native homelands, and the United States, noting the contributions of Langston Hughes, Claude McKay amongst others. Falola approaches the diaspora as a liminal space where African migrants negotiate their identities and reshape their imagination of Africa- “Third space”. As an offshoot of W.E.B DuBois “double consciousness” in relation to concept of space which is “a shifting entity”, Falola mentions that the African migrant manifest a “Triple Consciousness”- a situation where African migrants are trapped or exist between two worlds and contend with the third space as they are experiencing and forging their identities. The diaspora itself is a crossroad as it depicts the place where two cultures are in conversation, highlighting its convergences and divergences in history, politics, philosophy, and cultural nuances.

Chapter two titled “Culture and Cultural Politics in Cherno Njie’s *Sweat is Invisible in the Rain* analyzes Njie’s memoir to depict the negotiations of home and culture within the African continent. He starts by noting the communal lifestyle prevalent in African home and familial settings as opposed to the individualistic system of Western culture which has been thwarted by colonialism. Njie’s memoir as portrayed by Falola engages a couple of salient objectives crucial to the African culture. He highlights how cultural practices and traditions can be used to assert political dominance and marginalize those who do not conform to the dominant cultural norms, specifically in the Gambian culture. For instance, he recalls the collaboration of Gambians in the United States in the spiritual and religious aspect to espouse the importance in diasporic performances of traditional African ideologies. The chapter looks at the culture that shaped Njie’s life from his childhood to his diasporic interactions in the US, and ways in which he incorporates an Afropolitan ideal of cultural intermingling in his cultural expressions.

Chapter three titled “The Representation of Tradition and Modernity in Emmanuel Babatunde’s *Kelebogile*” explores African indigenous traditions (such as language, naming, reincarnation, purification rites, marriage ceremonies, facial marks, traditional medicine etc), and modernity simultaneously to show how the cooperation between African and Western cultures can shape cultures in Africa and the African diaspora. Through Falola’s careful and thoughtful engagement with Babatunde’s work, the memoir indicates colonialism truncated normative indigenous practices by the introduction of westernization. He notes that modernity is not an absolute departure from tradition rather it enhances the thought systems and cultures to a global pedestal. Like Falola notes, that “traditions are what makes an African stay true to his origin”, modernity will continue to aid new models of navigating through space, but the source will always pull from its origin and reference.

“Deriving Meaning: Nuances of Language, Nodes of Orality, and Sense of Communitarianism in Michael Afolayan’s *Fate of Our Mothers* which addresses the Yoruba language system is the focus in the fourth chapter. Here, Falola positively notes the way Afolayan combines the use of Yoruba and English languages in his memoir to assert that language and its usage are quintessential to the understanding of world literature. Falola engages aspect of orality and its epistemology—language patterns, tone, chants, praise poems, songs, translation of native proverbs and idioms that Afolayan consciously deploys in order to show that Yoruba culture and its language system existed before colonialism.

Falola’s fifth chapter “The Density of Cultures: A.B. Assensoh’s *Journeys*” engages the Assensoh’s memoir by providing a personal narrative of major historical events that shaped his life such as the Civil Rights movement and the Pan-Africanist movement. Falola focuses on topics from *A Matter of Sharing* and *Migrant Stories* to trace and reflect on Assensoh’s experiences on discrimination as an African immigrant in places like Sweden and the US. This chapter on Assensoh’s is detailed as it gives a clear narrative as he encounters people and his experience through places he travels to. Through Assensoh’s memoir, Falola further reveals the complexities of the African in new homelands.

Chapter six and seven returns to the previous chapters to analyze the works of A.B Assensoh, Cherno Njie, Emmanuel Babatunde and Michael Afolayan. The chapters are titled “Migrant (Un)Homeliness: Universalism and Global Identity in the Memoirs of A.B. Assensoh and Cherno Njie” and “Contrasting Experiences of Old and New Homes in the. New African Diaspora Memoirs” respectively. In chapter six, Falola examines global citizenship, Afropolitanism, cultural hybridity and the concept of straddling identities together through the Assensoh and Njie’s memoirs. As postcolonial writers and cosmopolitans,

Falola notes the different ways the texts examine the migrant experience and how Africans renegotiate their identity in a home far from home. From the vantage point of being in the diaspora, Assensoh and Njie are able to write about Africa from an aerial view that explores hybridity and multiculturalism. Chapter seven returns to the experiences of Emmanuel Babatunde, Michael Afolayan and Cherno Njie to examine the “culture shock” that these writers experience in their new homes. All the memoirs analyzed cover themes of communitarianism, family, corruption, bad governance, and misconceptions about African womanhood/motherhood. The point that Falola notes here is that the memoirs highlight the concerns of the writers who still look to Africa for hope and combine their despair with their new realities.

The book ends with a concluding chapter on the influence of slavery on African diasporic memoirs. This chapter titled “From Slave Narratives to Freed Narratives: A Genealogy of Immigrant Stories” traces the history from the immigrant stories of Olaudah Equiano, Frederick Douglass, Booker T. Washington etc from the homelands to the United States. Through various epochs and movements in history, African Americans have always found ways to document and keep accounts of slave narratives, freedom narratives, and immigrant stories. Falola notes that there is a connection between slave narratives and modern memoirs to the African diaspora by maintaining that DuBois “double consciousness” presents a case of merging both old traditions with new realities to navigate the self in the diaspora.

Falola’s book indeed brings a refreshing nostalgia and positive approach in considering the use of memoir as an artistic medium. The book draws from an array of historical fact and makes connection with contemporary studies and modernity which makes it relatable in the ongoing discourse of African migration and identity formations. Toyin Falola’s *Memories of Africa, Home and Abroad in the United States* is recommended for those interested in the intersection of History and Literature, Black studies, and African Diaspora scholarship.

Olayombo Raji-Oyelade
University of Texas at Austin
olayombo.raji@utexas.edu