

BOOK REVIEWS

WOMEN'S ROLE IN THE SLAVE TRADE

Ipsen, Pernille: Daughters of the Trade. Atlantic Slavers and Interracial Marriage on the Gold Coast. University of Pennsylvania, 2015, 269 pages. Price: 388 DKK.

Ipsen's book sets out to explore the politics of gender and race in the pre-colonial and colonial period on what was then known as the Gold Coast (now called Ghana). The topic is approached from the perspectives of women – the daughters of the trade – and the larger, transatlantic relations they were part of in Osu (a part of the capital Accra) as well as Copenhagen. In the book, it is described how these women should not be seen (only) as victims of the trade, but also as women who benefitted from the trade by virtue of their status as 'free' African women with linkages to the Danish fort Christiansborg. More specifically, the book has a focus on the institution of *cassare* (marriage in Portuguese), meaning marriage practices between Danish men at the fort and (Euro)African women on the Gold Coast in the 18th century. These marriages form a point of departure for understanding the shifting perceptions of gender and race in the pre-colonial and colonial period as well as of the broader perspectives of the slave trade.

By describing the lives of these daughters of the trade, whose existence have been erased from our memories, the book is shedding light on new and surprising perspectives on the slave trade which is often perceived to be a male 'business'. The reason for the invisibility of the women's stories may be that these marriages were tolerated, but not accepted, in Copenhagen, and that the women did not follow their husbands when they left the fort. Consequently, only few sources are available on this topic. In addition, the colonial period brought about a stronger segregation between Africans (including the (Euro) African women) and the white male staff of the fort. As such, the book contributes with

valuable insights through its meticulous documentation of the women's stories – perhaps also rather disturbing insights for the Ga people of Osu, reminding them of their role in the preservation of the slave trade, as well as for the Danish/Ghanaian descendants of the staff from the fort who were perhaps not aware of their forefather's former wives.

One of the main points of the book is that the *cassare* marriages were advantageous for both parties and served to maintain relations and build alliances between the Ga trading families in Osu and the Danish staff at the fort. The marriages took place in accordance with the Ga customs underlining the need to respect local traditions. It is described that “Women on the Gold Coast not only helped their European husbands survive and resettle in Africa; they also helped them as translators, cultural ambassadors, and trading partners” (p. 9). The front cover of the book is a painting of Sara Malm, the *cassare* wife of Wulff Joseph Wulff (a Danish assistant at the fort), illustrating her hybrid identity as a (Euro) African woman dressed in mainly European clothes but with a traditional African headscarf and gold jewellery to mark her difference from other African women. Through their marriages, the women gained access to the ‘mulatto chest’ at the fort, which supported the children of these marriages. In a number of cases, they also inherited property from their husbands.

Another main point of the book is that these (Euro)African women had more room for manoeuvre within their *cassare* marriages than they would have had in marriages with other African men, as the *cassare* wives often lived separately from their husbands with their extended Ga families along with their children. The women could therefore continue being engaged in different trade activities independently of their husbands. However, the book also contains examples from a later period where husbands and wives lived together in more ‘European’ style marriages.

The strength of the institution of the *cassare* marriages – and thus also the importance

of the book – is demonstrated by the fact that several attempts were made to regulate and undermine the institution. The most persistent attempts came from the religious authorities, as especially the chaplains were concerned about these intimate relations. A bishop wrote about the need for teaching the gospel of Christianity to the wives and the offspring of these marriages and for supporting the children. He also encouraged the Danish husbands to ask the wives to follow them back to Copenhagen. Thus, Christian schools were established and the offspring were trained according to the existing gendered division of labour.

Throughout the period the Danish husbands had to balance between on the one hand the dominant, racialised discourses legitimising the preservation of the slave trade – including the general notion of ‘the Africans’ as one uniform, lower-ranking group of people – and on the other hand the practices of the *cassare* marriages with specific (Euro)-African women who had to separate themselves from African women and to some extent assimilate themselves to European culture in the later period of these marriage practices. However, this balancing act became increasingly difficult. During the more pronounced racial segregation of the colonial period, it was probably not possible to even consider (Euro)African women as potential wives.

The book could serve as a way of mainstreaming gender, or perhaps more accurately women, in the teaching of the history of the Danish Atlantic slave trade. That makes the book a most timely contribution – especially bearing in mind the recent film *The Gold Coast* (2015), where these relations are not described at all. Women in the movie are portrayed as voiceless slaves available for providing different services for the male staff at the fort, with the sole exception of a female, Christian teacher. In light of these historical perspectives, the book reviewer wonders what the present day relations look like between Danish men and Ghanaian women, or between Danish women and Ghanaian men? Or

how the micro-politics of intimate relations links to present day intersections of gender and race?

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MEETING BARAD HALFWAY – HASSE'S BOOK ON LEARNING IS NOT WITHOUT FRICTION

Cathrine Hasse: An Anthropology of Learning: On nested Frictions in Cultural Ecologies. Springer, 2015, 320 pages. Price: 1119 DKK.

Let me begin this review by saying that this is a great book. It is one of those books you can't read without stopping after almost every paragraph thinking about the points just made and how it relates to your own research and teaching experiences. However, I also admit to becoming increasingly dissatisfied with the book as I proceeded through its nine, densely written chapters, for reasons I will get back to later.

As a book about learning in which Hasse tries to combine new materialism (drawing particularly on Karen Barad and Tim Ingold), cultural theory (particularly Clifford Geertz), and cultural-historical psychology (Lev Vygotsky and followers) the scope of the book is already larger than 'just' the practices of anthropological/ethnographic fieldwork, from which it draws most of its examples. This is about being-in-the-world as embodied subjects, trying to figure out what is going on.

Hasse deals with this topic through discussions about key issues in anthropology and cultural theory such as how to understand 'culture' (as an analytical construct), meaning (of words and materialities), embodied practices, expectations, friction and surprise, activity and technologies. All this with attention

to learning and material intra-actions in specific historical-cultural settings, and mostly with an emphasis on the researcher's perspective. One of the key features of the book is Hasse's ability to ask good questions in order to open up the black box of learning; the difficult questions of how it is at all possible to make sense of new experiences, of our embodied presence as individuals in social, collective, material-discursive spaces, where our actions shape and are shaped by the numerous particularities of the space we occupy. How do we actually learn when doing fieldwork? How can we understand the processes of surprise, friction, and entanglement that happens over time when we encounter (or place ourselves in) a – to us – new cultural setting? What is the role of material cultural markers, from the sound waves we make when we speak to chairs placed in particular spaces, when learning and doing fieldwork? How does meaning change over time with new experiences, and what kinds of inclusions and exclusions happen in the practiced space? How can learning be thought of as an intra-active, material-discursive process creating particular agential cuts – learning *with* instead of *from* the context you find yourself in as a researcher?

The book is primarily written for an anthropological audience, presumably as a textbook, but it is also relevant to fieldworkers in general. It addresses participant observation as a particular process in which learning happens, draws on a range of literature and analytical concepts from or relevant to this field, and tells tales from a variety of fieldwork settings, spanning from the gendered spaces of the physics education, to a village on an Italian island, fieldwork in Cameroon, and more. The fieldwork examples, in particular, are interesting, and the insistence on aligning the more classical literature of Geertz and Vygotsky with a Baradian new materialist emphasis on material entanglement and agentiality is undoubtedly a contribution to the field that will create both fruitful and frustrating frictions with its readership.

My main critique of Hasse's book is that it doesn't quite do what it sets out to do. The book aims to bring forth the material aspects of learning and culture, and to read diverse literature within different analytical fields together in order to enhance both understanding and theoretical depth. But at the same time, the choice to make the materialist point – to argue for materials in learning and culture – in theoretical and metaphorical language, paradoxically makes it difficult to reach these goals; the material becomes less tangible than it needed to be.

For instance, the book is filled with claims (rather than arguments) that, “[w]e, our being-in-the-world, evolve with our sensory pathways extending out and materialising meaningful materials...” (p. 19). And even great metaphors like ‘dust bunnies’ (see e.g. p. 70) sometimes end up in piles of other metaphors, such as when she writes that: “zones [of proximal developments] can, as *sedimented connections*, hold *dust bunnies* together by directing their development” (p. 258, my italics).

My point is that the abovementioned writing style as well as the structure of the text creates a distance to the material; it never really gets into the meat of things. The argument of the book rests on an emphasis on materiality as a prerequisite for learning, and continually through the book (e.g. with Dewey on p. 167 and Bateson on p. 194) Hasse states that theory should be based in the empirical field in contrast to making the empirical examples fit the theory. And yet, the structure of the text does exactly the opposite of what it argues for: it introduces a theoretical statement, and then (sometimes) shows how this theory holds by providing fieldwork examples (which often appear to be re-readings of older analyses through the introduced theoretical lense). The paradox here is both that the language of new materialism on the one hand becomes an abstraction from the messy, friction-full dust bunny of reality that it is supposed to describe (or, when it is best, analyse), and that the materiality of

the particular cultural context for learning becomes an illustration of the theoretical point, rather than the starting point. It is theory first, empirical examples second.

This is not just something Hasse is guilty of, but something that the whole field of new feminist materialist theorising needs to be attentive to (myself included). Hasse's book has excellent fieldwork examples – they are the best parts of the book! It would have been great if these had formed the basis for her written engagement with culture and material learning processes, in which the vocabulary of e.g. Barad (2007) could then have been reflectively tested, rather than added on.

In addition, I sometimes found Hasse's use of – or lack of use of – Barad's concepts problematic. Hasse's interpretation, for instance, of *diffracted reading* as a kind of ‘supplementary’ reading of otherwise contradictory texts (p. 33) makes the literary engagements strangely uncritical – and thereby somewhat superficial. Rather, the diffraction metaphor comes from waves crashing into and overlapping each other, where the effect creates depths in form of both ‘holes’ and synergies (see e.g. van der Tuin (2011) for a good example). Furthermore, Hasse's uncritical use of concepts like ‘social role’ (p. 101-109) and Don Ihde's concepts of ‘body I’ and ‘body II’ (p. 110f) would have benefitted from a critical Baradian approach, making statements such as: “when our body I is exposed to the cultural body II” (p. 113) impossible. What happened to intra-active entanglements here?

What critique *does* allow us to see the frictions more clearly and thereby also go a step deeper into the argument. The issues mentioned above result in making the book more like a think piece – a manifest for a new approach/reconfiguration of learning within anthropology – rather than a radical contribution to feminist/new materialist literature (which it had potential to become). It makes good claims, but lacks depth and feeling of newness to those already convinced of the feminist materialist approach. This critique is

serious, I think, but should probably be read against my initial positive expectation towards and, excitement about, Hasse's project. And the book does create enough interesting frictions that it is worth reading, and discussing, and criticising – in short, it is definitely worth learning from one's engagement with it.

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LITERATURE

- Barad, Karen (2007): Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning. Duke University Press.
- van der Tuin, Iris (2011): A Different Starting Point, a Different Metaphysics: Reading Bergson and Barad Diffractively, in *Hypatia* 2011/26.

Ph.D.- DISSERTATIONS

*Marietta Radomska: Uncontainable Life:
A Biophilosophy of Bioart*

This dissertation investigates the ways in which thinking through the contemporary hybrid scientifico-artistic practices of bioart is a biophilosophical practice, one that contributes to a more nuanced understanding of life than we encounter in mainstream academic discourse. When examined from a Deleuzian feminist perspective, bioartistic projects reveal the inadequacy of asking about life's essence. Instead of examining the defining criteria of life, bioartistic practices explore and enact life as processual and always already uncontainable, thus transcending pre-conceived material and conceptual boundaries. In this way, this doctoral thesis concentrates on the ontology of life as it emerges through the selected bioartworks. The hope is that such an ontology can enable future conceptualisations of an ethico-politics that avoids the anthropocentric logic dominant in the humanities and social sciences.

From: Tema Genus, Department of Thematic Studies, Linköping University
The defence took place: 22 April 2016

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