The Future Is Now: A New Look at African Diaspora Studies. Edited by Vanessa K. Valdés. Newcastle upon Tyne, United Kingdom: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012. 210 pp.

The Future Is Now: A New Look at African Diaspora Studies is an edited volume whose chapter contributions were originally presented at the conference, *Let Spirit Speak! Cultural Journeys through the African Diaspora*, which took place April 2010 at The City College of New York. The volume's editor, Vanessa K. Valdés, has assembled nine essays, seven written in English and two in Spanish, which examine various types of cultural production from the African diaspora. An edited volume of this nature faces the difficult challenge of trying to provide readers with a fair representation of the peoples, languages, nations, and expressive forms found among the diverse communities of the diaspora. Of course, it is impossible to be entirely inclusive. Edited volumes necessarily succumb to a process of selection while adhering to a certain set of limitations regarding format, length, scope, etc. Nonetheless, one of the ways in which this volume attempts to represent the diaspora's diversity adequately is through the inclusion of texts addressing the artists and communities of approximately ten different countries. The first five chapters deal specifically with the Francophone, Hispanophone, and Anglophone Caribbean: Haiti, Cuba, Puerto Rico, (the Atlantic littoral of) Colombia, and Trinidad and Tobago. Subsequently, there is one chapter addressing Brazil, two on the United States, and one analyzing the works of three African artists. Furthermore, *The Future Is Now* fittingly represents a wide array of artistic mediums through which black artists express their perspectives, such as film, performance art, painting, photography, literature, and music.

The book opens with an invocation from a performance titled "Because When God is Too Busy: Haiti, me and THE WORLD," by contemporary spoken-word artist, Gina Athena Ulysse. In this dramatic monologue, Ulysse weaves history and personal narrative into spoken word, along with vodou chants, as a way to reflect on childhood memories, social injustices, spirituality, and the frequent dehumanization of Haitians. She searches for strength in a misogynist world, while often equating her subjugation—as a black woman—to that of her native Haiti. Ulysse also looks beyond Haitian borders while paying homage to a long list of men and women from around the globe who have taken part in similar struggles against oppression. In essence, this invocation is about reaffirming her identity and defining her place in the world, which inevitably necessitates that she revisit history in order to fully understand how the past continues to impact the present.

Gina Athena Ulysse's performance is an appropriate beginning to the book given that, despite the title's reference to the future, many of these studies actually return to the past and offer new, if not alternate, views on history. The book's second chapter, for example, is titled, "Meticulous Production and the Embodiment of History: María Magdalena Campos-Pons's *My Mother Told Me I Am Chinese* Series." In this essay, Heather Shirey analyzes the manner in which Cuban-born artist, María Magdalena Campos-Pons, explores both personal identity and collective memory while addressing her Chinese ancestry through her multi-media series, *My Mother Told Me I Am Chinese.* Shirey explains how Campos-Pons's artwork transcends mere personal memory by contributing to our understanding of the often ignored history of Chinese immigration in Cuba and how this history is intertwined with the Afro-Cuban experience. Given that scholars are currently investing more resources into the research and exploration of Asian immigrant populations in Latin America, this is a relevant and worthwhile read. Furthermore, by revealing a more nuanced understanding of ethnicity in Cuba, this and other chapters like it effectively challenge simplistic or monolithic definitions of blackness.

The third chapter, "*El arte como resistencia: Lo afropuertorriqueño*," by María Elba Torres-Muñoz, is one of the two chapters in Spanish. In her study, Torres-Muñoz also revisits the past while explaining how Puerto Rican intelligentsia at the turn of the nineteenth century attempted to create a homogenous society discursively by celebrating the island's European heritage at the expense of the country's ethnic-racial diversity. Consequently, the African/black presence was marginalized in the national sphere. She claims that official history has traditionally reduced African contributions to nothing more than stereotyped representations. In order to understand Puerto Rican culture fully, all ethnic heritages informing the country's "hybridity" need to be rescued and acknowledged, particularly the African legacy. Thus, she specifically focuses on Afro-Puerto Rican painters and their contributions to Puerto Rican art. For Torres-Muñoz, Afro-Puerto Rican painting represents a form of resistance because it interrupts dominant (homogenized) history by highlighting the all too often marginalized African/black elements of Puerto Rican culture.

"*Afirmación étnica y estética en la ensayística y poética de Jorge Artel*" is the fourth chapter of the book and the second of the two texts written in Spanish. The author, Luisa García-Conde, returns to the literary production of Afro-Colombian poet, Jorge Artel. She asserts that Artel and his writings have not received the consideration they deserve, especially in his home country of Colombia. She explores his theoretical position in regard to "black poetry" ("poesía negroide") and compares three editions of his book, *Tambores en la noche*, in order to examine the evolution of his Afro-centric perspective. According to García-Conde, the later editions of *Tambores en la noche* evince his response to Nicolás Guillen's claims that Artel's poetry was not "poesía negra," but rather "poesía marina." García-Conde calls attention to the revisions made to various poems published in the book's later editions as evidence of Artel's desire to highlight his black identity and Afro-Colombian cultural heritage. Furthermore, based on her analysis of his poetry, she argues that Artel tried to avoid stereotyped representations of "gente negra" (in regard to certain poetic themes, such as sensuality, vernacular, the festive, music, and dance) while attempting to promote a more transnational black consciousness.

In the sixth chapter, "Afro-Brazilian Literature, from the Periphery to the Center," Vanessa K. Valdés provides an historic overview of Afro-Brazilian literature. Her intention, as suggested by the title, is to bring Afro-Brazilian writers from the margins to the center of literary studies. Moving in chronological order, she addresses Afro-Brazilian writers and their works within their respective socio-political and economic contexts. She begins with the second half of the nineteenth century vis-à-vis slavery and abolition and then concludes with more contemporary twentieth-century Afro-Brazilian writers, paying special attention to those who have taken part in political activism on behalf of the country's black communities. Though there is very little literary analysis in this chapter, it is nonetheless very informative, and it is a worthwhile read for students and scholars wanting to acquire more knowledge on the history of Afro-Brazilian writers and their contributions to national literature.

The seventh chapter, "Decolonizing the Banjo: Cultural Memory and a (Re)representation of Slave Performance, 1700s-1863," questions the prevailing definition of the banjo as a strictly "American" (or "white") instrument. According to the author, Katya Isayev, the banjo's African origins all too often have been ignored, and part of her objective is to trace the material and visual culture, specifically paintings, surrounding this instrument so as to uncover how ideologies of racial difference have influenced collective memory. Isayev addresses the banjo's past, which she admits is hard to reconstruct due to the biases of the Europeans who recorded history and the lack of access that slaves had to the literary and archival resources

needed. Although very little of this chapter is actually dedicated to proving the banjo's African origins, it nevertheless illustrates how slaves were indeed playing the banjo early on in American history. The true merit of this study is found in its emphasis on visual images or paintings, which when read through a "decolonial" lens, reveal how white artists embedded their visual depictions of slave musicians with their own racist values. This essay problematizes any simplistic readings of these visual texts and instead encourages readers to deconstruct them.

The book's final essay, "Performing the Archive: Photography and the African World," by Brendan Wattenberg, addresses more recent history by examining the archival work of three African photographers, Georges Adéagbo, Samuel Fosso, and Barthélémy Toguo. Wattenberg frames the artists' performative works and series "within a concept of the archive as the constellation of iconographic pictures; the visual ephemera of media and news culture; and the marketplace of images, both personal and popular, that exists between Africa, Europe, and the African Diaspora in North America" (184). Photography, says Wattenberg, is a type of visual language in which the selection process organizes and produces knowledge, and he demonstrates how Adéagbo, Fosso, and Barthélémy creatively use photography in order to counter dominant knowledge (stereotyped representations) historically produced through the archives. In a word, these artists attempt to challenge and transform universalizing narratives coming from the history of images in regard to Africa and African-descended peoples.

All of the abovementioned chapters, therefore, illustrate the continued importance of returning to and reinterpreting the past, through relatively new frameworks, as a way to rescue histories buried by the colonial experience and racial discrimination, which is a worthwhile exercise in order to understand fully how the past continues to affect the present and future communities of the African diaspora. Nevertheless, a few of the book's chapters place less emphasis on the past and instead focus on current forms of cultural production. The volume's first chapter, for example, is titled "*Mistè a Gatem*: Deploying Ezili and Queering the Haitian Religious Experience in Anne Lescot's and Laurence Magloire's Film *Des hommes et des dieux*." The author, Sophie Saint-Just, examines how this documentary depicts working-class homosexual Haitian men and their use of vodou as a strategy for resisting intolerance, validating their sexuality, and gaining a degree of social acceptance. Saint-Just's essay supplements the documentary by providing additional information on vodou and expanding on why Ezili is so appealing to members of Haiti's gay communities. Furthermore, her analysis calls attention to how the film can mistakenly lead to overreaching generalizations. According to Saint-Just, *Des hommes et des dieux* focuses primarily on the unifying aspects of vodou (across gender, sexuality, and class) without appropriately highlighting existing contradictions, tensions, and even dangers. Nevertheless, she stresses the importance of this film and others like it that portray marginalized lifestyles and perspectives rather than the usual stereotyped depictions of Haiti. Furthermore, this chapter inserts issues of gender and sexual orientation into the field, which effectively foregrounds the need for dialogue across disciplines, for example, between queer and diaspora studies.

The fifth chapter also addresses more contemporary material, specifically popular music. In her essay, "The Holy Temple of Soca: Rev. Rudder in Attendance," Allison McLetchie explores how Rev. David Rudder of Trinidad and Tobago attempts to transform soca—a form of calypso—into a religious experience, even though this genre typically has not been interpreted as religious music. McLetchie contextualizes this cultural practice within the island's history of colonization and settlement among the Catholic Spanish, Protestant British, African slaves, and lastly, the Chinese indentured servants and East Indian immigrants, who brought Hinduism and

Islam to the territory. This assorted group of settlers eventually led to a degree of religious syncretism, and this religious diversity greatly informs Rudder's music. According to McLetchie, carnival is proposed as an appropriate space for creating a new or "Creole tribe," and through music, Rev. Rudder wants to pull from the country's various religious traditions in an effort to form a new one that is secular, syncretic, and national. In a word, McLetchie attempts to show how Rev. Rudder is making the profane (carnival) into something sacred through music and performance. Though blackness inevitably informs the subject material of this essay (due to the African/black contributions to both calypso and carnival), it is not addressed directly. Nonetheless, similar to Saint-Just's essay, the merit of this chapter is found in how it adds to our understanding and appreciation of the complexity of black communities of the African diaspora, which in this case, results from the influx of multiple immigrant groups bringing with them an assortment of religious and musical practices.

Finally, the book's eighth chapter, "The Challenge of Toni Cade Bambara's *The Salt Eaters*: (Re)Claiming Wholeness," offers a new perspective on a relatively contemporary novel. In this essay, Ashley David argues that Bambara's book has been marred by claims of inaccessibility, which has displaced the text's underlying theme of *everything/and wholeness*. She asserts that dominant interpretation has failed to recognize "Bambara's overarching project, which defines wholeness as broadly inclusive and which makes a case for humanity's ongoing evolution of consciousness" (163). The novel is contextualized within the 1980s and the emergence of identity politics, which partly explains the prevalence of piecemeal interpretations along racial or gender lines, for example. According to David, while Bambara acknowledged the importance of racial matters, she most likely hoped that critics would eventually move beyond piecemeal understandings in order to arrive at the concept of *everything/and wholeness.* Her conjecture about what the author expected from her readership largely comes from her analysis of Barbara's essays, "What It Is that I Think I'm Doing Anyhow" and "Deep Sightings and Rescue Missions." Although neither David nor Bambara would suggest the need to disregard race completely, this essay suggests an interesting way of trying to imagine a better, more harmonious, world for all of humanity: "…although many scholars, critics, and readers, have defined 'us' in terms of the African American community, a community which Bambara clearly embraced and championed with and through her work, much of the evidence seems to suggest…that 'us' ultimately includes the species and the planet" (170). Although the essays in this volume overwhelmingly focus on diversity and difference, David's reading of Bambara's novel is unique in that the underlying message is the need also to recognize and embrace human interconnectedness.

In the book's conclusion, "Where Do We Go from Here? The Future of African Diaspora Studies," Valdés asserts that one of her principal objectives is to contribute to this growing discipline, and I believe that she has succeeded. Of course, the book is not without flaws. There are some minor editing issues found in select chapters, such as repetition and excessively long footnotes. Isayev's chapter on the banjo lacks a "Works Cited," and she uses two slightly different titles for the same painting (e.g., *The Banjo Man* and *The Banjo Player*). Beyond format, the essays vary in quality, and some are more informative than analytical. Moreover, readers may find fault with some of the theoretical arguments of individual chapters. Despite any of its imperfections, however, *The Future Is Now: A New Look at African Diaspora Studies* is a worthwhile read and a valuable resource for both educators and students of the African diaspora. The studies in this book highlight the importance for African and African-descended peoples to establish positive identities and a sense of belonging while also addressing both the history and

present-day circumstances of their respective communities. These essays call attention to black artists who pay homage to their ancestors while also recognizing and celebrating the contributions that their communities have made to their respective cultures and nations.

Furthermore, this edited volume certainly brings to the field a variety of voices and perspectives. In fact, given that these essays span centuries of history while simultaneously addressing a diverse group of artists and expressive forms, it may seem that the only common thread tying these chapters together is the ethnic-racial component. However, a more careful consideration shows that the unifying theme is actually the emphasis that this book places on the diversity found among the cultures of the African diaspora. Interestingly enough, Valdés also claims that she hopes that this volume will inspire more dialogue across regions, languages, and disciplines. Of course, Pan-African discussions and transnational cultural exchanges have been occurring for a long time, as some of the book's chapters even suggest: Luisa García-Conde's study of Jorge Artel's poetry points to exchanges among artists of the African diaspora; María Elba Torres-Muñoz's examination of Afro-Puerto Rican artists calls attention to the wide-reaching influence of the Harlem Renaissance; and Wattenberg's study of African photography highlights the transnational flow of black symbols and iconography.

Nevertheless, *The Future Is Now* advocates that not just *more*, but rather *new* dialogue and fresh approaches are needed, especially at a time when the world is becoming smaller, bringing diverse groups into contact and often accentuating differences. Current dialogues are seemingly much more crowded and complicated due to the necessary presence of a multitude of voices and worldviews. This edited volume brings into play differences based on generation, gender, sexual orientation, religious practice, ethnic-racial mixture, languages, and nationalities. Consequently, these studies blur simplistic notions of racial understandings by illuminating distinctive ways in which blackness is defined, contested, and negotiated in a wide range of contexts. The chapter on Jorge Artel, for instance, touches upon, but does not analyze in great detail, the difficulty of arriving at any sort of universally accepted consensus on the meaning(s) of blackness. Moreover, the same study also hints at the complexity of labeling or categorizing "black art" when broadly applied to forms of cultural production originating in distinct geographical locations, each with different histories, languages, nationalities, social practices, etc. In the end, therefore, *The Future Is Now* represents a significant contribution to the field not only because it evokes some of these larger issues and questions, but also because it reminds students and scholars that no one region, group, or discipline has a monopoly on the meaning(s) of blackness or "black art."

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