

Book Reviews

Robin Law, ed. *Source Material for Studying the Slave Trade and the African Diaspora*. Stirling: U of Stirling P, 1997. Pp. vi, 142. £5.00 pb.

Stephanie Newell, ed. *Images of African and Caribbean Women: Migration, Displacement, Diaspora*. Stirling: U of Stirling P, 1996. Pp. xiv, 158. £5.00 pb.

These two publications are complementary in that they both engage the subject of the African diaspora, though each explores only particular facets of the diasporic experience. Robin Law's *Source Material for Studying the Slave Trade and the African Diaspora* ventures primarily into an assessment of source material used in the study of the slave trade and the African diaspora. However, while its central concerns are methodological, it furnishes substantive content that constitutes a valuable background for Stephanie Newell's *Images of African and Caribbean Women: Migration, Displacement, Diaspora*. Newell's is a critical examination of issues relating to images of diasporic women, primarily those of African origin. The publication overlaps somewhat with *Source Material* since it, too, raises some methodological questions. Barbara Bush's essay, for example, discusses the validity of memory and oral history in writing the history of the oppressed (18-22); she sensitively explores the "problems of writing the history of subjects that have been 'beyond history' in the context of conventional historical methodology" (4). The complementarity of the two publications is not accidental. They are both collections of papers presented at conferences held in April 1996 at the University of Stirling's Centre of Commonwealth Studies, which maintains a vigorous program of research relating to the slave trade and its aftermath.

Source Material is a collection of eight papers, which, though varying somewhat in terms of focus, cohere through their discussions of "the nature of the source material under consideration, the problems of evaluation and interpretation which it poses, and the methodological approaches whereby its potential might be realized" (2). The first three papers deal mainly with European sources of "a conventional narrative character" (3). Law, for example, examines the correspon-

dence of agents of the Royal African Company of England on the West African coast, demonstrating its utility in illuminating both the day-to-day working of the European slave trade and the interaction between European activity and indigenous institutions. Law concludes that the correspondence can serve as a vital source for the social history of African coastal communities and for the trans-Atlantic slave trade itself. Dealing with the period following the legal abolition of the slave trade, Caroline Sorensen-Gilmour argues that the material produced by Europeans in the port of Badagry was generated by people external to both the country and the slave trade and was therefore likely to generate distortions or misrepresentations, while Larry Yarak suggests that documentation relating to the Dutch recruitment of soldiers from the Gold Coast can shed light on the nature of institutions of servitude. Essays by David Richardson and Patrick Manning also examine source material of European origin, but they employ statistical methods in the study of the slave trade. While such analyses fail to capture the realities of individual slave lives, they are nonetheless useful in identifying general patterns or in denoting the probability of specific speculations being correct.

The remaining essays in the collection are grouped under the headings "African and Diaspora Sources" and "Biographies." Elisée Soumonni discusses the value of local West African sources, in particular archeology and oral tradition, in the study of both African participants in and African victims of the slave trade, warning that such sources should be regarded only as a supplement to others. Douglas Chambers, relying on varied sources to trace the history of Africans from their homelands to their dispersal in the New World, highlights difficulties in interpreting the evidence. Paul Lovejoy, in describing a project to compile a data-base of slave biographies, considers methodological issues relating to biography as source material.

Source Material is an honest and professionally competent attempt to assess varied forms of evidence employed in the study of the African slave trade and diaspora. The essays here do not exhaust the categories of appropriate source material, since other forms of potential evidence—including written sources of local African origin, oral traditions among descendants of African slaves in the Americas, and autobiographical accounts by ex-slaves—are not discussed. The collection, however, serves to remind scholars in this field to moderate their confident conclusions, but it does allow the general reader insights that permit a critical examination of these studies and their findings. At the same time, the text supplies a wealth of social and historical information as contributors elaborate on particular research projects.

Stephanie Newell's *Images of African and Caribbean Women: Migration, Displacement, Diaspora*, which undertakes "to explore the relationships between gender and migration, displacement, and diaspora" (iii), has two parts. The first, containing eight essays, presents "narrations of

black women's life stories, reappraisals of slave histories, critiques of the status of gender within 'post-colonial' theory and discussions of specific Caribbean and African texts" (iii). The second offers a small selection of poems and short stories submitted by participants of the conference. The eight essays, though driven by differing interests and objectives, do address the central purpose of the collection, but with varying degrees of success.

Bush, for instance, probes the subject directly. Drawing on the insights of African American scholars, she explores Caribbean women's experiences within "a diasporic perspective" (4). She asserts that representations of black women—for example, as "matriarch" (along with the associated notion of "strong" and long-suffering "work-horse") and as the sexualized "Jezebel"—have been damaging often to black women, defining "their complex relationship to white women through white patriarchal ideals of female morality, femininity and female beauty" (5). Black women are not only marginalized and devalued but are also grossly misrepresented. In her analysis of "myth, memory, fact and fiction in the black women's past" (22), Bush highlights both the differences and the commonalities in black women's experiences, noting the important changes that have resulted from economic and cultural shifts. Black women have been the repository of the African cultural heritage and have played a vital role in sustaining it. The search for their own history incidentally has led black women to confront and reassess the white constructs of black females.

In a rather similar vein, Emilia Ippolito examines "migratory subjectivity" (62), with an emphasis on the work of Jamaica Kincaid. Ippolito observes that an idea which recurs, that "self-articulation" might follow migration,—an idea that recurs in the work of black women theorists—is reflected as well in Kincaid's work. It is through diasporic movements—for example in exile—that female characters gain a sense of their own selves. Seemingly, Kincaid is talking with her "own migrating subject in development" (66), in this way engendering her own metamorphosis. She uses "many different images of the transformation of the subject to let the characters of her novels migrate; through this migration, she re-invents her own identity." While this new identity "re-verses otherness," it exists more "in the 'elsewhere' of diasporic imaginings than in the precisely locatable" (67).

Veronique Bragard's essay pursues directly the theme of oppression and marginalization. She writes of the double-marginalization of East Indian women writers, first as East Indians and then as women, but notes as well that they are "giving birth to their woman voice" (75). They "deconstruct, subvert, and adapt the alien 'standard language' to give it the means to express their culture, values and experiences" (76). Isolation has stimulated a painful self-reflexion but has also spurred substantial creative writing. Indo-Caribbean women's writing has a bright future as the writers come to terms with history and truth,

consolidate the varied elements of their experience, culture, and identity, and claim "a place as home in the multicultural Caribbean" (82).

Other essays highly relevant to the central themes of the collection include Naana Jane Opoku-Agyemang's, for example, an analysis of the work of two women writers, one from Africa and the other from the Caribbean, who demonstrate that a personal journey into the past—though necessary for a meaningful present and future—might well "evoke humiliation, confusion, deep pain and sheer waste" (96), since an unspoiled past simply does not exist. Paulette Nhlapo exposes the denigration and devaluation of Black women in South African "anti-Apartheid" films. Slightly less directly, Susheila Nasta employs the story of how her critical anthology *Motherlands* came into being to comment on the monolithic tendencies of theory which homogenizes black women's experiences while claiming to privilege hybridity and plurality. She asserts that the postcolonial writer and critic has to discover "new forms and languages to reinscribe her experiences" as well as "subvert and demythologise the essential patriarchal theories that attempt to label" (58). Somewhat more tangentially, Polly Rewt outlines issues relating to the development of an exhibition that focuses on the social history of Africans in Scotland noting that public awareness of gaps and silences in such an exhibition may stir interest in the topic of African invisibility. The poems and short stories in the collection allow for expression by differing voices and are thus counter to "the monolith of a shared 'marginality'" (viii).

Images of African and Caribbean Women: Migration, Displacement, Diaspora is a useful publication, especially for those with an interest in gender issues or in postcolonial theory. The work is a fine illustration of the intersection of feminist analysis and postcolonial theory and it underscores the argument advanced by "socialist feminists" that the experiences of women from different groups are far from homogeneous. Some contributors also comment on the limitations of contemporary postcolonial theory such as its tendency to homogenize. The essays form a reasonably coherent whole, though some proceed rather more directly than others to the task at hand. There is some unevenness, however, in terms of theoretical strength and style of writing. Essays such as those by Ippolito and Nasta challenge the reader with a strong infusion of theory; others are more moderate in this regard. The variations of style, too, are quite obvious: some contributors exhibit an awesome facility with jargon, while others are less demanding of the reader. On the whole, Stephanie Newell's *Images of African and Caribbean Women: Migration, Displacement, Diaspora* is a fairly sophisticated collection which, like Robin Law's *Source Material for Studying the Slave Trade and the African Diaspora* probes in an informative and perceptive manner a specific dimension of the diasporic experience.

STELLA ALGOO-BAKSH