

BOOK REVIEW

Boukary Sawagodo. *Africans in Harlem: An Untold New York Story*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2022. xiv + 203 pp. Images. Preface. Appendix. Notes. Bibliography. Filmography. Index. \$27.99. Cloth. ISBN:9780823299126.

Boukary Sawagodo's new book, *Africans in Harlem: An Untold New York Story*, is written with clarity and coherence of thoughts, ideas, imagination, and passion. The book offers a uniquely important narrative of Harlem, its "African inhabitants," and how these Africans have contributed to its development as a significant cultural, intellectual, and economic venue within New York city. The author chronicles Harlem's social history from the point of view of an African immigrant, and with the eyes of a keen observer of the African community's creative and socio-cultural contributions to the development of Harlem, and indeed greater New York as a diasporic metropolitan city. Sawagodo, the author of *African Film Studies: An Introduction* (2019) and *West African Screen Media: Comedy, TV Series and Transnationalization* (2019), sketches Harlem's historical popularity as a hub which helped to forge the intellectual platforms of numerous great African writers, politicians, philosophers, thinkers, and activists such as Philip Payton, Madam C.J. Walker, Madam St. Clair, W.E.B. Du Bois, Marcus Garvey, Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, Alain Locke, Malcom X, James Baldwin, Ossie Davis (the film director of Wole Soyinka's *Kongi's Harvest* [1970]), and the first president of Nigeria, Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe.

With numerous explications and excellent analyses of theatrical enactments, film productions, literature, and extant archival sources, coupled with serious cinematic analysis of interactive-expanded-art forms, Sawagodo discusses the emergence, history, episteme, challenges, lifestyles, and struggles of Africans in Harlem, beginning at a time when black immigrants were already settling in New York in large numbers, over the course of eight chapters. The author shepherds his readers through the history of African slavery, demonstrating how it can serve as a catalyst for understanding modern mobility and migration. Additionally, there are chapters on "Black Radical Politics" and its influence on African political stalwarts, the struggle for identity and identity reconstruction in Harlem, and the many challenges faced by Black Africans, such as systemic racism, gentrification,

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and segregation. Other chapters explore the value of communal bonding among Africans and African Americans, the expression of cultural heritage, and the development of newer and evolving diasporic communities, reflecting upon how marginalized people have struggled for emancipation under a very difficult oppressive and racist system.

In the third chapter, titled “Push and Pull Factors in African Immigration to Harlem,” Sawadogo traces the history of “overseas ethnic, racial working class communities in Harlem,” and how such communities informed “how this neighborhood of color” emerged as a significant space for the improvement of African (and other Black) lives. Sawadogo goes on to stress that “Resistance to racism and colonialism spurred the formations of alliances and communities of the oppressed across continental boundaries, turning Harlem into a space of rebirth and growth” (53).

One of the most interesting features of the book is the fact that the author does not necessarily position himself within the evolutionary stages of Harlem, but he is pivotal to the historical presence of Harlem and its vibrancy as a community that has given birth to myriad scholars and intellectuals, especially between the mid-twentieth century and the present. Sawadogo writes as someone who has applied himself to learning by researching this rare history in relation to the influx of Africans who migrated to New York. What exactly is constitutive of this bubbling community? Why is the construction of this history so significant today? The author answers these questions by bridging the gap between the past and the present episteme of Africans and their various contributions to the development of Harlem in the twenty-first century:

“I have made a decision not to write myself out of the text, given that I am a member of the African community in Harlem, writing from this place. I would not have written this book if I did not happen to reside in Harlem at this specific time in history. (...) Famously from the 1920s to the early 1960s, Harlem was the intellectual and cultural center for the Black world; the Harlem Renaissance movement, with its wealth of literary and cultural expressions, was a hallmark of that vitality.” (2022: vii-viii)

The author chronicles Harlem’s contribution to the rise and development of Black writers and creative artistes of diverse backgrounds who were crucial to reaffirming the place of the “Black People” in New York and all over the United States of America, during a time of civil unrest, black protests against segregation, and other anti-social brutality experienced by Africans and African Americans. Sawadogo testifies to the significance of Harlem’s history as a community and hub capable of nurturing and producing active scholars and intellectuals who have repudiated fallacious narratives about Black Africans.

The book meets the challenges of the paucity and dearth of inchoate “data” on African immigrants in America, with just the availability of a handful of national documents such as the “US Census American Community

Survey,” which is only assessed every decade. Such a challenge only instigates and helps Sawadogo to accomplish the intellectual labor of writing an original book, heavily laden with indices of interdisciplinary research.

The book solidifies the place of migrant Africans and the entire Black world in Harlem and the city of New York, as well as emphasizing how important this community has become in the United States overall. It also serves as a vivid reminder of the recent atrocities, struggles, and challenges of Black people under the weight and pains of discrimination and outright prejudices in diasporic communities all over the world. Black Lives Matters comes to mind here, and the inconsequential murder of George Floyd (among others), which remains fresh in memory. It is also instructive how Sawadogo contextualizes the struggle, and the way he elevates many Africans scholars, thinkers, and intellectuals (alive or dead) is assuredly deep and excellent. He highlights the courage and enthusiasm with which Black people have continued to advocate for a world without wars and antipathy, one built in an atmosphere that thrives on respect, trust, and coexistence, and the need to inhabit that world without suspicion or segregation. This book is a finely crafted reminder of the way that Africans have entrenched their world-sense in every diasporic society, and why studies informed by their peculiar experiences deserve attention.

Boukary Sawadogo’s book is a mine of scholarly heavy lifting which everyone interested in the field of history, popular arts, cultural studies, cinema, literature, and other allied disciplines should read. Anchored upon the bedrock of intellectual and historical activism, the volume resonates with Cajetan Iheka’s closing statement to his brief editorial piece in the June 2021 issue of *African Studies Review*. Iheka concludes, “African Studies must not be left out of the ongoing moves to de-marginalize Blackness and improve societal knowledge of people of African descent in the United States and other parts of the world” (64 [2]:273). This important book offers a timely intervention on the connections between Africa and its diasporas (historical and contemporary) and the trajectory of the continent in the world today by drawing on history, politics, arts, film, migration, and diaspora studies. It is a reminder of how de-territorialized Africans are, not just in America but in other parts of the world as well. *Africans in Harlem: An Untold New York Story* superbly attests to Iheka’s suggestion in the most profound of ways.

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