

# BOOK REVIEW

**Wendy Wilson-Fall. *Memories of Madagascar and Slavery in the Black Atlantic*.** Athens: Ohio University Press, 2015. xx + 224 pp. Maps. Glossary. Bibliography. Index. \$25.95. Paper. ISBN: 978-0-8214-2193-2.

The sea route connecting Madagascar to North America was the longest and among the most dangerous routes of the transatlantic slave trade. Not only did ships have to round the tricky waters of the Cape of Good Hope, but they also had to brave the doldrums near the Equator, which often prolonged the voyage by reducing the speed of sailing ships. No wonder enslaved Malagasy stood out among the slave population of the Americas. Their relatively lighter complexion, straighter hair, and cultural background also set them apart from other enslaved Africans forced across the Atlantic. Wendy Wilson-Fall's book, *Memories of Madagascar and Slavery in the Black Atlantic*, explores slavery as it was experienced by Malagasy men and women in North America by looking at both historical traces as well as the memories of people claiming Malagasy descent. While focused on a relatively minor branch of the Black Atlantic diaspora, the book offers valuable insights into the experiences of Africans in slavery as well as important lessons on methods of history research and writing.

The book is divided into six chapters, accompanied by an Introduction highlighting the role of Madagascar as a particular ancestral place for people of African descent in the Americas. Chapter One provides a brief historical discussion of the island and its involvement in the slave trade to North America. Chapter Two examines histories of Virginia slaves and family stories by and about slave descendants that echo a sense of separation and displacement. Chapter Three focuses on the slaves' new surroundings and how that geography affected their sense of identity. Chapter Four traces new, undocumented arrivals of potential Malagasy slaves to North America following the American Revolution. Chapter Five takes a similar approach focused on Malagasy migrants disembarked voluntarily or involuntarily in North America during the Age of Abolition. Finally, Chapter Six provides a reflection on the use of diverse family stories to throw light onto historical events, arguing that a "metanarrative is not necessarily a conscious construction, but it is an observable one" (144).

Apart from the experiences of the Malagasy described, Wilson-Fall's approach to memory as a form of metanarrative is no doubt the most interesting aspect of the book. Historians normally hesitate to use memories as a source for historical inquiry or reconstruction simply because they are highly susceptible to conscious or unconscious change. Moreover, they do not carry the same level of detail as historical sources. However, one should not merely take them at their face value. Rather, as Wilson-Fall proposes, memories can be taken as observable constructions. In other words, they can be viewed as another form of evidence that requires proper contextualization, making them useful for historical analysis and interpretation. This approach can be particularly helpful when tracing such small migration flows, such as the slave trade from Madagascar to North America. Almost no historical records on that forced movement of people survive for the period after 1750 but, by carefully listening to the memories of descendants of Malagasy people in North America, Wilson-Fall documents their presence and experiences in that region to roughly the end of the nineteenth century.

Although insightful, the book has some limitations. While it makes a persuasive case for the use of memories as an important source of information, the paucity of historical records confirming such recollections can be sometimes frustrating. The book's scope is also significantly out of proportion in relation to its content. Enslaved Malagasy certainly comprised a minority of the overall African population forced across the Atlantic, but they were transported to several different regions during the period discussed. *Memories*, however, deals only with the stream taken to North America, especially Virginia. Any generalization made out of this particular segment of the traffic would be a gross exaggeration. Finally, while the book does provide a brief history of Madagascar, it is based almost exclusively on secondary sources, with little indication about how the Malagasy background of the people transported informed their experiences in Virginia, North America, or the Black Atlantic.

These issues notwithstanding, *Memories* is an engaging read that promises to inspire new research on the uses of memories for understanding the history of Africans and their descendants in the making of the Black Atlantic. Teachers are recommended to adopt it in seminar courses, for its ability to encourage intellectually stimulating class discussions and research papers.

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**For more reading on this subject, the ASR recommends:**

- Barber, Karin. 2007. "When People Cross Thresholds." *African Studies Review* 50 (2): 111–23. doi:10.1353/arw.2007.0079.
- Klein, Martin A. 1989. "Studying the History of Those Who Would Rather Forget: Oral History and the Experience of Slavery." *History in Africa* 16: 209–17. doi:10.2307/3171785.