

## BOOK REVIEWS

---

Review of *Melancholia Africana*

by Nathalie Etoke, Lanham:

Rowman & Littlefield, 2019

**Kristen Kirksey**

Department of Sociology, University of Connecticut

*Melancholia Africana: The Indispensable Overcoming of the Black Condition* by Nathalie Etoke, is equal parts ruminative meditation and urgent call to action for Black Africans and those in the diaspora. The titular concept, *melancholia africana*, is “an extensible concept that examines how sub-Saharan and people of African descent cope with loss, mourning, and survival in a practice of everyday life contaminated by the past.” (pg. 9). Etoke vehemently renounces the fatalism that can emerge as Black people navigate ongoing trauma rooted in the slave trade, slavery, colonization, and post-colonization. Instead, these experiences should “force them to act, to reinvent, and to be reborn from their ashes” (pg. 9). The author presents her arguments through three dialectical themes, beautifully woven and articulated through literature, poetry and music of the diaspora: 1) The mutual humanity between the self and the Other; 2) The incontrovertible links among the past, present and future; and 3) The imperative of moving from despair to action.

In chapter two, “For a Diasporic Consciousness,” Etoke highlights the difficult yet essential practice of recognizing the humanity both of the self and of the Other. She coins the concept of for/giv-

ing, which is at the heart of this practice. “To forgive [the Other] is to forgive oneself, to free oneself from the power the Other exercises over our thoughts. Thoughts that condition our becoming” (pg. 21). While neither forgetting, nor attempting to repair the past, for/giving places the self and the Other on a plane of vulnerability, providing space for true reconciliation, mutual liberation, and a promise for the future.

Etoke advances a non-linear temporality that “creates harmony between the dead and the living, the past and the present” (pg. 44). Largely explored in chapter five through a close reading and analysis of *Scarlet Dawns: Sankofa Cry* by Cameroonian author Léonora Miano, Etoke stresses the importance of remembering the ancestors and their struggles for liberation. Death is not the end of being; ancestors remain within the descendants, individually and in community. For the ancestors, descendants are a promise for liberation to come, an affirmation of the continuity of life, and of hope (pg. 43). Etoke continues exploring the interactions among past and present, life, death, and survival, as she transitions into chapter 6. Using works by Senegalese writer Boubacar Boris Diop and Rwandan writer Gilbert Gatore, she emphasizes the need for action; it is incumbent upon survivors of atrocities to construct a liberatory future from the rubble of the past.

Chapters seven and eight deliver Etoke’s most pointed calls to move from despair to action. In chapter seven, “From the Gaze of the Other to Self-Reflection,” the author muses, “Have we developed a dependency complex? ... Why do we expect everything from the Other and nothing from ourselves? ... This [dependency on the Other] will put us in eternal servitude” (pg. 56-57). Etoke’s placement of responsibility squarely on Black shoulders seems to betray the author’s earlier explication of for/giving and the nuanced,

often contradictory relationship between Black people and the Other. Her intention, however, is clear. We must move from despair to action. In a discussion based on the Cameroonian mantra “On va faire comment” (How are we going to do?), Etoke speaks against the internalization of powerlessness, sowed through generations of frustration. She implores readers to fight for their freedom, to refuse to suffer, to recognize the infinitude of their potential. Quoting Jamaican-American poet June Jordan, she asserts: “We are the ones we have been waiting for” (pg. 68).

Though expressed throughout the book, in chapter 4 Etoke articulates her deep appreciation for African-American modes of musical expression, namely spirituals, jazz, and blues. For Etoke, these expressions reveal the failure of the projects of death and dehumanization - they are songs of liberation. However, they also reveal the aporetic nature of Black existence, the painful harmony and disharmony that exists in the bodies of the diaspora.

At 82 pages, the book is divided into nine short and purposeful chapters, each in conversation with the others. In the Foreward, Lewis Gordon points out that the book is a testament to Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks*. Etoke confirms directly and indirectly through her discussions of the violent construction of Blackness and its existential implications. The book was written in the author’s native French, and translated into English by white, American male Bill Hamlett. In his translator’s note, Hamlett reveals his positional difficulties in completing the translation, which he views as an act of for/giveness. This transdisciplinary work could be valuable for scholars of poetry and literature, history, critical theory, Africana studies, and race and racism.

In *Melancholia Africana*, Etoke manages to capture a feeling that is well-known, yet previously unnamed, by those in the diaspora.

On the last page of the Epilogue, Etoke pairs a jazz song to each section of the book, starting with “Crepuscule with Nellie” by Thelonius Monk for the Introduction, and ending with “A Love Supreme, Part 1” by John Coltrane for the Coda. Upon completing the book, listening to the playlist serves as a catharsis, allowing the “thick sadness of the night [to fade] into the intoxicating joy of dawn” (pg. 22).