The Black Diaspora and the Legacies of Thinglessness

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Abstract

This paper aims to negotiate the relationship between oral history, materiality, and representation in the context of the Middle Passage. In the violent transplantation of African peoples to the “New World” aboard slave ships during transatlantic slavery, the most ominous aspect of the triangular trade was that the “cargo” was human – people were reduced to ‘things.’ What, then, does ‘the thing’ or ‘the object’ mean in this context? While the Middle Passage is the geographical space of the Atlantic Ocean through which slave ships travelled, it is also a site of genocide, an unmarked grave, and a trauma which disappears and absents certain types of memory. To examine it is to invoke an enormous, yet empty archive. The ships no longer exist, and for those who made the crossing, no ‘objects’ remain – the remnants and memories of the Middle Passage survive through oral histories, cultural, spiritual, and linguistic practice and not material items. This legacy of “thinglessness” is what, in part, engenders the massive psychic and epistemic ruptures experienced by many black diasporic peoples. In a contemporary context, the Middle Passage is largely accessed through acts of creative representation – novels, visual and performance art, film, poetry, and theatre.

This paper asks: what kinds of ethical and epistemological work do these acts of creative representation do in the wake of a black diasporic legacy of thinglessness?