Julia Yao Roig – Week 6

Tiya Miles in her book *All That She Carried* adopts a unique view of the political. Her work focuses mostly on slaves, who did not have a say in the political life of America. Yet, they were very much impacted by political decisions. The focus on the effect that these laws had on black people is why it is low politics. Their total subjugation to white people meant that everything regarding their person could be politized, their mere existence was politized. An example would be the perceived threat black women could pose to white women, by attracting their husbands and sons or by outshining them in their dress.[[1]](#footnote-1) Thereby upending the supposed natural hierarchy. This perceived threat was legislated away in 1735.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Despite their constant oppression, black culture flourished. Miles discusses low culture, focusing on clothes, hair, food, traditions, etc. As a result of their oppression, physical objects are rare. However, Ashley’s sack was full of objects black people treasured. As discussed previously clothing was an essential part of society, both for black and white people; it signified status but also is described as a symbol of defiance. A dress preserved black women’s dignity and shielded them from the eyes of slave owners.[[3]](#footnote-3) Hair was also a part of culture, showing black women’s beauty and in turn posing a threat to white women’s femininity. Southern culture is discussed here and there but often in terms of how it reinforced black people’s oppression.

Miles’s nationalism is very unique, in that it defies the standard approach of looking at a formed nation-state. Her observations and analysis do not argue that black people were their own nation, instead the analysis places black people outside of the promise of America and outside of the conventional national narrative. As a result of this unconventional approach, Mile’s nationalism is not modernist nor anti-modernist; it is constructivist. What binds black people together according to Miles is a common culture and history. Her analysis of food for example is reminiscent of Billig’s concept of banal nationalism. Miles analysis is very much influenced by methodological nationalism, it is constrained to firm borders and restricted to only analysing America.

Transnationalism is not present outright in the book, Miles only discusses America. However, the unique circumstances of enslaved people is that they were both people and goods, in the eyes of slave owners. The intersection of these two means that selling and buying them involved the movement of ideas and culture, the people that were sold still carried with them their identity. Therefore, it is not across nations but across plantations, where slaves would be subject to their rules, work for them and sometimes never see anything but that one plantation.

Comparison in this book is used in two ways. Firstly, to highlight the difference of experience between enslaved people and white people. An example being the city of Charleston, which white people saw it as a beacon of freedom due to religious tolerance but for black people it was not; Charleston was a central hub for slave trading.[[4]](#footnote-4) These comparisons are individualizing. The other type of comparison is universalizing. Miles uses comparison to emphasize the similarity of experiences for black people and to illustrate uniform traditions across plantations.

**Sources**

Miles, Tiya. 2024. *All That She Carried: The Journey of Ashley’s Sack, a Black Family Keepsake*. Paperback edition. London: Profile Books.

1. (Miles 2024, 134) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. (Miles 2024, 137) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. (Miles 2024, 106) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. (Miles 2024, 56) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)