

Book Review

Black Everyday Lives, Material Culture and Narrative: Tings in de House

Emma Agusita ^{1*}

¹ *University of the West of England, UNITED KINGDOM*

*Corresponding Author: emma3.agusita@uwe.ac.uk

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Sobers, S.-N. (2023). *Black Everyday Lives, Material Culture and Narrative: Tings in de House*. Abingdon and New York: Routledge.

This book is a remarkable exploration of the material culture of *everyday life*, which uses multiple forms and styles of writing and visual expression to examine the everyday experiences of African heritage Black people living in post-war Britain. Using a Small Anthropology approach and the framework of a family home, the materiality of the objects therein acts as a mechanism for reflection and as a focus for interdisciplinary social, historical and cultural analysis.

Sobers skilfully interweaves accounts and representations of lived experience with cultural and creative works: from popular culture, the author's creative practices, and from other artists and cultural producers. These are interlaced with existing research and studies to explore narratives and discourses concerning Black cultural heritages, histories and identities.

I felt as though I was invited into the different rooms of each chapter (front door/hallway, living room, front room, kitchen, bedrooms, bathroom, garden). Each reveals and contextualises stories evoked by the spaces and the selected 'Tings in de House' (signs, photos, television, sewing machine, armchair, radiogram, pictures, souvenirs and ornaments, Dutch pot, rice, Afro comb, medication, suitcase/grip, soil).

The author fuses auto-ethnographic accounts of his experience as a second-generation Black Briton whose parents emigrated from the Caribbean to the UK in the 1960s, with the experiences of his family and friends, other research participants and collaborators. These portraits and recollections inform and inspire a collection of studies which together act as a 'time capsule and a communicator' (p. 2), exploring intergenerational meaning-making.

As a result, this book contributes ideas about and approaches to understanding African diasporic black lives through the lenses of history and culture, attending to a plurality of voices and perspectives. A key strength and contribution of the book is its recognition of the connections and congruences within and between a diverse range of experiences and representations of Black lives, whilst identifying divergences and dissonances and holding both in tension.

For example, in Ch. 7, '(Front Room) The Last Supper', Sobers discusses signs of religious observance evoked by his father's da Vinci-inspired picture of the Last Supper hung in the front room, featuring a white Jesus. In contrast, Sobers' alternative Rastafari-inspired picture of the last supper featuring Black Jesus, is hung in his teenage bedroom directly above. As an 'active agent' in the space, Sobers reflects on the pictures' embodied values and associated narratives. Drawing on the lyrics of Bunny Wailer, depictions of Black Jesus in Film and TV and contemporary artwork of Black Jesus, he examines how these pictures and representations illuminate the

contradictions of religion and theology as a tool and resource of both Black oppression and Black empowerment, (e.g., of colonisation and decolonisation), cross-generationally, transnationally and ideologically.

In exploring *evocations* prompted by everyday living materials, this book offers a range of reflexive ideas about familial and/or familiar private spaces, and relational dynamics, as these connect to processes of socialisation and racialisation. For example, in Ch. 2, '(Living Room) Photo Wall', Sobers explores family photos as harnessing 'the essence of embodied personal connection with spatial presence' (p. 21), which 'even in silent rooms' are 'bursting with noise' (p. 33). Inspired by a collection of family photos located on the wall above the mantelpiece curated by his mum for whom he cared while writing the book, Sobers looks at the stories these summon, finding narratives of kinship, historical realignment, and political reclamation, resilience and emancipation, traced to the projects of slavery and colonialism. Using his own and others' photographic work and practices, which seek to reclaim and remake images, Sobers demonstrates 'the power of reclaiming and owning the narrative for oneself' (p. 32).

In dealing with the importance of the home as a site of social and cultural history the book provides important insights about identity and belonging. For instance, in creatively exploring and excavating layers of memories and meanings connected to *belongings* the book takes an innovative approach to the study of material culture, particularly of homes which can operate as a 'palimpsest of spatio-temporal contexts' building discursive narratives that articulate personal and social relations (Whitaker and McHugh, 2023). And as Sobers shows in numerous places in the book, the Covid pandemic brought the bounds of home and significance of social relationships into sharper focus for all.

Furthermore, this work resonates strongly with contemporary studies of identity-creation and the everyday practices of diasporic communities that underline how 'belonging is fostered in... the "microsocial"', referring to 'the everyday practices and rituals' and 'spaces people claim for themselves' (Saltus, 2023). Synchronously, in making Black lived experiences visible and audible, Sobers' work, like Saltus', highlights wider narratives of non-belonging that fuel discrimination and produce negative socio-economic impacts and outcomes, stratified by ethnicity and race. There are many examples of this cited in the book, including the UK Government's hostile approach to immigration, embodied by the recent Windrush Scandal that disproportionately impacted Caribbean elders.

Relatedly, Sobers reflects on the profound carrying costs of being an active agent in anti-racist and anti-colonialist struggles (e.g., 'the persistent drive for the embodied reclaiming of African heritage' (p. 104)). This speaks to contemporary political and philosophical debates about the politics of Black agency and the rendering and reduction of Black life to a state of oppression (Stewart, 2021) such that 'space for joy, leisure, frivolity, and the "lighter" aspects of life seem like a luxury of time that we can seldom afford. Though, of course, joy, leisure, and laughter in life are a necessity'" (Sobers, p. 103). Testimony to this idea, the book communicates a spectrum of human experience, emotion and thought. Through the rich texture of chosen words and images, Black life is profoundly and deliberately attested arousing celebration, affirmation and validation, alongside sober and melancholic reflections on Black lives lost, taken and diminished.

This book also opens up ideas about the importance of *process*. Firstly, through its use of mixed methods and approaches, to explore story, memory and meaning (e.g., research materials and outputs include transcripts, museum exhibits, photos, paintings, symbols, sculptures, social media content, fiction, *post-scripts, music, food/cooking and literature).

Secondly, the book adopts a position that does not seek to present a set of universal claims which essentialise Black people's experiences, but instead, by means of critical subjectivity, offers examples and opportunities to stimulate dialogue and informed understanding. For example: Ch. 7's discussion of the sewing machine and sewing cultures, linking to notions of identity for Sobers' parents' generation of Caribbean elders, offers a departure point for a discussion of the gendered dynamics of household and domestic work. And Ch. 2's vignette of a class discussion about photographic representation between the author and his students signals possibilities for enabling conversations about intersectionality.

***Post-script**

The author states that this is not a 'traditional' book. Arguably, this is not a conventional book review and a post-script, which Sobers uses so effectively as a mechanism throughout the book, affords me a different register to conclude.

Shawn-Naphtali Sobers is a colleague and a friend. This is important to know, in the spirit of transparency, honouring the tenets of Small Anthropology. We have collaborated and co-authored work, but not specifically related to the core substance of this book. Given this, I felt compelled to work with careful yet critical consideration.

Candidly, as an academic and creative practitioner, shaped by cultural and visual studies, this book excited and educated me. It raises unanswered questions, but by design not omission. In each chapter, I encountered something new conceptually and practically and I found myself scribbling notes energetically, in the margins, like a student.

This is one scribbled note that shouts playfully yet conclusively from the page:
'Small Anthropology, Big Ideas!'

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