Book Reviews

Konadu, Kwasi. *Many Black Women of this Fortress: Graça, Mónica and Adwoa, Three Enslaved Women of Portugal's African Empire.* London: Hurst Publishers, 2022.

Reviewed by Chad Graham, *Howard University*

From Michel-Rolph Trouillot to Saidiya Hartman, historians have commented on the task of locating African peoples within colonial archives and how essential their lack of presence is to the reproduction of history. In the midst of this, they have engaged in the systematic recovery of African women from the annals of imperialism and slavery. Their efforts to reckon with and even challenge the illegibility of their subjects within historical documents forces readers to sit with a fuller understanding of the violence visited upon African people and allows for a richer consideration of how said people pushed back against it. *Many Black Women of this Fortress* is an intervention into these ongoing conversations. A practitioner of the historical method rather than a devotee, Konadu represents the lives and worlds of three African women who toiled at the Sao Jorge da Mina Fortress in the sixteenth century to illustrate how they exerted their feminine and spiritual power in the face of oppression. Further, he offers a different sense of how to know and what can be known about the past under such circumstances.

The 1755 earthquake in Lisbon destroyed most of Portugal's royal archives. Though unfortunate, this shortage of relevant historical evidence underscores Konadu's point, that *the archive* is neither malevolent nor an instrument for the explicit erasure of knowledge about African people. It is a repository of human memory—one of many. The archival documents available don't and can't render complete portraits of who Graça, Monica, and Adwoa were what they experienced. Yet, rather than speculatively fabulate the missing pieces of the puzzle, Konadu reconstructs the divisions of the Inquisition—the empire's

juridical arm—and its accompanying actors in order to carefully detail how his subjects interfaced with the system that had them bound. As a result, he gets the most out of what is in the archive, without ruminating on what isn't.

Konadu staggers his rendering of the available historical materials with his analysis of the aspects of African culture gestures toward in the materials. An elder when she emerged into the Inquisition's purview, Graça's persistence as an enslaved, Black, and non-Christian woman somehow threatened the entire fabric of who her capturers believed themselves to be. She was charged with practicing so-called witchcraft, a crime of the highest order. By reconstructing the trial proceedings, Konadu demonstrates how the prosecution attempted to throw the proverbial (holy) book at Graça, while the defense plead her innocence due to her lack of a proper socialization into Catholicism and an ignorance in the faith which resulted.

Monica similarly stood trial for her alleged devotion to a way of knowing which resembled the ones that Europe sought to extinguish within itself. All that was known for certain is that Monica had a habit of healing herself in accordance to her people's traditions, that she had a verbal altercation with another enslaved woman, and that said woman died shortly after. By retracing the investigation and recounting the interviews, Konadu invites belief in or the possibility of the efficacy of Monica's ritual practices. There's a sense that she withheld some understanding of the cosmos which she knew not to confess to her interrogators. Reading both hers and Graça's cases engenders a desire for them both to be found not guilty; however they weren't the ones on trial. The Crown, the Inquisition, and the Church were ultimately trying to cleanse Portugal of any impurities and justify it as a holy and righteous empire. So, the truth had to be covered up and the myth had to be retold. Graça and Monica exposed this.

Adwoa did not have a judicial stage on which to unveil Portugal's insecurities. There's not even enough mention of her in the records to tell her story. However, instead of privileging the archive as the arbiter of the past, Konadu taps into repositories of Akan memory to reveal that she and the people of Adena had much more than the archive can see. Beginning with her name and transitioning to customs and protocols germane to the peoples of that region, he sketches a picture of Adwoa's personhood and how she would've navigated life near what her people—in their own language—referred to as "the large stone building." Being baptized as "Maria" wouldn't have pre-

cluded her from adhering to the taboos of being a Monday-born or the rites she was obligated to carry out according to her lineage. Shifting the focus to who Adwoa was to her people — and not who she was to somebody else — lays bare the empire's failures. The Crown, the Church, and the Inquisition could not predict, control, or discipline the people of Adena, even though it desperately tried.

Many Black Women of this Fortress locates its subjects at the heart of an empire's undoing, without presenting them as exceptional or hinging their prowess on their manipulation of outside actors. Graça, Monica, and Adwoa were everyday women. In many reso, the work is more about the circumstances that they faced than it is their triumph over them. Details about the Inquisition and the fortress's inner workings are expansive and intricate. However, Konadu weaves them around his characterizations of the three women. Further, he models the importance of African languages skills and African ways of knowing in the recovery of knowledge about said people. Otherwise, chroniclers of history risk merely interpreting what others remember about them. Konadu's methods and the sources he excavates produce a meaningful contribution to the discourse on early imperialism in Africa and the role of archives.

Sinha, Manisha. *The Rise and Fall of the Second American Republic: Reconstruction, 1860-1920.* New York: Liveright, 2024. 592pp.

Reviewed by Misa Gould, ***Florida International University***

Manisha Sinha's *The Rise and Fall of the Second American Republic: Reconstruction, 1860-1920* offers a sweeping and revisionist account of Reconstruction, extending its temporal and geographical scope beyond the South and beyond the traditional 1865–1877 framework. Sinha structures her book into four parts: The Midwife of Revolution (1860-1870), which examines the radical transformations wrought by the Civil War and the early struggles for Black citizenship; Grassroots and Reconstruction (1865-1872), which highlights the role of Freedpeople and other marginalized groups in shaping postwar democracy; American Thermidor (1870-1890), which explores the reactionary and racist backlash that dismantled Reconstruction's gains; and From Republic to Empire (1890-1920), which traces how the defeat of Reconstruction helped pave the way for U.S. imperial expansion and entrenched racial and economic hierarchies. Sinha's central argument is that Reconstruction was not merely a regional phenomenon confined to the post-Civil War South, but rather a national and even transnational struggle for interracial democracy that was ultimately crushed by the forces of racist backlash. By broadening the lens of Reconstruction historiography, Sinha places Black citizenship at the heart of American democracy while demonstrating how its defeat impacted not just Freedpeople but also Black women, workers, and Indigenous nations across the country.

One of the most significant contributions of Sinha's work is her insistence on linking Southern Reconstruction with contemporaneous struggles in the North and West. She argues that the overthrow of Reconstruction governments in the South was part of a broader pattern of reactionary backlash against democracy, a pattern that can be seen in the treatment of Native Americans, labor movements, and women's rights activists. As she states: "Where I depart from most historians of Reconstruction is in my attempt to link such developments in the South with others across the nation" (Sinha 9). By doing so, Sinha disrupts the conventional narrative that confines Reconstruction's failure to southern racial violence, instead framing it as part of a larger, national counterrevolution against the expansion of citizenship and democracy.

Sinha's exploration of Indigenous history within the Reconstruction framework is particularly striking. She draws parallels between the rhetoric used to denigrate Freedpeople and the arguments deployed against Native Americans, noting that settlers such as Daniel Grant repurposed Reconstruction-era criticisms of Black people as government "wards" to justify the subjugation of Indigenous nations (Sinha 10). This connection underscores her broader theme of the persistent tension between democracy and capitalism, in which expansionist and capitalist ambitions often triumphed over egalitarian ideals.

Another key intervention in Sinha's work is her focus on labor struggles and class conflict in the postwar period. She examines the Great Railroad Strike of 1877 and the rise of the Workingmen's Party, highlighting the backlash from conservatives who labeled these movements as foreign and dangerous, much like they had earlier dismissed Black political activism during Reconstruction (Sinha 10-11). Albert Parsons, a former Confederate who became a labor organizer, serves as a compelling figure illustrating the ideological continuity between Reconstruction-era struggles and later labor movements. As Parsons himself noted, his enemies in the South were those who oppressed Black people, while his enemies in the North were those who sought to perpetuate wage slavery (Sinha 11). In drawing these connections, Sinha expands Reconstruction's significance beyond racial justice to include broader questions of economic inequality and workers' rights.

In Part Two: Grassroots and Reconstruction (1865-1872), Sinha's concept of "grassroots Reconstruction" captures the agency of Freedpeople and other disenfranchised groups in shaping the postwar order. Freedpeople documented atrocities, pushing the federal government to intervene and shaping congressional responses to Reconstruction (Sinha 153). Their activism was instrumental in defining the era's policies, as was the participation of Black women in civic and political life. Figures like Lucy Parsons, Ellen Garrison Jackson, and Rebecca Primus highlight the intersection of gender and race in the struggle for citizenship. Sinha argues that Reconstruction was not just a battle for Black male suffrage but also an era that catalyzed the women's rights movement. She critiques simplistic narratives that portray northern white women as the primary champions of Black rights, instead centering Black women's activism in shaping a broader vision of democracy (Sinha 11-12).

As Sinha details in her third section, American Thermidor (1870-1890), she describes the collapse of Reconstruction as an extended process rather than

an abrupt event. The rise of racist domestic terrorism, combined with economic crises and political scandals, eroded national support for federal intervention in the South. Grant's second term saw increased terrorist activity against Freedpeople, culminating in what Frederick Douglass decried as the federal government's failure to protect Black voters (Sinha 317). Sinha describes the retreat from Reconstruction as a counterrevolution, emphasizing how the overthrow of Reconstruction governments in the 1870s paralleled the violent conquest of western Indian nations. The federal government's withdrawal from the South coincided with its intensified campaigns against Indigenous sovereignty, reinforcing her argument that Reconstruction's fall was intertwined with the expansion of American empire (Sinha 356-357).

By the end of the nineteenth-century, the failure of Reconstruction had set the stage for both Jim Crow in the South and aggressive U.S. imperialism abroad. Part Four: From Republic to Empire (1890-1920) examines this dichotomy as the racist thermidor that followed Reconstruction did not merely lead to the segregation and disenfranchisement of Black Americans; it also laid the ideological groundwork for US colonial ambitions in the Caribbean and the Pacific (Sinha 443-444). The rise of industrial capitalism, with its intensification of economic inequality and exploitation of immigrant labor, further entrenched the hierarchies Reconstruction had sought to dismantle. The emergence of industrial monopolies, the suppression of labor movements, and the disfranchisement of Black and Indigenous communities all signaled the triumph of reactionary forces over the democratic ideals of the Second American Republic (Sinha 399-400).

Yet, as Sinha argues, the legacies of Reconstruction endured beyond its formal demise. Women's suffrage, though delayed, was a direct outgrowth of Reconstruction's debates over citizenship and democracy. Social feminists such as Jane Addams, Lillian Wald, and Florence Kelley carried forward Reconstruction's ideals by linking labor rights, racial justice, and women's emancipation (Sinha 484). While Reconstruction's radical vision was ultimately overturned, its struggles provided a foundation for later movements, from the early twentieth-century fight for labor rights to the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s—the so-called Second Reconstruction (Sinha 483).

Sinha's work is an ambitious and necessary intervention in Reconstruction historiography. By expanding Reconstruction's scope temporally and geographically, she forces readers to reconsider the broader implications of its

failure. As she asserts: "The defeat of black freedom was the defeat of American democracy" (Sinha 12)—a thesis that powerfully underscores her argument that Reconstruction's failure had ramifications far beyond the South. However, some may question whether the book's expansive approach risks diluting the specificity of Reconstruction as a distinct historical period. Nevertheless, her synthesis of race, class, gender, and empire provides a compelling framework for understanding not only the post-Civil War era but also the ongoing struggles for democracy in America. In redefining Reconstruction as a national and transnational struggle, Sinha challenges us to rethink both its achievements and its failures. More than just a story of racial progress and backlash, *The Rise and Fall of the Second American Republic: Reconstruction, 1860-1920* is a history of contested democracy, one that remains deeply relevant in our own time.

Omari Souza. *Design Against Racism: Creating Work That Transforms Communities.* Princeton Architectural Press, 2025. 256 pp.

Reviewed by Milan Drake, *Stanford University*

Omari Souza's, *Design Against Racism*, explores design as both a praxis of power and a tool for transformation. Souza picks up where he and Tedra Moses left off with *An Anthology of Blackness* (Moses & Souza, 2023), Souza keeps the conversational flame lit by taking readers on a journey through the turbulent waters, past and present, that exist within design thinking and design work—colonialism, eurocentrism, racism, gatekeeping, deniability, accessibility, and not the least of all, hope. Through the intentional selection of each contributor and his own words, Souza reminds us that intellectually examining design's very problematic past is the only way we can design a pragmatic future. With clear, purposeful storytelling, Souza illustrates how design can either reinforce exclusionary histories or actively challenge them. His approach does not center problems but possibilities, positioning design as a method for intervention and repair.

The journey of *Design Against Racism* is laid out in three themes—History, Practice, and Case Studies. Each section is a necessary component that supports Souza's case that design thinking and design work play a valuable role in communal design, communal resistance, and communal justice. This approach further supports Souza's emphasis on "storytelling as a tool" while creating a unique story of his own (p. 10). The result is a book that documents some, though not all, of the ways Black designers, allies, and advocates have shaped experiences that both reflect the world and serve as tools for reshaping it.

The first section, History, situates itself as a revolutionary record of design's existence within and resistance against racism, capitalism, and colonialism. It is not a doom and gloom conversation, but rather it is a reminder of the resilience of Black people, Black Power, and Black designers. Souza also serves as a reminder of the importance of acknowledging the hard truths of the past. The history we hug and the history we hate are a part of the healing and designing of a reality that honors our full humanity. It is necessary to acknowledge our pasts, no matter the weight of the atrocity. Yes, in hopes of not repeating it and in hopes of being able to heal the scars such atrocities have left behind.

The second section, Practice, shifts the focus to solutions—how folks have embraced design as a tool, challenged societal narratives, and created new realities, using design as a canvas to shape a broader, more inclusive vision. Designers like Dr. Lesley-Ann Noel (p. 131), Kaleena Sales, Zariah Cameron (p. 182), and Sekou Cooke (p. 168) exemplify how design shapes narratives and holds complex stories of race, class, identity, and social dynamics. One amazing example briefly highlighted in this section was the State of Black Design Conference (SOBD) in March of 2022. If I did have a critique of Souza and this book, it would be here. Souza is far too humble in the limited mentioning of SOBD and the real-life example of hush-harbor for Black designers, as well as their allies and advocates. I have experienced SOBD in person, and if there was ever a living, breathing example of *how* to practice Black Design work, SOBD is it. The gathering of Black minds in a brave, Black space was life changing.

The final section, Case Studies, is where the most tangible evidence is presented. Here Souza looks at several examples of work being done in the community that represent putting the conversations of theory into real-world action. This section acknowledges contributions that have been historically overlooked due to the racial dynamics of the designers and or the racial dynamics of the communities which they serve. Many of the case studies highlight important, yet lesser-known work, and Souza's decision to include them brings visibility to designs that would be otherwise invisible.

I can see myself returning to this book as a citation in my own work and a reference in the design spaces I frequent. Designing Spaces for Racism is a tool for design thinking, design work, and activism—creating brave spaces where culture thrives, learning is encouraged, contributions are valued, all while challenging the status quo. If the goal was to push the conversation forward on how we design against racism and provide clear examples of those who have designed against racism and examples of those who are presently designing against racism, the book delivers completely. The intention is clear, the examples are strong, and the voices included within are done so with undeniable deliberateness.

As an academic and educator, many of the names and examples in the book's early sections felt familiar. To that end, I would have liked to see more conversations centered on community designers throughout the first two themes of the book. The case studies strike a balance between the conversations hap-

pening at universities and the applied practices happening in the communities (p. 200). The case studies inspired the following questions—what if some of these examples had been woven into the Practice section? What if some of these examples had shown up earlier? That is not to say the book fell short, but when authors finally give voice to subjects that are often marginalized, there is a tendency to want more.

Another of the book's strengths is its successful balance of theory and application from the Introduction to the Conclusion. Souza does not become overly focused on praising design thinking and design work, nor does he engage in a deep exploration of the doom-and-gloom of design practice. Instead, Souza offers a range of possibilities, pathways, and praxis from past successes and lessons learned, adding to the toolkit for those of us who call ourselves designers, educators, community leaders, and academic activists.

Omari Souza delivers a powerful, well put together story that tells of Black History of the past and reminds us of the urgency to redesign and reframe our thinking for resistance and liberation in 2025. The book exemplifies the necessity for amplifying a range of voices and lays a strong foundation for others to follow suit. Reading this book had me asking myself: What's next? Who's next? What else can I design? Maybe readers of this book will find themselves asking similar questions.