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## Introduction. Revisiting Slave Narratives II

Judith Misrahi Barak

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My thanks also go to David Boxer and Christopher Cozier for authorizing the reproduction of their works.

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Reims, France.

CENTRE D'ÉTUDES ET DE RECHERCHES  
SUR LES PAYS DU COMMONWEALTH

# Revisiting Slave Narratives II

## Les avatars contemporains des récits d'esclaves II

Texts collected by Judith Misrahi-Barak  
Textes réunis par Judith Misrahi-Barak

Coll. « Les Carnets du Cerpac » n° 6

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## INTRODUCTION

*Judith MISRAHI-BARAK*  
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In 2003, an international conference was held at Paul-Valéry University, Montpellier III, organised by the Cerpac (Centre d'études et de recherches sur les pays du Commonwealth / Research Center on the Commonwealth) whose topic was "Revisiting Slave Narratives / Les Avatars contemporains des récits d'esclaves". A true interaction between the critical and the creative fields was initiated by the presence of many specialists of the discipline as well as that of the two guests of honour, the writers Fred D'Aguiar and Caryl Phillips, the former delivering the opening keynote address and the latter a reading at the end of the conference. The wide response from academics across the world to the call for papers can easily be understood on several grounds: first, the number of works of fiction relating to slavery and the slave trade since the publication of *Jubilee* by Margaret Walker in 1966 is quite impressive. Also, it was the first time that such a topic

focused entirely on neo-slave narratives; of course, earlier slave narratives were the main frame of reference and supported the main argument of the conference, but they were no longer the main object of study. Finally, the focus was not only on African-American neo-slave narratives, but also on the new generation of Caribbean neo-slave narratives published in the 1990s, and they were placed side by side with the original African-American neo-slave narratives published in the 1960s. One can also add that the francophone neo-slave novel was also represented through the study of writers like Patrick Chamoiseau or Maryse Condé.

The proceedings of the conference that were published in 2005 made it clear that a double tradition was being responded to by the younger generation of neo-slave narrative writers, writers of Caribbean descent like Dionne Brand, Michele Cliff, David Dabydeen, Fred D'Aguiar, Caryl Phillips: that of the original 18th and 19th slave narratives, and that of the African-American neo-slave novels written during the civil rights movement. Whether in the francophone or the anglophone realms, what emerged out of that juxtaposing of the African-American slavery novels and Caribbean slavery novels, was the strategy of the *detour*, to borrow Edouard Glissant's approach, operated by Caribbean writers. Indeed, one cannot but notice that there were almost no slave narratives in the 18th and 19th century Caribbean, apart from Mary Prince's *The History of Mary Prince, a West Indian Slave*<sup>1</sup>. And yet, in the 1990s, Caribbean writers have renewed a genre on their own terms that had not been practised as such by their forefathers. They have effected a *detour* through African-American literature of the 1960s, borrowing a certain number of motifs, revisiting oth-

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1. *The History of Mary Prince, a West Indian Slave*, in *The Classic Slave Narratives*, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. ed. (1831. New York: Penguin Books, 1987).

ers in ways that point in new directions, in short, *signifying*. I will say a few more words about this further on in this introduction.

While the publication *Revisiting Slave Narratives / Les Avatars contemporains des Récits d'esclaves (RSN I)* was mostly concerned with bringing together those different layers of traditions and trans-textual references, it also focused on the renewal of the neo-slave narrative as genre, although this concern was restricted in scope. With the exception of Wendy Harding's analysis of two long poems by Robert Hayden and Clarence Major, only short-stories and novels were examined by the participants, and a small number of them. Even if considering only fiction writers, many authors were not included in the conference, nor were they in the book of course. Writers like André Brink, Barbara Chase-Riboud, Michelle Cliff, Beryl Gilroy, John Hearne, Manu Herstein, Edward P. Jones, Paule Marshall, Valerie Martin, Lawrence Scott, Simone Schwarz-Bart, Lalita Tademi, among others, were missing.

These are the two reasons why I decided to follow up on the first volume and launch a second call for contributions, the response to which was also very wide and enthusiastic in spite of the fact that there wasn't the supportive frame of a conference in the first place. Even though nothing can replace a good conference that brings together many scholars from across the world, it is extremely gratifying to be able to follow suit and expand the research that is being done in a given field. My conception of research is that one's individual work can only bloom through a dialogue with the community of scholars, when new vistas have been opened through confrontation and emulation as well as through friendship. That is why the opportunities granted by university departments and research centers are invaluable, and

I am grateful to the University of Montpellier III and the Équipe d'accueil 741 "Étude des pays anglophones" for having encouraged the Cerpac to pursue the project of *Revisiting Slave Narratives II (RSN II)*.

The publication of *RSN II* also marks another stage in the development of the Cerpac since it is the first time *Les Carnets du Cerpac* has actually relied on an International Advisory Board, making it a peer-reviewed collection. My warmest thanks go to the members of the International Board for the work they have done. It is another indispensable tool of collective research.

Of course, 2007 is the year of the bicentennial anniversary of the official abolition of the transatlantic slave trade in the British colonial Empire. 1807 was the first stage of a process that would be drawn out until 1888 (Brazil) as far as the Americas were concerned. The celebrations of such an anniversary are innumerable in the English-speaking world, be they exhibitions, academic events or other manifestations, and I am glad to be able to make my own contribution, however modest, and take part in the process of memorialisation that is taking place<sup>1</sup>. I would like, however, to add that all these manifestations should not be about 1807-2007 only—slavery-related issues should be kept in mind long after the commemoration events are over, and the questions that have arisen through this memorialisation should remain with us always and help us reconsider our present. This is an aspect that

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1. Among the thousands of websites celebrating the abolition of the slave trade, I would recommend the one hosted by the University of Central Lancashire, it is extremely well-done and lists the numerous anniversary events, memorials and links to other websites. It also presents STAMP, the Slave Trade Arts Memorial Project, led by Dr. Alan Rice, Academic Consultant to STAMP, Dept. of Humanities, University of Central Lancashire, Preston, UK.

[www.uclan.ac.uk/facs/class/cfe/ceth/abolition/](http://www.uclan.ac.uk/facs/class/cfe/ceth/abolition/)

had already been evoked in *RSN I*, particularly by the two invited writers, Fred D'Aguiar and Caryl Phillips—celebrations of past events are about the present, and our ways of celebrating, remembering and/or forgetting, reveal what we have become today. If understanding our past helps us decipher our present in ways that would not have been possible otherwise, the opposite can also be said, that our present illuminates the past in ways that had not been contemplated previously. This dialogic relationship provides the authors of *RSN II*, writers and scholars alike, with the *raison d'être* of their writing—and the whole collection is structured accordingly.

In order to focus even more on the reasons why such a genre as the slave narrative has been abandoned and taken up again, revisited and remoulded in such diverse ways and over such a long span of time, the contributions were selected according to the new approaches they were taking. Instead of focusing first and foremost on fiction, the scope has been enlarged so as to include works that revisit both the original 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century slave narratives and the 1960s African-American neo-slave novels, in a framework that was not necessarily that of the fictional narrative. The problematics of the volume have been opened up to non-fiction such as the autobiography or the essay or the travel memoir, to poetry, and to other media such as drama and the visual arts, precisely to be able to come closer to the problems that arise when one speaks of *generic recreation*. Every single paper in *RSN II*, whether written by experienced scholars or budding ones (and it has always been the choice of *Les Carnets du Cerpac* to give them a common platform) revolves around that generic axis, ie. not only examining why there has been such an abundance of fictional and critical writing in the wake of the classic slave nar-

ratives, but also why such or such a genre, or medium, has been chosen and how it modifies the discourse presented.

The notion of genre is one that has been considered important in the formation of literature across centuries, either because it was meant to give a form and shape to texts that were to imitate earlier models and abide by a certain number of prescriptions, or, on the contrary, because writers needed to break free from those frames. The history of the theory of genres seems to have evolved from a normative attitude in which aesthetic creation was inseparable from imitation, to an essentialist attitude that granted literary genres a reality of their own that was to help bring forward the inner logic of literature in its development. It is not my purpose to examine the intricacies of the theory of genres here—suffice it to say that in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the genre was more and more conceived as something that should be less of an obstacle and more of a practical tool. When he examines the concept of *generic recreation* (“re-création générique”), Jean-Marie Schaeffer tackles the very flexibility that pertains to the notion of genre itself:

[...] what happens when an author, let’s say a 20th century author, borrows generic features from a genre that has ceased to be practised for a certain time, for instance since the 17th century? Do relevant features (semantic or syntactic) continue to express the same generic determinations as in the 17th century?<sup>1</sup>

Of course not. The context has changed, so have the expectations, and the *horizon d’attente*<sup>2</sup> is not the same. Schaeffer also

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1. SCHAEFFER, Jean-Marie, *Qu’est-ce qu’un genre littéraire?* (Paris: Seuil, 1989): 136 (my translation).

2. JAUSS, H. R., *Pour une esthétique de la réception*. Paris: Gallimard, 1978.

adds that a writer who reactivates a defunct genre, consciously plays on the discrepancy between the original genre and the reactivated one (Schaeffer 1989: 138), and he deliberately plays with the expectations of the reader. The genre should not hinder what Gérard Genette calls “le plaisir générique”<sup>1</sup>—*generic pleasure*. Indeed, part of the reader’s pleasure derives from the pleasure of recognition, from the dialectics of expectation and satisfaction, as well as from the transgression of the generic norm.

Although neither Schaeffer nor Genette has in mind postcolonial literatures or speaks specifically of neo-slave narratives, this is exactly what happens in the context of the several generations of slave narratives and novels, created and recreated from 1760 to the first decade of the 21st century<sup>2</sup>. As H. A. Rushdy has explained, neo-slave narratives are “contemporary novels that assume the form, adopt the conventions, and take on the first-person voice of the antebellum narrative.”<sup>3</sup> But whether they do

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1. GENETTE, Gérard, *Figures V* (Paris: Seuil, 2002): 84.

2. Briton Hammon’s *Narrative of the Uncommon Sufferings, and Surprising (sic) Deliverance of Briton Hammon, a Negro Man . . .* published in 1760, is given by H. L. Gates Jr. as the first instance of slave narratives. He gives 1865 as the end date after which the slavery-related works shouldn’t be considered as slave narratives any longer: “Rather arbitrarily, we have defined as a slave narrative only those *written* works published before 1865, after which time *de jure* slavery ceased to exist. (. . .) We have assigned this end date simply for literary reasons: the very structure of the narratives, their rhetorical strategies as a genre, altered drastically once the milieu in which they were written and read altered drastically. Once slavery was formally abolished, no need existed for the slave to *write* himself into the human community through the action of first-person narration.” *The Slave’s Narrative* (Oxford University Press, 1985): xii-xiii.

3. RUSHDY, H. A. *Neo-Slave Narratives: Studies in the Social Logic of a Literary Form* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999): 3. The term was introduced a decade earlier by Bernard Bell in *The Afro-American Novel and its Tradition* (Amherst: Amherst University Press, 1987), a more general book about African-American literature and literary specificities.



so during the Civil rights movement in the 1960s in the United States, or in Europe in the early 1990s, is not the same thing<sup>1</sup>. This latest phase signals once more that the wound still needs healing, that History still needs appropriating, and that the past of slavery is still not past. It still needs revisiting, be it in a beeline or through diversions.

In the way the different articles of *RSN II* have been organised, something of that discussion about genre should come across. The reader of the collection will first find articles about works which appear to be closest in shape to the original slave narratives, and will continue with articles that focus on works that both use the legacy and put it at more and more of a distance. The first article, by Anna Hartnell, introduces into the discussion those questions pertaining to the concepts of legacy, heritage, filiation and affiliation. *The Autobiography of Malcom X*, because it claims to belong to the autobiographical genre, harks back to the very mode of expression that was originally chosen by the formerly enslaved Africans in the 18th and 19th centuries (although there was always a degree of intervention from the abolitionists and editors and one can say that autobiography was already in the position of being displaced, even within the original slave narratives). Through a comparison between Frederick Douglass's *Narrative* and Malcom X's *Autobiography*, Hartnell reinterprets the latter in the light of the former, reading Malcom X's *Autobiography* as borrowing the shape of the slave narrative while endeavouring to reach a different goal. Hartnell analyses Malcom X's conversion to Islam as being one more avatar of the narrative of liberation of the enslaved, the individual striving toward an alternative identity, outside of the American culture which he claims to reject.

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1. I would say that the third generation of slavery literature was initiated with Caryl Phillips's *Cambridge* in 1991.

One easily sees how complex these issues of appropriation and rejection are in the context of the narrative of the enslaved. The rhetoric of liberation is definitely and decidedly lifted from the slave narrative itself, but even as it is coupled with the rejection of Western Christianity, the text is nonetheless revealed as deeply American. It is the whole tradition of liberation that is rethought in the context of America's history of slavery.

John Edgar Wideman's *The Island Martinique* is also a non-fiction work and it is both a personal and a political text, just like the slave narratives. If the original narrative of the enslaved was striving towards the horizon of freedom, and Malcom X's *Autobiography* was also reaching out towards another space, Wideman's text is not openly autobiographical, although it integrates autobiographical elements. In his article, Claude Julien shows how it plays quite freely with generic boundaries, being part diary, part travelogue, part fiction and part meditation. After the National Geographic asked Wideman to go anywhere he wanted and write about it, the choice of Martinique eventually imposed itself, attractive as it must have been in its uncanny proximity and strangeness. Isn't the island the perfect example of the type of world that has resulted from the Middle Passage and the ensuing African diaspora? Isn't it the best locale to probe the prolonged effects of plantation culture on contemporary society and mind-scape? What Julien does is highlight the critique that Wideman makes while untangling the different threads and loops in a writing that integrates all kinds of ghosts—the ghosts of local historical figures, of writers and even of former literary genres. Wideman says in *The Island Martinique*:

Writing is a forgetting, a technique for abandoning things, leaving things out, replacing with the artifice of narrative what's

happening or what's already gone on about its mysterious business. All experience dissolves into chaos and terror if we remember too much.<sup>1</sup>

Of course, he and the other writers examined in this collection also show the opposite, that writing is remembering, but writing is first and foremost a form of emancipation, in which a measure of forgetting must take place. All kinds of shackles are to be shaken —generic shackles among them. Maybe *generic remembering* together with *generic forgetting* would make sense in this context. Although it is not actually formulated in such a way in the individual articles, I think all the articles point to the fact that the regeneration of the genre and form of the slave narrative is one of the instances of a creative strategy that leads, through imagination and creation, to a deeper kind of emancipation. Using the poetic mode, or the dramatic or artistic one, to revisit the slave narrative and the neo-slave narrative can be interpreted as an instance of that loosening of the generic shackles. It can appear as quite daring to resort to genres that were never actually used by the formerly enslaved and to invent new modes.

Two articles have chosen to examine poetic texts in order to explore *the remains of the slave narrative* and understand how the narrative form is problematized. Abigail Ward considers Fred D'Aguiar's novel in verse, *Bloodlines*, as a complex work that in spite of appearances takes a double paradoxical direction: it takes us back to the period of slavery and the context of the plantation, while it relies on rhetoric that distances the reader from that very past. There is no easy access back to slavery, nor to slave

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1. WIDEMAN, John, *The Island: Martinique* (Washington, D.C.: the National Geographic Society, 2003): 62-63.

narratives, this is how the constraint of the *ottava rima* should be heard. *Bloodlines* is a text of the *working through*, the taking stock of the trauma that slavery was without necessarily trying to heal the wound at all cost. Ward's relying on Marianne Hirsh's essays "Past Lives: Postmemories in Exile" and "Surviving Images: Holocaust Photographs and the Work of Postmemory", is particularly enlightening in helping to understand the complexities of closeness and distance in post-traumatic situations. Marilyn Nelson's book of poems *Fortune's Bones*, also raises the questions—how close can one get? how distant does one have to be? Wendy Harding examines from up close the fascination that the very skeleton of the enslaved Fortune exerted from his own time (his master dissecting his body for the purposes of anatomical study) until the present. In the poems as well as in the paratexts that accompany them, something of the slave narrative re-emerges to the surface, yet also to be put at a distance and questioned. The reader is presented with the very pith and marrow, if I may risk saying so, of the revisiting process and of the generic question. How far beyond the trauma and the mystery can one move? How is one to resuscitate the past while laying it to rest? Harding and Nelson also raise the issues of survival and celebration, and of how much rejection one can / has to admit. If the constraint of the *ottava rima* was the obstacle in D'Aguiar's course, here it is the musical metaphor, jazz and the religious requiem, that is used as a distancing device. Retrieving and distancing walk hand in hand, so do remembering and forgetting.

It may seem harder to move beyond the generic boundaries of the slave narrative and the neo-slave narrative through the genre of fiction and more precisely the novel. The works that are analysed by Iris Johnson (Edward P. Jones's *The Known*

*World*), Mélanie Joseph-Vilain (André Brink's *A Chain of Voices*), Ada Savin (Paule Marshall's *The Chosen Place, the Timeless People*), Željka Švrljuga (Barbara Chase-Riboud's *The Hottentot Venus*), Ana Nunes (Phyllis Perry's *Stigmata*), Stephanie Li (Susan Straight's *A Million Nightingales*) and Marta Lysik (Cristina Garcia's *Monkey Hunting*), as well as Barbara Lewis (*Kindred*, in a comparison with the play *Sally's Rape*), are all works of fiction, on the model of the neo-slave narrative, published between 1969 and 2003. And yet, they all in their own ways question the very genre in which they evolve, either to ask if any writer is authorized to write about slavery (in that perspective, Edward P. Jones should be interesting to read in parallel to Susan Straight . . . ), or to foreground the issue of the medium. Hybrid novels like Paule Marshall's or polyphonic and multifocal ones like André Brink's or Barbara Chase-Riboud's (or still Fred D'Aguiar's and Caryl Phillips's, cf *RSN I*) bring into focus the possibility—the necessity?—of distorting the original generic forms and definitions so as to reinscribe them in the present. And the aim always seems to be a deeper vision into the present, as is obvious in novels by Brink, Chase-Riboud or Garcia. The mode is also turned into a powerful tool, whether it is the historical, the realist, the carnivalesque, the scientific or the fictional mode, the science-fictional or the magic realist one, as Johnson, Švrljuga and Nunes show. What comes across most forcefully in these four articles about neo-slave narratives by Edward P. Jones (Johnson), André Brink (Joseph-Vilain), Paule Marshall (Savin), Barbara Chase-Riboud (Švrljuga), Phyllis Perry (Nunes) and Cristina Garcia (Lysik) is the dialogic relationship that ties them to previous slave narratives and novels, the trans-textuality that brings together texts written decades apart.

Additionally, Barbara Lewis's article about *Sally's Rape* and *Kindred* brings side by side works that belong to the dramatic and the fictional mode. In order to show how the continuum that takes us from the days of slavery to the present can be stretched, Lewis compares the science-fictional mode used by Octavia Butler (time-traveling across generations), and the dramatic mode that shines the light on the performing female body. The very fact of a physical performance on the stage initiates another development and opens another vista in the argument of the collection—the body performing on the stage becomes absolutely *present* in all meanings of the term, here and now, absolutely. As Lewis says, the past bleeds into the present. Two more essays are devoted to plays, and emphasize ever so strongly the echos of slavery and slavery-related narratives and novels that are carried over to our present day: William Etter on three plays by August Wilson, and Kerry-Jane Wallart on Derek Walcott's *Dream on Monkey Mountain*. In plays written in the 1990s and 2000s, but whose context is the early 20th century, August Wilson re-confronts us with present-day slave narratives. Derek Walcott, on the other hand, also listens to the distorted echos of history while deconstructing many of the features that have traditionally been said to characterize the texts of the enslaved. As Wallart demonstrates, far from writing a scenario of escape, Walcott locks his characters up in a circular structure and formulates more unresolved questions than answers. In both cases, the physical performance, the orality of language and the extra-linguistic medium are used as tools to penetrate the spectator's contemporary consciousness.

It is also the spectator's contemporary consciousness that is called upon in the visual art works that have been increasingly in the limelight, and it is interesting to note that some visual

artists working on slavery-related material and the memorialisation of it actually come from the theatre, like Lubaina Himid or Godfried Donkor. The implication of the body, visual questioning and understanding, these are what visual art helps us realize. An amazingly high number of visual artists have also tackled the relationship we can have nowadays with slavery and slavery-related narratives. They are living in the UK (Kevin Dalton-Johnson, Godfried Donkor, Lubaina Himid, Yinka Shonibare, for example), in the US (Renée Green, David Hammons, Isaac Julien, Glenn Ligon, Kerry James Marshal, Adrian Piper, Lorna Simpson, Kara Walker, among others) or in Africa and the Caribbean (Georges Adéagbo, David Boxer, Christopher Cozier for example)<sup>1</sup>. They may work across several media: theatre and art; photography and art. As Dinah Holzman shows in writing about Kara Walker, or Rosalie Smith McCrea in writing about David Boxer and Christopher Cozier, these visual artists not only shove the modern-day impact of slavery under our noses, but also integrate, refer to and deconstruct the textual dimension of the narratives and novels.

None of these artists, and this is true for the novelists and poets too who are examined in this collection, wants to revisit plantation days for the sake of revisiting. The only thing we can gain is understanding, and a new vision about the past and about ourselves. The question still is, how are we to negotiate trauma and the representations of trauma? How is the *working through* to be performed? Part of the answer lies in the fact that all of us, writ-

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1. I am particularly grateful to Glenn Ligon for allowing me a second time to use one of his "Runaways" for the cover (cf *RSN I*). My thanks also go to his gallery in New York, D'Amelio Terras, as well as to François Quintin, Director of the Frac Champagne-Ardennes, who holds the piece. I am also grateful to David Boxer and Christopher Cozier for having authorized the reproduction of some of their works in Rosalie Smith McCrea's article.

ers and readers, actors and spectators alike, can be manumitted through the emancipation of form, this is what is required and what this collection strives to demonstrate.

Slavery is not only about the past. Our present is still shaped by it, it has even become a global problem we can't seem to get rid of<sup>1</sup>. It is the role of writers, playwrights, poets and artists to point out what we could otherwise have remained blind to, to formulate and reinterpret reality, and hopefully start changing it.

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1. There are thousands of websites devoted to the problem of modern-day slavery and person-trafficking. I would simply like to mention two of those. The Trafficking in Persons Report, released by the Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons, June 5, 2002, can be seen at: [usgovinfo.about.com/gi/dynamic/offsite.htm?site=http://www.state.gov/g/tip/rls/tiprpt/2002/10678.htm](http://www.usgovinfo.about.com/gi/dynamic/offsite.htm?site=http://www.state.gov/g/tip/rls/tiprpt/2002/10678.htm).

The Global Alliance Against Forced Labour, by the International Labour Office, can be seen at: [www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/trust/docs/forced\\_labour\\_report\\_summary.pdf](http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/trust/docs/forced_labour_report_summary.pdf).

In spite of the Trafficking Victims Protection Act, passed in October 2000 in the US, in spite of the international engagement of many countries, governments and NGOs, the situation remains frighteningly dreadful with over 150 countries involved, and over 12 million people are directly concerned. The 2006 Trafficking in Persons Report on "Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act of 2000" can be seen at: [usgovinfo.about.com/gi/dynamic/offsite.htm?site=http://www.state.gov/g/tip/rls/tiprpt/2002/10678.htm](http://www.usgovinfo.about.com/gi/dynamic/offsite.htm?site=http://www.state.gov/g/tip/rls/tiprpt/2002/10678.htm).