



**HAL**  
open science

## Revisiting Slave Narratives II

Judith Misrahi Barak

► **To cite this version:**

Judith Misrahi Barak (Dir.). Revisiting Slave Narratives II. Presses universitaires de la Méditerranée, 478 p., 2007, 978-2-84269-811-9. hal-03051081v1

**HAL Id: hal-03051081**

**<https://hal.science/hal-03051081v1>**

Submitted on 19 Mar 2021 (v1), last revised 10 Jun 2021 (v2)

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.



I address my warmest thanks to Glenn Ligon and his gallery in New York, D'Amelio Terras, for letting me use one of the ten lithographs constituting "Runaways", 1993 ; 39,3 × 29,2 cm ; photographer André Morin ; Collection Frac Champagne-Ardenne, Reims, France.

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

*Cover / Couverture* : Glenn LIGON, "Runaways", 1993 ; 39,3 × 29,2 cm ;  
photo : André Morin ; Collection Frac Champagne-Ardenne,  
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

PRESSES UNIVERSITAIRES DE LA MÉDITERRANÉE

*Les Carnets du Cerpac* is a collection attached to the Cerpac (Centre d'études et de recherches sur les pays du Commonwealth / Research Centre on the Commonwealth) and devoted to the study of colonial and postcolonial literatures and cultures. It is a publication of Paul-Valéry University, Montpellier III, France.

<http://recherche.univ-montp3.fr/mambo/cerpac>

### **General Editor / Directrice de publication**

Dr Judith MISRAHI-BARAK (Université Montpellier III, France)

### **International Advisory Board / Comité de lecture international**

Dr Susan BARRET (University of Bordeaux III, France); Pr Phil BARRISH (University of Austin, Texas, USA); Pr Wolfgang BINDER (University of Erlangen, Germany); Pr Florence BOOS (University of Iowa, USA); Pr Bella BRODZKI (Sarah Lawrence College, New York, USA); Dr Rita CHRISTIAN (London Metropolitan University, UK); Dr Florence D'SOUZA (University of Lille III, France); Pr Christiane FROUPOU (University of Toulouse-le-Mirail, France); Pr Teresa GIBERT (UNED, Madrid, Spain); Dr Matthew GRAVES (University of Provence, France); Dr Matt KIMMICH (University of Berne, Switzerland); Dr John McLEOD (University of Leeds, UK); Pr Evelyn O'CALLAGHAN (University of the West Indies, Cave Hill Campus, Barbados); Pr Peter PIERCE (James Cook University, Australia); Pr Martine PIQUET (University of Paris X, France); Pr Alan RICE (University of Central Lancashire, UK); Pr Richard SAMIN (University of Metz, France); Pr Ronnie SCHARFMAN (Purchase College, SUNY, USA); Dr Charlotte STURGESS (University of Strasbourg, France); Pr Louise YELIN (Purchase College, SUNY, USA); Dr Candace WARD (Florida State University, USA).

## CONTENTS

<b>Judith MISRAHI-BARAK</b>	
Introduction . . . . .	9
<b>Anna HARTNELL</b>	
Narrating Slavery, Narrating America : freedom as conversion in <i>The Autobiography of Malcolm X</i> . . . . .	25
<b>Claude JULIEN</b>	
<i>The Island : Martinique</i> : a Narrative of the Long Shadow of Slavery . . . . .	53
<b>Abigail WARD</b>	
Postmemories of Slavery in Fred D'Aguiar's <i>Bloodlines</i>	73
<b>Wendy HARDING</b>	
The Remains of the Slave Narrative in Marilyn Nelson's <i>Fortune's Bones : A Manumission Requiem</i> . . . . .	99

**Iris Nicole JOHNSON**

Contemporary Ownership : The Master, the Slave, and  
the Self in Edward P. Jones's *The Known World* . . . . . 129

**Mélanie JOSEPH-VILAIN**

*A Chain of Voices* : a "masters and slaves" Narrative . . . 155

**Ada SAVIN**

Rituals of "rememory" in Paule Marshall's *The Chosen  
Place, The Timeless People* . . . . . 177

**Željka ŠVRLJUGA**

The Science/Fiction Carnival in Barbara Chase-Riboud's  
*Hottentot Venus* . . . . . 199

**Ana NUNES**

From the Fantastic to Magic Realism : The Spectral  
Presence in Phyllis Perry's *Stigmata* . . . . . 223

**Stephanie LI**

Racial Alliances in a White Neo-Slave Narrative : Susan  
Straight's *A Million Nightingales* . . . . . 249

**Marta LYSIK**

Multiple Trajectories of Slavery : Cristina García's  
*Monkey Hunting* as a Transnational Neo-Slave Narrative 275

**Barbara LEWIS**

Antebellum Revisitations : Insurrectionary  
Interventions in *Kindred* and *Sally's Rape* . . . . . 297

**William ETTER**

Legacies of Enslavement and Emancipation : American  
Slave Narratives and August Wilson's Plays . . . . . 321

**Kerry-Jane WALLART**

Derek Walcott's *Dream on Monkey Mountain* :  
Crossroads, Crosswords and Cross-purposes, or the  
Impossible Straight Line into Freedom . . . . . 351

**Dinah HOLTZMAN**

"Save the Trauma for your Mama" : Kara Walker, the  
Art World's *Beloved* . . . . . 377

**Rosalie SMITH McCREA**

Postmodern Caribbean Image-Text Correspondences :  
Visual Constructions from David Boxer and  
Christopher Cozier . . . . . 405

Selected bibliography . . . . . 439

Contributors . . . . . 451

Abstracts . . . . . 459

Cerpac . . . . . 473





*Les Carnets du Cerpac* n° 6, 2007, 9-23.

## INTRODUCTION

*Judith MISRAHI-BARAK*  
*Université Paul-Valéry, Montpellier III*

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-

---

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

---

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

---

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

---

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.

---

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

---

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-

---

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.

---

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).





*Les Carnets du Cerpac* n° 6, 2007, 25-52.

**NARRATING SLAVERY, NARRATING AMERICA:  
FREEDOM AS CONVERSION IN  
*THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF MALCOLM X***

*Anna HARTNELL*  
*University of Birmingham*

Never have I witnessed such sincere hospitality and the overwhelming spirit of true brotherhood as is practiced by people of all colors and races here in this ancient Holy Land, the home of Abraham, Muhammad, and all the other prophets of the Holy Scriptures. For the past week, I have been utterly speechless and spellbound by the graciousness I see displayed all around me by people of *all colors*.<sup>1</sup>

The wonder with which Malcolm X narrates his encounter with the Islamic East recalls and seemingly fulfils Frederick Douglass'

---

1. X, Malcolm, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, with the assistance of Alex Haley (1965. London: Penguin, 1968): 454.

prophetic sense that “there is a better day coming”.<sup>1</sup> Douglass’ wistful yet powerful encounter on the banks of the Chesapeake Bay with what William Lloyd Garrison describes as “the living spirit of freedom” is thus brought home to Malcolm X on soil profoundly foreign to New World Christianity (Douglass 1845: 249). Douglass’ text itself can be read as a foreshadowing of this ironic destiny: the spirit of freedom in this scene is an aquatic register chasing vessels “from every quarter of the habitable globe” (Douglass 1845: 293). In contrast Douglass’ enslaved body remains landlocked within the confines of the United States of America. More than a hundred years later, Malcolm X appears to break free from these confines via an intense and dramatic conversion.

The advent of the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade occasions the opportunity to re-assess the significance of these two pivotal moments separated by over a century but united in their shared sense that freedom beckons from a world much wider than just America. That Malcolm X’s autobiography itself traces the same transformative shapes that structure Douglass’ archetypal slave narrative is testimony not only to the fact that America lagged behind the abolitionist impulses of the British Empire by over fifty years, but it also vividly demonstrates Malcolm’s insistence on slavery’s enduring legacy. Throughout his political life, Malcolm X articulated his sense that while 1865 ended slavery’s official sojourn in the United States, its material and psychological consequences were still determining the lives of African Americans until the year of his death in 1965. That Malcolm X conceived of emancipation in

---

1. DOUGLASS, Frederick, “Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an African Slave” in *The Classic Slave Narratives*, Henry Louis Gates, ed. (1845. New York: Mentor, 1987): 243-331; 294.

overwhelmingly internationalist terms lends his narrative a special relevance for today's world. Not only does his vision speak to a world made global by the colonizing thrust of imperial power, but it also offers a fresh eye through which "the West" might view an object of increasing fascination: "Islam". For the neo-slave narrative of Malcolm X unequivocally equates Islam with the long-awaited dream of freedom. This dream unfolds before Malcolm's eyes in the magical scenes he witnesses at Mecca.

This defining encounter with a non-Western culture is the culmination of a series of conversions that make up the redemptive trajectory of the *Autobiography of Malcolm X*. The religious transformations that structure the text are thus accompanied by spiritual migration away from a United States that, according to Malcolm X, still defines its democratic vistas in relation to a population of the fundamentally unfree. The *Autobiography's* theological-political thrust thus projects a route out of slavery via a fundamental negation of American national identity. So where Douglass' narrative challenges the United States to live up to its promise of freedom, Malcolm's enacts a symbolic rejection of a promise seemingly destined to forever remain in the never-never realm of the "yet-to-come".

And yet I suggest that the seeds of this rejection are already latent within the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*. For the 1845 text proffers an anxious embrace of an American Christianity tainted by the toxic combination of religion and racism. Douglass was all too aware of this deeply problematic legacy, which became a central point of departure from which Malcolm X would later launch his attack on what he perceived as a "lost" American culture. And yet arguably, Malcolm's experiences in the Middle East in fact stage a paradoxical "discovery" of this "lost"

national identity. As he gazes on an idealized image of “the East” he ironically casts himself as the “innocent” American transfixed by its “Oriental” other. In spite of his apparent negation of America, in some ways his portrayal of the “Orient” reinscribes his text under the sign of the West. So just as Douglass possibly mutes his own troubled perception of American duplicity in order to lay claim to citizenship, so too, perhaps, does Malcolm embody the ambivalences of a national culture he only outwardly claims to reject.

This essay explores Malcolm X’s evolving embrace of an ostensibly non-Western freedom via the experience of religious conversion. Through an examination of the two major spiritual transformations in Malcolm’s life—as penned by Alex Haley in the *Autobiography*—I suggest that his story appropriates a range of tropes deployed by the original slave narratives in order to forge a much more nuanced relationship to the culture of the West than his frequently stated rejections of American democracy imply. And yet as with the case of Douglass, Malcolm’s ambivalent—as opposed to straightforwardly rejectionist—moments are perhaps those that most fully “trouble” the idea of America. So while Malcolm X’s gravitation away from Christianity towards Islam is not, I suggest, a straight path away from identification with the West to that with the East, it nonetheless centralizes an alternative tradition for thinking the terms of liberation on American soil.

As perhaps *the* slave narrative *par excellence*, the Hebrew exodus out of Egypt recorded in the Hebrew Bible and the Christian Old Testament has been central to the imagination of freedom in the United States. In line with a tradition dating back to the Puritan settlers, the rhetoric of liberation deployed by African

and African American slaves was similarly pervaded by the influence of the Exodus text. Yet theirs was far from a straightforward repetition. The very fact that slaves were appropriating one of America's founding national myths rather than swallowing whole the story of meek submission was an act of subversion in itself; as Charles H. Nichols writes, "while pretending to accept the religion which exhorted them to obedience", the slaves instead embraced "the God who delivered the Israelites from Egyptian bondage".<sup>1</sup> This was thus an alternative story of national liberation via a revolutionary God, one that was to have a marked effect on Malcolm's early childhood and spiritual education.

For the exodus trope makes its way into what Eddie Glaude describes as a black "Nation language",<sup>2</sup> one forcefully articulated in the Little household of Malcolm's childhood via the "back-to-Africa" rhetoric of Marcus Garvey. As the Haley-inflected Malcolm of the *Autobiography* explains, while many blacks in his home-town of Lansing were waiting "for the pie-in-the-sky and their heaven in the hereafter", his family raised their own food on the basis of his parents' sense of the need for black independence. Recalling his father, Malcolm writes that "the image of him that made me proudest was his crusading and militantly campaigning with the words of Marcus Garvey" (X 1968: 84). As critics have pointed out, in many ways Malcolm's discovery of the Nation of Islam in prison re-connected him to

---

1. NICHOLS, Charles H., "The Slave Narrators and the Picaresque Mode: Archetypes for Modern Black Personae" in *The Slave's Narrative*, ed. Charles T. Davis and Henry Louis Gates (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1985): 283-297; 285.

2. GLAUDE, Eddie S., *Exodus! Religion, Race and Nation in Early Nineteenth-Century Black America* (Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 2000).

Garveyite roots lost during the “wilderness period” of his hustler days. Certainly the memory of “an old lady, grinning and saying to my father, ‘You’re scaring these white folks to death!’” (X 1968: 84) was bound to have a powerful effect on the boy who came to be known as “the angriest black man in America”.

And yet even at this stage, Malcolm claims to have registered a profound ambivalence concerning even the militant brand of black Christianity espoused by his parents. While his brother Philbert “loved church, [...] it confused and amazed me”:

I would sit goggle-eyed at my father jumping and shouting as he preached, with the congregation jumping and shouting behind him, their souls and bodies devoted to singing and praying (X 1968: 83).

Malcolm contrasts these scenes at church to the Garvey U.N.I.A (Universal Negro Improvement Association) meetings: in the latter the members of the congregation and Malcolm’s father “were more intense, more intelligent and down to earth” (X 1968: 85). As he admits, however, his father’s role as Baptist preacher “fit his association with the back-to-Africa movement, with Marcus Garvey’s ‘Black Train Homeward’” (X 1968: 83). For at this stage Garvey was undoubtedly a Christian fixed on the liberatory potential of Psalm 68: 31: “Princes shall come out of Egypt; Ethiopia shall soon stretch out her hands unto God”.<sup>1</sup> Thus while the emphasis here is on Africa and black independence, it nonetheless issues from a Judeo-Christian narrative of freedom that Malcolm was later to decidedly reject.

---

1. I refer here to the Authorized King James Version of the Bible (KJV).

Thus in its opening chapter the *Autobiography* casts doubt over the viability of a black Christian theology of liberation while at the same time celebrating one of its greatest achievements in the figure of Marcus Garvey; in so doing Malcolm echoes the sense of two-ness that characterizes the slaves' earliest encounters with American religious culture. Frederick Douglass clearly registers this strain when he feels the need to add an "Appendix" to his *Narrative* so as to assure his readers of his Christian credentials. Having repeated throughout his text that Christianity seems to have no benevolent effects on slaveholders and that in fact, if anything, it only increases their cruelty, Douglass is concerned to avert the "misapprehension" that he is "an opponent of all religion":

What I have said respecting and against religion, I mean strictly to apply to the *slaveholding religion* of this land, and with no possible reference to Christianity proper; for, between the Christianity of this land, and the Christianity of Christ, I recognize the widest possible difference—so wide, that to receive the one as good, pure, and holy, is of necessity to reject the other as bad, corrupt, and wicked (Douglass 1845: 326).

Yet surely Douglass protests too much. Douglass claims that "the Christianity of America", like the religion of the Pharisees, observes only the letter and not the spirit of the law; yet clearly his self-positioning as true bearer of the Gospels betrays his acknowledgement that the passport to American citizenship remains bound up in outward expressions of the Christian faith. For in spite of his poignant sense that freedom may well be a foreign destination, Douglass was well aware that his own acceptance as a free person—and as representative of those still condemned to



slavery—relied on writing himself into the narrative of American identity. This was evidently not the case for Malcolm X.

In spite of his Baptist upbringing, Malcolm as a young boy “just couldn’t believe in the Christian concept of Jesus as someone divine” (X 1968: 83). His later contempt for Martin Luther King and the civil rights movement (which would turn to reluctant admiration shortly before his death) seemingly confirmed his earlier sense that a black freedom narrative couched within Christian terms was doomed to aping white culture. Thus where King spoke the language of integration, Malcolm X insisted on independence. The migration of the exodus motif from Garveyism to the Ghandian-inspired civil rights movement perhaps proved the point that its trajectory was not a radical one; thus this powerful slave narrative so central to King’s integrationist vision was jettisoned by a man who came to challenge “the dominant discourse of Judeo-Christian American-ness”.<sup>1</sup> In this sense Malcolm was “free” to articulate the suggestion which remains unspoken in Douglass’ text: that Christianity might just be irretrievably contaminated by white racism. Thus Malcolm turned to an organization that identified not with the ancient Israelites but rather with their archetypal opposite: those nurtured in “the rich Nile Valley of Egypt” (Elijah Muhammad quoted by McAllister 1999: 628). This reversal would in turn engender its own breed of “racism”.

As Melani McAllister writes, for the Nation of Islam the “Jews were not those whose ancient history was the prototype for contemporary liberation, as was the case for King and other civil rights leaders, but those whose putative status as ‘the chosen peo-

---

1. McALLISTER, Melani, “One Black Allah: The Middle East in the Cultural Politics of African American Liberation, 1955-1970”, *American Quarterly* 51.3 (1999): 622-656; 626.

ple' had usurped the position of the black people in relation to God" (630). Thus Malcolm's first conversion to a form of "Islam" entailed a complete overhaul of his previous religious conceptions; as the *Autobiography* memorably explains, "I found Allah and the religion of Islam and it completely transformed my life" (X 1968: 243).

While in prison, Malcolm's family begin to expose him to the Nation of Islam's highly idiosyncratic doctrines; under their influence Malcolm comes to believe that central to the Christian religion is "an alien God having the same blond hair, pale skin and blue eyes as the slavemaster". "This religion taught the 'Negro' that black was a curse. It taught him to hate everything black, including himself" (X 1968: 257). This toxic blend of religion and racism that sustained slavery in the South was widely acknowledged even by the exponent of non-violent Christianity himself:

Logic was manipulated to give intellectual credence to the system of slavery. Someone formulated the argument for the inferiority of the Negro in the shape of a syllogism: "All men are made in the image of God; God, as everybody knows, is not a Negro; therefore the Negro is not a man".<sup>1</sup>

In contrast to King's reclamation of what he admitted to be a compromised Christianity, Malcolm's "rehabilitation" of his own sense of his humanity, his repudiation of the self-hatred that propelled his career as a hustler and his identity as "Satan", crucially entails a wholesale rejection of the Christian religion. Rather, and

---

1. KING, Martin Luther, quoted by Amiri YaSin Al-Hadid, *Between Cross and Crescent: Christian and Muslim Perspectives on Malcolm and Martin* (Gainesville, FL: University of Florida Press, 2002): 69.

as Reginald suggests, Islam offers him the opportunity—both literally and spiritually—“to get out of prison” (X 1968: 249).

Malcolm’s escape from prison into the arms of the Nation of Islam involves a profound rejection of the trajectory of the black experience on what he came to see as “this wilderness of North America”. As Malcolm begins to absorb some of the Nation’s lessons in prison, “the white people I had known marched before my mind’s eye” (X 1968: 253); what parades before him is a string of figures associated with exploitation at a federal, state, legal and personal level. The alternative history to which the Nation exposes him teaches that the sub-text to black contact with white American culture is the subjugation of a superior race by the descendants of devils. Black freedom therefore lies in negating the experience of suffering by embracing a past represented not by Hebrew slaves but rather by the powerful images of the Egyptian Pharaohs; these awe-inspiring figures, Malcolm came to believe, oversaw the birth of civilization while whites were still roaming Europe in barbarian hordes.

Thus Malcolm’s prison transformation, I suggest, introduces a radical split into what was already a hyphenated—“African American”—identity. In his recognition of the realities of American racism, Malcolm acknowledges his double consciousness, one that posits, in Du Bois’ words, “two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder”.<sup>1</sup> While in the Du Boisian text this “peculiar sensation” is a painful yet at times productive cleavage which yields a heightened awareness via African American “second sight”, for Malcolm it is a

---

1. DU BOIS, W.E.B., *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903. New York: The Modern Library, 2003): 5.

thoroughly negative condition engendered by the internalization of racism. Black salvation lies in repudiating this false consciousness and, crucially, recognizing America as a foreign land. When Muhammed Ali returns from a tour of Africa and the Middle East in 1964 and announces "I'm not an American; I'm a black man" he echoes the sentiments of countless statements made by Malcolm X (McAllister 1999: 623). Thus the group that came to be known as the "Black Muslims" proposed the "resolution" of this conflicted sense of "two-ness" by purging the African American of all sense of *valued* connection with the white world.

According to the Nation of Islam, the major vehicle for this injurious brainwashing of black people was Christianity. And the corollary to the subsequent rejection of Christianity as an alien religion was the Nation's insistence that Islam is the "true" religion of the "black man". Hugely overlooked in studies of black American religiosity is the fact that large numbers of Muslims did make the Middle Passage; as Amiri YaSin Al-Hadid explains, "Islam first came to the United States on slave ships. Between 1492 and 1865, millions of Muslims from the coast and interior of North West Africa were captured, sold, and transported". While the exact numbers of Muslims enslaved and brought to North America remain unknown, "estimates range between 10 and 40 per cent" (Baldwin and Al-Hadid 2002: 66). In recognition of the fact that Christian beliefs were adapted and made central to early forms of black religion in the United States, the Nation claimed that Islam did not discard but rather succeeded the older religion. This move not only mimicked Christianity's own claims to supercede Judaism, but it also meant that the Nation could draw on teachings from the bible and a Christian symbolism that already wielded significant cultural power within the black com-

munity. As McAllister writes, “this teaching also carried with it a racial, political, and moral geography: it pitted (black) Islam against (white) Christianity in a world-wide and historic struggle” (McAllister 1999: 629). Thus Malcolm came to see Islam, and not Christianity, as the “true” religion of black nationalism made known to him during his Garveyite childhood. Central to this new religious identity was the notion that it was fundamentally un-American.

Malcolm’s evolution from prison in-mate to “Minister Malcolm X” thus involved a series of negations which, according to Kenneth Mostern, resulted in the formation of a “specifically *blank* identity formed in the rejection of whiteness”.<sup>1</sup> In some ways Mostern’s suggestion goes too far in that Malcolm’s role in the Nation of Islam involved recapturing a sense of pride in the black community which *did* posit substantive content to “black identity”. Through an emphasis on a black past defined outside the purview of oppression, Malcolm’s rhetoric laid stress on a subjective wholeness afforded to those who could see beyond a history of vulnerability and back to the splendours of Egypt. As McAllister explains, leaders of the Black Muslims “believed emphatically that Egypt was a black nation and that the greatness of ancient Egyptian civilization was proof of the historical greatness of black culture” (McAllister 1999: 632). This powerful and empowering story of origins restored to the “black man” a sense of dignity denied by a society that would sooner incarcerate its black “citizens” than accept them on equal terms. Thus Malcolm’s story is offered up as an example, initially dedicated to

---

1. MOSTERN, Kenneth, *Autobiography and Black Identity Politics: Radicalization in Twentieth-Century America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999): 142.

the Honorable Elijah Muhammad who found me here in America in the muck and mire of the filthiest civilization and society on earth, and pulled me out, cleaned me up, and stood me on my feet, and made me the man that I am today.

For the Nation of Islam proposes an identification with “Africa” over and against “America”, and in so doing returns Malcolm and those that follow in his footsteps to a sense of their full humanity. Yet what exactly does this new identity consist of? Is the “Africa” of Elijah Muhammad’s imagination a manifestation of precisely this “blankness” noted by Mostern?

Most critics agree that Malcolm was unable to take a truly Pan-African approach until his break with the Nation of Islam in 1964. As Manning Marable explains, “throughout 1960-63, Malcolm frequently spoke at hundreds of public forums” on a number of issues including foreign policy, a subject “alien to Elijah Muhammad”.<sup>1</sup> For all the Nation’s talk about “Africa” — and indeed its spiritual connections with the Muslim world — its horizons remained narrowly focused on issues such as business development, personal hygiene and socially conservative behaviour. McAllister suggests that the fact that “Egypt was (and is) largely a Muslim nation” was deployed by the Nation to underscore a “link between ancient black greatness and contemporary Islam”. Yet her suggestion that the Nation offered its members an “alternative sacred geography with Mecca as its center” (McAllister 1999: 630-632) must be qualified by the fact that this “sacred geography” functioned almost entirely on the level of the imaginary. Both “Africa” and “Mecca” symbolized a connection with the non-

---

1. MARABLE, Manning, “Malcolm as Messiah: Cultural Myth vs. Historical Reality in *Malcolm X*”, *Cineaste* 19.4 (1993): 7-9; 9.

white and decolonizing world, but Elijah Muhammad's vision was essentially a parochial one much more centred on America than he liked to admit. There are obvious political reasons for this. The fact that the theological premises of the Nation of Islam only bear faint resemblance to Islam as practiced in the East has been widely noted. Thus Muhammad exerted considerable efforts to rein in his more adventurous—and often frustrated—protégé in an attempt to avert the discovery of embarrassing discontinuities between the religious practices of the Islamic East and the highly novel brand of “Islam” dreamed up for black Americans. Similarly, Malcolm's attempts to forge links with African organizations were thwarted by a man whose power was in fact parasitic upon the experience of American racism. For the Nation of Islam's separatist doctrines were in fact meaningless without its white counterpart. Thus where Du Bois' double consciousness acknowledges a self that encompasses the other, the Nation's reclaimed black subjectivity projects a radically external other against which it must define itself. Such a position presupposes a permanent kind of exile amongst what was curiously perceived as a race of “white devils”.

As Louis DeCaro writes, “one of the least noticed aspects of the legacy of the Nation of Islam is that in calling white people ‘the devil,’ belief in the metaphysical Satan is nullified”.<sup>1</sup> That the Nation of Islam's religious drama is projected largely as a human encounter is evident from Malcolm's mysterious visitation in prison which sits at the heart of the *Autobiography's* conversion narrative. The narrator explains, “I suddenly, with a start, became aware of a man sitting beside me in my chair”; Malcolm

---

1. DECARO, Louis A., *Malcolm and the Cross: The Nation of Islam, Malcolm X, and Christianity* (New York and London: New York University Press, 1998): 1.

later comes to believe that this “pre-vision” of a dark suited man, neither black nor white, is “Master W.D. Fard, the Messiah, the one whom Elijah Muhammad said had appointed him—Elijah Muhammad—as his Last Messenger to the black people of North America” (X 1968: 282-285). In many ways the figure of Fard—of “Asiatic” appearance in Malcolm’s account—stands in for the Nation’s version of an incarnate God, the archetypal opposite of the white Satan which similarly bears a human face.

In its dramatic qualities this scene is comparable to one of the pivotal turning points in Douglass’ “career as a slave”: Douglass’ battle and triumph over his putative “overseer”, Edward Covey (Douglass 1845: 298). Yet interestingly, where Douglass experiences a reawakening of “the few expiring embers of freedom” within him via a display of physical strength over another man, Malcolm’s turning point quite literally brings him to his knees. Malcolm’s first attempt at prayer seemingly entails a poignant encounter with “Allah”, yet it becomes increasingly clear that the object of Malcolm’s worship as a Black Muslim was Elijah Muhammad himself. Rather than exhibiting religious devotion to an inaccessible monotheistic God, it seems that Malcolm’s faith was displaced through human channels, transferred from the Messiah-figure of Fard to the father-figure of the organization’s leader. So where Douglass gains a sense of independence through asserting himself over another human being, Malcolm in contrast gains admission into a human community by accepting the cultic authority of Elijah Muhammad.

Yet as DeCaro writes, “Malcolm would eventually discover that no one in Mecca ever heard of W.D. Fard’ or the Nation’s



'Honorable' figurehead".<sup>1</sup> That Malcolm would move on to make this discovery is due to the fact that, in spite of its pivotal place in the *Autobiography*, his first conversion would not be his last. In many ways this point undercuts the very notion of "conversion", suggesting as it does a complete—and, crucially, completed—transformation. Paul John Eakin explains:

In the moment of conversion a new identity is discovered; further, this turning point sharply defines a two-part, before-after time scheme for the narrative; the movement of the self from "lost" to "found" constitutes the plot; and, finally, the very nature of the experience supplies an evangelical motive for autobiography.<sup>2</sup>

But as Eakin suggests, Malcolm X's own sense of his autobiography's trajectory underwent drastic changes during the process of its textual construction. Following his ejection from the Nation of Islam in the March of 1964, Malcolm instructed Alex Haley to cancel the book's original dedication to the organization's leader. Malcolm's disillusionment with Muhammad was profound but gradual and accompanied by frequent disclaimers: "but I was the follower of Mr Muhammad". When Malcolm hears his name coupled with "death-talk" in Nation circles he realizes that it must "have been approved of—if not actually initiated—by only one man": "I was like someone who for twelve years had had an inseparable, beautiful marriage". Somewhat paradoxically, it is Malcolm's discovery of Muhammad's all-too-human fallibility that occasions the closest analogies with God: "I felt as though

---

1. DECARO, Louis A., *On the Side of My People: A Religious Life of Malcolm X* (New York and London: New York University Press, 1996): 125.

2. EAKINS, Paul John, "Malcolm X and the Limits of Autobiography" in *African American Autobiography*, William L. Andrews, ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1993): 153.

something in *nature* had failed, like the sun, or the stars. It was an incredible phenomenon to me—something stupendous to conceive” (X 1968: 411-414). That Malcolm experiences the failure of this “god” as a personal betrayal signals the opening up of the supposedly sealed process of conversion.

Thus as Eakin highlights, the revelations about Muhammad and the Nation of Islam destroy “the very premises of the autobiography” Malcolm “had set out to write” (Eakin 1993: 156). So while Malcolm explicitly draws parallels with his own conversion experience in prison with that which took hold of Paul on the road to Damascus, the *Autobiography* itself, with its multiple levels of narrative voices that emerge from differing periods of the subject’s life, testifies to the fact that the figures of Fard and Muhammad did not set the trajectory for the rest of Malcolm’s life as Jesus clearly did for Paul. For increasingly, Malcolm came to realize: “my whole life had been a chronology of *changes*” (X 1968: 454). Thus where the “I am” of Paul’s narrative is achieved by a thunderbolt on the road to Damascus, Malcolm affirms his own identity as one of constant flux. And where Paul’s sense of Christianity arguably hinges on its oppositional identity in relation to Judaism, I suggest that Malcolm’s initiation into Islam as practiced in the East in some ways liberated him from the oppositional logic that defined the project of the Black Muslims.

Just as the Nation’s sense of black identity expresses itself primarily through its white other, so too, I suggest, does its “Islamic” religious vision emerge most distinctly when contrasted with Christianity. For in the absence of “orthodox” practices, the organization’s rather hazy theological premises rest heavily on a definition of “the enemy”. Malcolm clearly became very aware of this hole at the heart of the Nation’s spiritual orientation when he

made the pilgrimage to Mecca and discovered something quite different: “in my thirty-nine years on this earth, the Holy city of Mecca had been the first time I had ever stood before the Creator of All and felt like a complete human being”. Malcolm’s contact with what he believed to be “the true religion of Islam” (X 1968: 453) thus involved the crucial gesture of eschewing the idea of a human deity and its flipside: the experience on the hajj of throwing stones at a metaphysical “Satan” was a key moment in Malcolm’s rejection of the Nation’s race doctrines which were, after all, simply an inversion of the racist Christian theology that justified slavery and segregation.

What Malcolm experiences in the East is a sense of the “Oneness of God”, a sense that not only grounds his evolving sense of human equality but also the idea that “true”, “orthodox” Islam “is the one religion that erases from its society the race problem” (X 1968: 454-455). Thus Malcolm comes to associate the Islam he discovers in the East with an unconditional hospitality:

Throughout my travels in the Muslim world, I have met, talked to, and even eaten with people who in America would have been considered “white” —but the “white” attitude was removed from their minds by the religion of Islam. I have never before seen *sincere* and *true* brotherhood practiced by all colors together, irrespective of their color (X 1968: 454).

In a sense then the Malcolm of the *Autobiography* is at this moment most fully liberated from the evils of American slavery and Western colonialism; as he basks in the universalism of the “Allah” he discovers in the Middle East his narrative perhaps comes closest to breaking the chains of American identity. Quite in contrast to the Oriental fantasy—that by necessity remained

a fantasy—of the Nation of Islam, Malcolm is here exposed to a concrete experience of religious life in the East; similarly, Malcolm travelled widely in Africa, a fact that gets little coverage in the *Autobiography* or, indeed, in Spike Lee's epic of Malcolm's life which drew heavily on Haley's account. Nonetheless, Malcolm's experiences in Africa, alongside those in the Middle East, undoubtedly broadened his horizons and helped shape what was clearly a developing "internationalist" vision. That Malcolm spent a considerable amount of his time in Africa in Cairo shows that for him, the link with Egypt as a symbolic meeting point of African and Muslim worlds was still highly significant. Yet after his travels this link was much more than symbolic, his ideas of "Africa", the "Middle East" and "Islam" were much more than empty signifiers. Thus his two new organizations, the Muslim Mosque Inc. and the Organization of African American Unity, derived directly from these experiences<sup>1</sup> and represented the religious and secular faces of the same moral vision. This vision was profoundly affected by Malcolm's experience of the "color-blindness" he witnessed in the Muslim world (X 1968: 453).

Malcolm did not return to the US in any way reconciled to American democracy; as Steve Clark explains, "he never gave an inch to United States nationalism ('Americanism')".<sup>2</sup> Rather he returned with a mission to achieve not civil rights but rather human rights for America's black population, a mission that clearly transcended the boundaries of the nation. In this sense, rather than negating one of the terms in Du Bois' formulation of

---

1. The OAAU was explicitly modelled on the OAU, the Organization for African Unity.

2. CLARK, Steve, "Introduction" in Malcolm X, *By Any Means Necessary*, George Breitman, ed. (New York: Pathfinder, 1992): 9-21; 15.

double consciousness, Malcolm's post-Mecca philosophy envisaged a sublation of black and white identities with the world—and not America—as horizon. And yet the extent to which this utopian project really did surpass the inexorable dialectic of master and slave, Egyptian and Hebrew—that plagued the reverse psychology of the Black Muslims as it did their white Christian counterparts—is, ultimately, uncertain.

What is fascinating about Malcolm's representations of his experiences in the holy places of Mecca, Medina and the East more generally is the sense that, in spite of their status as historical "reality", they do nonetheless also operate on the level of Orientalist fantasy. As Bashir El-Beshti explains, Malcolm

walks into the world of "orthodox" Islam in its purest, most idealistic form. The hajj as a ritual dissolves, if only temporarily, the divisions, the internal strife, the barriers separating humans; in other words, the reality of the Muslim world.<sup>1</sup>

Yet Malcolm's narrative seemingly extends these dream-like qualities to the entire region; the delight with which he experiences the hospitality in Saudi Arabia is evident in the *Autobiography*, but his status as a "tourist" is nowhere more pronounced than in Spike Lee's film. Malcolm is treated as an honoured guest wherever he goes, and yet he is without fail treated as "the black man from America"; as he writes in a letter from Lagos, Nigeria, "in the Muslim world they loved me once they learned I was an American Muslim, and here in Africa they love me as soon as they learn that I am Malcolm X of the militant American Mus-

---

1. EL-BESHTI, Bashir M., "The Semiotics of Salvation: Malcolm X and the Autobiographical Self", *The Journal of Negro History* 82.4 (Autumn 1997): 359-367; 366.

lims".<sup>1</sup> Thus Malcolm seems to overlook the very real colour caste systems that do operate in Muslim and African societies—albeit most often as a direct consequence of colonialism—while at the same time enjoying the privileges of his “American” status and celebrity. In this way his travels emerge as not wholly dissimilar to the texts examined by Edward Said in his landmark study of Orientalism.<sup>2</sup> Does the fact that this comparison can even be drawn cast doubt over the decolonizing thrust of Malcolm’s life story?

The very fact that the *Autobiography of Malcolm X* takes the shape of a slave narrative in the tradition of Frederick Douglass confirms its embrace of a peculiarly American literary form. Moreover, its place in the Western canon is similarly affirmed via its emphasis on literacy. The powerful scenes of reading at the heart of Douglass’ text—and indeed at the centre of most slave narratives—are echoed in Malcolm’s prison experiences. Psychological liberation via reading is similarly the prerequisite for physical freedom, just as Malcolm must also “subscribe himself” in order to make his mark on a post-Enlightenment culture. As Henry Louis Gates explains, “in the black tradition, writing became the visible sign, the commodity of exchange, the text and technology of reason”.<sup>3</sup> It is thus through this largely American lens that Malcolm “reads” the Orient and translates it into a “Western” space.

The narrative’s redemptive trajectory, however, places the “Orient” of Malcolm’s imagination in a fundamentally different posi-

---

1. X, Malcolm, *Malcolm X Speaks*, George Breitman, ed. (New York: Grove Press, 1990): 61.

2. SAID, Edward, *Orientalism* (1978. London: Penguin, 1995).

3. GATES, Henry Louis, *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988): 132.

tion to those images of the “Orient” colonized by the Western mind. For where the Orientalists of Said’s account consign the East to an often romanticized past, Malcolm unequivocally holds up the East—and indeed the South—as “future”. Thus Egypt does not remain for him simply the land of the Pharaohs but one that opens up the possibilities of an alliance politics truly global in scope. So while his appeal to African heads of State insists that “our problems are your problems” (X 1990: 74), he also comes to firmly believe that “the Muslim world is forced to concern itself, from the moral point of view in its own religious concepts, with the fact that our plight clearly involves the violation of *human rights*” (X 1990: 61). Connections with the “Third World” thus provide the terms for thinking African American identity outside of the fractured frameworks available in America. What is rendered anachronistic according to Malcolm’s text is not, therefore, the East or Africa, but rather a racist US culture and a “Christianity [that] has failed us 100 percent” (X 1992: 46).

The *Autobiography* thus registers an ambivalence about—and not, ultimately, a negation of—the West in general and America in particular, an equivocal identification that is the hallmark of US slave narratives. Because Malcolm did not emigrate to Africa or the Middle East but rather dedicated the final year of his life to bringing these foreign spaces “home” to America, he remained, like Douglass, in the partially exiled zones of double consciousness, in the interstitial spaces of national life. Even the form of the final version of the *Autobiography*, which many have criticized as being the product of the ideologically conservative Alex Haley, registers this peculiar mix of African- and American-ness: it is a literal embodiment of what Gates describes as the “trope of the

Talking Book" (Gates 1988: 127-169). As noted by many critics, Malcolm was a talker, not a writer, he was a master of the spoken word. This fact lies at the heart of the *Autobiography's* composition as an "as told to" narrative, the process of which is chronicled in detail in Haley's "Foreword". Thus while many have complained that what we get are not Malcolm's own words but rather Haley's interpretation, which surely is the case, the text dramatizes a conversation and invites its readers into a dialogue. This dialogue takes place not just between narrator and reader, Haley and Malcolm, but also, fascinatingly, between the many "Malcolms" that emerge from the text's complicated and multi-layered temporality—for Haley refused to "purge" Malcolm's multiple selves into a singular, over-arching voice. Moreover, Haley has succeeded in capturing—to an uncanny degree—the cadences of Malcolm's speech as recorded in the transcripts of his many public addresses. In this sense, and in line with Gates' theory, Malcolm's life story does make "the language and conventions of the Western literary tradition speak to and through the voice of black oral culture" (Andrews 1993: 4).

This then is not the didactic voice of the traditional conversion narrative. Yet I suggest that the trope of conversion is nonetheless central to an understanding of the text's vision of "freedom". As Malcolm was to learn from his exile from the Nation of Islam, "you have not converted a man because you have silenced him" (X 1968: 32). This idea acknowledges the fact that conversion may be a process rather than a product, but it also shows that it is a process that Malcolm continued to value. In his introduction to *By Any Means Necessary*, a collection of Malcolm's public statements, Steve Clark suggests that "the Nation was not Malcolm's road to politics, nor even a detour. It was a dead end" (X 1992: 12).



Yet this is surely not the sense bequeathed by the *Autobiography*, which clearly portrays Malcolm's identity as a Black Muslim as a stage on the way to "enlightenment". For Malcolm's sense that one's life is "written" indicates a belief that each stage in his life was a necessary one (X 1968: 242); as Al-Hadid explains, his story can be mapped onto an Islamic trajectory:

Malcolm's consciousness evolved in three distinct stages: (1) Jahiliyah (Days of Ignorance), (2) False Consciousness (Nation of Islam), and (3) Allah Consciousness (Taqwa) or True Consciousness. Each stage was marked by a name change (Baldwin and Al-Hadid: 2002: 50).

This, I suggest, is *The Autobiography of Malcolm X's* major difference from Douglass' *Narrative*: it maps an alternative religious consciousness outside of a mainstream American culture. The subject of religion has been central to the heated critical debates over Malcolm's legacy. Malcolm X has been claimed by various groups eager to make him over into a black nationalist, a Socialist, a Sunni Muslim, and there have even been claims that he was, after all, the archetypal Black Muslim. The problem with all of these interpretations is that they tend to try to make Malcolm "mean" just one thing. Specifically, both black nationalist and socialist groups have wanted to deny his religious legacy. They are surely right to insist upon the increasingly radical politics that shaped Malcolm's final weeks. Moreover, Malcolm did make statements in late 1964 indicating that religious differences, if divisive, should remain a private matter: "Because if it hasn't done anything more for you than it has, you need to forget it anyway" (X 1992: 196). But clearly religion had done something of life-changing proportions for Malcolm X himself; and, I would

argue, it was the new religious vision that Malcolm discovered in Mecca that drove his rising sense of the need to break out of a system that had enslaved African Americans. For a man whose political career was dedicated to challenging white racism, his claim that “true Islam removes racism” cannot be insignificant (X 1990: 60). What he seemed to have clearly left behind with the Nation of Islam was the notion that a private religious life should be favoured over and above a public political one. Rather his vision, like that of Martin Luther King, was a theological-political one, and this, I think, is what we find in the *Autobiography*.

In a letter from Ghana, Malcolm recounts the fact that the Muslim Students Society of Nigeria “renamed me ‘Omolwale,’ which means ‘the child has come home’ in the Yoruba language”; he compares his burgeoning Pan-Africanism, symbolized by this new name, to the diasporic consciousness that unites “world Jewry” (X 1990: 62-63). In so doing Malcolm offers a welcome antidote to the anti-Semitic strains in his own thinking, and makes the move suggested by Paul Gilroy in his conclusion to *The Black Atlantic*. Gilroy’s analysis of the diaspora model of identity holds it up as an alternative to triumphalist expressions of black nationalism. In this vein Gilroy notes that black identification with the Exodus narrative is waning, and that “blacks today appear to identify far more readily with the glamorous pharaohs than with the abject plight of those they held in bondage”.<sup>1</sup> Gilroy seems to unequivocally associate the Hebrews with slavery and Egypt with mastery, overlooking the fact that the notion of “the chosen people” that defines the new Israelite nation itself originates a powerful chauvinism. The first religious turning point in the

---

1. GILROY, Paul, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London and New York: Verso, 1993): 207.

life writing of Malcolm X rejects precisely this chauvinism at the heart of Judeo-Christian culture, and instead suggests a shift in the locus of black identification to the Muslim world. Yet I suggest that Malcolm's second conversion, while moving geographically further from the culture of the West, paradoxically stages a partial return. Involving as it did the embrace of an ostensible "universalism", Malcolm's final religious vision gestures towards an opening out of the three "Abrahamic" faiths; this gesture casts monotheistic religion in the light of the history of Western colonialism and projects a fundamentally globalized future for an interdependent and decolonizing world.

Manning Marable claims that conservative interpreters of Malcolm's legacy have wanted to locate him on "safe religious grounds rather than on the more dangerous terrain of race and class struggle" (Marable 1993: 8-9). Yet in today's world religious grounds seem far from "safe", and Malcolm X's powerful sense that "America needs to understand Islam" (X 1968: 454) in order to confront slavery's enduring legacy is surely deeply prophetic.

### *Works Cited*

- ANDREWS, William L. ed. *African American Autobiography: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1993.
- BALDWIN, Lewis V. and AL-HADID, Amiri YaSin. *Between Cross and Crescent: Christian and Muslim Perspectives on Malcolm and Martin*. Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2002.
- CLARK, Steve. "Introduction" in Malcolm X, *By Any Means Necessary*, George Breitman, ed. New York: Pathfinder, 1992; 9-21.
- DAVIS, Charles T. and Gates, Henry Louis, eds. *The Slave's Narrative*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1985.

- DECARO, Louis A. *Malcolm and the Cross: The Nation of Islam, Malcolm X, and Christianity*. New York and London: New York University Press, 1998.
- DECARO, Louis A. *On the Side of My People: A Religious Life of Malcolm X*. New York and London: New York University Press, 1996.
- DOUGLASS, Frederick. "Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an African Slave" in *The Classic Slave Narratives*, Henry Louis Gates, ed. 1845. New York: Mentor, 1987; 243-331.
- DU BOIS, W.E.B. *The Souls of Black Folk*. 1903. New York: The Modern Library, 2003.
- EAKINS, Paul John. "Malcolm X and the Limits of Autobiography" in *African American Autobiography*, William L. Andrews, ed. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1993.
- EL-BESHTI, Bashir M. "The Semiotics of Salvation: Malcolm X and the Autobiographical Self". *The Journal of Negro History* 82.4. Autumn 1997: 359-367.
- GATES, Henry Louis. *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988.
- GATES, Henry Louis, ed. *The Classic Slave Narratives*. New York: Mentor, 1987.
- GILROY, Paul. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. London and New York: Verso, 1993.
- GLAUDE, Eddie S. *Exodus! Religion, Race and Nation in Early Nineteenth-Century Black America*. Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 2000.
- MARABLE, Manning. "Malcolm as Messiah: Cultural Myth vs. Historical Reality in *Malcolm X*". *Cineaste* 19.4. 1993: 7-9.
- MOSTERN, Kenneth. *Autobiography and Black Identity Politics: Radicalization in Twentieth-Century America*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

- MCALLISTER, Melani. "One Black Allah: The Middle East in the Cultural Politics of African American Liberation, 1955-1970". *American Quarterly* 51.3. 1999; 622-656.
- NICHOLS, Charles H. "The Slave Narrators and the Picaresque Mode: Archetypes for Modern Black Personae" in *The Slave's Narrative*, Charles T. Davis and Henry Louis Gates, eds. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1985; 283-297.
- SAID, Edward. *Orientalism*. 1978. London: Penguin, 1995.
- X, Malcolm. *By Any Means Necessary*, George Breitman, ed. New York: Pathfinder, 1992.
- X, Malcolm. *Malcolm X Speaks*, George Breitman, ed. New York: Grove Press, 1990.
- X, Malcolm. *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, with the assistance of Alex Haley. 1965. London: Penguin, 1968.

*Les Carnets du Cerpac* n°6, 2007, 53-72.

**THE ISLAND: MARTINIQUE:  
A NARRATIVE OF THE LONG SHADOW OF SLAVERY**

Claude JULIEN  
*Université François-Rabelais de Tours*

... a single personality is ... pretty much a kind of  
superstition.

J. E. Wideman, 1993<sup>a</sup>

Authors fragment themselves, shift ground, claim the only  
ground is shifting ground.

*The Island: Martinique*<sup>2</sup>

*The Island: MARTINIQUE*<sup>3</sup> is a deeply challenging book, both in

---

1. TuSMITH, Bonnie, ed., *Conversations with John Wideman* (Jackson, MS.: University Press of Mississippi, 1998): 122.

2. WIDEMAN, John, *The Island: Martinique* (Washington, D.C.: the National Geographic Society, 2003): 31.

3. This is the way the title appears on the book's dust jacket. It will be hereafter abbreviated as *The Island*. "The Island" between inverted commas will be used to refer to the book's eponymous fourth chapter. All references appear in the text between square brackets.

terms of form and content. It is moving as a personal text because the island becomes a locus for relentless self-examination and self-criticism, a means for John Wideman to question his status and motivation as a successful person—himself a product of the western capitalism he denounces. It is provocative as a political text because it brings together the island's past role in the African diaspora and its present role as a showcase of exotic blackness designed to please the western tourist. Brazenly scratching that veneer off, the text presents Martinique as an outpost of colonization where slavery took root and where its after-effects still inform life. Two sides, micro and macro—the historical and the personal—complement each other as Wideman ponders the black man's condition in the world at large, and his own position within a nascent interracial relationship. Hope gleams faintly as the book closes in spite of the overbearing weight of the racial past and current world politics.

Let us first focus on the personal: a new relationship is beginning for Wideman after his thirty-year-long marriage unraveled, and he comes to the island with this question: can a new life be invented or created on this soil? The island is dual, both a lush paradise and a former slave colony—a gulag and an Eden. The locale where Wideman is seeking self while denouncing the ways of the western world was not chosen casually. The root of the book is a commission by the National Geographic to “go anywhere in the world and write about it” [xx]. Wideman tells of how he first thought he would travel to a troubled place where to bear witness to the struggle for fairness, as he did when he visited South Africa. But Martinique was his final choice because, tainted as it was by its history of racial oppression, it was conveniently close, yet foreign and, besides, the birthplace of a novelist

he likes very much, Patrick Chamoiseau. However, *The Island* is no travelogue, not even marginally that. The need to speak out is too strong for Wideman to engage in describing landscapes, monuments or a tourist's day-to-day activities. Like *Fatheralong*, its immediate introspective predecessor, *The Island* can be described as a "meditation"—but one that goes farther back. The past in *Fatheralong* begins with Columbus's adventure and the subsequent Wideman family roots in the new world, ironically planted in a place called "Promised Land" that cannot be found on the South Carolina road map. *The Island* goes back all the way to the advent of Christianity, to Wideman a wrongly touted rebirth that provoked racial exclusion and oppression.

Wideman appropriates the island, turns it into a historico-political as well as an introspective laboratory that zigzags from the present to the past, from dismay to hopefulness, from fact to fiction, a web where the "Great Time" described in the introduction to the Homewood trilogy is given free rein:

Do not look for straightforward linear steps from book to book. [...] Imagine the Great Time of our African ancestors, a non linear, atemporal medium in which all things that have been, are, or will be, mingle freely.<sup>1</sup>

"Great Time" was later redefined in terms of its literary potential in *Fatheralong*, a memoir that deals with—and often reconfigures—real people, places, dates and events, as usual in Wideman: ". . . the always present tense of narrative where every

---

1. WIDEMAN, John, *The Homewood Books* (Pittsburgh, PA.: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1992): xi.



alternative is possible, where the quick and the dead meet, where all stories are true".<sup>1</sup>

The introduction to *The Island* begins with Father Du Tertre's<sup>2</sup> affectionate designation for Martinique, "le pays des revenants" [xix]: the land where people return, literally, but also—this is unavoidable when reading in Wideman's spirit—the land of ghosts. Du Tertre's appreciative phrase turns Martinique into an ideal terrain for Wideman to destroy temporality and create permeable frontiers between the long-dead slaves and today's African-American tourist. Wideman grasps Du Tertre's statement as a license to revamp historical characters, to probe time and identity and fictionalize the new couple he now forms with Catherine, a French lady. The identity question, "who I am and who I am not" [xxvi], troubles the author even as the plane lands: is he a privileged tourist in love with a gorgeous woman, a man blessed by life, or the living memory of someone who might have been a slave in an earlier time in this very place? The personal narrative weaves its way into a plain-spoken critique of the world in black and white resulting from the African diaspora. A constant, insistent shuttle movement nourishes reflection on world and self, on then and now, on body and spirit. The book presents itself in four chapters we will deal with in succession to show how it constructs its way, playing one literary genre against another, swinging from the personal to the historical (and vice versa) toward the uncertain, fragile and merely personal hope it ends with. The first

---

1. WIDEMAN, John, *Fatheralong* (London: Picador): 62.

2. Jean-Baptiste (born Jacques) Du Tertre (1610-1687) served in the army in Flanders then became a Dominican who stayed in the West Indies as a missionary from 1640 to 1658. Also a botanist, he was charmed by the Caribbean and wrote several treatises describing plants and animals. Incidentally, he was the first to describe how the slaves processed alcohol from sugar cane.

part, titled “Journal”, covers the whole stay, day by day, from Dec. 25, 2000 to Jan. 11, 2001. It is by far the longest. The second, “Père Labat”, plunges into the mind, as reconstructed by Wideman, of a 17<sup>th</sup> century Dominican who ran a large and highly profitable church-owned rum and sugar plantation. The third, “Fanon”, is a fiction set in the 1960s that encapsulates the shadows of today’s Wideman and Catherine.<sup>1</sup> The last, “The Island”, is again a journal, but one that covers just one imaginary day trip (at break-neck speed up and down the western coast) just prior to flying home—an epiphany that rounds the book up while the fear of being shadowed by a police state (embodied by an oxymoronic mangy ghetto mutt) and self-deprecation mix.

The book’s first chapter is not what its title suggests, a *journal*. Instead, it reads like stream of consciousness triggered by personal elements, by outside factors heard or seen, or remembered from historical documents. This diary-like aspect (make-believe is part of the world’s game), subverts time. Date-headings appear as each section begins, days follow one another but are irrelevant to anyone expecting a tourist’s sight-seeing memoir.

Two programmatic days take special significance through their psychological and historical contents: December 25<sup>th</sup> and 31<sup>st</sup>. Christmas day is a holiday, a holy day, but such banal considerations are by-passed. Commercial festivities and religious celebrations merely exist in limbo. Instead, Christmas is denounced as a great divide that categorized people, the start of a new world order camouflaged behind the unfulfilled promises of a creed “no better or worse than others” [5] which the faithful have used to bring others down by creating hierarchies granting them “permiss-

---

1. The name is spelled “Katrine” in the book. This form will be used accordingly.

sion to treat non-believers worse than dogs" [id]. This notion of a dichotomous world flowing from religious otherness is an extension from Wideman's earlier vision of a divided world based on the color line which first surfaced in his introduction to DuBois's *The Souls of Black Folk*:

Theirs. Yours. Mine Will we blend, change survive, or is the color line one more measure of the limits of our collective imagination, our cultural graveyard of either/or terminal distinctions: black/white, male/female, young/old, rich/poor, spirit/flesh. . . . These are the monumental questions reverberating in *The Souls of Black Folk*, matters unresolved by the last one hundred years, which have tumbled us, bloody and confused on the threshold of the twenty-first century. (Wideman 1990: xiii)

The idea of a dual world seems to have first surfaced in *Brothers and Keepers*. One may consider *The Island* as a comment on the final essays of DuBois's *The Souls of Black Folk* whose hopeful prediction, "Surely there shall yet dawn some mighty morning to lift the veil and set the imprisoned free" [id. 231] has not come true.<sup>1</sup>

The December 31<sup>st</sup> entry focuses on slavery as the foundation of an exploitative modern global economy. Contents and chronology come together into a devastating irony. December 31<sup>st</sup> announces the division of calendar time and January 1<sup>st</sup> symbolically becomes the "ground zero moment" [59] when Wideman-slave becomes "a wanderer in Babylon" hearing Bob Marley's song waft in through an open window in a Sainte-Anne hotel

---

1. Wideman's preoccupation with the identity question consistently reverberates throughout his works. One may suggest that the anti-Christian strain at work in *The Island* has arisen as a reaction to the contemporary rise of world wide religious fundamentalism. Wideman's contention has its weaknesses. Christian principles do not recommend slavery.

“How can we sing King Alpha in a strange land?” [53] Calendar time between the December 25<sup>th</sup> and 31<sup>st</sup> entries adds up to seven days: seven days—genesis-fashion—for the book to create the overbearing shadow of our modern world, a (voluntary) dungeon rooted in racism and unfairness.<sup>1</sup>

Intensely personal matter is nested in those seven world-creation opening entries, or days. Katrine’s body starts to leak red on the morning following their arrival: her period was late and Martinique has released it. So John thinks, but, to Katrine, this is a miscarriage, “her farewell to the child we would never conceive” [10]. The couple had formed at the time of the Cancun conference.<sup>2</sup> Then each had drifted apart, John in the throes of his dissolving marriage, not sure he deserved another chance to commit himself. Reunion was followed by the decision to travel to Martinique and led to the hope of inventing “another chance on this island” [22]. Hope for Katrine was a baby, which John terms “a couple of weeks of fanciful speculating” [12]. Hope for John consisted in a fine new relationship. He shows himself indifferent to a turn-of-life child, and jokes about the fetus he calls “a cute lit-

---

1. The shadow of slavery constantly takes on an existential weight, the consciousness that tourists, like anyone else, are just so many willing prisoners: “Like slaves, we forget that the choice to live or die empowers us to withhold labor, to rebel, to organize, to disrupt the imaginary holding us in place. We’re enmeshed in a package deal, distracted, entertained, maybe a bit frustrated occasionally, but also enthralled”. [95]

2. The Cancun conference ran from Sep. 10 to 14, 2003. The author manipulates time as this detail [15] does not square chronologically with the couple’s stay in Martinique around December 2000. On the other hand, an interest in the Cancun conference where the WTO could find no compromise between the interests of wealthier and poorer nations squares with the political views expressed in *The Island*. Unrelated elements can legitimately merge to form a true story. Even if, as inscribed on Wideman’s collection *all stories are true* cover page, the phrase subliminally reads “L.I.A.R”.

tle pot-au-feu [beef stew] simmering in her flat stomach" [13] that dissolves into blood.<sup>1</sup> Recurrent echoes from the past, echoes of forbidden interracial sex, reverberate though this passage when John, teasing Katrine, postures as the (white) master doubting his paternity because he has seen a maroon negro depart through the back door. The personal and historical strands merge: the couple's dual dreaming turns sour, as did Columbus's "soap opera fate he imagined for himself" [18]. Inventing a new life on Martinique fades into a lost maternity for Katrine, and, for John, into the realization that discord is a hair breadth away from harmony. The child will not be conceived. Martinique has been destructive and becomes a locus for isolation which textual images underline: the blue beyond the land is the same as the blue in Katrine's eyes. Individuals are islands, a point made as the writing minces syntax to pieces while not entirely foreclosing hope: "floating" implies separateness, but "merging" concludes the paragraph

The island called Katrine. The island called John. The island called Katrine. Called John. Called Katrine. John/Katrine. Katrine/John. Called. Being called. Separate islands. Floating. Merging.<sup>2</sup> [13]

---

1. Readers who are familiar with Wideman's oeuvre will bear in mind the lost child motif in *Philadelphia Fire*, in *Two Cities*, in *Fatheralong*, as well as in stories like "Casa Grande" and "Newborn Thrown in Trash and Dies" that are included in *all stories Are tRue*.

2. That individuals are islands denies the presence of the unifying hand of a Creator implied in John Donne's Meditation n° XVII (1623). Islanded individuals and the odds and vagaries of love recur insistently, as in this quotation whose existential pessimism spins words from an image to the next one: "Each life an island floating in the sea. Here on Martinique we are tempted to forget for a while that each island possesses its unforgettable history, the past (whether we choose to read or to ignore it) indelibly inscribed in its features, its sounds, the barely perceptible pulse of engines animating the present of its sensuous

The couple's frailty that is made perceptible in their different perceptions of their situations is juxtaposed against the indestructible strength of the brutally unjust world colonization has built: when Port Royal (the capital's name at the time) is attacked, British iron balls hit the French stone ramparts to no effect. The historical siege mentioned in the text is turned into an existential metaphor: people are topsy-turvy in the impregnable fortress, but the whites are still over the blacks. A stratified society that relentlessly exploits the poor, the ones Fanon calls the "damned of the earth", is unshakable. An arresting thought is that this metaphorical siege serves as a transition to "the ground-zero moment" [59] of January 1<sup>st</sup> that ties the past to our modern times—just before history steps in forcefully to evoke memories of the transcontinental evils attendant on slavery. The "Codes Noirs" that Colbert (who is honored in French history books as the initiator of modern manufacturing and national prosperity) proposed and enforced under the authority of King Louis XIV. The social construction of blackness as a means to vindicate the existence of slavery. Emperor Napoleon I who, at the request of Joséphine, his bride who was born a privileged Martinican, reinstated slavery after the Revolution. Thomas Jefferson throwing a Prospero-like<sup>1</sup>

---

moments, the *éblouissance* of its changing weather. Each life distinct and often opaque even to the gaze around which it forms, the subject that the gaze creates a visitor, a tourist of itself, losing as much ground as it gains, the gaze temporal, temporary, mortal—the island disappearing at a slightly slower rate that it appears, materializing from the mist, but disappearances always gaining on the speed of appearances until inevitably the two lines meet, cross, and, nothing else appears. I'm trying to imagine that instant but it is not me, not yet, so I can't. No more than it will imagine me after lines converge". [75]

1. Frequent allusions bring up memories of Shakespeare's *The Tempest* which Wideman calls "a prison narrative" [76], "a prescient vision of the contemporary muddle" [77] prefiguring a world in which both the colonized and the

veil over the world in his hill top mansion designed so that slave servants were kept out of sight in underground tunnels leading to the kitchen and service areas. Nested in the midst of this list of intercontinental evils, Wideman brings creolization up. But the slaves' way to resist, the proof of their resilience is much less visible than the domination of hostile forces.

Racial history leads on to present-day American politics with flippant polemics on the incumbent president's policy who—Booker T. Washington-like, at least part of the way—promised his fellow citizens, “united as the fingers of the hand in a fist when fists are necessary, as separate and different as those same fingers when it comes to what each receives as a fair share of bounties and privileges” [72], that they would be immune from the consequences of national selfishness. Censure then shifts back to Martinique that hides the ghosts of the past. Tourists, so many slaves contained in an illusion of freedom, but trapped in a demeaning system that makes them bend, on time to board their coach, to a pre-determined behavior they follow because they have paid for it. Voluntary servitude has become a way of life, and the passage ends with Martinicans who, given an either/or choice in the 1946 referendum, opted for a Prospero-like status, French citizenship, rather than independence through self-determination.<sup>1</sup>

---

colonizer are now jailed. One insistent motif is an eerie cry that is reminiscent of Caliban's. This is heard at the beginning and end, from a hotel room in the early morning then amid the ruins of Habitation Latouche, a plantation inland from Le Carbet.

1. Wideman lumps two referenda into one and we need to clarify this political matter. In 1946, under the leadership of Aimé Césaire, Martinicans opted for *départementalisation*—meaning the island became a full-fledged French *département* electing representatives to the national assembly and administered by a *préfet*. Césaire's support of the change rested on cultural grounds and he later denounced a misunderstanding between the island and the mother country.

The second chapter, “*Père Labat*” is a historical fiction that strides satirically over centuries. The real Labat<sup>1</sup> was a builder of Martinique and Guadeloupe who managed a large (sixty acres) operation employing about 120 Africans and reconciled Christianity and slavery without the least qualm. He has left us a self-serving narration of his Caribbean life that shows him as a pragmatist not entirely closed to compassion who, besides, naïvely believed slaves loved their masters when they treated them well. According to Harms, life expectancy for half the newly imported slaves was eight years, and 1,300 new arrivals were needed yearly to keep the workforce stable. To counter slave mortality, Labat invented “un régime de vie”, a system one may call “seasoning”, to help (did he really believe what he wrote?) “these unfortunate people tired by a long trip”.<sup>2</sup> Still, the (self-defined) good Dominican harbored special prejudice toward mulattos whom he believed to be particularly hungry for sex, and could be extremely harsh when ordering a “sorcerer”—that is to say any slave who strayed away from received Catholic practice—chastised.

Labat’s introductory portrait (“a bizarre mix of the scientific rationalism of his era and medieval superstition”. [xxvii]) is brief

---

Had Martinicans chosen to remain a colony by rejecting the 1946 status, they might have opted for autonomy developing into independence at the time of the 1958 referendum to ratify the constitution of the fifth republic, potentially becoming part of the West Indian Confederation whose future was then thought promising.

1. According to Robert Harms, Labat’s management was not so harsh as that of smaller planters. Still, Labat was a proud man who “fancied himself a model plantation owner who was setting a good example . . . It was a sign of his times that Labat . . . became extremely upset when people accused him and his fellow priests to dabble in commerce”. HARMS, Robert, *The Diligent* (New York: Basis Books, 2002): 351.

2. LABAT, Jean-Baptiste, *Voyage aux isles* (Paris: Phébus, 1998): 227 (my translation).



but faithful to historical fact, including the Dominican's having come down in modern folklore as a hobgoblin whom parents use to threaten unruly children with putting them out of the house so Père Labat comes to fetch them away. However, the chapter in the book's core invents a totally different personage, a monument of self-centered unrelieved evil. Wideman seems to relish caricaturing the churchman. Labat is shown becalmed in La Rochelle for six weeks before sailing out, whiling time away in a tavern (of all places), farting so his own odor blots out those of others around him, and watching in the eye customers who cannot see him. This fictitious Labat is multi-faceted. A proud man, he feels he is being called as a superior man to lift the islands out of the devil's reach. Wideman's narrative voice joins Labat's who also, cynically, looks upon himself as extending the rotting finger of the old world to the new, a savior launching himself from a charnel house. As a Governor (which, by the way, he never was), he is shown ordering a recalcitrant slave put to a cruel death after trying to talk to him in the only ear he has left. Labat feels especially good with himself for attempting to talk a slave into proper behavior because blacks, contrary to parrots, cannot speak like humans. Finally, in an anachronistic twist reminding the reader this is a bitter satire aimed at slavery and the hypocrisy of the church, Wideman takes Labat, "God's messenger in winged shoes like Mercury" [112], to a shoe shop in some mall where, miser-like, he hesitates a long time before finally deciding to indulge in—not one, but three expensive pairs of Nikes to last him through his tenure in the Caribbean. The past, the present and the future merge. The lanes of commerce to Martinique are open.

Contrary to the previous chapter, "Fanon" is openly announced to be a fiction in the introduction. This is a part in which Wide-

man returns to the intensely personal from another vantage point. “Fanon” is a fragmented piece where quotations from Frantz Fanon (on the harm of colonialism, or on the need to remain thoughtfully militant and independent from the powers that be) head passages narrated by Wideman’s “virtual couple” (xxviii), Chantal and Paul, who are loosely constructed as personas for John and Catherine.<sup>1</sup>

Chantal is a French woman, a committed anti-colonialist who in the 1960s defied tradition in the arms of non-white lovers. Paul is a black New Yorker, formerly a student committed to succeeding through college, and therefore inattentive to events in Africa then in the throes of decolonization with the cold war for a background. He is pictured as someone beholden to western promises, an egotist closing his eyes to atrocities in Africa, on important developments like Fanon’s meeting with soon-to-be-butchered Patrice Lumumba— two men that are “irrelevant to the hazy plans [he] day-dreamed for [his] future” [120]. Paul has become a writer who is splurging his advance on his first novel with Chantal in Martinique.<sup>2</sup> Although he is working toward a new book

---

1. This chapter is transformed into an eponymous story in *God’s Gym*. The same protagonists, Chantal, Paul, Antoine, Fanon and Marilyn Monroe are involved in the same plot, also in Martinique, New York and Washington, DC. But the story’s skein is rearranged. Only one quotation from Fanon, “Today I believe in the possibility of love”, appears to head the story and the elements of the narration are re-sequenced—except for the closing part, the meeting between Fanon and Marilyn that concludes the story with a very unlikely prediction that things will change: “It doesn’t end like this. This is just a dream. We’re trapped in someone’s evil dreaming. Sleep, sleep, my pumpkin. Soon we’ll wake up in another dream. Everything will be different.” [WIDEMAN, John, *God’s Gym* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2005): 137].

2. Strangely, taking one’s cue from dates, there seems to be here a twist that once more breaks calendar time up and invests different people into the same protagonist. The fictitious Chantal has another double besides Catherine: Judy,

based on Fanon, Paul is at first unable to grasp the significance of a weather-beaten partly erased face stenciled on a greenish-gray metal shed he strolls by with Chantal. And neither can anyone, least of all a nonchalant native, a young man on a bicycle, tell him the face represents Fanon—Fanon so quickly forgotten in his birthplace.

On a dream-perfect day, the pair finds their way to an isolated beach where they strip naked, even though their privacy is broken by other tourists, some with clothing on, some without. The passage is reminiscent of Wideman's "The Statue of Liberty" (in *Fever. Twelve Stories*, 1989), but this time without the least uneasiness on the part of the black man. The white woman shows her intimate self, "what belonged to you and to me what couldn't be stolen from us, what couldn't be owned or possessed" [128]. Paul believes himself free of jealousy in this you/me/us situation. In spite of the insistent stare of a sun-tanned white bather, he is free of jealousy "that day and maybe in the days to come" [id.]. A fleeting delusion, for love unravels, not because of the present but of the past: Paul grows jealous of Antoine, one of Chantal's former lovers, white, rich, dominant—her employer, in fact—who took her to Martinique years before Paul and Chantal's own interracial relationship. The lovers quarrel and break up. Paul needs excuses. He first blames their failure on their having been enslaved by the island's "erotic presence" [121] that provoked his infidelity right after coming back to New York. After acrimonious unspoken dialogues churning first in Paul's mind then in Chantal's, the narra-

---

Wideman's wife of thirty years, with whom he might indeed have come but did not if we believe *Brothers & Keepers* that hints at a honeymoon in Maine [Wideman 1985: 28]) to spend his advance for his first novel, *A Glance Away*, on the island. The dates match.

tive moves out of the 1960s to “the threshold of the twenty-first century” [142], to the continued reality of inequality between the colonizer and the colonized that posits the frailty of interracial relationships. The fiction’s resolution (maybe an attempt at exorcising fear) is an impossible but all the same true story headed by a quotation from Frantz Fanon “Today I believe in the possibility of love” [144] taken out of context: Fanon and Marilyn Monroe, co-victims of the modern world who have crossed the Atlantic in the hull of a slave ship, are reunited in a Washington, D.C., hospital where Marilyn encourages Fanon, to hold his own against disease, to go to sleep—“Sleep, sleep, my pumpkin” [145]—and wake up in another dream where everything will be different.

“Fanon” is a fiction nourished by the ghosts from the 1960’s and a failed interracial marriage. A story haunted by the question of the durability of interracial love that ends on the improbable hope the world will change. “The Island” is the title Wideman chose for the fourth and last chapter, perhaps because it best sums up the existential specters that crisscross the book. Martinique offers many shades. Formerly a gulag for the slaves, it is today a deleterious tropical Eden for African-Americans, a place that stands as a metaphor for the individual’s isolation, a theme already vented in the diary. But the island is also history, and Wideman returns to extra-personal material in the last part. “The island” presents itself as an account of a day trip from Sainte-Anne to Saint-Pierre: a massive flow of consciousness eleven pages long without a period, not even a full stop, with commas only. As we shall see, it only takes a short leap of the imagination to grasp this flow of words as a poetic embodiment of the 1902 volcanic eruption that ravaged Saint-Pierre and the environs, an uncontrollable natural

catastrophe matching the man-made evils that govern human relationships. As always in Wideman, dates, events—personal and historical—and feelings overlap.

Snow outside Wideman's window in New York<sup>1</sup> stirs up memories of Martinique, of the "petite neige" — whitish ash—the residents of the Saint-Pierre area could see blowing from Mount Pelée, but did not heed, in the weeks preceding the fateful eruption. The passage insists on the absurdity of it all. No one fled the area until the volcano's first tremors were felt. Only then did the surrounding villagers flee to the city for protection . . . when it was too late—too close anyway. There were two survivors, petty delinquents protected from the heat by the thick walls of their dungeon. 30,000 lives were cut short because people had been encouraged to stay for the coming election, or hid their heads in the sand for some other personal reason, or believed their faith in God would "charm away the inconceivable cataclysm" [152].

Time is once again manipulated. This all-in-one-piece chapter presents itself as a temporal merry-go-round in which the 6:00 a.m. beginning of the volcanic eruption corresponds to John and Katrine's 6:00 p.m. visit of the cathedral's ruins. The past and the present merge, bringing dawn and dusk together, though about one century apart. Dusk makes the writing on the cathedral's plaque (the date of the 1902 catastrophe) undecipherable, like "runes" [154-155]. Runes. Ruins scattered like Ozymandias's statue in Shelley's poem, the king of kings fallen from power to rubble:

---

1. The book may be appreciated more fully with the help of its genesis. Did Wideman actually write the first part as day-to-day essays on the island and the other three sections back at home?

Round the decay  
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare  
The lone and level sands stretch far away.

The cathedral's ruins, a hard climb from the town, are deserted. The only other visitor is a "skinny, scruffy, typecast ghetto dog watching us, too curious about our business to be just an innocent mutt" [156]: an insistent presence.

Down from the cathedral, and probably visited before climbing out of the town is the museum where artifacts from the eruption, such as bottles deformed by heat, are on display. Chronology goes backward, as one museum leads to another. The reader is led back to 1888 and the Gauguin museum our tourists must have visited earlier that day on the way up to Saint-Pierre. Nothing is said about that place, no painting is described. Wideman is strictly concerned with the island's meaning for the painter who found respite after a painful stay in the Panama canal area. The island was beneficial to the sickly outsider. Or, rather, its resilient inhabitants. It was in Martinique that Gauguin healed by learning from "a brown, sturdy people" [159], and moved on to a rejuvenated artistic expression that was to bloom in Polynesia.

Next to the Gauguin museum, up in the hills from the town of Le Carbet lies Habitation Latouche. Wideman does not follow the crowds drawn to the Balata botanical gardens next to the former plantation. This major attraction is not even mentioned. Alone with Katrine among the "grave-quiet" ruins, Wideman mourns those that baptized "the land with their blood and sweat, African artisans and mechanics who built whatever the plantation required", men and women who were "invested . . . imprisoned . . . buried" [160] there. He "interrogate[s] the silence

with [his] own" [161]. A silence broken by the same unearthly squeals "fracturing the morning's stillness" [62] first heard from the hotel bedroom in Sainte-Anne: maybe "ghost-colored long-horned African cattle" [61] stung by insects. Or maybe the caterwauling of cats in heat. Or maybe the moans of Africans detained, exploited, abused there. Maybe none of the above as the mysterious cry takes Wideman back to his days at Oxford, UK, where, a Rhodes scholar, he heard peacocks in a pub. Although it is not said in so many words, this late-coming reminiscence associates Wideman with Paul, his protagonist in "Fanon" dedicated exclusively to his personal success, living in blissful ignorance of the plight of Third World countries, "blank regions on the map of [his] imagination" [120], of the fate of Patrice Lumumba whose body was chopped and burned "in an oil drum" [119]. A personal sense of early guilt—of having been hoodwinked by the surrounding world—surges in as *Habitation Latouche* turns into

an early outpost of the mission, the burden we Rhodes<sup>1</sup> scholars had been anointed to assume, the white man's burden I'd been schooled to believe was mine too, spreading the net of civilization to green islands such as Martinique . . . [162].

Still proceeding backward, the first leg of the day trip to Saint-Pierre is described in the concluding pages which again focus on the couple. Martinique also means John and Katrine as tourists, purchasing food from vendors and having a good time on a beach. Not quite a refuge from post-9/11 Big Brother, though: the

---

1. Cecil Rhodes, for whom Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) formerly was named, is called an exploitative "bandit" [162]. The older Wideman feels guilty for having been distinguished as a Rhodes Scholar, the second African-American thus honored.

sneaky dog seen among the ruins of the cathedral now is roaming around on the beach. And John hopes it is not a cop dog, or a cyborg device reporting on Katrine's squatting to wet the grass between two boulders, or on John "loosing a steaming Mount Pelée burst, huddled in [his] pocket of shadow" [167]: maybe a fart massive enough to drown Père Labat's in his tavern. Who knows?

This self-derision and Katrine's "desecrating holy ground" [167] that roll the cathedral ruins and the beach into one resonates with the book's beginning, the built-in deleteriousness of the Christian religion, the tool of colonizers. John's and Katrine's innocent fun on the beach, John's admiration for his partner's expert swimming defying the waves may be read as the hope the racial ghosts that vitiated the relationship of Paul and Chantal are now exorcised: Paul is alone on returning to New York. John and Katrine go back together.

Thus does the book's circularity tie the loop in a way that underlines a pessimistic outlook on a changed but really unchanging world, and expresses the fragile hope that an interracial relationship can survive the ghosts from mankind's past history. Du Tertre's favorable "revenants" can always come back.

*The Island* is a book in which two strands, one personal and one historical, keep interfering, simply because Wideman is persuaded that historians are "novelists who haven't come out of the closet" (TuSmith 1998: 120). An itinerary that deconstructs chronology, invents or misrepresents, robes and disrobes facts, takes the reader from the personal to the historical, and vice versa, challenging philosophical and religious assumptions, and making mince meat of political correctness. Great Time ("I've learned through the old people in my family that Great Time is where



we have a sense of community and unity of being which can't be touched by oppression or slavery" [TuSmith 1998: 124]) has not yet dawned on the western world.

### *Works Cited*

- HARMS, Robert. *The Diligent. A Voyage through the Worlds of the Slave Trade*. New York, NY: Basic Books, 2002.
- LABAT, Jean-Baptiste. [Michel Le Bres, ed.] *Voyage aux isles, chronique aventureuse des Caraïbes, 1693-1705*. 1719. Paris: Phébus, 1998.
- TUSMITH, Bonnie. *Conversations with John Edgar Wideman*. Jackson, Ms.: University Press of Mississippi, 1998.
- WIDEMAN, John E. *Brothers & Keepers*. 1984. London: Allison & Busby, 1985.
- WIDEMAN, John E. (Introduction to) *The Souls of Black Folk*. New York, NY: Vintage, 1990.
- WIDEMAN, John E. *The Homewood Books*. Pittsburgh, Pa.: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1992.
- WIDEMAN, John E. *Fatheralong. A Meditation on Fathers and Sons, Race and Society*. 1994. London: Picador, 1995.
- WIDEMAN, John E. *The Island: Martinique*. Washington, DC: the National Geographic Society, 2003.
- WIDEMAN, John E. *God's Gym. Stories*. Boston, Ma.: Houghton Mifflin, 2005.

*Les Carnets du Cerpac* n° 6, 2007, 73-98.

**POSTMEMORIES OF SLAVERY  
IN FRED D'AGUIAR'S *BLOODLINES***

Abigail WARD  
Nottingham Trent University, UK

We joke about associating only with other couples [...] with an equal distribution of the two races between them. Our children. We stop. The words hang in the air. Two stars that have dropped from the heavens to a point just above our heads and as bright as two suns. Our children. Yes. Our children. Several of them.<sup>1</sup>

Like the narrator figures of Fred D'Aguiar's novel *Feeding the Ghosts* (1997) and Caryl Phillips's novel *Crossing the River* (1993), the life of the central narrator of D'Aguiar's long poem *Bloodlines* (2000) has spanned centuries. In the course of the poem, the narrator traces the evolving relationship between his parents. Faith, a black slave, was raped by Christy, a white son of a slave-owner, but they gradually fall in love. The couple run away together, and

---

1. D'AGUIAR, Fred, *The Longest Memory* (1994. London: Vintage, 1995): 103.

are aided in their plan to move north by Tom and Stella, two ex-slaves in the Underground Railroad movement. Unfortunately, as Tom steers their boat across the river, they are ambushed and Christy and Faith become separated from Tom, whom they presume dead. They eventually find refuge in a barn, but a gang of white men happen upon them and, after repeatedly raping Faith and humiliating Christy, Faith is sold back into slavery to Mr and Mrs Mason. Christy, captured for indenture, becomes a boxer. Faith dies shortly after giving birth to the narrator and Christy, unable to locate either Faith or his son, is buried a pauper. The narrator records his journey to find his father and laments his inability to die, rendered animate by the continuing of legacies of slavery.<sup>1</sup> Alongside the central narrator, chapters are also narrated by Faith, Christy, Mrs Mason, Stella and Tom. D'Aguiar deploys the ottava rima form throughout his text, a style appropriate to the nineteenth-century "beginning" of the tale.<sup>2</sup> As I will indicate, his choice of form is no mere whim, but has important implications for his concerns about the apparent "vogue" of texts written about slavery.

*Bloodlines*, arguably, is a much more problematic and morally-challenging text than D'Aguiar's earlier novels about slavery *The Longest Memory* (1994) and *Feeding the Ghosts*, particularly in relation to the portrayal of female roles. My opening quotation from *The Longest Memory* introduces the notion of the transformative power of sexual relations between black and white people; a premise devastatingly challenged in *Bloodlines*. Published

---

1. The narrator is named after his father, but in order to avoid confusion, I shall continue to refer to him as "the narrator".

2. The ottava rima, introduced into English by Wyatt, was most famously the form employed by Byron in *Don Juan* (1819-24).

six years after *The Longest Memory*, *Bloodlines* is characterised by a pervading cynicism regarding the potential of relationships between mixed-race couples. The optimism of my opening quotation, which shapes the stellar imagery of Chapel and Lydia's future hopes for children, is contrasted in *Bloodlines* with the mixed-race narrator, who is the child of Faith and Christy. As I will show, he is orphaned and alone, fruitlessly searching for a place to "belong" and subject to continuing racism and violence. My intention initially is to examine the most difficult, or problematic aspects of this text, beginning with the relationship between Christy and Faith and moving on to explore the form of the poem. I shall then consider why I believe *Bloodlines* makes an important contribution to D'Aguiar's continuing concerns with the ethics of representing slavery and the remembrance of this past. As I demonstrate, *Bloodlines* can provocatively be seen as an example of what Marianne Hirsch calls "postmemory".<sup>1</sup> The text arguably enacts a postmemorialisation of slavery which is gloomily resigned to the impossibility of ending the legacies of this trade. In her many influential essays, Hirsch coins the term "postmemory" as a way of explaining what she calls the belated "memories" experienced by those who did not directly witness the traumatic events.<sup>2</sup> Hirsch writes that, "although familial inheritance offers the clearest model for it, postmemory need not be strictly an identity position. Instead, I prefer to see it as an intersubjective transgenerational space of remembrance, linked

---

1. HIRSCH, Marianne, "Projected Memory: Holocaust Photographs in Personal and Public Fantasy", in *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present*, by Mieke Bal, Jonathan Crewe and Leo Spitzer, eds. (Hanover, NH and London: University Press of New England, 1999): 2-23; 8.

2. *Ibid.*

specifically to cultural or collective trauma".<sup>1</sup> In writing about the possibility for postmemory as a potential space for cultural or collective trauma, Hirsch broadens the scope for empathy. Postmemory is therefore especially useful in thinking about the how authors like D'Aguiar can explore the remembrance of slavery in the absence of direct experience of this past.

Towards the start of *Bloodlines*, there occurs the rape at knife-point of a female slave, Faith—a moment arguably handled by D'Aguiar without due sensitivity or gravitas. In order that I may explain the difficulties created by the way in which he handles the moment of rape, it is necessary to quote from his text at length:

He knew what to do to make her scared—  
he made the deep impression of a scar

by pressing the knife on her face. She turned rigid,  
wooden, and he mounted her and he rode  
flat out as she shut her mind down to get rid  
of him in her and made herself a lifeless board  
under his weight, his teeth biting, his rancid  
breath, his hips, its thrust, its sudden load,  
the knife threatening to break her skin,  
so she had to, she had to, let him in.<sup>2</sup>

D'Aguiar suggests in this passage the level of trauma experienced by Faith as she "shut[s] her mind down" to her violation. She does not, it is clear from the above passage, yield willingly to Christy's assault. Yet, as Christy rapes Faith, D'Aguiar writes of "her hate burning to love" (6). In the midst of being raped, there-

---

1. HIRSCH, Marianne, "Surviving Images: Holocaust Photographs and the Work of Postmemory", *Yale Journal of Criticism*, 14: 1 (2002): 5-37; 10.

2. D'AGUIAR, Fred, *Bloodlines* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2000): 6.

fore, he suggests that Faith falls in love with her rapist. This seemingly untroubled shift of Christy's category from rapist to suitor arguably perpetuates the myth that women essentially enjoy the masochism of violent relationships.<sup>1</sup> Following Faith's rape by the group of men, it is significant that he dreams of her "in an orgy instead of her trials" (73). The worrying suggestion that Faith "chooses" Christy precisely because he uses force to subdue her seems to correlate to the notion of "hate burning to love" and a deliberate confusion by D'Aguiar of the two states.

If the act of rape is not already dealt with in a contentious-enough way in *Bloodlines*, it is further problematised by race; it is, specifically, the rape of a black woman by a white man. This adds a further, difficult, layer to the already problematic aspect of rape. The racist view of the apparently "harlot" or sexualised nature of black women has been explored by a range of scholars. Mary Berry and John Blassingame, for example, have written that, until the last decades of the twentieth century, white men were "fascinated" by black people. They note that black women featured in the majority of their fantasies, writing that: "[t]he image of the black woman was that she was the most sensuous, exotic, mysterious, and voluptuous female in the world—the embodiment of passion".<sup>2</sup> The apparent abundance of passion and subsequent

---

1. Carole Vance writes that "[w]omen are encouraged to assent that all male sexuality done to them is pleasurable and liberatory: women really enjoy being raped but can't admit it". See VANCE, "Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality" (1984) in *Feminisms*, Sandra Kemp and Judith Squires, eds. (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1997): 327-335; 329.

2. BERRY, Mary Frances and John W. BLASSINGAME, *Long Memory: The Black Experience in America* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982): 115. They add that "[g]iven the belief in the ungovernable passion of blacks, the rape of a black woman by a white man was a legal *non sequitur*. She stood defenseless before the bar of justice because it was always assumed that she had

dehumanisation of black women has also been examined by bell hooks, who writes in *Ain't I a Woman* (1981) that:

The designation of all black women as sexually depraved, immoral, and loose had its roots in the slave system. White women and men justified the sexual exploitation of enslaved black women by arguing that they were the initiators of sexual relationships with men. From such thinking emerged the stereotype of black women as sexual savages, and in sexist terms a sexual savage, a non-human, an animal cannot be raped.<sup>1</sup>

In *Bloodlines*, the sexual exploitation of black women is shown to be institutionalised within the slave trade; as Christy's father tells him, Christy was expected to "fuck as many as [he] liked" (17). It is perhaps logical, then, that he at first apparently shares this view of Faith, imaging her to be initiating the "relationship":

when she locked eyes with his  
all he could think of was that she was there  
because she wanted him, making easy this  
thing he was always doing with a slave;  
the polar opposite of her motive. (4)

Christy assumes that Faith is, in hooks's terminology, a "sexual savage", although his advances are clearly unwanted. D'Aguiar seems in this text to write carelessly about his female protagonist and, as is to be expected, some reviewers have picked up on the book's apparent misogyny. Bruce King, for example, has noted in his review of *Bloodlines* that, "[w]e are to believe that a black slave raped at knifepoint by a lusty young white man will fall in love

---

been the seducer" (115).

1. Hooks, bell, *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (London: Pluto Press, 1982): 52.

with him and he with her. It seems more like de Sade than the romantic tale that follows".<sup>1</sup>

From the start of this text, then, important issues are raised, via D'Aguiar's portrayal of the rape of a slave, surrounding the ethics of writing about slavery; the most pressing being whether his writing ought to be categorised as exposing the "pornography of Empire" or an act of de Sadean titillation, as King implies.<sup>2</sup> The narrator reports that, as a child, he was informed by other children:

My mother was raped and I came along,  
that was the truth and I should confess  
and drop this love-match, love-child crap. (50)

In this quotation, D'Aguiar not only challenges the concept of "truth" but illustrates he is aware how the relationship could be viewed, arguably forestalling his reader's thoughts to desist in calling rape, "love".

I would suggest, contrary to King, that D'Aguiar's portrayal of rape serves an important and threefold metaphorical purpose and is not merely insensitive writing. Firstly, D'Aguiar indicates through his long-suffering female protagonist—the aptly-named Faith—the inherent misogyny of slavery in nineteenth-century America. As mentioned, black women were persistently abused by white men on the plantations. *The Longest Memory*, of course, also included the violent rape of Cook by Sanders Senior,

---

1. KING, Bruce, "Bloodlines", *World Literature Today*, 75: 1 (2001) in *Literature Online* lion.chadwyck.co.uk [accessed 22 February 2005]: para. 4 of 5.

2. I borrow the phrase "pornography of Empire" from David Dabydeen. See DABYDEEN, "On Not Being Milton: Nigger Talk in England Today", in *Tibisiri: Caribbean Writers and Critics*, Maggie Butcher, ed. (Sydney; Mundelstrup, Denmark and Coventry: Dangaroo Press, 1989), 121-135; 121.



although, and less controversially, she failed to love Sanders Senior despite, or because of, her violation.

Secondly, bell hooks provides another possible explanation for his handling of the scene in her comments about the “devaluation of black womanhood”. She cites this devaluation as stemming from the aforementioned sexual exploitation of black women during the slave trade and suggests that it has been perpetuated into the twentieth century (hooks 1982: 53). Referring to Susan Brownmiller’s book about rape, *Against Our Will* (1975), hooks notes:

While Brownmiller successfully impresses upon readers the fact that white men brutally assaulted black women during slavery, she minimizes the impact that oppression has had on all black women in America by placing it solely in the limited historical context of an “institutionalized crime” during slavery. (hooks 1982: 52)

By confining the rape of, and violence towards, black women by white men to the past of slavery, hooks argues, writers like Brownmiller fail to address the continuing problem of violence against black women in the twentieth century. Like the continued devaluation of black womanhood, D’Aguiar’s novel offers intimations of the things that extend from the time of slavery into the present day—such as racism, violence and sexism—the act of rape of black women by white men conflating all three elements.<sup>1</sup> D’Aguiar’s narrator is unable to die until the “conditions of slavery” end, reiterating D’Aguiar’s argument in “The Last Essay About Slavery” (1996) that there cannot be a last text

---

1. Although hooks also notes that white men (rather than black men) continued to be identified in the late twentieth century as potential rapists for black women: “[t]he emphasis on the white male as sexual exploiter in black communities often deflects attention away from black male sexual exploitation of black women”, indicating another persistent legacy of slavery (hooks 1982: 68).

about this past because slavery is not yet dead: “[t]his is a fact of my heritage. So how can it be over? How can it ever be conferred to a condition of non-being when it lived, still lives, in me?”<sup>1</sup> The slave ship of *Feeding the Ghosts*, the *Zong*, is perpetually on the high seas: it is, D’Aguiar reminds us, “the present, not slavery, [that] refuses to allow slavery to go away” (D’Aguiar 1996: 126).

*Bloodlines* therefore sees a renewal of D’Aguiar’s concerns with the continuation of slavery and, in particular, with the ongoing problem of racism in the twenty-first century as a legacy of this past. The narrator’s existence captures this concern:

So history greeted me. I am condemned  
to live an eternity, unless all the conditions  
that brought me into being somehow mend:  
I mean Slavery and all its ramifications  
marching unfazed into the new millennium.  
Everything that I see in countries and nations  
tells me this is true: Slavery may be buried,  
but it’s not dead, its offspring, Racism, still breeds. (150)

The conditions that brought him into being were, of course, slavery but also rape. Christy’s rape of Faith therefore stands as a metaphor for slavery and an example of what D’Aguiar suggests was the prevailing engagement between black women and white men during the first half of the nineteenth century. He can therefore be seen as intimating that the violation of women has been perpetuated, like racism, into the twenty-first century:

it has always  
been and will always be the white man’s way:

---

1. D’AGUIAR, Fred, “The Last Essay About Slavery”, in *The Age of Anxiety*, Sarah Dunant and Roy Porter, eds. (London: Virago, 1996): 125-147; 131.

to take what he wants when he wants,  
 how he wants, to go where he pleases  
 when he wishes. (5)

By indicating the continuation of this abuse via his “timeless” narrator, D’Aguiar arguably avoids hooks’s charges of confining this kind of violation of women to the historical past.

Thirdly, I want to suggest that much of the motivation behind the violent opening section of *Bloodlines* is derived from D’Aguiar’s attempt to persuade his reader of the difficult nature of relationships between black and white people during the time of slavery and the ultimate failure of inter-racial love as a vehicle for transforming the legacies of this past. In *The Longest Memory*, the love and hopes of Chapel and Lydia for children as a method of healing the damage done by slavery are thwarted by Chapel’s death, and the close of *Feeding the Ghosts* similarly rejects a reunion between Mintah and Simon. *Bloodlines* is no more optimistic about mixed-race relationships—the relationship between black and white people is also ended through separation and provided with finality by the death of Faith, suggesting that D’Aguiar feels these relations were impossible at this time. Evident from *Feeding the Ghosts*, *The Longest Memory* and *Bloodlines*, he is interested in mixed-race relationships, or those that defied the norms of nineteenth-century America and Britain. D’Aguiar makes clear, however, that these relationships are especially problematic and, in *Bloodlines*, uses rape as a way of suggesting their perpetually uneven footing. He implies the relationship between Faith and Christy is compromised by a fundamental inequality, inviting us to “[p]icture those two if you can, arm-in-arm, / master and slave” (18). They are therefore ultimately

unable to move beyond their historically-prescribed roles in this text. The unsteadiness of their relationship is in direct comparison to that of Tom and Stella, who are portrayed as starting off on a more even level; both are ex-slaves and are able to find happiness, despite hardship.

As I have suggested, utopian hopes for a harmonious future for black and white people are dashed in *Bloodlines*. D'Aguiar declines to provide a happy ending; the bond of love between Christy and Faith is unconvincing and, following their separation, Faith soon dies. I would contend that D'Aguiar is refusing to transcend a relationship that began in violence; in so doing, he does not minimise the psychological damage enacted by rape, or make it (returning to the earlier metaphor, like slavery) something easily dismissed. Bruce King's review, therefore, appears to miss the irony of *Bloodlines*; this text deliberately withholds a happy conclusion, even if their son believes that "Christy and Faith's love survives their deaths. / They go hand-in-hand into the black and blue" (144). Faith pays the ultimate price for Christy's rape: it effectively kills her with the birth of her son, suggesting that although the central characters make an attempt to forge a relationship together, ultimately, the violence and trauma (which D'Aguiar implies inevitable in relationships between white men and black women at this time) cannot be transcended. We can see in this failure to provide positive conclusions to his texts the fatally dispiriting way in which D'Aguiar indicates the futility of attempts to transcend slavery via the idealisation of mixed-race relationships. He offers no hope that this is, or even should be, possible; we should not forget or minimise the damage perpetrated at the start of *Bloodlines*. As I shall indicate in a moment, the poem can be seen as being caught in a state of

anguished postmemory, where postmemories of this past and the continuing legacies of slavery forestall a transformative counter-remembrance.

From such sordid beginnings, D'Aguiar proposes, only sadness can follow. The narrator is correspondingly troubled and leads a wandering, unfulfilled life: "I am the singer and the song—/ lest you forget—wrong-doer and wronged" (153). He is informed by Mr Mason:

You don't know who you are because, young  
man, you're nobody, neither black nor white!  
You occupy a no-man's-land! You belong  
nowhere! (48)

The narrator's itinerant sense of unbelonging can be attributed to his mixed-race origins, like Chapel in *The Longest Memory*, who also struggled with his role as a slave—unknowingly because of his dual racial parentage. D'Aguiar's narrator in *Bloodlines* is a fitting emblem of the legacies of slavery because he embodies both "sides" of slavery and is accordingly riddled with contradictions. He has inherited the plantation from Mrs Mason, yet, as partly born of a slave, feels he should work upon it. Slavery has left, it seems, difficult legacies:

Surrounded by my inheritance, immersed,  
daily telling myself I am a dog-eared mule  
to be laden, beaten, ridden, harnessed,  
my immortal side bends all the rules  
that keep my slave side well versed  
in hard work, hoping to kill the soul  
by wrecking the body. I am master,  
slave and overseer bringing disaster. (152)

The narrator's troubled position as "master, slave and overseer" indicates the complexity of the legacies of slavery. D'Aguiar is questioning the simplicity and idealism of the transformative potential of love. From rapist to knight, slaver to abolitionist, later actions cannot, he implies in this text, be permitted to overshadow earlier ones. As I show, he also does not pander to the vogue for an affirmative story about slaves overcoming their oppression.

If *Bloodlines* is troubled at times by its author's use of rape as a means of suggesting the misogynistic and continuing nature of slavery, at others, it is made increasingly difficult by its ottava rima form which requires a patient reading. Consequently, D'Aguiar's poetic talent has been questioned in reviews of this book. Bruce King has noted, for example, that "D'Aguiar shows daring in using such a stanza and the resulting tones to describe the violence of slavery, but it does not work. The tone feels wrong" (King 2001: para. 3 of 5). Robert Nye has similarly claimed that the ottava rima form "hardly lends itself to D'Aguiar's seriousness. [...] The form constricts the content and works against it".<sup>1</sup> Richard King's even more damning review suggests that "[t]he poem fails in its mission [. . . because] it is just so awful to read". He continues, adding that

So determined is D'Aguiar to stick with the eight-line stanza that, overall, the poem probably has about twice as many words as it needs. The lines [...] all but stagger to their painful ends, or rather their conclusions, an unremitting stream of pointless explication pervading the whole mess.<sup>2</sup>

---

1. NYE, Robert, "No Rhythm in the Heart of Darkness", *The Times*, 2 August 2000, section Times 2: 18.

2. KING, Richard, "I Fell 'Lurve'", *PN Review*, 27: 4 (2001) in *Literature Online*

At the time of the publication of *Bloodlines*, D'Aguiar had published three novels and four editions of poetry; it seems unlikely, therefore, that it is just an uncharacteristically poor text or the "unremitting stream of pointless explication" Richard King believes it to be. If we turn for a moment to one of the more indelicate moments in *Bloodlines*:

"Not you only, Faith, the two of us.  
 Whatever you do, I do; when you fall  
 pregnant we'll bear our children simultaneous-  
 ly". "Yes! Christy, let's turn with you still  
 in me". (59)

The unsophisticated rhymes and painful rhythm are typical of the poem. The writing is so unwieldy, in fact, that towards the beginning, the narrator apologises for his anachronistic vocabulary: "[h]e would never have said hood, but wait, / he doesn't have to rhyme every other line" (17). The deliberately ungraceful writing exhibited by the narrator of *Bloodlines* can be compared with the eloquence of D'Aguiar's writing in poems such as "Shadow Play" (2001):

There isn't enough light in the world.  
 Too many shadows define what I've become  
 Forcing me to register only those shapes  
 Shaded from the light and shadowed  
 By the shade; amorphous, pellucid and cold.<sup>1</sup>

---

<<http://o-lion.chadwyck.co.uk>> [accessed 22 February 2005]: para. 4 of 8.

1. D'AGUIAR, Fred, "Shadow Play", *An English Sampler: New and Selected Poems* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2001): I. 1.

Nor can the clumsy rhymes of *Bloodlines* be entirely a product of his unfamiliarity with older verse forms such as the ottava rima. He is much more successful in earlier attempts at adopting the sonnet form in his poem "The Last Sonnet About Slavery" (1996):

Put your hand on my shoulder, dear mistress.  
 Hands as delicate should not hang in the air  
 But find ample places to pose and rest.  
 And since my shoulders, my head, the hair  
 On it, all belong to you, let those hands  
 Settle anywhere on me but do not let them float  
 Aimlessly, nor be idle, nor stand  
 Out as if they had no greater goal. (D'Aguiar 1996: 144)

As we can see here, an intimacy with metre and style creates a flowing and poised verse which carefully depicts the unequal relationship between servant and mistress in eighteenth-century Britain. D'Aguiar's deployment of a verse form most commonly associated with love poetry also implies a closer relationship between the portrait sitters.

D'Aguiar does not, on the whole, write "bad" poetry, therefore, even when adhering to inflexible verse forms. Rather—as Richard King suggests—the unwieldy form of *Bloodlines* perhaps contains an implication for the way in which form and content can interact in examining the past of slavery. King proposes: "[i]t may be said that the narrator of *Bloodlines* is purposefully drawn as incompetent"; indeed, the failure of rhyme could be a "strategic failure, the slavish nature of the rhyming work at one with the lives of the black protagonists" (Richard King 2001: para. 7 of 8). He suggests, then, that D'Aguiar has chosen the confining and difficult ottava



rima form in order to comment on the oppression of slavery. However, although I would agree that the form of *Bloodlines* should not be ignored, I would suggest a slightly different reason for the implementation of this particular stanza form. D'Aguiar has chosen an especially unusual and difficult form in which to narrate his story—one which distorts and fragments his sentences and words. Depictions of rape, violence, racism and the poem's obtuse verse and faltering rhythm arguably collude to prevent an easy or enjoyable exploration of the past of slavery. D'Aguiar ensures, in his ungainly text, that it is not going to be comfortable for the reader; this will not be a slave narrative to appease those readers who wish for a redemptive conclusion.

There is an earlier precedent for poetic sequences about slavery in a Caribbean context set by the epics of Edward Kamau Brathwaite, and David Dabydeen's long poem "Turner" (1994) also examines the past of slavery—this time focusing on Britain's role in the trade. The American setting and focus on plantation slavery makes *Bloodlines* different again, and a poetic form is particularly helpful to D'Aguiar in allowing his narrator to move through centuries in a more condensed way. After writing about the involvement of Britain and America in the slave trade in his novels *Feeding the Ghosts* and *The Longest Memory*, turning to poetry arguably dissociates further D'Aguiar from the simulacrum of the slave narrative.<sup>1</sup> The number of novels about slavery published in the last decade of the twentieth century rein-

---

1. Writing about rape also distances *Bloodlines* from simulating slave narratives, as Cynthia S. Hamilton notes, rape was "the often alluded to, but unspeakable subject" of nineteenth-century American slave narratives. See HAMILTON, "Revisions, Rememories and Exorcisms: Toni Morrison and the Slave Narrative", *Journal of American Studies*, 30 (1996): 429-445; 435.

forces Dabydeen's claims about "peasantry" being "in vogue"; aside from works by D'Aguiar, we might think of Phillips's novels *Cambridge* (1991) or *Crossing the River*, or Dabydeen's novel *A Harlot's Progress* (1999). Writing about slavery in prose is a popular choice and, by writing in poetry, D'Aguiar therefore seeks to avoid the normalising propensity of prose. The contemporary, self-conscious references of *Bloodlines* ensure it also does not attempt to imitate nineteenth-century poetry by slaves such as Phillis Wheatley; D'Aguiar does not attempt to offer a beautifying or transformative work about slavery.

The title of *Bloodlines* alludes not only to the act of writing, but also to the genealogical lines in the veins, the myth of collective memory, or remembering, carried by blood:

I am the lives of slaves. Every move  
I make obeys orders from an overseer.  
First he is a whip, a kick, a rude  
mouth, a fist and spit, yes sir, no sir. (150)

The narrator, although not a slave, carries the "lives of slaves" within him — indicating the perpetuation of experiences of slavery for those born of slaves; though, once again, this is, to be accurate, remembering rather than memory. As I have mentioned, postmemory is defined by Hirsch as the relationship between the experiences of those who have undergone trauma and their children, who "remember" their parents' experiences as stories or images, though these "are so powerful, so monumental, as to constitute memories in their own right" (Hirsch 1999: 8). Postmemory, as Hirsch uses it, is applicable to what she calls the "second generation" of trauma witnesses; that is, the children of Holocaust survivors. As Hirsch adds, this is not, therefore, a term refer-

ring to actual, or living, memories; the name “postmemory” is intended to indicate “its secondary or second-generation memory quality, its basis in displacement, its belatedness” (Hirsch 1999: 8). Given the temporal distance between slavery and the present, postmemories of this past can only ever be belated. Ultimately, for Hirsch,

Postmemory characterizes the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are displaced by the stories of their previous generation, shaped by traumatic events that they can neither understand nor re-create. (Hirsch 1999: 8)

The life of D’Aguiar’s narrator is dominated by the narratives of Christy and Faith and, as a result, he devotes his time to tracing his father and trying to come to terms with his ancestry as well as the larger past of slavery. The narrator appears to struggle with postmemories of slavery; this is also, I would contend, the challenge facing D’Aguiar. He is aware, in his lack of interest in simulating slave narratives or poetry, that the past of slavery cannot be “re-created”. Rather than try to do this, therefore, D’Aguiar attempts to understand slavery through *new* creation. However, the paralysing narratives of postmemories of slavery arguably dominate *Bloodlines*, as D’Aguiar and his narrator are unable to relinquish the fundamentally incomprehensible and unsettling memories of this past.

*Bloodlines* seems, therefore, caught in what can be viewed as a sombre condition of postmemorialisation. Although conceptualised in relation to the children of Holocaust survivors, Hirsch is adamant that she does not wish “to restrict the notion of post-

memory to the remembrance of the Holocaust", and is clear in suggesting the wider scope offered by the term.<sup>1</sup> As Hirsch adds,

It is a question of conceiving oneself as multiply interconnected with others of the same, of previous, and of subsequent generations, of the same and of other—proximate or distant—cultures and subcultures. It is a question, more specifically, of an *ethical* relation to the oppressed or persecuted other for which postmemory can serve as a model. (Hirsch 1999: 9)

Postmemory, as conceptualised by Hirsch, is not restricted to actual descendants of trauma but is expanded to include the "ethical" and multiple connections between twentieth- or twenty-first-century readers and the past of slavery. The postmemorialisation of slavery can be seen as a central concern in the work of D'Aguiar who grapples with the earlier "narratives" and "traumatic events" pertaining to the slave trade. Hirsch notes in "Past Lives: Postmemories in Exile" (1998):

Holocaust postmemory [...] attempts to bridge more than just a temporal divide. The children of exiled survivors, although they have not themselves lived through the trauma of banishment and the destruction of home, remain always marginal or exiled, always in the diaspora. "Home" is always elsewhere. (Hirsch 1998: 420)

This is, of course, the same conclusion D'Aguiar had reached in his poem entitled "Home" from *British Subjects* (1993), in which he writes of the airport official "telling [him] with Surrey loam caked / on the tongue, home is always elsewhere".<sup>2</sup> The extended

---

1. HIRSCH, "Surviving Images: Holocaust Photographs and the Work of Postmemory": 11.

2. D'AGUIAR, Fred, "Home", *An English Sampler*: I. 9.

scope for postmemory suggested by Hirsch therefore has interesting implications for black writers within Britain who often struggle with the notion of “home”.

As Hirsch continues, the “condition of exile from the space of identity, this diasporic experience, is characteristic of postmemory” (Hirsch 1998: 421). The exiled diasporic experience is arguably reflected within *Bloodlines* in the articulation of the narrator’s condition of unbelonging:

I have no one left on earth to speak of.  
 No flesh and scent I can follow away  
 from harm. No names to drop, or trip off  
 my tongue. No “mother” or “father” to say  
 without thinking. Only a gap big enough  
 for me to spend the rest of my days  
 between earth and sky, my cloudy head  
 humming full of Slavery’s towering dead. (146)

We can see in this extract the difficulty of examining the past of slavery for D’Aguiar, with no living witnesses—just a “gap” between present and past. Slavery cannot be ignored, however; the narrator’s head “hums” with the dead of this past. Hirsch signals that possibly the most taxing issue for those exploring art forms of postmemorialisation concerns the appropriateness of identification:

The challenge for the postmemorial artist is precisely to find the balance that allows the spectator to enter the image, to imagine the disaster, but that disallows an overappropriative identification that makes the distances disappear, creating too available, too easy an access to this particular past. (Hirsch 1999: 10)

D'Aguiar employs various distancing effects in *Bloodlines*—rape, deliberately “poor” poetry, twenty-first-century references—as I have already suggested, many of the most perturbing features of the poem can be seen as methods of distancing the reader from the slave past. The twenty-first-century references enhance the text's eschewal of slave narrative simulacrum, and the conspiring violent content and troublesome form further alienate the reader and point to D'Aguiar's intention to avoid an “overappropriative” identification with this past. In refusing to provide an uplifting story about the potential of love between races as a means of overcoming slavery, *Bloodlines* does not, as I have indicated, offer an easy access into this past.

It is also vitally important to be sensitive to the distance between the lives of slaves and the writers under examination in this thesis, in their admitted twenty-first-century positions of privilege. As Dabydeen has candidly commented in an interview with Lars Eckstein: “[Caryl] Phillips is a wealthy man who drives a big limousine up and down in New York. What f\*\*\*ing scars has he got?”<sup>1</sup> He concludes that “we have to be honest with the subject and say, ‘Really, it happened a long time ago to our ancestors’” (Eckstein 2001: 30). Slavery ended in the British Caribbean more than one hundred and fifty years ago, yet it is not a too-distant past and is one which, for D'Aguiar, requires continual revisiting and exploration. Hirsch identifies a similar desire to work through trauma in the work of Dominick LaCapra:

He has distinguished between two memorial positions: acting out (melancholia) and working through (mourning). Acting out

---

1. ECKSTEIN, Lars, “Getting Back to the Idea of Art as Art—An Interview with David Dabydeen”, *World Literature Written in English*, 39: 1 (2001): 27-36; 30.

is based on tragic identification and the constitution of one's self as a surrogate victim. It is based on overidentification and repetition. Keeping the wounds open, it results in retraumatization. Working through, on the other hand, involves self-reflexivity, a determination of responsibility, some amount of distance. (Hirsch 1999: 16)

Melancholia, where the writer enacts a "tragic identification" is the kind of position Dabydeen hopes to avoid in his call for honesty in writing about slavery.<sup>1</sup> This concern is clearly shared by D'Aguiar and the notion of retraumatization is also particularly crucial to his work. For the narrator of *Bloodlines*, retraumatization occurs through the postmemory of his parents' past. The distancing effects utilised in *Bloodlines* create a necessary gap which indicates D'Aguiar's desire to elucidate the difference between his texts, which examine the slave past in an imaginative way, and slave testimony. This space enables him, in Hirsch's words, to attempt to "work through" the past of slavery. As Dabydeen reminds us, we have perhaps moved on from this past. However, while the material position of black people in Britain and the United States has undoubtedly improved since the demise of the slave trade, we are left with lingering racial prejudices from this period which have not been entirely banished and continue to affect trauma. Correspondingly, in *Bloodlines* D'Aguiar's narrator encounters the living legacy of twentieth-century racism when using a public standpipe:

A crowd gathers and one of them empties  
paraffin on me. Either I am too stubborn

---

1. In the abovementioned interview with Eckstein, Dabydeen adds: "you can't write about slavery in a flat, flattened way with a [...] parade of grievances or with a display of 'look how hurt I am, look at my scars'" (Eckstein 2001: 30).

to catch alight or the famous humidity  
softens their matches. I start to run,  
they give chase. My crime? I only  
failed to read the sign, Whites Only. (156)

It would seem that D'Aguiar is unable to offer hope for this particular legacy of slavery ending. His poem attempts to work through the past of slavery, but he finds this is not entirely possible—there can be, he affirms, no final text yet about this past because slavery has not truly ended.

This state of negativity is reinforced by the narrator of *Bloodlines's* realisation of the impossibility of healing through love the rift between races generated by slavery:

I ask myself if I am ready  
to die and leave Slavery and feel no regret  
that white remains white and black is black. (159)

*The Longest Memory*, *Feeding the Ghosts* and *Bloodlines* may all present the possibility, however fleeting, of a benign future enabled by a transforming relationship between black and white men and women, but ultimately reject the utopian potential of such meetings. D'Aguiar, perhaps even more pessimistically, indicates in *Bloodlines* that the trauma of slavery can never be entirely "worked through". Slavery, he repeatedly tells us, persists in the racism of today. Even twenty-first-century generations of black and white people cannot alter the conditions of how they first met historically, in the violent period of slavery. There is no way of forgetting or assuaging the fact of slavery. As with Christy's unconvincing metamorphosis from rapist to knight, later actions (abolition, twentieth-century migration, anti-discriminatory laws and so on) cannot neatly appease the past. D'Aguiar's pessimism can-



not be seen as indicative of a peculiarly British approach to writing about the past of slavery. In novels like *Crossing the River*, for instance, Phillips—ventriloquizing Martin Luther King—offers the possibility “that the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave-owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood”.<sup>1</sup> D’Aguiar, however, does not share his optimism about the possibility of harmony between races.

Instead, *Bloodlines* arguably offers a form of postmemorial mourning described by Hirsch, who writes that

postmemory seeks connection. It creates where it cannot recover. It imagines where it cannot recall. It mourns a loss that cannot be repaired. And, because even the act of mourning is secondary, the lost object can never be incorporated and mourning can never be overcome. (Hirsch 1998: 422)

D’Aguiar’s works also suggest that in the absence of living witnesses or accounts from slaves, and where history fails him in returning to the past of slavery, he is compelled creatively to imagine this past. But he, too, cannot overcome mourning; just as his narrator’s head “hum[s] full of Slavery’s towering dead”, D’Aguiar reveals in his texts that slavery cannot be forgotten or easily dismissed. *Bloodlines* is not a hopeful text. It can perhaps be read as a postmemorial to slavery, though it does not mark the demise of the trade, but rather mourns the continuation of aspects of this past in the racism of the twenty-first century.

---

1. PHILLIPS, Caryl, *Crossing the River* (1993. New York: Vintage, 1995): 237.

*Works cited*

- BAL, Mieke, Jonathan CREWE and Leo SPITZER, eds. *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present*. Hanover, NH and London: University Press of New England, 1999.
- BERRY, Mary and John W. BLASSINGAME. *Long Memory: The Black Experience in America*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982.
- D'AGUIAR, Fred. *An English Sampler: New and Selected Poems*. London: Chatto & Windus, 2001.
- D'AGUIAR, Fred. *Bloodlines*. London: Chatto & Windus, 2000.
- D'AGUIAR, Fred. *The Longest Memory*. 1994. London: Vintage, 1995.
- DUNANT, Sarah and Roy Porter, eds. *The Age of Anxiety*. London: Virago, 1996.
- ECKSTEIN, Lars. "Getting Back to the Idea of Art as Art—An Interview with David Dabydeen". *World Literature Written in English*. 39: 1 (2001): 27-36.
- HAMILTON, Cynthia S. "Revisions, Rememories and Exorcisms: Toni Morrison and the Slave Narrative". *Journal of American Studies*. 30 (1996): 429-445.
- HIRSCH, Marianne. "Surviving Images: Holocaust Photographs and the Work of Postmemory". *Yale Journal of Criticism*. 14: 1 (2001): 5-37.
- HOOKS, bell. *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism*. London: Pluto Press, 1982.
- KEMP, Sandra and Judith Squires, eds. *Feminisms*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.
- KING, Bruce. "Bloodlines". *World Literature Today*. 75: 1 (2001). *Literature Online* lion.chadwyck.co.uk [accessed 22 February 2005].
- KING, Richard. "I Fell 'Lurve'". *PN Review*, 27: 4 (2001). *Literature Online*. 0-lion.chadwyck.co.uk [accessed 22 February 2005].

- NYE, Robert. "No Rhythm in the Heart of Darkness". *The Times*, 2 August 2000. Section Times 2: 18.
- PHILLIPS, Caryl. *Crossing the River*. 1993. New York: Vintage, 1995.
- SULEIMAN, Susan Rubin, ed. *Exile and Creativity: Signposts, Travelers, Outsiders, Backward Glances*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1998.

*Les Carnets du Cerpac* n°6, 2007, 99-127.

**THE REMAINS OF THE SLAVE NARRATIVE  
IN MARILYN NELSON'S *FORTUNE'S BONES*:  
A MANUMISSION REQUIEM**

Wendy HARDING  
*Université de Toulouse-Le Mirail*

Published in 2004, Marilyn Nelson's book of poems, *Fortune's Bones: A Manumission Requiem*,<sup>1</sup> has an intriguing history behind it. The work was commissioned by the Mattatuck Museum, in Waterbury, Connecticut, in response to the discovery that the previously anonymous skeleton donated to the museum in 1933 belonged to one of the last slaves to reside in Waterbury.<sup>2</sup> The work of identifying the skeleton began in 1996. The team of

---

1. NELSON, Marilyn, *Fortune's Bones: The Manumission Requiem*, notes and annotations by Pamela Espeland (Asheville, North Carolina: Front Street, 2004). Subsequent references to the text will be noted parenthetically. Permission to quote from the poems contained in this book has kindly been granted courtesy of Boyds Mills Press, Inc., of Honesdale, Pennsylvania.

2. Espeland's notes to the text state that by 1790 there were 12 slaves residing in Waterbury. "Five were members of Fortune's family, all owned by Dr. Preserved Porter" (Nelson 2004: 8).

anthropologists, archeologists and historians reached the conclusion that the bones were those of Fortune, a slave who died in Waterbury in 1798. Upon his death his owner, Dr. Preserved Porter, dissected the body and boiled the bones in order to preserve the skeleton for anatomical study. This rather gruesome reminder of Connecticut's buried history of slavery caused division within the museum's African American History Project committee and in the community at large. While some argued that the bones are valuable to research, others felt that Fortune's remains should finally be allowed the dignity of a burial.<sup>1</sup> It was at this point that the Mattatuck Museum contacted African American poet Marilyn Nelson, Connecticut's poet laureate, with the request that she write a work "to commemorate Fortune's life".<sup>2</sup> For Nelson, a poet particularly gifted at narrative forms,<sup>3</sup> one of the ways in which to approach the assignment would have been to use the accumulated historical data to write a series of biographical poems imaginatively retrieving Fortune's story.

---

1. See the Afterword to *Fortune's Bones*, written by the Museum's Executive Director, Marie Galbraith (31). See also the National Public Radio's internet archive of the programme *All Things Considered*, September 16, 2003: "Hidden Museum Treasures: Fortune's Bones" [www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=1433035](http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=1433035)

2. These are the words on the book's jacket notes.

3. Marilyn Nelson's recent books include an African American revisiting of the *Canterbury Tales* published in *The Cachoeira Tales and Other Poems* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005), as well as a series of poems relating the story of Venture Smith entitled *The Freedom Business: Connecticut Landscapes Through the Eyes of Venture Smith* (Old Lyme: Lyme Historical Society, 2006). When I wrote to the author explaining that I intended to study *Fortune's Bones* as a neo-slave narrative, she very generously sent me a copy of the Venture Smith cycle, suggesting that it might be more pertinent. However, what interests me in *Fortune's Bones* is its simultaneous evocation of slave narrative conventions and its refusal of the biographical form.

Instead, as the “Author’s Note” declares, Marilyn Nelson based her commemorative poem on the musical form of a “traditional funeral mass” (9). Nevertheless, I hope to show that both the book’s “paratexts”—the copious notes and images that accompany the text—and various narrative motifs appearing in the poems evoke the slave narrative<sup>1</sup>. Yet, despite these reminders of an earlier African American literary form, the book ultimately moves beyond the slave narrative in order to try to repair its inherent racial divisions.

The notes and images accompanying Marilyn Nelson’s poems recall very strongly the heavy paratextual apparatus belonging to the books that Robert Stepto has labeled “primal” or “first phase” slave narratives:

These documents—and voices—may not always be smoothly integrated with the former slave’s tale, but they are nevertheless parts of the narrative. Their primary function is, of course to authenticate the former slave’s account; in doing so, they are at least partly responsible for the narrative’s acceptance as historical evidence. However in literary terms, the documents collectively create something close to a dialogue—of forms as well as voices—which suggests that in its primal state or first phase, the slave narrative is an *eclectic narrative* form.<sup>2</sup>

---

1. In her correspondence with the present writer (February 7, 2007), Marilyn Nelson describes the book as “a four-way collaboration: I wrote the poem, then the publisher, Stephen Roxburgh, imagined it into a book (the poem alone could not be a book), and asked my friend Pamela to write the historical section (she and Stephen worked closely together on this part), and Helen Robinson, the book designer, put that together with photographs, maps, etc.”

2. STEPTO, Robert B., *Behind the Veil: A Study of Afro-American Narrative* (1979. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition 1991): 3-4.

Much of the paratextual material of *Fortune's Bones* has a comparable authenticating function and produces a similarly eclectic form. For example, among the various images which recall that slavery existed in the North East throughout the eighteenth century are such items as a photograph of a bill of sale for Peter, a slave sold in Woodbury, Connecticut in 1762, reproduced on the title page (3), an ink silhouette of Flora, a "negro slave," which was attached to another bill of sale (14),<sup>1</sup> and an embroidered scene which represents, in the center, a white woman sitting at her desk writing while in the far right hand corner a black woman rocks a cradle (14).<sup>2</sup> Such reminders are necessary due to the success of revisionist nineteenth century efforts to characterize the North as the place of emancipated white labor in contrast to the cruel and corrupt slavery system in the South.<sup>3</sup> An additional function of the illustrations and explanatory notes is to convince readers that the skeleton from the Mattatuck museum was indeed Dr. Preserved Porter's slave, Fortune. Pamela Espeland's notes immediately present this as an indisputable fact: "Before Fortune was bones in a Connecticut museum, he was a husband, a father, a baptized Christian and a slave" (12). There follows, in equally simple, declarative sentences, a synopsis of the available facts about Fortune's life and death. Indeed, the same kinds of facts about family ties and ownership are established in the prefa-

---

1. The caption next to the silhouette identifies the bill of sale as that of Dinah, Fortune's wife, who was sold to a Stratford man in 1796.

2. The caption under the image identifies it as an "eighteenth-century silk embroidery by Prudence Punderson," from the collection of the Connecticut Historical Society, Hartford, Connecticut.

3. See MELISH, Joanne Pope, *Disowning Slavery: Gradual Emancipation and "Race" in New England 1780-1860* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1998): especially 222-223.

tory letters to Henry Bibb's *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, an American Slave* (1849),<sup>1</sup> the text that Stepto cites as typical of the "eclectic" or "first phase narrative" (Stepto 1991: 4).

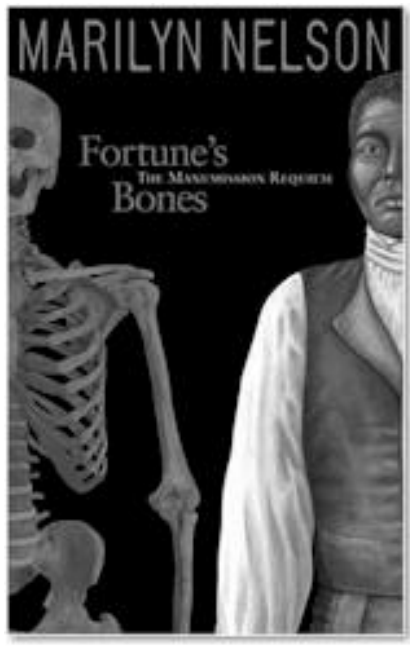


FIG. 1. — Front cover, *Fortune's Bones: The Manumission Requiem*. Photograph of Fortune's skeleton by Mattatuck Museum. Painting of Fortune by medical illustrator William Westwood. Jacket design by Helen Robinson. Reprinted by permission of Front Street and Boyds Mills Press.

---

1. The narrative is available in its entirety, along with numerous other slave narratives, on the University of North Carolina's very impressive website, *Documenting the American South*: <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/bibb/bibb.html>



The book's split concern with Fortune's death and his life is announced on the front cover: on the left is a photograph of the skeleton's left side; on the right, the right side of Fortune's body, from a painting by William Westwood. Though Westwood is a medical illustrator, he depicts Fortune's body fully clothed, in late eighteenth century dress that evokes the portraits from the frontispieces of slave narratives. Like the freed slaves that are the authors of these books, Fortune is not in work dress, but in clothes that evoke a degree of affluence. He wears a soft white shirt with fine textured blue woolen hose and waistcoat, as well as matching blue leather shoes. We can compare Westwood's painting (see figs. 1 and 2) and Frank Bender's forensic sculpture, reproduced on page 23 of *Fortune's Bones* (see fig. 3),<sup>1</sup> to the half-portrait engraving of Henry Bibb from the first page of his narrative (fig. 4). The men's elegant clothes suggest freedom and success. The significant difference is that where Bibb proudly holds a copy of a book in his hand, in Bender's reconstruction, Fortune seems to be buttoning his shirt cuff, as if in the final stages of getting dressed. Bibb's portrait shows him to be an author, while Fortune's image suggests that his flesh truly clothed the Mattatuck museum skeleton. Though slightly different, the representations of Bibb and Fortune serve as authenticating evidence typical of the paratexts of slave narrative. Nonetheless, the artists' imaginative reconstructions of Fortune seem to contradict the biographical details gathered by the historians, making him better dressed than his slave status would allow.

---

1. Three stages of Bender's reconstruction work are reproduced in *Fortune's Bones* (26). Figure 3 shows the final stage.



FIG. 2. — Overlay of the photograph of Fortune's skeleton and Westwood's painting (*Fortune's Bones* 6). Reproduced by permission of Front Street and Boyds Mills Press.



FIG. 3. — The final stage of the facial reconstruction by the forensic sculptor Frank Bender, created for the Mattatuck Museum (*Fortune's Bones* 26). Reproduced by permission of Front Street and Boyds Mills Press.



FIG. 4. — Portrait from the frontispiece of Henry Bibb's *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, an American Slave* (New York: H. Bibb, 1849), reproduced with the permission of the Joyner Library, East Carolina University.

The troubling sense of contradiction fostered by the paratextual material included in *Fortune's Bones* begins with the cover, which suggests that the book will treat Fortune's story both before and after his death. However, the normal order of before and after seems to have been reversed. As we read from left to right, the skeleton appears first and the man second, replicating not the order of existence, but the procedure of the forensic sculptor who reconstructed an image of Fortune from the evidence provided by his bone structure. Moreover, there is a mismatch between the two sides, which fail to fit together to create a complete body. This split announces the dual aim of the book: to evoke the biography of a slave and, at the same time, to treat a forensic mystery. On the one hand, the book's layout evokes nineteenth century slave narratives, an association which is aided by the forensic artists' imitation of their iconography. On the other hand, the numerous photographs of the bones from the Mattatuck Museum evoke both the imagery of medical science and the macabre iconography of Halloween or Gothic fiction.

Perhaps unintentionally, the book's split iconography recalls the division in the scientific and local community over what to do with Fortune's remains. In agreeing to write the book, Marilyn Nelson faced the problem of addressing a readership torn between the desire to resuscitate the past and to put it to rest. Indeed, this is the dilemma America confronts in relation to slavery. This ambivalence is replicated in the book's oxymoronic sub-title; the word "requiem" corresponds to the skeleton that clamors to be buried and the word "manumission," to the well-dressed African American who demands recognition. At the same time, the subtitle suggests that poetic language, in its ability to hold opposites together, can respond positively and creatively to cultural and historical ambivalence.

*Fortune's Bones: A Manumission Requiem* can be compared to contemporary rewritings of the slave narrative such as Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. Like *Beloved*, it moves beyond the slavery period to deal with the problem of surviving history's traumas, though it finds an answer in the non-narrative form of a highly original requiem. The book shares the neo-slave narratives' recourse to oral and musical traditions as well as the evocation of the ghostly presence of one of slavery's victims. Although the poems eschew the biographical impulse, they recall slave narratives thematically, through the evocation of traditional African American topoi such as naming, flight, reflections on religion, the slave's humanity, the slaveholder's inhumanity, and the culminating celebration of freedom. The result of this hybridizing effort is a work whose stimulating contradictions prepare for a new kind of vision that moves beyond the original slave narrative.

"Preface," the first poem to appear in *Fortune's Bones*, responds to the conventional openings of the slave narratives by asserting the impossibility of gaining exhaustive knowledge about Fortune's life. The poem thus inverts an important argumentative strategy of the slave narratives, their validation of claims to truth. Since laws blocked slaves from learning to write, and the popular imagination also associated Blacks with illiteracy, the narratives habitually cite white "authorities" as evidence of their authenticity. Henry Bibb's narrative thus begins with a Preface written by the Abolitionist minister, Lucius C. Matlack, which asserts the narrative's "claims to truth". In the texts that follow, a Committee of respectable white citizens presents the results of an empirical "investigation [which] has sifted and analysed every essential fact alleged, and demonstrated clearly that this thrilling and eloquent narrative, though stranger than fiction, is undoubtedly true" ("Introduction" ii). By contrast, Nelson's

“Preface” moves from conviction to speculation to a frank avowal of ignorance. The facts it asserts in the opening lines are meager and deliberately disappointing in their blunt obviousness: “Fortune was born; he died. Between those truths/ stretched years of drudgery . . . ” (13). Moreover, whatever knowledge the Preface asserts issues not from the pens of white authorities but from the bones themselves,<sup>1</sup> which, miraculously, speak in blank verse: “they speak of cleared acres, miles of stone walls./ They say work broke his back: Before it healed, / They say, he suffered years of wrenching pain” (13). The Preface then moves into the realm of conjecture with a hypothesis about the slave’s anger at his situation: “A man unmanned, / he must sometimes have walked with balled-up fists” (13). Subsequently, the relative assurance of “must” shades off into doubt when the subject of religion is evoked: “and Fortune may or may not have believed” (13). Lastly, the speaker admits profound ignorance concerning Fortune’s character and emotions:

Was Fortune bitter? Was he good or bad?  
 Did he sometimes throw back his head and laugh?  
 His bones say only that he served and died,  
 that he was useful, even into death,  
 stripped of his name, his story, and his flesh. (13)

These three unanswerable questions voice the desire to know more than historical or scientific methods can furnish. Fortune’s skeleton demonstrates the limits of factual knowledge, for it lacks the flesh and blood details that give narrative its force. Fortune

---

1. Here the poem departs significantly from Espeland’s explanatory notes, which attribute this knowledge to scientists’ findings (18).

thus becomes emblematic of all the unfreed slaves who “served and died” and whose stories have disappeared.

A standard theme of the slave narrative is its reflection on the cruelty and depravity of slave owners. Asserting the inevitability of the institution’s degrading effects on whites made a strong argument for its abolition. In his chapter on “A Slaveholder’s Character,” Frederick Douglass condemns the “*outrages deep, dark, and nameless*” committed by a man that he concedes might have been humane in a different society.<sup>1</sup> Nelson refuses to reproduce the conventional tirades against the slaveholders’ cruelty. Still, the “Preface” —the only poem to be spoken rather than sung according to the book’s list of “Contents” —shows the exploitative nature of slavery though its blunt statements about the drudgery and hopelessness of Fortune’s life. It also targets white hypocrisy in depicting how: “A white priest painted water on his head” (13). This description of the rite of initiation into the Christian community is derisively ironic. Baptizing someone without an acknowledgment of the recipient’s equality with other Christians is represented to be as ineffectual as painting without pigments. Eschewing the extravagant language of the slave narratives, the “Preface” employs understatement to protest chattel slavery, characterizing Dr. Preserved Porter’s unfeeling final exploitation of Fortune’s body for medical research as making it “useful, even into death . . . ” (13). The truncated attempt to tell Fortune’s story ends with this protest against exploitation, and the spoken voice gives way to song as Nelson allows the slave narrative to mutate into an African American requiem mass.

---

1. DOUGLASS, Frederick, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass, Written by Himself*. New Revised Edition (Boston: De Wolfe & Fiske, 1892): 50.  
<http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/doug192/menu.html>



The polyphonic requiem gives a more nuanced—though certainly not uncritical—portrayal of slavery, especially in allowing the voice of Dr. Preserved Porter to participate. As if to emphasize her rejection of narrative, Nelson inverts the chronological order of story or history in organizing the sequence of the poems. “Dinah’s Lament,” Fortune’s wife’s song about her very peculiar experience of widowhood precedes “On Abrigador Hill,” the poem that describes Porter’s dissection of the body. Thus the slave is given precedence over the master, and her experience of the consequences of the doctor’s act appears before the act itself.

Assigned to the “contralto” voice of Dinah, Fortune’s wife, the first song of “The Manumission Requiem” follows the lead of the neo-slave narratives in employing the oral accent of an uneducated slave in order to bear witness to past humiliations. The poem shows the pitiless cruelty of chattel slavery obliquely through Dinah’s ironic description of her mistress’s squeamishness about the newly stripped skeleton:

Miss Lydia doesn’t clean the Doctor room.  
 She say she can’t go in that room: she scared.  
 She make me take the dust rag and the broom  
 and clean around my husband, hanging there.  
 Since she seen Fortune head in that big pot  
 Miss Lydia say that room make her feel ill,  
 sick with the thought of boiling human broth.  
 I wonder how she think it make me feel? (15)

Unlike the traditional slave narratives, “Dinah’s Lament” avoids echoing the Abolitionist discourse of condemnation, protest and analysis. Instead, the poem begins by repeating the white mistress’s protest against a chore which she judges too

hard for her own sensitive nature, but suitable for a slave. In this way, Miss Lydia is made to express revolt against the exploitation she practices herself. In a clever use of ironic signifying,<sup>1</sup> Dinah's voice repeats her mistress's denunciation of Dr. Porter's act of "boiling human broth," a practice that would place him among the "savages" stigmatized by the discourses of slavery and colonialism. "Dinah's Lament" uses the veiled irony of the rhetorical question to protest the horrific task the slave has to perform. Indeed, Dinah's feelings have to remain unspoken, not because she is inarticulate, but because she lacks an interlocutor who can hear her. The last line of her lament echoes a familiar spiritual: "nobody know my pain, but Fortune bones".<sup>2</sup> Touchingly, the only audience for her lament is the skeleton she is ordered to dust.

Nelson's most daring departure from the tradition of slave narrative is in attributing a complex, even sympathetic voice to the slave owner. "On Abrigador Hill,"<sup>3</sup> the poem in which Dr. Preserved Porter's voice describes "the dissection of/ the former body

---

1. My use of the term "signify" refers to the many studies that discuss this African American linguistic and literary practice of subverting the master's discourse through various rhetorical means. See notably Henry Louis GATES, *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford, 1988).

2. This line recalls the spiritual: "Nobody knows the trouble I've seen". It was one of the ten "sorrow songs" quoted by W.E.B. DUBOIS in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903). Reprinted in *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, Henry Louis Gates and Nellie Y. McKay, eds. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997): 734. The substitution of "but Fortune's bones" for "Nobody knows but Jesus" is an example of the poem's signifying.

3. Abrigador Hill was the site outside Waterbury boundaries where the doctor had to perform his forbidden act. (The "Fortune's Story" website mentions that dissection was illegal in the United States before 1834.) See *Fortune's Story*, [www.fortunestory.org/](http://www.fortunestory.org/).

of my former slave" (17) strangely recalls the title of the jazz hit "Blueberry Hill".<sup>1</sup> Creating this ironic contrast between the text and the musical intertext is the first step in the process of weighting this moment with emotional complexity. The dissection could easily have been represented as an unfeeling utilitarian exploitation of Fortune's body; instead it becomes a moment of almost tender intimacy. What begins as a scientific exploration of the body ("Herewith begins my dissection . . .") transmutes into a profoundly moving encounter with the other and finishes by echoing a love song:

Note well how death softens the human skin,  
making it almost transparent,  
so that under my reverent knife—  
the first cut takes my breath away,  
it feels like cutting the whole world—  
it falls open like bridal gossamer. (17)

The dissection hovers ambivalently between an act of torture ("the first cut") and of love ("takes my breath away"). It evokes both rape ("it falls open") and marriage ("like bridal gossamer"). Dr. Porter appears as an intruder imitating an imperialist act of possession—"Standing on a new continent" (19)—and also as one who is himself penetrated and possessed—"beyond the boundaries of nakedness/ I am forever changed by what I see . . ." (19). Finally, Porter's last statement in the poem—"I enter Fortune, and he enters me" (19)—rewrites the sentimental chiasmus at the end of "Blueberry Hill"<sup>2</sup> to encapsulate the double significance of what the master does to his slave. Though it is certainly a final vio-

---

1. Recorded in 1956 by both Louis Armstrong and Fats Domino.

2. "Tho' we're apart, you're part of me still . . .".

lation of the integrity of the slave's body, the dissection seems to be partly redeemed by a scientific and humanitarian impulse that makes Porter receptive to what he can learn from Fortune's body. Doctor Porter represents himself above all as a healer, for the first ten lines of the poem list the numerous medical acts performed in fifty years of practice. The refrain, repeated with variations after each ten line stanza, expresses the difficulty of performing those functions without any empirical knowledge of the human body: "And I've been humbled by ignorance/ humbled by ignorance". This tone of respectful humility upsets the normal binary relations between master and slave, black and white. Fortune's body becomes Porter's teacher, giving a lesson both in anatomy, and in common humanity.<sup>1</sup>

Other traditional motifs from the slave narratives appear in oblique and sometimes inverted ways. The topos of naming appears in a new transmutation. In the traditional slave narratives, masters named and renamed their slaves, exercising patriarchal control over their property. In freedom, the ex-slaves chose different names, either as protection or as a proclamation of their new identity. In the first stanza of "Kyrie of the Bones" the voice of Dr. Preserved Porter renames Fortune:

1800 [baritone I]  
I called him Larry. It was easier  
to face him with an imaginary name.  
For Fortune was an image of myself:  
my fortune known, my face bare bone. (21)

---

1. The fact that master and slave share human characteristics is one of the themes of the traditional slave narratives.

Espeland's notes on the facing page explains the historical detail that inspired this stanza: "At some point—no one knows exactly when—'Larry' was written on the skull. Fortune's name was forgotten for nearly a century" (20). The attribution of this act of renaming to Porter,<sup>1</sup> who died in 1803, might initially appear as an accusation leveled against the slave owner. Nevertheless, although this is an instance of calling a man out of his name,<sup>2</sup> the motives that Porter admits to reveal a mitigating sense of remorse toward the man he treats as an object. The words "to face him" acknowledge responsibility toward a fellow human being; indeed Fortune has become Porter's double: "an image of myself: / my fortune known . . .".

References to flight, another conventional motif in slave narratives, appear in the opening and closing poems through a typically New England image of migrating geese. At first the image is conveyed in a negative statement:

Fortune's legacy

was his inheritance: the hopeless hope  
of a people valued for their labor, not  
for their ability to watch and dream  
as vees of geese define fall evening skies (13).

The possibility of escape is not even envisioned here; instead Fortune simply anticipates passing on his condition to his children. Ironically, the only expectation he transmits is a "hopeless hope". Yet the poetry soars, as the longing for flight is transmitted not only in the image, but also in the sounds of the words,

---

1. Baritone I sings both Dr. Porter's part in "On Abridgator Hill" and this stanza of "Kyrie of the Bones".

2. I use the African American expression here for calling someone something other than his name, often in order to insult him.

through the assonance of the long front vowels in “dream,” “vees,” “geese” and “evening”. In the final poem, “Sanctus,” the image of flight returns again in the plea: “Be to us what south is to autumn geese” (29). As the choir implores: “Call us home, Lord, call us home./ Call us home, Lord, set us free” (29), their lines recall the spirituals that the slaves sang to encode messages about their plans for escape.<sup>1</sup> Yet, the traditional direction for flight is reversed in the image of geese flying south. Indeed, the compass points, so vital for escaping slaves, are confused in the final poem, for “home” seems to be located in the North as well as the South, as the choir pleads: “Magnetic center of the universe, / make us iron filings” (29).

In choosing the form of the requiem mass, Nelson rejects the narrative suspense and excitement that characterizes the slave narratives. Everything there is to know about Fortune is already told in the “Preface” and the paratexts. While the traditional slave narrative borrows from the picaresque novel, relating the protagonist’s adventures in traveling through American space,<sup>2</sup> *Fortune’s Bones* shows Fortune journeying only in time, persisting through the centuries in “Kyrie of the Bones” and being displaced only from the Porter home to the Mattatuck museum in Waterbury. Clearly, Fortune’s sad but un-heroic life and ignominious death is not an apt subject for narrative. Instead, by hybridizing slave narrative motifs with the requiem mass Nelson produces a jazz-like improvisation on conventional themes. In this way, she reinvents and reappropriates an outmoded form so as to make it say something new.

---

1. See WALKER, Wyatt Tee, *Somebody’s Calling My Name* (Valley Forge, Pa.: Judson Press, 1979).

2. See HEDIN, Raymond, “The American Slave Narrative: The Justification of the Picaro,” *American Literature*, 53 (1982): 630-645.

Nelson's most radical departure from the slave narrative tradition comes in the representation of Fortune's voice. The whole purpose of the traditional slave narrative's elaborate paratextual apparatus is to provide an authenticating context and a frame enabling the ex-slave "to write himself into the human community through the action of the first-person narration".<sup>1</sup> When Fortune's voice finally appears in the book's penultimate poem, "Not My Bones," its first declaration seems to refute all the claims made in the paratexts: "I was not this body, / I was not these bones" (25). With these words, the book's careful presentation of the forensic and historical evidence for Fortune's identity seems to be denied. The poem thus seems to distance itself from the effort to attach a body, a name, and a history to the unburied skeleton. In keeping with the doubts and questions surrounding Fortune in the "Preface," the penultimate poem confirms his absence, the irretrievability of his lived experience. Rather than filling in the gaps in the narrative of his life, Fortune's voice keeps history's secrets by denying the importance of his material existence.

In its silences, the text prolongs the tendency W.E.B. Dubois finds in the productions surviving from slavery times to reveal little of "the inner thoughts of the slaves and their relations one with another . . . , so that we get but glimpses here and there, and also with them, eloquent omissions and silences". (W.E.B. Du Bois 1997: 736). Paul Gilroy calls this reticence, "the topos of unsayability". In his view it explains the emergence of music as a preeminent form of Black expression: "[The topos] can be used to challenge the privileged conceptions of both language

---

1. DAVIS, Charles T. and Henry Louis GATES, JR., "Introduction: The Language of Slavery," *The Slave's Narrative* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985): xiii.

and writing as preeminent expressions of human consciousness. The power and significance of music within the black Atlantic have grown in inverse proportion to the limited expressive power of language".<sup>1</sup> Nelson's choice of the sung Requiem as a response to Fortune's story conforms to this theory in part. The poems take up African American musical idioms like spirituals, blues, and jazz to give an emotional response to history. Yet the emphasis on music in the book does not come at the expense of writing. The poems employ a wide range of poetic and verbal forms, marrying African American popular forms with all the literary resources of English.

Eschewing narrative, Fortune's voice finds a more liberating form of expression in the joyous song that breaks out of the mold of the traditional requiem mass.<sup>2</sup> The apparent disclaimer of the title, "Not My Bones" becomes an attention-getting assertion that prepares for a new improvisation on conventional representations of freedom in the slave narratives. Nelson borrows from a non-Western religious tradition in this eclectic poem. In words inspired by the consolation of the Vietnamese Buddhist leader, Thich Nhat Hanh,<sup>3</sup> Fortune's voice proclaims that the essential part of him has survived slavery and death. The poem comes as a joyous assertion of life after a meditation on mortality. In con-

---

1. GILROY, Paul, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double-Consciousness* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993): 74.

2. See "Author's Note" where Nelson explains: "My requiem has some but not all of the elements of a traditional funeral mass: the Introit (I call it a Preface), the Kyrie (the prayer of *Kyrie eleison*, Greek for 'Lord, have mercy'), and the Sanctus, a hymn of praise . . . 'Not My Bones' . . . is not part of the traditional funeral mass" (9).

3. The author's note explains that this spiritual guide advised that "the most helpful thing" to tell the dying is "Don't worry. The body that is dying here is not you" (9).



trast to the other poems, the idiosyncratically patterned stanzas of “Not my Bones” sound a syncopated, jazz-like note:

I was not this body,  
 I was not these bones.  
 This skeleton was just my  
 temporary home.  
 Elementary molecules converged for a breath,  
 then danced on beyond my individual death.  
 And I am not my body,  
 I am not my body. (25)

The first five of the poem’s six stanzas repeat this (abcbbdaa) rhyme scheme, but the stress patterns are widely varied, giving a simultaneous impression of freedom and pattern. The fifth and sixth lines of the stanza could perhaps have been divided to create something approximating a ballad, with the last two lines of the stanza constituting a refrain, but instead, the chosen layout gives the impression of irregularity and improvisation. The longer lines create a change in tempo, since more words are compressed into the space of a breath. The poem’s polysyllabic words produce an effect of syncopation, and assonance and consonance heighten this effect, especially in the longer lines, where they tend to coincide with the stressed syllables: “*El***EM***EN*tary **MO***Le*cules **co***n***VER***GED* for a **BREATH**, / then **DANCED** *on* **beYOND** my **indi***VID*ual **DEATH**” (25). The jazz aesthetic is also expressed in the sometimes jarring juxtaposition of different tonal registers. Elegant phrasing like “the night sky’s/ mute geometry” contrasts with colloquial phrases like “your itty-bitty voice” (27). Original metaphors like “we are clouds in clothes” stand alongside lines from familiar songs.

At moments, the poem produces the effect of an improvised solo, particularly in the final stanza, where the rhyme scheme and the first-person statements change:

Well, I woke up this morning just so glad to be free,  
glad to be free, glad to be free.  
I woke up this morning in restful peace.  
For I am not my body,  
I am not my bones.  
I am not my body,  
glory hallelujah, not my bones.  
I am not my bones. (27)

Here the past tense of the poem's opening line, "I was not this body," switches to a triumphant present tense, as Fortune finally affirms his freedom and his existence in the paradoxical state of waking up "in restful peace" and being in non-being ("I am not . . ."). There is a heavy insistence on repetition or reprise, as this stanza not only picks up the variations on Thich Nhat Hanh's consolatory advice that recur in every stanza, but also includes well-known lines from the African American musical tradition. The insertion of "glory hallelujah" into the refrain sounds a gospel note. Besides recalling the culminating moment of the slave narrative, the line, "Well, I woke up this morning just so glad to be free," reprises a line from a spiritual that was adapted during the civil rights movement to fit secular longings for release. "Woke up this morning with my mind stayed on Jesus" became "Woke up this morning with my mind stayed on freedom".<sup>1</sup> In Nelson's poem, this line mutates once again; the

---

1. See Marcella Monk Flake's discussion of spirituals on the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute website. "Sing Two Stanzas and Rebel in the Morning: The

oxymoronic phrase—"I woke up this morning in restful peace"—creates a vernacular echo of the "requiescat in pace" of the traditional mass for the dead.

Diverging as it does from the more sober mood of the other poems, Fortune's jazz-like song seems to introduce disorder into the melodic composition of "The Manumission Requiem". This disruptive moment befits the more hybrid, disjunctive African American aesthetic. As Nelson suggests in her prefatory note, the penultimate poem corresponds to the moment in "a traditional New Orleans brass band jazz funeral . . . [w]hen the music becomes jubilant. The mourners dance joyfully through the streets in what they call a 'second-line parade.' And crowds of people, passers-by, strangers, come out and join them. What was a dirge for the dead becomes a celebration of life".<sup>1</sup> Indeed, in spite of its apparent repudiation of the body, images of dance and movement are recurrent in the poem. Scripted as a song for "baritone II with choir" (7), the poem celebrates a community of spirits that breaks the boundaries of time and place. The poem associates I, you and we in a shared refusal of the importance of the body that paradoxically becomes a celebration. Like witnesses at a jazz funeral, readers are invited to participate in a joyous ceremony connecting the living with the dead man and denying the finality of death.

Though the final poem, "Sanctus," returns to a more solemn tone and rhythm, it prolongs the call for identification in adopt-

---

Role of Black Religious Music in the Struggle for Freedom,"

[www.yale.edu/ynhti/curriculum/units/1997/5/97.05.07.x.html](http://www.yale.edu/ynhti/curriculum/units/1997/5/97.05.07.x.html)

1. "Author's Note," (9).

ing exclusively the first person plural. While the slave narratives celebrate the singularity of the slave narrator, whose adventures transform him into a distinctive hero, Nelson's concluding poem insists, "Each and every one of us is Fortune" (29). Echoing powerful phrases from the African American tradition, the final line, "Call us home, Lord, set us free," invites contemporary readers to participate in a new ceremony aimed at moving beyond distress and division. The poem reaches for a truth beyond history, finding a remedy for the past in the idea of a universal god: "Holy of Holies, thy creating name/ be raised above all barriers" (29). "Sanctus" moves beyond race as well as time, envisioning a reconciliation of differences beyond death. The poem looks to a time when individuality will cease to matter, and all will be united in a common "Eternal source" (29). The "us" of the final poem brings together all the singers of the mass, black and white, as well as readers of all races, in a vision of peace that moves beyond racial conflict, and more concretely, beyond the suffering bodies of slavery's history.

We have seen how *Fortune's Bones: The Manumission Requiem* evokes the slave narrative form in order to move beyond it. The poems cite motifs from the original slave narratives but use them in new ways. While the book's paratexts serve to validate Fortune's identity, thus imitating the original slave narratives, the poems seem to counter their argument, downplaying the importance of his material existence in order to endorse the spiritual life. The poems mock the empirical epistemology of the slave narratives, calling into question their tendency to depict history in terms of binary oppositions, and drawing attention to their commonplaces. In evoking the original slave narratives in order to break with them, the book participates in the new genre of

the neo-slave narrative. Though most of the neo-slave narratives are novels, they often problematize the narrative mode, drawing instead on the poetic and musical forms that are fundamental to Nelson's treatment of Fortune's story. Like Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, the poems of *Fortune's Bones* move into the post-slavery period. The paradoxical necessity and impossibility of the aim to retrieve lost stories from the African American past gives rise to dispersed or ghostly voicings of slavery. These rewritings of the slave narrative summon slavery's unburied ghosts, but confront the problem of their absence or their unrepresentability. In so doing they awaken a sense of loss, beginning the work of mourning.

Finally, though, *Fortune's Bones: The Manumission Requiem* is not so much a neo-slave narrative as a new ritual created to respond to one of the many tales of horror from the history of North American slavery.<sup>1</sup> Borrowing the form of the Catholic requiem, it illustrates the African American genius for improvising on Western forms, which reaches its highest expression of creativity in jazz. The aim of *The Manumission Requiem* is not to tell a story but to offer an emotional response to what has happened. The mass begins with a blues lament, moves on to the joyous dance of "Not My Bones" to end in the exaltation of the "Sanctus". The poems partake in a peculiarly African American aesthetic described in Nelson's words as: "setting grief side by side with joy" (9). This oxymoronic emotional charge can be found in spirituals, gospel, the blues, and jazz. W.E.B. Dubois heard it and expressed it eloquently in a description that could very well apply to Nelson's poems:

---

1. In this it recalls the improvised exorcism that rescues Sethe at the end of *Beloved*. See MORRISON, Toni, *Beloved* (New York: Knopf, 1987): 257-262.

Through all the sorrow of the Sorrow Songs there breathes a hope—a faith in the ultimate justice of things. The minor cadences of despair change often to triumph and calm confidence. Sometimes it is faith in life, sometimes a faith in death, sometimes assurance of boundless justice in some fair world beyond. But whichever it is, the meaning is always clear: that sometime, somewhere, men will judge men by their souls and not by their skins. (W.E.B. Du Bois 1997: 738)

Ultimately, all the work of reconstituting Fortune's body that is detailed in the paratexts of *Fortune's bones: The Manumission Requiem* is made to seem irrelevant. The *Requiem* finishes by evoking an "eternal" time in which material details and individual differences dissolve and "I" and "you" become "we". The conflicts of history only impede this resolution. Tellingly, the book is dedicated not to the victims of slavery, but to more recent victims: "to everyone in the world who died on 9/11—the victims of the terrorist attacks, but also the victims of starvation, of illness, of poverty, of war, of old age, of neglect: Everyone" (9). The *Requiem's* final poem offers a promise of hope for bodies still tortured by political and economic divisions. The liberation called for in the poem's last line is predicted when contradictions and conflicts dissolve in spiritual unity. It thus embraces the hope that Dubois expresses at the end of his book and affirms the truth of song, not narrative. Finally, the religious message of "Sanctus" is less important than its place in a ritual exorcism—a Manumission Requiem—that liberates readers from the horror of the past and puts Fortune's story to rest.

*Works Cited*

DAVIS, Charles T. and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. *The Slave's Narrative*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985.

*Documenting the American South*: docsouth.unc.edu/neh/bibb/bibb.html

DOUGLASS, Frederick. *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass, Written by Himself*. New Revised Edition. Boston: De Wolfe & Fiske, 1892.

DU BOIS, W.E.B. *The Souls of Black Folk*. Reprinted in *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, Henry Louis Gates and Nellie Y. McKay, eds. (1903. New York: W.W. Norton, 1997): 613-740.

FLAKE, Marcella Monk. "Sing Two Stanzas and Rebel in the Morning: The Role of Black Religious Music in the Struggle for Freedom" Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute website. www.yale.edu/ynhti/curriculum/units/1997/5/97.05.07.x.html

GATES, Henry Louis. *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African American Literary Criticism*. New York: Oxford, 1988.

GILROY, Paul. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double-Consciousness*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993.

HEDIN, Raymond. "The American Slave Narrative: The Justification of the Picaro". *American Literature*, 53 (1982): 630-645.

Mattatuck Historical Society. *Fortune's Story* website. 2004.

www.fortunestory.org

MELISH, Joanne Pope. *Disowning Slavery: Gradual Emancipation and "Race" in New England 1780-1860*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1998.

MORRISON, Toni. *Beloved*. New York: Knopf, 1987.

NELSON, Marilyn. *The Cachoeira Tales and Other Poems*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005.

NELSON, Marilyn. *Fortune's Bones: The Manumission Requiem*. Notes and annotations by Pamela Espeland. Asheville, North Carolina: Front Street, 2004.

NELSON, Marilyn. *The Freedom Business: Connecticut Landscapes Through the Eyes of Venture Smith*. Old Lyme: Lyme Historical Society, 2006.

National Public Radio Archive. "Hidden Museum Treasures: Fortune's Bones". *All Things Considered*, September 16, 2003.

[www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=1433035](http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=1433035)

STEPTO, Robert B. *Behind the Veil: A Study of Afro-American Narrative*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1979; 2<sup>nd</sup> edition 1991.

WALKER, Wyatt Tee. *Somebody's Calling My Name*. Valley Forge, Pa.: Judson Press, 1979.





*Les Carnets du Cerpac* n° 6, 2007, 129-154.

**CONTEMPORARY OWNERSHIP:  
THE MASTER, THE SLAVE, AND THE SELF IN EDWARD P.  
JONES'S *THE KNOWN WORLD***

*Iris Nicole JOHNSON*  
*Texas A&M University-Commerce*

The social and political turmoil wrought by the institution of slavery gave birth to one of America's most powerful literary genres: the slave narrative. Given its origins, the slave narrative is defined by critics as one of the few literary forms indigenous to the Americas. This literary form is one which by necessity evokes the spirits of perseverance and survival. According to Marion Starling, over 6,000 slave narratives are known to exist, including more than 200 book-length slave narratives published between 1760-1947 in the United States and Western Europe. As with other literary genres, there are many variations or sub-genres of the slave narrative, adapted by writers to different artistic styles and needs. This literary form originated from the experiences of enslaved individuals—namely Africans enslaved in the Americas

or Caribbean. Slaves and ex-slaves wrote accounts of their experiences in slavery, and these accounts, usually auto-biographical in nature, created the framework for the broader characteristics used to classify examples of the slave narrative genre today.

One of the most recent manifestations of how the slave narrative has evolved began during the post-war era of 1950-1980, during which African Americans were making more visible and vocal demands for equality. It was also during this time that there was a strong push for ethnocentricity in the African American community, as African Americans sought to establish a clearly defined cultural (Black) appeal and aesthetic. It is no surprise that writers of this time found that both the historical and cultural origins of the slave narrative form to hold limitless potential. The slave narrative genre expanded to include another variation: the neo-slave narrative. In novels such as *Jubilee* (1966) by Margaret Walker, *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* (1971) by Ernest Gaines, *Flight to Canada* (1976) by Ishmael Reed, *Roots* (1977) by Alex Haley, and *Kindred* (1979) by Octavia Butler, the authors took the slave narrative and manipulated it into sweeping historical novels or detailed individual portraits that chronicled both the history of slavery as an institution and the history of the African American community. Whether or not these writers took the history of slavery at historical value and used it as a plot within their novels, their work shows a very keen awareness of the characteristics of the slave narrative genre.

Not only did the genre allow a “telling” of history through the eyes of another generation, it provided the further justification for the equality struggles that these authors faced themselves. In revisiting the stories of struggle and survival, the African American community established cultural value for themselves and for the larger community. The penning of these narratives allowed

African American writers to incorporate their voices into the historical fabric of the nation, while at the same time giving them the opportunity to create cultural identity markers for future generations; consequently, this genre empowered both the writer and the African American community, just as it did during the pre- and immediate post-Civil War era.

Despite the various probes into the historical aspects of the U.S. institution of slavery, through both autobiographical slave narratives and other types of nonfiction commentary, an increasing amount of critical attention has been placed on how this form has been manipulated in fiction. One cannot ignore the accolades or body of criticism that exists for Toni Morrison's Nobel Prize-winning novel, *Beloved*, as a testament to contemporary interest in this literary genre. Most recently, a *New York Times* survey of the Best Work of American Fiction in the last 25 years identifies *Beloved* as the most compelling piece of contemporary American fiction. According to A.O. Scott, the novel's win highlights a characteristic of American writing:

the recovery of the past—especially the more recent past—turns out to be the dominant concern of American writing, at least as reflected in this survey, over the past quarter-century. Our age is retrospective (para. 14).

On a large scale, *Beloved* is the most renowned neo-slave narrative to date, receiving ample scholarly attention as well as mass popularity, and solidifying its place in the canon of American literature. Morrison molds the slave narrative into the heart-wrenching story of a mother's sacrifice and a family's penance, at once individualizing and globalizing the painful complexity of slave history.

As a specific textual reference, the criticism surrounding Toni Morrison's novel, *Beloved*, is a perfect illustration of the turn current criticism has taken in an effort to see slavery and the slave narrative not only as a historical representation, but as an opportunity to discuss and challenge the depictions and consequences of this representation. Although not much criticism has surfaced on Edward Jones's *The Known World*<sup>1</sup>, it is clearly another example of the ways in which contemporary novels appropriate the genre's crippling and enabling questions of silence and authority. Many analyses of *Beloved* seek to explore how the story of slavery, told in such a narrowly focused genre, resonates with so many readers. Using the critical attention this novel has received as a springboard, I will examine how Edward P. Jones's novel, *The Known World*, appropriates the slave narrative's ever evolving form to explore the literal and figurative manners in which the African American community continually emancipates itself from social bonds. Neo-slave narratives (also called contemporary slave narratives) in particular, show the ways in which this genre has helped to redefine African American cultural identity and authority. Like Morrison's novel, *The Known World* provides glimpses of unutterable silences, but most of these depictions are inextricably linked to the question of authority that runs through the novel. Jones picks up where Morrison left off on the question of authority. He uses a three pronged exploration of ownership to address the role authority plays in contemporary slave narratives. *The Known World* problematizes the authority of African American slave owners, the authority of the individual African American identity and the authority of the African American artist.

---

1. JONES, Edward P., *The Known World* (New York: Amistad, 2003).

In the past, slave narratives served to critique and reconstruct a given identity; contemporary applications of this genre demonstrates the growth of this identity as it grapples with questions of silence and authority. The question of silence is multi-layered in that it addresses many of the following: the silence of critics concerning certain aspects of the slave narrative, the silence of characters on the institution of slavery, and the silence of African American writers on the contemporary incorporation of this literary inheritance. The question of authority is also one that can be examined from different angles: authority of the African American character, authority of the African American individual, and ultimately, the authority of the African American artist/writer.

Edward Jones's *The Known World* offers examples of how these elements function to inform and deform not only characters, but the African American literary community. The text also reflects the critical shift of the slave narrative genre from a largely descriptive perspective of slavery to one that is more prescriptive in nature. Contemporary authors, like Jones, seem to view some of the silences incurred by slavery as ones that cannot and will not ever be articulated by anyone. However, this position is juxtaposed by another argument that of all writers, it is the African American who is best authorized to probe and communicate these silences.

In the first world of authority, that of slave ownership, silence is evident both inside and outside of the text itself. The very subject of Jones's narrative, African American slave owners, speaks to a historical and literary silence. Although historical records document the existence of African American slave owners, when the institution of slavery is discussed in school textbooks or lectures, this existence is not usually explored. Likewise, despite the proliferation of fictional and autobiographical slave narratives, African

American slave owners are rarely the subject of this genre. In speaking about this issue Jones grants himself the authority to probe the possibilities for this silence. It is also interesting to note that although Jones received the 2004 Pulitzer Prize for this novel, it has been greeted by critical silence. (This silence could also be attributed to the relative “newness” of the novel—published in 2003.) To own a slave was to own power and prestige in the world of slavery. As Maude, a black slave owner in Jones’s novel, puts it, “the legacy is your future [. . .]. The legacy meant slaves and land, the foundation of wealth” (180). Placing African Americans in this position is complicated. Could an African American slave owner ever *own* slavery? Jones seems to suggest that African Americans could never possess slavery from the role of master. It was not an institution they created, and therefore, they could not effectively embrace ownership, morally, physically or mentally.

One of the first silences indicating the authority struggle that surfaced with African American slave owners occurs when Henry Townsend buys his first slave, Moses. Although he had proudly spent a day at his parents’ house detailing his intentions to build a two-story house, “the day he bought [. . .] his first slave, [. . .] he did not go to their house and he did not go to them for a long time” (Jones 2003: 122). Instead, Henry Townsend spends his first day as slave owner with his white father-figure, William Robbins (his former owner). Robbins functions to grant Henry the instructions he needs to be a successful slave owner.

For example, Robbins later reprimands Henry for “‘rollin’ around with property you have a slip of paper on [and asks . . .] What will you do when you have ten slips of paper [. . .] How will you act when you have a hundred slips of paper?’” (123). Through this lecture, he clarifies the new position of authority

that Henry has as master to a slave. His knowledgeable authority as a slave owner informs Henry's understanding of his new world. It does not seem to bother Henry that as a master, part of Robbins' knowledge derives from his previous slave-master relationship with him. Robbins explains to Henry that slaves are not family and friends, they are property. This idea is one that surfaces repeatedly in slave narrative criticism.

Dara Byrne<sup>1</sup> presents the relationship of black slaves and their white masters as an economic one. This relationship is characterized by the perception of the slave (by himself and others) as a commodity. According to Byrne, the slave's perception of his role is sometimes clarified or realized by an event that "took" something he believed was his property—his wife's milk, her children, his life (34). Byrne uses an analysis of *Beloved* characters Sixo and Sethe (Baby Suggs briefly) to present this aspect of ownership. However, this also applies as Henry goes to reinstate Moses as property (after Robbins' instruction) by slapping him twice across the face. He strips Moses of any thoughts of equality:

Moses felt himself beginning to sink in the dirt. He lifted one foot and placed it elsewhere, hoping that would be better, but it wasn't. He wanted to move the other foot, but that would have

---

1. BYRNE, Dara, "'Yonder They Do Not Love Your Flesh.' Community in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*: The Limitations of Citizenship and Property in the American Public Sphere", *Canadian Review of American Studies* 29.2 (1999): 25-60. Presents the relationship of black slaves and their white masters. This relationship is characterized by the perception of the slave (by himself and others) as a commodity. One of the consequences of this realization was an embracing of death as a safe haven. Through the act of death, slaves could become possessors of their own lives. Byrne uses an analysis of Sixo and Sethe (Baby Suggs briefly) to present this aspect of ownership.



been too much—as it was, moving the first foot was done without permission. (124)

According to Robbins, the authority of the law will not readily protect a man's property if the man fails in his role as master. As part of this world, Henry becomes a sort of equal and is therefore superior to Moses. He is a lawful slave owner and must abide within the established boundaries of that world.

As a matter of fact, in this regard, black slave owners seem to have no distinction from white slave owners. However, reading Henry's silence with his parents about his purchase suggests otherwise. The Townsends were a family of slaves owned by the Robbins family. To Henry's father, Augustus, a man who had worked for years to purchase himself, his wife and son from Robbins, the only foreseeable reason to purchase a slave is to set him free. Despite the lawful existence of slavery all around him, Henry's silence indicates his question of authority. Did he have the right to purchase another human life, especially in light of his own past as a slave? Apparently not. Or else he wouldn't have felt the need to defend or hide his actions by whimpering "I ain't done nothin no white man wouldn't do" (138). Henry's assertion and then pathetic, childlike justification echoes parts of Hegel's master-slave dialectic. In parts of this work, Hegel suggests that the dialectic is primitive and defective, mainly in that it creates a pseudo-consciousness that is based in self-absorption. Henry desires to see himself as master, but in true existence is still a slave, or slave like in the social structure of black/white. His enabling realization is an aspect of Hegel's dialectic reworked in Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic*. Henry understands that there are socio-economic systems set in place to favor the consciousness

of the master over the slave. He realizes that there is a working exchange of submission and cooperation between the master and slave, despite the inequality of relationships. In much the same way Gilroy identifies the exchange, transmission and revision of ideas and cultures that occurred as a result of slave trade and slavery. The key in Henry's statement is that he isn't a white man, and as a black man, owning slaves isn't something he is expected to do (at least by some black people, including his parents). Upon assuming this authority, Henry's relationship with his parents disintegrates; his announcement of ownership to his parents ends as his father beats him out of the house with a walking stick and cries "thas how a slave feel" (138). As he leaves, Henry takes the walking stick and after two tries, breaks it while declaring "thas how a master feels" (138).

The significance of this moment is two-fold. Augustus purchased his family from slavery by selling his woodwork, namely pieces of furniture and walking sticks. He beats a new slave master, his son, with the very art that helped him escape from slavery. He could represent an artist figure just outside of the world of slavery. Augustus is still tied to the world of slavery as a former slave. His initial ties existed because although he and his wife were free, his son wasn't. He would make daily trips back to the Robbins plantation to see Henry, working hard and hoping to establish family bonds that slavery would not destroy. His desire to complete his family, signified by these trips back into slavery ensured that Augustus would never truly be a free artist. His authority as artist was limited because he never examined his work through the eyes of an artist. To him, the chairs and walking sticks were tools to help him buy freedom, but they were not freedom itself. The fact that even at his son's illness, he prefers

to sleep in the slave quarters instead of in his son's house is further evidence of Augustus' unwillingness to truly free himself from slavery. It could also be that he knew the reality of his situation, that slavery itself had not completely freed him; for like the other "free men in Manchester [he] knew the tenuousness of [his life . . . ]; they know they were slaves with just another title" (252).

Contrary to Mildred, his wife, who believes "that the bigger Henry could make the world he lived in, the freer he would be," he resists many of the changes brought by freedom and wants to shield his son from its evils (113). Although he refuses to live in the town that supported slavery, locating his house of freedom on the edge of this world proves not to be far enough. Augustus' ties to slavery prove to be too close, and he is eventually kidnapped and sold back into slavery. He dies a slave, leaving behind no evidence of his skilled artistry. However, the destruction of his slavery based art occurs before his physical re-enslavement or death. It happens when his own son resists his painful lesson in morality and turns his descriptive triumph into a defeat. In beating Henry, Augustus hopes to show him, to provide a description of, slavery. Neither he nor Mildred can put words to what their son has become and, silently, both sort through their memories to see where their teaching had failed.

What they don't realize is that Henry's desire for authority in the master-slave relationship of his world overrides his desire to be a morally informed son of a slave father. He severs his former ties with slavery as a slave (including his family), and creates new ones with the slave world he knew by becoming its master. Henry's breaking of the walking stick is reflective of both his desire for authority and his breaking of family ties. Despite the determi-

nation with which he completes this action, notice that he struggles in his attempt to break the walking stick. This difficulty may symbolize the strength of the walking stick itself, imbued with power of family and history. It may also reflect how Henry, as a black slave owner, would encounter problems not typical of those encountered by white slave owners.

The problem most prevalent in the relationship of black slave owners with their slaves is the recurring inability to see slaves solely as property. It is a question that arises not only in black communities themselves, but also in the white. When Anderson Frazier, a historian of sorts, comes to visit Fern Elston on the issue of black slave owners, he thinks of how odd it would be, "owning his own family, the people in my family" (108). And although Fern defiantly reassures him that it is "not the same as owning people in your own family" because it is an activity sanctioned by both God and the law, she does not clarify the distinction for Frazier. Fern's justification, the civil and divine sanctioning of slavery, implies that owning one's family is not something sanctioned by either. Here, the definition of "family" is critical. In Fern's eyes, family probably represents a group of people who share blood ties. However, her experience as a teacher would have necessarily exposed her to another definition: a group of people who share similar characteristics, similar respect and more importantly, similar experiences.

In light of the latter definition, Fern's ownership of slaves would be the ownership of her family, thereby violating the laws of God and of man. But technically, even ex-slaves, like Augustus Townsend, who purchased their families from slavery, owned them. Like a family unit, Fern's slave quarters were situated very

close to her house. Even members of the black community questioned her authority as a slave owner: "those Elstons didn't have slaves, [. . .] they had neighbors who happened to be slaves" (134). Throughout the novel, Fern's relationship with her slaves is characterized as familial. She labors alongside her loyal, aging house servant in the garden, and bears an emotional guilt after a runaway slave's right foot is amputated. The emotion, sorrow she feels towards the crippled slave moves her to set him free. His anguish forces her to see him as more than property, or even family.

The problem of family in particular further complicates the question of authority in the lives of black slave owners. The line between master, family, friend and slave is one that becomes blurred on several occasions. This is exemplified not only in Henry's first lesson from Robbins, but it also surfaces in the lives of the novel's other black slave owners. For example, Robbins' black mistress, Philomena demands first that he purchase her mother, brother, and friend Sophie, and then later, that he give them to her as gifts. Although both Sophie and her brother run away to freedom, Philomena "didn't seem to mind that she had lost two pieces of property" (115). It could stand to reason that she didn't understand the power of slave owning, the authority of a master, or the economic value of a slave. Or it could be that she simply saw her slaves for what they were, members of her family. The role that her remaining slave, her mother, plays is one that is common of most maternal figures; her mother helped her with her children and cleaned up after her. So, the question remains whether Philomena asked these things of her mother because she was her mother or because she was her slave.

Although Henry lives a prosperous, respectable life as a slave owner, he dies an untimely death, leaving all of his worldly possessions to his wife, Caldonia. Unlike Henry, who buys his seat of authority, Caldonia is a free black woman who had “been brought up to believe that they [Caldonia and Calvin] were rulers waiting in the wings” (287). Caldonia had been raised by a mother who considered slave ownership a legacy, an inheritance. Throughout the novel, Maude tells her daughter and son that to lose their slaves would be worse than death. As a matter of fact, she even poisons her husband when he speaks of freeing the family’s slaves. As much as Maude tries to impress her children with the importance of maintaining their legacy, the legacy crumbles. The possibility is that this inheritance was not truly theirs for the taking. Calvin (the son) has abolitionist desires and subtly works to thwart his mother’s influence over Caldonia.

As it stands, Calvin’s efforts were not entirely necessary. Although she initially seeks to recover and reassert her authority as a slave owner by having Moses retell stories of her husband, Caldonia sabotages her own authority as an African American slave owner by sleeping with the slave overseer. As most critical analyses of slave narratives reflect, the act of story-telling (or retelling) is an act of empowerment; it is also reflective of oral tradition inherent in the African and African American literary community. It appears that Caldonia wishes to absorb some of this power by having Moses tell her the story of her husband’s beginnings. Such an instance underwrites what many critics have identified the African American woman’s struggle both with established male and female dichotomies, and judgment by standards of white femininity. In her article, “Mama’s Baby,

Papa's Maybe," Hortense Spillers argues that when viewed in context of historical oppression, gender roles take on nuanced meaning and differentiation<sup>1</sup>. The generalized act of enslavement, and subsequent specific acts (rape, whippings, familial separation), not only dehumanized, it necessarily "ungendered" the female body for African American women. The collapsed gender boundaries experienced by the enslaved African American female seem to carry over to Caldonia's choices as she "inherits" the male position of Master Townsend. However, it appears that she still needs the power of her husband's story. Through Moses, she becomes a part of Henry's story and Henry's authority. Her mere ability to both call and dismiss Moses as the story teller is a reflection of this power. For in this, she not only controls Moses as a slave, she controls the system of time in which he has to tell the story (both time of day and amount of time [length]).

Even though Moses realizes the authority he gains as the storyteller, he knows that Caldonia's authority as owner is greater. It is only by breaking the barrier of ownership that he will be "able to walk through that back door again without knocking" (321). If the overseer is able to walk into the owner's house without acknowledgement of his slave inferiority, he knows his quest for authority is complete. So, unconsciously, he begins to destroy the barriers of ownership, first by speaking, then by glancing, and finally, by touching Caldonia. Although it begins with an anti-silence, Moses' speaking of Henry's authority, the latter moves (looking and touching) are initially done in silence. In touching his owner, Moses is able to assist in deforming her position of authority. However, the ultimate destruction occurs when the

---

1. SPILLERS, Hortense, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book", *Diacritics*, (Summer 1987): 65-81; 68-69.

silence of their lovemaking is broken and Caldonia admits her desire/need for Moses. After he leaves she solidifies her emotion by whispering to herself, "I love Moses. I love Moses with his one name" (292). She undermines her authority not because she sleeps with Moses (white slave owners slept with slaves all of the time), but because she allows herself to see Moses as a human being instead of property.

Examining Caldonia's failed authority on slave ownership presents a question of individual authority. Moses was the slave overseer of Henry Townsend's workers. He had been with Henry from the beginning and later testifies of his dead master's fairness to his mistress. However, in his moments of silence, away from his master and mistress, Moses sits alone in the rain. He eats the dirt, drinks the rain and masturbates. The act of "eating dirt" harkens back to the geophagy associated with African women. It is noted that pregnant women would eat dirt during pregnancy to provide themselves with supplemental nutrients and minerals. This act transfers from Africa to the Americas through slave trade. Only in the forest, away from even his slave family, does Moses feel free enough to return to his natural state. His actions "tied him to the only thing in his small world that meant almost as much as his life" (2). The silences that Moses encounters in the forest inform his emotional and mental health. He is at peace with himself and his person, or so it seems.

Another reading of Moses' trips to the forest would identify his antics a suppressed desire for authority; not the authority of ownership of another human being, but simply the ownership of himself as an individual. The act of "eating dirt" or any type of geophagy is associated with malnourishment, or the idea that something is missing from the diet. One may read that personal



authority is absent in Moses' life and his actions are ones of substitution, a desperate attempt to address a deficiency he subconsciously knows exists. The private, personal act of masturbation is the one point of freedom that Moses has. His pleasure is not for his wife or his master, it is a gesture of ownership. Likewise, his eating of the dirt serves no purpose other than to inform his mind of the season. As an overseer, he has a pseudo-authority, one handed down by his master. So, although he can tell other slaves what to do in certain situations, he cannot even command his own life. Moses is a man who has spent thirty plus years as someone else's property; it would stand to reason that he would, consciously or unconsciously, search for ways to assert his individual authority—the right to do what he himself wanted.

More evidence to support this reading occurs first during his storytelling episodes with Caldonia. At first he was humble and uncomfortable in his owner's house. He feels powerless and inadequate; his speeches about the labor conditions were short and non-elaborative. However, as time progresses, he begins to feel the liberty of an artist. His reports get longer and more detailed, and eventually he "began to leave off from talking about the work of the day and create stories out of nothing about the slaves" (208). Later, at Caldonia's request, Moses begins to retell the stories of his master, and consequently, of himself—a mini-slave narrative of his own. Eventually, as Gilroy notes in his reading of Frederick Douglass' narrative, "[it] is the slave rather than the master who emerges from [the] account possessed of 'consciousness that exists for itself,' while the master becomes representative of a 'consciousness that is repressed within itself'" (60). At this point, he realizes the power of a creative act. He finally acquires enough confidence to

create the history of his master, starting with the boy who had enough in his head for two boys. He was present at Henry's birth, he was there the day he was freed, he gave testimony of how all the best white people stretched out their feet and bid Henry to make them shoes and boots that the could walk to heaven in. (273)

He has the power to recreate Henry Townsend's life for his grieving wife. Her acceptance of his creation empowers Moses. He begins to make demands and requests (ordering a new pair of pants and a shirt for himself), and, as noticed by Alice, begins to mimic the authority of an owner. Moses slaps his wife for insolence and Alice sings "Little Marse be slappin," implying that Moses' quest for individual authority has shifted to another desire—to have authority over others.

Moses' story telling also functions as an act of un- and re-naming, an act Kimberly Benston<sup>1</sup> places as central to the reformation of the Afro-American self. She argues that the revision that accompanies the self-naming speaks to restructuring and recapturing a fragmented past shared by the black community. The un-naming process seeks to destroy dysfunctional, untruthful images of the historical black self and to resituate the freed slave in American society. Although not yet free, Moses envisions himself as a free man, and he begins his act of un- and renaming

---

1. BENSTON, Kimberly, "I Yam What I am: the Topos of (Un)Naming in Afro-American Literature", in *Black Literature and Literary Theory*, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., ed. (New York: Methuen, 1984): 151-172. Un-naming and re-naming are central to the reformation of the Afro-American self. The revision that accompanies the self-naming speaks to restructuring and recapturing a fragmented past shared by the black community. The un-naming process seeks to destroy dysfunctional, untruthful images of the historical black self and to resituate the freed slave in American society.

by trying to rid himself of slavery's stench. Before going for his visit with Caldonia, he "stood at the well and poured water over himself and scrubbed with his hands"; although his wife Pricilla laughs, "just gonna get all that dirt all over you again tomorrow" (263). Moses wants Caldonia to see him not as a dirty slave, but as an individual, a man. Benston's discussion of how un-naming and re-naming plays a developmental role in the separation and unification of Afro-American identity to the historical past definitely applies to Moses' final acts towards his family. After he begins having sex with Caldonia, he realizes the potential authority within his grasp, first as an individual and later as her husband, and he asks Caldonia "When you gonna free me?" (Jones 2003: 324).

By this point, Moses' dreams of authority had begun to both inform and deform his character. As mentioned, he now understood the manifold meanings of freedom and authority. It is only after sleeping with Caldonia that he even contemplates breaching the boundaries of ownership, thinking "had he not been her slave, he might have gotten up and went [...] just on the authority of last night" (286); he starts to live his life with freedom in mind. At first these thoughts had a positive impact; he was happier, easier to get along with. However, these same thoughts turned to deform him, both emotionally and physically. Emotionally, he severs the ties he has with his slave wife, Pricilla and their son, eventually "freeing" them, along with a crazy woman, Alice, so that he would be relieved of slave ties. According to Trudier Harris<sup>1</sup>, this kind of action violates the rules of true authority, for the

---

1. HARRIS, Trudier, "Escaping Slavery but Not Its Images", in *Toni Morrison: Critical Perspectives, Past and Present*. Henry L. Gates, Jr. and K. A. Appiah, eds. (New York: Amistad Press, 1993): 330-41. Harris makes the distinction between

ultimate key to true possession of one's future and one's self is not through ownership or possession of another; it is through recognized levels of accountability within relationships. Upon ultimate rejection by Caldonia, Moses realizes that his dreams of authority had cost him his family. Moses does not seem to understand the importance his slave family has in the formation of his individual identity. In dismissing them, he dismisses part of himself.

The physical deformation that Moses suffers occurs after his pursuit of individual authority. He escapes from the Townsend plantation, but unlike his biblical name suggests, does not make it to the "promised land". Moses is captured and has his Achilles tendon cut (in one ankle) as punishment for his escape; he is crippled for life. This situation may suggest, like elements in Morrison's work, that the African American individual will never fully escape the history of slavery, and that despite brushes with ownership authority, the African American as "slave" is an aspect of slavery which will forever complicate African American writing. As Steinberg<sup>1</sup> notes in his references to Charles Johnson's *Middle Passage*, the historical baggage attached to the slave narrative is difficult to shake—areas of social and political influence and intention accost any black writer who tackles the subject of

---

ownership and possession. She illustrates this point with a discussion of Stamp Paid's story (a character in *Beloved*). According to Harris, although physically enslaved, this man possesses himself psychologically—demonstrated by his concept of purchasing his freedom by allowing the sacrificial rape of his wife. Ultimately the key to true possession of one's future and one's self is not through ownership or possession of another; it is through recognizing levels of accountability within relationships that guarantees freedom.

1. STEINBERG, Marc, "Charles Johnson's *Middle Passage*: Fictionalizing History and Historicizing Fiction", *Texas Studies in Literature and Languages* 45. 4 (2003): 375-390.

slavery. Steinberg posits that re-appropriative power is the contemporary focus of slave narratives.

Through writing a text (both literary and figuratively) the African American writer is able to assume a certain personal power over history; he can revise, overwrite, and rewrite history by providing fictional truths that mimic/incorporate traditional slave narratives and historical writing. The acquisition of this power and what Johnson (and his character Calhoun) does with this power speaks to slavery as more than a physically or socially destructive component of black and white society. It transcends the tangible to the philosophical realm of "history" as it is defined and relived through the mechanisms of a particular culture. Steinberg argues that Johnson through his appropriation and manipulation of language and the concept of writing attempts to expose readers to historical possibilities—retellings that are both fictional and plausible.

One of the most interesting explorations of authority occurs in light of Jones's role as author. He presents his perspectives on this position through the life of the novel's artist figure. Throughout *The Known World*, a crazy woman creeps at night, peeping out from behind trees, singing songs about death, life and authority figures. Alice wanders the borders of the Townsend plantation, presumably "crazy" as result of a mule kick to the head. Alice functions as an anti-silence similar to *Beloved* in that she brings news of the past so that characters can move into the future. For example, in her wanderings, she stumbles upon Moses in the forest, frightening him. It is at this point that Moses begins to realize the power that Alice has as an artist. Through her singing and crazy antics, she garners the respectful fear of all she comes in contact with, including the slave patrollers. Moses assumes that

her art is the art of trickery and deceit. He believes that she is not as crazy as she appears to be and thus employs her services in his scheme to “free” his wife and child. As in Linda Krumholz’s<sup>1</sup> analysis of Morrison’s *Beloved*, it could be argued that Jones too, is confusing and complicating traditional novel reading and processing of narrative for readers. Alice, as an illegitimate, crazy, slave artist is reflective of how history itself has a trickster spirit—something that can never be recovered by one or two interpretations.

By the novel’s end, however, it is clear that Alice is indeed a true artist figure. She resurfaces, seemingly sane, as a painter whose work Calvin encounters in a Washington hotel. Her paintings are maps of Manchester County Virginia, some more specifically map paintings that detail the Townsend plantation. Her paintings depict the people (living and dead), the land, and the animals—no one is forgotten, but some are absent—Alice and the other two escapees. Those captured in the painting are all part of a known world. Alice’s painting does not seem to offer commentary. It just exists. However, Alice’s absence from the picture and her presence outside of the picture, her real existence as a now free woman, contradicts the objectivity of the painting. It would be safe to say that the paintings and maps are pictures of the world as she “knew it”—a representation of her memory. She does not produce the art until she had left the plantation itself. This provides a statement on the condition of the enslaved artist.

---

1. KRUMHOLZ, Linda, “The Ghosts of Slavery: Historical Recovery in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*”, *African American Review* 26.3 (1992): 395-409. Looks at the entirety of Morrison’s text as a “trickster” reference, or as incorporating folk tradition. Not only examines specific characters as exemplifying trickster behavior, Krumholz argues that the author is confusing and complicating traditional novel reading and processing of narrative for readers.

As long as Alice lives as a slave, she cannot produce. She is limited by others' perceptions of her as a piece of "crazy", almost worthless property. She is misunderstood and overlooked.

Alice signs her name "Alice Night" and Calvin refers to her works as Creations (first letter capitalized), made from "every kind of art man has ever thought to represent himself. Yes, clay. Yes, paint. Yes, cloth" (Jones 384). Alice and Pricilla did escape from slavery. Alice was living a successful life as an artist, an African American artist who depicts her own experiences in slavery. Her work was made from various materials, signifying her boundless ability to recreate from any medium. The perspective her paintings offer is Godlike, showing every thing in her memory, all encompassing. Calvin writes that "it is what God sees when he looks down" (385). Alice has become a Creator. Like contemporary writers of the slave narrative, Alice seeks to recover, through her acts of creativity, the fluid heritage of a shared black experience. Timothy Parrish<sup>1</sup> declares that such writing (artistry) forces a different interpretation from those of past slave narratives—in that the purpose and social contexts are different. Current slave narratives are designed to be more than a responsive or reactive measure against white oppression: it is a reestablishment of identity, one inseparable from, but interpreted differently than, a historical past.

---

1. PARRISH, Timothy, "Imagining Slavery: Toni Morrison and Charles Johnson", *Studies in American Fiction* 25.1 (1997): 81-99. A comparative analysis of *Beloved* and *Oxherding Tale*. Parrish disagrees with previous readings that place these two novels in opposition to one another. He claims that both works display the futility of trying to recapture the meaning or experience of slavery. *Beloved* and *Oxherding Tale* are authorial efforts (reflective of the black community) to explore the slave self. This self has been an elusive, but ever present component of black literature from the time of slave narratives. Contemporary writers recover, through their acts of creativity, the fluid heritage of a shared black experience.

This character brings the novel full circle in answer to the question of artist authority. It appears that Jones, like Morrison, feels that although retelling the silences found in slavery is a complicated, interpretive task, it is one that African American writers are best able to tell. Madhu Dubey<sup>1</sup> cites Morrison's feelings of exclusion from American democracy have informed her position as African American artist. The slave narrative (novel), for both Morrison and Jones, is a genre/form that is distinctly identified by and with the black community; there is an undeniable emphasis on oral tradition, historical story-telling as a creative act, and in the case of *Beloved*, a blending of the supernatural and the real. Such emphasis serves to define new, distinctly "black" characteristics of the novel genre. These new aspects of the genre challenge the traditional presentations of narrative, and at the same time address the silences (about black history) that occur as a result of the traditional novel's limited form. Dubey cites *Beloved's* return from the dead as Morrison's attempt to bring to life the generic possibilities that conflict with the traditional. Beyond an obvious conflict with the novel's prescribed characteristics, the character of *Beloved* brings an immediate confrontation of the black community to African roots—both in belief systems and in narrative traditions.

The subject matter of Jones' novel brings a different type of confrontation to forefront. The confrontation of a told history and an aspect of untold history calls into question the African American's holistic concept of American slavery. His work does indeed qualify as a neo-slave narrative, as defined by Bernard Bell<sup>2</sup>: a

---

1. DUBEY, Madhu, "The Politics of Genre in *Beloved*", *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 32.2 (1999): 187-207.

2. The neo-slave narrative is by general definition a contemporary novel writ-



form that revisits the “historical era of slavery [. . .] the origins of the African-American literary tradition and reassesses, from a contemporary vantage point, the political promise of literacy that fueled this tradition” (187). Jones’ novel does not address “the silences in slave narratives due to authorial compromises to white audiences and to self-masking from a painful past,” he gives voice to what some critics might call a necessary silence (Bell 8). In this instance, critics like Ryan McDermott<sup>1</sup> feel that silence, through criticism, has taken on negative connotations. He examines the effects of these connotations on slave narratives like *Beloved*.

---

ten about slavery. These accounts are not written by those who have first-hand experience of slavery, but are written instead by those who have lived in the socio-political aftermath of slavery. Neo-slave narratives use the history of slavery as a framework, incorporating oral histories of slavery, already existing slave narratives, and creative imagination as tools to shape characters and events. This subgenre of the slave narrative, by nature of its authorship, shifts from the larger genre of historical non-fiction over into historical fiction.

Bernard Bell is credited with coining the term “neo-slave narrative” in his 1987 work *The Afro-American Novel and its Tradition*. In the process of analyzing Margaret Walker’s 1966 *Jubilee* and Ernest Gaines’s 1971 *Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*, he defines neo-slave narratives as “residually oral, modern narratives of escape from bondage to freedom” (289).

For further study on the neo-slave narrative see Ashraf H. A. RUSHDY, *Neo-Slave Narratives: Studies in the Social Logic of a Literary Form*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); Elizabeth Ann BEAULIEU, *Black Women Writers and the American Neo-Slave Narrative: Femininity Unfettered* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1999).

1. MCDERMOTT, Ryan, “Silence, Visuality, and the Staying Image: the ‘unspeakable scene’ of Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*”. *Journal of the Theoretical Humanities* 8.1 (2003): 75-89. Uses Pierre Macherey’s theoretical position that silence within a literary text is a positive endowment of form. The absences are necessary; they create a part of the text itself. Chooses not to focus on *Beloved* as a novel of representation, but as a novel of constructed silence.

However, Pierre Macherey's theoretical position that silence within a literary text is a positive endowment of form, can also be used to explore *The Known World*. In it, the absences or silences are necessary; they create a part of the text itself. McDermott uses the "unspeakable scene" in *Beloved* as an example of a silence that remains throughout the text, despite the narrators' attempts to give it voice or to recreate it. Readers and writers cannot speak of the scene precisely because they did not witness it (77). So, between its recreation through text and the absence of its reality, readers can only visualize pieces of the unspeakable. Likewise, the silence that exists concerning black slave owners, the authority of the individual, and the authority of the artist is one that exists to move Jones' novel. As McDermott notes, considering the necessary silence of the text on some issues, reading or writing slave narratives as an attempt to break the silence is a futile activity. So, ultimately, although the authors can tell of silences (what it does and how it affects) through slave narratives, no one has the authority to tell these silences (what it is).

### *Works Cited*

- BELL, Bernard. "Beloved: A Womanist Neo-slave Narrative; or Multivocal Remembrances of Things Past". *African American Review* 26.1 (1992): 7-17.
- BENSTON, Kimberly. "I Yam What I am: the Topos of (Un)Naming in Afro-American Literature". *Black Literature and Literary Theory*, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., ed. New York: Methuen, 1984; 151-172.
- BYRNE, Dara. "'Yonder They Do Not Love Your Flesh.' Community in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*: The Limitations of Citizenship and Prop-

- erty in the American Public Sphere". *Canadian Review of American Studies* 29.2 (1999): 25-60.
- DUBEY, Madhu. "The Politics of Genre in *Beloved*". *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 32.2 (1999): 187-207.
- HARRIS, Trudier. "Escaping Slavery but Not Its Images". *Toni Morrison: Critical Perspectives, Past and Present*, Henry L. Gates, Jr. and K. A. Appiah, eds. New York: Amistad Press, 1993; 330-41.
- JONES, Edward P. *The Known World*. New York: Amistad, 2003.
- KRUMHOLZ, Linda. "The Ghosts of Slavery: Historical Recovery in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*". *African American Review* 26.3 (1992): 395-409.
- MCDERMOTT, Ryan. "Silence, Visuality, and the Staying Image: the 'unspeakable scene' of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*". *Journal of the Theoretical Humanities* 8.1 (2003): 75-89.
- PARRISH, Timothy. "Imagining Slavery: Toni Morrison and Charles Johnson". *Studies in American Fiction* 25.1 (1997): 81-99.
- SCOTT, A.O. "In Search of the Best". *New York Times*. 21 May 2006.
- STARLING, Marion. *The Slave Narrative: Its Place in American History*. Washington, D. C.: Howard UP, 1988.
- STEINBERG, Marc. "Charles Johnson's *Middle Passage*: Fictionalizing History and Historicizing Fiction". *Texas Studies in Literature and Languages* 454 (2003): 375-390.

*Les Carnets du Cerpac* n° 6, 2007, 155-176.

**A CHAIN OF VOICES:  
A “MASTERS AND SLAVES” NARRATIVE**

*Mélanie JOSEPH-VILAIN*  
*Université de Bourgogne*

André Brink has often explained how crucial his discovery of the House of Slaves at Gorée, near Dakar, was in terms of his perception of his own “Africanness” — a founding experience echoed in his novel *An Act of Terror*, in which the main protagonist, the aptly named Thomas Landman, makes the same kind of discovery:

And Gorée. Gorée, the island of tears. [...] The place where, with such a sense of physical shock, I rediscover my own past in the history of my most distant known ancestral mother, Catharijn. [...] In the heavy dust of the place, among these silent peeling stone walls—the casual rustling of water at the fountain, the bleating of a goat, the murmur of melodic voices from the girls gathered in the shade to wash their smooth dark legs (my own Catharijn might have been one of such an arch group: if she had

been free and not a slave)—I acknowledge irrevocably, fatally, that I belong to Africa<sup>1</sup>.

It may certainly seem paradoxical for a white writer to see in Gorée's House of Slaves such a founding place for himself and for his own people. Yet, that slavery was a defining experience not only for black and coloured South Africans, but for the whole South African nation, cannot be denied. Like most of its counterparts all over the world, colonial South African society came into being mostly thanks to—or because of—the exploitation of native and/or imported slaves by their white masters.

As a dissident twentieth-century Afrikaner writer, André Brink could not but want to explore slavery's shaping influence on contemporary South Africa. He did it in two novels which were published respectively in 1976 and in 1982, *An Instant in the Wind* and *A Chain of Voices*. While the former was based on an Australian story—which also inspired Patrick White's *A Fringe of Leaves*<sup>2</sup>—and focused on two characters, a white woman and a black slave, lost in the wilderness, the latter adopts a much broader scope and clearly proclaims itself as an attempt at understanding how central slavery was to nineteenth-century South Africa. One only has to quote Ma-Rose's opening sentence, immediately after the "Act of Accusation"—a historical document which merely serves an introductory function in the novel, grounding it in historical reality—and functions as the novel's actual incipit: "To know is not enough. One must try to understand too"<sup>3</sup>.

1. BRINK, André, *An Act of Terror* (London: Minerva Paperbacks, 1991): 442.

2. See HASSALL Anthony J., "The Making of a Colonial Myth: The Mrs. Fraser Story in Patrick White's *A Fringe of Leaves* and André Brink's *An Instant in the Wind*", *ARIEL, A Review of International English Literature*, 18-3 (July 1987): 3-28.

3. BRINK, André, *A Chain of Voices* (London: Minerva Paperbacks, 1982): 17.

The specificity of Brink’s novel lies in its form—more than thirty different narrative voices coalesce to tell the story of an actual slave uprising which took place in the Bokkeveld in 1825 after a group of slaves led by a man called Galant, saw their hopes of being freed over New Year shattered by their masters and decided to murder them in retaliation. My point in this article will be to examine how Brink’s narrative technique helps him shape a new kind of neo-slave narrative. I will particularly try and establish to what extent it may be termed a South African neo-slave narrative—or rather, a South African slave narrative, since neither the Cape region nor South Africa as a whole, can provide any model that could be written back to:

In contrast to the United States and the Caribbean, there were no written slave testimonies by ex-slaves at the Cape. Such narratives were usually encouraged by missionaries and abolitionists; neither paid attention to Cape slaves<sup>1</sup>.

This is why I will be relying mostly on American slave narratives and neo-slave narratives to analyse Brink’s achievement in *A Chain of Voices*.

Literally speaking, *A Chain of Voices* is a slave narrative—a narrative about slaves and slavery. But if we are to rely on Henry Louis Gates Jr.’s now famous definition<sup>2</sup>, Brink’s novel cannot in

---

1. WARD, Kerry and Nigel WORDEN, “Commemorating, Suppressing and Invoking Cape Slavery”, *Negotiating the Past: The Making of Memory in South Africa*, Sarah Nuttall and Carli Coetzee, eds. (London and Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1998): 204.

2. “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”. (Henry Louis Gates Jr., *The Slave’s Narrative*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1985): xii.

any way be incorporated into the body of texts that serve as a canon for the genre, since it was not written at a time when slavery existed, nor is it a “first-person contemporary account of the reality of slavery as it was experienced”<sup>1</sup>.

Strictly speaking, it is a first-person account, though, but what makes it completely different from traditional slave narratives is, first, the shifting reference of the first-person pronoun—although the reader is never at a loss regarding its reference since if one excepts the opening and closing historical documents, each chapter bears the name of its narrator as a title—and second, and perhaps more importantly, the fact that it was written a long time after slavery was abolished in South Africa.

These two features immediately conjure up another type of narrative, the now familiar “neo-slave narratives” defined by Ashraf Rushdy as “contemporary novels that assume the form, adopt the conventions, and take on the first-person voice of the antebellum slave narrative”.<sup>2</sup> Because *A Chain of Voices* writes back to traditional slave narratives, adopting some of the conventions of the genre, it can indeed be defined as a neo-slave narrative. It is therefore not surprising that in his review of the novel Julian Moynahan noted striking parallels between *A Chain of Voices* and one of the most famous neo-slave narratives, William Styron’s *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, “a work to which it is substantially superior in insight and artistry”. According to Moynahan, “whereas Styron’s *Turner* seems to be used as an outlet for the author’s

---

1. MISRAHI-BARAK, Judith, ed., *Revisiting Slave Narratives*. coll. *Les Carnets du Cerpac*, n° 2 (Montpellier: service des Publications de l’université Paul-Valéry, 2005): 15.

2. RUSHDY, H. A., *Neo-Slave Narratives: Studies in the Social Logic of a Literary Form* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999): 3.

neo-romantic rhetoric and white liberal opinion, Brink’s characters, though they do not speak in the precise dialect of the time, seem to express feelings authentic to their condition”.<sup>1</sup>

Although Brink himself explained that the use of first-person narrators was literally imposed on him by the historical documents which originally inspired the novel<sup>2</sup>, the polyphony thus achieved also appears as a way of restoring the voices of the losers of history, those who did not have any opportunity to speak in official history. *A Chain of Voices* therefore resorts to a strategy not uncommon in other neo-slave narratives, for instance in Caryl Phillips’s *Cambridge* and *Crossing the River* or in Fred D’Aguiar’s *The Longest Memory* and *Feeding the Ghosts*. These rewritings of slave narratives heavily rely on polyphony as a strategy of re-inscription of the initial genre, as Benedicte Ledent showed in an article aptly entitled ‘Slavery Revisited through Vocal Kaleidoscopes’:

By giving a voice to the different parties involved in slavery— not only the slaves and their descendants, but also their masters or traders—they obviously subvert the grand, master narrative of History. But they do so not through a mere reversal of the centre and the margin, but by individualizing the speakers and replacing the original exclusiveness by a new inclusive approach which involves as many standpoints as possible<sup>3</sup>.

---

1. MOYNAHAN, Julian, “Slaves Who Said No”, *New York Times*, June 13, 1982. Available on:

[www.nytimes.com/books/99/03/21/specials/brink-chain.html](http://www.nytimes.com/books/99/03/21/specials/brink-chain.html)

2. Brink explained in an interview that he used archives on the actual slave revolt, “consisting of all the depositions made by the accused and the witnesses and everybody even remotely connected with the incident. That in fact suggested the form, with the different voices speaking, each putting his own point of view” [“Interview with Jim Davidson”, *Overland*, 94-95 (1984): 28].

3. LEDENT, Bénédicte, “Slavery Revisited through Vocal Kaleidoscopes. Poly-



This description of D'Aguiar and Phillips's neo-slave narratives could perfectly fit Brink's inclusive approach in *A Chain of Voices*, whose title is taken from a passage in which Ma-Rose explains what the novel is about:

Now out of the shadow of death we're all looking back over the past. And perhaps someone will hear us calling out, all these voices in the great silence, all of us together, each one forever alone. We go on talking and talking, an endless chain of voices, all together yet all apart, all different yet all the same, and the separate links might lie but the chain is the truth. And the name of the chain is Houd-den-Bek. (419)

What is striking here is the contrast between the inclusiveness of the project—giving a voice to every single person involved in the slave revolt, from the soft-headed slave woman Lydia to the now-impotent patriarch Piet Van der Merwe—and the meaninglessness of each voice when taken separately from the others. Brink clearly wants to make it plain that what the voices tell us can achieve meaning only if the reader links them together.

But the frailty of such an attempt is also suggested by the author, both through the ironic use of the name of the farm, Houd-den-Bek—in Afrikaans, “Shut Your Trap”—and through the paradoxical image of the chain, which “evokes the contradictory notions of the imprisoning nature of ‘dialogue’ and of the interdependency and interrelation of speech acts”,<sup>1</sup> but also, on a more down-to-earth level, the intricate relationships between slaves and masters in a world where slavery defined not only the

---

phony in Novels by Fred D'Aguiar and Caryl Phillips” in Judith Misrahi-Barak ed., *Revisiting Slave Narratives*. coll. *Les Carnets du Cerpac* n° 2 (Montpellier: service des Publications de l'université Paul-Valéry, 2005): 281-293; 291.

1. KOSSEW, Sue, *Pen and Power. A Post-Colonial Reading of J. M. Coetzee and André Brink* (Amsterdam and Atlanta: Rodopi, Cross/Cultures n° 27, 1996): 139.

various modes of interaction between people, but also their very identity.

The novel constantly reminds us that the masters are as oppressed by the system as their slaves—which is, as we shall see, by no means innocent on the part of Brink, and certainly problematic—so that all the characters think of their relationships with others in terms of power and ownership, even the most oppressed of them. Almost all the female characters, for instance, think of children in terms of ownership: they consider children as objects which can be owned, and seem to think that such ownership gives them power not only over the children themselves, but also over their fathers. Even Hester, in spite of the fact that she is presented throughout the novel as a mysterious and independent person, thinks of her son in terms of ownership and power: “And yet, in his very independence he was *mine*, formed and shaped by myself; in him I had *a hold on* the man he would be one day” (239, emphasis added). These words seem to echo Alida’s perception of her own children: “He was the first thing I had ever *owned* for myself”, “he was *mine*”, she writes about Barend (63, emphasis added); “But this one you won’t touch. Not ever. *She’s mine now*” (69, emphasis added), she tells her husband when he tries to beat Hester after her father’s death. Giving the reader access to the masters’ narratives thus enables Brink to show that they, too, are oppressed by slavery, which controls the way they perceive others.

This notion can particularly be detected in the way Cecilia feels oppressed by the slaves’ constant presence, epitomized by their inescapable gaze:

Wherever one came or turned or went they would be hovering in the background or shuffling past soundlessly on their bare feet,

eyes gleaming in the half-light. Like shadows, like cats; everywhere. Looking down as one came past—except for that Galant—or suddenly busying themselves very conspicuously; but as soon as you'd passed you could feel the eyes following you again. One wasn't free to be mistress in one's own home while they were around. In their meekness and ubiquitousness they ruled over hearth and home. Because they knew, and I knew, that they were indispensable. (115-116)

This rather lengthy quote not only shows the guilt (unconsciously) felt by the masters, it also states explicitly how interdependent the slaves and the masters are—an interdependence which Brink chose to mirror in the very form of the novel thanks to the use of polyphony. In *A Chain of Voices*, masters and slaves all tell the story, and a number of key scenes are narrated several times and seen through several characters' eyes, so that the reader may get a better grasp of what happens. The eponymous "chain of voices" is also a chain of eyes/"I"s—however weird the image may seem: thanks to the juxtaposition of two or more versions of the same episode, the text becomes not only polyphonic, but also multifocal, since we share the characters' perception of things as well as listen to their voices.

The effect of the juxtaposition is usually to show how estranged to one another the characters are. One could give many examples, but the most striking one is probably the childhood memory of the lion hunt, shared by Galant and Nicolaas, because it symbolises the moment when the young master betrays his slave friend and becomes "one of them" (50). This episode also shows that slavery forces people to define themselves as either masters or slaves, as Nicolaas puts it in his final section: "I here: you there. Master: slave" (464). The repeated use of colons suggests causal-

ity, emphasizing the interconnection of the two groups: masters can be masters only if there are slaves, and vice versa. "It was the moment, the irreparable moment, when I changed from your friend into your master that I finally destroyed my own freedom" (464), Nicolaas adds, which implies, again, that masters and slaves are all similarly oppressed by the system—although, of course, the physical suffering is not shared.

The fact that all the characters, blacks and whites alike, are prisoners of categories, and defined only as members of a specific group, as well as their consecutive lack of freedom, also points to another prominent feature of the novel: the parallel it implicitly draws between slavery and apartheid. This should not come as a surprise, since the neo-slave narratives' "pivotal relationship to the present" is a defining feature of the genre, which Fred D'Aguiar described as "a prism through which the present is examined".<sup>1</sup>

It is indeed difficult to forget or to ignore the fact that *A Chain of Voices* was written under apartheid, and, significantly, not long after the 1976 Soweto uprisings, which it seems to comment on indirectly. The first obvious link the novel establishes between nineteenth-century and twentieth-century South Africa is the suggestion that from a historical perspective the roots of the apartheid system partly lie in the slave system—white people exploiting and oppressing black people. The parallel is quite clearly drawn, and explains why in *A Chain of Voices* Brink insisted so heavily on the fact that masters are as oppressed by the

---

1. D'AGUIAR, Fred, "How Wilson Harris's Intuitive Approach to Writing Fiction Applies to Writing Novels About Slavery", in Judith Misrahi-Barak eds., *Revisiting Slave Narratives* (coll. *Les Carnets du Cerpac* n° 2, service des Publications de l'université Paul-Valéry, 2005): 22.

system as their slaves: as an Afrikaner writer, he both belonged to the twentieth-century group of oppressors and strongly disagreed with them—without altogether rejecting his Afrikaner heritage, which is not the least of his contradictions. Showing that the masters are victims of the system they implemented implicitly suggested that Brink himself, and other Afrikaners, were, in a way, victimized by apartheid.

But the novel also holds a mirror to the apartheid society in a more indirect way, emphasising the need to act against slavery in a section seen through Ma-Rose's eyes: "In the beginning, I thought it is not enough to know: one must also understand. Now I'm not so sure. Is it enough to understand unless you also try to change it?" (418) As Ma-Rose, who is a free Hottentot, often acts as a mouthpiece for Brink himself<sup>1</sup>, the reader is led to understand that the answer to her question is the necessity to act. In this regard, *A Chain of Voices* does not differ from Brink's other apartheid novels, in which the Camusian figure of the dissident, the rebel, has always been central:

The most abiding influence on my work, however, has been Camus, notably in his view of man in a state of incessant revolt against the conditions imposed upon him, and reacting creatively to the challenge of meaninglessness. In much of my work this is linked to an element of mysticism derived from the Spanish writers of the seventeenth century. The other most abiding influence on my writing is the study of history. All my work is pervaded with a sense of "roots," whether in the collective history of peoples or in the private history of an individual<sup>2</sup>.

---

1. All the characters act as mouthpieces for Brink, since the reason why he resorts to polyphony in the novel is precisely to try to literally become each and every one of them.

2. Ross, Jean W., "André Brink", in *Contemporary Authors*, Christine Nasso ed., vol. 144 (Detroit: Gale Research, 1982): 55.

In most of Brink’s novels, the central figure is that of the Afrikaner dissident. In *A Chain of Voices* the rebels are slaves, but basically the “message” is the same: revolt is at the core of the human condition. Galant, the leader of the revolt, therefore takes on a universal significance—which is suggested from the outset by his dubious parentage: “Galant has many fathers. No one is his father, and everybody is” (23). Galant, the Rebel, epitomizes the necessity of revolt as a way of life, illustrating Camus’s words: “What is a rebel? A man who says no: but whose refusal does not imply a renunciation. He is also a man who says yes as soon as he begins to think for himself”<sup>1</sup>. Significantly, one of the articles published about *A Chain of Voices* when it was first released was entitled “Slaves Who Said No”, with an obvious reference to the Camusian “Rebel”’s influence on Brink—an influence the writer often claimed, underlining how much his work owed the French philosopher:

I was particularly attracted to the concept of the rebel which he had shaped through the metaphor of Sisyphus. When I read Camus, I understood how futile it was to want to escape the society in which we were born. Camus helped me to assume responsibilities in my own society<sup>2</sup>.

---

1. “Qu’est-ce qu’un homme révolté? Un homme qui dit non. Mais s’il refuse, il ne renonce pas: c’est aussi un homme qui dit oui, dès son premier mouvement”, Albert Camus, “L’Homme révolté”, *Essais* (Paris: Gallimard, coll. “Bibliothèque de la Pléiade”, 1965): 423. Translation mine.

One could also quote this other passage from Camus: “Dans l’épreuve quotidienne qui est la nôtre, la révolte joue le même rôle que le ‘cogito’ dans l’ordre de la pensée: elle est la première évidence. Mais cette évidence tire l’individu de sa solitude. Elle est un lieu commun qui fonde sur tous les hommes la première valeur. *Je me révolte, donc nous sommes*” (Camus 1965: 432, emphasis added).

2. “J’étais particulièrement attiré par le concept de l’homme révolté qu’il avait élaboré à travers la métaphore de Sisyphe. En lisant Camus, j’ai compris combien il était futile de vouloir fuir la société dont nous sommes issus. Camus

As a writer, Brink could “assume responsibilities” in apartheid society through his work. In *A Chain of Voices*, the neo-slave narrative mode helped him shed indirect light on the evils of apartheid, thus escaping the censorship a more direct denunciation would probably have owned him. As Anthony J. Hassall puts it: “There are clear parallels with the 1980s, when apartheid, the Boers’ replacement for slavery, is under worldwide attack, and the winds of political change gather strength”<sup>1</sup>. In an article entitled “Of Slaves and Masters”, Brink himself pointed out the obvious parallels between the slave revolt which inspired *A Chain of Voices* and contemporary South Africa: “it is part of the horror of the South African situation in 1978 that the slave-owner mentality exemplified in the case of 1825, still forms a main ingredient in the social and political thinking of this Government”<sup>2</sup>. Although Brink was aware of the numerous differences between the two situations, he wanted to make it clear that he was not only writing about historical events, but also about contemporary South Africa, in which the Soweto uprisings had been as fiercely repressed as the 1825 slave revolt depicted in *A Chain of Voices*. Using the historical novel as a tool for criticizing the apartheid system was at the time common practice, since

---

m’a aidé à assumer mes responsabilités envers ma société” (Tirthankar Chanda, “André Brink en quête d’un avenir pour les lettres d’Afrique du Sud”, *L’Humanité*, 11 Septembre 1999. Available on: [www.humanite.presse.fr/journal/1999-09-11/1999-09-11-295768](http://www.humanite.presse.fr/journal/1999-09-11/1999-09-11-295768), [www.humanite.presse.fr/journal/1999-09-11/1999-09-11-295768](http://www.humanite.presse.fr/journal/1999-09-11/1999-09-11-295768); translation mine).

1. HASSALL, Anthony J., André Brink: The Lives of Adamastor. Ross, Robert L. ed., *International Literature in English. Essays on the Major Writers* (Chicago and London: St James Press, 1991): 185.

2. *Mapmakers. Writing in a State of Siege* (London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1983): 154-162; 162.

indirectness enabled writers to escape censorship. Brink himself denounced apartheid by alternately writing novels set in contemporary South Africa, such as *A Dry White Season*, and historical novels—although, of course, taking a stance against apartheid was far from being his only goal in writing such novels.

This is why I would like to suggest here that although *A Chain of Voices* bears many resemblances to neo-slave narratives in terms of *form*, especially because of its recourse to a polyphonic and multifocal mode of writing, it is also extremely close to traditional slave narratives in terms of *function*. Originally, slave narratives were written to bear testimony to the evils of slavery, and thus convince white people that slavery had to be abolished and that it was worth fighting against it in spite of a bleak immediate future. The very structure of *A Chain of Voices*, inspired by the judicial form of the archives used by Brink as a basis for his work, seems particularly apt to achieve such an aim, since the novel is literally composed of a kaleidoscope of reinvented testimonies, and the reader is put in the position of judge and jury. The fact that the voices themselves are only reconstructions mediated through the author's imagination is in itself an echo of traditional slave narratives, which were more often than not largely co-written, if not entirely written, by white abolitionists, and aimed at convincing readers that slavery had to be abolished. This desire to convince readers accounts for the novel's so-called manipulative nature:

Despite the intended polyphony of the text and Brink's use of the narrative strategy of providing several versions of the same incident viewed through different people's eyes, the reader's responses are carefully guided, so that there is little respite from the



representation of colonizing activity and from auctorial presence. (Kossev 1996: 136)

Brink's guiding of his readers is part and parcel of the author's anti-apartheid, abolitionist-like rhetoric. Brink's desire to convince readers of the evil nature of slavery and, therefore, of its contemporary offspring, apartheid, accounts for the incorporation into the individual narratives of elements clearly not idiosyncratic to the characters:

What must be grasped is that characters in this book don't so much speak according to their condition - apart from passages of direct dialogue—as they are given utterance that reflects the author's large intentions. These are to explore in depth, and with a reach of knowledge that extends to such figures as Marx and Engels, Hegel and Roland Barthes, the fullest meaning of slaveholding as a social and human phenomenon. Practically speaking, that means that an illiterate agricultural worker such as Galant gives voice at times to reflections and concepts and finds words to which, realistically, he would not have had access. (Moy-nahan 1982)

I would like to suggest that such deliberate anachronism or manipulation is not only reminiscent of canonical slave narratives, in which the white abolitionist's editing impulse often superimposed itself on the voice of the slave who was supposed to be telling his/her story, sometimes almost silencing it, but it also contributes to make the nineteenth-century characters more accessible, more easy to understand, perhaps closer to twentieth-century readers, therefore increasing the novel's political effectiveness. Like traditional slave narratives<sup>1</sup>, *A Chain of Voices* had

---

1. See, for instance, Jenny Sharpe's analysis of Harriet Jacobs's slave narrative, which drew on the language of the sentimental novel because she was "writing

to win its readers to the cause it defended, and showing what the nineteenth-century characters had in common with them, that is, their common humanity, was a powerful way of convincing readers that the anti-apartheid struggle was a just cause.

The fact that *A Chain of Voices* held a mirror to the 1980s apartheid society also explains why, although the novel is partly informed by the Judeo-Christian mythological structure in which Frances Smith Foster saw the core of traditional slave narratives<sup>1</sup>, it does not entirely fulfill the pattern of rebirth through liberation that characterized narratives written by former slaves:

In the slave narrative the mythological pattern is realized in four chronological phases. First comes the *loss of innocence*, which is objectified through the development of an awareness of what it means to be a slave. This can be compared to the descent from perfection or mortification. The mortification process includes purgation, for as the slave learns the meaning of slavery, he also tries to purge himself of those elements that would facilitate enslavement. Second is *the realization of alternatives to bondage and the formulation of a resolve to be free*. This decision begins the ascent to the ideal, or invigoration. The resolution to quit slavery is, in

---

for white middle-class Northern women" [*Ghosts of Slavery. A Literary Archaeology of Black Women's Lives* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2003): xix].

1. "The plot of the nineteenth-century slave narrative is informed by the Judeo-Christian mythological structure on both the material and the spiritual levels. The action moves from the idyllic life of a garden of Eden into the wilderness, the struggle for survival, the providential help, and the arrival into the Promised Land. In addition, the plot of the slave narrative incorporates the parallel structure of birth into death and death into birth which also distinguishes the Judeo-Christian myth" (*Witnessing Slavery: The Development of Ante-bellum Slave Narratives* [2d. ed., 1994]: 84).

It is worth noticing, though, that in *A Chain of Voices* the recurrent Christian imagery does not reflect the slave narrative model, but rather the imprint of Calvinism on Afrikaners.

effect, a climax to a conversion experience. The third phase is *the escape*. Whether it occurs between two sentences or forms the largest portion of the narrative, it is part of the struggle to overcome evil. The interest at this point is in the details, the pitfalls and obstacles, the sufferings and moments of bravery encountered in the process of achieving freedom. Although the first attempt sometimes ends in capture, the outcome is never in doubt. The narrative, after all, was written by a freeman. The fourth phase is that of *freedom obtained*. It is the arrival at the City of God or the New Jerusalem and it corresponds to the jubilation period of ancient ritual. (Smith Foster 1994: 85, emphasis added)

In Brink's novel, the first three phases are realized: childhood, with its blissful s between masters and slaves, is presented as a lost Paradise both by Nicolaas and by Galant. Then comes Galant's resolve to be free, triggered by persistent rumours about abolition coming from Cape Town and by his shattered hopes. The third phase is not escape in its traditional sense, since the slaves seem to be aware that their revolt will no doubt be short-lived—and, indeed, they are caught and sentenced to death, and their voices seem to come from beyond the grave.

Thus, Galant and the rebel slaves do not completely fulfil the traditional pattern that led the slaves to freedom. Galant *does* think that he has achieved some kind of freedom through his sexual encounter with Hester, which enabled both of them to escape the pre-defined categories of slaves and masters: "In that loft I was free: a man; and she a woman" (483). But such a freedom, achieved through sex—an aspect which critics have often reproached Brink for in their readings of the novel—is only individual, not collective, and the slave revolt was thwarted: the closing "Verdict" section leaves no doubt about it. The reason for

the incompleteness of the Judeo-Christian mythological structure described by Smith Foster is probably that *A Chain of Voices* drew parallels between slavery and apartheid, which was far from being over when the novel was published in 1982.

I am not suggesting here that *A Chain of Voices* was only an anti-apartheid novel. What I am trying to point out, conversely, is the resemblances and differences it bears with slave narratives. Besides, it cannot be denied that the novel also makes a powerful statement about the human condition in general, as Brink's own analysis of the novel suggests:

. . . slaves, all of them, locked in an inescapable chain of voices, sprung from earth, cleansed in water, seared in fire, wanton with wind. Only in the leap from history to story, and from world to word, does literature as a form of cultural opposition find its true voice: opposition to the lie, opposition to injustice, opposition to the unfreedom which in one form or another holds us all<sup>1</sup>.

But if *A Chain of Voices* is undeniably first and foremost a literary work, it also achieves some sort of effectiveness, and indirectly comments on apartheid South Africa. This is why I would like to suggest that it is not only a rewriting—or, rather, a writ-

---

1. "Literature as Cultural Opposition", *Reinventing a Continent. Writing and Politics in South Africa*. (Cambridge Ma.: Zoland Books, 1998): 198. The unifying themes of "Earth. Water. Wind. Fire" (*A Chain of Voices*: 463) inform the imagery of the four distinct parts of the novel.

Such an analysis is characteristic of Brink's conception of literature: "The work of art cannot—and need not—be justified on religious, political, moral or other grounds. But it satisfies a need in man which is as vital as hunger, even though it may not be recognized as readily. Like hunger, it is a personal need. But in its intimacy it is extremely significant. For it can expand *an awareness of the human condition*", "Writers and Writing in the World", *Mapmakers. Writing in a State of Siege* (London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1983): 46, emphasis added.

ing back to—US or Caribbean slave and neo-slave narratives, but that it also echoes the various narratives circulated at the time to bear witness to life under apartheid. One should note in passing that a number of critics have noted the undeniable resemblances between slave narratives and narratives about life under apartheid: “like the American slave narratives, they have political, historical, social, economic, and literary significance”<sup>1</sup>.

That Brink himself had read such accounts makes no doubt, and that he found them inspirational is also quite obvious, as the following lines from an article on fiction in South Africa clearly show:

The first-hand, yet fictionalized accounts of black suffering and anger in the stories of Mtutuzeli Matshoba (*Call Me not a Man*, 1979) are indelibly inscribed on the South African mind. And it is significant that his harrowing fictionalized account of a labour farm in “A Glimpse of Slavery” marks the reader more unforgettably than its early factional model, the eyewitness report Henry Nxumalo wrote in the fifties for *Drum* on the horrors of a Bethal prison farm<sup>2</sup>.

Similarly, Brink’s account, which is almost a first-hand one since he read extensively the original records—“They were *there*,” he wrote in an article about the genesis of the novel, “speaking to me: speaking, indeed, across a divide of a hundred and fifty years, but speaking in their own voices, telling their own stories, exposing whatever truth of their tortured lives they could grope at”<sup>3</sup>—

---

1. BOYCE DAVIES, Carol, “In Their Own Words: Life and Work in South Africa”, *College English*, 51-1 (Jan., 1989): 88-94; 88.

2. “Reimagining the Real: English South African Fiction Now” (Brink 1998: 144-163).

3. “Speaking in Voices” (Brink 1998: 17-18).

might make a deeper impression on the reader than the archives themselves, mostly because, like slave narratives, *A Chain of Voices* "demonstrate[s] the subjectivity of a human being whose humanity had been negated" (Sharpe 2003: xxiv). *A Chain of Voices* therefore simultaneously writes back to the "foreign" genres of slave and neo-slave narratives and to the "local" genre of apartheid narrative, trying to establish a counter-memory for South Africa as well as to explore more fundamental components of the human condition, in particular the notion of freedom.

In guise of conclusion, I would also like to insist on the notion of polyphony, which deeply informs the novel. First, the polyphony works at the narrative level, since masters and slaves are given a say in the narrative, as I tried to show in this article. It also functions at the intertextual level, since the novel weaves threads leading to various genres and texts: slave and neo-slave narratives, apartheid narratives, but also Brink's own novels, and even novels by Faulkner<sup>1</sup>.

But the polyphony is even deeper, since in the original manuscript—or rather manuscripts, since there were several successive versions—Brink worked both in English and in Afrikaans,

---

1. "A far more important connection can be made between *A Chain of Voices*, Brink's fifth novel, and those major fictions of William Faulkner—for instance, *Absalom: Absalom* and *Go Down, Moses*—in which Faulkner counts the moral cost of white racism, both before and after Emancipation, in terms of the tragic spoliation of all relationships, not merely those between white oppressors and their nonwhite or partially white victims. Brink also owes a technical debt to Faulkner for the device of telling a story entirely through a series of first-person monologues, the chain of voices of the title. Brink even has a Dilsey, though an unrepentantly pagan one. She is the elderly slave and conjure woman, Ma-Rose, who endures to see the beginning and the end of a hopeless uprising organized by Galant, a young slave foreman whom Ma-Rose had raised from infancy after his young mother was sold away from him" (Moynahan 1982).

using English for the white characters and Afrikaans for the black ones, so that they literally did not understand one another. In the end, of course, Brink came out with two versions of his novel, one written in his native language and the other in English, as he has been doing for all his novels since *Kennis Van die Aand* was banned in 1974. Echoes of the dialogue between the two languages can still be heard in the final English version, and if masters and slaves all speak in the novel, which thus becomes a “masters and slaves” narrative, the dominant voice remains that of the bilingual author. *A Chain of Voices* therefore remains first and foremost a South African neo-slave narrative—thematically, formally and linguistically speaking.

#### *Works cited*

- BOYCE DAVIES, Carol. “In Their Own Words: Life and Work in South Africa”. *College English*, 51-1 (Jan. 1989): 88-94.
- BRINK, André. *A Chain of Voices*. London: Minerva Paperbacks, 1982.
- BRINK, André. *An Act of Terror*. London: Minerva Paperbacks, 1991.
- BRINK, André. “Interview with Jim Davidson”. *Overland*, 94-95 (1984): 24-30.
- BRINK, André. “Literature as Cultural Opposition”. *Reinventing a Continent. Writing and Politics in South Africa*. Cambridge (Ma.): Zoland Books, 1998; 185-202.
- BRINK, André. “Reimagining the Real: English South African Fiction Now”. *Reinventing a Continent. Writing and Politics in South Africa*. Cambridge (Ma.): Zoland Books, 1998; 144-163.
- BRINK, André. “Speaking in Voices”. *Reinventing a Continent. Writing and Politics in South Africa*. Cambridge (Ma.): Zoland Books, 1998; 13-24.

- BRINK, André. "Of Slaves and Masters" in *Mapmakers. Writing in a State of Siege*. London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1983; 154-162.
- BRINK, André. "Writers and Writing in the World" in *Mapmakers. Writing in a State of Siege*. London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1983; 41-53.
- CAMUS, Albert. "L'Homme révolté" in *Essais*. Paris: Gallimard, coll. "Bibliothèque de la Pléiade", 1965.
- CHANDA, Tirthankar. "André Brink en quête d'un avenir pour les lettres d'Afrique du Sud". *L'Humanité*, 11 Septembre 1999. Available on [www.humanite.presse.fr/journal/1999-09-11/1999-09-11-295768](http://www.humanite.presse.fr/journal/1999-09-11/1999-09-11-295768).
- D'AGUIAR, Fred. "How Wilson Harris's Intuitive Approach to Writing Fiction Applies to Writing Novels About Slavery", in *Revisiting Slave Narratives*, Judith Misrahi-Barak ed., coll. *Les Carnets du Cerpac* n° 2, service des Publication de l'université Paul-Valéry, 2006; 21-35.
- GATES, Henry Louis, Jr. *The Slave's Narrative*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1985.
- HASSALL, Anthony J. "The Making of a Colonial Myth: The Mrs. Fraser Story in Patrick White's *A Fringe of Leaves* and André Brink's *An Instant in the Wind*". *ARIEL, A Review of International English Literature*, 18-3 (July 1987): 3-28.
- HASSALL, Anthony J. "André Brink: The Lives of Adamastor" in *International Literature in English. Essays on the Major Writers*, Ross Robert L. ed. Chicago and London: St James Press, 1991; 181-192.
- KOSSEW, Sue. *Pen and Power. A Post-Colonial Reading of J. M. Coetzee and André Brink*. Amsterdam and Atlanta: Rodopi, Cross/Cultures n° 27, 1996.
- LEDENT, Bénédicte. "Slavery Revisited through Vocal Kaleidoscopes. Polyphony in Novels by Fred D'Aguiar and Caryl Phillips" in



- Revisiting Slave Narratives*, Judith Misrahi-Barak ed., coll. *Les Carnets du Cerpac* n° 2, Montpellier: service des Publications de l'université Paul-Valéry, 2006; 281-293.
- MISRAHI-BARAK, Judith, ed. *Revisiting Slave Narratives*. coll. *Les Carnets du Cerpac* n° 2. Montpellier: service des Publications de l'université Paul-Valéry, 2005.
- MOYNAHAN, Julian. "Slaves Who Said No". *New York Times*, June 13, 1982. Available on: [www.nytimes.com/books/99/03/21/specials/brink-chain.html](http://www.nytimes.com/books/99/03/21/specials/brink-chain.html).
- ROSS, Jean W. "André Brink". *Contemporary Authors*, Christine Nasso, ed. vol. 144. Detroit: Gale Research, 1982; 54-59.
- RUSHDY, Ashraf H. *Neo-Slave Narratives: Studies in the Social Logic of a Literary Form*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999.
- SHARPE, Jenny. *Ghosts of Slavery. A Literary Archaeology of Black Women's Lives*. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2003.
- WARD, Kerry and Nigel WORDEN. "Commemorating, Suppressing and Invoking Cape Slavery" in *Negotiating the Past: The Making of Memory in South Africa*, Sarah Nuttall and Carli Coetzee, eds. London and Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1998; 201-217.

*Les Carnets du Cerpac* n° 6, 2007, 177-198.

**RITUALS OF “REMEMORY” IN PAULE MARSHALL’S *THE CHOSEN PLACE, THE TIMELESS PEOPLE***

*Ada SAVIN*  
*University of Versailles*

Verandahs, where the pages of the sea  
are a book left open by an absent master  
in the middle of another life —  
I begin here again,  
begin until this ocean’s  
a shut book. . . .

Derek Walcott, *Another Life*

The sigh of History rises over ruins, not over landscapes, and  
in the Antilles there are few ruins to sigh over, apart from the  
ruins of sugar estates and abandoned forts.

Derek Walcott, “The Antilles: Fragments of Epic Memory”

Almost forty years after its publication, Paule Marshall’s novel *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People* (1969) strikes the reader anew with its artful blending of universal and topical concerns. Set on a tiny Caribbean island, the novel branches out over three conti-

nents probing the effects of the past on a wide range of issues—the aftermath of slavery and colonialism, Black and Jewish Diasporas, post-colonial societies and First World relations.<sup>1</sup> Well ahead of her time, Marshall explores interconnections between the local and the global in a transnational world.

A Barbadian immigrant in the United States, the writer holds an insider/outsider position on the American literary map.<sup>2</sup> This in-between status—neither African-American nor Caribbean—was not a very comfortable one during the 1960s and 1970s. Influenced by the ideological confrontation between Black Power intellectuals and White establishment, African-American writings took on a radical stance that left little room for a more nuanced approach to issues of race and class. The period was also marked by the revival of the archetypal African American genre: the slave narrative. A maverick of sorts, Paule Marshall embarked on her own literary trajectory which earned her some severe criticism from writers Nikki Giovanni and Kamau Brathwaite among others. Her writings have received due recognition only within the past two decades as critics are opening up to Marshall's hybrid fiction that suggests comparisons with African-American women writers (Gloria Naylor comes to mind) but also with the themes and preoccupations of Caribbean writers like Fred D'Aguiar or Caryl Phillips.<sup>3</sup>

---

1. Cf. Caryl Phillips' comment on the Caribbean artists as being better prepared for migration than others since three continents, Europe, Africa, Asia have provided the bedrock of their identity. "Caribbean people are forever moving between versions of 'home', spurred on by the restless confluence of blood in their veins, an impure mixture that suggests transcendence and connectivity". *A New World Order* (New York: Random House, 2001): 131.

2. Her first novel, *Brown Girl, Brownstones* (1959) centers on the members of a Barbadian family in New York.

3. It has been noted that Caribbean writers made earlier and more numerous

This essay focuses on Marshall's peculiar representation of the Middle Passage and on her interweaving of Black and Jewish diasporic figures, i.e. ironically the very aspects that were criticized or overlooked when the book first came out. I will also argue that Marshall creates a unique, original genre in *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People*. Even as she resorts to some tropes of the (neo)-slave narrative, she ultimately strays away/departs from the strict generic canon and produces a hybrid fictional work.

The novel unfolds against the backdrop of a fictional, forgotten and forlorn Caribbean island where blacks, whites and mixed race people—locals and visitors of various origins and social classes—are brought together. The novel's starting point is the arrival of an American team (headed by Saul Amron, a Jewish American anthropologist) whose mission is to assist the islanders in their economic development. Bourne Island<sup>1</sup> is divided into two sections: the rich one inhabited by the local elite and Bournehills, the devastated part of the island —Marshall's "chosen place" whose inhabitants are the "timeless people", poor, black, forever marked by their past enslavement. Their spokeswoman, Merle Kinbona,<sup>2</sup> the offspring of a white sugar cane plantation owner and a black servant, is back on the island after a tumultuous stay in London. The tense, ambivalent relations between natives and

---

attempts at portraying the Middle Passage than their American counterparts. See the individual works and the long debate between Lamming, Naipaul and Brathwaite on the concept of Caribbean culture. Cf. Françoise Charras, "Landings: Robert Hayden and Kamau Brathwaite's Poetic Renderings of the Middle Passage in Comparative Perspective", in *Black Imagination and the Middle Passage*, Maria Diedrich, Henry L. Gates, Jr. and C. Pedersen, eds. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999): 57-70.

1. Note the choice of the name "bourne," i. e. edge, limit.
2. The name suggests the kinship of bones, maybe as a reference to her African origins.

foreigners, blacks and whites, haves and have-nots dramatize the legacy of the past and the vicissitudes of post-colonial power relationships. The novel closes with the cancellation of Saul's project, his wife Harriet's suicide, and Merle's decision to return to Africa and join her estranged husband and daughter.

In its sweeping epic scope, *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People* tells the intertwined histories of slavery and the black Diaspora in reverse, starting from the New World.<sup>1</sup> The novel's narrative and thematic structure appears to be governed by a strange dialectics between spatial unity and temporal expansion. Bourne Island lies at the far east of the Caribbean, in a nexus position between the New World, Africa and Europe:

Like the others, it was small, poignantly so, and vulnerable, defenseless. Like all the rest, it seemed expendable: for what could it be worth to the world, being so small? Unlike the others [...] it stood off by itself to the right, almost out in the Atlantic. It might have been put there by the giants to mark the eastern boundary of the entire continent, to serve as its bourn[...] it remained—alone amid an immensity of sea and sky, becalmed now that its turbulent history was past, facing east, the open sea, and across the sea, hidden beyond the horizon, the colossus of Africa.<sup>2</sup>

---

1. "The chronology of Marshall's publications suggests her intentional design to reverse the 'middle passage'; that is she examines the experience of blacks not in transit from Africa to the New World but from the New World back toward Africa". Dorothy H. Denniston, *The Fiction of Paule Marshall* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1983): xii.

2. MARSHALL Paule, *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People* (1969. New-York: Vintage, 1992): 12-13. The page numbers of subsequent quotations are noted parenthetically in the text.

History and geography have come together to mark Bourne Island as a physical and cultural crossroads between past and present, between Old World and New World. This is Marshall's "chosen place" that brings together "heirs and descendants" (title of Part I) of the slave society and of colonial rule and forces them to confront their burdensome pasts. Seen from a plane, this patch of land appears to be "at the will of a mindless sea," like a boat or a ship that could be swallowed by the sea at any moment. Given her insider/outsider perspective, Marshall manages to capture and to convey the sense of fragmentation, the instability, the cultural heterogeneity, that characterize the Caribbean. Outsiders who try to apply their methods to understanding the area are soon confronted with their incapacity to decipher its multiple layers of meaning. This is precisely what happens when the team of American anthropologists comes to Bourne Island. Saul Amron (and the reader in his wake) embarks on an ethnographic exploration of the island only to find out that his "tools" are not adapted to penetrating the secrets of "the chosen place".

One could actually argue that Marshall's fictive island epitomizes the volatility, the unpredictability but also the serial, repetitive nature that, according to certain scholars, characterizes the Caribbean.<sup>1</sup> Approached from this angle, Bourne Island appears as a "repeating island," a chaotic space "which can lead to unexpected corridors allowing passage from one point to another in

---

1. Influenced by the theory of Chaos, Antonio Benitez-Rojo claims that "within the sociocultural fluidity of the Caribbean archipelago, within its historiographic turbulence and its ethnological and linguistic clamor, within its generalized instability of vertigo and hurricane, one can sense the features of an island that 'repeats' itself, unfolding and bifurcating until it reaches all the seas and lands of the earth . . ." *The Repeating Island: The Caribbean and the Post-modern Perspective* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1992): 3.

the labyrinth" (Benitez-Rojo 1992: 3). The peculiar topography, suggestive of timelessness but also of transience, makes the island a fit outdoor stage for the performance of human passions lying dormant. The "wrecked hills that appeared to be racing en masse toward the sea [...] looked like crude seats of some half-ruined coliseum, *where an ancient tragedy was still performed*" (99, my italics).<sup>1</sup> The island appears as "a narrow winding corridor" taking the visitors into another time (95). It seems unreal, a trick played on the eye. To Saul it evokes "every place that had been wantonly used, its substance stripped away, and then abandoned" . . . (100) A contact zone of intersecting histories and geographies, the place elicits a sense of *déjà vu* among the main characters; Merles, Saul and his wife Harriet are set off on intricate journeys into (re)memory.

The island reverberates with the turbulent history of the Caribbean—the destruction of the local Caribs and the importing of slaves by the Whites, "those uninvited guests". Not much has changed in Bournehills since slavery times; the economy is still based on sugar cane cutting and the poor islanders still live with the memory of the slave revolt led by Cuffee Ned, a memory rekindled and re-enacted during the yearly carnival. The islanders' everyday life is accompanied by the persistent sound of the ocean. In its fluidity, instability and clamour, the sea perpe-

---

1. Marshall seems to anticipate Derek Walcott's vision of a devastated Caribbean devoid of grand ruins and monuments whose only exhibits are "the rusted slave wheel of the sugar factory, cannon, and chains, the crusted amphora of cutthroats, all the paraphernalia of degradation and cruelty which we exhibit as history [...] as if the ovens of Auschwitz and Hiroshima were the temples of the race". "The Muse of History", *What the Twilight Says* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1998): 44.

trates the "unceasing lament" of those drowned during the Middle Passage:

It was the Atlantic this side of the island, a wild-eyed, marauding sea the color of slate, deep, full of dangerous currents, lined with row upon row of barrier reefs, and with a sound like that of the combined voices of the drowned raised in a loud unceasing lament—all those, the nine million and more it is said, who in their enforced exile, their Diaspora, had gone down between this point and the homeland lying out of sight to the east. (106)<sup>1</sup>

An emotionally charged place, Bournehills is given a majestic stature in the novel. It is home and exile, space and place, "rememory" and forgetfulness, past and present. The poor inhabitants—"heirs and descendants" of slaves, victims of colonization and neo-slavery—form an indistinct, faceless group, marking the significant events on the island by their regular appearance: immobile and silent, they gaze intently at the white visitors, their inquisitive eyes asking for an impossible redress. The islanders' silent chorus speaks louder than the most vociferous accusation.<sup>2</sup> Messengers of another time, they are never assigned names; in their still life poses, they look "unimaginably old," as if they had come from the other end of "a dimly lit corridor" (137). Their deep-

---

1. Note Derek Walcott's similar perception: "The sea sighs with the drowned from the Middle Passage, the butchery of its aborigines [...] bleeds in the scarlet of the immortelle, and even the actions of surf on sand cannot erase the African memory" . . . , "The Antilles: Fragments of Epic Memory", *What the Twilight Says* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1998): 81.

2. "The women were silent also but they gave the impression of being on the verge of uttering some word, some dark pronouncement which they would intone in prophetic Delphic voices" (135). As Robert Hayden suggested, "a silence can be audible as a laugh, a sigh, a groan" (*Collected Prose, "Reflections,"* in Charras 1999: 59).



seated incapacity and unwillingness to communicate suggest the impossibility of uttering the unspeakable. Drowned in the submarine unity of the Caribbean, their ancestors' traumatic experience is forever silenced.<sup>1</sup> If the tragedy of the Middle Passage remains inarticulate, it is palpable in the alternating rhythms of the roaring ocean and in the islanders' pregnant silence; or, in Merle Kinbona's oscillating moods between occasional verbal overflow (actually a counterpart to the islanders' silence) and cataleptic states of mute isolation.

Merle, arguably the novel's central character and Marshall's *alter ego*, is an educated, "twice diasporized" half-breed whose physical appearance betrays the presence of conflicting strains: Bantu face dusted over lightly with talcum powder, earrings carved in the form of European saints, colorful print dress with African tribal motifs. "She had donned this somewhat bizarre outfit, each item of which stood opposed to, at war even, with the other, to express rather a diversity and disunity within herself, and her attempt, unconscious probably, to reconcile these opposing parts, to make of them a whole" (5). Her heavy bracelets,

---

1. "Africa, the signified which could not be represented directly in slavery, remained and remains the unspeakable 'presence' in Caribbean culture". Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora", in *Theorizing Diaspora*, Jana Evans Braziel and A. Manur, eds. (1990. Oxford: Blackwell, 2003): 240. The only story the islanders are willing to pass on, by re-enacting it during carnival is that of Cuffee Ned's revolt. Note also Edouard Glissant's comment on Kamau Brathwaite's sweeping statement about Caribbean cultures, "the unity is submarine": "To my mind, this expression can only evoke all those Africans weighed down with ball and chain and thrown overboard whenever a slave ship was pursued by enemy vessels and felt too weak to put up a fight. *They sowed in the depths the seeds of an invisible presence*. And so transversality, and not the universal transcendence of the sublime, has come to light". Edouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*. Trans. J. Michael Dash (Charlottesville VA: University of Virginia Press, 1992). [social.chass.ncsu.edu/wyrick/debclass/glissa1.htm](http://social.chass.ncsu.edu/wyrick/debclass/glissa1.htm).

"like a captive's chains [...] lent a clangorous, unsettling note to her every move" (5). Her name is a strange composite of the African Kinbona ("That's just a little something left over from my African campaign") and the European Merle: "The name's just Merle. And soon it won't even be that. No names. No tags or titles. Just anonymity and silence". (72) Insecure, at odds with her self, Merle is tempted to join the islanders' "anonymity and silence". As if replicating Bourne Island's nexus location, she is both bridge and center, go-between and spokesperson. Saul's intuition is correct; to know the island and its people he has to know Merle, she "appeared to contain them all" (260).

The entire text is fraught with tensions arising from the juxtaposition of ahistorical (horizontal) and historical (vertical) perspectives, from the collusion between the Western notion of regularly progressive time and the "aquatic, sinuous culture of the Caribbean where time unfolds irregularly and resists being captured by the cycles of clock and calendar" (Benitez-Rojo 1992: 11). Time seems to have come to a standstill on Bournehills, even if outside intervention is meant to propel it forwards. Approaching the island, Harriet is overcome by "the sensation of being borne backward in time rather than forward in space". (21) The cyclical nature of the islanders' seasonal activities acts upon the visitors' psyche modifying their sense of space and time, laying bare the workings of their subconscious. This peculiar environment brings to the fore "some mysterious and obscured region of the mind which ordinary consciousness did not dare admit to light" (21); in Saul's case, "it could have been a troubled region within himself to which he had unwittingly returned" (100). Time appears to be governed by "its own laws" of simultaneous expansion and contraction: days and weeks seem to take years (Saul no longer

knows how long he has been there), while whole centuries are telescoped into recent events. Moreover, the boundaries between the living and the dead, between the young and the old tend to dissolve. The local children seem “unnervingly old and knowing [...] They might have been very old people who had lived out their time, and then instead of dying, had resumed the forms of the children they had once been and begun the life cycle all over again” (168). Saul is prone to a feeling that “he had stumbled upon a world that was real, inescapably real, yet at the same time somehow unreal; of the present but even more so of the past”. (216) He desperately wants to reach these “holdouts who [...] continued to stand like so many ghosts washed up by the sea under the great shadow of the house” (139). Churning the events of the past, the “repeating island” seems to expand in space and in time; thus, the “shadow” of the house evokes the Great House and its slaves but it could also signify other Shadows in recent history—the Shoa and the nuclear “holocaust”.<sup>1</sup>

*The Chosen Place, the Timeless People* is built on thematic and narrative triangulations. As Eric Sundquist put it, “the sea sounds of history toll differently” for Merle, Saul and Harriet.<sup>2</sup> The African, European and New World “presences”<sup>3</sup> that have come together in the making of Caribbean cultural identities are represented, albeit rather systematically, by the three characters. A former site of slave trade turned into a post-colonial society, Bourne Island

---

1. The nuclear menace is represented by the “shadowy” character of Harriet’s first husband, a physicist working in the development of nuclear programs.

2. SUNDQUIST, Eric, *Strangers in the Land: Blacks, Jews, Post-Holocaust America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005): 277.

3. The term is borrowed from Aimé Césaire’s and Leopold Senghor’s metaphor: *Présence africaine, présence européenne, présence américaine*. Cf. Hall 2003: 240.

is the aptly "chosen" place for a repetition of sorts, a remake with a difference as it were, of past events. At its centre lies the sugar factory: with its connections to slavery, underdevelopment, capitalism, imperialism, repression, and wars, it is one of the present-day manifestations of the plantation "the extraordinary Caribbean machine that repeats itself continually" (Benitez-Rojo 1992: 8).<sup>1</sup> Parallels between the plantation work of slavery and plant work under neo-colonialism are manifest. Bourne Island sustains dangerous race and class divisions made visible in the geographical separation of the islanders. The men working in the factory evoke their enslaved ancestors ("ghosts they might have been from some long sea voyage taken centuries ago", 154). The white manager Pollard, a reincarnation of the past overseer, holding to old ways, jodhpurs, polished boots, hat and horse, "called to mind some ghost who refused to keep to his grave even during the daytime" (161). The veranda of Merle's house, "like some no man's land no one dared cross" (132), epitomizes this separation: the poor islanders stare at it from a distance but refuse to join the party even though they are invited to do so.<sup>2</sup>

Race and class distinctions are temporarily abolished during the yearly "Bacchanal! Big Fete!" "Carnival in *The Chosen Place, the Timeless People* is less the pre-Lenten tourist festival, less the ancient cosmic festival of chaos and order, and more a ritual re-enactment of an event from the past—a re-memory of the Fall that displaced and dispersed people of African descent to the Ameri-

---

1. My use of the concepts "machine" and "plantation" is informed by Benitez-Rojo's interpretation of Deleuze and Guattari's concept. "[...] every machine is a conjunction of machines coupled together, and each one of these interrupts the flow of the previous one," (Benitez-Rojo 1992: 6)

2. The text repeatedly evokes Toni Morrison's concept of "rememory" as the continued presence of that which has disappeared or been forgotten.

cas" . . . <sup>1</sup> The opening march, punctuated by the sound of steps and the ring of bracelets, evokes the Africans' forced migration to the New World:

It was an awesome sound—the measured tread of those countless feet in the dust and the loud report of the bracelets, a sombre counterpoint to the gay carnival celebration. It conjured up [...] dark alien images of legions marching bound together over a vast tract, iron fitted into dank stone walls, chains [...] rattling in the deep hold of ships, and exile in an inhospitable land—an exile bitter and irreversible in which all memory of the former life and of the self as it had once been had been destroyed. (282)

The novel is suffused with “haunted imagery” that foregrounds the overlapping of present time and historical time. Marshall “resurrects” the dead as a silent, menacing presence that relentlessly haunts the living. Featuring the former slaves, the Bournehills band wear identical blue-and-white striped costumes and don the same masque “as if they had actually become those they were depicting” (283).<sup>2</sup> The past is strangely present in “those eyes which always appeared to be regarding you from across a great vista of time” (283). The ghostly spell of slavery hanging over the march is broken with the re-enactment of Cuffee Ned’s revolt.<sup>3</sup> His legacy is passed on mainly through ritualized expres-

---

1. REYES, Angelita, “Carnival as an Archeological Site for Memory” in *Memory, Narrative and Identity*, A. Singh, J. Skerett, Jr. and R. Hogan, eds. (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1994): 180.

2. Edwidge Danticat describes a similar procession during the carnival in Jacmel, Haiti. Cf. *After the Dance: A Walk through carnival in Jacmel, Haiti*. (New York: Crown Publishers, 2002): 44.

3. “Cuffee Ned perfectly embodies Bournehills’ idea of subversion that is rehearsed in various New World historical narratives—Haiti’s Toussaint L’Ouvverture and Nat Turner and Denmark Vesey of the southern United States share

sion: body language, gestures, music, drums. The pageant proceeds with a "restrained two-step dance" conveying the entire ceremony a binary character, with alternating rhythms between silence and music, death and life, sadness and jubilation, defeat and triumph. "So it went the entire afternoon, the dead march alternating with the vivid scene on the float and the triumphal outpouring" (288). Remindful of the ocean's tide, the movement is repeated throughout the streets culminating with the performance of Cuffee Ned's victory. The entire town participates in this climactic moment that contrasts with the numbed silence of the opening ceremony. In the cyclical repetition of the ritual, the Bournehills people stubbornly stake their claim to this crucial episode of their history affirming its messianic value (they await the second coming of a mythic slave rebel). The poor islanders live with the (re)memory of the past: "We're an odd, half-mad people [...] We don't ever forget anything, and yesterday comes like today to us" (102), confesses Merle. It is as if the past had abruptly stopped with the slave institution, as if historical continuity had been rendered impossible. Marshall's islanders seem haunted by a "history that has not ended, [...] by a historical occurrence of an event that, in effect, *does not end*".<sup>1</sup>

If Bourne Island is a paradigm for impoverished, post-colonial countries it also acts as a resonance chamber, echoing past and present vicissitudes, perpetrated there and elsewhere. Sugar's

---

the same heroic constellation". Hortense SPILLERS, "Chosen Place, Timeless People: Some Figurations on the New World," in *Conjuring: Black Women, Fiction, and Literary Tradition*, Marjorie Pryse and Hortense Spillers, eds. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985): 162.

1. FELMAN, Shoshana and DORI LAUB, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History* (New York: Routledge, 1992): xix.

nightclub,<sup>1</sup> the meeting point of islanders and visitors, still bears signs of having served as one of the famous West Indian barracons.<sup>2</sup>

It resembled a junk shop rather than a nightclub, so filled was it with an assortment of odds and ends. It could have been the dumping ground of the world. All the discards of the nations, all the things that had become worn out over the centuries or fallen into disuse might have been brought and piled in a great charnel heap here. (82)

*Mutatis mutandis*, Marshall's description of "the dumping ground of the world" echoes certain literary and visual representations of the Shoah.<sup>3</sup> The omniscient narrator's voice traces the long-term effects of slavery from the vantage point of a post-Holocaust consciousness. There emerges a bleak, repetitive vision of history in which wrongs are endlessly perpetuated and impossible to efface. The novel's epigraph (from the Tiv of West Africa)—"Once a great wrong has been done, it never dies. People speak the words of peace, but their hearts do not forgive. Generations perform ceremonies of reconciliation but there is no end"—cancels out any hope for redress, as if the concentric view of time with its inherent fatalism had won over the West European notion of progress, of regeneration.

---

1. Note the significant choice of the name. Sundquist quotes a chilling Cuban aphorism, "Sugar is made with blood" (Sundquist 2005: 276).

2. "The rusted remains of the iron manacles that had been fitted around the ankles and wrists, around the dark throats, could still be seen [...] in the walls of the cellar. It had all begun there" (82).

3. Paule Marshall is not the only Caribbean writer to resort to the Holocaust as a possible point of departure for understanding slavery. Caryl Phillips, Derek Walcott and Jamaica Kincaid also probe connections between Black and Jewish history and memory.

The title of the novel harbors an implicit association with another chosen people and another timeless place. By making Bourne Island the meeting ground between Merle and Saul, children of the Black and Jewish Diaspora respectively, Marshall adds a significant layer of history and memory to the text. A sympathetic outsider, ready to assist Bournehills in its economic uplift, Saul Amron is a Sephardic Jew whose first wife had been a survivor of Auschwitz. The instant he sets foot on the island, Saul is prone to a strange feeling of *déjà vu*. In its barrenness and depletion, the place "seemed to hold some personal meaning for him, his thoughts becoming complex, circular, wheels within a wheel" (100). The islanders' expressions of self-hatred mingled with disdain for their own kin mirror Saul's own ambivalent feelings. He craves acceptance from the faceless, silent people whose penetrating gaze seems to lay bare all his flaws. This gnawing sense of kinship acquires sudden meaning when (in a partial analogy with the biblical Saul) he is struck by a two-fold revelation: his Sephardic Jewish heritage has made him sensitive to the suffering of others; however, atonement can only come from one's inner self. His momentary communion with Merle is based on affinities that go back to their ancestors' experience of suffering and oppression over centuries of displacement.<sup>1</sup> Merle and Saul "might have been witness to, victim of, some unspeakably inhuman act and been condemned to wander the world telling every

---

1. As Paul Gilroy points out, "fruitful links between the experiences of oppression encountered by [Jews and Blacks] can be deduced not from the stress on pain and suffering, on dissonance and the negative [...] but from a more primary experience, namely that of *fear and vulnerability*: the helplessness of the village community before the perpetual and unpredictable imminence of the lynching or the pogrom, the race riot". *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London: Verso, 1993): 206.



stranger about it". (89) Though differently placed in origin and situation, Merle and Saul "can intimately 'have' the same experience".<sup>1</sup> This empathic intersubjectivity is what allows them to engage in acts of "mutual rememory". In its display of excess and chaos, carnival time catalyses their feelings, prompting them to pour out their respective tales. As he is watching the silent march of the Bournehills band, Saul sums up the painful past of the two Diasporas in a condensed, elliptical statement ("it evokes better than any words in the world what it must have been like back then for your people—and for mine for that matter, all those centuries", 314). Marshall aptly refrains from reifying Black or Jewish identity. Merle and Saul express irony, sarcasm and scepticism toward each other but are also tolerant toward their respective idiosyncrasies. A significant reversal of roles occurs when Saul, who has been interviewing the local inhabitants for his research, is interviewed by Merle, the native Caribbean educated in England. Throughout, the novel addresses many of the epistemological, ideological and moral issues that anthropology as a discipline has had to face in its confrontation with "the Other".

Though not meant to last, the relationship between Merle and Saul is built on trust, responsibility and independence. Mutual confessions pour forth as each discovers in the other an empathic listener and a unique chance to atone for past sins. In a poignant scene, Merle's and Saul's deceased wife Shosha's faces seem to merge in a joint accusation: "And it fleetingly occurred to [Saul]

---

1. I am indebted to Ashraf Rushdy's general reflections on "The Palimpsest Imperative in African American Fiction", *Remembering Generations: Race and Family in Contemporary African American Fiction* (The University of North Carolina Press, 2001).

[uncpress.unc.edu/chapters/rushdy\\\_remembering.html](http://uncpress.unc.edu/chapters/rushdy\_remembering.html)

that perhaps in Merle he was being offered a chance to make good that old failure” (399). Sitting by her bedside, Saul takes in the objects in the room, Merle’s personal belongings “dumped in a confused heap” (401) but also the prints and drawings hanging on the walls. The latter retrace the history of slavery starting with the Middle Passage<sup>1</sup> and moving on to scenes of the planters’ wives and daughters out for their late-afternoon drives, next to others showing “black figures at work in the fields that looked deceptively pleasant in the old prints” . . . (400) “Fixed and rooted in that other time”, Bournehills serves as a *lasting testimony* to all that had gone on [. . .] as a *reminder* . . . that it was not yet over, only the forms had changed [. . .] and finally, as a *memorial* [. . .] to the figures bound to the millwheel in the print and to each other in the packed, airless hold of the ship in the drawing. (402, my italics) It is then and there, in Merle’s room, among the scattered objects in the room, “memorabilia of a lifetime—and of the time that reached beyond her small life” (401) that Saul has a new revelation: the room not only mirrors Merle’s “attempt to impose some order on the chaos” (401), it is a representation of Bournehills’ history and memory and, by extension, of the entire Caribbean:

Like the room, [Bournehills], too, was perhaps a kind of museum, a place in which had been stored the relics and remains of the era recorded in the faded prints on the walls [. . .] Bournehills, its shabby woebegone hills and spent land, its odd people who at

---

1. “In the midst of these . . . stood a large, very old . . . drawing of a three-masted Bristol slaver [. . .] the kind famous in its day. It had been meticulously rendered in cross-section to show how the cargo, the men, women and children, the babies at breast, had been stowed away on the closely tiered decks to take up the least room on the journey” (401)

times seemed other than themselves, might have been selected as the repository of the history which reached beyond it to include the hemisphere north and south (402).<sup>1</sup>

Saul views the Caribbean as a “paradoxical space in which one has the illusion of experiencing totality” (Benitez-Rojo 1992: 17) possibly because people neutralize violence through real or symbolic sacrifice, by referring society to the trans-historical codes of Nature.

The “timeless people’s” rites and rituals remain shrouded in mystery.<sup>2</sup> In the novel’s closing lines, a heavy curtain of rain covers the roads of the island erasing all the traces of the place and the people. Likewise, the frequent use of modals like “might”, “might have been,” “could have been” constantly undermines the reliability of the narrator so that the reader is left wondering whether this may have all been a dream or rather the nightmare from which Bournehills has not awakened yet.<sup>3</sup> This narrative unreliability underscores the novel’s hybrid generic form. If *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People* clearly belongs to the long series of African American writing that take slavery as its “pre-text”,<sup>4</sup>

---

1. “The Antilles are an *island bridge* connecting, in ‘another way,’ North and South America. This geographical accident gives the entire area, including its continental foci, the character of an archipelago, that is, a discontinuous conjunction” . . . (Benitez-Rojo 1992: 2, my italics).

2. Importing American technology and know-how into this universe only provokes misunderstandings as the presence of “the other” brings to the surface deep-seated feelings of resentment on the part of the local people. “You can’t see for looking” . . . Merle tells Saul (390).

3. Besides this reference to Joyce, the text contains numerous inter-textual references; among others, to the Wandering Jew, the Ancient Mariner and, of course, *The Tempest*.

4. Cf. CARBY, Hazel, “Ideologies of Black Folk: The Historical Novel of Slavery,” in *Slavery and the Literary Imagination*, Deborah McDowell and Arnold Ram-

it does raise puzzling generic questions: Is it a slave narrative? A neo-slave narrative? A palimpsest narrative? A trans-national historical novel? Marshall's novel certainly contains elements of all. But while it reworks tropes of the (neo)-slave narrative, the novel does not conform to the classic definitions of the genre.<sup>1</sup> I would suggest that it is a mark of Marshall's literary originality to have crossed the generic boundaries traced by her predecessors and to create a unique literary work that defies strict generic definitions.

Pathos gives way to bathos in the novel's open ending. Saul and Merle's capacity to act as go-betweens (as "island bridges") has reached its limits. Harriet is claimed by the sea that harbors the victims of the Middle Passage. Saul heads back to the United States in search of a new vocation, while Merle embarks on a voyage to Africa, via an original trajectory that will take her south to Trinidad, then to Recife<sup>2</sup> and on to Uganda. Her "chosen place" however remains Bourne Island, the New World, where Africa exists as an imagined community, with an imaginative geography and history. "To *this* 'Africa,' which is a necessary part of the Caribbean imaginary, we can't literally go home again" (Hall 1990: 241). A return to the mother country of origin appears impossible. Merle and Saul remain diasporic identities, "constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference" (Hall 1990: 244). Within its paradoxical space and time, Marshall's novel ultimately probes the

---

persad, eds. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989): 126.

1. Cf. BELL, Bernard, *The African American Novel and its Tradition*. (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1987) and Ashraf RUSHDY, *Neo-Slave Narratives: Studies in the Social Logic of a Literary Form* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

2. Recife was the first place in the New World to harbor Sephardic Jews after their expulsion from Spain.

limits of inter-personal understanding and the possibility of intelligible discourse across cultures and religions. Merle and Saul's momentary communion offer a glimmer of hope for the future of inter-personal relationships across Diasporas. But their short-lived experience could only take place in Bournehills, "someplace the world has turned its back on and even God's forgotten" (469). It is no mere accident that the "chosen place" should be located in the Caribbean—"the first, the original and the purest diaspora".<sup>1</sup>

### *Works Cited*

- BELL, Bernard. *The African American Novel and its Tradition*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1987.
- BENITEZ-ROJO, Antonio. *The Repeating Island: The Caribbean and the Post-modern Perspective*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1992.
- CARBY, Hazel. "Ideologies of Black Folk: The Historical Novel of Slavery," in *Slavery and the Literary Imagination*, Deborah McDowell and Arnold Rampersad, eds. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989; 125-143.
- CHARRAS, Françoise. "Landings: Robert Hayden and Kamau Brathwaite's Poetic Renderings of the Middle Passage in Comparative Perspective", in *Black Imagination and the Middle Passage*, Maria Diedrich, H. L. Gates, Jr. and C. Pedersen, eds. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999; 57-70.
- DENNISTON, Dorothy. *The Fiction of Paule Marshall*. Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1983.

---

1. HALL, Stuart, "Caribbean Identity in Question" (University of Warwick "Walter Rodney Memorial Lecture", 1991): [www.mona.uwi.edu/library/stuart\\\_hall.html](http://www.mona.uwi.edu/library/stuart\_hall.html). For Hall, diaspora means hybridity and difference; hence his vision of the New World as the real beginning of diaspora and difference. Cf. Hall: 1990.

GILROY, Paul. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, London: Verso, 1993.

GLISSANT, Edouard. *Caribbean Discourse*. Trans. J. Michael Dash, Charlottesville VA: University of Virginia Press, 1992.

[social.chass.ncsu.edu/wyrick/debclass/glissa1.htm](http://social.chass.ncsu.edu/wyrick/debclass/glissa1.htm).

HALL, Stuart. "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" in *Theorizing Diaspora*, Braziel, Jana Evans and A. Manur, eds.. 1990. Oxford: Blackwell, 2003; 233-247.

HALL, Stuart. "Caribbean Identity in Question", "Walter Rodney Memorial Lecture", University of Warwick, 1991.

[www.mona.uwi.edu/library/stuart\\\_hall.html](http://www.mona.uwi.edu/library/stuart\_hall.html)

MARSHALL, Paule. *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People*. 1969. New-York: Vintage, 1992.

PHILLIPS, Caryl. *A New World Order*. Random House: New York, 2001.

REYES, Angelita. "Carnival as an Archeological Site for Memory", in *Memory, Narrative and Identity*. A. Singh, J. Skerett, Jr. and R. Hogan, eds. Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1994; 179-198.

RUSHDY, Ashraf. *Neo-Slave Narratives: Studies in the Social Logic of a Literary Form*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999.

RUSHDY, Ashraf. *Remembering Generations: Race and Family in Contemporary African American Fiction*. The University of North Carolina Press, 2001.

[uncpress.unc.edu/chapters/rushdy\\\_remembering.html](http://uncpress.unc.edu/chapters/rushdy\_remembering.html).

SPILLERS, Hortense. "Chosen Place, Timeless People: Some Figurations on the New World," in *Conjuring: Black Women, Fiction, and Literary Tradition*, Marjorie Pryse and Hortense Spillers, eds. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985; 151-174.

SUNDQUIST, Eric. *Strangers in the Land: Blacks, Jews, Post-Holocaust America*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005.

WALCOTT, Derek. *Selected Poetry*. Oxford: Heinemann, 1993.

WALCOTT, Derek. *What the Twilight Says*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998.

*Les Carnets du Cerpac* n° 6, 2007, 199-221.

**THE SCIENCE/FICTION CARNIVAL IN BARBARA  
CHASE-RIBOUD'S *HOTTENTOT VENUS***

*Željka ŠVRLJUGA*

*University of Bergen, Norway*

As is long since established, the neo-slave narrative draws on its nineteenth century forerunner as history, cultural memory, and genre. Rewriting the past in fiction, possibly with more reverence than pure historiography would dare to show, implies an attempt to redeem the past and its (skewed) ideology, as well as its historical subjects. The process of redemption requires a time lapse to enable a more appropriate perspective to emerge, and thus a better understanding and interpretation of historical events. Redemption and happiness is what we expect from the future, regardless of the fact whether this future is viewed from the vantage point of the present or of the past. Or, as Walter Benjamin proposes, “our view of the past, [...] is the concern of history. The past carries with it a temporal index by which it is referred to redemption. There is a secret agreement between



past generations and the present ones”<sup>1</sup> (1999: 245-46). Consequently, just as history and its concomitant redemption, or historical scholarship as redemption, implies an “image” and a “view”, which strive towards accuracy but can never fully claim it, historiographic fiction applies a similar method of scrutiny though with fewer pretensions. Barbara Chase-Riboud’s novel, in its attempt to redeem the historical subject behind the pejorative designation of Hottentot Venus, scrutinizes the period in which she lived, targeting its paradoxical overlap with the age of reason and the institution of slavery, and their concomitant ideologies and Weltanschauung. Using her eponymous character as her mouthpiece, the author, who champions irony as her predominant trope and the carnivalesque as her textual politics, perceives in Western expansionism and colonialism the roots of economic exploitation, slavery, and racism.

If the hallmark of carnival is turning the world upside-down and inside-out, with the aim to destabilize the prevailing cultural norms, standards and values, and challenge the existing hierarchies, then carnival as a trope of cultural change and transformation is both an ideal, albeit utopian model<sup>2</sup>, and an analytic category.<sup>3</sup> What makes carnival, as an institution, an ideal is its apparently revolutionary nature that seems to promise a reversal of power structures: that the low will reign high, that the slaves will rule their masters, and that popular forms will undermine the symbolic order. As a popular and religious festivity, carnival

---

1. BENJAMIN, Walter, “Theses on the Philosophy of History”, in *Illuminations*, Hannah Arendt, ed. (London: Pimlico, 1999): 245-258.

2. BAKHTIN, Mikhail, *Rabelais and His World*. Cambridge, MA: MIT P, 1968): 256.

3. STALLYBRASS, Peter and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1986): 6.

works by consent within a limited time span, which restricts its subversive potential. Working by inversion, it offers a promise regarding unfulfilled desires for cultural and political change. When literature, in turn, adopts it as its *modus operandi*, it has the reversal of norms, values, and beliefs on its agenda. The carnivalesque in literature is, by contention, sanctioned and delimited in time, and its utopian politics of reversal is short-lived, just as in its extramural model.

Twentieth century re-visions of slavery set out to question, revise and reverse not only the power relations which have governed ethnic and racial politics, but also narrative, generic and scientific representations. Their aim is to debunk dominant discourses and their concomitant biases, and the rigid set of binary oppositions—subject/object, master/slave, culture/nature, science/fiction—that share a distrust of a transcendental signified. If all power is linguistically, thus socially and ideologically constituted, then the border between the dominant (monological) and subordinate (popular, fictional, vernacular and subversive) discourses is fluid. The ensuing negotiation of positions, spaces, discursive practices, ideologies, and textual and cultural productions has become a matrix for the postmodern novel, thus also for the burgeoning branch of the carnivalesque neo-slave narrative.

Of late, the neo-slave narrative has also engaged with the discourse of science—scientific racism—adopting and adapting it for its textual politics. Thus Ishmael Reed's paradigmatic *Flight to Canada* (1976) not only turns history, literary representations of slavery and the big house narratives, the slave-narrative genre, the politics of ethnicity/race, and sexuality into carnival; it also parodies Samuel Cartwright's racially founded medical science and its afflictions—*Drapetomania* (a mental illness that affects

slaves causing them to run away) and *Dysathesia Aethypica* [sic] (a pathological insensitivity to physical and mental stimuli)—making them, in Massa Swille’s belief, responsible for the behavior and escape of his slaves<sup>1</sup> While Reed’s sporadic parodic reference is the first to inscribe science into the neo-slave narrative, Patricia Eakins constructs *The Marvelous Adventures of Pierre Baptiste, Father and Mother, First and Last* (1999) as a “shadow history” of the Comte de Buffon’s *Histoire Naturelle* (1749-1778). The novel’s title character, who follows in Buffon’s footsteps and considers himself his “Apprentice” in animal morphology, questions, revises and reverses Savant’s genealogy of species, hence concomitant issues of race. He records his findings and reflections on the “obverse of the [tea] labels”<sup>2</sup>, an act by which he indeed becomes the obverse of Buffon’s taxonomy, and his narrative, written in the style of fantastic realism, becomes the obverse of the scientist’s objective and descriptive style. Barbara Chase-Riboud, in turn, creates another shadow history in *Hottentot Venus* (2003), in which her heroine provides a counter narrative to that of Georges Léopold Cuvier. This intellectual and scholarly follower and revisionist of Buffon, anatomist and paleontologist by orientation, is introduced into the neo-slave narrative as a propagator of polygenism (a belief in different development of races), and, by extension, of the Great Chain of Being and scientific racism. Although it is incorrect to claim that our knowledge of Sarah Baartman relies solely on his annals, for she was after all a nineteenth century icon of racial and sexual difference<sup>3</sup>, it is nonetheless true

---

1. REED, Ishmael, *Flight to Canada* (New York: Scribner, 1976): 18.

2. EAKINS, Patricia, *The Marvelous Adventures of Pierre Baptiste, Father and Mother, First and Last* (New York: New York UP, 1999): 34.

3. GILMAN, Sander L., “Black Bodies, White Bodies: Toward an Iconography

that their coupling has produced a series of binaries that have steered our understanding of race and sexuality in the Age of Reason. Consequently, the names of Georges Cuvier and Sarah Baartman came to stand for the science/specimen, culture/nature, and intellect/body nexus, which has been transported into literature, and thus also into Elizabeth Alexander's poetic work *The Venus Hottentot* (1990), Susan-Lori Parks's play *Venus* (1997) and most recently in Barbara Chase-Riboud's novel, *Hottentot Venus* (2003).

Little is known of the woman who was considered the early nineteenth century embodiment of African sexuality. Her steatopygia (protruding buttocks) and the well-hidden female *tablier* (the so-called "Hottentot apron" or the hypertrophy of external genitalia), made her into a grotesque attraction in sideshows and viewing salons in England and France, London and Paris in particular. Ssehura was born a member of the Khoekhoe nation in the Cape Town region of South Africa, and was orphaned at an early age. Married in her early teens, she was early widowed and left with a child who died in infancy, upon which she abandoned her native land and left for Cape Town. With the move, her name was changed to Saartjie (a Dutch diminutive for Sarah), and before she left the Cape region it was Anglicized into Sarah Baartman. She worked for a Dutch family as a nanny, and eventually signed a contract with her master's brother, Hendrick Caesar, and a ship surgeon, Alexander William Dunlop, to go to England, exhibit

---

of Female Sexuality in Late Nineteenth-Century Art, Medicine and Literature", in *Race, Writing, and Difference*, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. ed. (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1986): 223-261; 232. SHARPLEY-WHITING, T. Denean. *Black Venus. Sexual Savages, Primal Fears, and Primitive Narratives in French* (Durham, N.C.: Duke UP, 1999): 24.

her body of difference, and collect her share in the profit they expected to make. After the six-year contract period, her aim was to return to South Africa.

Chase-Riboud's *Hottentot Venus*, which recreates the life of Sarah Baartman, is not her first novel to focus on a historically verifiable female slave subject and her relation to the white male scientific authority, in whose shadow she stood. Almost a quarter of a century earlier, she fleshed out the story of Thomas Jefferson's slave and concubine Sally Hemings in her first novel, the title of which bears the protagonist's name.<sup>1</sup> Not only were Sally Hemings and Sarah Baartman contemporaries, but their life stories are seen through the prism of the governing ideology, and of scholarly and political thought of the period in which they lived. Their counter narratives to the official narratives of the men of science are the author's reconstruction of history from the vantage point of the repressed: what history failed to do, the story amends. This reparative act of writing/righting the wrongs of history appears at first glance radical in that it gives primacy to the voice of the oppressed; yet like the institution of carnival it is restricted in scope. The wished-for change and transgression, although limited in time, are granted by the same structure that provides the norm of power relations. Working by concession, such reversals, which are revolutionary in appearance yet utopian in intent, only confirm the existing power relations which they attempt to subvert. Although they do not bring real change,

---

1. Her earlier work—*Echo of Lions* (1989), whose subject matter is the *Amistad* mutiny; *The President's Daughter* (1994), a direct follow-up to her first novel relating the life story of the alleged daughter of Thomas Jefferson and his slave companion, Sally Hemings; and in a wider sense, her captivity narrative *Valide: A Story of Harem* (1986)—demonstrates her commitment to the history of slavery in and outside of the US.

they disclose the weaknesses of the system in power, thus ensuring with their impotence the perpetuation of the system of oppression. However, as an ideological critique their function is revolutionary, although it does not bring the desired political change. Nevertheless, it brings change in our consciousness and urges us to critically assess the discourse of the past and its concomitant ideologies. Although the carnivalesque empowerment is short lived, it is nonetheless a necessary revisionist historical and narrative tool and strategy of rebuttal.

A carnival enactment requires that the subordinate discourse be related to the official one, be it history, science or genre. Motivated by reverence for her characters in history, Chase-Riboud adopts a politics of suspicion vis-à-vis the history that has neglected and/or repressed their individuality and role. Yet the critique she offers is double edged. While, as already stated, the system which pushed them to the margins of history is her primary objective, the author is also critical of her heroines' compliance with that system and their unwillingness and inability to act. When I again bring Chase-Riboud's *Sally Hemings* (1979) into the discussion, it is to stress that her first novel provides a thematic and narrative matrix for her latest in staging a dialogue between two competing discourses: the monological discourse of science and its personal counter narrative. Jefferson and Cuvier's excerpts, which precede each individual chapter in the respective novels (the official, authoritative and authoritarian discourse of science), and the protagonists' life stories (the subordinate, popular and subjective discourse) compete for verisimilitude; they tell their disparate truths, and although the stories cannot cancel the scientific treatises, they at least challenge the official discourse and the myth of truth as such. Such discourses of the other, which

in a manner of speaking represent our cultural treasures, are, in Benjamin's historical materialist view, indebted to their nameless contemporaries. Among these are, no doubt, the two women that historical and narrative revisionism have finally brought to our attention. Another equally if not more relevant point that needs to be driven home is Benjamin's equation of cultural documents with brutality (Benjamin 199: 248), which is in our case doubly significant since the two women were slave subjects, whose brutalized personal histories are also overshadowed by brutalizing narratives of power. While Jefferson's views on the inferiority of non-Caucasian races are only one of the narrative motives in *Sally Hemings* – the others being philosophical, political and cultural views that relate to social issues at large—the excerpts serve as pillars of scholarly thought which underpin the narrative interpretation of the era in general and the position of female slave subjects in particular. Thus excerpts from *Notes on the State of Virginia*, which are imported as epigraphs into *Sally Hemings*, appear in *Hottentot Venus* as narrated cross-references, and are by no means out of context. Since Jefferson's views on race are similar to those of Cuvier, and the novel's Cuvier is a great admirer of Thomas Jefferson, they figure as ideological pillars on which the novel rests.<sup>1</sup> Political philosopher, twice elected president and Father of the Constitution, who penned, "that all men are created equal", Jefferson not only held but fathered slaves, which potentially undermines his otherwise radical-political and scientific sig-

---

1. The fact that Jefferson was a great admirer of Cuvier, whose views and methodologies he in part endorses in his *Notes on the State of Virginia* [Yochelson, Ellis L., "Mr. Peale and His Mammoth Museum", *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 136: 4 (December 1992): 493], merits our attention and enforces this argument.

nificance. As one of the founding fathers of the US nation, Jefferson is treated with reverence, though with a substantial dose of skepticism and implicit criticism, which characterizes Chase-Riboud's politics of textuality in general. This is by no means an unexpected strategy in a narrative project whose aim is to lift the two repressed women from the status of historical footnotes to that of agents in history.

Chase-Riboud's aim is to give voice and subjectivity to the objectified female slave subjects<sup>1</sup> who were exploited as free labor, providers of sexual services, and objects of the voyeuristic gaze of the general public and its medical counterpart, as in Cuvier's "theatre of anatomy". Last but not least, the most extreme form of objectification relates to the violation of the body through autopsy in Cuvier's "slaughterhouse of science"<sup>2</sup>, where the severing of organs becomes scientific rape and the excision of Baartman's sex leads to scientific and verbal orgasm, which is crowned with a gratuitous and gratifying discharge: "The great Chain of Being. The great Chain of Being! The great Chain of Being, he cried out as he ejaculated his hand deep in my entrails. He was stuttering like a Hottentot" (282). The woman, and particularly her sexual organs that were earlier pronounced "the very object of [the scientists'] desire" (241), in the dissection episode becomes "unexplored Africa, the Dark Continent, dissected, vio-

---

1. Sarah Baartman was a slave for only a short period of her life, and she was manumitted before she turned thirteen, after which she became an indentured servant. Nevertheless, I would argue for her status as a slave, not on legal grounds but on the basis of her economic and sexual exploitation and treatment by different owners. For alternative views see Magubane 2001.

2. CHASE-RIBOUD, Barbara, *Hottentot Venus* (New York: Anchor Books, 2004: 285). Subsequent page references to the novel will be provided parenthetically in the text.



lated, probed, raped by dead white men since Roman times" (281). Freudian allusions aside, this whole scene signifies on the politics of colonization of Africa and its inhabitants' bodies, the female ones in particular, highlighting the grotesque participation in this carnival of scientific inquiry, in which the speaking cadaver-cum-soul can do nothing but sneer:

This was the intelligentsia born of the Age of Enlightenment: medical doctors, anatomists, paleontologists, alienists, naturalists, evolutionists, [...] God was on their side and the iron fettered weight of civilization (281).

As in carnival proper, there are no audiences, only participants, and the men of science cast off their academic cloaks and join in the passing around the jar containing her most desired and cherished organ, which they admire and worship "like a Holy Grail" (283).

With the body's silent screams that accompany the perverse dissection and the ensuing stories of the individual organs relating how they were pickled or dropped into the slop pail, the narrator displaces the abject onto the participating crowd of scholars, who join in her ravishment and voyeuristically devour her body, which eventually ends up at the Musée de l'homme in Paris. (The remains of Sarah Baartman were finally repatriated and cremated in 2002.) Chase-Riboud underscores an almost two-hundred-year-old transgression against the humanity of this Khoesian woman in the novel's Epilogue, in which the protagonist tells her bell-jar story of imprisonment as museum exhibit number 33, and of her ultimate emancipation. As an exhibit, Baartman is both the object of the spectatorial gaze of her new set of audiences, but also the "subject" of the gaze as "a spectator to the twentieth century's

dance of death” and a literal embodiment of “the body politic of Africa’s intercourse with Europe” (312). The prevalent physical imagery, with its pronounced focus on bodily facets, further enforces Chase-Riboud’s politics of carnival as an appropriate critical approach to the story of a destiny that should never have been allowed.

Thus, the Epilogue highlights the author’s redemption project that pieces together the fragments of Saartjie Baartman’s life story in a similar manner to that in which her remains were finally assembled and laid to rest in her native South Africa. This fictional articulation of the past is doubly embedded in the present. On the one hand, the past is available only through the present from which the author examines it. However, this present extends beyond a historical present to what Benjamin terms *Jetztzeit*: an eternal and mystical present, a phenomenological entity that escapes articulation and simply is (Benjamin 1999: 253). This timeless present that is associated with God—and, by extension, with the Word and naming—erases the difference between races and cancels, in Chase-Riboud’s narrative universe, the designations “Hottentot” and “white” in the name of humanity (xi). On the other hand, time present is the *hic et nunc* of history, so time as theme provides a contextualization of the novel’s denouement. This present is the year 2002 of the novel’s Epilogue, the time when the French National Assembly passed the bill that demanded the release of Baartman’s remains from the National Museum of Natural History and their return to the land of her origin. With the body’s extradition and the burial ceremony, the novel returns full circle to Baartman’s beginnings in Africa.

Baartman’s historically verifiable trajectory replicates the narrative movement in which the past (her early African experience)

merges with the present (the death scene in Paris) with which the novel opens. With memory as a bridge between the two times, loci, climates, cultures and mores, Chase-Riboud seems to suggest that time, just like carnival time, is revolutionary (progressive) on the one hand, and conservative (regressive, repetitive, cyclical) on the other. The latter seems to suggest stability as biological and natural life, thus renewal and revitalization as its inevitable results (Bakhtin 1968: 25), while the historical or linear time aims at radical change. Although the metaphor of birth implies one-directionality, as in “the past giving birth to the future” (Bakhtin 1968: 412), it subsumes cyclical displacements, and thereby what may appear as disparate temporal qualities. Revolution as repetition is a quality of carnival that promises change, which is cancelled when carnival time is over. The change that the novel claims is at the level of political consciousness, demands a reevaluation and revision of the past. While the politics of the carnivalesque may be progressive, carnival time is limited: it frees the spirit, though not necessarily the body. Baartman’s dying scene is, beyond doubt, an apposite example.

Suffering from pneumonia in the freezing winter climate, the protagonist takes a bath to keep her body warm, warming her insides with gin and cannabis that help her forget her humiliation, exploitation, and illness, and transport her back to Africa. Although her guardian has left the door unlocked to enable her escape, she is too ill and too intoxicated to leave, and her body shape impedes her from getting easily out of the tub. When she eventually rises out of the blood tainted bath froth, she finally earns her Venus attribute. Chase-Riboud’s eckphrastic depiction of black Venus is an inversion of Sandro Botticelli’s *Birth of Venus*. While the white Venus, the goddess of love, symbolizes beauty,

femininity, chastity, and spiritual enhancement, her darker sister, the alleged embodiment of carnal love and animal-like sexuality and sexual availability, stands in the white imagination for all that is “ugly, savage, uncivilized, brutal, deformed, reprehensible” (6). The white public’s abjection and stigmatization of her body, declaring her “the missing link between beast and man” (5, 105, 212, 238, 311), provides an ironic textual refrain which not only fixes her status in the white world, but enforces her negative self-image and her experience of herself as “the thing-that-should-never-have-been-born” (3, 5, 7, 101, 102, 105, 150, 161, 185, 188, 193, 263, 265, 269). This stigma that she has psychologically adopted is the English translation of the name of the Khosian rainmaker! Naeheta Magahâs, whom she sees as an embodiment of the abject, and whose attempts to dissuade her from leaving her native land make her, in Ssehura’s view, even more repulsive.

The rainmaker’s resemblance to “an antique, dilapidated baboon” (25) may seem to support Baartman’s stigmatization and negative identification, although it is the narrator in the guise of young Ssehura who provides the comparison. There is no doubt a connection between the grotesque figure and the missing-link reference that sticks with the protagonist, which the narrative establishes and repeatedly subverts. Declared “a monster of imagination, not nature” (12), Baartman refuses sympathy and rejects or disbelieves the empathy that the fictional Jane Austin, abolitionist Robert Wedderburn and painter Nicholas Tiedeman offer. However, apart from her servant, teacher and keeper Alice Unicorn, Tiedeman is the only white person she is able to relate to in the theatre of anatomy, in the autopsy scene, and finally in the museum. It is he, the white artist, who raises a question regarding the ethics of science and stigmatization in his conversation with

Charles Darwin—"Why is it [...] that white freaks are always exhibited as oddities, the exception that proves the rule, while black freaks [...] are exhibited as *typical* of their race?" (302)—that, due to its rhetorical nature, receives no answer. While there is no single answer to the enigma, its roots are to be found in the binary, hierarchical way of thinking in the Western world. The encounter between the scientist and the artist before Baartman's remains forty-some years after her death, reawakens the discussion of humanity, slavery and the Great Chain of Being. Darwin's presence, as indeed needs be, implies a focus shift on the monogenetic theory of race of which *On the Origin of Species* is indisputably a major revolutionary document. In line with its politics of reversal, the narrative topsy-turves the earlier views, which equate the African with the ape and depict the white man as a racially and intellectually superior being, by focusing on Darwin's appearance. The now aged Tiedeman, who was originally commissioned to sculpt Baartman during her medical examination and later autopsy and who still continues to pay his respects to her at the museum, is appalled by Darwin's resemblance to an ape. When the fictional Darwin declares that his cranium is "the exact replica of the Neanderthal's man" (299), and that Abraham Lincoln is not far behind him, readers reenter the world of carnival, where the origin and the target of laughter and ridicule merge. By refusing to be a detached scientist-observer, Darwin joins in the circus of history and deems himself worthy of a place in its museum. With Baartman's skeleton as their audience, the subject/object, observer/observed fuse, and the three "figures", which obviously respect one another and perceive the paradox of history and science that has split them into two camps, bow their heads in valediction. The reverence they show stands in stark con-

trast to the bizarre dissection scene and the passing around of Baartman's body parts "like cotton candy at a country fair" (302), where only her brain and sexual organs (the measurable signs of difference) are pickled and preserved for posterity. The heart is an anatomical enigma because of its constancy of shape and weight in all human beings, thus representing, in Darwin's view, a "metaphysical" quality, which Tiedeman sees as the scientists' "heartlessness" (295), which he witnessed in Cuvier's laboratory of anatomy.

The novel's pronounced focus on the body, body parts and bodily functions, scatology included, juxtaposed with the obscenities which are associated with her viewing audiences and circumstances surrounding her showing, confirm her vitality as (the legend of) black Venus. Her humanity supersedes the alleged humanity of her voyeuristic audiences, whose appetite for the exotic and erotic titillates their imagination and seeks gratification. The rainmaker's original warning against the white world outside the Khoer territory, which bordered on a prohibition, was her futile attempt at dissuading Ssehura from leaving. While it was fueled by the old woman's vision of her never returning home, the warning has had little effect on Ssehura; she sees no future in her colonized land where the usurpers have deprived her of her family through slaughter. Neither the white man's conquest of her people, nor Naeheta Magahâs's analysis of the white world as a place that is "not made of human beings. Yet they are not beasts either" (26)<sup>1</sup>, nor even the sad-eyed heron—

---

1. One can, no doubt, recognize cultural and philosophical correspondences between the People of the People and the imaginary Allmuseri tribesmen, whose transcendental philosophy figures most prominently in Charles Johnson's *Middle Passage* (New York: Plume, 1990). With the tribes' inherent human—

the incarnation of her hunted-down mother, who physically tries to block her way, thus prevent her from leaving—offer strong enough motivation for her to stay. The path from the open and free skies of the Cape area to being a “prisoner in [her] own country” (40), and finally a slave is short; so short that Ssehura literally manages to walk it. Yet, as already indicated, her objectification, exploitation and manipulation, which are initiated in Africa and augmented in Europe, also continue posthumously:

How could I imagine that death would not end my life? That I, a monster of imagination, not nature, was to begin a posthumous life of such drama and complexity that it would last for centuries? A life even more monstrous than the one I had just quit? (12).

The life-and-death cycle and the reeling of time that lie at the core of a revisionist and reverential project like *Hottentot Venus*, are also at the crux of carnival time with its repetitions, renewals, and reversals. The reverential element that carnival cultivates concerns the body and the vernacular that the official discourses of history, religion and science tend to suppress. The cyclical politics of memory that mentally recycles life and history becomes, in Chase-Riboud’s novelistic universe, a politics of textuality. The narrative repeatedly returns to its beginnings—both historical and geographical, and, as will become evident, also narrative—as if trying to emphasize that the case of Sarah Baartman’s exploitation is the case of many, and that repetition as a drill does justice to the nameless multitudes. For reasons of clarification, I would like to focus once more on the novel’s beginning, which provides a key to its end.

---

ism and environmentalism, Chase-Riboud and Johnson critique western materialist and dualist thought.

While the already discussed image of Venus, which Baartman embodies in her death scene, is a Western symbol of rebirth, there is a resonant scene at the end of the novel following Baartman's death. That scene, I would suggest, is equally, if not more, pertinent to the recovery of this subject of history. Although Baartman is gone, she is present in her good-bye letter and in the sea of obituaries that curl around Alice Unicorn's feet "like sea froth" (274). With Alice apparently standing in Sarah Baartman's stead amidst the curled paper, it is possible to believe that their roles have been changed, whereas in fact, the obituaries announcing Baartman's death bring her to life—in words. Many stories, episodes, dates and names are omitted from them, Alice notices, but the novel appears to recover them by becoming a Venus as text. For it is Sarah Baartman, the fictional black Venus, who tells her story, thus creating for herself a new life in language.

That cyclical carnival time does not stop here is underscored by the narrative with its repetitive return to its (and Baartman's) beginnings. The alleged dates of the protagonist's birth and death, 1 January, are narratively construed to coincide<sup>1</sup>, which neatly translates her life cycle into a historical measuring unit of time and its seasons. Thus the first day of the year completes one cycle and initiates a new cycle, which is what Baartman's life and posthumous stories require. The repetition of the death scene in its chronological story-line position merges the past and the present, as already indicated. The protagonist's final memories

---

1. Although the date of her birth is unknown and that of her death is 29 December 1815 (Cuvier, G.C., "Extrait d'observations. Faites sur le Cadavre d'une femme connue à Paris et à Londres sous le nom de Vénus Hottentotte", *Memoirs du Museum d'histoire naturelle* 3 (1817): 34), the author invents the former and adjusts the latter to 1 January 1816 to conflate her life cycle with a measurable time cycle of the year that collapses progression and repetition.



go back to her mother singing a birthday song in Khoe, by which the narrative underscores Ssehura's return home, to her native tongue "of soft clics and coos" and to the name that her mother gave her (12, 265).

The present-past nexus that is enacted at the various levels of the story is, moreover, reflected at the level of the narrative at large. Before returning one last time to Chase-Riboud's carnivalistic science/fiction poetics, there are some questions that *Hottentot Venus* leaves begging concerning its form. The neo-slave narrative, like its slave-narrative forerunner, conflates the social-economic system with the generic one, producing a format that is not only predicated on the former system, but is equally rigid and encapsulating. Recognizing in its form the embodiment of a master-slave dialectic, James Olney has ironically labeled its constraints "Master Plan for Slave Narrative"<sup>1</sup>. He sees a paradox between the former slave subject's escape from slavery and his embracing of a proscribed, rigid (enslaving?) system of narrative requirements. Among these are a white frame, consisting of an abolitionist preface and a postscript, whose function is to guarantee the narrative's authenticity and the slave subject's identity, as well as to reveal the abolitionist political agenda. In line with the genre's enslaving format, Charles Johnson requires the manumission of the first-person narrator<sup>2</sup>, whom he lifts up from the status of the "first person universal" (Johnson 1988: 153) to that of the subject of his own narrative. My contention is that the manumission of the narrator also entails the manumission of form, which is con-

---

1. OLNEY, James, "I Was Born': Slave Narratives, Their Status as Autobiography and as Literature", *Callaloo* 20 (Winter 1984): 46-73; 50-51.

2. JOHNSON, Charles, *Middle Passage* (New York: Plume, 1990): 152.

firmed by the text's inflected format, which adopts parody and the carnivalesque as it *raison d'être*.

In line with its textual politics of rebuttal, the neo-slave narrative reverses the preexisting norms, starting with the form. Thus, what was the abolitionists' preface and postscript in the original slave narrative becomes in *Hottentot Venus* "The Heroine's Note" and "Epilogue", both penned by "the protagonist-narrator"—posthumously. While the original slave narratives' white frame served as an authentication of the former slave subjects and their stories (Olney 1984: 50), Sarah Baartman needs no validation, least of all white. As the object of study in medical annals and a subject of literature, Baartman is the only possible guarantor of her own "subjectivity" and humanity, which the white, so-called civilized world has claimed to stand for and has deprived her of.

The introductory Note launches a carnival of reversals by staging the tension between the eponymous character's Khoekhoe nation—the People of the People—and the three colonizing powers who have subdued it—the Portuguese, the Dutch and the English. The "Once upon a time" opening underscores the First Nation's idyll, which foreign intervention in the name of civilization disturbs and destroys with its side effects: "syphilis, smallpox and slavery" (xi). The white man's expansionism in the name of progress becomes its obverse, and irony becomes the text's predominant trope. The People of the People, whose very name underscores their humanity, are one with nature, being nomads, gatherers and herders, and for them the land is a source of livelihood and belongs to one and all. In addition, they believe in the equality of their members, all members, unlike the white man's system of "castes and categories" (xi), that sees everything in terms of power relations, including, among others, language. Oth-

ered by her white oppressor, the narrator adopts his language and naming (“Hottentot”) in order to reach him, but she does not accept its stigma, and thus its ideological lining, but reverses it, and makes his weapon—hers. Language and naming equal power, the Note stresses, and this claim is supported semantically (through different stages of named oppression), grammatically (in the form of the passive voice), and narratively (by producing the history’s counter narrative). Yet the power of the word as a deadly weapon, which the rainmaker had taught Ssahura before she left her tribal territory, is disclosed only in the final chapter when Saartjie Baartman’s curse “kills off” her oppressors and those who have contributed to the subjection of African peoples. The word’s supreme power, however, resounds in the Epilogue, which brings us to the present: to the petition by South Africans for the repatriation of Saartjie Baartman’s remains, and to the bill of 29 January 2002 which granted their return. While Baartman’s recently freed compatriots have voiced their plea for the return of her remains in a foreign tongue, her final return to the shores of her childhood becomes the final return to her mother tongue, to a Khosian “click of [the] tongue” (317); to the tongue which had originally earned her the pejorative designation of Hottentot, and which she now puts back into her mouth to command the women of her land to remember her.

The memory of Baartman, as already stated, is doubly encoded in the novel, and the protagonist comes to life as the subject and object of (hi)story and science. That dual role, however, is granted at the level of story, and figures only latently at the level of text at large. Chase-Riboud’s textual universe comprises a polyphony of voices that highlight the author’s ideological positioning. These voices resound both inside the narrative proper and as notional

pillars that carry the weight of ideology in the form of epigraphs, which precede each of the three parts of the novel and each individual chapter. These purloined letters, by being evenly and systematically distributed throughout the body of the text, stand both inside and outside of it. They are inside due to their incorporated presence, yet they are also outside because they are not related to the course of narrative events, with the exception of Georges Cuvier. None of Cuvier's excerpts-cum-chapter-epigraphs are taken from his autopsy report on Baartman, nor do they in any way directly refer to her. Nevertheless, they play a central role in fronting his view on racial difference, which motivates the narrative course and highlights Chase-Riboud's politics of redemption. The carefully selected Cuvier excerpts appear in the novel as a chain of signifiers to which Chase-Riboud allies fictional and unstable signifieds. By replacing the bar that links the signifier and the signified with an open space that separates and joins the two discourses, the author provides a fluid border that visually signals a deferral and fluidity of meaning. In other words, by refusing science the status of mastery over the subjective discourse of a woman who happens to be a slave, if only metaphorically, the author deconstructs the master/slave dialectic; she rewards her disempowered protagonist by giving her the last laugh and allowing her to soar the African sky after her funeral ceremony.

The novel's utopian outcome is in line with its successful politics of carnival, which demands general participation in the process of turning the world upside-down (Bakhtin 1968: 7). Cuvier, the conceited "Napoleon of Intelligence" (220) who soars in the recounted scenes, becomes the carnival's dethroned king in his attempted rape of Sarah Baartman, at which point he embodies

the primitivism that he associates with non-Caucasian races in his scholarly work. A similar politics of reversal occurs at a ball in Paris, where the socialites gather to view “Hottentot Venus” and her “primitive” shape, and expect her performance to prove her racial inferiority; yet they become “a troop of baboons [...] scavenging in garbage” (255), transforming themselves in their culturally motivated attempt to prove their racial superiority. While the fictional Baartman’s awareness of the whites’ inadequacies and weaknesses may be morally uplifting, it can in no way alter her destiny. Despite its inability to provide any immediate or radical change, the novel’s carnivalesque politics becomes a strategy of rebuttal, if only at the level of discourse. If, as the novel demonstrates, the word kills—it was Baartman’s curse which killed her enemies—it is the word that will always bring her back.

### *Works cited*

- BAKHTIN, Mikhail. *Rabelais and His World*. Cambridge, MA: MIT P, 1968.
- BENJAMIN, Walter. “Theses on the Philosophy of History”, in *Illuminations*, Hannah Arendt, ed. London: Pimlico, 1999: 245-258.
- CHASE-RIBOUD, Barbara. *Hottentot Venus*. New York: Anchor Books, 2004.
- CUVIER, G.C., “Extrait d’observations. Faites sur le Cadavre d’une femme connue à Paris et à Londres sous le nom de Vénus Hottentotte”. *Memoirs du Museum d’histoire naturelle* 3. Paris: G. Doufour, 1817: 259-274.
- EAKINS, Patricia. *The Marvelous Adventures of Pierre Baptiste, Father and Mother, First and Last*. New York: New York UP, 1999.
- GILMAN, Sander L. “Black Bodies, White Bodies: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality in Late Nineteenth-Century Art,

- Medicine and Literature", in *Race, Writing, and Difference*. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. ed. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1986; 223-261.
- JOHNSON, Charles. *Oxherding Tale*. 1982. New York: Plume, 1995.
- JOHNSON, Charles. *Middle Passage*. New York: Plume, 1990.
- MAGUBANE, Zine. "Which Bodies Matter? Feminism, Poststructuralism, Race and the Curious Theoretical Odyssey of the 'Hottentot Venus'". *Gender and Society* 15: 4 (December 2001): 816-834.
- OLNEY, James. "'I Was Born': Slave Narratives, Their Status as Autobiography and as Literature." *Callaloo* 20 (Winter 1984): 46-73.
- REED, Ishmael. *Flight to Canada*. New York: Scribner, 1976.
- SHARPLEY-WHITING, T. Denean. *Black Venus. Sexual Savages, Primal Fears, and Primitive Narratives in French*. Durham, N.C.: Duke UP, 1999.
- STALLYBRASS, Peter and Allon White. *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1986.
- YOCHELSON, Ellis L. "Mr. Peale and His Mammoth Museum." *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 136: 4 (December 1992): 487-506.



*Les Carnets du Cerpac* n° 6, 2007, 223-248.

## FROM THE FANTASTIC TO MAGIC REALISM: THE SPECTRAL PRESENCE IN PHYLLIS PERRY'S *STIGMATA*

Ana NUNES  
*School of English and Drama, University College Dublin*

In *Stigmata* (1998), Phyllis Perry plays with the conventions of the fantastic in order to represent African American history. In *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, Tzvetan Todorov states that

[t]he fantastic [...] lasts only as long as a certain hesitation: a hesitation common to the reader and character, who must decide whether or not what they perceive derives from "reality" as it exists in the common opinion. [...] If he [or she] decides that the laws of reality remain intact and permit an explanation of the phenomena described, we say that the work belongs to another genre: the uncanny. If, on the contrary, he [or she] decides that new laws of nature must be entertained to account for the phenomena, we enter the genre of the marvellous.



The fantastic therefore leads a life full of dangers, and may evaporate at any moment.<sup>1</sup>

Perry's novel explores the tensions between the fantastic which, as Todorov defines it, depends on the reader's and the character's hesitation "between a natural and a supernatural explanation of the events described" (33) and the supernatural accepted, or the marvellous, what I will call magical realism. In this novel the protagonist's journey is one from the fantastic, the estrangement from her family and society at large, to magical realism, signalled by the acceptance of the supernatural and her return to the community.

Upon receiving a trunk containing among other things the diary of her great-great-grandmother and a quilt sewn by her grandmother, Lizzie begins to journey to these women's past. In *Stigmata*, the device of time travelling does not simply imply that a character becomes a mere observer or participant in the events of another era. Lizzie does not witness her foremothers' lives from a distance, rather she becomes Ayo and Grace: "When I open [my eyes] again, Grace is with me—or I am with her. [...] I sit on the old bed with Grace, marveling that I can move her fingers and toes".<sup>2</sup> Thus, Lizzie's experiences of the supernatural suggest a sense of "fluid identities and interconnectedness",<sup>3</sup> as Wendy B. Faris puts it in relation to another novel. The manner in which Lizzie represents these first journeys to the past suggests that the character is in the realm of the fantastic:

---

1. TODOROV, Tzvetan, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*. Translated from the French by Richard Howard (New York: Cornell University Press, 1975): 41.

2. PERRY, Phyllis, *Stigmata* (1998. London: Piatkus, 1999): 57.

3. FARIS, Wendy B., *Ordinary Enchantments: Magical Realism and the Remystification of Narrative* (Nashville: Vanderbilt Press, 2004): 25.

A sound startles me. [...] My eyes fly open and I look down. At my feet a hairbrush lay on the wood floor, and as I bend to pick it up I absently consider the fact that my mother's new carpet, the carpet just installed three months ago, seems to have disappeared. [...]

For a moment I can't think, can't feel my body in this place. I can only see the scene before me [...] (53-54).

The narration of this episode contains elements which express the character's hesitation between the real and the magical. The expression "seems to have disappeared" illustrates this vacillation between a more *natural* explanation of the event and the experience of the supernatural. This is reinforced by the fact that Lizzie cannot "[f]or a moment" feel her body in this other supernatural realm. This expression of her inability to think and "feel [her] body" is significant since it directs the reader's interpretation of the narrated occurrence towards the world of the dreams. An interpretation corroborated by the character who articulates it in contradictory terms: "I get up slowly, painfully. The whole episode didn't feel like a dream, but I must have slept, and in an awkward position" (56). Without these elements that denote doubt, "we should be plunged into the world of the marvellous, with no reference to everyday reality" (38), as Todorov observes. The language used to communicate the experience of the supernatural is, thus, at the crossroads between the real and the magical and constitutes one of the central aspects of the discourse of the fantastic.

For Todorov,

[t]he supernatural is born of language, it is both its consequence and its proof: not only do the devil and vampires exist only in words, but language alone enables us to conceive what is always

absent: the supernatural. The supernatural thereby becomes a symbol of language, just as the figures of rhetoric do (82).

This is particularly relevant in texts which attempt to represent the absences in the African American historical record. When the first-person narrator declares that the tangible and familiar world of her parents' house "seems to have disappeared", or "[it] didn't feel like a dream, but I must have slept", she creates with language this other space, which does not correspond to the perceived reality, or to an unquestioned magical realm, but to a space of hesitation between the two; she conceives a place for the fantastic. This hesitation between the real and the fantastic becomes a prevailing pattern in the novel until Lizzie begins to make sense of her experiences: "I don't know who to tell. Not them, the parents, who'll say how I was dreaming. No, I was there. I was Grace. [...] Gotta be a dream. I was sitting here daydreaming" (74), or "When I woke up, or came to, or whatever, it didn't feel like a dream. [...] But I had to be asleep" (83). It is worth noting that the substantive "dream" functions as a symbol for the unexplained, for Lizzie's "fantastic out-of-body story" (82). Unable to make sense of her experience, Lizzie resorts to everyday language in an attempt to normalise her experience of the supernatural.

Lizzie's experiences expressed in a language of hesitation to sceptical interlocutors contribute to her gradual alienation from social structures in which there is no place for the magical: her middle-class family, educational system, and later, Western medicine. "Unlike magical realism", as P. Gabrielle Foreman states, "the fantastic and the uncanny posit an individual who experiences a world beyond the community's parameters".<sup>1</sup> The

---

1. FOREMAN, P. Gabrielle, "Past-On Stories: History and the Magically Real,

opening of *Stigmata* is meaningfully set in a psychiatric hospital. This "padded cell" (1) functions in the narrative as a literal and figurative space of rupture between the protagonist and her community. This is signalled most significantly by Lizzie's relationship with her parents and the orderly middle-class world they create in which the magical is interpreted as mental disorder. Perry uses constructs of class and consumption in order to represent this alienation from the rituals and beliefs of the ancestors.

In Perry's work, the South of the 1970s to the mid 1990s is clearly not represented as the "nonmoney economy",<sup>1</sup> which Susan Willis identifies as prevailing in contemporary African American women's writing. In *Stigmata*, Southern black society is not free from the politics of class that emerged in the North during the same period. In this context, it is worth noting how notions of consumption interfere with the way characters interpret the world. Years of Western education and a self-conscious adoption of white middle-class values obscure Lizzie's father vision. When he sees the trunk with the family relics passed on to Lizzie, he misinterprets it as mere property, missing its magical significance: "All that mystery, all that talk about giving it at the right time to the right person". He rolls his eyes. "That trunk should be your property, shouldn't it, Sarah?" (22).

---

Morrison and Allende on Call", in *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris, eds. (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995): 286.

1. The South in contemporary black women's writing, Susan Willis states, "is never portrayed as even a partial wage-labor economy, even though many Southerners have worked for a wage [...] and a percentage of these have been black. What black women are documenting in the writing is the essential characteristic of the system as a whole as it arose out of slavery [...]. As a non-wage economy, the South is very often depicted as a nonmoney economy" [*Specifying: Black Women Writing the American Experience* (London: Routledge, 1990): 10-11].

Lizzie's mother, "speaking her college-bred English" (25), also lost the essential connection with her ancestors which would allow her to interpret the world in a way distinct from that of the hegemonic white culture. Looking at her mother's quilt, a composition in which she narrates the history of her ancestors, Mrs Dr DuBose cannot read the text before her. Educated in a history which follows chronology, and is therefore linear, she cannot decode the circular narrative before her: "What kind of quilt is that anyway? Just some pictures stuck to a background. No rhyme or reason. She [her mother] wrote about it like it was supposed to mean something" (23). In this way, the newly found quilt is in the danger of being lost as a source of meaning.<sup>1</sup> For the meaning to be recovered, Sarah has to recognise the quilt as a text that can be read and interpreted, and a medium through which her mother expressed her creativity and historical legacy.

The separation between Lizzie and her parents is also signalled by Perry's usage of a first-person narrator. In the magical realist text, the belief in the supernatural is reinforced by non-dramatised omniscient narrators. If magic incidents are narrated by such narrators, as Todorov states, "we should immediately be in the marvellous; there would be no occasion, in fact, to doubt his [or her] words. [...] It is no accident that tales of the marvellous

---

1. In her well-known essay "In Search of Our Mother's Gardens", Alice Walker points to the importance of quilts as textual evidence of black women's imagination, which flourished in a creatively adverse soil: "In fanciful, inspired, and yet simple and identifiable figures, it portrays the story of the Crucifixion. [The quilt] is made with bits and pieces of worthless rags, it is obviously the work of powerful imagination and deep spiritual feeling". "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens", in *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (London: The Women's Press, 1984): 239.

rarely employ the first person" (83).<sup>1</sup> Hence, the belief in the magical is closely related to an omniscient narrator, who takes the magical for granted and, therefore, as a continuum of the real. The dramatised narrator in the first-person narrative, in turn, is particularly suitable and more common in fantastic narratives because, as Todorov puts it, "[t]his narrator discourse has an ambiguous status, [...] emphasizing one or another of its aspects: as the narrator's, the discourse lies outside the test of truth; as the character's it must pass the test" (86). In other words, the "character can lie, while the narrator must not" (85). In the description of the same episode by the narrator and the character, the gaps between the first and the latter's discourse are obvious:

The ground slowly rolls under my feet. I smell—taste—sweat and blood and months of misery. The scent knocks me dizzy for a moment and I stumble forward. Then I am pulled, jerked. [...] I see the deck, the water beyond and the line of dark bodies going jerkily forward into the ghost-land (86).

The narrator's depiction of a slave ship in such sensorial terms illustrates the authenticity of Lizzie's experience. However, when the character attempts to reconstruct that same episode her fragmented account reconstructs the necessary hesitation in the fantastic narrative:

I was on a ship [...]. A slave ship, Daddy. [...] Maybe I was just sleepwalking. [...] I keep . . . winking out. [...] I said *sometimes* it's

---

1. Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) is a good example of how the omniscient narrator works in the narrative as an element of connection, interlacing the necessarily individual experiences of slavery in order to represent the collective African American history, and establishing a continuum between the real and the magic.

like I get drowsy. Other times I'm just doing something else and I have a flash back of some moment or some place. I remember something that I know can't be true (101).

This tension between the narrator's and the character's discourse keeps the essential doubt (to believe or disbelieve) characteristic of the fantastic narrative. This is critical in a work that explores the tension between the fantastic and the magical real, between the character's alienation from the community and the necessity to understand individual experience in the context of the group's history.

In Perry's novel, the experience of the fantastic is reinforced by the stigmata which appear in Lizzie's body. In African American literature, the disfigurement of the body constitutes a central vehicle of both personal and collective history.<sup>1</sup> Lizzie's stigmata work as a physical manifestation of Morrison's concept of memory, the never-ending resurfacing of a traumatic and partially lost history. On another level, stigmata function as a powerful means to transform abstract history into a tangible reality. At this level the open wounds work as an element of connection between the ancestors and Lizzie, the past and present, and the real and the magical: "you're marked so you won't forget this time, so you

---

1. From Margaret Walker's Vvry's marked back, "[t]he scars were webbed and [...] had ridges like a washboard" [*Jubilee* (1966. New York: Bantam Books, 1967): 406], to the disfigurement of Sherley Anne Williams Dessa's "loins [which] looked like a mutilated cat face. Scar tissue plowed through her pubic region so that no hair would ever grow there again" [*Dessa Rose* (1986. London: Women's Press, 1998): 154], the tree engraved on Sethe's back described by Paul D in a moment of (com)passion as "the decorative work of an ironsmith too passionate for display" (17) and instants later as "a revolting clump of scars" (21), and *Beloved's* "smile under her chin" (275), the scarred body functions as a textual record of slavery.

will remember" (214). In this context, it is worth noting that when Lizzie makes reference to her marked body, she evokes her bond with the foremothers:

A spasm of pain sears my back. I gasp, trying to keep my focus, and in that moment Grace steps forward and takes the blow. We stand together in her battered body, bent double with pain (125).

In this passage grandmother and granddaughter stand together in a magical realm receiving the blow which marked the back of the first woman of the family, Ayo, the African. Lizzie's "maze of scars, from neck to waist and beyond, permanent remembrance of the power of time folded back upon itself" (205) are the evidence of a forgotten history. Like Morrison's rememory, Perry's stigmata constitute the urgent call of history pressing against the forgetfulness of time.

However, the ancestral apparition in Perry's novel is quite different from Morrison's unforgiving ghost. It is worth noting that when "Grace steps forward to take the blow", she emerges as a protective figure. In this sense, the name "Grace" becomes highly significant. According to Christian beliefs only the grace of God can free humanity from its original sin which in the context of Perry's work can be equated with the loss of African American history. On another level, it is worth noting the distinction made by St Thomas Aquinas between nature and the supernatural. According to Aquinas, the former can be known by reason, while the latter can only be understood through the Grace of God. Thus, Lizzie's grandmother functions in the text as a bridge to the magical and the knowledge of the past it holds.

The acquisition of that knowledge is a painful process and the "[p]roof of lives intersecting from past to present" (205) is the



imprint of slavery in Lizzie's body. The use of the vocable "intersection" highlights the novel's attempt to represent the effects of slavery in contemporary America. In this way, Perry's protagonist functions in the text as an epicentre for African American history. Lizzie's experience of the supernatural allowed her to learn the ancestors' names and their history by becoming them in a fusion of minds and bodies, literally moving inside them, "mov[ing] [their] fingers and toes" and returning home "with dirty feet" (106) from old African dust: "I can see her [Grace] and I can see through her. I remember what her body feels like. And both of us, me and her, are sort of superimposed on another person [Ayo]" (140). The merging of individual subjectivity with that of ancestral others embodies a collective memory that needs to be honoured and remembered. This notion of subjectivity evokes Morrison's representation of a transhistorical self in *Beloved*. In this way, the apparitions in both Perry's and Morrison's works "refuse to remain locked into modern categories of individual psychology, insisting instead that the self is actualized by participation in communal and cosmic categories",<sup>1</sup> as Zamora puts it.

With Lizzie's acknowledgement of her multiple subjectivity, the fact that she is "Old and young. Old and young at the same time" (45), there is a narrative departure from the fantastic, the "[t]he soft opening and closing of a door between adjacent worlds" (55), to an acceptance of "the forces that have brought [her] to stand here with a clear view of the past and the present and the marriage of both" (155). It is worth noting that the "adja-

---

1. ZAMORA, Lois Parkinson, "Magical Romance/Magical Realism: Ghosts in U. S. and Latin American Fiction", in *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris, eds. (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995): 544.

cent" worlds, close but separate, on frontier of which resided the place for hesitation between the real and the magical, become married, one, when the hesitation dissipates and Lizzie understands that past and present, and the magical and the real are part of the same realm. In this way, according to Todorov's theoretical approach to the fantastic, *Stigmata* can be included among "works that sustain the hesitation characteristic of the true fantastic for a long period, but that ultimately end in the marvellous or in the uncanny" (44). When the sense of hesitation dissipates, the frontier between the real and the magical, which Todorov describes as "a frontier between two adjacent realms" (44), is also dissolved and both character and reader enter in the magical real. Once we enter the realm of the magic accepted, our perception of the world is changed in order to accommodate phenomena that are not subject to physical laws. In this context, we leave the fantastic and enter the magical real.<sup>1</sup> It is important to emphasise here the fickleness of the fantastic text, a genre which "leads a life full of dangers, and may evaporate at any moment" (Todorov 1975: 52). This is a critical aspect in Perry's narrative since this transition from the fantastic to the magical real will mark the central character's shift from a place of isolation to one where history can be shared and actualised.

---

1. In *Ordinary Enchantments: Magical Realism and the Remystification of Narrative*, Wendy B. Faris suggests five primary characteristics of the magical realistic text: "First, the text contains an 'irreducible element' of magic; second, the descriptions in magical realism detail a strong presence of the phenomenal world; third, the reader may experience some unsettling doubts in the effort to reconcile two contradictory understandings of events; fourth, the narrative merges different realms; and, finally, magical realism disturbs received ideas about time, space, and identity", 7. See also Wendy B. Faris's "Sheherazade's Children: Magical Realism and Postmodern Fiction", in *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, op. cit.

This merging of the real and the magical, as Morrison states, has origins in the “acceptance of the supernatural and a profound rootedness in the real world at the same time with neither taking precedence over the other”.<sup>1</sup> The merging of the real and the magical without one having primacy over the other is the most central aspect of the magic realist text. Magic in African American literature, thus, has origins in beliefs and superstitions that inform black folklore and is, therefore, distinct from other literary traditions which merge the real and the magical. In an interview with Gail Calwell,

Morrison nods at the comparison between black American folklore and magic realism, though she says that she was well into *Song of Solomon* before she discovered Gabriel Garcia Marquez. “Their stuff was so readily available to them—that mixture of Indian and Spanish. Whereas I felt the preachers, the storytelling, the folklore, the music was very accessible to me, but I felt almost alone. It wasn’t only mine, but I didn’t have any literary precedent for what I was trying to do with the magic”.<sup>2</sup>

Morrison clearly roots her use of the supernatural in distinct African American cultural traditions ranging from storytelling to folklore and music. This allows writers such as Morrison and Perry to create their works around distinctive African American narrative modes, while reworking the use of folklore in black American literature.

---

1. Morrison, Toni, “Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation”, in *Black Women Writers (1950-1980): A Critical Evaluation*, Mari Evans, ed. (Garden City, NY: Anchor-Doubleday, 1984): 343.

2. MORRISON, Toni interviewed by Gail Caldwell, “Author Toni Morrison Discusses Her Latest Novel *Beloved*”, in *Conversations with Toni Morrison*, Danille Taylor-Guthrie, ed. (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994): 242-243.

Edward P. Jones reiterates Morrison's ideas about the role of magic in black writing. In the plot of his first novel, *The Known World* (2003), the magical emerges occasionally in an otherwise realistic narrative. These supernatural incidents, which are left unexplained, point towards a view of the world in which the real and the magic share the same space. In an interview the author explains how this sense of magic has its roots in African American folklore:

I was raised among a people who believe that if a person is killed on a city street, the blood of that person will show on that spot every time it rains. [...] I was raised to believe that one's hair should be taken from combs and brushes and burned [...] because the hair could somehow get out into the world where birds could find it, make a nest of the hair, and give the person headaches. [...]

Given all that, it's easy to create a situation where lightning runs away from a man because the lightning doesn't think it's time for the man to die [...]. So the supernatural events are just another way of telling the story by someone who grew up thinking that the universe did weird things all the time.<sup>1</sup>

Jones describes a system of beliefs which seeks to explain the inexplicable. Lines are drawn between certain events so that an ordering principle emerges. This allows a disenfranchised people to make sense of the world outside officially sanctioned organisations and discourses. Hence, the supernatural as "another way of telling the story" is a vehicle of empowerment in the construction of narratives that challenge and resist hegemonic forms of representation. The rejection of a binary polarisation between the dominant traditions and other African American "way[s] of knowing

---

1. JONES, Edward P., "An Interview with Edward P. Jones", in *The Known World* (2003. New York: Amistad, 2004): 5.

things" is evident in the lack of explanation, or justification for the use of the supernatural in *The Known World* and *Beloved*.

However, the removal of the hierarchy between the real and the magical can emerge only take place in a communal context. When Lizzie finally leaves the psychiatric hospital and returns to her parents' house, she knows that the past needs to be remembered and actualised in the context of the community. The actualisation of the historical past by cultural practice is an essential means of recovering African American history. Folk traditions such as religious rituals, song and storytelling, food and quilt making constitute an important means of bearing witness to the past. Thus, it is interesting to note that among *Beloved's* fractured memories of the Middle Passage, there is a record of a song, a cultural scrap, a testimony of the humanity of the person who sang it and of those who listened to it. In Perry's novel that fragment of cultural memory is a piece of blue cloth that Ayo brought from Africa, creased in a ball enclosed in her fist as a tangible memory of home. The scrap of fabric functions in the narrative as a link to Africa, but it also symbolises the passing on of the historical testimony along the generational line. Ayo's mother, the master dyer, made and tinted the fabric, Ayo brought it from Africa, Grace uses a piece in her quilt and puts another fragment in the trunk as a family relic destined for her granddaughter and "a very old bit of blue cloth" (17) reaches Lizzie, which she uses it in her own quilt to be passed on the next generation.<sup>1</sup>

---

1. The "bit of blue cloth" recalls the "teeny faded blue piece from Great Grandpa Ezra's uniform that he wore in the Civil War" pieced in a quilt in Alice Walker's short story "Everyday Use" where quilting is also represented as a means of passing on African America tradition and history, in "Everyday Use", *The Complete Stories* (London: The Women's Press, 1994): 53.

"Quilts", as Floris Barnett Cash states, "can be used as resources in reconstructing the experiences of African-American women. They provide a record of their cultural and political past. [...] The voices of black women are stitched within their quilts".<sup>1</sup> In this sense, the quilt constitutes another form of oral history: "I'm telling Grace's story with this quilt—just as she told Ayo's story with hers—and the fabric has to hold up at least until the next story teller comes along" (64). The use of vocables such as "telling" and "story teller" highlight the function of the quilt as a significant narrative form. "The narrative quilts", as Cash observes, "are a distinct American form" (34). However, as this critic goes on to say, the "use of appliqued [sic] techniques is rooted in African culture" (34). In this way, Lizzie's appliquéd quilt, "[l]ike Grandmamma Grace's" (60), reflects the hybrid nature of African American tradition. The technique Lizzie uses in the making of the quilt is similar to that used in the tapestries of West Africa, while the narrative structure roots it in an American tradition, evoking the geographical and cultural journey of black people from the African continent to the New World.

In this way, Lizzie's sense of design points to a distinct African American aesthetic. For example, it is worth noting Lizzie's reference to the African American artist Romare Bearden (Perry 1999: 52). Bearden's modernist aesthetic combines traditional black American techniques such as the patterns of quilt making and jazz with photography in order to represent a tableau of past and present, personal and collective experience of the people of African descent in America. "Through his work", as Sharon F. Pat-

---

1. CASH, Floris Barnett, "Kinship and Quilting: An Examination of an African-American Tradition", *Journal of Negro History*, 80 (1) [Silver Spring, MD. (Winter 1995): 30-41; 30].

ton observes, "Bearden attempted to create [...] an autobiography, and a historical narrative of black life",<sup>1</sup> recalling the personal and historical record which Lizzie attempts to design. The pictorial representation of history in Bearden's photomontages is particularly relevant to Lizzie for whom the quilt is a means of "reclaiming [her] sixty-one-year-old daughter" (94), Sarah, by revealing to her a lost history via a sequence of images.

Sarah is Lizzie's mother, weakened by the years her daughter spent in psychiatric institutions, but she is also Grace/Lizzie's daughter, the child abandoned by her mother at the age of seven when the weight of the past drove her away from her present, her family and community. Thus, in *Stigmata*, the mother/daughter relationship is the focal point of history. Lizzie engages her mother/daughter in the making of the quilt as an attempt to reveal her multiple subjectivity. However, when Sarah lost her connection to the ancestors, she also lost those distinct African American ways of passing on the testimony and is, therefore, confused by Lizzie's choice of form for her quilt: "'You could tell better what was going on if the pictures were in a row', Mother grumbles [...]. 'This is hopelessly jumbled'" (94). Sarah finds "the design unsettling" (94) because her Western education taught her to read history as a chronological and, therefore, linear narrative.

The quilt functions in the narrative as vehicle of cultural recovery. Quilt making, as a group activity, is an important aspect of what Perry attempts to achieve with this specific usage of African American folklore. In this context, the process of sewing the blanket is as important as the end product. According to Pat Ferrero, quilting bees were "invaluable agents of cultural cohesion and

---

1. PATTON, Sharon F., *African-American Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998): 189.

group identity".<sup>1</sup> Thus, in order to recognise in the quilt the story of her own mother and Lizzie's multiple identity, Sarah has to engage in African American traditional cultural practice. In other words, the quilt serves an instrument for Sarah's reintegration in the community's traditions and history, establishing a common ground for the reunion between mother and daughter.

The symbolic, or pictorial nature of quilts is critical in the representation of African American history. In *Stigmata*, images are a crucial means of depicting a traumatic history. The symbolic quality of the images used both in the quilt and in John Paul's paintings emphasise not only distinct African American narrative modes, which do not use the written word as a mode of representation, but also highlight the difficulty in using verbal language to express the experience of slavery, evoking Beloved's words: "how can I say things that are pictures".<sup>2</sup>

In *Stigmata*, functioning in conjunction with the recovery of traditional cultural practices as a means of reimagining the past in ways which are meaningful and useful in the present, is the characters' acceptance of the magical. This acceptance of the supernatural makes the journey back to the past a cathartic passage, allowing the transcendence of a ghostly past and the communion with the ancestors. In this context, memory and the conscious act of remembering are key issues in the construction of a context in which past and present can be reconciled:

I am free, I remember. These things can't hurt me anymore. The story on those diary pages belongs to me, but they don't own me.

---

1. Ferrero, Pat, as quoted by Floris Barnett Cash in "Kinship and Quilting: An Examination of an African-American Tradition", 32.

2. MORRISON, Toni, *Beloved* (1987. London: Picador, 1988): 210.



My memories live somewhere spacious now; the airless chamber of horrors has melted into the ground (46-47).

Lizzie's initial experience of the supernatural trapped her in a painful cycle of repetition in which she acted out a ghostly past for which there seemed to be no room or purpose in the present. Thus, the engagement with a traumatic past is a painful journey and it constitutes a simultaneous process of discovery of the ancestral other and of one self.

Thus, it is significant that just before Sarah recognises in Lizzie her long lost mother, she carries the quilt, "the keys that unlock the door to what you call the past", "like a gushing wound that she cradles close to her chest" (225). The red cloth draped in Sarah's arms evokes both the bloody history of the foremothers and the pain of its memory for their descendants.

Linear history allowed Sarah to live in a straight line, with her back turned to her past, the process of making the quilt allows her to acknowledge history as a force present in the shared space of memory—a space inhabited by the living and the dead. It is Sarah's revision of a sense of history based on white Western modes of representation that allows her to acknowledge the ancestors and their sorrowful history, realising that "the slaves who were our selves had so much to say",<sup>1</sup> as Notozake Shange puts it. Once Lizzie, and later Sarah, understands that the magical is a means of reviving a lost and forgotten past, history becomes a regenerative force.

This recognition of the past expressed in the faith of the community is central to the interpretation of *Stigmata* as a text that

---

1. SHANGE, Notozake, *Sassafrass, Cypress and Indigo* (1983. London: Minerva, 1996): 27.

begins in the fantastic and ends in the magically real, signalling the acceptance of the magical and the recovery of a lost history. Lizzie and Sarah reclaim the foremothers' story, acknowledging the importance of the past in their lives in twentieth-century America. The present is, therefore, embedded in the past, and history is spatial rather than temporal. In this context, it is important to emphasise the significance of Lizzie's quilt where past and present merge in a graphic space. This evokes the techniques used in Bearden's collages where African American history is represented, as Patton states, in "an overall shallow pictorial space [...]. There is a similar jazz-rhythm created for the eye in the juxtaposition of different-sized figures in one spatial plane" (189). The concept of juxtaposition of different figures and their projection in a "pictorial space" is useful in articulating Perry's representation of identity, the supernatural, and history. Lizzie's experience of the supernatural juxtaposes past and present in a space shared by her and her foremothers. In this space where past and present come together, their identities are also juxtaposed in order to represent a sense of self which is multiple, mythical, and therefore representative of the African American experience. In this sense, chronological history gives way to a spatial sense of history characterised by the converging of times and identities in the shared space of memory. Thus, quilt making becomes a canvas of synthesis in which seemingly contradictory forces such as past and present, personal and collective can be contained, evoking Baker's view of the blues as a "a robust matrix, where endless antinomies are mediated and understanding and explanation finds conditions of possibility".<sup>1</sup> Bearden's collages also contain

---

1. BAKER, HOUSTON, JR., *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987): 7.

these paradoxical elements. His technique, as Ralph Ellison states, reflects “leaps in consciousness, distortions, paradoxes, reversals, telescoping of time and surreal blending of styles, values, hopes and dreams which characterize much of the Negro history”.<sup>1</sup> In this context, quilt making as a form of synthesis, mirrors the magical realist text in its attempt to present real and the magical as part of the same continuum, while revising the hegemonic historical record.<sup>2</sup>

In *Stigmata*, Perry seeks to enlarge a narrative space constricted by realist principles of time, space, and identity in order to represent the silenced voices of history. In order to achieve this the novelist uses a series of narrative techniques, producing a written patchwork of Lizzie’s and her foremothers’ histories, creating a narrative space for the contemporary narrator and the voices of the ancestors. The supernatural represents the central vehicle for the representation of history, but Perry uses others, constructing an intricate narrative pattern. A primary characteristic of this narrative is a call and response structure, which facilitates the dialogue between Lizzie and her foremothers. Her memory of the day Ayo was kidnapped in an African market encapsulates the call and response structure which informs the novel. Ayo’s mother puts “her hand on [Ayo’s/Lizzie’s] head” (24)<sup>3</sup> and wakes

---

1. Ralph Ellison, as quoted by Sharon F. Patton, in *African-American Art*, 189.

2. It is interesting to note that the technique of collage which borrows images from a variety of sources varying from paintings, photographs to the media also attempts to blur the distinctions between the real and the unreal, transforming the way the world is perceived. Hence, the collage, like the magical realist text, aims to enlarge the narrative space so that established representations of the world are challenged. See Sharon F. PATTON, in *African-American Art*, 191.

3. It is worth noticing that Ayo’s mother’s hand calling her daughter and encouraging her to begin the journey recalls the hands of other ancestral figures which with their hands call upon their descendants to engage with the

her up: "We have a long way. We must start" (24). This call from the ancestor initiates the critical journey from home to the market. For Ayo, this is a trip without return that symbolises other journeys, the Middle Passage and Lizzie's return to the ancestral past. The ancestors' call from the past is the primary medium of historical reconstruction.

*Stigmata* is also structured around Lizzie's journal entries interwoven with Joy's diary (signalled in italics), which in turn contains Ayo's dictated narrative. Joy's journal is a narrative of dialogical intimacy clearly lost with the disintegration of family units when several generations no longer live in close proximity. This facilitates not only the necessary trust to relate the experience of slavery, but also the record of the mundane tasks which bond families and communities:

Frank got Mama garden turned over. She say she gon wait another week though cause she say more frost comin. Meantime she makin a little dress [...] for the girl baby she say is comin. Aint no baby comin Mama I say. [...] She cant get here cause Im in the way she say (33-34).

The use of "I say", "she say" is a clear mark of the continuous dialogue between mother and daughter, but the representation of the ordinary in this passage reveals Ayo's sixth sense, the one that allowed her to predict weather and the arrival of her granddaughter, and foresee her own death. Joy's silent wait for a child after being "*married a long time*" (34) is also subtly revealed. In the call and response strategy repetition is a key issue in passing on history. It is by repetition that history is shared and memorised.

---

past. See below Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983) and Morrison's *Song of Solomon* (1977).

For example Ayo's dedication of her narrative is repeated with variations. These variations are quite minor, but they signal the reappearance of certain passages in Joy's diary, emphasising their importance in Ayo's story.<sup>1</sup>

Perry's representation of the written record as a valid way to record African American history and the introduction of Joy's journal both as a narrative device and as evidence that former slaves recorded their stories and passed them on to the subsequent generations in contexts completely outside the abolitionist circuit constitute an innovative aspect of Perry's novel. In addition, she continues and reworks the tradition of the African American novel. Sherley Anne Williams's *Dessa*, like Ayo, also entrusts her life story to her descendant, rejecting the figure of a white abolitionist as amanuensis. *Dessa Rose* ends with the protagonist entrusting her life story to her grandchild, who in turn will "say it back" (236), producing a written record of the foremother's history. In *Stigmata*, the reader witnesses the importance of that written record in the lives of the women of Ayo's lineage, stressing how the written word can be populated with a distinct African American cadence, intention, and imagination, to paraphrase Mikhail Bakhtin. This clearly contrasts with the distrust of the written word in Gayl Jones's *Corregidora* and Morrison's assertion that *Beloved's* story is not one "to pass on" (274). In fact, the only written record of *Beloved*, beside the news clip on her mother's deviant deed, is seven letters engraved in her tombstone given in exchange for a few minutes of sex.

---

1. See, for example, pages 7 and 17. "I remember" (7) is later presented as "I choose to remember" (17); "This is for whose bones lay sleepin in the heart of the ocean" (7) is subsequently recorded as "This is for whose bones lay in the heart of the ocean"; *the aside* (7) is replaced by "beside".

In the refrain of the final chapter of *Beloved*, "It was not a story to pass on" (274-5), there is an obvious inherent paradox. The story has already been passed on to the reader and history, which in the closing of the novel emerges as the occasional "knuckles brushing a cheek in sleep seeming to belong to the sleeper" (275), has already been presented "as muscle and flesh for the real and living bones of history",<sup>1</sup> as Margaret Walker puts it, and resurrected by the author's imagination. In this way, in the ending of *Beloved*, Morrison plays with preconceived notions of reality in order to demonstrate how realistic modes of representation limit the unexplained, and more importantly, do not recreate a history for which there are no records. Thus, the closing of *Beloved* serves as a metafictional commentary on illusion; an illusion which does not emanate from the magical, but from realistic modes of representation. Magical realist authors, as Zamora puts it,

write *against* the illusionism of narrative realism by heightening their own narrative investment in illusion. They undermine the credibility of narrative realism by flaunting the relative *incredibility* of their own texts. In short, they point to literary devices by which "realistic" literary worlds are constructed and constrained, and they dramatise by counterrealistic narrative strategies the ways in which those literary worlds (and their inhabitants) may be liberated. (501)

In this way, the magical realist text is essentially a text of counter narrative that aims at critiquing, revising, and transforming the world as perceived in hegemonic forms of representa-

---

1. WALKER, Margaret, "How I Wrote *Jubilee*", in *How I Wrote Jubilee and Other Essays on Life and Literature*, Maryemma Graham, ed. (New York: The Feminist Press at The City University of New York, 1990): 58.

tion. In the African American text this exercise of transformation aims at recreating stereotypical views of identity and history. The supernatural emerges both in *Beloved* and *Stigmata* as the central agent for this transformation of the world. This necessity to transform linear history and narratives comes from practices of institutional abuse and a need to fill in the gaps of a lost history, unsettling forms of univocal discourse. According to Salman Rushdie, “the fiction of the Victorian age, which was realist, has [...] been inadequate as a description of the world for some time now [...]. For realism to convince, there must be a fairly broad agreement between the author and the reader about the nature of the world that is being described”. However, as Rushdie goes on to say, “now we don’t have this kind of consensus about the world”.<sup>1</sup> In this sense, the magical realist text emerges as text of polyphony. In the African American context, the ancestral apparition emerges as a voice that needs to be rescued from the caverns of time and memory. However, for the past to be recovered, the ancestors’ voices have to find an echo in those of the descendants so that the historical record can be revised and actualised; history becomes a space in which time is freed from simple linearity, a world that is “multiple, permeable, transformative, animistic”.

### *Works cited*

BAKER, Houston, Jr. *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987.

---

1. Rushdie, Salman, as quoted by Faris, 144.

- CALDWELL, Gail. "Author Toni Morrison Discusses Her Latest Novel *Beloved*, 1987." *Conversations with Toni Morrison*, Danille Taylor-Guthrie, ed. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994.
- CASH, Floris Barnett. "Kinship and Quilting: An Examination of an African-American Tradition". *Journal of Negro History* 80(1). Silver Spring, MD. (Winter 1995): 30-41.
- FARIS, Wendy B. "Sheherazade's Children: Magical Realism and Post-modern Fiction". *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris, eds. Durham: Duke University Press, 1995.
- FARIS, Wendy B. *Ordinary Enchantments: Magical Realism and the Remystification of Narrative*. Nashville: Vanderbilt Press, 2004.
- FOREMAN, P. Gabrielle. "Past-On Stories: History and the Magically Real, Morrison and Allende on Call". *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris, eds. Durham: Duke University Press, 1995.
- JONES, Edward P. "An Interview with Edward P. Jones". *The Known World*. 2003. New York: Amistad, 2004.
- JONES, Gayl. *Corregidora*. 1975. London: Candel Press, 1988.
- MARSHALL, Paule. *Praisesong for the Widow*. London: Plume, 1983.
- MORRISON, Toni. "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation". *Black Women Writers (1950-1980): A Critical Evaluation*. Mari Evans, ed. Garden City, NY: Anchor-Doubleday, 1984.
- MORRISON, Toni. *Beloved*. 1987. London: Picador, 1988.
- MORRISON, Toni. *Song of Solomon*. 1977. London: Picador, 1989.
- PATTON, Sharon F. *African-American Art*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1998.
- PERRY, Phyllis. *Stigmata*. 1998. London: Piatkus, 1999.
- SHANGE, Ntozake. *Sassafrass, Cypress and Indigo*. 1983. London: Minerva, 1996.



- TODOROV, Tzvetan. *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*. Translated from the French by Richard Howard. New York: Cornell University Press, 1975.
- WALKER, Alice. "Everyday Use". *The Complete Stories*. London: The Women's Press, 1994.
- WALKER, Alice. "In Search of Our Mother's Gardens". *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*. London: The Women's Press, 1984.
- WALKER, Margaret. *Jubilee*. 1966. New York: Bantam Books, 1967.
- WALKER, Margaret. *How I Wrote Jubilee and Other essays on Life and Literature*. Maryemma Graham, ed. New York: The Feminist Press at The City University of New York, 1990.
- WILLIAMS, Sherley Anne. *Dessa Rose*. 1986. London: Women's Press, 1998.
- WILLIS, Susan. *Specifying: Black Women Writing the American Experience*. London: Routledge, 1990.
- ZAMORA, Lois Parkinson. "Magical Romance/Magical Realism: Ghosts in U. S. and Latin American Fiction". *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris, eds. Durham: Duke University Press, 1995.

*Les Carnets du Cerpac* n° 6, 2007, 249-273.

**RACIAL ALLIANCES IN A WHITE NEO-SLAVE  
NARRATIVE: SUSAN STRAIGHT'S  
*A MILLION NIGHTINGALES***

Stephanie LI  
*University of Rochester*

The neo-slave narrative has typically been considered a province exclusive to African American writers. Toni Morrison, David Bradley, and Shirley Anne Williams among others have pioneered this genre, producing some of the most important works of the past decades.<sup>1</sup> The neo-slave narrative has proved to be an important tool of African American empowerment through its exploration of political issues and historically marginalized subjectivities. For example, as Ashraf H. A. Rushdy argues, such neo-slave narratives as Ishmael Reed's *Flight to Canada* (1976) and

---

1. Deborah McDowell defines the neo-slave narrative genre as uniquely "Afro-American" (144). See McDOWELL, Deborah, "Negotiating Between Tenses: Witnessing Slavery After Freedom—Dessa Rose", in *Slavery and the Literary Imagination*, Deborah McDowell and Arnold Rampersad, eds. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1989): 144-163.

Charles Johnson's *Middle Passage* (1990) have usefully contributed to debates of the seventies and eighties that interrogate the "relationship between the history of slavery and the social significance of contemporary racial identity" (22). Moreover, in *Black Women Writers and the American Neo-Slave Narrative: Femininity Unfettered* (1999), Elizabeth Beaulieu notes how African American women writers have used neo-slave narratives to reinscribe history from the perspective of black female slaves.

As these studies indicate, the subject matter and political import of the neo-slave narrative lends itself to African American writers, although the imaginative possibilities of antebellum slave voices have also attracted the creativity of non-black authors. However, in the wake of the heated controversy surrounding William Styron's *Confessions of Nat Turner* (1967), there has been a significant absence of white writers venturing into this politically fraught literary genre.<sup>1</sup> Although Valerie Martin's *Property* (2003) explored white subjectivity in an antebellum context, the novel's protagonist, the mistress of a slave plantation, dominated the narrative. Consequently, Susan Straight's recent novel, *A Million Nightingales* (2006), which is told from the perspective of a mixed-race slave girl, marks an important foray into the growing body of neo-slave narratives.

Though Straight has previously adopted the perspective of black characters and explored the lives of various ethnic groups in the U.S., *A Million Nightingales* is the first of her novels narrated by an African American living in the antebellum South. Her 2002 novel *Highwire Moon*, a finalist for the National Book Award, describes the struggles of Mexican immigrants while ear-

---

1. See CLARKE, John Henrik, ed. *William Styron's Nat Turner: Ten Black Writers Respond* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968).

lier works like *I Been in Sorrow's Kitchen and Licked Out All the Pots* (1993) and *The Getting Place* (1997) are centered on African American characters. In the early years of Straight's writing career, she received some criticism concerning her treatment of black experiences.<sup>1</sup> However, Straight affirms that when this issue is raised at public forums she is frequently defended by black audience members.<sup>2</sup> Straight's fictional characters reflect a life spent in the racially diverse area of Riverside, California and her close ties to African Americans (her ex-husband, and the father of her three daughters, is black). She also cites James Baldwin's mentorship at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst as formative to her development as a writer.

Like many neo-slave narratives by black authors, *A Million Nightingales* is derived from the story of an actual woman, a mulatta slave named Manon who was born in 1778 and was emancipated when she was thirty. Straight became intrigued by Manon in part because the free woman of color owned her son, a paradox resulting from the fact that the boy could not be manumitted until he turned twenty-one. However, due to financial distress, Manon was forced to indenture him in order to keep her boardinghouse. She attempted to buy him back after he was sent to work in the fields, but eventually her property was seized. Because there is no further mention of her son in historical records, Straight concluded that he died although Manon lived to be eighty-four,

---

1. See QUINN, Eli, "White Authors Cash In on Black Themes", *Emerge Magazine* (Sep. 1993): 76. Of Straight's reception among critics, Quinn writes: "her book is well-received first and foremost because her skin color doesn't threaten the predominantly white publishing and movie industries".

2. O'CONNOR, Anne-Marie, "Can you imagine?", *Los Angeles Times* 24 Oct. 2006, home ed., E1.

never bearing other children. Straight wrote about her response to Manon's story in the *Washington Post*:

When I finished reading, I cried. I floated in and out of my children's small bedroom like a ghost and stood in my hallway, where the full moon left silver-blue squares on the wood floor . . . I imagined her while I braided my own children's hair and rubbed lotion into their golden skin. I was a mother with daughters whose brains and hearts I worried over every day. I did not own them . . . But who would understand Manon? A piece of paper. A trade. A sale. A gamble.

Manon's history was especially touching to Straight because of her three mixed race daughters. Straight has stated that *A Million Nightingales* is largely inspired from her reflections on what life would have been like for her children had they been born two hundred years ago. This profoundly personal concern is linked to Straight's decision to explore Manon's story through fiction, a choice which demonstrates her belief that novels generate a unique form of empathy: "Only novels make us fully inhabit someone's life, someone's body and brain and soul. It felt imperative for me to imagine a life like hers, a gamble like hers, and every night I could write nothing else." ("Between the Lines"). These comments also illuminate Straight's use of a first person narrative perspective for as Moinette tells her story, readers are made to feel the urgency of her condition.

Straight concludes her reflections on the genesis of her novel with the hope that it may help her youngest daughter to understand the historical circumstances under which a woman could be bought and sold. The deeply personal impetus behind *A Million Nightingales* recalls the inspiration of such neo-slave narra-

tives as *Jubilee*. Margaret Walker has stated that her novel was written “to substantiate my material, to authenticate the story I had heard from my grandmother’s lips” (54). While Walker’s novel seeks to honor the experiences of her grandmother, Straight’s project is based upon an integration of the past with the present as it examines the possibilities of her daughter’s experiences in the antebellum South. Prompted to examine history through the hypothetical experiences of her children, Straight utilizes the neo-slave narrative genre as a way to synthesize contemporary social realities with inequities of the past.

Although many neo-slave narratives involve protagonists of mixed race, *A Million Nightingales* is unique in that the racial background of Moinette causes her to be severely marginalized from both black and white communities. She is described as a “Cadeau-fille” (5) or gift-girl because she is the result of the night her mother was forced to have sex with a visiting broker. Though Moinette’s light skin is prized by slaveowners, it is scorned by her fellow slaves. Unlike such characters as Walker’s Vvry and California Cooper’s *Always of Family* (1991), Moinette must confront her mixed-race origin not simply as a symbol of slavery’s violence and injustice, but also as a daily burden that separates her from both blacks and whites. Moreover, as a “cadeau-fille,” who is emblematic of the “fancy-girls” of New Orleans, Moinette tells her story from a social position unexamined by previous neo-slave narratives.<sup>1</sup> This is an especially important perspective

---

1. A number of historians have described the New Orleans “fancy-girl” market which consisted of light skinned slaves who frequently became mistresses to wealthy planters and businessmen. See DAVIS, Adrienne, “‘Don’t Let Nobody Bother Yo’ Principle’: The Sexual Economy of American Slavery”, *Sister Circle: Black Women and Work*, Sharon Harley ed. (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2002): 103-127.

because, as Hortense Spillers argues, the figure of the “mulatta/o” embodies “the ‘unspeakable,’ . . . the Everything that the dominant culture would forget” about slavery (“Notes” 165-6). By highlighting the complexities and consequences of Moinette’s status as a “sang mêlé” (18), Straight refuses easy dichotomies between black and white, slave and free to suggest that bondage is not a function of race alone. Moreover, her exploration of Moinette’s life represents a radical rewriting of the figure of the “tragic mulatta,” the doomed daughter of miscegenation who typically ends in death.<sup>1</sup> Straight’s heroine spurns the conventional distress over her mixed-race origin that is commonly associated with the tragic mulatta, directing her energies upon liberating herself and caring for those she loves.

While Straight is fundamentally concerned with Manon’s plight and her struggle to provide for her child, Jean-Paul, she also demonstrates special interest in interracial alliances and the ways in which black and white women suffered differing but related forms of commodification.<sup>2</sup> By examining critical links between persecuted groups including women of both races, homosexual men and Jews, *A Million Nightingales* suggests that antebellum slavery and the mores of nineteenth-century Amer-

---

1. For detailed discussion of the tragic mulatta see RAIMON, Eve Allegra, *The “Tragic Mulatta” Revisited: Race and Nationalism in Nineteenth-Century Antislavery Fiction* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2004).

2. Straight is not unique in noting the similarities between black and white women of the antebellum era. Hortense Spillers writes: “African-American women’s community and Anglo-American women’s community, under certain shared cultural conditions, were the twin actants on a common psychic landscape, were subject to the same fabric of dread and humiliation. Neither could claim her body and its various productions—for quite different reasons, albeit—as her own” (77). SPILLERS, Hortense, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book”, *Diacritics* (Summer 1987): 65-81. Moreover, Williams’ *Dessa Rose* (1986) dramatizes some of the dangers that both black and white women confronted.

ica entrapped a host of individuals. Slavery certainly left its deepest impress upon blacks, but in her exploration of the conventions governing gender roles and sexual behavior as well as the deep-seated prejudices against non-white ethnic groups, Straight implies that bonds forged across categories of social identity foster both constructive resistance and lasting forms of community.

As a mixed race slave, Moinette occupies a special place in the Bordelon household where she is born and raised. She is derided by field slaves like Christophe who reminds her that as a “Yellow girl” she is “only good for one thing, for what under your dress” (5). However, for her white masters, Moinette’s light skin makes her an ideal domestic servant. As the young Céphaline’s personal attendant, Moinette is exposed to a world of knowledge and scientific study that profoundly influences her understanding of others and her relationship to them. Significantly, she responds to Christophe’s comment not with a personal attack, but rather with the science-based observation: “We’re all animals . . . Hair and skin are like fur” (6).

Such comments are typical of the intellectually curious Moinette who is first introduced to readers as she puzzles over the brain in Doctor Tom’s jar and wonders about the head measurements she took of various slaves:

All our heads were the same size according to our age and sex: mine and Céphaline’s, Mamère and Madame’s, the men cutting cane and Msieu Bordeon’s. Under their hair, all their skulls were the same, and so the pecan brains floating inside that bone would be the same size. (4)

These opening reflections indicate that Moinette perceives those around her, regardless of their particular racial and social distinctions, through their shared humanity. Accordingly, they



are all animals, each struggling to fulfill the basic needs and drives of their existence. This frame of reference allows Moinette to empathize with individuals of all races, a perspective which strongly mimics Straight's authorial project. This opening passage also introduces readers to Moinette's stark, terse language that highlights the simplicity of her conception of human nature as well as the habits of a girl who is not at liberty to express herself fully.

Moinette's special narrative position is also enhanced by her unique sense of double consciousness. W.E.B. DuBois first described double consciousness as a type of "second sight" that is granted to the African American because he operates in a "world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world". DuBois further explains:

It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness,—an American, a Negro; two warring souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body. (2)

While Moinette's double consciousness is complicated by her sex as well as by her mixed-race origin, what most distinguishes her sense of "twoness" is how she applies it to those around her and, most significantly, to those who are not black or mixed-race. Although Moinette is highly aware of the biological commonality between people, she also understands that others do not perceive what lies beneath layers of skin. For example, she believes that Céphaline's brain is "perfect, because she learned

everything each of her tutors taught her and even questioned the lessons" (6). However, this intelligence is invisible to Céphaline's suitors who spurn her reading and pock-marked face. As Madame Bordelon explains to her husband, "the presentation of beauty . . . is more important than you know" (26) because it is the measure by which Céphaline will be judged marriageable. Moinette's sensitivity to the "two warring souls" that operate in her young mistress—that is, the young scholar hungry for knowledge and the submissive daughter bound for marriage—indicates that she has a profound awareness of how even white individuals are subject to limiting social conventions. Through Moinette, Straight suggests that double consciousness confers not only greater insight into one's racialized position, but may enhance one's understanding of a more general conflict between social expectations and personal desire.

Moinette even notes that Etienne, the heir of Rosière, must yield to the demands of his father and the expectations of others. Despite the power of his sex and wealth, Etienne is obliged to adopt roles that befit his social status, not his personal inclinations. Prior to his rape of Moinette, Etienne is taunted by Msieu Ebrard:

"Etienne, he said. Pélagie's slave has been summoned. You are fortunate.

I don't see it that way.

Then you are foolish.

Not foolish, but not interested.

Then maybe you learned nothing in Paris. Or you learned from the wrong men. The ones—

I learned what was necessary in Paris. And it doesn't matter here. Nothing I do matters here" . . .

Msieu Ebrard said, "Etienne should prove he isn't foolish. Or unnatural". (168-9)

Etienne's rape of Moinette must be understood within the context of his insecurity before Msieu Ebrard and his need to prove his heterosexual masculinity. Etienne does not seek Moinette for sexual gratification alone and while this social pressure does not excuse his violence, Moinette's careful observation of this conversation highlights her awareness that even those who occupy the top of the antebellum social hierarchy are subject to demands beyond their control. Moinette's unique sense of double-consciousness not only enables her to see how others perceive her, but she is also able to appreciate the social projections others must confront about themselves. Moinette understands that society establishes false standards for all individuals and that varied categories of race and gender only call for differing forms of coerced behavior.

Although Moinette is officially Céphaline's slave, the two women share a relationship far more intimate and complex than that mandated by the strictures imposed on master and chattel. Following her death, Moinette reflects that Céphaline "was my governess. I was her pupil" (70). The two reconfigure the relationship imposed upon them by the patriarchy of slavery such that they cannot be relegated to simplistic categories of slave and mistress. Moinette states that while she was not afraid of Céphaline, she "had not loved her" (206). The complexity of Moinette's feelings for Céphaline and her difficulties in describing their relationship suggests that this unique intimacy exists outside traditional conventions. Just as Moinette occupies a liminal space as a "sang mêlé," so her feelings for Céphaline are problematized by unsta-

ble categories of mistress and slave, teacher and student, sister and friend. There are no words that adequately describe this relationship, indicating both the transgressive quality of their partnership and the malleability of their apparent social roles.

Straight offers further insight into the bond between Moinette and Céphaline by highlighting how they are powerless to institutions and dictates beyond their control. Upon learning that the Bordelons are in financial distress, Moinette asks Tretite: "Who will he sell?" The older slave replies: "Céphaline . . . She marry the money, Msieu buy the land next door, and build a new house" (42). Despite her whiteness, Céphaline is a commodity to be traded for financial gain. As the only daughter of the Bordelons, she represents their sole opportunity to reestablish their fortune. The stark reality of this unfortunate position is clear to Céphaline who recognizes a distinct parallel between her life and that of Moinette:

I am making no distinction between us. I am supposed to meet the Lemoyne cousin, the Auzenne nephew, and mate with someone. You mate with someone else. I can read Latin and Spanish, and it won't change my task . . . My task is to make money by marrying . . . The moment I agree, my father makes money. But then I must lie down and receive the formation of a boy. Or everything will be lost. (49-50)

Education will not exempt either Céphaline or Moinette from the roles required of them in the dominant patriarchal economy and only embitters them to the lives they cannot easily escape.

According to Céphaline, the only significant difference between herself and Moinette is that while she must produce a son, the enslaved woman must produce girls.

"I am not meant to know," she said. "Only to produce a mammal. A son. My mother couldn't. And you are meant to produce girl mammals. Monsieur Lemoyne always said girls like you are worth more than boys". (49)

While Céphaline needs to produce an heir, Moinette is meant to bear daughters because light skinned girls garner the highest prices on the slave market. Both women are required to procreate to serve powers beyond their control and consequently to reify the very strictures that value them as commodities, not as individuals.

Although Céphaline is quick to draw parallels between herself and Moinette, as a white woman, she has freedoms and advantages impossible for female slaves. Her children will never be sold and she will never be separated without knowledge of her family. Although Céphaline is subject to a degree of sexual violence, attack by her husband is less horrific than the complete vulnerability Moinette experiences. The comparison between Céphaline and Moinette provides the former with an easy analogy, but their social positions cannot be conflated. Céphaline's quick rejection of the racial difference between herself and Moinette is ultimately a mark of her privilege, not of her insight.

Despite the critical social differences between them, Moinette also realizes that she has freedoms beyond those of the sickly Céphaline. Regarding her bed-ridden mistress, she wonders:

Did she hate us all now? Did she hate me for walking freely, for my face without a single mark except for a white scar like a grain of rice at my chin, where Christophe had once shoved me onto a rock? Did she hate her mother for not having a son? "You say every day you love me, you love me. But you didn't make the

right mammal, and now you are sorry. Drown me and begin again". (59)

Although Céphaline occupies a far more privileged social position than her slave, Moinette notes that the white woman's frail health is a detriment to her mobility and well-being. Most importantly, however, Moinette observes the strain in Céphaline's relationship with her mother. Because the elder Bordelons require a lucrative marriage for their daughter, Madame becomes impatient with Céphaline's scholarly pursuits, claiming, "We think the books cause the boutons" (52). However, as Moinette suggests, had Madame fulfilled the task she expects of her daughter—to bear a male heir—Céphaline would be able to follow her intellectual interests with greater freedom.

While the procreative demands on white women lead to strife between the Bordelons, Moinette and her mother are united by shared opposition to and disdain for their station in life. Moinette's mother tells her, "My only work here is to keep you alive" (8). This intense unity between the enslaved mother and daughter stands in striking contrast to the turmoil among the Bordelons. Moinette never doubts her mother's dedication and affection, and while her sex makes her vulnerable to men, it is not a point of resentment or antagonism for them. In some respects, Céphaline is actually more isolated than Moinette because she lacks a source of unconditional love. This is not to suggest that the white woman is more disadvantaged than her black slave, but rather indicates that freedom and self-fulfillment are not functions of whiteness alone. The example of Céphaline encourages Moinette to appreciate her health and her mother, and to recognize that she has advantages impossible for her mistress. While it is erroneous to

understand Céphaline as a slave, the comparison between herself and Moinette demonstrates that gender conventions and reproductive demands, either for heirs or for lucrative assets, strongly govern the expectations and limitations of women of all colors.

The complexities of race, gender and social status evident in the contrast between Moinette and Céphaline indicate that in the fraught world of *A Million Nightingales*, there are few certainties regarding freedom and personal loyalties. In Straight's novel, characters may act well towards others of different races and social classes, but most often these actions are motivated by self-interest. These contradictions are especially apparent in Moinette's encounter with Sally, the Indian wife of a slave trader who captures Moinette after she flees Rosière. As with the difficulties in describing the relationship between Céphaline and Moinette, the use of the term "wife" necessitates scrutiny since Sally's position bears striking similarities to slavery. Although Sally states that the white trader is "my husband," she explains to Moinette, "My uncle sold my brother for a slave, but he sold me for a wife. We cannot go" (123). Sally is not easily classified as either slave or wife, just as her interaction with Moinette cannot be simplistically interpreted. In this world, there are no loyalties without qualifications.

Sally saves Moinette from rape by striking the trader unconscious, but she then delivers the girl to her brother so she may collect the reward money. Because this action could have taken place after Moinette's rape, we must understand Sally as sympathetic to Moinette's plight; she spares Moinette from the violence of her "husband". Crossing lines of race and color, Sally aids Moinette possibly because of their shared sex or because she empathizes with her vulnerability. However, rather than free Moinette, Sally

explains that she wants the reward money to fund an eventual escape to New Orleans. She poignantly adds, “No one is free” (122), a conclusion which may be understood as intended rationalization for her failure to release Moinette. Her statement may be read both as a general commentary on how all are shackled by social circumstance and as a direct observation of Moinette’s situation. Even if Sally released Moinette, the slave girl would likely be found again, and Sally would be without the benefit of the reward money. In effect, Sally does not consider herself sufficiently free to free Moinette since the latter represents a unique monetary opportunity for her.

Sally’s final words to Moinette, “Don’t run again. Money is you” (123), reinscribe the very commodification that imprisons both women; there is no escape from the system of exchange that dominates their lives. Although Sally has greater opportunities than Moinette and is ostensibly free, she is not in control of her life. Moreover, her brother’s slavery seriously compromises her own freedom. Sally’s position suggests that all are constrained in a world that sanctions the enslavement of anyone. As Moinette sadly concludes from this incident: “And it was clear to me, then, that every free person I met—Indian, white, African—would only sell me or use me as an animal. My skin. Hide. Pounds of money—my fat and fingers and breasts” (128). Power and exploitation have no color, and loyalties are rarely divorced from self-interest.

The difficulty of establishing interracial alliances between women is further explored in Moinette’s relationship with her second mistress, Pélagie. Unlike Céphaline, Pélagie is anxious to find a husband. She seeks marriage with the widower Prudhomme to safeguard her livelihood and to escape from Monsieur Vincent, her husband by French law. Following the death of Pélagie’s first



husband, Monsieur Vincent raped Pélégie and the two were then married. Although Pélégie fled France to begin anew in America, Monsieur Vincent finds her in order to murder her and thereby seize her assets.

The two freely converse in front of Moinette for as Monsieur Vincent notes, slaves are forbidden from giving testimony. He reminds Pélégie: “She is not a viable presence here. She is nothing. You are nothing” (190). Moinette confirms the similarity between her and Pélégie, observing, “He spoke to her as if she were a slave” (187). Pélégie is powerless before her husband who has charged her with criminal desertion though he originally left her starving. As in America, nineteenth-century French law favored men in negotiations of marriage and property. Though Pélégie hoped to find freedom in America, there is no escape from the patriarchy of this time period. Even in seeking shelter through marriage to Prudhomme, Pélégie must rely on a male-dominated institution for protection.

In her confrontation with Monsieur Vincent, Pélégie tells Moinette how he raped her: “You forced yourself onto me. Do you hear that, Moinette? He came into my bedroom and—” (188). This desperate aside is highly significant given Pélégie’s complicity in Moinette’s rape by Monsieur Ebrard. In the previous chapter, Pélégie delivers Moinette to Ebrard with the feeble comment, “They say this is how it is done here in Louisiana . . . I am sorry” (153). As Moinette’s mistress, Pélégie could have prevented Moinette’s rape, and we can only speculate on her motives in facilitating the assault. Pélégie may have hoped to win favor with Monsieur Ebrard as a way to secure her engagement with Prudhomme. Referring to her plans for Moinette, she tells Lise:

I am without a husband yet, and with an abundance of hospitality required of me. There is no need to be coy, as Americans pretend to be here. She is fifteen, I think. She could have been sold for a high price . . . Ebrard will notice her again. (166)

While Pélégie has strategic designs for her own future, her decision to give Moinette to Ebrard may indicate a more sadistic desire to victimize the girl and inflict upon her the hurt and humiliation she suffered at the hand of Monsieur Vincent. In this way, Pélégie manages some meager sense of power for while she is still bound to the dictates of patriarchal institutions, she is not the weakest member of this social hierarchy. Pélégie's action presents a striking reversal of Sally's decision to save Moinette from rape. Nonetheless, both actions may be read as interventions based upon the desire to wield power over Moinette; while Pélégie exercises her social superiority through her complicity in Moinette's rape, by subverting the trader's designs, Sally uses Moinette for monetary gain. Neither woman acts with the best intentions for Moinette, underscoring the notion that alliances operate most powerfully through self-interest, not necessarily through empathy and shared vulnerability.

Despite the base way in which Pélégie treated Moinette, she calls upon her slave for help in her confrontation with Monsieur Vincent, demanding "Moinette! You will not forget a word when you tell them!" (190). Although Monsieur Vincent originally dismisses Moinette's presence, she ultimately precipitates his death by hitting him and bringing Etienne to the scene of the crime. As with Sally and Pélégie, Moinette also acts upon self-interest though she protects her mistress's name and brings about the death of Monsieur Vincent. Prior to killing Pélégie,

Monsieur Vincent states, "Your slave belongs to me now, and I will kill her afterward if she does not cooperate" (190), suggesting he will frame Moinette for the murder. Thus, Moinette's fate is inextricable from that of Pélagie; to save her mistress is to save herself. Moinette does not act as a free woman in this scene. Her response to Pélagie's peril further demonstrates her bondage as she attempts to protect the woman responsible for her rape. Moinette's move to help Pélagie may suggest a degree of loyalty and even empathy, but it cannot be divorced from the life or death consequences that this situation has for the enslaved girl.

Straight expands her discussion of the multiple inequalities present in antebellum American culture by describing the anti-semitism experienced by Jonah Greene and the necessary secrecy of his homosexual relationship with Msieu Antoine. The two lawyers present an unusual study in discrimination and the confines of social conventions. As educated white men, they are of the privileged elite, and their separation from family and attending obligations grant them a degree of freedom even Etienne would envy. However, their love must remain hidden as they present a public façade of professional partnership to a world that would otherwise destroy them. Only Moinette knows their secret. She is originally purchased by Msieu Antoine so others will assume she is his concubine. Although their relationship begins due to Msieu Antoine's self-interest, the two develop a close, supportive relationship. When buying Jean-Paul, Moinette adds Msieu Antoine's surname to her own, noting that their relationship "cannot be defined" (185). As in Moinette's relationship with Céphaline, language fails to characterize this transgressive bond.

Although Moinette is initially puzzled by Msieu Antoine's failure to have sex with her, she later discovers that he is in love with Mr. Greene. As she considers the absurdity of social mores, Moinette reflects, "It was acceptable that two men, three at a time, lay with me. But it was not acceptable that one man loved another" (275). Interestingly, in moving from the sexual violence she has experienced to the bond between the two men, Moinette assumes that they engage in a sexual relationship rooted in love. In immediately recognizing the emotional foundation of Msieu Antoine and Mr. Greene's relationship, Moinette perceives the taboo as one based not simply in sexual practice, but in emotional transgression. This perspective is significant because it offers Moinette a point of empathy between herself and the two men.

The inability of Msieu Antoine and Mr. Greene to express their love presents another form of social oppression although the limitations they confront, like those of Céphaline, cannot be equated with Moinette's struggles. However, their example highlights a conception of freedom critical to Moinette, a type of freedom that is not based solely upon physical autonomy and individual emancipation. Despite their privileged social positions, Msieu Antoine and Mr. Greene are not able to love according to their will. In a related way, Moinette also experiences limitations on how she may love others. Following the birth of her son, she considers that death may be best:

It would have been hard to kill him when he was inside of me, without knowing what to drink or do, but watching him mewling and his legs drawn up helplessly to his chest, his eyes unseeing

when they tried to focus on my face, I understood what some women did.

Just don't make them live. (277)

Moinette's ambivalent attitude towards her son's birth reveals her hesitation to love a child who may be taken from her. Similarly, she is reluctant to behave tenderly towards David, a slave boy she initially buys to trade for Jean-Paul, for fear of developing an emotional attachment to him. As a slave and even as a free woman who is desperate to emancipate her son, Moinette cannot be generous or careless with her love. While the threat of Moinette's separation from Jean-Paul is far greater than what may occur between the circumspect Msieu Antoine and Mr. Greene, Moinette, like the two men, makes herself vulnerable through her love for another. Jean-Paul's existence prevents Moinette from escaping with Hervé Richard, causing her to remain in bondage. By choosing to love one another, Msieu Antoine and Mr. Greene must carefully strategize their future and their public image. The union of the two lovers, like the union between mother and son, requires both risk and constant vigilance.

Mr. Green is further encumbered by the prejudice incurred by his Jewish ancestry. His very presence is suspect because as Msieu Césaire explains to him, "In the original Code Noir, in 1724, the first article decreed that all Jews must leave the colony or become Catholic" (191). The Code Noir, which also mandated the slavery of Africans, links Mr. Greene's situation to Moinette's bondage as does Straight's suggestion that neither racial or religious designations are stable categories of identity. Following his near fatal illness in which his circumcised penis was visible both to Doctor Vidrine and Moinette, Mr. Greene reflects upon the nature of his difference from others:

“Do you know what a Jew is?” Mr. Jonah Greene looked at me from his bed. He drank leaves instead of beans. He didn’t like sugar. He did not attend Mass. He loved Msieu Antoine. He was an American.

I shook my head.

“I am not certain I know anymore, myself”. He turned his head to the window then, and I went down the stairs. (274)

Moinette’s reflections on Mr. Greene’s differences—how he prefers tea to coffee, his lack of church attendance, his love for Msieu Antoine—suggest that she perceives him through a whole series of individual characteristics rather than by totalizing markers of social identity. He, like all the other characters of this novel, cannot be reduced to a simple label. Moreover, while Doctor Vidrine attempts to attach a biological meaning to Mr. Greene’s Jewish identity—“Perhaps the Jews have different blood, as well, that protected you from the fever” (274)—Moinette has long understood the scientific basis of human commonality as well as the healing powers of care.

Significantly, it is Mr. Greene who speaks of the million nightingales from which the novel takes its title. Following his outrage that Moinette will buy David to trade for Jean-Paul, he reflects “‘I have a million nightingales on the branches of my heart singing freedom,’ he said softly. ‘My grandmother knew someone who sang that. So always someone is not free’” (277-278). This image captures both the underlying tension of Straight’s text as well as its fundamental hope. We may understand the singing of the nightingales as a testament to the fact that no one is truly free; the novel demonstrates that even the most privileged members of society chafe against social expectations and traditional mores. The image also has special resonance for Moinette who has survived her struggles in part by cultivating a collection of “memory

people" (238), people like her mother and Céphaline who have profoundly touched her life. As figures of the nightingales who sing in Moinette's heart, they remind her of past forms of oppression that resonate with her own immediate struggles.

The community of "memory people" that live within Moinette consist not only of blood relatives, but also of individuals outside her immediate family. In explaining Tretite's relationship to her son, Moinette tells Jean-Paul: "Tretite isn't truly your grand-mère. But she is now. You sometimes make your family" (285). This notion, that families can be made and chosen, highlights a new freedom to love that is born of the harsh reality of imminent separation endured by slaves. In a world in which blood family members cannot assume they will always be together, the ability to love and welcome others as family becomes paramount. Following the death of Jean-Paul, Moinette adopts two girls. Describing the purchase of the first girl, Moinette states: "Marie-Claire was my daughter because I bought her, and she had no one else, and I was her mother, and would free her when she turned twenty-one" (321). As the girls grow, Moinette tells them stories of her life and those she has loved. By learning of Moinette's "memory people"—Moinette's mother, Tretite, Jean-Paul, Céphaline and others—the daughters establish a continuity of family, which though not linked by blood, are united through love as well as through Moinette's profound generosity.

In her study of neo-slave narratives and their authors, Beaulieu notes: "These writers reflect an active engagement with America's past and its legacy; they are committed to breaking the silence of the past in order to promote a new understanding" (xv). Although this observation refers specifically to black women writers, Straight's novel clearly joins the literary project described

here.<sup>1</sup> *A Million Nightingales* breaks the silence surrounding a wide variety of experiences of the antebellum South. Straight's mixed-race narrator is uniquely positioned to provide insight into the struggles of white women, homosexual men, and Jews in addition to describing the horrors inflicted upon black slaves. *A Million Nightingales* does not suggest that the difficulties confronted by these various groups are equivalent, but by juxtaposing such encounters, Straight expands our understanding of how forms of oppression are interrelated as well as how resistance can operate beyond boundaries of race, gender, sexuality and blood.

### Works Cited

- BEAULIEU, Elizabeth. *Black Women Writers and the American Neo-Slave Narrative: Femininity Unfettered*. Westport: Greenwood Press, 1999.
- CLARKE, John, ed. *William Styron's Nat Turner: Ten Black Writers Respond*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1968.
- DUBOIS, W.E.B. *The Souls of Black Folk*. New York: Dover Thrift Editions, 1994.
- DAVIS, Adrienne. "'Don't Let Nobody Bother Yo' Principle': The Sexual Economy of American Slavery", in *Sister Circle: Black Women and Work*, Sharon Harley, ed. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2002; 103-127.

---

1. In her study of neo-slave narratives or what she terms "liberatory narratives," Angelyn Mitchell also explores the specific contributions of black women writers. She writes: "By creating this discursive space of interrogation, these writers recast and augment our understanding of our sometimes painful, but always collective, past. In many ways, these narratives foster the conversation on race the country so sorely needs" (21). Straight's novel may also be understood as participating in this discursive space, especially in its keen awareness of the "collective" nature of America's past. MITCHELL, Angelyn, *The Freedom to Remember: Narrative, Slavery, and Gender in Contemporary Black Women's Fiction* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2002).



- McDOWELL, Deborah. "Negotiating Between Tenses: Witnessing Slavery After Freedom—Dessa Rose". *Slavery and the Literary Imagination*, Deborah McDowell and Arnold Rampersad, eds. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1989; 144-163.
- MITCHELL, Angelyn. *The Freedom to Remember: Narrative, Slavery, and Gender in Contemporary Black Women's Fiction*. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2002.
- O'CONNOR, Anne-Marie. "Can you imagine?" *Los Angeles Times* 24 Oct. 2006, home ed., E1.
- QUINN, Eli. "White Authors Cash In on Black Themes". *Emerge Magazine*. Sep. 1993: 76.
- RAIMON, Eve Allegra. *The "Tragic Mulatta" Revisited: Race and Nationalism in Nineteenth-Century Antislavery Fiction*. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2004.
- RUSHDY, Ashraf H. A. *Neo-Slave Narratives: Studies in the Social Logic of a Literary Form*. New York: Oxford UP, 1999.
- SPILLERS, Hortense. "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book". *Diacritics* (Summer 1987): 65-81.
- SPILLERS, Hortense. "Notes on an Alternative Model - Neither/Nor", in *The Difference Within: Feminism and Critical Theory*, Elizabeth Meese and Alice Parker eds. Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing, 1989; 165-187.
- STRAIGHT, Susan. "Between the Lines". *Washington Post* 6 Aug. 2006: BW 15.
- STRAIGHT, Susan. *The Gettin Place*. New York: Anchor Books, 1997.
- STRAIGHT, Susan. *Highwire Moon*. New York: Anchor Books, 2002.
- STRAIGHT, Susan. *I Been in Sorrow's Kitchen and Licked Out All the Pots*. New York: Anchor Books, 1993.
- STRAIGHT, Susan. *A Million Nightingales: A Novel*. New York: Pantheon Books, 2006.

WALKER, Margaret. "How I Wrote *Jubilee*", in *How I Wrote Jubilee and Other Essays on Life and Literature*, Maryemma Graham, ed. New York: The Feminist Press at City University of New York, 1990; 50-65.



*Les Carnets du Cerpac* n° 6, 2007, 275-295.

**MULTIPLE TRAJECTORIES OF SLAVERY:  
CRISTINA GARCÍA'S *MONKEY HUNTING* AS  
A TRANSNATIONAL NEO-SLAVE NARRATIVE**

*Marta LYSIK  
Humboldt-Universität, Berlin*

The year 2007 marks the bicentennial anniversary of the formal abolition of transatlantic slave trade within the British colonial empire, and in 2008 we will celebrate the 200th anniversary of the abolishment of the American transatlantic slave trade. The legislation helped outlaw the practice, yet failed to hinder domestic slave trade that continued to flourish in the Southern States and was annulled only in 1865 with the passing of the 13th Amendment. In the Caribbean region, Spaniards put an end to slavery: in Puerto Rico in 1873, and in Cuba in 1886, yet the slave trade continued into the late nineteenth century. The anniversaries constitute a perfect context to reflect on the legacies and representations of chattel slavery in the 20th and 21st century. Contemporary literature abounds in neo-slave narratives, which according to Ashraf

Rushdy, are “modern or contemporary fictional works substantially concerned with depicting the experience or the effects of New World slavery”.<sup>1</sup> They are penned not only by African American writers, but also by African diasporic novelists, who direct their literary imagination and creative efforts towards revising and reclaiming oppressive historical moments. This transnational and transcultural distribution of literary production professes against nationalist paradigms in cultural and literary history. The emerging transnational neo-slave narratives promulgate comparative history paradigms and continue the polylogue about slavery and its practice outside of the U.S. *Monkey Hunting* (2003) by Cristina García<sup>2</sup> is a transnational neo-slave narrative insofar as it follows multiple trajectories and brings to the foreground various forms of slavery: chattel system in Cuba, forced marriages, foot binding and cross-dressing in pre-Cultural Revolution China, and prostitution during the Vietnam war. García, a contemporary author, is concerned with slavery under many guises—slavery of the mind, body and soul, and she positions a classical slave society of nineteenth-century Cuba next to societies practicing slavery-like forms of oppression. She prioritizes the well-being of women, especially Latinas inside and outside of the U.S., with her previous novels *Dreaming in Cuban* (1992) and *The Agüero Sisters* (1997) constituting perfect examples. However, she also “travels” further, historicizing the past not only of the Americas, in order to tell troubled tales of men and women from Africa, China, or Vietnam. This essay is informed by the “New Ameri-

---

1. RUSHDY, Ashraf H.A., “Neo-slave Narrative”, *The Oxford Companion to African American Literature*, William L. Andrews, Francis Smith Foster, and Trudier Harris, eds. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997): 533.

2. GARCÍA, Cristina, *Monkey Hunting* (2003. New York: Ballantine Books, 2004).

canist" approach of inquiring into American literature, as formulated by Saldívar in *The Dialectics of Our America*, an influential work on the cultural hybridity of the American landscape. The approach attempts to emplace the literary America in a context of hemispheric, transnational and global terms, rather than in a single national perspective, and the transnational neo-slave narrative aptly epitomizes this attitude. Saldívar's "new line of comparative American studies" embraces the hemisphere's diversity and multiple migrations when he comparatively analyzes Afro-Caribbean, African-American and Chicano texts unraveling "the knotty issues of pan-American literary history".<sup>1</sup> García reconstructs the global tales of slavery and produces a text which revisits events from varied vantage points, thus participating in this New Americanist method. The literary history of the Caribbean, especially the Anglophone part, is difficult to pinpoint due to its diasporic character<sup>2</sup> and the identities of writers should be subject to their own definition. García's narrative, I will demonstrate while analyzing the protagonists' peregrinations, embodies what Saldívar terms "a new, transgeographical conception of American culture—one more responsive to the hemisphere's geographical ties and political crosscurrents than to narrow national ideologies" (Saldívar 1991: xi).

Representations of slavery as practiced in the United States are numerous in literature. Yet, slavery was not limited to that area

---

1. SALDÍVAR, José David, *The Dialectics of Our America: Genealogy, Cultural Critique, and Literary History* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1991): xi.

2. LEDENT, Bénédicte, "Slavery Revisited Through Vocal Kaleidoscopes: Polyphony in Novels by Fred D'Aguiar and Caryl Phillips", in *Revisiting Slave Narratives*, Judith Misrahi-Barak, ed. Collection *Les Carnets du Cerpac* n° 2 (Montpellier: Services des publications de Montpellier III: université Paul-Valéry, 2005): 281.

and the chattel system in the Caribbean has recently received increased coverage. We witness “the new generation of Caribbean neo-slave narratives, be they francophone or anglophone”<sup>1</sup> by novelists such as Fred D’Aguiar, David Dabydeen, Dionne Brand, Caryl Phillips (Misrahi-Barak 2005: 13), Michelle Cliff (Misrahi-Barak 2005: 16). The teleological explanation behind “[t]his insistent delving into the texts concerned with slavery and the slave trade indicates the continuing need to revisit those texts from our present-day perspective” (Misrahi-Barak 2005: 14). Contrary to common belief, “slavery is not past” (Ledent 2005: 292). When “one looks at the agenda of young novelists of Caribbean descent in the 1990s, one is struck by the centrality of slavery as a theme in their works, regardless of their place of residence” (Ledent 2005: 282). García problematizes this issue and elaborates on the thin line between fiction and history. Beaulieu asserts that

[t]he slave narrative genre itself is characterized by a blurring between fact and fiction; the narratives of ex-slaves written in the nineteenth century occupy a liminal space somewhere between autobiography, literature, and history.<sup>2</sup>

The life of slaves, particularly of slave women, in the United States was not much different from the fate of a slave woman in the Caribbean. Life consisted of work in the fields, on the plantation or in the household, accompanied by dreams of freedom from bondage, and for women in particular, by resistance towards sexual advances. I plan to show how a contemporary

---

1. MISRAHI-BARAK, Judith, “Introduction”, *Revisiting Slave Narratives*, Judith Misrahi-Barak, ed. Collection *Les Carnets du Cerpac* n° 2 (Montpellier: Services des publications de Montpellier III: université Paul-Valéry, 2005): 13.

2. BEAULIEU, Elizabeth Ann, *Black Women Writers and the American Neo-Slave Narrative* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1999): 61.

neo-slave narrative, *Monkey Hunting* probes the generic and thematic scope of the original slave narratives. The novel revisits multiple moments of slavery of multifarious kind. Neo-slave narratives, according to Rushdy, are “contemporary novels that assume the form, adopt the conventions, and take on the first-person voice of the ante-bellum slave narrative”.<sup>1</sup> He asserted the emergence of the literary form as a result of the legacy of 1960s social movements and historiographical discussions and revisions continuing the discourse on slavery and its legacy (Rushdy 1999: 3). García adopted and rewrote certain strategies of the ante-bellum slave narrative, writing in the voices of the enslaved and the oppressed, scattered across the globe. *Monkey Hunting* is historiographic in its echoes of the texts and contexts of the past, it positions itself within historical discourse while retaining its autonomy as work of fiction. It is historiography for García writes fictionalized historical literature based on a critical analysis, evaluation, and selection of authentic source materials and incorporates the knowledge and the approach into her narrative.

Reflecting on the nature of literary texts, one cannot but help ponder their role either as apolitical aesthetic works or products of their representative cultural and historical contexts, capable of influencing the readers and society. Original slave narratives were treated as tools of slavery abolition and acquirement of civil rights. For contemporary readers they constitute documents about the history of slavery as experienced and told first-hand. This article reflects on the relationship between literature and history, or literature and politics insofar as it concerns a narrative text attempting historical and political revisions. While analyzing

---

1. RUSHDY, Ashraf H. A., *Neo-Slave Narratives: Studies in the Social Logic of a Literary Form* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999): 3.



several neo-slave narratives, Rushdy argues that neo-slave narratives are “engaged in dialogue not only with specific literary texts, but with an ethos; not just with another novel, but with the discursive formation from which another novel emerged” (Rushdy 1999: 17). *Monkey Hunting* exhibits a dialogic relationship with slave narratives and neo-slave narratives by presenting comparable phenomena, the crimes committed against men and women worldwide. According to Misrahi-Barak, this dialogic quality prevails in the new slavery novels authored by writers of Caribbean descent:

the use they make of voice, singular and plural, monophonic and polyphonic, always dialogic, writing back to the previous texts and authors, preserving the memory and legacy, subverting and responding without conserving. (Misrahi-Barak 2005: 17)

*Monkey Hunting* purports to have a dialogic, both ideological and aesthetical, relationship with other slave narratives. The assertion is rooted in the fact that slave narratives are formulaic, deploying fixed topics and patterns that reoccur in these novels creating a dialogue on semantic, rhetorical and thematic levels. The original slave narratives were imbued with oral characteristics. Antebellum African-American writers understood their mission and joined anti-slavery societies bent on mobilizing the ex-slaves to recount their tales of captivity. In addition to impassioned oral declarations, slave testimonies were written down, published and used as weapons in favor of political and social changes. Frederick Douglass or Harriet Jacobs realized the significance of publicizing their life stories: both, the telling and the writing down were powerful acts of discarding submissiveness and reclaiming the black slave’s agency. Rushdy maintains that neo-

slave narratives were characterized by “the use and celebration of ‘oral’ modes of representation” (Rushdy 1997: 533). During the times of slavery many tales were told and re-told in the slave cabins, and religious practice encompassed inspiring sermons following the call-and-response pattern. Because it was inherent to the slave culture, former slaves attempted to instill this verbal quality into their written narratives. Orality in *Monkey Hunting* manifests itself within the narrative structure consisting of fragments telling separate yet interconnected stories of a dispersed family across generations, continents and centuries. Oral quality is reinforced through the dominant first-person narration of various protagonists, occasionally sprinkled with third-person narration. Perhaps harking back to her journalistic past and belief in multiple, rather than omniscient, narration, it is a form García favors in her writing:

I don't believe any one voice can tell the whole truth of a story. In my opinion, you need several people, at minimum, to even begin to approach something resembling the truth. To me, a story is always subject to competing realities. Ambiguity is generally more honest than absolutes.<sup>1</sup>

Men's and women's lives in *Monkey Hunting* (MH) revolve around slavery and oppressive living conditions. García is not only concerned with the fates of Latinos and Latinas in the U.S., but her interest goes beyond nationalist paradigms and loyalties. Traditional slavery is portrayed in the third-person narration of Lucrecia and Chen Pan, two slave characters. At the age of 20, in 1857 Chen Pan left China and went to Cuba in search of work.

---

1. BROWN, Scott Shibuya, “A Conversation with Cristina García”, in Cristina García *Monkey Hunting*. (2003. New York: Ballantine Books, 2004): 264.

In contrast to the slaves from West Africa, he had a choice and was lured by images of paradisaical happiness of warmer climate, more eager women and generally easier living. However, he was enslaved and made to work with other slaves, Chinese and African, cutting sugarcane on a plantation. Which is somewhat ironic, for as he was signing a contract to go and hoping to come back a rich man to China, already planning to “buy two or three more wives, comely and fecund as hens, found his own dynasty” (MH: 5-6), he did not take any other fates into account. His first wife was barren and therefore scorned and looked down upon by Chen Pan’s family, his mother in particular, who although suffering from ailments related to bound feet, instantiated and perpetuated patriarchal order. Chen Pan boards a ship where many like him undergo the Middle Passage-like trip in 1857. The ship is “outfitted like a prison, with irons and grates. The recruits were kept belowdecks, like animals in a pen” (MH: 8). Conditions were appalling:

he thought more of his shoe-leather throat than of the life awaiting him in Cuba. Those who demanded more water were answered with blows. Chen Pan watched men drink their own urine, lick moisture from the walls of the ship. A few swallowed seawater until their stomachs swelled and they choked in their own filth. (MH: 9)

One man throws himself into the ocean to end his pitiful lot, only to be followed by more suicidal deaths. Fights erupt and diseases outbreak, resulting in anonymous deaths and burials (throwing aboard). After over three months at sea the ship finally sailed to Cuba, and the men “were rounded up in groups of sixty—wood haulers and barbers, shoemakers, fishermen, farmers—then parceled out in smaller groups to the waiting landowners” (MH: 20). Chen Pan did not escape the auction, he

“was forced to strip and be examined for strength, like horses or oxen that were for sale [...] One hundred fifty pesos was the going rate for a healthy *chino*” (MH: 21). An entire chapter depicts the vicissitudes of slavery in Cuba as imposed by the Spanish, which does not differ from images of toil in the African American slave narratives. La Amada plantation slaves struggle to survive everyday, “[m]ost of the slaves had a spiderweb of scars on their backs, or strips of pink flesh still raw from the overseer’s whip” (MH: 23). The imagery reminds one of the scar on Sethe’s back. After being whipped with a cowhide, Sethe has “a tree on [her] back [...] A chokecherry tree. Trunk, branches, and even leaves. Tiny little chokecherry leaves”.<sup>1</sup>

Soon enough it occurs to Chen Pan “that he was in Cuba not as a hired worker but as a slave, no different from the Africans” (MH: 24). Living with other slaves in the slave quarters, *barracón*, he witnesses their creativity and spirituality. He participates in the times of joy, fiestas, and the times of mourning, burial rites. García portrays syncretic, transcultural religious practices. Previous novels addressed Santería, in *Monkey Hunting* Chen Pan watches the slaves’ religious rituals and teaches another slave how to do “Chinese exercises to begin his day, to gather energy from the heavens to strengthen his body” (MH: 26). The harsh reality is exacerbated by the presence of “the overseer, a burly pig of a criollo they called El Bigote” (MH: 27) who made ample use of his whip. It is reminiscent of the portrait of an overseer in Frederick Douglass’ narrative:

Mr. Severe, the overseer, [...] armed with a large hickory stick and heavy cowskin, ready to whip [...] he was a cruel man. I

---

1. MORRISON, Toni, *Beloved* (1987. London: Random House Vintage: 2005): 19.

have seen him whip a woman, causing the blood to run half an hour at the time [...] he seemed to take pleasure in manifesting his fiendish barbarity.<sup>1</sup>

Chen Pan kills El Bigote with a stone and each slave receives punishment, because the plantation owner cannot determine who has committed murder. When Chen Pan shows attention to a slave named Rita, he notices the master looking at her as well, and witnesses him ordering “Rita’s steady lover, Narciso, to be switched to the night shift at the mill. Then the master summoned Rita to his bed” (MH: 35). Her lover is shot and she is pregnant with her master’s child. When it is clear she cannot work in the fields, she is sold to another plantation—a common scenario in slave narratives.

Just like in other neo- and slave narratives, talk of freedom prevails in *Monkey Hunting*. Escapes are planned and undertaken, slaves are being caught, brought back and penalized. Female slaves in the Caribbean participated in the back-breaking toil to equal extent as the male slaves, were exploited as field labor, planting and cultivating the sugarcane. Slave owners depended on women’s reproduction abilities in order to boost the amount of the work force. Although Lucrecia does not live and work on a plantation, the fate of her and her mother was similar: corporal punishment, harsh living conditions, numerous chores, humiliation and sexual advances by the Spanish owner. Lucrecia recalls her mother working and not only catering to the needs of the household, but also to her master’s sexual needs: “Lucrecia had believed that this was just another of her mother’s duties, like washing clothes or peeling yams” (MH: 128). After her mother’s

---

1. DOUGLASS, Frederick, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave: Written by Himself* (1845. New York: A Signet Classic, 1997): 27.

death, the lascivious master, who is simultaneously her father, rapes Lucrecia and she realizes “[t]hat what her mother had suffered, she was now suffering” (MH: 133). The scenario reminds one of Gayl Jones’ neo-slave narrative *Corregidora* (1975), where incest and rape belong to plantation reality. The women’s fate was doubly perilous, not only were they subjected to hard work on the plantation, but also were sexually exploited, and their offspring was seen as valuable investment. Jacobs rightly and bitterly pointed out in her narrative: “[s]lavery is terrible for men; but it is far more terrible for women. Superadded to the burden common to all, *they* have wrongs, and sufferings, and mortifications peculiarly their own”.<sup>1</sup>

The authors of slave narratives described the culture and coping mechanisms of slaves. It included portrayal of the quotidian activities, as well as festive celebrations and religious worship. The legacy of this cultural system prevailed until the modern day, according to Kevane:

[t]he culture and traditions of the African slaves have found their way into contemporary island cultures, especially in religious and spiritual matters in Cuba, the Dominican Republic, and Puerto Rico. In fact, it would be impossible to understand *santería* without knowing something of the Western African Yoruban slaves and their religious practices like Orisha, which formed the basis for *santería*. *Santería*, a folk religion prevalent in the Spanish Caribbean where slaves were predominant, combines African gods with Catholic saints. It continues to be a part of the literature by Latinos from the islands, both on the mainland and on the islands themselves.<sup>2</sup>

---

1. JACOBS, Harriet, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Written by Herself*, Jean Fagan Yellin, ed. (1861. Cambridge, MS: Harvard University Press, 1994): 77.

2. KEVANE, Bridget, *Latino Literature in America* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2003): 4.

Quizzed as to why she includes Santería in her writing, García responds:

Santería was traditionally an unacknowledged and underappreciated aspect of what it meant to be Cuban. Yet the syncretism between the Yoruban religion that the slaves brought to the island and the Catholicism of their masters is, in my opinion, the underpinning of Cuban culture. Every artistic realm—music, theater, literature, etc. —owes a huge debt to Santería and the slaves who practiced it and passed it on, largely secretively, for generations.<sup>1</sup>

The enslaved Africans brought their languages with them, along with their gods, religious practices, healing methods and rituals, e.g. Santería. Santería practitioners believe in the existence of sacred plants and sacred trees. In the sacred Ceiba tree, sixteen orishas, or African saints, dwell together with spirits. Hence many religious ceremonies revolve around this tree. In the novel, the tree “was their mother; her sap, blood; her touch, a tender caress” (MH: 38). In moments of distress, Chen Pan walked to the ceiba tree “rubbed its sacred earth on his face and throat, on his temples to clear his thinking. It was moist and acrid and cooled him, steadied his jumping blood” (MH: 38). He hid in the ceiba tree after running away from the plantation. He is accompanied by an owl’s screeching. He believes the owl is his mother’s ghost who came back to haunt him and scorn him for not being a good son. He presented her with sacrifices and offerings to appease her. Santería religion surfaces throughout the novel which spans four generations and four countries, three continents and two centuries. The youngest heir Domingo Chen, Chen Pan’s great-

---

1. BROWN, Scott Shibuya, “A Conversation with Cristina García”, in Cristina García, *Dreaming in Cuban* (1992. New York: Ballantine Books, 2004): 255.

grandson, who lives in New York, remembers how his mother used to “compare the planets to *santos*, Venus was Ochún. Mars was Changó. And Saturn with all its rings of knowledge was the serene Obatalá” (MH: 44). His great-grandmother Lucrecia also recalls accompanying her mother to sacred offerings and Santería ceremonies.

Slave auctions were humiliating experiences, denigrating the slave, and dehumanizing the sellers and buyers. Lucrecia’s master places an ad:

A negress (with her first child) young and robust, birthed six weeks ago and abundant milk, very regular cook, basic principles of sewing, excellent handservant, particular skills, healthy and without vices. (MH: 60)

Similar situation was portrayed in Douglass’ narrative where a master bought a female slave to become the breeder for his plantation: “[s]he was large, able-bodied woman, about twenty years old. She had already given birth to one child, which proved her to be just what he [the master] wanted” (Douglass 1845: 73). Chen Pan went to “inspect the slave and her child” (MH: 60) and bought her to help him at his store “The Lucky Find”. The owner thus advertized “the goods,” first the mother: “[y]ou can cancel the milkman with this heifer in your house,” then her baby: “[s]ee, he never cries. In a couple of years you could put him to work as well. Then breed his mother with a few young bucks and populate your own plantation!” (MH: 67). Also Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* (1982) contains a scene in which Celie is shown to Mr. \_\_\_\_: “She ugly [...] But she ain’t no stranger to hard work. And she clean. And God done fixed her. You can do everything just like you want to and she ain’t gonna make you feed it or



clothe it"<sup>1</sup>. Chen Pan was looking for a woman's help in his house and at his shop, and intended to eventually emancipate Lucrecia. Lucrecia was taught by the nuns how to manufacture candles, and was soon "peddling her candles all over Havana. For Easter, she made pastel tapers dipped in vanilla and rose oil. By June, she was selling votives scented with crushed orange blossoms" (MH: 77). This enterprise had helped her amass the amount of money needed to secure her own and her son's freedom. She went to the magistrate and had herself evaluated. Lucrecia is reminiscent of Celie, the pants manufacturer from the neo-slave narrative *The Color Purple*, insofar as she takes her own economic situation in her hands and becomes independent financially and spiritually.

The novel also tells the life story of Chen Fang, Chen Pan's granddaughter in China, a girl raised as a boy because her mother was ashamed of birthing three daughters and no sons. Her older sisters married early: "[t]hey are traditional women, obedient to their men and eldest sons. They have bound feet and never traveled far. I am not like my sisters" (MH: 88-89). She does not have to work in the household, nor are her feet bound. She is sent to school instead: "[m]y father sent extra money for this purpose, to educate his eldest son" (MH: 90). She excels as a student in a male boarding school where she is compelled to disguise her sex. Once she returns to her village, her mother makes her marry a man and suddenly she has to act feminine: "[t]here is no harder work than being a woman. I know this because I pretended to be a boy for so long" (MH: 96). Her mother-in-law, white master-like, keeps meticulous track of her monthly cycle in order to be in charge of Chen Fang's reproductive processes. After Chen Fang

---

1. WALKER, Alice, *The Color Purple* (1982. New York: Pocket Books, 1985): 9.

bears a son, she is made to leave the house. She goes to Shanghai where she teaches classics and modern literatures, no longer in a disguise. She sums up her life bitterly: “[i]n China women do not stand alone. They obey fathers, husbands, their eldest sons. I lived outside the dictates of men, and so my life proved as unsteady as an egg on an ox” (MH: 226). Chen Fang lived an unfulfilled life because her relationship with a woman was not accommodated by the rigid social conventions. During the cultural revolution in China, elderly Chen Fang was imprisoned, interrogated and tortured by communists for having taught the children of diplomats and having had foreign connections.

García is concerned with women’s and men’s well-being, telling their stories, as crude and violent as they come. Quizzed about the women protagonists and their lives, García says:

I think these were not unusual fates for women of these times and places—and in fact, for many women today in various parts of the world. I had no ulterior motive for making my female characters so oppressed except to stay close to their reality. I wanted very much to make their dire situations come vividly alive. (Brown 2003: 262)

She spotlights Lucrecia, her past as a slave, incested and humiliated, and her peaceful life and love with Chen Pan, who initially bought her but in due course taught her to love and enjoy her sexuality. Lucrecia chose to be with him and it reminds one of Harriet Jacobs’ resolve to be in charge of her love life. García writes about women and about men, seemingly saying that no one is liberated until everyone is liberated. After the revolution in Cuba, Pipo Chen and his son Domingo come to America and establish a restaurant Havana Dragon. Pipo Chen commits sui-

cide and frees himself ultimately from the immigrant fate and from painful memories. Domingo recalls his father being arrested on charges of anti-revolutionary behavior in Cuba and sent to a psychiatric hospital where truly insane and those plotting against El Comandante received “special revolutionary treatment: psychotropic drugs, electroshock therapy, beatings by the criminally insane released in their ward” (MH: 113). After his father’s suicide, Domingo goes to Vietnam, where he encounters a prostitute in her early twenties, Tham Thanh Lan, “the guaranteed best lay in Saigon” (MH: 103). Through his narration we hear her story, a modern-day tale of slavery: sold by her father to “the passing fish sauce trader” who would offer her services to “men who’d paid (. . .) to sleep with the girl from the North” (MH: 159). She has been violently treated and has numbers tattooed on her thigh:

the identity code of a jealous Republican general. And the scars between her legs—she opened them wide to show him—were from this same general, who had once tied her to the bed and penetrated her with his dagger. (MH: 159)

One would like to believe that Domingo will take care of her, however he leaves her pregnant, attempting to patch things up with a wad of money. After the war, GIs would often bring back home their Vietnamese girlfriends and wives,

[s]tories drifted back to Vietnam of former bar girls waking up in Georgia, bleaching their hair, wearing blue jeans and cowboy hats, renaming themselves Delilah. Other stories were sadder still. Of underaged girls dressed up like China dolls at their husbands’ insistence, paraded around small towns in Texas or Mississippi, shopping for trinkets at Woolworth’s. Saddest of all

were the suicides—the poisonings, the slit wrists. Anything to set their souls free to fly home. (MH: 209)

With evidence like this, one is confounded as to which solution would have been better for Tham Thanh Lan. Examples of modern-day transgressions against women, and its detrimental results on men as well, are numerous in the narrative. Images of prostitution appear in Chen Pan's story and the reader is tempted to write him off as a pedophile. He used to enjoy his visits to the brothel and listened eagerly to gossip of "a French girl just arrived at madame Yvette's, a fourteen-year-old natural blonde" (MH: 75). Fetching child brides from China was common practice, and Chen Pan was advised to secure one for himself, after Lucrecia's death. His friend ordered "a fifteen-year-old doll" whom everybody admired, until she poisoned her husband. The mode of thinking about women as incurable seductresses, perpetuates crimes against them:

[h]is friends believed that women, by and large, were mankind's menace. How many kings and ministers, sages and saints, had been ruined by the presumably gentler sex? Recently, they'd heard reports from China that unfaithful wives no longer jumped in wells and that widows remarried without so much as threatening to commit suicide. "Such disrespect!" they cried. (MH: 170)

Chen Pan learned to believe otherwise, for he grew to truly love and respect Lucrecia.

Rushdy argues that one of the hallmarks of neo-slave narratives is "that they represent slavery as a historical phenomenon that has lasting cultural meaning and enduring social conse-

quences" (Rushdy 1997: 533). He catalogs two basic types of neo-slave narratives: "historical novels set in the antebellum South," and "social realist or magical realist novels set in post-Reconstruction or twentieth-century America but dealing substantially with the demonstrable effects of slavery on contemporary African American subjects" (Rushdy 1997: 534). This paper strives to establish the existence of a third kind of a neo-slave narrative responding to the burning issues and dilemmas of the modern day, a transnational neo-slave narrative. The transnational neo-slave narratives are novels set in modern or contemporary contexts, and are concerned with contemporary versions of slavery and their impact on modern-day subjects and societies worldwide. This article has attempted to show how *Monkey Hunting* by Cristina García participates in emerging transnational paradigm of neo-slave narratives concerned with slavery under many guises, taking place in diverse locations and cultures. This article has underlined the thematic tension between the neo- and slave narratives, and *Monkey Hunting*, a contemporary, transnational neo-slave narrative. A continuation of globe-spanning slavery-related themes can be discerned in *The Salt Roads* (2003) by Nalo Hopkinson. The novel is a neo-slave narrative deploying science-fiction technique of time traveling, thus exhibiting a dialogic relationship with Octavia Butler's *Kindred* (1979), partly with Jewelle Gomez' *The Gilda Stories* (1991), or Phyllis Alessia Perry's *Stigmata* (1998). *The Salt Roads* is a variation of a conventional slave narrative in content, theme, and form, as it examines the widespread detrimental effects of slavery across centuries and continents. The text portrays Ezili, the ancient African goddess of love, becoming entangled in the lives

of three women: Mer, an Afro-Caribbean slave woman and a midwife; Jeanne Duval, Afro-French lover of the poet Charles Baudelaire; and Meritet, a slave and a prostitute known as St. Mary of Egypt.

In an interview, Julia Kristeva while elaborating on the therapeutical and psychoanalysis-like effects of the novels, defines literature as “a continuous lay analysis” and posits that

novelistic writing is an immense and very powerful means of guiding us most deeply into our crises and furthest away from them at the same time [...] This is why the modern novel [...] is a tremendous opportunity for the sublimation of our crises and malaises. It is a kind of continuous lay analysis [...] Certain writers manage to lead us as deeply as possible into our malaises, where we seldom go except in dreams, and without always bringing back adequate accounts of those dreams.<sup>1</sup>

Slave narratives addressed the disturbing *status quo* of chattel system and were meant to incite social and political activism. *Monkey Hunting* by Cristina García intends to be “a continuous lay analysis,” probing and revisiting traumatic moments in history, saving them from silence and oblivion. This form of analysis and reflection continues the cultural work of the neo-slave narratives “which lean[s] well into the past for its subject matter and its inspiration, extend[s] the hope of healing far into our future” (Beaulieu 1999: xv). Beaulieu argues that the spate of neo-slave narratives authored by women in the past three decades meant to redefine and refine notions of African American wom-

---

1. WALLER, Margaret, “An Interview with Julia Kristeva”, in *Intertextuality and Contemporary American Fiction*, Patrick O'Donnell and Robert Con Davis, eds. (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989): 285-286.

anhood (Beaulieu 1999: 3). My assertion is that *Monkey Hunting*, the transnational neo-slave narrative by Cristina García, purports to revisit slavery and redefine women and men transnationally and transculturally.

### *Works Cited*

- BEAULIEU, Elizabeth Ann. *Black Women Writers and the American Neo-Slave Narrative*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1999.
- BROWN, Scott Shibuya. "A Conversation with Cristina García", in Cristina García. *Dreaming in Cuban*. 1992. New York: Ballantine Books, 2004; 249-256.
- BROWN, Scott Shibuya. "A Conversation with Cristina García", in Cristina García, *Monkey Hunting*. 2003. New York: Ballantine Books, 2004. 257-266.
- DOUGLASS, Frederick. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave: Written by Himself*. 1845. New York: A Signet Classic, 1997.
- GARCÍA, Cristina. *Monkey Hunting*. 2003. New York: Ballantine Books, 2004.
- JACOBS, Harriet. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Written by Herself*. Jean Fagan Yellin, ed. 1861. Cambridge, MS: Harvard University Press, 1994.
- KEVANE, Bridget. *Latino Literature in America*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2003.
- LEDENT, Bénédicte. "Slavery Revisited Through Vocal Kaleidoscopes: Polyphony in Novels by Fred D'Aguiar and Caryl Phillips" in *Revisiting Slave Narratives*, Judith Misrahi-Barak, ed. Collection *Les Carnets du Cerpac* n° 2. Montpellier: Services des publications de Montpellier III: université Paul-Valéry, 2005; 281-293.

- MISRAHI-BARAK, Judith. "Introduction" in *Revisiting Slave Narratives*, Judith Misrahi-Barak, ed. Collection *Les Carnets du Cerpac* n° 2. Montpellier: Services des publications de Montpellier III: université Paul-Valéry, 2005; 11-18.
- MORRISON, Toni. *Beloved*. 1987. London: Random House Vintage, 2005.
- RUSHDY, Ashraf H. A. *Neo-Slave Narratives: Studies in the Social Logic of a Literary Form*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999.
- RUSHDY, Ashraf H. A. "Neo-slave narrative", in *The Oxford Companion to African American Literature*. William L. Andrews, Francis Smith Foster, and Trudier Harris, eds. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997; 533-535.
- SALDÍVAR, José David. *The Dialectics of Our America: Genealogy, Cultural Critique, and Literary History*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1991.
- WALKER, Alice, *The Color Purple*. 1982. New York: Pocket Books, 1985.
- WALLER, Margaret. "An Interview with Julia Kristeva", in *Intertextuality and Contemporary American Fiction*. Patrick O'Donnell and Robert Con Davis, eds. Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989; 280-293.





*Les Carnets du Cerpac* n° 6, 2007, 297-319.

## ANTEBELLUM REVISITATIONS: INSURRECTIONARY INTERVENTIONS IN *KINDRED* AND *SALLY'S RAPE*

Barbara LEWIS  
*University of Massachusetts, Boston*

Mammy and her servile sister, the maid, are updated in *Kindred* and in *Sally's Rape*. In *Kindred*, Dana, steps beyond the mammy caretaking the dreams of others, and tends the well-being of her white charges only as much as it serves her family's future. Drudge work in field and house and handling basic adult requests fall to Sally in *Sally's Rape*. Still, she grits and bears menial importunities with the knowledge that a softer future awaits around the corner in freedom, which she will take in hand and shape, as if she were kneading dough. In *Kindred* and in *Sally's Rape*, it is the black family, going back generations, and not the white, that is sustained and valued. Giving the black family pride of place before white, and thus flouting slavery's norm, is insurrectionary.

"I lost an arm".<sup>1</sup> So begins the prologue in *Kindred* by Octavia Butler, which specifies the harm, often irreparable, that slavery imposes on anyone trapped in its thrall. The body captive in slavery's grip is figured as disabled, disempowered, weak, female, inferior. Still, it can on occasion wield insurrectionary might, the force to battle against and loosen, even destroy slavery's hold. In *Kindred*, Edana Franklin, known as Dana, travels back to an antebellum Maryland plantation, drawn there, like some latter-day Harriet Tubman making multiple trips in and out of slavery's domain in response to freedom's call. Again and again, Dana is yanked from a stable California existence in 1976, the bicentennial year, into a pre-Nat Turner South, slipping through a tear between yesterday and tomorrow. After the journeying has begun, Dana realizes that she has been called back to the past to care for a red-headed boy named Rufus who will sire the biracial family line to which she belongs. Thus, she assumes the onus of her family's collective future as it inches forward on a route ringed in by assault and injury, an experience that does not permit unscathed escape. Dana is caught in hard commute to yesteryear, with visits lasting longer and longer until leaving extracts its corporeal price.

Alice is an ancestral name that figures prominently in *Kindred* and is also passed down through the generations in *Sally's Rape*, an improvisational, two-character drama by Robbie McCauley that, like *Kindred*, foregrounds the violence and violation of slavery as it impacts the black female body through time, from past to present.

Grandma Sally had two children  
by the master. One of 'em

---

1. BUTLER, Octavia E., *Kindred* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003): 9.

was my Grandma Alice, my mother's  
grandmother, where my mother got her name.<sup>1</sup>

In the above verse, *Grandma* is an honorific for captive women who birth and name the future, claiming it, and absolving it as best they can from the paternal sin. The first Alice in *Sally's Rape* came to womanhood after slavery, and Sally, her mother, wiped the crust of slavery from her feet, giving her every advantage for a clean start. From Sally forward to the third Alice, Robbie McCauley can still hear the sound of slavery, and she remains receptive to its spirit. In *Kindred*, Alice Greenwood, like Sally, is forced to become the master's concubine. Four children are born to her, but only the last two survive. Hagar, the baby, is named after a Biblical character once enslaved; thus, she is christened in anticipation of freedom. Dana, descended from Hagar, is caught in hand-to-hand combat with the past and loses her arm on July 4, 1976, a date recalling the democratic mission of freedom unfulfilled since before the age of the grandmothers.

The discussion that follows is centered on these two neo-slave narratives, both written by African American women in the last quarter of the twentieth century. I am concerned here with the extent to which the female slave character, who represents not just herself but the captive collective forced into and maintained within a position of passivity and receptivity without entitlement to speak or act from the heart or mind, is able to push back against the curtailments and denials that slavery dictates. Whether through direct or indirect challenge, the iconic captive females in the novel by Butler and in the performance piece by McCauley affect an insurrectionary stance that foregrounds

---

1. McCauley, Robbie, *Sally's Rape* in Sydne Mahone, *Moon Marked and Kissed by the Sun* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1994): 229.

the feminine heroic. These slave women did not wage blood-letting rebellions to express outrage at the saddling of their bodies, the theft of their pleasure, or the harnessing of their reproductive organs, but they do what they can to resist on a smaller scale, hitting slavery where it lived and lusted. Alice, Dana, and Sally reject the role of nonentity, and perform dissent and difference. In this category, I also include Uncle Buck, who is womanized, denied a public voice in his petition for justice. Butler and McCauley feature slaves who detach from the expected, dislodge from subservience, and shatter the status quo to generate with their bodies a protest archive for history.

In the conventional archive, which Butler rewrites, the slave body is cast outside the norm. The black female body minus an arm, prominently placed in *Kindred*, departs from and yet belongs to the tradition of the display of mutilated racial others. Usually men are the targets of lynching, but women and children are not immune. In the case of the man, castration often removes any indicia of gender, such that he is feminized, or at the very least unmanned. The mammy is unwomanned. Her identity as a sexual being is effaced, leaving behind the veneer of motherhood. Children are her charge, but they were not born of her body. Subservience links the mammy and lynching. The mammy is pushed into a circumscribed role, into which she must pour her all, her blood, her life, her spirit, all given to safeguard the white child and family from harm. If a black man or woman refuses a subservient role, one that gives primacy to whites, then that person is subject to being lynched.<sup>1</sup> The crime that he or she has com-

---

1. In 1918, Mary Turner and her baby were lynched because Mrs. Turner vowed that she would have vengeance on the men who lynched her husband. Emmett Till, a teenager, was lynched in 1955 because he violated the southern

mitted is stepping away from a status as underling. In tending Rufus the boy and Rufus the man, Dana moves along the spectrum from mammy to maid, roles she negotiates according to a personal agenda. She rejects subservience, and has to escape into the safety of home.

Her journeys also take her back into the far reaches of time, back to the woman who birthed the woman who birthed Hagar. The first woman, referred to only as Alice's mother, was born, perhaps free (her condition when Dana meets her), at the end of the eighteenth century, in the revolutionary era. Dana identifies the matrilineal source, the fountainhead of her family. In so doing, she pushes beyond recorded time chronicled in Hagar's bible, back to an era when those born in Africa were living embodiments of the customs and practices of the mother country brought to New World urban shores and southern tilling fields. In her travels, Dana stitches past to present and future, along an itinerary that recalls African cosmogony. According to Nobel Laureate Wole Soyinka, the actor hero (in this case the role-playing heroine) is able to trace a bridge across the gulf separating humanity's procession into living, dead, and posterity.<sup>1</sup> In the process, the ruptures of the past, the deep wounds that keep the group unaware of its strength and meaning and history are sealed. Dana, as anima standing for the group that has been parceled out under slavery's sway, goes to the chthonic regions of ancestry and returns having pieced back together and quilted the torn and tatty communal fabric.

---

law against black males keeping their eyes downcast.

1. SOYINKA, Wole, "Appendix: The Fourth Stage", in *Myth, Literature, and the African World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976): 140-160.

Agency, the power to exert one's will, live one's desire, is in short supply for the slave, who is lodged in the master's toolbox as a functionary, constrained from acting outside its confines. Butler crafts a character with dual status, one that steps in and out of the box. Dana is ordered around, made to say master, sent to the fields, whipped, and faces down a gun, twice, but she can read and write, she can nurse and heal the sick, she doesn't age, and, on death's doorstep, she can flee to another time. The neo-slave narratives by Butler and McCauley, both inhabiting the memory of slavery, highlight the power, however tenuous, of the captive female who, through skill or attractiveness, found notice in the master's eye. Every now and then, a slave woman managed to escape from the box and impressed her story on history, affecting the bravado of a post-slavery woman. "It's my story, and you're in it because I put you in it," McCauley tells her white co-star early in their exchange (McCauley 1994: 219). Feeling empowered to set the ground rules and perform one's will is part of the twentieth-century legacy of Butler and McCauley, but it is not out of reach for several of the slave women whose lives they portray.

*Kindred* and *Sally's Rape* are concerned with the repeated sexual demands that the empowered imposed on female slaves, the outside families so created, and the modicum of agency that women captive inside such ambiguous arrangements were able, every now and then, to exert. Without legal support or protection, the captive female had to think and fend for herself.<sup>1</sup> Given the retaliation anyone helping her would suffer, she could not count on aid from family or fellow slaves. Linda Brent, the autobiographical stand-in for Harriet Jacobs in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*,

---

1. HARTMAN, Saidiya, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997): 79.

the most popular nineteenth century woman-authored slave narrative, was able to find a hidden space of retreat with her grandmother, but that was rare. Sequestering herself for seven years in an attic, where she could not stand, she eluded her master's unwelcome attention. The plantation, Sandra Gunning tells us, was a virtual harem, with slaves sexually at risk, subject to being "raped and tortured with impunity".<sup>1</sup> Butler and McCauley explore the impact of rape, how it invasively denied any prerogative the self could call its own. Still, through feminine resolve and a focus on the future, a few slave women were able to negotiate a self-preserving space and thus blunt some of the ravages of rape.

Dana's sacrificed arm signals the flesh extracted from the slave who opposes the master. The example of Celia, who, at her peril, redefined her relationship with Robert Newsome, her owner, reveals the extremity of odds for Alice and Dana in *Kindred* and for Sally and Buck in *Sally's Rape*. In rejecting sexual bondage, Celia lost more than a limb. A teenager in Missouri in the 1850s, Celia wanted her body back so that she could give it to the man of her choice, bear his children and thus live as a desiring subject, one who held dominion over her body. In the four or five years since she was purchased at auction, Newsome raped her routinely. A prosperous planter, he built her a small cabin on his property, and got her twice with child. By age nineteen, Celia had fallen in love with George, a fellow slave, who told her that she had to end things with Newsome, or he would stop seeing her. He urged her to confront Newsome, which she did, to no avail. In pushing forward with her desire, she found the way blocked. Celia removed the obstacle, and landed in court, where punish-

---

1. GUNNING, Sandra, *Race, Rape, and Lynching: The Red Record of American Literature, 1890-1912* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996): 21.



ment was speedy, but her story languished. Celia, the cook and concubine, is slavery's unhappy mother, defiled, but fighting back against a society that penalizes her for the violation committed against her body.

Although she was sexually violated for years, it is as a criminal, without right to represent herself and speak in court, that Celia enters history. At the time, her behavior radically challenged convention, and the trial transcript of *Missouri v. Celia* (1855) was forgotten, perhaps deliberately, for over a century (Hartman 1997: 82). Celia's case underscores the renegotiation later centuries can provide to the antebellum record of race as lived by slave women whose stories have largely been sidelined and ignored.<sup>1</sup> That reconsideration is a germane part of the mission that Butler and McCauley take on in their neo-slave narratives. In their hands, the future revisits the past or the past comes to the present to provide insights that could not be derived or emphasized earlier. Why did Celia go to trial? She raised her hand against Newsome after he refused to accept her plea to end the relationship. She set a boundary. When he crossed it, she hit him with a stick. Her arm must have wielded extraordinary force.<sup>2</sup> With a second blow, he

---

1. "White women have been hyper-visible in cultural mythologies of rape; black women, and the acts of violent objectification done to them, have been rendered invisible, written out of cultural myth". Deborah Thompson, "Black-face, Rape, and Beyond: Rehearsing Interracial Dialogue in *Sally's Rape*," *Theatre Journal* 48.2 (1996): 123-139.

2. There is speculation that Celia did not act alone. She had been sick for months, or at least she had been claiming to be (perhaps to stop Newsome's sexual attention), and she was pregnant with a third child, who may or may not have been fathered by George. That in such a condition she could, without help, kill a healthy man and then drag him to the fireplace and incinerate his body was put forth in her defense. After Celia was apprehended, George disappeared, but first he gave testimony against her. While in jail, the child that she

fell dead. For her effort to stop the abuse she had been suffering, she was sentenced to hang. With her story reclaimed from history, Celia can go to the bench in time's court and give utterance to the degradation she countered and rewrote with her hand.

Butler and McCauley chose literatures of critique within which to operate. For Butler it was science fiction, which takes a stance outside the present as the vantage from which to comment upon and characterize the ethos of the time. In *Kindred*, Butler's approach to the genre is controversial since the novel's trajectory is oriented to the past rather than the future, making a yesterday rooted in slavery the touchstone for today. Her postmodern experiments with discontinuity and simultaneous realities put her in a vanguard car on the science fiction train.<sup>1</sup> To take a white-male-centric genre that excluded blacks from its future sights and tunnel through it a space of accommodation is to upend things. By shuttling back and forth between the slave past and a present bearing the marks of the past, she comments on the failings of both. She also incorporates the two other main characteristics of science fiction, the alien outsider and the scientific. What could be more alien in slavery's regime than a free black woman from the future, out of step with the servile mammy customs of the times? In an era when doctors are still bleeding people, Dana comes through with enough science to keep folks alive, which is more than most medical men in that age can achieve.

Performance, which fosters discovery and consensus and is thus democratic as well as disruptive, emphasizes utterance, the

---

was carrying died. McLaurin, Melton A., *Celia: A Slave* (New York: Avon Books, 1991).

1. STEINBERG, Marc, "Inverting History in Octavia Butler's Postmodern Slave Narrative", *African American Review* 38.3 (Fall: 2004): 467-476.

power to recreate reality through words. McCauley uses performance to open dialogue with the ghosts of yesterday, given flesh. Rather than return into the distance of time, she brings the past forward to interact and convene with today. In staging a slave auction in Georgia that invites spectators to enter a bidding frenzy, she plays upon their lust for acquisition, their impulse to buy their way out of inadequacy, their craving to have needs, carnal or domestic, met by a living, breathing, vulnerable and naked maid-servant named Sally. For each voice that bids, yesterday bleeds into today, staining any claim to innocence from past sin, implicating the now. As a way to roil the status quo, performance again became popular starting in the war-torn era from the middle to end of the twentieth century. Earlier, during slavery, it had been kept alive in the masked ancestral arts of dance, music, song, which held the memories and experiences of slavery translated into stories told bodily and orally. An art of challenge, performance allowed the slaves to preserve their lore as a legacy for the future as they engaged a hierarchy that hemmed in their humanity. Performance was an arena in which the children and grandchildren of slavery had much experience.

Through the commemorative years of Civil Rights, tales of the slave past were still being transmitted orally in the black family. McCauley tells how Sally's stories came down to her, from Sally's children to her grandmother to Sally, her mother, and then to her ears. There were other families like hers. The slaves were gone, but some of their grandchildren, who had heard the sermon straight from the source, were still alive and they passed the flame of memory to their children and grandchildren, some of whom took up the torch. For Butler, the experience of her mother

and grandmother as maids was not distinct from the hierarchical interactions that had obtained during slavery. In witnessing the indignities that her relatives endured in the kitchens where they worked, Butler determined that she would write her way out of that dilemma, the way the authors of the slave narratives wrote their way out of intolerable status. Butler and McCauley were well aware of the lessons of another time, and understood that it was their turn to enter the relay race to the future. With a mandate and the energy to move forward, they adapted the written legacy of struggle to a new time. Janus-faced mediums, they merged the then into the now in their neo-slave narratives.

Butler and McCauley came of age in the 1960s and 1970s. These decades emphasize performance, a stepping away from the master narrative and old roles to craft and conceive new insight. In those years, black artists were attempting to remake reality in engagement with the page and stage, and they had a strong foundation of support. They had inherited a vast living library of memory and experience, a catalogue going back centuries, but most robust in the nineteenth when former slaves published roughly a hundred testimonies. The most celebrated, for example those by Frederick Douglass, Harriet Jacobs, and William Wells Brown, which were published in the 1840s through 1860s, bespeak a classic era of oracular status. In 1967, William Styron outraged members of the black intelligentsia when, in *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, he called into question the revolutionary significance of Turner, the slave resistor who enacted a blood-spilling revolt in Virginia in 1831. Then in 1976, Alex Haley published *Roots*, in which a slave finds his African origins. The neo-slave narrative gained momentum, as black writers understood that

at stake was the retelling of slavery's saga by a pen that did not neuter, that comprehended rather than contradicted the legacy of resistance and loss. The children of segregation had plenty ink.

Black women, seeking an expressive space separate from the feminist and black nationalist movements, embraced the paradigm shift. The male trek to freedom was slavery's major tale. In the abolitionist era, which gained stunning momentum after the Turner revolt, male fugitives published most of the narratives, prefaced and introduced by some local or national white notable to lend credence and vouch for the slave's veracity. Stories of female defiance existed, but were deemed less significant. Giving greater voice to the female experience of slavery became a priority for black women writers like Butler and McCauley. Because of their sexual usefulness to the master's pocket and pleasure, black women had a separate story to tell. The white abolitionist authority of the nineteenth century slave narrative became a white friend or partner in the writings of Butler and McCauley. But that representative white character does not have the upper hand. Kevin, Dana's husband, is powerless to return home without her. In the prologue, McCauley makes it clear that she alone holds the reins of story. In the neo-slave narratives that Butler and McCauley have crafted, the white authenticating abolitionist voice no longer possesses overriding authority.

In a performance, that, like jazz, is never the same twice, in that it repeats yet departs from a basic pattern, two women of roughly identical age, but different races, sit and chat, drink tea. Their worlds have always been distinct. Now, they are making efforts to walk into and feel comfortable in each other's lives. They are equal, and yet not equal. Tensions rise and fall. "I can't win in your language," Robbie blurts out. Jeannie admits that

she's frightened, feels vulnerable in Robbie's presence. Back and forth go the "dialogue and debate,"<sup>1</sup> hallmarks of the neo-slave narrative that repeats through inflection and extends the abolitionist model of literary insurgence pushing for freedom. Robbie already sees herself as free. She has her own performative language of movement, of change, of becoming and being, revolution. Performance is her tool for creation, for temps and counter-temps. And music is her inspiration. "I'm influenced by . . . jazz . . . in that it has a clear theme and narrative, but it is also random and impulsive," McCauley explains. "I work with music through the passion that I have for it and the ability to hear it down deep" (McCauley 1994: 213).

One night as Robbie dreamed, in her ear she heard Sally's refrain, "I don't wanna do it" (McCauley 1994: 213). Robbie knew what Sally was referencing, the rapes she had endured as a slave, rapes done in the dark and in the dirt that rooted the family tree. Sally's point of view, her story, had not yet been told. Robbie could do that for her. She could create a platform and invite her to contribute her voice to *Sally's Rape*, to open her mouth and articulate what mattered to her, provide an opportunity for her to speak the refusal that had been stuffed back into her mouth. Once slavery was no more, at least on paper, what mattered for Sally was personhood, not just for herself, but for her children. In working to assure a better future for her family, Sally contravened essentialist notions of the mammy and maid, which consigned black women to sustaining white families at the expense of their own. Taking on the custodianship of her family's future, as Dana did in *Kindred*, Sally set about constructing the basis for

---

1. RUSHDY, Ashraf H. A., *Neo-Slave Narratives: Studies in the Social Logic of a Literary Form* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999): 228.

public respectability. She did that through her labor, by cleaning houses for cash, always for cash. By painstakingly accumulating money and living an upright life, she established family standing. In time, she bought property so “that none of us ever had to do what she had to do. How many mothers does that cover? That’s historic. That’s heroic” (McCauley 1994: 214).

Speaking out against power, pressing for one’s due can be dangerous. The tale of Uncle Buck, in *Sally’s Rape*, is illustrative. Freedom was in the air. That was the rumor. To discover its truth, Uncle Buck, a much-respected elder (reverse image of the male mammy, Uncle Tom), headed for the Big House. The other slaves followed. Buck asked the Master if it was true that freedom had come. The Master answered yes with his mouth. With his gun, he answered no. He shot and killed Uncle Buck on the spot. That Uncle Buck had dared to buck tradition, to initiate a conversation that threatened to disrupt the pillars under the plantation ideal, the master took as an outrage. The slave was not an equal, but a subservient in dialogue. Using his mouth to utter a desire for freedom, to perform disruption, was anathema, according to the master. So inscribed on the bodies of each was the system of slavery that ending it meant the death of one or the other. Under the contract of slavery, the master took the arm of the slave as his own. To lose the slave was to lose the extended power of his arm, an eventuality the master could not countenance. Uncle Buck, like so many before and after him, paid the price of public resistance. Raising his voice to power was fatal, a lot that Celia drew as well.

Buck and Celia represent two of slavery’s insurrectionary masks, the Anti-Tom and the Temptress. Nemesis to the plantation mistress, the Temptress, mammy’s bad twin, could divert the master’s attention and welcome him into her bed to gain favor

and freedom, boons only occasionally granted. But her greatest danger lay elsewhere. Through her intimate access to the master, she could assail him in private moments, when he was at rest, no longer vigilant, thus vulnerable. That was when Celia struck. Uncle Buck also faced down the master in an exposed space, on the porch, in the open, where the master had to confront the waning authority of the absolute rule that the big white house of slavery signified. In the past, Buck had been his right arm, the legendary *big black buck*, muscle-bound and capable, reliable breeder of bodies for the market. Now, Buck had turned on him, had become, like Nat Turner, a slave with his mind focused on freedom. Because they disrupt slavery's carefully measured but grotesque dance of power by opting to lead rather than follow, Buck and Celia are sacrificed. Each was killed in front of witnesses, Buck with the other slaves watching, and Celia with the eyes of white community on her.

Celia had committed the unthinkable. It was one thing for a male slave to rise up, but it was quite another for a female slave, especially a favored one, to smite the hand providing her privilege. In proclaiming her right to approve how her body is used, Celia becomes David to the master's Goliath on the battle ground of morality. Holding to a moral prerogative to live in monogamous union with the man of her heart, Celia contests the constructed myth of the amoral and lascivious black woman that sanctioned her conversion into livestock.<sup>1</sup> As chattel, akin to cattle and sheep, she was treated as always available for sex.

---

1. "The myth of the promiscuity of slave women allowed white men to rape them and claim ownership of their offspring with impunity", SMITH, Valerie, "Split Affinities: The Case of Interracial Rape," in *Conflicts in Feminism*, Marianne Hirsch and Evelyn Fox Keller, eds. (New York: Routledge, 1990): 272.



Celia, Alice, Dana, and Sally, claim their humanity and assert their right to say no. Refusing to comply with the master's program was costly. Alice, in *Kindred*, paid dearly, and so did Celia. Even though her left arm was sacrificed, Dana got off with a symbolic scratch because she could go home to a later time. Without the option of a living escape, Alice and Celia paid the ultimate price. In Celia's case, it was the hand of law that extracted its due. For Alice, it was her own despairing hand that ended her seduction. In the final analysis, each hand, though seemingly different, wound up being exactly the same, the hand of oppression.

Escape cost Alice her freedom. She had been born free, like her mother, but her father was a slave on the Maryland plantation of Tom Weylin, father of Rufus. As lord of the plantation, the older Weylin violently interfered with their conjugal relations by sending patrollers to police their bed, and thus prevent any further offspring from that union. The freedom of Alice's mother and child and the potential for other free children challenged Weylin's margin of superiority. Like mother, like daughter: Alice fell in love with a slave and married him. In the footsteps of his father, Rufus refused to respect Alice's marriage; he tried to take her in rape. Her husband, Isaac Jackson, stopped him. In foiling Rufus's attempted rape, Isaac beat him senseless. In jeopardy, Alice and Isaac fled, but were gone only a few days before being captured, mauled by dogs and brutally beaten. On recapture, Isaac had his ears cut off, a sign that he was a problem slave, then he was deported South, and Alice was stripped of her freedom.

It took a while for Rufus to start raping Alice once she was technically his property. First, she had to recover from her extensive wounds. A doctor was out of the question. Tom Weylin never spent money on medical bills for his slaves, which was not an

unusual attitude in other masters. Further, Weylin couldn't countenance buying a half dead slave who, in his mind, deserved to be banished to the South, where her sin of defection would be more fully punished. So Dana had to nurse Alice back to health. In time, Rufus enlisted Dana to persuade Alice to come to his bed, a task Dana detested. Alice hated this man who had taken her from her husband. Even so, she knew that she had little choice in the matter. He owned the body that no longer belonged to her. What she really wanted was to kill him, but she found another punishment. In time, it seemed, they compromised; but Alice was never able to forget her mutilated husband. To get her attention, Rufus sent away the children, Joseph and Hagar. Feeling that she had lost everything, Alice took her life in the barn. She and Celia end up the same way, hanging by the neck until dead.

Celia was raped in a cabin. So was Alice. Sally, however, was taken on the ground, in the dirt and dust, but she endured. There were different hierarchies of plantation concubines. Some were treated almost as wives. Others were incidental relations, consummated whenever and wherever the urge struck, even if it was out in the open. Fanny Kemble, the British actress who married a wealthy southern plantation owner and observed up close the sexual mores of the South, chose to chastise the captive slave for sexual indiscretion, rather than the master. In conversation with Kemble, a slave named Sophy made it clear that captive women knew the moral implications of fornication, but had to exist on earth under the master's watch. If Sophy could make her life easier by giving the master what he desired, then that was the bargain she had to strike.<sup>1</sup> Sally was faced with the same com-

---

1. KEMBLE, Fanny, *Journal of a Residence on a Georgia Plantation in 1838-1839*, John A. Scott, ed. (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1984): 270.

promise. She didn't like what she had to do, but there was little recourse short of death.

Perhaps that was the same way Sally Hemings, long reputed as the slave consort of Thomas Jefferson, felt. McCauley equates the situation of the two Sallies, who, like Celia, were raped mothers of biracial children:

They say Sally had  
dem chillun by the massa like it was supposed  
to a been something. Shit, Thomas's Sally was just as  
much a slave as our grandma and it was just as much a  
rape,  
One Sally's rape by the massa no gooder n'an n'orthern. (McCauley 1994: 232)

We will never know what Sally Hemings felt. She left no diary. We do know, however, that the news of Jefferson taking a captive slave to bed and creating a family with her was of such common knowledge that William Wells Brown, an escaped slave, took it as inspiration for a novel.<sup>1</sup> For centuries, the white branch of the Jefferson family denied that there was any truth to the rumor of Jefferson's paternity of Sally's children. The Hemings descendants maintained otherwise. As an explanation for the resemblance between the Hemings children and the president, relatives of Jefferson were put forward as Sally's partners. To date, Sally remains the most famous of slavery's paramours. She has been a character on stage and in film, the focus of several novels, and the subject of scholarly speculation. In 1998, scientific tests were

---

1. *Clotel; or, the President's Daughter*, which Brown rewrote and republished several times, first appeared in London in 1853, and bears distinction as most likely the first novel from the pen of an African American author.

done to determine if Jefferson fathered Sally's children; these tests upheld the likelihood, but were not conclusive.

The Sally in *Sally's Rape* had separate sets of children, two daughters by the master, and two sons by the husband she married after Emancipation. With freedom's advent, Sally set about changing their options, engaging in a reconfiguration of slavery's narrative, accomplished against the odds. Not everyone welcomed freedom. Men like the master who killed Buck refused to accept the reduction in personal power that slavery's end represented. They fought back, banding into packs like the Ku Klux Klan. Rape and lynching were the tools of terror they chose to reenact slavery as abjection on emancipated bodies. With vigilance, Sally kept her daughters out of danger's grasp. The family retreated into the home, which was not always safe space, but still Sally effected the transformation from property into property owner. From that point forward, her children and their descendants had wider options. They could take pride in their prospects and answer the dictates of desire, without being prostituted. Jefferson never freed Sally, but the other Sally birthed and named a future that was grounded in freedom. With her labor and her vision, she also endowed tomorrow. She left the history of rape in the dust, where it had found her.

When Dana started her Maryland sojourn, Rufus Weylin was a child with a genius for close calls. Dana saved him from drowning, burning, a drubbing, a broken leg, and a dangerous fever. Their relationship changed as he matured. By 1831, when Hagar is born, Rufus has become a man who rapes his slaves, sells them at whim, sends them to the field to be overworked, and turns them over to the overseer to be scourged. A differential sense of timing obtains in the novel. On the twentieth century track, time

moves with the usual speed, but on yesterday's track it advances with the momentum of a worm. Months in Maryland equal minutes in California. In 1831, southern time, which is 1976, California time, Rufus and Dana are only a year apart in age. Her past kindnesses matter little. What matters is that his libido craves satisfaction. Rather than submit to his sexual demand, she stabs him, twice. To protect Dana from violent treatment at the hand of the law, similar to what Celia experienced, some of the slaves on the Weylin plantation, in symbolic collusion between past and present (a necessary alliance for unhanding slavery) come together to burn the house down to its foundation and thus to cover over the deed, clearing the way for a new tale to be told.

Twice in *Kindred*, Dana gets away from the threat of rape by the force of her arm. Rape is the border that she will not allow anyone to cross. To her, it means the annihilation of self. On her second trip to Maryland, she is threatened with rape for the first time. Like Celia had done, with a stick she wards off her attacker, a patroller who belongs to a gang of Klan-like enforcers. This benighted man has confused Dana and Alice's mother, a mistake that means nothing to him, just as it is of no import to Rufus that Dana is not Alice. The two look enough alike to be taken as sisters. Since Rufus is in the market for a replacement woman, his eyes turn to Dana. He used her in the past to get Alice to submit to his will. He intends to use her again, as he needs her.

A slave was a slave. Anything could be done to her. And Rufus was Rufus— erratic, alternately generous and vicious. I could accept him as my ancestor, my younger brother, my friend, but not as my master, and not as my lover. He had understood that once.

I twisted sharply, broke away from him. He caught me, trying not to hurt me. I was aware of him trying not to hurt me even as I raised the knife, even as I sank it into his side.

He screamed. I had never heard anyone scream that way—an animal sound. He screamed again, a lower ugly gurgle.

He lost his hold on my hand for a moment, but caught my arm before I could get away. Then he brought up the fist of his free hand to punch me once, and again as the patroller had done so long ago.

I pulled the knife free of him somehow, raised it, and brought it down again into his back.

This time he only grunted. He collapsed across me, somehow still alive, still holding my arm. (Butler 2003: 260)

Dana returns to 1976 on July 4. At least, most of her does. The arm that Rufus grasped gets wedged in the wall. Countering violence leaves its mark, and slavery claims an arm. Some losses can never be recuperated, but losses can also pay the freight of gain. Dana, Sally, and Celia demonstrate that. The narratives from these three women, one conceived in imagination, one kept in memory, and one drawn from history connect into a linked story representing the past that is historical foundation, the present that is living memory, and the future that is imagined. Their stories tell of fighting the status quo and achieving one's ends. Dana made it impossible for Rufus to carry out his threat of rape. Sally used the shards of her experience under slavery to piece together and cement a solid tomorrow for her family. Celia ended Newsome's career of sexual abuse. Each had one leg in and one leg out of the house of slavery, an empowering stance. Dana came and went through slavery's door in response to her need to secure the bed that would yield her family future. In establishing a new

home for her family, Sally counteracted the plantation past. At the hearth in her cabin, Celia incinerated the master's flesh and bones, converting the illicit home that slavery built into a site of contestation. Dana, Sally, and Celia used the license of sex to pull back the covers on slavery's narrow bed, revealing its stains and procrustean nature.

Freedom, holding title to the self, is humanity's ultimate fruit, whether it is obtained by intervening in current circumstance or by waiting for the arrival of another, better sun. Slavery made black women at least the equals of black men, and thus, tillers in the same orchard. Indeed, Dana, Sally, and Celia, each in her way, put in the labor to possess the self. Octavia Butler and Robbie McCauley open a portal from today into yesterday, making palpable the continuum of slavery that still impacts and informs our daily lives in ways we tend to ignore. They pull from the recesses of time and memory the story of female insurgence, how some brave women in the clutch of slavery liberated themselves from the dead-end existence of the mammy, the maid, and the breeding sow.

### *Works Cited*

- BUTLER, Octavia E. *Kindred*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2003.
- GUNNING, Sandra. *Race, Rape, and Lynching: The Red Record of American Literature, 1890-1912*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1996.
- HALE, Grace Elizabeth, *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1998.
- HARTMAN, Saidiya. *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.

- KEMBLE, Fanny. *Journal of a Residence on a Georgia Plantation in 1838-1839*, John A. Scott, ed. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1984.
- MCCAULEY, Robbie. *Sally's Rape* in Sydne Mahone, ed. *Moon Marked and Kissed by the Sun*. New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1994.
- MCLAURIN, Melton A. *Celia: A Slave*. New York: Avon Books, 1991.
- RUSHDY, Ashraf H. A. *Neo-Slave Narratives: Studies in the Social Logic of a Literary Form*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999.
- SMITH, Valerie, "Split Affinities: The Case of Interracial Rape," in *Conflicts in Feminism*, Marianne Hirsch and Evelyn Fox Keller, eds. New York: Routledge, 1990.
- SOYINKA, Wole. "Appendix: The Fourth Stage", in *Myth, Literature, and the African World*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976.
- STEINBERG, Marc. "Inverting History in Octavia Butler's Postmodern Slave Narrative". *African American Review* 38.3 (Fall 2004): 467-476.
- THOMPSON, Deborah. "Blackface, Rape, and Beyond: Rehearsing Interracial Dialogue in *Sally's Rape*". *Theatre Journal* 48.2 (1996): 123-139.





*Les Carnets du Cerpac* n° 6, 2007, 321-350.

**LEGACIES OF ENSLAVEMENT AND EMANCIPATION:  
AMERICAN SLAVE NARRATIVES  
AND AUGUST WILSON'S PLAYS**

*William ETTER*  
*Irvine Valley College*

An important part of Black Theater that is often ignored but is seminal to its tradition is its origins on the slave plantations.

August Wilson

In a collection of ten plays, August Wilson (1945-2005) has dramatized African-American life in each decade of the twentieth century. Scholars, critics, and audiences alike have long appreciated that slavery is a dominant presence in these plays. Wilson believed enslavement was “the most crucial and central thing to our presence here in America”.<sup>1</sup> Consequently, Wilson’s self-described aim as a playwright was to create characters

---

1. ELAM, Harry J. Jr., “The Dialectics of August Wilson’s *The Piano Lesson*”, *Theatre Journal* 52 (2000): 374.

who “would not only represent the culture [of twentieth-century African America] but illuminate the historical context both of the period in which [each] play is set and the continuum of black life in America that stretches back to the early 17<sup>th</sup> century”.<sup>1</sup> In his three plays set in the 1900s, 1910s, and 1930s—*Gem of the Ocean*, *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*, and *The Piano Lesson*, respectively—this continuum is most forcefully advanced.<sup>2</sup>

Scholars have primarily interpreted the role in slavery in Wilson’s plays by reference to the historical fact of slavery and Wilson’s portrayal of its lasting economic, psychological, and spiritual impact on modern African-American life. Wilson himself stated that “The term black or African American [...] carries with it the vestige of slavery”.<sup>3</sup> And he has dramatized such remnants throughout his plays, from Aunt Ester’s folding of her own bill of sale into a paper model of a slave ship, to Herald Loomis’ vision of the Middle Passage, both of which are integral to these characters’ present-day sense of self. While an understanding of slavery is certainly essential for understanding Wilson’s plays, in this paper I argue that Wilson’s dramatic representation of slavery and its legacies is related not only to the historical experience of enslavement generally but also to antebellum African-American slave narratives in particular. Formally, Wilson’s plays revisit some of the most characteristic elements of the classic slave nar-

---

1. WILSON, August, “Characters behind History Teach Wilson about Plays”, *New York Times* 12 Apr 1992, sec. H: 5.

2. Harry Elam observes with respect to *The Piano Lesson*, “the legacies of Africa and of African chattel slavery in America enter the narrative not as idealized subjects, but as elements that play a constitutive role within the African American present” (Elam 2000: 363).

3. WILSON, August, “The Ground on Which I Stand”, *Callaloo* 20.3 (1998): 495.

ratives, including these narratives' typical critiques of the slave system and their representation of the ambiguous achievement of "freedom". Rhetorically, the goals of affirming the human and cultural value of African Americans through oral and physical, extra-linguistic expression are also parallel in the literary works of slave narrators and Wilson's plays.

In a keynote address given at the 1997 National Black Theater Festival, August Wilson provided a brief autobiographical sketch of his life as a young man in 1960s Pittsburg, a sketch which might also be seen as a summary of the slave experience as represented in most antebellum slave narratives,

I left my mother's house [and] [...] I began to make discoveries about myself. That my ancestors [...] were forced to work on the vast agricultural plantations in the South. They made do without surnames and lived in dirt floor cabins. When they tried to escape, they were hunted down by dogs and men on horseback. They were denied the benefits of familial tutoring. [...] They lived in a world that [...] despised their ethos and refused to recognize even their humanity.<sup>1</sup>

By juxtaposing the specific presentations of African-American history and culture in *Gem of the Ocean* (2003), *Joe Turner's Come*

---

1. WILSON, August, "National Black Theater Festival, 1997", *Callaloo* 20.3 (1998): 484.

Devon Boan is one of the few scholars to equate an August Wilson play with the genre of the slave narrative explicitly. Considering *The Piano Lesson*, Boan sees the piano's history as "the family's slave narrative" and contends that because "the events of [Boy Willie's] own life constitute, in his mind, a second, metaphorical, enslavement [...] the play itself comes to constitute a broader, metaphorical slave narrative". Boan, Devon, "Call-and-Response: Parallel 'Slave Narrative' in August Wilson's *The Piano Lesson*", *African American Review* 32.2 (Summer 1998): 264.

and *Gone* (1988), and *The Piano Lesson* (1989-90) with American slave narratives, we can see Wilson has constructed contemporary dramatic works that parallel these nineteenth-century texts and thus stand as present-day slave narratives. To study these parallels, this essay will consider these three plays alongside three of the most widely read slave narratives in the United States: Frederick Douglass' *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845), James W.C. Pennington's *The Fugitive Blacksmith* (1849), and Henry Bibb's *Narrative of the Life of Henry Bibb* (1850).<sup>1</sup>

African Americans of the post-Reconstruction, "Jim Crow" era Wilson demonstrates, often underwent experiences that were little better, or virtually equivalent to, enslavement. In the first scene of *Gem of the Ocean*, Solly's sister in Alabama sends him a letter reporting that

the times are terrible here the most anybody remember since bondage. [...] The white peoples is gone crazy and won't let anybody leave [...] They killed some more and say the colored can't buy any tickets on the train to get away

referencing the dramatic rise in lynchings and race riots that occurred at the turn of the century.<sup>2</sup> The white title figure of *Joe*

---

1. Probably the least known of the three, the Reverend James W.C. Pennington was the first African American to earn a doctoral degree from a European university (University of Heidelberg) and the author of what is believed to be the first book of black history by an African-American writer, published in 1841.

2. WILSON, August, *Gem of the Ocean* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2006): 15.

For historical background on increasing violence against Southern blacks in the first years of the twentieth century, see FRANKLIN, John Hope, *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of African Americans*. 7<sup>th</sup> ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill Companies, 1994), and Shaprio, Herbert, *White Violence and Black Response: from Reconstruction to Montgomery* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988).

Turner's illegally searches for and forces blacks to work on his farm, reminding one of both Atlantic slave trading and hunting fugitive slaves. Major male characters in *The Piano Lesson* were imprisoned at Parchman Farm penitentiary for three years where they worked in cotton fields. In the same play, Boy Willie's friend Lymon, we are told, was arrested in the South for vagrancy and fined \$100, then leased out to a Mr. Stovall who paid the fine so "the judge say I got to work for him to pay him back" in a shady convict-lease arrangement.<sup>1</sup> Significantly, it is Stovall who is described later by Boy Willie as being the person who economically subjugated his own father through the sharecropping system.

Wilson represents the history of slavery, its legacy into the twentieth-century, and its close cousins in Jim Crow practices in modes characteristic of antebellum slave narratives. A central climax of the typical antebellum slave narrative, the escape from slavery is a good example of such revisiting. The autobiographer exhibits slavery in a particularly depraved light in these moments of white Americans going to cruel and drastic lengths to restrict the liberty of black Americans, humans hunting other humans. Slave catchers were the special target of fugitive slave narrators' fear and contempt, even more so than the geographic difficulties in making their way North to freedom. "See how human bloodhounds gratuitously chase [...] the flying bondman," James Pennington addresses the reader, emphasizing in his metaphor how such pursuers lose their humanity in their efforts.<sup>2</sup> These "blood-

---

1. WILSON, August, *The Piano Lesson* (New York: Plume, 1990): 37.

2. PENNINGTON, James W.C., *The Fugitive Blacksmith, or Events in the History of James W.C. Pennington. Great Slave Narratives*, Arna Bontemps, ed. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969): 228.

hounds" (a reference to the dogs trained to hunt fugitive slaves) are echoed in the "hellhounds that seemingly bay at" Herald Loomis' "heels," after he has left Joe Turner's illegal work gang.<sup>1</sup> Even the characters of *The Piano Lesson*, set a quarter-century distant from *Joe Turner*, must flee from Southern whites in positions of authority who pursue them with the intention of putting them in bondage and exploiting them for their labor. Lymon's effort at "dodging the sheriff and Mr. Stovall" and their convict-lease arrangement is the reason he travels to Pittsburg with Boy Willie at the start of the play (Wilson 1990: 37).<sup>2</sup>

In *Gem of the Ocean*, Citizen Barlow's story of his own flight to Pittsburg should be seen as a neo-fugitive slave narrative of escape: "When I left Alabama they had all the roads closed to the colored people. I had to sneak out [...] I had to go out the back way and find my own roads. Took me almost two weeks" (Wilson 2006: 22). But it is Solly Two Kings who most fully exhibits the tormenting of the fugitive slave and the dehumanization of the slave catcher in this play. A former conductor on the Underground Railroad, Solly is pursued again in the play by Caesar Wilks after burning down the city's tin mill. Caesar is a black man who has assumed the position of neo-slave driver, assisting white authorities in keeping other blacks imprisoned; early in the play, Solly says of him: "If I ever get me a plantation I'm gonna hire him to keep my niggers in line" (Wilson 2006: 14). Caesar is a local constable, one step below the policemen (who are white) but who has fully aligned himself with white institutions in Pittsburg

---

1. WILSON, August, *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* (New York: Plume, 1988): 13-14.

2. Similarly, Devon Boan refers to Sutter's Ghost as "a sort of spiritual slave catcher" sent after Boy Willie (Boan 1998: 268).

which keep blacks in an inferior social and economic position. He opposes any work stoppage by black mill workers and believes all such racial unrest is "Abraham Lincoln's fault. [...] Some of these niggers was better off in slavery" (Wilson 2006: 34). It is his obsessive pursuit and eventual murder of the fugitive Solly at the conclusion of the play that generates Caesar's dehumanization; his sister Black Mary's final act is to disown him as no longer recognizable to her, as essentially dead.

Inclusion of discussions of confinement, familial division, and the hunting of escaped humans served the crucial rhetorical function in slave narratives of advancing humanizing critiques of the slave system in an era that all too often witnessed either indifference to, or explicit defense of, chattel slavery. In addition, slave narrators typically advanced highly complex arguments refuting central principles of the slave system, arguments revisited in Wilson's plays. The most common critique of the ideology of slavery made by slave narrators focused on its commodification of humans. Pennington marshals one of the most sustained analyses when he attacks what he calls "the property principle" at the core of the slave system. Slaves' coerced participation in the slave market and the "valuation[s]," or appraisals, of slaveholders' estates along with livestock and inanimate property, Pennington asserts, contradicts natural law, logic, and Christian principles. August Wilson chooses to present his own critique of this dehumanizing "property principle" in the context of slavery as well. In *The Piano Lesson*, the piano itself only enters the Charles family's history because in antebellum times African-American slaves were transferable property. In Doaker's oral history of the family Robert Sutter who "had no money. But he had some niggers" offered to trade these slaves to Nolander for a piano Sutter's



wife desired (Wilson 1990: 42). Doaker then relates the story of the piano's magnificent carvings and describes how his grandfather was commanded to carve figures of his enslaved family onto Miss Ophelia Sutter's piano when she missed this family after they had been traded: "When Miss Ophelia seen [the carved piano] [...] she got excited. Now she had her piano and her niggers too" (Wilson 1990: 44). In the most astute reading of this incident available, Harry Elam interprets Wilson's reference to the carved figures as stand-ins for black humans:

The carved wooden representation [...] was enough to satisfy Miss Ophelia's desire. The wooden image replaced the real slave body. [...] the carving equaled the real slave because neither was perceived as human. Thus, both the piano and the "niggers" remained her property (Elam 2000: 369).

Both Pennington and Wilson dramatize this commodification of humanity in the white slaveholders' presumptions of blending African-American people and the bourgeois trappings of their households.

The "property principle" was, slave narrators make clear, an injustice sanctioned by the American legal system. The slaveholder's "political influence," Pennington writes, is so substantial that "they essentially make the law" (Pennington 1969: 249). As a result of the slave being excluded from the ability to exercise legal agency, Douglass emphasizes, the most horrific acts by the slaveholder escape punishment; though the overseer Mr. Gore shoots a slave, "His horrid crime was not even submitted to judicial investigation. It was committed in the presence of slaves, and they of

course could neither institute a suit, nor testify against him".<sup>1</sup> Wilson certainly appreciated the destructive power of such legalized racism both during the period of slavery and since its abolition. Continuing legal discrimination against African Americans, he believed, has resulted in some equivalence between nineteenth-century chattel slavery and present-day national discrimination against blacks who live in a "bitter relationship with a system of laws and privileges which seemingly seeks to prolong our enslavement by denying us access to tools necessary for productive and industrious life" (Wilson "National" 1998: 487-8). Solly thus speaks for Wilson in his own unique dialect when he laments the condition of blacks both before and after emancipation: "They got the law tied to their toe. Every time they try and swim the law pull them under" (Wilson 2006: 60). A suggestive interaction between Wining Boy and Boy Willie in *The Piano Lesson* revisits the criticisms leveled by slave narrators against the legal system, illustrating Wilson's belief that little has changed from the antebellum period to 1936, the play's setting. Wining Boy claims Boy Willie's attempt to buy land in the South won't allow him self-determination or be fully legitimized by social recognition because some white man will sooner or later "fix it with the law" to reclaim part of it for himself while "The colored man can't fix nothing with the law" (Wilson 1990: 38). Wining Boy's complaint is echoed virtually verbatim in texts like Pennington's: "when [slaveholders] find the laws operate more in favor of the slaves than themselves, they can easily evade or change it" (Pennington 1969: 249).

---

1. DOUGLASS, Frederick, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (New York: Penguin, 1986): 67.

Along with U.S. law, Christianity is critiqued by slave narrators as an institution complicit with the slave regime. In slave narratives, as in Wilson's plays, however, Christianity is not merely reviled but also revised to give new religious authority to the African American's desire for self-determination. Most common in slave narratives are attacks against the Christianity of slaveholders which only encourages cruelty. "We have men-stealers for ministers, women-whippers for missionaries, and cradle-plunderers for church members," Douglass rants, all slaveholders who often twisted St. Paul's writings to demand obedience from slaves (Douglass 1986: 154). This sort of critique is clearly reimagined through the character of Herald Loomis and his bitter response to his wife's insistent quotation of the twenty-third Psalm at the conclusion of *Joe Turner's*: "Great big old white man [...] your Mr. Jesus Christ. Standing there with a whip in one hand and tote board in another, and them niggers swimming in a sea of cotton" (Wilson 1988: 92). By transfiguring the slave body into the wounded body of the crucified Christ, however, some slave narrators take advantage of the cultural capital offered by a Christian tradition that celebrates the redemptive value of an innocent's physical suffering. In his discussion of his successful escape Henry Bibb relates that he pushed himself and his horse hard when fleeing across the prairies, knowing "I could indeed afford to crucify my own flesh for the sake of redeeming myself from perpetual slavery".<sup>1</sup> By rendering himself simultaneously the crucifier and the crucified Bibb erases the slaveholder and the abolitionist and acts as his own savior. In *Joe Turner's* Loomis appears as a close parallel to Bibb's (re-)

---

1. BIBB, Henry, *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, an American Slave* (New Hampshire: Ayer Company Publishers, Inc., 1991): 163.

imagining of the slave as Christ.<sup>1</sup> His critique of Christianity as a slaveholding religion is immediately followed by his coopting of the sacrificial power of Christ to himself. After responding to his Pentecostalist wife's call for conversion with the self-affirming statement "I don't need nobody to bleed for me! I can bleed for myself," Loomis "slashes himself across the chest [...] rubs the blood over his face and comes to a realization" (Wilson 1988: 93). This climactic realization, Wilson tells us in his stage directions, is one of "self-sufficiency," achieved by Loomis when he critiques then reinscribes Christian ideals into a form meaningful to the "ex-slave".

Even moving into a geographical space of freedom, then, slave narrators and Wilson's characters realize this "freedom" can be difficult to define, understand, or enjoy. This sophisticated approach to the meaning and achievement of freedom is perhaps one of the closest ideological points of convergence of antebellum American slave narratives and Wilson's plays. Wilson's introduction to *Joe Turner's* echoes the progressive structure of the latter sections of the classic slave narrative while emphasizing the challenges of freedom:

From the deep and the near South the sons and daughters of newly freed African slaves wander into the city. [...] bludgeoning and shaping the malleable parts of themselves into a new identity as free men of definite and sincere worth (Wilson 1998: n.p.).

---

1. This signification of Loomis might seem contradictory, given Loomis' critique of Christianity. In reading Loomis' characterization symbolically, however, we must differentiate between Christian beliefs and the "hypocritical" institution of racist Southern Christianity, a key differentiation Douglass makes in the Appendix to his 1845 *Narrative* (Douglass 1986: 153ff).

Freedom, these texts ultimately assert, is truly attained by struggling towards a sense of personal self-worth and confidence in one's ability to achieve self-determination.

In many slave narratives, this evolution is portrayed as an originary revelation that death is preferable to submission and the subsequent liberatory sense of independence from white power. The most famous example of this narrative "moment" appears in Douglass' 1845 *Narrative* when he fights and physically bests the notorious "slave-breaker" Edward Covey. Douglass calls this moment a "turning-point [...] a glorious resurrection" of his "own manhood" and "self-confidence" because not only did he discover himself capable of successfully resisting the physical oppression of slavery but most importantly, "the day had passed forever when I could be a slave" for "the white man who expected to succeed in whipping, must also succeed in killing me" (Douglass 1986: 113). Paul Gilroy's important work on the place of slave narratives in our understanding of Western modernity has demonstrated that Douglass' realization about death challenges Hegel's master-slave dialectic, allowing the slave to derive an independent self-consciousness outside of the ideology of the slave system.<sup>1</sup> Harry Elam then uses Gilroy's work to make his own important insight: in *The Piano Lesson*, both Papa Boy Charles' risking death in order to steal the piano and Boy Willie's claim that "a nigger that ain't afraid to die is the worse kind of nigger for the white man," are "memories of Frederick Douglass" (Wilson 1990: 88; Elam 2000: 373, 372; also see Pereira 1995: 98). Wilson repeats this idea in *Gem of the Ocean* in Solly's statement that "I ain't never been afraid" since he came to the conclusion that slave-

---

1. GILROY, Paul, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).

holders “were gonna have to kill me” if they wished to keep him in bondage, which also revisits the foundational Douglass-Covey altercation (Wilson 2006: 59). The end of these struggles towards freedom is, as figured in slave narratives, the achievement of a new sense of self, founded on a firm acceptance of personal pride. “From the hull of a ship to self-determining, self-respecting people. That is the journey we are making,” Wilson believed, outlining not only the trajectory of black history in the United States but also the trajectory of slave narratives and his own plays (Wilson “Ground” 1998: 501).

Even when freedom has been achieved in the course of subjective empowerment and geographic movement from the South to the North, however, slave narrators and Wilson inform the reader that African Americans’ full freedom is often curtailed by Northern racism. That is the parallel experience of African-American fugitive slaves of the early nineteenth century and the characters of Wilson’s three plays of the early twentieth century, most of whom are participants in the “Great Migration”. Disillusioned slave narrators often report experiencing the same sorts of racism in the North they had lived with formerly. Douglass is bitter he cannot get a job caulking ships in Massachusetts because “such was the strength of prejudice against color, among the white caulkers” (Douglass 1986: 150). Migrations North by African Americans in the early twentieth-century, also in response to racism and economic oppression in the South, resulted — Wilson’s plays suggest — in the same continued oppression by white society. In *Gem of the Ocean* violent labor conflicts at the Pittsburg tin mill are described as occurring off-stage throughout the play; we very quickly learn this mill engages in unfair labor practices against new migrants like Citizen Barlow. “Come payday they

give me three dollars say the rest go on my bill," he relates. "They say we got to pay two dollars room and board [...] What I'm gonna do?" (Wilson 2006: 22).<sup>1</sup> The Northern industrial economic system operates in a manner strikingly reminiscent of the Southern slave plantation; when the black laborers at the tin mill refuse to work in Act 1, "the police tried to make them [...] charged the crowd arresting everybody" (Wilson 2006: 24). Indeed, one primary reason Solly finally destroys the mill is because, in his words, he expected "freedom" to be achieved after the Civil War, but now that he is older "I see where I'm gonna die and everything gonna be the same" (Wilson 2006: 75).

These parallels between classic antebellum slave narratives and Wilson's plays set in the early decades of the twentieth century exist in large part due to these texts' comparable rhetorical contexts and aims. Jacqueline Wood's description of the conditions of literary production of modern African-American drama might as well be a description of the genre of the slave narrative, as described by scholars like William L. Andrews: the "text/audience relationship is unique [...] because of its consistent intent to privilege, as beneficiary of audience activism, a specific cultural community that exists within a hostile environment".<sup>2</sup> Contemporary African-Americans, Wilson has stated,

---

1. Jeremy Furlow experiences a similar form of economic exploitation of black migrants in *Joe Turner's*: "they fired me. White fellow come by told me to give him fifty cents if I wanted to keep working. Going around to all the colored making them give him fifty cents to keep hold to their jobs" (Wilson 1988: 64).

2. WOOD, Jacqueline, "Enacting Texts: African American Drama, Politics, and Presentation in the African American Literature Classroom", *College Literature* 32.1 (Winter 2005): 106; ANDREWS, William L., *To Tell a Free Story: The First Century of Afro-American Autobiography, 1760-1865* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1986): 3-7.

“are [still] trying to place a value on ourselves as freemen” after hundreds of years. He added, “Our cultural products, our song and dance, our literature, our theatrical endeavors aid in that” (Wilson “National” 1998: 488).

How then do slave narrators and August Wilson engage in the common activity of “plac[ing] value on ourselves” in a “hostile environment”? An approach central to the rhetorical projects of both involves critiquing the ethnocentric values of Euro-America and its “writing culture” while offering alternative ideas of human “being” and validating cultural modes of expression not centered on conventional Western understandings of literacy. Throughout his career August Wilson opposed contemporary American theater’s narrow financial and artistic commitment to “the single value system of Western thought” (Wilson “National” 1998: 485). In his view, the ethnocentrism of the present was merely the latest stage of a continuous

cultural battle that had been taking place since the early 17<sup>th</sup> century when we came to this country in chains and were perceived as being without language, art, [and] culture (Wilson “National” 1998: 486).<sup>1</sup>

Ronald Judy has rightly described American slave narratives as texts produced “along the lines of orality and literacy,” often validating the former in opposition to white America’s privileging of the latter and the traditional Western belief that only

---

1. Alan Nadel also recognizes that “Wilson exposes the ways that black Americans have lived outside of the governing metanarratives of white Western culture”. NADEL, Alan, “Boundaries, Logistics, and Identity: The Property of Metaphor in *Fences* and *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*”, *May All Your Fences Have Gates: Essays on the Drama of August Wilson*, Alan Nadel, ed. (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1994): 102.



rationality and specifically “literacy can offer . . . enlightenment”.<sup>1</sup> Various forms of African-American expression described by slave narrators— slave songs, dances, and oral storytelling— demonstrated blacks were capable of establishing valid forms of self-reflective consciousness, philosophy, communication, and resistance to the slave regime through non-written, non-literate modes. Judy brilliantly observes that the key scene of Douglass’ awakening to the power of literacy—the most famous of all such scenes in a slave narrative—actually validates the power of the slave’s thought apart from reading and writing. Douglass relates how reading “The Columbian Orator” “gave tongue to interesting thoughts of my own soul, which had frequently flashed through my mind, and died away for want of utterance” (Douglass 1986: 84). In Judy’s view, “Here Douglass tells us rather directly that thought is not the product of literacy . . . The utterance he claims lack of is . . . an acceptance and legitimacy” because white culture rested its “authority” in the “myth” that “Writing embodied thought” and that the slave was a non-reflective being (Judy 1993: 103).

In contrast to this myth, Douglass’ description of slave songs celebrates the power of African-American music over the printed word. These work songs and spirituals

reveal [...] at once the highest joy and the deepest sadness. [...] the mere hearing of those songs would do more to impress some minds with the horrible character of slavery, than the reading of whole volumes of philosophy (Douglass 1986: 57).

---

1. JUDY, Ronald A.T., *Disforming the American Canon: African-Arabic Slave Narratives and the Vernacular* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993): 155; Andrews 1986: 7.

Moreover, Douglass recognizes the cultural specificity of such music to African Americans by identifying white slaveholders' inability to understand it, "they would sing, as a chorus, to words which to many would seem unmeaning jargon, but which, nevertheless, were full of meaning" (Douglass 1986: 57). Many scholars have claimed a similar legitimacy and cultural specificity for the manifestations of blues music in Wilson's plays.<sup>1</sup> Wilson's own vision of the blues, offered in a 1989 interview with Bill Moyers, echoed Douglass' statements: "Contained in the blues is a philosophical system at work. [...] That is a way of passing along information [...] and it is sanctioned by the community" (qtd. in Pereira 1995: 8). Imagined as an essential component of African-American cultural identity which exists outside of, and as an alternative to, white cultural values and understanding, African-American music is a crucial element of the "orality" of slave narratives and Wilson's plays. It provides a means of unique cultural expression, and individual and communal creativity, and often plays a key role in helping characters overcome their traumatic pasts. Samuel Floyd interprets the blues "as they emerged during or after Reconstruction . . . [as] a way of coping with the new trials and realizations brought by freedom," which is, as we

---

1. See, for example: PEREIRA, Kim, *August Wilson and the African-American Odyssey* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1995): 61ff; GUSSOW, Adam, "Where is the Love?: Racial Violence, Racial Healing, and Blues Communities", *Southern Cultures* 12.4 (Winter 2006): 33-54; MORALES, Donald M., "The Pervasive Force of Music in African, Caribbean, and African American Drama", *Research in African Literatures* 34.2 (Summer 2003): 145-154; and ELAM, Harry J., *The Past as Present in the Drama of August Wilson* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004). Samuel Floyd emphasizes that "instrumental blues spoke a musical code decipherable by knowers of the culture but inaccessible to those outside it", Samuel A. FLOYD, JR., *The Power of Black Music: Interpreting Its History from Africa to the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995): 78.

have seen, a primary struggle experienced by Wilson's characters (Floyd 1995: 76).

"If Black Theater is subordinate to the values of European Americans," Wilson contended, "it cannot come into its own," and the characters in his plays counter these ethnocentric "values" with oral cultural expressions (Wilson "National" 1998: 489). Dramatic practice offers a convenient means of doing so, and Wilson allows various characters in his plays extensive monologues that serve as oral histories; witness, for example, Solly's narration of his experiences fifty years earlier as an Underground Railroad conductor and Doaker's strikingly long relation of the Charles family's story. Michael Morales has compared Doaker to the "men of memory" in the cultures of West Africa who served as "communal oral historians" in a cultural tradition outside of a Eurocentric one.<sup>1</sup> In his plays Wilson also offers subtle critiques of the "writing culture" of white America by privileging orality over literacy, as Douglass does. In *The Piano Lesson* Boy Willie encourages his young niece Maretha to learn a "boogie-woogie" tune on the piano that "You can dance to," but Maretha (who has been learning from her mother though Berniece still refuses to play the piano herself and fully accept her family's slave history) says "I got to read it on the paper" to be able to play. Boy Willie replies testily "You don't need no paper. Go on," a criticism that is echoed significantly in the second act when Boy Willie criticizes Berniece for failing to encourage racial pride in her daughter (Wilson 1990: 21). It is in this critical vein that Harry Elam reads the play's cli-

---

1. MORALES, Michael, "Ghosts on the Piano: August Wilson and the Representation of Black American History," in *May All Your Fences Have Gates: Essays on the Drama of August Wilson*, Alan Nadel, ed. (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1994): 107, 106.

mactic scene in which the white ghost is driven away to restore harmony to the black family: “in exorcising Sutter’s ghost, the ‘Euro’-Christian litany, the *written* text of faith in the Bible fails,” when the preacher Avery attempts to battle the ghost, while “the spontaneous and oral calling forth of the ancestral spirits, succeeds” (Elam 2000: 378).

The major figure of moral, spiritual, and historical weight in *Gem of the Ocean*—Aunt Ester—delivers a riveting critique of white writing culture, though she herself appears to be illiterate. When Caesar serves her with an arrest warrant for aiding Solly’s escape, she presents him with the old Bill of Sale exchanged when, as a twelve-year old girl, she was sold as a slave. “Now you tell me how much it’s worth, Mr. Caesar,” she challenges him in his position as town constable,

You see, Mr. Caesar, you can put the law on the paper but that don’t make it right. That piece of paper say I was property . . . The law say I needed a piece of paper to say I was a free woman. But I didn’t need no piece of paper to tell me that. Do you need a piece of paper, Mr. Caesar? (Wilson 2006: 78).

Obviously, the Bill of Sale had legal and economic legitimacy within the institution of American slavery, just as Caesar’s warrant has legal power according to the state. Ester, however, voids the writing of any real force by asserting it has no moral or ontological legitimacy and that she is fully aware of truth and reality without any reference to the printed word. The white written word could not transform Ester from a free being into property, though it explicitly claimed to do so; as such, it is mere fiction that does not “make . . . right” nor reality. The question of “how much it’s worth” is never sufficiently answered explicitly because

this worth is absent; the paper, its writing, and the ideology of the writing culture that authorized it, have no genuine worth. Furthermore, her interrogation of Caesar, "Do you need a piece of paper," emphasizes how acceptance of the white validation of literacy and print culture can delude an individual, corrupting his sense of self-worth and resulting, as Caesar's storyline makes clear, in a loss of moral perception and sense of social responsibility.

Slave narratives and Wilson's plays diverge even more dramatically from white "writing culture" by positing alternatives to disembodied linguistic production as valid forms of African-American expression and modes of being. Delineating the rhetorical context of nineteenth-century American slave narratives, Lindon Barrett confirms that white literacy was privileged as a mark of humanity in racialized terms localized around African-American physicality and understood as evidence of "the mind's ability to extend itself beyond the constricted limits and conditions of the body".<sup>1</sup> Euro-American culture understood itself as thoroughly rational and disembodied in contrast to thoroughly embodied, and enslaved, African peoples; this perspective is, however, routinely critiqued in slave narratives and Wilson's plays as part of a critique of white writing culture's denigration of the body. Katherine Fishburn has offered the provocative thesis that, as participants in a system where oppression was enacted through physical subjugation, slaves possessed an awareness of physical "being" traditionally excised from Western metaphysics

---

1. BARRETT, Lindon, "African-American Slave Narratives: Literacy, The Body, Authority," *American Literary History* 7.3 (1995): 419. Specifically, Barrett provides detailed readings of James L. Smith's, Frederick Douglass', and William and Ellen Craft's narratives.

and language.<sup>1</sup> In describing slave songs, therefore, we find Douglass placing value on the words sung but also appreciating that “thought . . . came out” also “if not in the word, in the sound;— and as frequently in the one as in the other” (Douglass 1986: 57). These intonations are a form of bodily semiotics that communicate powerful messages about enslavement. Perhaps the most salient scenes of such physical signification appear in slave narrators’ description of the lasting scars left on their bodies. “My feet have been so cracked with the frost,” Douglass writes, connecting his past experience with slavery and his present action of writing several years later, “that the pen with which I am writing might be laid in the gashes” (Douglass 1986: 72). Wilson replicates scenes such as these when he has Solly narrate his life as an Underground Railroad conductor: “Look here . . . see that? A dog tried to tear my leg off one time. I got a big part of my arm missing. Tore out the muscle” (Wilson 2006: 58). Solly’s injunctions to the other characters (and the audience) to “Look” and “see” his body as a repository of historical information requires no literacy (at least none in the way Western culture traditionally has defined it) to fulfill. In *The Piano Lesson*, the Charles’ piano with its antebellum carvings of the family history is most obviously the equivalent, in carved wood, of a written autobiographical slave narrative, but it is also a memorial of physical and emotional suffering, preserving the blood Berniece’s mother Mama Ola rubbed into it as she cleaned it, mingling contemporary physical damage with the sculpted narrative of her family’s slave past. This physical damage “the maimings [...] the lashings [...] the lynchings”

---

1. FISHBURN, Katherine, *The Problem of Embodiment in Early African American Narrative* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1997).

were the inherited signs of “The history of our bodies” as African Americans, Wilson contended (Wilson “Ground” 1998: 499).

Understanding physical damage as historical, Wilson appreciated that violently textualizing slave bodies “to mark them” as property by wounding slave flesh—branding initials with hot irons, cutting out flesh, or knocking out front teeth “in case of escape”—was the means by which slaveholders strove to render the black body legible as “enslaved”. Moreover, at a deeper level, such events indicated slaves were marked not by an inherently inferior “blackness” but by externally imposed traces of oppression. When these marks on the flesh became overdetermined within the cultural symbology of the slave system, they resulted—as Hortense Spillers has taught us—in the cultural pathologization of the slave through a body that was never merely material. This “altered human tissue” with its markings of violent intrusion were meaningful in the slave system’s hierarchical legal and social discourses which constructed representations of this flesh. Cultural perceptions of racial difference were oriented to a supposedly “meaningful” and natural physiology.<sup>1</sup> In contrast, slave narrators and August Wilson emphasize that the author of the black body’s marks are not God or nature but the cruel and arbitrary human authority of slaveholders and the violent racism of the lynch mob. As is the case with many slave narratives and characters like Solly, the depiction of slavery’s violent impulse to imprint the black body “translate[s] literacy from a sign of Reason to one of . . . annihilation” and physical as well as psychological violation (Judy 1993: 71).

---

1. SPILLERS, Hortense, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” *Diacritics* 17.2 (Summer 1987): 67.

The performance of actions without verbalization is one central way Wilson uses bodily semiotics to communicate the experience of slavery and the ways this experience informs later African-American life. In this regard, theater critic Frank Rich's interpretation of *Joe Turner's* remains one of the earliest and still one of the most insightful. Rich believes, "it is essential to grasp what the characters do not say—to decipher the history that is dramatized in images and actions beyond the reach of logical narrative".<sup>1</sup> A good example of such physically enacted "images and actions" in the play occurs when Loomis—physically and emotionally traumatized by seven years on a work gang—experiences a vision and collapses in a wordless fit near the end of Act 1. A similar communication through physical actions appears in the long scene of masked pantomime in *Gem of the Ocean* during which the young Citizen Barlow, the ancestor of slaves, spiritually experiences the history of slavery in the New World. As described in Wilson's stage directions: "Masked Solly and masked Eli seize him [...] They symbolically brand and symbolically whip Citizen, then throw him into the hull of the boat" (Wilson 2006: 67). It is subsequently significant that the "reborn" Citizen brings the curtain down on the play by exiting—as Wilson specifically indicates—"Without a word" to embark on a new life, it is implied, helping blacks in the Jim Crow South. Both Herald Loomis and Citizen Barlow are redeemed by physical action, by performances with deep spiritual power, rather than by language.

Dancing is another form of non-verbal and physical expression presented in Wilson's plays that provides access to meth-

---

1. RICH, Frank, "Panoramic History of Blacks in America in Wilson's 'Joe Turner'", *The New York Times*, 28 Mar 1988 Section C: 15.



ods of signification in which all blacks can participate regardless of literacy. The most famous example of this signifying performance is the Juba dancing scene in *Joe Turner*, described in the stage directions as “reminiscent of the Ring Shouts of the African slaves” (Wilson 1988: 53).<sup>1</sup> Wilson refined his dramatic staging of African-American dance in the later *The Piano Lesson* when he constructed the performance of a work song from a Mississippi penitentiary — “Berta” — by all the major male characters of the play. The four men, representing two generations, “stamp and clap to keep time [...] in harmony with great fervor and style” (Wilson 1990: 39). The design of this performance closely mirrors Samuel A. Floyd’s description of “testifying” ring shouts, a mode of African-American dance Floyd calls “almost purely African, with continuous stamping and clapping accompanying a short, repeated melody” (Floyd 1995: 43). Through this work song, we see even see echoes of the “Dance, Drum, and Song” triad Floyd commonly identifies as central to traditional African communal rituals; Wilson thus selects distinctively non-Western modes of expression to dramatize the African-American experience of bondage (Floyd 1995: 50). Most immediately, Wilson communicates to the audience the characters’ common experience of incarceration, a history of forced labor paralleling slavery. This dance re-enacts for the audience not only slaves’ ring shouts but also the work songs invented first by slaves and later by African-American chain gangs to regulate the performance of their tasks. Furthermore, in the closely regulated physical action of harmonizing their steps, along with the accompanying song’s fixed repe-

---

1. Pereira offers a brilliant and creative reading of this scene in terms of its staging and visual display as a form of non-verbal signification for the other characters in the scene as well as the audience (Pereira 1995: 113, n.10).

titions, the men's dance represents the confinement of shackled African Americans as a communal ritual. Through the twentieth-century work song, one of the most direct musical legacies of antebellum slave culture, African-American workers "sought," as Lawrence W. Levine observes, "a shared remedy for a common plight" while "their white counterparts . . . [worked] in silence".<sup>1</sup> It is therefore worth noting that Wilson rejected the practice of "color-blind casting" with the assertion that African Americans' bodies were capable of uniquely representing African-American culture; "Our manners [...] our gestures [...] and our bodies" must not be assimilated into white theater, he claimed (Wilson "Ground" 1998: 499).

The juba dancing and ring shouts of African-American slaves were, according to Samuel A. Floyd, crucial means by which slaves in America maintained a "continuity" of culture and spiritual beliefs between Africa and the New World and "reaffirmed community, discipline, [and] identity" among their present social relations (Floyd 1995: 39). Sterling Stuckey contends that much of slaves' religious beliefs, cultural expressions, and musical creations were inextricably tied to non-literate, physical activities, "to particular configurations of dance and dance rhythm" and "ritual performance".<sup>2</sup> By incorporating this dance and music into his drama, therefore, August Wilson maintains the African cultural "continuity" Floyd identifies into the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, using distinctively African-American

---

1. LEVINE, Lawrence W., *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought From Slavery to Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977): 213, 208.

2. STUCKEY, Sterling, *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and the Foundations of Black America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987): 27.

means to link his dramatic works historically to antebellum American slavery and, further, to an African past.

Why do we find August Wilson revisiting the grounds of antebellum slave narratives? It is important to appreciate that Wilson identified a strong historical continuity between the period in which slavery existed in America and his own era, a continuity so strong he at times lamented it as stagnancy. This understanding came from Wilson's early development in the 1960s when the Black Power movement made a lasting impact on this thought. Black Power, he related, understood that race relations "had begun as master and slave and had made little progress in the three hundred and some odd years since" (Wilson "National" 1998: 484).<sup>1</sup> When he surveyed the American dramatic scene, he saw the same racist ideas of black inferiority, as evident in the reception of black theater by the majority white culture which he termed "cultural imperialists who [...] see blacks as woefully deficient, not only in arts and letters but in the abundant gifts of humanity," just as they did in "the 19<sup>th</sup> century" (Wilson "Ground" 1998: 496).

In addition, Wilson's views of the functions of contemporary black theater with respect to the construction of black subjectivity closely matched central functions of slave narratives. Motivated by a purpose shared by the modern black playwright, "the African in the confines of the slave quarters sought to invest his spirit with the strength of his ancestors by conceiving in his art [...] a world in which he was the [...] center" (Wilson "Ground"

---

1. It was also during this period of the 1960s, we should recall, that interest in antebellum slave narratives was revived by the socio-political advances of African Americans, resulting in the republication, and therefore increased availability, of the texts we enjoy access to today.

1998: 495-6). This striving for self-determination through cultural, specifically literary, productions drives slave narrators and Wilson's characters alike. The act of creating a slave narrative allowed the author to achieve larger purposes, among them determining the structure and meaning of his or her life story, achieving some public recognition, and furthering the cause of abolition. By doing so, the slave narrator (in William L. Andrews' apt phrase) aims "to *declare* himself" as a singular, independent, and valuable subject. Characters like Herald Loomis follow a plot in which they achieve the same status. As Sandra L. Richards puts it, "Loomis's experience repeats in miniature the experience of Africans in the Americas: brutally and abruptly torn from their families, these Africans have had to come to terms with why they were dehumanized and how they are to enact a new, enabling narrative".<sup>1</sup>

Wilson's historical awareness of the significance of the slave past in the construction of the African-American present for individuals as well as their communities resulted in the creation of characters who follow paths which revisit the trajectory outlined by the autobiographers who composed slave narratives. Andrews points out that "Reconstructing their past lives required many ex-slaves to undergo a disquieting psychic immersion into their former selves as slaves [...] forced to relive the most psychologically charged moments of his or her past" in the course of narrating the complete story of their movement from slavery to freedom (Andrews 1986: 7). In Citizen Barlow's final decision to take up Solly Two Kings' staff and carry on the work of the old Under-

---

1. RICHARDS, Sandra L., "Yoruba Gods on the American Stage: August Wilson's *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*", *Research in African Literatures* 30.4 (Winter 1999): 96.

ground Railroad conductor, in Loomis' vision of the slave ship which marks the commencement of his "realization" of a route to spiritual freedom, and in Berniece's choice to call upon her slave ancestors for help in exorcising Sutter's ghost at the conclusion of *The Piano Lesson*, Wilson dramatizes the continued significance as well as the power of the slave's story.

### *Works Cited*

- ANDREWS, William L. *To Tell a Free Story: The First Century of Afro-American Autobiography, 1760-1865*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1986.
- BARRETT, Lindon. "African-American Slave Narratives: Literacy, The Body, Authority". *American Literary History* 7.3 (1995): 415-442.
- BIBB, Henry. *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, an American Slave*. 1850. New Hampshire: Ayer Company Publishers, Inc., 1991.
- BOAN, Devon. "Call-and-Response: Parallel 'Slave Narrative' in August Wilson's *The Piano Lesson*". *African American Review* 32.2 (Summer 1998): 263-271.
- DOUGLASS, Frederick. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*. 1845. New York: Penguin, 1986.
- ELAM, Harry J., Jr. "The Dialectics of August Wilson's *The Piano Lesson*". *Theatre Journal* 52 (2000): 361-379.
- FISHBURN, Katherine. *The Problem of Embodiment in Early African American Narrative*. Westport: Greenwood Press, 1997.
- FLOYD, Samuel A., Jr. *The Power of Black Music: Interpreting Its History from Africa to the United States*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1995.
- GILROY, Paul. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993.

- JUDY, Ronald A.T. *Disforming the American Canon: African-Arabic Slave Narratives and the Vernacular*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993.
- LEVINE, Lawrence W. *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought From Slavery to Freedom*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1977; 213, 208.
- MORALES, Michael. "Ghosts on the Piano: August Wilson and the Representation of Black American History", in *May All Your Fences Have Gates: Essays on the Drama of August Wilson*. Alan Nadel, ed. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1994.
- NADEL, Alan. "Boundaries, Logistics, and Identity: The Property of Metaphor in *Fences* and *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*", in *May All Your Fences Have Gates: Essays on the Drama of August Wilson*. Alan Nadel, ed. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1994.
- PENNINGTON, James W.C. *The Fugitive Blacksmith, or Events in the History of James W.C. Pennington*. 1849. *Great Slave Narratives*. Arna Bontemps, ed. Boston: Beacon Press, 1969.
- PEREIRA, Kim. *August Wilson and the African-American Odyssey*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1995.
- RICH, Frank. "Panoramic History of Blacks in America in Wilson's 'Joe Turner.'" *The New York Times* 28 Mar 1988 Section C: 15.
- RICHARDS, Sandra L. "Yoruba Gods on the American Stage: August Wilson's *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*". *Research in African Literatures* 30.4 (Winter 1999): 92-105.
- SPILLERS, Hortense. "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book". *Diacritics* 17.2 (Summer 1987): 65-81.
- STUCKEY, Sterling. *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and the Foundations of Black America*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1987.
- WILSON, August. "Characters behind History Teach Wilson about Plays". *New York Times*. 12 Apr 1992, sec. H: 5.

- WILSON, August. *Gem of the Ocean*. New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2006.
- WILSON, August. "The Ground on Which I Stand". *Callaloo* 20.3 (1998): 493-503.
- WILSON, August. *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*. New York: Plume, 1988.
- WILSON, August. "National Black Theater Festival, 1997". *Callaloo* 20.3 (1998): 483-492.
- WILSON, August. *The Piano Lesson*. New York: Plume, 1990.
- WOOD, Jacqueline. "Enacting Texts: African American Drama, Politics, and Presentation in the African American Literature Classroom". *College Literature* 32.1 (Winter 2005): 103-126.

*Les Carnets du Cerpac* n° 6, 2007, 351-375.

**DEREK WALCOTT'S *DREAM ON MONKEY MOUNTAIN*:  
CROSSROADS, CROSSWORDS AND CROSS-PURPOSES,  
OR THE IMPOSSIBLE STRAIGHT LINE INTO FREEDOM**

Kerry-Jane WALLART  
*Université Paris IX-Dauphine*

Commenting upon *Dream on Monkey Mountain*<sup>1</sup>, a play by Derek Walcott first performed by the author's troupe in 1967, Errol Hill deems it "a tangled, incoherent piece".<sup>2</sup> Yet, the plot seems unrecondite enough: on a Saturday, Makak, a poor Black man living in the mountains, goes to town to relate the vision which has visited him; he ends up wreaking havoc and finishes in jail. From there, along with his fellow-prisoners Tigre and Souris, he escapes and travels back to his "monkey" mountain, emboldened by his dream of a pure state of nature but hunted down by

---

1. WALCOTT, Derek, *Dream on Monkey Mountain and Other Plays* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1970). References to the play will be made, in the text, as: (act number, scene number, page number).

2. HILL, Errol, "Emergence of a National Drama in the West Indies", *Caribbean Quarterly* 18, 4 (December 1972): 33.



Corporal, a character embodying law and order who nevertheless eventually joins the ranks of Makak's grotesque utopia. Up on Monkey Mountain Makak endeavours to recreate a presumably African and laughably savage kingdom until he commits murder and renounces. The play then takes us back to jail, which Makak had never left but in a dream and where he resolves simply to hail back to his hut and remain there, a lonely woodsman. The play is structured around the motifs of bondage and escape and stages the conflict between the individual and an oppressive, iniquitous society, the flight of an underdog onto the open road and into dignity. *Dream on Monkey Mountain* clearly draws upon the tradition of those slave narratives which so captivated the 18th and 19th century readership, and in which runaway slaves told of their self-granted manumission<sup>1</sup>. However, the escape in point remains an extremely ambiguous, elusive and provisory one, accounting for Hill's statement to some extent. Whereas slave narratives were often texts geared towards the elaboration of a righteous discourse on man and society Derek Walcott's play constantly oscillates between opposite values until, in his last cue, Makak expresses the wish to "be swallowed up in mist again". Not only does his escape fail, sending him back to his derelict hut and his oppressed conscience, but it appears as altogether cancelled

---

1. We shall see in the course of the present paper that the fate of runaway slaves was quite different in the Caribbean on the one hand, and in the United States on the other; in the former area, they had to cross not only borders but also seas to find a space where they could be free men, and very often resorted, instead, to fleeing to the mountains and the woods in an enterprise which came to be known as "marronage". Return to civilization was made possible by the constitution of whole maroon communities, but also by reaching England, as is the case for example in *The History of Mary Prince, A West Indian Slave, Related by Herself*, F. Westley and A.H. Davis (Stationers' Hall Court, London, 1831).

by a circular ending which infuses the play with everything that slave narratives were not: an equivocal standpoint, a nebulous voice, an unresolved identity. The dramatic genre itself, with the playwright's enunciation inevitably shattered among the various characters, seems to rule out the model of slave narratives and their strong autobiographical vein. Furthermore no slave narrative is, however implicitly, made reference to in this play penned by an author who otherwise is a tireless quoter<sup>1</sup>, piling up citations with great exhilaration. One may wonder whether such an absence of allusions not be the sure sign that the play is written *as* a slave narrative, without the mediation of quotes, of pastiche or parody. We shall attempt to show how diffractions of voice and meaning do not so much distinguish *Dream on Monkey Mountain* from traditional slave narratives as they redeem what still holds true and can make them ring in postmodern fashion. With his sinuous trajectory Makak stands as a subversive heir to a genre which had to comply with the rigours of censure, allowing for a rewriting which is both a transposition and a prolongation. We will finally interrogate the ways in which *Dream on Monkey Mountain* is a play about tricks and viles revealed, but also and mainly about the unnamable and unspoken evil which sprang up after slavery was abolished without its unfairness being removed. A text perpetually at cross-purposes with itself the play saturates the stage with a criss-cross of voices, languages and meanings which fails to cover a gaping ethical and hermeneutic chasm.

The very linear trajectory of the slave narrative comes to a fork

---

1. It fell to another, later play by Derek Walcott, *Walker* (first performed 1993), to resort to that specific intertextuality, the hero being a thinly veiled incarnation of Frederick Douglass, a runaway now living in Boston, the editor and printer of an abolitionist paper. Quotations of slave narratives are numerous in the play.

in *Dream on Monkey Mountain*, a play in which, after all, Quatre Chemins is the most common topography, the name of the crossroads, of the jail and of the market place altogether. The circle figures as an obsessive geometrical shape in the play, both textually and visually (the—otherwise sparse—stage directions indicate a drum, a gong, a full moon, the sun as well as characters going round and round or forming a circle, and the drawings made by the author to illustrate his directing the play show an ongoing moon at the back of the stage). Equally central to the play's semiotics is the coal which Makak sells for a living and which he uses to depict his vision, making it rhyme with the Black "soul": coal is what has already been burnt but will reignite, a material whose transformation leads not so much to the other as to the same. Similarly, Makak's journey turns round and round in a movement which stands for the specific experience of runaway slaves in the Caribbean. Short of sailing away to another island they were indeed condemned to roam through mountains and woods in an endless and restless marronage, trapped by the circularity of the territory<sup>1</sup>. Caribbean slave narratives are tales of the impossible North, of a bondage that will never really end, of

---

1. Cf. the runaway slave whose fate is told by Édouard Glissant in his *Discours antillais*, in an attempt at rewriting a—third-person—slave narrative: "Il avait tracé un chemin, de cache en cache, et tournait en rond: c'était sa seule chance d'échapper aux autres [...] Chaque nuit, il revenait vers les cases [...] Il n'avait pas d'avenir, n'ayant pu atteindre la mer et voler une barque. Il mourrait bientôt. Mais il courait en rond sans arrêt, comme un soleil noir [...] Il allait de cache en cache, sur une trace qui tournait sans fin [...] Il tournait, s'efforçant de retrouver les caches qu'il avait aménagées [...] Il ne savait pas qu'il fermait le cercle", GLISSANT, Édouard, *Le Discours antillais* (Paris: Gallimard, 1997): 276-278. The text interestingly closes upon a footnote sending the reader back to one of Derek Walcott's texts, "History is Sea", as indeed, this recurrent circle figure is quite Walcottian). The whole of Glissant's works, and notably his novel *Le Quatrième siècle* (1964), is haunted by the figure of the *nègre marron*, or runaway slave.

an escape which needs to be reiterated, in both the literal and figurative sense of the word, every single day. Whereas the North American runaway slave followed a straightforward trajectory northwards, Makak's lot is to walk around like a caged animal:

CORPORAL. Walk round the cage! *Marchez! Marchez!*

[*Makak rises and walks round the bench, as the CHORUS begins to sing*]

[...] CORPORAL. About turn!

[*Makak turns around wearily*]

CHORUS. Cause when I turn round, monkey turn around too.  
(prologue, 222)

The circle which he describes is no symbol for fullness and completion but rather a frightening absence of progress, an impossibility to escape, a reduction to animality. Far from being cancelled by the flight into the forest, such circularity is maintained throughout the episode during which Makak becomes a *nègre marron* and invents a kingdom of his own:

SOURIS. He doesn't know where to go.

CORPORAL. Put him in front. He's a shadow now. Let him face the moon and move towards it. Let him go forward. [...] Forward, forward.

SOURIS. Where? The world is a circle, Corporal. Remember that.  
[*They move off wearily. The CORPORAL remains behind in a single spot*] (II, 2, 306-307)

The action and plot of the play advance through a series of "weary" spirals winding into helplessness, represented on stage by such cosmogonic circles as the moon or the earth. The enlightening typology of neo-slave narratives coined by Robert Stepto would have *Dream on Monkey Mountain* fall into the category of

the “immersion narrative”, in which the journey into freedom paradoxically makes no headway:

[T]he Afro-American pregeneric myth of the quest for freedom and literacy has occasioned two basic types of narrative expressions, the narratives of ascent and immersion. The classic ascent narrative launches an “enslaved” and semi-literate figure on a ritualized journey to a symbolic North; that journey is charted through spatial expressions of social structure, invariably systems of signs that the questing figure situated in the least oppressive social structure afforded by the world of the narrative, and free in the sense that he or she has gained sufficient literacy to assume the mantle of an articulate survivor. [. . . T]he immersion narrative is fundamentally an expression of a ritualized journey into a symbolic South, in which the protagonist seeks those aspects of tribal literacy that ameliorate, if not obliterate, the conditions imposed by solitude. The conventional immersion narrative ends almost paradoxically, with the questing figure located in or near the narrative’s most oppressive environment.<sup>1</sup>

A dream indeed, the whole play presents a universe in which values and notions blur into one another, in which the one is bound to be turned into the other and vice versa: “I have become what I have mocked” (II, 2, 300). The declaration is a far cry from the traditional persona of slave narratives, one who seeks moral redemption and whose metamorphosis is definite; ontology, in Derek Walcott’s text, is inevitably caught in a maelstrom of carnivalesque revolutions.

Circularity is conveyed, in the play, by the present time of the performance: no matter how far the chronological plot line may stretch, a dramatic staging will take place in the here and now, scorning past and future. The circle is also represented by the

---

1. STEPTO, Robert, *From Behind the Veil: A Study of Afro-American Narrative* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1979): 167.

stage, the unique territory available to drama semiotics, while slave narratives took place in the reader's imagination and could therefore convoke the whole American space. Furthermore, the stage is itself a place where revolutions and circumscriptions rule. Makak's journey away from oppression is set under the sign of repeated passages and metamorphoses, of the mutability of the world and of the stage. Corporal thus exclaims with anger: "Stop turning this place to a stinking zoo!" (prologue, 216; the phrase is repeated almost exactly in II, 2, 301). The play resorts to visible tricks to transform the stage with, for example, the "*cage is raised out of sight*" (prologue, 226), then *The cells rise* [...] *Makak lies alone in the hut* (prologue, 230) and at the end of the following scene, *The hut rises out of sight* (I, 1, 242) to become a country road. Space is malleable, fully obeying the concept of transformability proposed by Keir Elam:

What has been termed the "generative capacity" of the theatrical sign—the extraordinary economy of communicational means whereby in certain forms of dramatic presentation, from the ancient Greek to Grotowski's 'poor' theatre, a rich semantic structure is produced by a small and predictable stock of vehicles — is enhanced by a quality variously characterized by the Prague structuralists as its mobility, dynamism or transformability. [...] What appears in one scene as the handle of a sword may be converted, in the next, into a cross by a simple change of position, just as the set which stands in one context for a palisade is immediately transformed, without structural modification, into a wall or garden fence.<sup>1</sup>

---

1. ELAM, Keir, *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama* (London: Routledge, 1980): 12.

A long way off the realistic landscape in slave narratives, space is slippery and maddeningly circular in *Dream on Monkey Mountain*, jettisoning the possibility of escape.

Words themselves appear as more than unreliable. "I can both accuse and defend this man": one of the opening assertions (prologue, 120) points to the profound ambiguity of language. Words keep coming full circle and the play declenses all the various rhetorical figures of repetition, as if one were perpetually returning to the same crossroads to take a different direction, mapping out a territory but also locking up the open road. One of the most recurrent figures of repetition is that of the chiasmus, a rhetorical cross, crossroads and crossword: "The drum of the bull-frog, the blackbird flute [...] Not the blackbird flute, / Not the bull-frog drum" (prologue, 227). Elsewhere, minor changes intervene between identical blocks of text: Makak's verse cue in the prologue (226-227) is repeated word by word in the first scene, in prose this time (234-235), and Moustique's description of his adoption by Makak ("you pick me up like a wet fly in the dust", I, 1, 233) is taken up by Makak at the other end of the scene: "I pick you up like a wet fly from the dust" (I, 1, 241). Language is thus often structured around a call and response pattern; it is often the chorus which takes up some song or cue uttered by one of the characters. Just as circuitous is the question of Makak's name: when the Corporal asks him what it is, Makak first states that he has forgotten it, then says that Makak is not his name ("Makak is not my name", I, 1, 236) and finally answers, a few lines before the end of the play, "Felix Hobain", his official name, but also one which must have been inherited in the times of slavery and is no better than his infamous nickname ("they calling me Makak for my face, you see? Is as I so ugly", II, 3, 322). As one goes back and

forth between one name and another, linguistic slippages accumulate. Such onomastic doubleness proliferates in a play where everyone is likely to become someone else at some stage in the plot. Doubles run galore in the play: Makak / Moustique, Souris / Tigre, Corporal / the woman in white. The latter is incidentally described in the *dramatis personae* as "APPARITION, the moon, the muse, the white Goddess, a dancer", while "A DANCER" is also "NARRATOR" and "BASIL" is both "a cabinet-maker" and "figure of death". Corporal tellingly compares Makak with Esau (prologue, 222), the twin brother of Jacob with whom he exchanged identities. One of the main crossroads in *Dream on Monkey Mountain* is not only linguistic but also semiotic, and has to do with the source of enunciation. On stage, the latter is at least two-fold, since the actor utters words penned by the playwright whereas slave narratives were most often first-person, lyrical confessions. Additionally, this play counts several characters, who all share the utterance of the text. Here, the play is quite the opposite of what Robert Stepto calls an "integrated narrative", the later form of slave narratives:

When the various forms (letters, prefaces, guarantees, tales) and their accompanying voices become integrated in the slave narrative text, we are presented with another type of basic narrative which I call an *integrated narrative*. This type of narrative represents the second phase of slave narrative narration; it usually yields a more sophisticated text, wherein most of the literary and rhetorical functions previously performed by several texts and voices (the appended prefaces, letters, and documents as well as the tale) are now considered by a loosely unified single text and voice. In this second phase, the authenticating documents "come alive" in the former slave's tale as speech and even action; and the



former slave—often while assuming a deferential posture toward his white friends, editors, and guarantors—carries much of the burden of introducing and authenticating his own tale. (Stepito 1979: 4)

The play has a choric and choral quality, it relies on polyphony, on ventriloquy even; the circle which structures it is also, prominently so, a multi-vocal one.

Trapped in a circle, Makak still escapes. Moreover the epilogue does not so much conclude to a tragic failure, to a symbolic death of the main character and the restoration of order, as to a way out, as is outlined by Makak himself in a final declaration:

Other men will come, other prophets will come, and they will be stoned, and mocked, and betrayed, but now this old hermit is going back home, back to the beginning, to the green beginning of the world. Come, Moustique, we going home. (Epilogue, 326)

The image of the hermit is highly reminiscent of the specific religious undertones that characterized many slave narratives which were written as spiritual autobiographies, as accounts of so many souls caught in a world of sin and depravation and seeking redemption. Makak's journey might not be as circular as it is circuitous, staging a wanderer, a picaro who recalls those narratives where runaways were often caught over and again before a successful and final attempt (such suspense was a staple element of a genre which partly owes its claim to fame to its sensational dimension). Makak distinctly recalls a delusionary Quixote ("Saddle my horse!" he tells a Sancho-like Moustique, whereas, naturally, he has no such animal, I, 1, 240). Raymond Hedin has shown the intimate links there exist between the picaro and the

runaway slave: "The picaro could not disappear entirely because the survival techniques of the picaro were becoming even more important to the slave than they had been before",<sup>1</sup> and Frederick Douglass thus links his writing with his relentless and excruciating walking in quite striking fashion: "My feet have been so cracked with the frost, that the pen with which I am writing might be laid in the gashes".<sup>2</sup> Crossing rivers in Indian canoes, finding one's way through the American wilderness, avoiding human dwellings and leaving society resolutely behind, experiencing thirst and hunger, dread and danger, chance encounters and recaptures: such is the stock-in-trade of the slave narrative. Similarly, Makak is a vagabond, as Moustique complains: "I tired begging. Look, look at us. So poor we had to sell the donkey. Bare-footed, nasty, and what you want me to do, bow my head and say thanks?" (I, 2, 254). Derek Walcott goes back to the suspense of slave narratives, having Corporal hunt the three convicts, Makak, Souris and Tigre ("So I let them escape. Let them run ahead. Then I'll have good reason for shooting them down", II, 1, 286-287) through a dense wood on the morne. Makak is, after all, the *nègre marron* condemned to a savage life far away from all human society: "I have live all my life / Like a wild beast in hiding. Without child, without wife" (prologue, 226). His predicament is a tribute to the (hi)story of these runaway slaves who were reduced to an animal, solitary life, eating roots and dwelling in huts and caves, but also a discourse on the fate of the postcolonial subject: "Makak is an extreme representation of what colonialism can do

---

1. HEDIN, Raymond, "The American Slave Narrative: The Justification of the Picaro", *American Literature*, 53: 4, (January 1982): 636.

2. DOUGLASS, Frederick, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1845. New York: Penguin Classics, 1986): 72.

to a man—he is reduced to an almost animal-like state of degradation”.<sup>1</sup> Through him, slave narratives echo and ripple into modern times, providing a frame which might take to task new forms of an oppression which has been looming and lurking, unnamed, ever since the end of slavery.

Makak’s crossing the border into the unknown and the lawless in a truly devious (in both senses of the term) trajectory also fully illustrates the paradox which is at play in all slave narratives: their author is bound to be an outcast, a maverick endeavouring to make himself accepted through the confession of the misdeeds without which no escape was conceivable during slavery. Unable to submit, the author of slave narratives breaks the law in the full conscience of his own right, just as Makak flees a prison where he has been unfairly jailed to reach the forest and establish an ideal kingdom where injustice would be redressed.<sup>2</sup> Transgression is a seminal element both in slave narratives and in *Dream on Monkey Mountain*; it prevents escape in a straight line, with the picaro standing not only for rootless and restless odysseys but also for law violation and rule infringement. Vagabonds contravening proper behaviour, refusing to “bow their heads and say thanks”, as Moustique puts it, Makak and his accomplices are such bold but apparently criminal characters. In Walcott’s play, the Fanonian theme of the set role in which the Black man cannot not be cast echoes: “Bastard, Hatchet-man, opportunist, executioner. I have the black man work to do, you know” (II, 2, 307).

---

1. WALCOTT, Derek, *The New Yorker* (26 June 1971): 30.

2. In this comical episode, Makak notably undertakes to sue those famous figures who have been found guilty of racial prejudice, starting from Noah and Plato up until Sir Cecil Rhodes and Mandrake the Magician, who had a Black servant, Lothal.

A wanderer but also a trickster at heart, Makak is an incarnation of the runaway left to his own devices, and he certainly does recall the monkey character in African tales, one who will outwit the lion or the elephant, the powerful kings of the jungle<sup>1</sup>. He incarnates a ruthless and pragmatic cleverness, he is on the side of dissent and of cunning ploys. Similarly, some authors of slave narratives described a universe of vice and debauchery judged by many as the only solution to their oppressed condition. Thus, Arthur fashions himself as a rebel in a colourful narrative<sup>2</sup> telling of his thefts, his “whor[ing] and dr[inking] to great excess” in the West Indies, his vagaries and his crimes. Admittedly, such resolutely anti-Uncle Tom imagery remained unacceptable during slavery and would be censured, so that undaunted Arthur’s ends with contrition (“And accordingly I was, on the 24th of September last, sentenced to be hanged, which I must confess is but too just a reward for my many notorious crimes”<sup>3</sup>), and slave narratives unfailingly showed—an apparent—acceptance of the ideals of the dominant white society. The moral constraints, the implicit censure exercised upon slave narratives are no longer there in *Dream on Monkey Mountain*, a text which stages a grotesque defilement of order, a venture into chaos, into cannibalism and savage rites. Such a process is far away from the sentimental form of

---

1. Often called “Anancy” in the Caribbean and North American lore, the trickster appears in the play as the spider, a current representation thereof, and which, here, haunts Makak’s dreams (“Make the web of the spider heavy with diamonds”, prologue, 226) and whose poison kills the unfortunate Moustique.

2. *The Life and Dying Speech of Arthur, a Negro Man: Who Was Executed at Worcester, October 20th, 1768, For a Rape Committed on the Body of One Deborah Metcalfe* (Bostone: Printed and Sold in Milk Street, 1768).

3. Quoted in STARLING WILSON, Marion, *The Slave Narrative: Its Place in American History* (Washington: Howard University Press, 1982): 55.

romance which is, after all, one of the literary ancestors of the slave narrative. However, slave narratives often testified to the necessity to deceive others as long as the Mason-Dixon line had not been crossed:

In fact, the only weapon of self defence that I could use successfully, was that of deception. It is useless for a poor helpless slave, to resist a white man in a slaveholding State. Public opinion and the law is against him; and resistance in many cases is death to the slave, while the law declares, that he shall submit or die.<sup>1</sup>

Deception is further emphasized in the play through a theatricality visible everywhere, a world of disguising, impersonating, role-playing and simulacra. Masks abound, hiding and distorting faces. They also embody the colonial alienation denounced by Fanon, who is implicitly quoted in the play ("Black faces, white masks! I tried like you" I, 3, 271).

The ultimate trickery resorted to in the play is a linguistic one, as Makak and the other protagonists are constantly talking in riddles, puns and quips: "the Mosaic tablets" (I, 3, 256); "Peace? Piece of what?" (II, 2, 292; the pun testifies here to an impossibility to use abstract notions and to the concomitant necessity to conceive of the world piecemeal); "Once I knew this jungle like the black of my hand" (II, 2, 296; blackness is here once more linked to an impossible movement forward and to the figure of the crossroads to which one keeps returning); "A figment of the imagination, a banana of the mind . . ." (II, 2, 297). These

---

1. BIBB, Henry, *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, An American Slave, Written by Himself* (New York: 5 Spruce Street, 1849): 17.

puns lay the emphasis on the “signifying”<sup>1</sup> indefiniteness of the trickster’s idiom, and recall some passages in slave narratives in which biblical undertones and apparently sermonizing passages, for example, were taken at cross-purposes and made to mean something else entirely (the “Mosaic tablets” is a good example thereof, transforming a deferential allusion to Moses into carnivalesque contingency and plurality). In *Dream on Monkey Mountain*, language also jars with dramatic realities, so that semantics and semiotics are constantly at cross-purposes in the play. Such visible disjunction between enunciation and stage signs appears with Makak’s crown: “MAKAK. My crown / SOURIS. [*Twisting a vine and crowning him*] Crown” (II, 2, 294). Seemingly performative, the word is here a deceit, an illusion, a trick to fool the fool who would be king. The figure of speech resorted to here, a recurrent one in the text, is that of metalepsis, a dissociation between speech and fact, between the word and the stage<sup>2</sup>. The world presented to the audience is everything but what is described by the characters’ remarks and cues, projecting the play into comedy, triggering laughter. Such is, similarly, the fate of Makak’s boat, one which is entirely delusional as Tigre drily and pitilessly remarks:

MAKAK. Back into the boat, a beautiful boat, and soon, after many moons, after many songs, we will see Africa, the golden

---

1. On this concept, one which goes back to times of slavery, see GATES, Henry Louis Jr., “The ‘Blackness of Blackness’: A Critique of the Sign and the Signifying Monkey” in *Figures in Black: Words, Signs and the “Racial” Self* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987): 235-276.

2. Cf. ELAM, Keir, *op. cit.*: 176-178 (“Such logical and referential figures (as opposed to semantic and syntactic ones) are named metalogisms by Groupe  $\mu$  [and] are context-bound devices to the extent that they depend on the audience’s ability to *measure* the gap, as it were, between reference and referent”).

sand, the rivers where lions come down to drink, lapping at the water with their red tongues, then the villages, the birds, the sound of flutes. [...]

TIGRE. We will need money to go there, uncle. To buy a boat. (II, 2, 291)

Such signifying is not to be found in slave narratives, which are based on the assurance that the thing and the word equal, beyond distortions which may be redressed, in any case, by he who is familiar with the codes used. If the trajectory of the runaway is devious in both cases, Derek Walcott's play interrogates a hermeneutic crack which attempts to come to terms with new, postmodern forms of oppression.

While everything in slave narratives was subsumed to eschatology, to a broader perspective and hopes of redemption<sup>1</sup>, *Dream on Monkey Mountain* is, as the title indicates, a dream, a moon-struck reverie, an inner and very subjective experience of maronage. Derek Walcott writes in his note on production:

The play is a dream, one that exists as much in the given minds of its principal characters as in that of its writer, and as such, it is illogical, derivative, contradictory. Its source is metaphor and it is best treated as a physical poem with all the subconscious

---

1. "The plot of the nineteenth-century slave narrative is informed by the Judeo-Christian mythological structure on both the material and the spiritual levels. The action moves from the idyllic life of a garden of Eden into the wilderness, the struggle for survival, the providential help, and the arrival into the Promised Land. In addition, the plot of the slave narrative incorporates the parallel structure of birth into death and death into birth which also distinguishes the Judeo-Christian myth", FOSTER, Frances Smith, *Witnessing Slavery: The Development of Ante-bellum Slave Narratives* (1979. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1994): 84.

and deliberate borrowings of poetry. Its style should be spare, essential as the details of a dream. (208)

It is a text without the linear, didactic, "logical" course which characterized slave narratives. With nothing but a maddening circle on which to stake his hopes, the character in the play vanishes into nothingness. Derek Walcott's text repeatedly points to an ontological absence, to an aporia, to an identity that will not hold: "Once we letting him believe what he is, is all right. Otherwise . . . [*Draws the knife across his throat*]" (II, 2, 294). Deeply meta-theatrical, the text designates roles as nothing more than roles: "I must play another part" (II, 1, 286). The end explicitly recalls that of *The Tempest* ("we are wrapped in black air, we are black, ourselves shadows in the firelight of the white man's mind" (II, 2, 304)), and similarly treats the world as an illusion best represented by dramatic artifice. Makak describes himself, in the third person and clearly romantic accents, as a fantasy: "Makak lives where he has always lived, in the dream of his people" (epilogue, 326), and Corporal Lestrade is fashioned around a dark hole, a baroque identity which hides a frightening nothingness:

And who stand in your way but your dear friend, Corporal Lestrade the straddler, neither one thing nor the next, neither milk, coal, neither day nor night, neither lion nor monkey, but a mulatto, a foot-licking servant of marble law? (II, 1, 283)

Nothingness is, indeed, one of the main themes in the play, becoming visible (*[He points at nothing]*, prologue, 227) and grammatically positive, as the adverb "too" intimates in the following exchange:

TIGRE. Who de hell he talking to? I see nothing.



SOURIS. I see nothing too.

MAKAK. He is talking to nothing. (II, 2, 299)

The characters on stage are Beckettian<sup>1</sup>, they are bodies without substance, a mere voice, the last and least human presence: “My lords, as you can see, this is a being without a mind, a will, a name, a tribe of its own” (prologue, 222). The matter of the name notably crops up again and indeed, the real name of Makak remains unpronounced but by the woman in white: “she call out my name, my real name. A name I do not use” (I, 1, 235). Such emptiness is paradoxically furthered by a dense intertextuality: references to Fanon (“black faces, white masks”, I, 3, 271) and Sartre, to Cervantes, to Shakespeare stand next to biblical undertones (Makak is, for example, explicitly presented as a Christ-like figure, and Souris and Tigre as the two thieves crucified along with him). All these appear as shreds and scraps clothing a text which doubts its own existence; conversely, the intertextuality there is to be found in slave narratives was most consistent, it described the perils, physical or spiritual, experienced by runaways with a great display of biblical allusions, drawing upon the New England sermonizing tradition and upon such devotional books as *The Pilgrim’s Progress*. In *Dream on Monkey Mountain* intertextuality works through cross-references rather than through a fully significant web, the tension between the various intertexts being stunted by their brevity and the whirling movements in which

---

1. The numerous links between Walcott’s and Beckett’s dramas have been systematically underlined in the dissertation of Corina Martin-Iordache, “Modernism, Postcolonialism and the Experience of a Place: A Study of Samuel Beckett and Derek Walcott” (University of Toronto, 2001). The two playwrights are exactly contemporary, and Derek Walcott has staged *Krapp’s Last Tape* in Port-of-Spain in 1962, just a few years before writing *Dream*.

they are caught, producing an accumulation behind which an irreducible void lurks. Appended to such hollowness, there is in *Dream on Monkey Mountain* a reflexion about memory, or rather, the necessity to forget.

[T]he noblest are those who are trapped, who have accepted the twilight.

If I see these as heroes it is because they have kept the sacred urge of actors everywhere: to record the anguish of the race. To do this, they must return through a darkness whose terminus is amnesia.<sup>1</sup>

Whereas slave narratives were meant as testimonies intended for the following generations, amnesia is the final victory of Makak's, who wishes past indignities to pass out of recollection: "Let me be swallowed up in mist again, and let me be forgotten" (epilogue, 326).

Emptiness is also prominently an ethical and metaphysical one in *Dream on Monkey Mountain*. Placed under the double authority of Franz Fanon and Jean-Paul Sartre, respectively quoted at the beginning of the two parts of the play, Derek Walcott's text conflates viewpoints without solving the oppositions brought about. It is a play dealing with, and steeped in, ambiguities, and images of mist and fog proliferate. Interestingly, such opacity is the means towards a better vision: "I will tell you my dream. Sirs, make a white mist / In the mind [...] A man swimming through smoke, / And the bandage of fog unpeeling my eyes" (prologue, 226-227). Here, Derek Walcott runs counter to the clear value frame, to the didactic content which lie at the core of any

---

1. WALCOTT, Derek, "What the Twilight Says" (*What the Twilight Says, Essays*, New York: Faber, 1998): 5.

slave narrative, opposing the South and the North, delivering a discourse centered around the stability of human dignity, going far to show the legitimacy of their own right; slave narratives inevitably partook of abolitionist propaganda<sup>1</sup> and displayed a forthright wish to forge a collective idiom and literature, to write back on behalf of the whole Black community, enslaved or otherwise<sup>2</sup>. In *Dream on Monkey Mountain*, no moral choice is made nor even merely formulated. Winnowing truth from lie appears impossible and clearly beside the point in this play, a very anti-Sartrean one from that standpoint. One never quite knows, for example, whether Makak is a drunk or a visionary, an epileptic or a dreamer: “Spirit does talk to me” (prologue, 225)<sup>3</sup>. If guaran-

---

1. “Oh the horrors of slavery! - How the thought of it pains my heart! But the truth ought to be told of it; and what my eyes have seen I think it is my duty to relate; for few people in England know what slavery is. I have been a slave - I have felt what a slave feels, and I know what a slave knows; and I would have all the good people in England to know it too, that they may break our chains, and set us free”, *The History of Mary Prince, a West Indian Slave, Related by Herself*, F. Westley and A.H. Davis (Stationers’Hall Court London, 1831): 11.

2. “Consider, my dear friends, that it is but a very few years since any body could be found that had courage enough to step out of the common road of thinking and object to the insufficient, unsatisfactory, and unsubstantial arguments used against us”, *The Address of Abraham Johnstone, a Black Man, Who Was Hanged at Woodbury, in the County of Gloucester, and State of New Jersey, etc.*, quoted in Starling, *op. cit.*: 89

3. Colette Maximin aptly notes that whereas standard English would privilege “spirits” (singular) as meaning “alcohol”, Caribbean English resorts to “does” even in the plural form, so that both “alcohol” and “supernatural apparitions” are possible here. She concludes to a final reconciliation of both meanings: “Dissociées d’abord, les deux fonctions de l’alcoolisme se rejoignent enfin dans les dernières scènes: à son arrestation en état d’ivresse, Makak doit d’avoir découvert son nom—sa véritable identité. Les turbulences du rhum lui fraient une voie nouvelle, lui assurant, parallèlement, au bénéfice des autres, un rôle de médiateur”, *Littératures caribéennes comparées* (Paris / Pointe-à-Pitre: Jasor-Karthala, 1996): 287-288.

teeing of the truth of the story but also the authenticity of authorship were very much at stake in slave narratives<sup>1</sup>, the whole of the play revolves around the question of Makak's legitimacy without, this time, asserting it convincingly. He remains both a king and a jester, a lion and an insect, he encapsulates the whole ambiguity of man:

SOURIS. So how is the king?

*[Makak has drawn apart, talking to himself]*

TIGRE. Mad like an ant. He just make me general. (II, 2, 293)<sup>2</sup>

The accumulation of monosyllables is not inadvertent here, exposing a language which is decomposing, falling apart, going to rack and ruin.

Indeed, chaos is also linguistic in Walcott's play, one which repeatedly veers towards babelic babble. It is a case in point how words, which are very much treated as they were in that theatre of the absurd which was coming to existence at the same time in Europe, and which Derek Walcott was among the first American directors to stage, are merely a stopgap solution, a signifier without a proper signified, an absence of substance. Languages are piled upon one another in a chaos of meaning: "CORPORAL [*Infuriated*] English, English! For we are observing the principles

---

1. One need merely look at titles, which very often included a phrase indicating that the narrative had effectively and indeed been written by its main protagonist: "written by himself / herself".

2. Here, the pun relies on a Caribbeanism: in Jamaica, the island where Derek Walcott studied, mad-ant is the common name of *Iridomyrmex inquilus*, and it is known for "its erratic 'this-way-and-that-way' movements as it forages for food, always seemingly in a hurry but never quite making up its mind where it wants to go", ALLSOPP, Richard, *Dictionary of Caribbean English Usage* (1996. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004): 360.

and precepts of Roman law, and Roman law is English law" (prologue, 219). Corporal's linguistic alienation goes on to provide for a purple patch of absurdist legalese which criss-crosses jargons:

My noble judges. When this crime has been categorically examined by due process of law, and when the emotive of the hereby accused by whereas and ad hoc shall be established without dychotomy, and long after we have perambulated through the labyrinthine bewilderment of the defendant's ignorance, let us hope, that justice, whom we all serve, will not only be done, but will appear, my lords, to have itself, been done . . . [*The JUDGES applaud*]

In a quite farcical scene, in the market place, he misuses words deliberately as a further means to assert and wield his power:

CORPORAL. Morning. That's a nice pawpaw, sir.

VENDOR. *Oui, mon corporal.* [*They move on*]

CORPORAL. You see?

INSPECTOR. That was a melon.

CORPORAL. I know. But in the opinion of the pistol, and for the preservation of order, and to avoid any argument, we both was satisfied it was a pawpaw.

INSPECTOR. I am beginning to understand the law. (I, 3, 260-261)

The spoken word and even more so, the written letter, are in the grip of power, embodied in the play by Corporal; the common slang phrase "shut your trap" (prologue, 214) also testifies to the danger there is in opening one's mouth. Whereas slave narratives unfailingly told of a quest for literacy<sup>1</sup>, with confession of ver-

---

1. See STEPTO, Robert, *From Behind the Veil: A Study of Afro-American Narrative*, (*op. cit.*), on the correlation between freedom and literacy in slave narratives.

bal deficiencies belonging to the genre, *Dream on Monkey Mountain* resorts to an improper gibberish (the term is used several times), to a language which is part-French creole dialect and part-standard English, with both idioms seamed into one (“*Tiens, what is that?*”, II, 2, 292). Words are tangled, deformed and distorted, producing a crossword whose direction remains unclear. If an illusory African language is recreated<sup>1</sup> by Makak (“*Dire, Abou-ma-la-ka-jonga*”, I, 3, 266), it only goes to show how meaningless any language shift is bound to remain. Languages are criss-crossed once more to let the audience hear the emptiness which lies at the core of the entire play: “*He lets out a terrible cry of emptiness*” (I, 3, 274).

In the main, *Dream on Monkey Mountain* is a rewriting of slave narratives which concentrates on showing to what extent the trajectory of their structure was already crooked, further sending the text into circles rather than straight lines, recuperating their often disregarded picaresque dimension, intimating that escape was never possible in a world where prejudices were, after all, the same everywhere. The play merely goes one step farther, finally emptying their didactic discourse to let emptiness invade the ideological frame. The text is a homage to the roughness and unruliness of slave narratives, drawing upon some aspects of the tradition which were speaking of transgression to the care-

---

1. After all, many slave narratives have been penned by Africans having been brought to the Americas, and whose mother tongue was African; it is the case for example of Gronniosaw (*A Narrative of the Most Remarkable Particulars in the Life of James Albert Ukwawaw Gronniosaw, an African Prince, as Related by Himself*, Bath, 1772), of Equiano (*The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African, Written by Himself*, London, 1789), of Venture Smith (*A Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Venture, a Native of Africa; But Resident above Sixty Years in the United States of America*, New London, 1798).

ful reader. Derek Walcott's play reinvents a captivity which has no other outlet than moral, philosophical and literary blurriness, one which is made of a very Caribbean flotsam indeed:

Antillean art is this restoration of our shattered histories, our shards of vocabulary, our archipelago becoming a synonym for pieces broken off from the original continent [...] That is the basis of the Antillean experience, this shipwreck of fragments, these echoes, these shards of a huge tribal vocabulary, these partially remembered customs, and they are not decayed but strong.<sup>1</sup>

*Dream on Monkey Mountain* is a text whose complete exegesis is impossible, whose meanings fork and circle and whose structure criss-crosses as much as the Quatre Chemins crossroads where most of the action takes place, a crossword always at cross-purposes with itself.

#### *Works cited*

- ALLSOPP, Richard. *Dictionary of Caribbean English Usage*. 1996. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.
- ARTHUR. *The Life and Dying Speech of Arthur, a Negro Man: Who Was Executed at Worcester, October 20th, 1768, For a Rape Committed on the Body of One Deborah Metcalfe*. Boston: Printed and Sold in Milk Street, 1768.
- BIBB, Henry. *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, An American Slave, Written by Himself*. New York: 5 Spruce Street, 1849.
- DOUGLASS, Frederick. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*. 1845. New York: Penguin Classics, 1986.
- ELAM, Keir. *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama*. London: Routledge, 1980.

---

1. WALCOTT, Derek, "The Antilles: Fragments of Epic Memory" (*What the Twilight Says, Essays, op. cit.*): 69-70.

- FANON, FRANZ. *Peau noire, masques blancs*. Paris: Seuil, 1952.
- FOSTER, Frances Smith. *Witnessing Slavery: The Development of Antebellum Slave Narratives*. 1979. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1994.
- GLISSANT, Édouard. *Le Discours antillais*. Paris: Gallimard, 1997.
- MAXIMIN, Colette. *Littératures caribéennes comparées*. Paris: Karthala, 1996.
- STARLING WILSON, Marion. *The Slave Narrative: Its Place in American History*. Washington: Howard University Press, 1982.
- STEPHO, Robert. *From Behind the Veil: A Study of Afro-American Narrative*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1979.
- WALCOTT, Derek. *Dream on Monkey Mountain and Other Plays*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1970.
- WALCOTT, Derek. *What the Twilight Says, Essays*. New York: Faber, 1998.





*Les Carnets du Cerpac* n° 6, 2007, 377-404.

**“SAVE THE TRAUMA FOR YOUR MAMA”: KARA  
WALKER, THE ART WORLD’S BELOVED**

*Dinah HOLTZMAN  
University of Rochester*

Kara Walker’s rise to art world fame occurred in conjunction with a largely intra-racial controversy over her appropriation of historic visual, linguistic, and narrative ephemera from our national archive of racism/s past and present. The debate over Walker and her tendentious tableaux was constructed by art media as an intra-racial face off between two generations of black artists. Two eminent elder artists, Betye Saar and Howarda Pindell, publicly expressed the belief that Walker’s art is a form of racial and gender treachery. They are aware that Walker’s champions understand the work as satirical; however, they do not share the opinion that such sacrosanct themes as slavery, sexual exploitation and genocide ought to be represented through irony; since institutional racism still exists within white hegemonic “high” art institutions.

Saar instigated a letter writing campaign urging curators and gallerists to boycott Walker's work.<sup>1</sup> Pindell protested the overwhelmingly positive response to Walker's work as "the narcotic enthusiasm of the European and European-American public, as well as museums with a large European and European-American membership".<sup>2</sup> Although Saar is largely known for the piece *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima* (1972), which appropriates a racist archetype, her arguments against Walker's use of similarly stereotyped imagery suggests that she feels the histories associated with the stereotypes are better left in the past or recuperated didactically in a positive and empowering light.

Differences of opinion over black artists' recuperations of racist imagery led Stuart Hall to diagnose the "end of the innocent notion of the essential black subject".<sup>3</sup> He claims that black visual art has moved beyond a narrow focus on inclusion within white hegemonic art institutions and positive imagery to counteract racist stereotypes. For Hall, this shift represents a questioning of the notion that any essential black identity exists. Walker's embrace of historic, popular, racist ephemera suggests that race is both a social construction and the performance of an imagined

---

1. According to Marie Garrett Shawn, "Betye Saar sent a protest letter to every African American (and three whites) she knew in the art world. It included a reproduction of one of Walker's works and three questions: 'Do you find these images racist? Do you find these images sexist? Are they disturbing?'" in GARRETT, Shawn Marie, "Return of the Repressed", *Theater* 32.2 (2002): 26-43; 28.

2. PINDELL, Howardena, "Diaspora/Realities/Strategies: A Conference Paper from *Trade Routes, History, Geography, Culture: Towards a Definition of Culture in the late 20th Century* (Johannesburg Biennale, October 1997, updated with a new postscript, Jan 2002)." *N. Paradoxa* 7 (August 1998). ©Howardena Pindell Online.

Retrieved 26 Mar web.ukonline.co.uk/n.paradoxa/pindell.htm

3. HALL, Stuart, "What is this 'black' in black popular culture?", *Social Justice*, 20: 2, Spring-Summer (1993): 104-11.

identity rooted in ideological fallacies. Moves by contemporary black artists to reclaim racist imagery minus a didactic instructional framing lends itself to interpretation as a "death" of what Gayatri Spivak refers to as "strategic essentialism."

Reading the contentious debate between Walker, Saar and Pindell as a dialogue as battle<sup>1</sup> opens it up for interpretation as a reinterpretation of the white male Modernist artistic cliché (*à la Picasso*) that "In art one must kill one's father." The Oedipal Modernist cliché is transformed through repopulation with an entirely black female cast. The fraught father/son relationship paradigm is switched for that of the fraught mother/daughter paradigm; the same paradigm at work in Toni Morrison's Pulitzer prize winning novel, *Beloved*. Mae Henderson suggests that, "Morrison uses the metaphor of maternity to establish an alternative to the metaphor of paternity common in white/male historical discourse"<sup>2</sup>. I propose to do the same with the relationship between Walker, Saar and Pindell by revising their public dialogue as battle as an alternative model to white/male (art) historical discourse.

I examine their public dialogue as an example of what Mae Henderson refers to as "speaking in tongues." In her germinal essay "Speaking in Tongues: Dialogics, Dialectics, and the Black Woman Writer's Tradition" Henderson suggests that black women writers are uniquely positioned to engage in a dialogic

---

1. Lynn Pearce aligns herself with Dale Bauer in a desire to "propose that Bakhtin's notion of the dialogic be extended to encompass the 'battle' as well as the more gentle modes of communication", *Reading Dialogics* (New York & London: Routledge, 1994): 134.

2. HENDERSON, Mae G., "Toni Morrison's *Beloved*: Re-Membering the Body as Historical Text", in *Comparative American Identities: Race, Sex, and Nationality in the Modern Text*, Hortense Spillers, ed. (New York & London: Routledge, 1991): 75.

(and often contestatorial) discourse with “hegemonic dominant and subdominant or ‘ambiguously (non) hegemonic’ discourses”<sup>1</sup>. In addition to participating in a dialogue with white male (hegemonic), white female (subdominant hegemonic), and black male (ambiguously (non) hegemonic) discourses; Henderson suggests that black women are also involved in a dialogue with one another. [The] heteroglossic voices of the other(s) “encounter one another and coexist in the consciousness or real people — first and foremost in the creative consciousness of people who write novels,”<sup>2</sup> that speaks to the situation of black women writers in particular “privileged” by a social positionality that enables them to speak in dialogically racial and gendered voices to the other(s) both within and without . . . black women’s speech/writing . . . Speak[s] both to and from the position of the other(s), black women writers must, in the words of Audre Lorde, deal not only with “the external manifestations of racism and sexism,” but also “with the results of those distortions internalized within our consciousness of ourselves and one another” (Henderson 2000: 3).

In line with Henderson’s model we can read the debate between the three artists, as a catalyst for discussions about black women’s role in history; and as a model enabling black women take ownership of histories from which their voices have been excluded.

Canonized histories of Modern art as theorized by Clement Greenberg, represent Modern art as a linear progression characterized by successive generations of white male artists metaphori-

---

1. HENDERSON, Mae G., “Speaking in Tongues: Dialogics, Dialectics, and the Black Woman Writer’s Literary Tradition”, in *African American Literary Theory: A Reader*, Winston Napier, ed. (New York: New York University Press, 2000): 4.

2. Here Henderson is quoting a passage from Mikhail Bakhtin’s “Discourse in the Novel,” in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, M.M. Bakhtin, Michael Holquist, ed. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982).

cally "killing fathers." This Oedipalized view of artistic "progress" as the result of trans-generational white male chest thumping bears some similarity to the battle of Walker, Saar and Pindell. However we might ask, "How does the substitution of the 'killing one's father' cliché with 'killing one's mother' change ideas about the linearity or progression of art (and history) or does it change the paradigm at all?" In both versions the "killing" is metaphorical and refers to a competitive Oedipal instinct to challenge or replace the parental figure. The "killing" is a contentious dialogue as battle with artistic predecessors and ancestors. Lynn Pearce suggests that "dialogue is often as much about resistance and non-cooperation as it is about engagement reciprocity" (Pearce 1994: 134). Walker's conflicted relationship to her artistic "mothers", Saar and Pindell, lends itself to interpretation as a conversation around how best to confront the "external manifestations of racism and sexism" as well as "internalized distortions." For Saar and Pindell, who are still invested in strategic essentialism, Walker's willingness to publicly expose her own internalized distortions reflects on all black artists via the burden of representation.

In *Untitled* (1998) Walker incorporates an epistolary text presumably addressed to Howardena Pindell. The upper right corner bears the inscription "Description for the visually illiterate and/or impaired (This means you Howardina)." The watercolor/gouache features a white woman nattily dressed in a cocktail gown. She wears a black woman wrapped around her neck as though she were an exotic mink stole. The black woman's chin rests atop the white woman's coiffure. Her pendulous breasts are carefully positioned on either side of the white woman's neck. Her arms are wrapped around the white woman's chest

and folded in a pose connoting weary self-defense. The image is intriguing primarily because the two women seem to be perfectly comfortable with their pretzel-like physical conjoining. However, the black woman's facial expression can be interpreted as a cynical and habitual response to white women's perceived ignorance. What could be a ludicrous scene of a naked black woman ambushing a white woman at a cocktail function, is rather an allegory for the imbrications of blackness and whiteness.

In an additional portion of the text Walker asks "Am I that flapper too!?" suggesting that not only is she engaged in an epistolary dialogue with Pindell; she is also in a dialogue with the characters that populate her work as well as her imagined audience. Walker imagines Pindell's response to the image, "Now you come along and suggest that all the white supremacist, racist, sexist art power structure wants is to see pictures of black women's breasts and that when they do they will walk out of the gallery, say, and not just wonder what yours feel like, but will write laws that will enable them greater access to them."<sup>1</sup> She then formulates her own response to Pindell's imagined criticism/s, "I imagine that the white (racist, sexist, oh so powerful) viewer might even leave the gallery . . . thinking about how she adorns herself with the idealized (or, stereotypical) body (or thought process) of blackness . . ." Walker is attempting to argue an alternative scenario for Pindell, one that is rather more optimistic about white audiences' ability to engage in anti-racist thought.

In *Untitled* Walker has incorporated Pindell's public criticisms into the body of her work. If Walker received the criticisms as traumatic and painful, then perhaps *Untitled* is her attempt to narra-

---

1. Walker may be responding actual criticisms made by Pindell via the art press; however, if that is the case, I am not aware of the comments.

tivize the trauma received at the hands of the elder artist/artistic mother. This interpretation supports the idea of Walker as a Beloved-like figure engaged in a contentious relationship with her (artistic) mother. *Untitled* is illustrative of Henderson's contention that black women's discourse is often engaging in a dialogue with the texts/speech/writing of other black women. Critic Robert Reid Pharr suggests,

[D]ifferences between the two artists [Saar and Walker] turn then on the belief—or the disbelief—that it is possible for contemporary Americans to remember the history of slavery. While Saar presumably understands this memory as visceral and perhaps racial, Walker clearly sees it as made up of rather suspect cultural artifacts produced more efficiently in Hollywood than within any black freedom struggle.<sup>1</sup>

Walker has embraced and simultaneously abandoned the burden of representation in that she willfully embraces and, at times, embodies historic racist archetypes. Her attraction to stereotypes suggests that the images resonate with her sense of self; if only because she has often experienced the Fanonian situation of self-fragmentation, being forced to see herself through the eyes of the other(s) who can measure her only in relation to stereotyped images of blackness.<sup>2</sup>

---

1. PHARR, Robert Reid, "Black Girl Lost", in *Kara Walker: Pictures from Another Time*, Annette Dixon, ed. (Ann Arbor: The Regents of the University of Michigan, 2002): 38.

2. Here I am referring to the famous passage from *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 1967). "Mama, see the Negro! I'm frightened!" Frightened! Frightened! Now they were beginning to be afraid of me. I made up my mind to laugh myself to tears, but laughter had become impossible. I could no longer laugh, because I already knew that there were legends, stories, history, and above all *historicity* . . . Then,



Stuart Hall's rethinking of how to move beyond the institutional inclusion/positive representation paradigm of black art could be a description of Walker's methodology:

The fetishism which one finds—the fixing of particularly sexual imagery in relation both to race and to gender . . . a feature of . . . negative stereotyping . . . if you were trying to intervene in this field . . . the best thing to do would be to leave the fetishism alone . . . because it's so contaminated by the stereotypical uses to which it has been put. However, quite the opposite: you would go exactly into the nature of fetishism itself because of the secret power which it has . . . it has operated to stabilize stereotypes for a reason – not just for a joke—because it has very powerful powers of identification in fantasy. If you want to begin to change the relationship of the viewer to the image, you have to intervene in exactly that powerful exchange between the image and its psychic meaning, the depths of the fantasy, the collective and social fantasies with which we invest images, in order to, as it were, expose and deconstruct the work of representation which the stereotypes are doing.<sup>1</sup>

---

assailed at various points, the corporeal schema crumbled, its place taken by a racial epidermal schema . . . it was no longer a question of being aware of my body in the third person but in a triple person . . . I was responsible at the same time for my body, for my race, for my ancestors. I subjected myself to an objective examination, I discovered my blackness, my ethnic characteristics; and I was battered down by tom-toms, cannibalism, intellectual deficiency, fetishism, racial defects, slave-ships, and above all else, above all: "Sho' good eatin." (Fanon 1967: 112-113)

Of course anyone familiar with Walker's work will recognize that the "tom toms, cannibalism, intellectual deficiency, fetishism, racial defects, slave ships and 'sho nuf good eatin" referenced by Fanon are the subject of Walker's images. Walker's tableaux can be interpreted as visual representations of the experience of double consciousness catalyzed by racist encounters.

1. HALL, Stuart, "Representation and the Media", in *Media Education Foundation Transcript: Challenging Media* (Northampton: Media Education Foundation,

Walker has clearly embraced Hall's notion that stereotypes are most effectively rendered powerless through excessive embodiment rather than simplistic inversion of the negative for the positive. Walker's work can be interpreted as the literal interpretation of Hall's "end of the innocent notion of the essential black subject".<sup>1</sup> Ironically Walker returns to the most malignant and least "innocent" notions of the essential black subject to demonstrate her point. The move away from a strategic essentialist involvement with positive representation is most starkly manifested in Walker's return to the original source material that the positive representations were created to oppose e.g. Saar's *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima* (1972).

The elder artists see Walker's art as a gross violation of the burden of representation. Unlike Walker, they do not seem to question the usefulness of the burden of representation or of strategic essentialism. For Saar and Pindell, strategic essentialism continues to be a viable strategy, the only strategy for redressing art institutional racism. Hall argues that such a strategy, though well intentioned, is ultimately misguided:

[W]here you have a negative field of stereotypes, and you try to intervene in it to represent the negative group in a more positive way; you try to reverse the stereotypes . . . there is a problem in attempts to reverse stereotypes . . . if you could guarantee that, having put positive images of Black men and women in the place where negative images existed before, you could somehow maintain a positive regime of representation in the place of the stereotyped representation that you had before. But the actual practice

---

2005): 21.

1. HALL, Stuart, "What is this 'black' in black popular culture?" (Rethinking Race), *Social Justice*, 20: 2, (Spring-Summer 1993): 104-11.

suggests . . . it is just as impossible for them to fix bad representation, so it's almost impossible for us to fix good ones. (Hall 2005: 20)

The debate between the three artists is reflective of larger questions around issues of identity and identity politics that have been playing out in the contemporary art scene for several decades. Public conversations around the use of stereotyped imagery instigated by the dialogue between Walker, Saar and Pindell is largely about how best to confront the history of racism and its ongoing legacy in the present.

In the title of this essay I refer to Kara Walker as the art world's *Beloved*. I characterize her as beloved in the sense that she is beloved (a darling) of the international contemporary art scene. I also refer to her as beloved with a sense of irony since her detractors not only do not love her, they appear to take her art, her various art world/tableaux personae, and her interviews/commentary as a communal racial attack and betrayal. Although Walker responds to many of her detractors with characteristic outrage at the personal nature of their critiques, she courts such emotional and personal responses, I think, as a crucial component of her art. As Rauschenberg and Johns incorporate both mockery and deference to the legacy of the Abstract Expressionists in their proto Pop art, Walker does something similar with the Civil Rights era artists who preceded her.<sup>1</sup>

The quarrel between the artists lends itself to comparison with the fraught dynamics of the Sethe/*Beloved*/Denver relationships in *Beloved*. The battle of wills between Sethe, Denver and *Beloved* can be similarly construed as both a literal confrontation of his-

---

1. Intriguingly Walker's father, Larry Walker, is an accomplished artist of the same generation as Betye Saar and Howardina Pindell. However, Larry Walker's art is primarily abstractionist though dealing with racial themes.

tory and an attempt to negotiate histories that continue to inform the present. As with the white male Oedipal Modernist battles, Walker can only ever exist in relation to her predecessors. The natural response of younger generations is to fight for autonomy from one's parents/predecessors while simultaneously acknowledging one's utter dependence upon them. This is, of course, also a description of the working through of the Freudian Oedipal complex.

I also refer to Walker as beloved in the sense that many of her critical supporters frequently compare the artist and her work to Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved*. Gwendolyn Dubois Shaw and Thelma Golden<sup>1</sup> point to the work as "a return of the repressed" and as "slave narratives never told." Walker's persona as art world instigator bears a strong resemblance to the disruptive force *Beloved* brings to 124 Bluestone.<sup>2</sup> The transformation of the spiteful baby ghost into an embodied devouring human is directly equated with the arrival of a visiting carnival. *Beloved*'s mysterious appearance occurs on the same afternoon that Sethe, Paul D, and Denver return from their outing to the carnival. The abuse the happy trio endure from the white circus freaks and the

---

1. The title of Shaw's book length study of Walker, *Seeing the Unspeakable: The Art of Kara Walker* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004) is an improvisation on the title of a Morrison essay entitled, "Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature." Golden in the preface to a Walker work commissioned by *ArtForum* "Oral Mores: A Postbellum Shadow Play" suggests that both Morrison's novel and Walker's tableaux are stories that "you don't want to 'hear' or 'look' at . . . but you have to", *ArtForum* (September 1996): 92-93.

2. Initially it appears that it is Denver who suffers from Oedipal jealousy over the arrival of Paul D but it could be argued that *Beloved* wills her own rebirth in a fit of Oedipal rage over being driven from 124 Bluestone Road by Sethe's new suitor.

comic episode involving Paul D's recognition of the fake "African primitive" foreshadow the abuse they will be subjected to by the "freakish," primitive yet somehow familiar, Beloved.

Walker's tableaux, like Morrison's novel, are full of carnivalesque representations of taboo behaviors and bodily abjection.<sup>1</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin's celebration of carnival as a temporary, utopic, egalitarian public space suggests that the grotesque body is a trope for a collective body always in the process of becoming via death, birth and renewal. Morrison's *Beloved* is just such a tale of becoming. The novel details the becoming of a family as microcosm for a community learning to negotiate/navigate a history for themselves beyond the traumas of slavery. Beloved as grotesque (becoming) body par excellence is the catalyst for carnival as a means to confront repressed trauma. Walker's celebrations of grotesque becoming bodies also function as a microcosm for a larger national attempt to confront and narrativize repressed traumas of slavery. I contend that it is not only Walker's work that performs as a "return of the repressed" but that Walker herself embodies a Beloved-like persona.

In his essay *Black Girl Lost*, critic Robert Reid Pharr hypothesizes that,

The black girl whom Walker creates, sometimes visually, at other times through appellations like "Missus K.E.B. Walker, Colored" or "nigger wench," ought to be understood not as a subject whom we already know and understand but instead as a newly emerging subject who barely knows herself. She is, in fact, a child.

---

1. Walker's tableaux and Morrison's novel share incidents of murder, rape/sexual exploitation, potential incest as well as multiple instances of excretions of bodily effluvia such as blood, breast milk, urine, vomit, and birth waters.

Thus, like the artist, both inquisitiveness and a species of naïve cruelty are a part of her nature. (Pharr 2002: 35)

Pharr's description ascribes psychology and behaviors of childhood to the adult artist. The character Beloved is similarly a pre-Oedipal infant ego taking up temporary residence in an adult woman's body. Walker is at once separate from and embodied in "Black Girl Lost." Her (dis)embodiment in a childish alter ego empowers her to voice sentiments adults find irresponsible and cruel. Saar and Pindell refer to Walker with descriptors suggestive of a Beloved like parasite, suggesting that she grows stronger and more powerful by sucking away the dignity of those who made her existence possible (her artistic mothers/ancestors). As Beloved seems to require Sethe's death to give birth to her own child,<sup>1</sup> Walker too may require (metaphorical) matricide to achieve her own autonomous artistic success.

Imagining Walker as Beloved to her artistic mothers suggests that the three women have instigated a dialogue between female generations and ancestors that, like Morrison's *Beloved*, can be painful and traumatic. As in *Beloved* the living continue to live in a dialogue with past, present and future and the dead continue to haunt the past, present and future peripherally. Walker as Beloved is the returned angry trauma that refuses to let us forget. Beloved refuses to be forgotten by remaining always present in some guise or other. She demands expressions of love via storytelling from both Sethe and Denver. She demands to be named,

---

1. An inversion of the original scenario in which Sethe murders the infant Beloved.

commanding Paul D to “touch me on my inside part and call me my name”.<sup>1</sup>

Beloved’s desires are the primal human instincts for love and recognition. She wishes to exist among the living, to reclaim the birthright that Sethe took from her in a fit of desperation. She wants to be named, remembered and passed on; though her creator suggests somewhat dubiously that Beloved’s story is “not a story to pass on.” The novel, of course, does exactly that. The injunction can be alternatively read as “this is a story that must be passed on (to future generations).” Morrison has characterized *Beloved* as a channeling of ancestors (and stories) lost to history and the censorship of “proceedings too terrible to relate.” The author suggests that she reanimates these women by

---

1. MORRISON, Toni, *Beloved* (1987. New York: Plume, 1988): 116.

Beloved’s confrontation of Paul D is a revisioning of the Oedipal desire to “kill one’s father.” Rather than a confrontation of the father and son over the right to the mother’s love and body it is a confrontation of a daughter and her mother’s lover; the same lover who beat the spirit of “a baby’s venom” out of 124 Bluestone. Paul D’s presence is a continual affront to Beloved’s attempts to remain present in Sethe’s life. The confrontation between embodied Beloved and her male rival is staged to eliminate Paul D as a romantic/sexual rival for Sethe’s love and her body. Beloved tells Paul D of her pre-Oedipal mother-love and related feelings of rejection, “She don’t love me like I love her. I don’t love nobody but her.” Rather than killing the father, Beloved, the oral sadistic infant moves him (physically, spatially, supernaturally, sexually) until he is vanquished as a competitor for Sethe’s love and body. Paul D is only able to return to Sethe’s life after the townswomen have effectively exorcised embodied Beloved. In effect Paul D is seduced by the embodied history of trauma to release his own repressed trauma at the same moment that Beloved fights the father for access to the mother’s body, “He didn’t hear the whisper that the flakes of rust made wither as they fell away from the seams of his tobacco tin. So when the lid gave he didn’t know it.” (Morrison 1988) Speaking her name, touching her, all forms of recognizing and acknowledging her existence lead to the violent release of the repressed traumas Paul D locked away in his rusted tobacco tin/heart.

“call[ing them] by their names and ask[ing] them to reappear”.<sup>1</sup> In a sense, Beloved's seduction of Paul D can also be read as Beloved's seduction of Morrison who calls her (by her) name and asks her to appear. Morrison's text is a sort of tautology in that both the methodology and the story itself involve the resurrection of ghosts.

Walker too cites her own courtship of ghosts in an interview with Thelma Golden:

There is a fair amount of African American history that has been absorbed and worked in strange ways. I've been thinking of this issue of voice since I started the notecards. Actually I've been thinking about the whole ancestor idea of ghosts. I have decided not to let them be quiet and to engage the potential ghosts, so I am not sure if its just my own psychosis or they actually hold the answer.<sup>2</sup>

Walker similarly seems to be telling stories that she refuses to pass on (by). She describes her tableaux as attempts at writing her own “inner plantation” but admits that,

I am too aware of the role of my overzealous imagination interfering in the basic facts of history, so in a way my work is about the sincere attempt to write *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and winding up with *Mandingo* instead. A collusion of fact and fiction that has probably informed me from day one. (Pharr 2002: 32)

---

1. BROGAN, Kathleen, *Cultural Haunting: Ghosts and Ethnicity in Recent American Literature* (Charlottesville & London: University Press of Virginia, 1998): 68.

2. GOLDEN, Thelma, “A Dialogue with Kara Walker”, in *Kara Walker: Pictures from Another Time*, Annette Dixon ed. (Ann Arbor: The Regents of the University of Michigan, 2002): 49.



In a strictly temporal sense, a better analogy would be that Walker is trying to write *Beloved* but “winds up with *Mandingo* instead.”

Walker’s art exists in a dialogue with Morrison’s *Beloved*. Walker too is attempting to give voice to “proceedings too terrible to relate”. Both women are essentially writing neo-slave narratives. Walker’s proceedings, like Morrison’s are imagined, however Morrison’s are an imagined composite rooted in actual historical accounts. Walker’s, as her comment suggests, are filtered through an imagination overrun with historical, literary, and pop cultural artifacts and representations of slavery. Walker’s tableaux lend themselves to interpretation as the “low” carnival version of *Beloved*. A version in which the gothic elements are more reminiscent of gory lowbrow horror films and the attempts at narrative are somewhat more akin to the pathetically drawn “narratives” of porn.

Walker explains her recuperation of stereotypes as reflective of her desire to claim ownership of the racist archetypes. In an interview with Lawrence Rinder, Walker states:

For me they become characters the minute I start working with them. Because they become mine in a way. So that when I encounter the much contested racist tchotchkes and derogatory images they don’t have the power over me that they used to . . . being in control of the characters that represent the social manipulations that blacks have undergone in this century at least, puts me in the position of bring the controller or the puppet master of imaginary black people.<sup>1</sup>

---

1. RINDER, Lawrence, “An Interview with Kara Walker,” in *Capp Street Project: Kara Walker. CCAC, Oakland, CA, USA* (1999). Retrieved 26 Mar. 2007 [www.nyfa.org/current/\\_archive/1999/cur042099.html#else](http://www.nyfa.org/current/_archive/1999/cur042099.html#else)

Her assertion of ownership of the archetypes and desire to give them voice, functions in much the same fashion as Sethe's claims to ownership of her children in the face of slavery. Kathleen Brogan suggests that,

Morrison's extraordinary power over the dead the spirit of Margaret Garner's child having been rescued "from the grave of time and inattention"<sup>1</sup> by the novel now "comes running when called". The author triumphantly asserts "she is here now, alive. I have seen, named and claimed her". (Brogan 1998: 68)

Walker and Morrison both assert black women's right to their own history, in effect, claiming a right to ownership of that which has historically been designated as the exclusive territory of white men. Yet Morrison's novel is lionized as an "authentic" long overdue paean to the trauma of slavery visited upon women and children and Walker's scenarios are lambasted for a lack of authenticity. Saar views Walker's work as an affront to enslaved ancestors, particularly enslaved women and children. The two women's projects are similar and yet Morrison's is idealized and Walker's is castigated. The differences in the reception of the two women's oeuvres is likely the product of questions of what constitute "authentic" versions of history. Both Morrison's novel and Walker's tableaux create a space for repetition within narration/s of history.

*Beloved* narrates a battle of wills between a mother, and I would argue, her two daughters. The novel presents a story of three women attempting to work out a functional relationship to one another. Slavery has had an irrevocable impact on familial relationships and *Beloved* charts one family's attempt to nav-

---

1. All citations within the Brogan quotation are her citations of Toni Morrison's words.

igate the horrific impact of slavery on their lives and relationships to one another. *Beloved* is a morbid take on a dialogue between generations of black women as a literal murder of a daughter and the metaphorical, though nearly literal, killing of the mother. The primary differences between the Oedipal Modernist "killing one's father" and the revision/rewritten version of "killing one's mother" is the possibility of fusion and the abandonment of chronological linearity for repetition. In psychoanalytic terms narration and repetition are posited as a binaristic pair; narration representing the successful assimilation of trauma (mourning) versus repetition representing the unsuccessful incorporation (cannibalization) of trauma i.e. melancholia. Both Morrison and Walker explore repetition and narration not as a binaristic pair of either/or but rather, in the spirit of dialogism, as a both/and.

Working with James Snead's idea of repetition as a figure in black culture, I suggest that Walker and Morrison enact what Snead refers to as "repetition with a difference." Snead's formulation of repetition is largely grounded in the idea of the musical phenomenon of the "cut." He defines the "cut" as a repetition with a difference. He then abstracts his theory of the cut as repetition with a difference beyond the realm of music into a model applicable to black culture in general and black history in particular.

Whenever we encounter repetition in cultural forms, we indeed are not viewing "the same thing," but its transformation, not just a formal ploy, but often the willed grafting onto culture of an essentially philosophical insight about the shape of time and history.<sup>1</sup>

---

1. SNEAD, James, "On Repetition in Black Culture", *Black American Literature*

Snead transforms the negative valences of repetition as examples of a lack of history or a lack of progress (associated with Africa and Africans by Hegel) into a positive and uniquely black mode of articulation that offers an alternative to Eurocentric enlightenment rationality fixations on linear, ceaseless forward movement as “progress.” He suggests that cut/repetition with a difference (as a figure of black culture) has performed an intervention into a white hegemonic cultural obsession with linear progress and posits repetition with a difference/transformation as an alternative model to the Eurocentric enlightenment vision of Hegelian history. The notion that repetition must occur before trauma can be effectively narrativized, is central to Morrison’s literary and Walker’s artistic oeuvres.

Interpreting Walker’s work via Snead’s concept of repetition, suggests that her images represent insight into the “shape of time and history.” Walker clearly expresses her desire to conflate history and repetition in her body of work,

Once you get a clear grasp on the fundamentals of history: who’s writing it, what emotions are involved in reshaping it, what kinds of people are subjected to it—well, like being the guinea pig . . . European style enlightenment: “Thems that are most doomed to repeat it are thems who believe in it”—taking history like a faith, a new religion of time and events and more time and more events. So in a way the follower’s actions are in keeping with his or her creed. Me? Me, I say consciously and conscientiously: “repeat actual events out of someone’s history text book.” Conscientious repetition is the surest way to kill memory, and at that, history.<sup>1</sup>

---

*Forum*. 15: 4, Black Textual Strategies, Volume 1: Theory (Winter 1981): 146-154; 146.

1. SALTZ, Jerry, “Kara Walker: Ill Will and Desire”, *Flash Art* (November/December 1996): 82-86; 85.

The artist's "conscious and conscientious repetition" of racist archetypes populating carnivalesque antebellum scenarios is her method of killing historical memory. This is the seeming antithesis of Freud's argument that repetition compulsion is a sign of incorporated rather than assimilated trauma. Snead's reinterpretation of repetition within black culture suggests that indeed for blacks repetition is not an avoidance of assimilating trauma but rather the vehicle for a confrontation with trauma.

Walker's self-portrait *Cut* (1998) is illustrative of the artist's Sneadian approach to representations/narrations of history. The silhouette portrait is based on a photograph of Walker taken for a feature in *Interview* magazine. In the photograph, Walker leaps into the air clicking her heels together; a gesture reminiscent of both *Mary Poppins* and *The Wizard of Oz*. The movement is either an expression of bodily joy (*Mary Poppins*) or a tactic to facilitate a "return home" (*The Wizard of Oz*). Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw characterizes the image as "part artist/magician and part nanny/mammy" (Shaw 2004: 133). *The Wizard of Oz* allusion has resonance with Robert Reid Pharr's characterization of Walker as "Black Girl Lost." Like Dorothy, Walker is cast in the role of naïve outsider in a parallel world controlled by a seemingly omnipotent wizard who is, in fact, a somewhat impotent mere mortal. The white hegemonic art world can be interpreted as the wizard figure. However, a more interesting interpretation is that of the wizard as a Dorothy/Walker doppelganger, an idealized self-figure/alter ego, imagined to have omnipotent powers of control over her environment/world. Walker is the creator/controller of her imagined antebellum worlds. Though it is never made explicit in *The Wizard of Oz*, Dorothy too, is likely the creator/controller of Oz.

In *Cut* the real Walker has severed the silhouette Walker's wrists, though the image suggests that the silhouette figure has cut her own wrists with a straight razor. Shaw posits the self-destructive/ suicidal act as a representation of "the pain of constantly performing an authentic artistic otherness" (Shaw 2004: 130). I do not disagree with Shaw's claim though I do think she has overlooked an additional meaning suggested by the title. *Cut* is, of course, the physical gesture that Walker performs as an artist working with the medium of cut paper silhouette. No doubt, this is part of the pun in Walker's title. Through "cutting" herself into the silhouette she may also suggest that the characters she "cuts" are cuts/repetitions (with a difference) of herself. *Cut* might also be a reference to Snead's formulation of the cut as representative of "repetition as a figure in black culture." Entitling her self-portrait *Cut* illustrates the idea that Walker's paper cuts also function as the repetition/cuts that Snead describes as "philosophical insight about the shape and time of history" (Snead 1981: 146). Walker frames her work as a meditation on the "shape of time and history" as it is played out upon her body. Indeed this is precisely what Mae Henderson suggests Morrison does in *Beloved* as the title of her essay is "Toni Morrison's *Beloved*: Re-Membering the Body as Historical Text."

Morrison's *Beloved*, like Walker's tableaux, is also invested in "conscientious repetition" if not as a means to kill history, than as a means to confront and claim ownership of history. The crucial roles that repetition and narration play in Morrison's texts and Walker's tableaux affirm Snead's idea that repetition has become a paramount figure in black art and culture. Intriguingly while Snead's valuation of the cut is intimately tied to Jazz, Walker and Morrison's uses of the cut associate repetition more specifically

with what Henderson dubs black women's (writerly/literary) discourse. Walker's work is in many ways a visual correlate to Morrison's tale of haunting trauma.

Repetition and narration of trauma are the key themes in *Beloved* and Morrison's novel, like Walker's scenarios, suggest that repetition and narrativization of trauma/s, are not mutually exclusive but exist in a state of relationality. "It is not a story to pass on" is a kind of double meaning in a novel characterized by polyvocal narrations of women claiming ownership of one another.<sup>1</sup> It is not a story to pass on can mean, "This is a story that should not be told." However it can also be interpreted as "This is a story that must be told." As *Beloved* craves acknowledgment of her existence, Walker's archetypes want viewers to acknowledge their existence no matter how thoroughly we may have collectively tried to bury (repress) them. In many ways Walker seems to have fused with the archetypes that people her scenarios. Parallels can be drawn between Walker's identification with her appropriated creations and the near fusion of Sethe and *Beloved*. Walker, like Sethe, gave birth to the figures that are both part of her and that haunt her.

Various psychoanalytic theories regarding fusion, suggest that it can occur through violence or through (sexual) ecstasy. The near fusion of Sethe and *Beloved* evolves through instances of both. The pre-Oedipal infant exists in a state of fusion with the mother, unable to differentiate itself from the mother's body. The

---

1. Here I am referring to the start of three successive chapters in *Beloved*, narrated by Sethe, Denver and *Beloved* respectively. Sethe's chapter begins "Beloved, she my daughter. She Mine" (201). Denver's chapter begins "Beloved is my sister. I swallowed her blood right along with my mother's milk" (205). And *Beloved*'s chapter begins, "I am *Beloved* and she [Sethe] is mine" (210).

oral sadistic phase of infant development according to Freud's theories of the Oedipal complex suggest that for the infant, loving and sadistic impulses towards the mother cannot be dissociated. The breastfeeding oral-sadistic infant is the characteristic scene for the playing out of this conjunction of overwhelming need/love and violent impulse to wound.

Morrison too uses the breastfeeding scene of the pre-Oedipal infant in *Beloved*. Enacting the behaviors of loving/sadistic infant, Beloved nearly strangles Sethe to death, massages her wounded neck as form of bodily seduction and then moves to breastfeed. In this instance the boundaries between maternal nourishment and physical sexual seduction are confused by the infant Beloved's appearance in an adult female body:

We must look a sight, she thought, and closed her eyes to see it: the three women in the middle of the clearing . . . one seated, yielding up her throat to the kind hands of one of the two kneeling before her. Denver watched the faces of the other two. Beloved watched the work her thumbs were doing and must have loved what she saw because she leaned over and kissed the tenderness under Sethe's chin . . . they stayed that way for a while because neither Denver nor Sethe knew how not to: how to stop and not love the look or feel of the lips that kept on kissing. Then Sethe, grabbing Beloved's hair, blinking rapidly, separated herself. She later believed that it was because the girl's breath was exactly like new milk that she said to her, stern and frowning, "You too old for that" (Morrison 1988: 97-98).

Beloved, as oral sadistic infant, is characterized by "the advent of aggressiveness, by ambivalence, and by the anxiety associated with the destruction of the loved object and the fear of being devoured in turn by that object" (International Dictionary of Psy-



choanalysis 2005).<sup>1</sup> Beloved, in a past incarnation, was literally “devoured” by her mother. Events that transpire upon her return in embodied form suggest that she intends to devour her mother in turn. Infant Beloved is not yet able to differentiate or repress her coterminous violent and loving/sexual impulses towards her mother’s body. She moves towards breast-feeding by kissing the skin under Sethe’s chin, the same location where Beloved bears the scar of her murder at Sethe’s hands. In this sense, Beloved’s kiss of Sethe is a kind of kiss of herself. The kiss is instigated to heal the damage Beloved herself wrought upon Sethe’s throat. This is a foreshadowing of the attempts that Sethe will make to heal the hurt/death she wrought upon the infant Beloved. History is repeated but the mother/child roles are reversed.

In this passage Morrison suggests that Sethe is momentarily aroused by Beloved’s ministrations. Denver who has already recognized Beloved’s identity as her dead infant sister participates in the scene as a voyeur. Though she later chastises Beloved for nearly killing Sethe, Denver too has had sadistic impulses towards her mother. However, Denver also identifies with and envies her mother’s arousal by Beloved. Beloved has similarly seduced Denver. Intriguingly it is only the revelation of Beloved as infant that seems to motivate Sethe’s rejection of Beloved’s erotic advances. It is the smell of breast milk in Beloved’s mouth that transforms the scene from erotic encounter to maternal encounter. In this scene the familial dynamics between women (mother and sister relationships) are fraught with erotic /maternal jealousies.

Walker’s tableau *The End of Uncle Tom and The Grand Allegorical Tableau of Eva in Heaven* (1995) features a vignette of three female slaves and an infant girl suckling from one another’s breasts. This

---

1. “Psychoanalysis information about Oral-Sadistic Stage” *International Dictionary of Psychoanalysis*. Copyright © 2005 by The Gale Group, Inc.

image is an allusion to the scene from *Beloved* discussed above. The three women in Walker's vignette may very well be stand-ins for Sethe, Beloved and Denver. The infant in *The End of Uncle Tom* can be read as the ghost of infant Beloved. Annette Dixon points to this particular image as an erotically charged representation of the ways in which enslaved women were able to draw sustenance from one another (Dixon 2002: 14). She continues by citing Walker's own inflammatory explanation for the image, "History. My constant need . . . to suckle from history, as though history could be seen as a seemingly endless supply of mother's milk presented by the big black mammy of old." This comment positions Walker as the Beloved figure and Sethe's breast as stand in for "history." Walker suggests that history is, in fact, the product of black women's bodies. Time, renewal, birth and death are signified, as in carnival, through the becoming body and its abject effluvia. Walker nourishes herself and (bites the teat) of history. She receives/craves the milk/history as nourishment and may also experience the feeding as erotic. Her relationship to history is similar to that of Beloved's relationship to Sethe, fraught with love, violence, eroticism, dependence, identification and cannibalistic incorporation.

My project in this essay was to imagine Walker's tableaux as a dialogue with Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and as a dialogue as battle with elder artists/artistic mothers, Saar and Pindell. I have tried to posit both dialogues as reframings of the psychoanalytic Oedipal battle between fathers/sons. In Morrison's *Beloved* the Oedipal battle is reimagined as a conflict between mothers and daughters over access to one another's bodies. The dialogue as battle between Walker, Saar and Pindell is a conflict over the right to imagine enslaved ancestors via the appropria-

tion of racist archetypes. I use Mae Henderson's model of black woman's discourse as polyvocal dialogism in order to reframe the seemingly contentious relationships between generations of black women as alternative model to white/male (art) historical discourse rooted in father/son Oedipal conflicts. Henderson's "speaking in tongues" suggests that dialogues, even contestatorial dialogues, between generations of black women are as much a form of "progress" as the Modernist artistic "killing one's father" paradigm albeit a progress characterized by repetition rather than linear chronology. Snead's model of repetition as a figure in black culture seems to me applicable to the work of Morrison and Walker as well as of Saar and Pindell. These four black women artists are all engaged in representations/narrations of history through repetition. Saar's recuperation of Aunt Jemima too is an example of a Sneadian repetition with a difference. The work of each of these four women focus on repetition/narration as a relational and productive pairing; a focus that reframes the Eurocentric enlightenment paradigm of repetition as stasis or pathology. Morrison, Walker and Saar's Sneadian repetitions (with a difference) of stereotypes of blackness and trauma/s of blackness are in the words of Morrison "stories not to be passed on."

### *Work Cited*

- DIXON, Annette, ed. *Kara Walker: Pictures from Another Time*. Ann Arbor: The Regents of the University of Michigan, 2002.
- FANON, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks: The Experiences of a Black Man in a White World*. New York: Grove Press, 1967.

- Gale Group, Inc. "Psychoanalysis information about Oral-Sadistic Stage" *International Dictionary of Psychoanalysis* Copyright © 2005 by The Gale Group, Inc.
- GARRETT, Shawn Marie. "Return of the Repressed", *Theater* 32.2 (2002): 26-43.
- GOLDEN, Thelma. "A Dialogue with Kara Walker", in *Kara Walker: Pictures from Another Time*, Annette Dixon, ed. Ann Arbor: The Regents of the University of Michigan, 2002.
- HALL, Stuart. "Representation and the Media", in *Media Education Foundation Transcript: Challenging Media*. Northampton: Media Education Foundation, 2005.
- HALL, Stuart. "What is this 'black' in black popular culture?", *Social Justice* 20: 2, Spring-Summer (1993): 104-11.
- Harvard University Art Museums. *Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke: A Series of Conversations on the Use of Black Stereotypes in Contemporary Visual Practice*. Press Release. February 23, 1998. [www.artmuseums.harvard.edu/press/released1998/jokeyolk.html](http://www.artmuseums.harvard.edu/press/released1998/jokeyolk.html) Online. ©President and Fellows Harvard College, 2003. January 30, 2007.
- HENDERSON, Mae G. "Speaking in Tongues: Dialogics, Dialectics and the Black Woman's Literary Tradition", in *African American Literary Theory: A Reader*, Winston Napier, ed. New York: New York University Press, 2000.
- HENDERSON, Mae G. "Toni Morrison's *Beloved*: Re-Membering the Body as Historical Text", in *Comparative American Identities: Race, Sex, and Nationality in the Modern Text*, Hortense Spillers, ed. New York & London: Routledge, 1991.
- MORRISON, Toni. *Beloved*. 1987. New York: Plume, 1988.
- PEARCE, Lynn. *Reading Dialogics*. New York & London: Routledge, 1994.
- PHARR, Robert Reid. "Black Girl Lost", *Kara Walker: Pictures from Another Time*, Annette Dixon, ed. Ann Arbor: The Regents of the University of Michigan, 2002.

- PINDELL, Howardena. "Diaspora/Realities/Strategies: A Conference Paper from *Trade Routes, History, Geography, Culture: Towards a Definition of Culture in the late 20th Century*. Johannesburg Biennale, October 1997, updated with a new postscript, Jan 2002." *N. Paradoxa* 7 (August 1998) ©Howardena Pindell Online. 31 Jan. 2007.
- RINDER, Lawrence. "Elsewhere on the Net: Kara Walker is the first cap street project resident at CCAC" nyfa.org. Retrieved 26 Mar. 2007 [www.nyfa.org/current/\\_archive/1999/cur042099.html#else](http://www.nyfa.org/current/_archive/1999/cur042099.html#else).
- SALTZ, Jerry. "Kara Walker: Ill Will and Desire", *Flash Art* (November/December 1996): 82-86.
- SHAW, Gwendolyn DuBois. *Seeing the Unspeakable: The Art of Kara Walker*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2004.

*Les Carnets du Cerpac* n° 6, 2007, 405-437.

**POSTMODERN CARIBBEAN IMAGE-TEXT  
CORRESPONDENCES: VISUAL CONSTRUCTIONS FROM  
DAVID BOXER AND CHRISTOPHER COZIER**

*Rosalie SMITH McCREA*

*College for Women, Department of Art & Design, Kuwait University*

Every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably.

Walter Benjamin, *Theses on Philosophy of History*

My attempt, in writing this essay, is to introduce scholars, artists, critics and academics to the studio practices of influential Caribbean art historians and artists whose work have been significant locally and regionally in the English, French and Spanish speaking Caribbean archipelago. Although examples of their art may now reside in major museums and galleries in Europe, the United States and elsewhere, some of these artists have not had the critical exposure they deserve, due mainly to professional choices to remain full-time in their home territories creating art,

teaching, writing about art or curating the legacy of their nation's graphic and plastic cultures. This essay concerns two artists, one of whom has produced a body of work very relevant to the re-visitation of the original historical Slave Narrative and its contemporary manifestation; the neo-slave narrative or slave novel.<sup>1</sup>

Sometime in the early 1990s David Boxer began experimenting with the magnification of images on a photocopying machine. His interest then, was to make copies for further use in collage as mechanical reproduction was a visual technique that he had been practicing since his first year at Cornell University. The element of imagery's magnification and diminution, produced from mechanical reproduction via the Xerox/Laser photocopier, has been a continual source of fascination for the artist. Not only because it allows for the "principle of variation" so attractive to the artist, but also because the work that this essay explores and comments on, has been created as an extension of this principle.<sup>2</sup> The process of recopying and magnifying until the images of individual figures in the first photocopy is no longer recognizable because they are subsumed in an abstract pattern created by technology became the matrix on which David Boxer began superimposing other selected recopied images that he associated with slavery and the Middle Passage.<sup>3</sup>

---

1. David Wayne Boxer was born in Jamaica in 1946. He was educated in Jamaica and in the United States (Cornell University, A.B. 1969 and the John Hopkins University, M.A. 1972 and Ph.D. 1975). He is currently the Director Emeritus and Chief Curator of the National Gallery of Jamaica. He lives and works in Kingston. His works are in private collections in the Caribbean, throughout the Americas and Europe.

2. One of the earliest examples of the 'theme and variations' procedure is the *Thirty Variations on a Renaissance Youth* produced in Jamaica in 1977 (the Thirty-Six was edited down to Thirty)

3. David Boxer to Rosalie Smith McCrea in an e-mail letter dated Thursday, May 11, 2006.

As a work-in-progress over a period of ten years, *The Black Books* was first included in an exhibition at the National Gallery of Jamaica in 1997 called "Black as Colour". Pages were not bound at the time but were exhibited in three folders with a group of five main selected images. In that exhibition the catalogue entry read:

Three Black Books (The Slavery Chronicles 1494-1838)  
Handmade book in progress  
Original "photocopy" ink-jet prints  
Total: 345 pages  
Each 23.5 x 30 cm

*The Black Books* were recently displayed in the 2005 exhibition "Island Thresholds: Contemporary Art from the Caribbean". This exhibition aside from David Boxer, exhibited works by Tony Capellán from the Dominican Republic, Kcho from Cuba and Marc Latamie from Martinique. It was an attempt to explore the continuum of contemporary Caribbean art as well as a chance to probe further into the cultural meanings of the sea as history.<sup>1</sup> In this show, the catalogue entry for David Boxer's work read:

The Black Books, 1992-2003  
Bound digital images on paper  
3 books, each 9 x 26in. (open)

A third version of *The Black Books* will be exhibited this September at the Yale Centre for British Art in commemoration of the bicentenary of the Abolition of the Slave Trade (proper title of

---

1. See *Island Thresholds: Contemporary Art From The Caribbean*. Exhibition catalogue. Peabody Essex Museum, Salem Massachusetts, February 19-June 5, 2005. Sam Scott, Assistant Curator was the organizer of this exhibition.



exhibition to follow). One of its more unique features is that *The Black Books* in three bound volumes contain no written texts. Volume I covers the period 1494 to 1613, Volume II, 1614 to 1733 and Volume III, 1734 to 1838. The visual “histories”, as the reader will realize, pay central attention to the impact of Spanish and British colonization on the geography and peoples of Jamaica. According to the artist, the whole purpose of doing a page for each year “is to show the whole process of Europe’s contact as a continuum of the subjugation of ‘other peoples’, the Taino, first, the African slave and their Creole descendents.”<sup>1</sup> A fourth volume was originally conceived that would have carried the viewer from the colonial period of emancipation up to Jamaica’s Independence from Britain in 1962. This has been abandoned. All three Volumes have been bound in black Buckram instead of leather as the artist was unable to find the leather appropriate for the binding.<sup>2</sup>

Yet, a range of discourses from various texts lie embedded in its 345 pages. If one were to quickly scan a selection of images from volumes I to III, what is apparent is that “texts” inform each visual fragment that is arranged and juxtaposed with, against and alongside each other conveying mainly narrative colonial histories, medical and art histories. These comprise: early print portraits of Columbus and his arrival in the Americas; Spain’s Christian missionary zeal in converting or exterminating aboriginal peoples; Western art history’s images of the early Renaissance’s “Madonna and Child”, the “Crucifixion” and the “Dead Christ” [the pietá]; the “Madonna and Child with donor”; 16<sup>th</sup> century anatomical illustrations of the human anatomy, taken principally from *De Humani Corporis Fabrica*, 1543 by Andreas

---

1. David Boxer to Rosalie Smith McCrea in an e-mail dated August 10th, 2007.

2. David Boxer to Rosalie McCrea in an e-mail dated Friday, March 16<sup>th</sup>, 2007.

Vesalius; the 1787 engraving of the *Slave Ship Brooks* produced for Abolitionists in London; William Blake's engravings of tortured African slaves after Gabriel Stedman's drawings for his *Narrative*; William Grainger's engraving after Thomas Stothard's painting of "The Sable Venus" created for Bryan Edwards's *History*; further "texts" relate to notated music; 20<sup>th</sup> century X-Ray plates on areas of the human anatomy coming from the artist's collection and Jamaican Taino Indian sculpture.<sup>1</sup> What we behold, therefore, is a 3-volumed graphic picture-book, where the only colour is black and the entire project, to quote Erich Auerbach is "fraught with background".<sup>2</sup>

David Boxer's *The Black Books*, it is proposed in this essay, is an engagement in a "midrasic" form of visual exegesis, whereby the artist in a formal visual sense, explores and deconstructs while at the same time illuminates upon the richness of Western cultural production as it co-exists with the cruelty and de-humanising features of the human condition within the institution of British Atlantic colonial slavery. Boxer, as well, stresses that the European works of art quoted in *The Black Books* were chosen for their content, contents capable of being appropriated for symbolic use carrying levels of meaning. For example: the four images of Eliz-

---

1. The works referenced in this project will be located in a glossary at the end before "Works Cited".

2. AUERBACH, Erich, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (German publication, 1946. English Translation, 1953). Written while living in Turkey and published in German in 1946, the first English translation came out in 1953. My usage of the term "midrasic" to follow, is indebted to Ronnie Scharfman's meaning as applied to her essay, "Africa Has Her Mouth on Moses: Zora Neale Hurston Rewrites the Exodus Narrative" in *Revisiting Slave Narratives: Les avatars contemporains des récits d'esclaves*, Judith Misrahi-Barak ed. (Montpellier: Services des publications de l'université Paul-Valéry, Montpellier III, 2005): 40. I shall often hereonwards be referring to this publication.

abeth I, used for the years 1562/63/64 and 1565, establishes the entry of the British Crown into the slave trade as well as the ancestral connection between herself and Queen Victoria (who ‘set we free’).<sup>1</sup> At the conceptual heart of his project is the historical and imaginative visual working-out of forms (the book) which give tangible expression to notions of hybridity and the vernacular. His selected images of Blake’s engravings after Stedman, *The Sable Venus*, the *Noah* and the *New Seville* carvings are all examples of Caribbean New World iconography and Jamaican images in particular, born from these historical contacts. The artist achieves an ongoing visual commentary on the fragmented and discursive narratives through the modern practice of mechanical reproduction and *montage*.<sup>2</sup> Together with this proposition, my essay will argue that despite the differences in media [the visual vs. the verbal or written], *The Black Books* correspond more with features common to the neo-slave narrative or novel than with the original slave narrative as a genre.

To begin, I shall consider the title. The title, “The Black Books” has both a literal and a metaphorical meaning and so alludes to two discourses. “Black” referring to an actual pigment colour, or lack of colour depending on the definition’s source. One current manual on the theory and practice of art defines “black” as:

a neutral colour together with white and gray which reflect varying amounts of the colour wavelengths in a ray of light [...] Black, then, is usually called the absence of colour, because it

---

1. David Boxer to Rosalie Smith McCrea in an e-mail dated August 10th, 2007.

2. Meaning a technique of producing a new composite whole from fragments of pictures, words, music and other sources. See THOMPSON, Della, ed., *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English*. Ninth Edition (Oxford: Clarendon Press): 881.

results when a surface absorbs all the colour rays equally and reflects none of them [...] most blacks will contain some trace of reflected colour, however slight.<sup>1</sup>

Metaphorically, “black” as a colour within Western civilization has resonated discursively in nearly all the disciplines of the humanities from the early modern period. But discourses concerned with human pigmentation as colour have associated “blackness” with theories or ideologies on race and the racialised subject particularly since the eighteenth century. The scholarship and historiography on this issue is quite large but I shall cite some of the artist’s views on “black” as a colour, as it illuminates upon some of his more arcane and private predilections. In an interview with another art historian, Veerle Poupeye, David Boxer stated that for himself, “white” as a colour is associated with annihilation, whereas “black” was “more symbolic of the unknown, and in another sense, of sensuality”. It is a colour that figures predominately in other serial works by the artist such as: *Dialogues*, sexual dialogues; *Nottes*, the colour of night; *Nervfelds* and the *Second Incarnation*, figures materializing from central blackness and the more recent *Penny Blacks* and *Black Backs* where the colour is given racial significance.<sup>2</sup> How, then, do these kaleidoscopic graphic volumes correspond more with the neo-slave narrative or novel, and less with the historical slave narrative?

In reading *Revisiting Slave Narratives*, the editor and several contributors concluded that, as there was a long list of original Slave Narratives, so were there many more fictional contempo-

---

1. OCVIK, G. Otto et al., *Art Fundamentals: Theory and Practice*. Tenth Edition. (New York, Boston: McGrawHill, 2006): 148.

2. POUPEYE, Veerle, *David Boxer Interviewed March - June 2000*. (Privately printed publication of limited edition): 21.

rary slave narratives dating from the 1960s. The general consensus appears to be that the original slave narrative is similar and different from the contemporary slave novel (Misrahi-Barak 2005: Introduction).

Some of the earliest studies on the original slave narrative as a genre were written by Henry Louis Gates Jr., and Charles Davis.<sup>1</sup> Recurring conclusions on this early form include first-person narration, the autobiographical nature of the story and the use of rhetoric as a feature of the genre's structure. I shall re-iterate a similar point, and that is that the slave narrative of the later eighteenth-century for instance, was written to ensure the maximum "affect" on the reader of sensibility; contemporary readers who were increasingly aware of the British Abolitionist machine after 1768. In short, the narrative written by Olaudah Equiano, one of the few more successful black Britons after his manumission, and the only known black within this period to have left a Will, was written to make the reader aware of his pride, ambitions, desire for freedom and agency.<sup>2</sup> Points brought out by Misrahi-Barak about both old and new Slave Narratives are worth noting. Essentially the movement backwards, forwards and to the future, re-appropriating time and speaking in a past and present space are some of the literary features separating and binding both traditional narrative and new narrative (Misrahi-Barak 2005: 15). And what of the contemporary neo-slave narrative?

---

1. GATES, Henry Louis Jr. and Charles T. DAVIS, *The Slave's Narrative* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

2. SMITH MCCREA, Rosalie, *Antislavery and British Painting of the Black: 1760-1841*. Unpublished doctoral thesis (The University of Manchester, England): Introduction and Chapter 4.

Again, contributors to the anthology including literary historians such as Bénédicte Ledent, point out the hybrid and experimental nature of the contemporary slave novel. Still, I would like to focus on three assessments and discussions in the Anthology that, in my opinion, present strategies which correspond with David Boxer's *The Black Books*.

The first, concerning recent novelists of Caribbean descent is Judith Misrahi-Barak's observations that these writers use singular and plural voices, voices that are monophonic and polyphonic, "always dialogic, [...] preserving the memory and legacy, subverting and responding without conserving" (Misrahi-Barak 2005: 17). I shall add to this last sentence, "deconstructive and subverting as it creates anew". The second, is the essay contribution from Isabel Soto Garcia under "Thresholds" and the third, written by Bénédicte Ledent under "The Anglophone Caribbean".<sup>1</sup>

I mention Soto's proposition in which she postulates that the element organizing both traditional and new slave narrative is the "threshold" principle which shapes the narrative and textual strategic patterns (Soto, in Misrahi-Barak 2005: 104). The "Limen", an anthropological term with a Latin root is understood to be a metaphor for the study of space/time/place transitions/process and genesis. The author regards it mainly as a tool of analysis and explication. Still, how is this metaphor relevant to *The Black Books*?

The "limen" as metaphor, relates well to Boxer's project because it is a "porus" metaphor that contains a "performative" dimen-

---

1. See SOTO, Isabel, "The Threshold as Organizing Principle in Neo-Slave Narrative" and BÉNÉDICTE LEDENT, "Slavery Revisited through Vocal Kaleidoscopes: Polyphony in Novels by Fred D'Aguiar and Caryl Phillips" in Misrahi-Barak 2005: 103-118; 281-293 respectively.

sion. In the case of *The Black Books*, single images and passages of imagery, separate, transmit and transform as well as translate, mediate and destabilise themselves and each other. In Soto's reading, this particular form of transformative practice of which serial painters and cultural workers such as Boxer are examples, is connotative of "displacement, incompleteness and destabilization" (Soto, in Misrahi-Barak 2005: 106).

I should point out that Boxer has often referred to the iconoclastic aspect of his practice. In speaking with Veerle Poupeye about his *Renaissance Transformations*, he pointed out from diary entries, key words common to his studio practice at the time. These were: transformation, masking, obliterating and defacing (Boxer interviewed by Poupeye, 18). Although that series was produced in the 1970s, these features are still current today in projects such as *The Black Books*. We see this process at work particularly in the "Madonna and Child" imagery throughout the three volumes.<sup>1</sup> Further, Soto adds that the "threshold" provides a site where a multitude of discourses, Western and non-Western converge. In *The Black Books* discourses are mainly Western, but the entire 3-Volume kaleidoscope encapsulates narratives about Western contact with a geography, [Jamaica], its people and their descendents, and, the creation of the vernacular or hybrid as a result. The notion of convergence and encounter as articulated in Mary Pratt's study on the "contact zone" is applicable to *The Black*

---

1. *The Madonna and Child with Donor* motif is an image after an engraving after Mantegna's *The Madonna della Vittoria* in the Louvre. Please see the Glossary for further references.

*Books*.<sup>1</sup> We see eliding activity and, “vernacular” imagery signifying upon dominantly Western imagery. In the actual geopolitical and historical arenas these activities created admixture. In *The Black Books* they are visually expressive of creolisation, métissage and hybridity concluded in the actual creation of the three volumes; a new hybrid signifyier.<sup>2</sup> The page for the year 1644 from Volume II, depicting the crucified image of Christ/Boxer we may consider a “vernacular” image. The artist has substituted or imposed his features/self portrait for that of a more recognizable “Western” Christ;<sup>3</sup> a visual conceit practiced from the days of Albrecht Dürer. The countenance or head of this vernacular image dominates the background *Slave Ship Brookes* of manacled bodies as well as the medical anatomical figure illustrating the pattern of musculature in the human anatomy. Boxer’s work in this sense may be said to show a visual strategy common to the literatures of both historical and contemporary slave narration.

*The Black Books* appropriate one of the main canonical images in the iconography of slavery, visual culture and black diasporic studies; that of James Phillip’s copper engraving after a drawing by Thomas Clarkson’s *Plan of the Slave Ship Brookes of Liverpool* (1788-9). In this way, it is defined to an extent by the historical

---

1. See PRATT, Mary Louise, *Imperial Eyes. Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992): 6.

2. Two relevant studies on “hybridity” are: GILROY, Paul, *The Black Atlantic, Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1993) and BÉNITEZ-ROJO, Antonio, “Three Words towards Creolization” in *Caribbean Creolization: Reflections on the Cultural Dynamics of Language, Literature and Identity*, Kathleen M. Balutansky and Marie-Agnes Sourieau, eds. (Gainesville: UP of Florida, 1998).

3. This image references the *Christ of San Placido* ca. 1632 by Velásquez in the Prado, Madrid.





FIG. 1. — Year 1644. The Boxer/Christ vernacular image. Permission the artist.

abolitionist debate which became the *raison d'être* behind most, if not all historical slave narrative. How is this so?

The central background image for most all pages in each volume on which is superimposed other images is that of the *Slave Ship Brookes* of Liverpool. Magnification and diminution of the ship and its human cargo form the basic warp and weave of the three volumes of visual text. When magnified to a great extent, images become fragmented and broken up giving the viewer a sense of looking at shifting water. Within these abstracted forms on selected pages, for instance, we may see fish and black bodies; living and dead fixtures of the Ocean or Sea. The *Slave Ship Brookes*,

then, is the glue upon which all other images become affixed. The viewer, knowledgeable about the history of Transatlantic Slavery should instantly sense a leitmotif on “The Middle Passage”. At this point a note on the *Slave Ship Brookes* is in order.

This copper engraving print was produced after a drawing done by Thomas Clarkson, one of the leading names within the pantheon of British abolitionism. It was drawn after research into the practices of concealment of numbers defying the Parliamentary “Dolben Regulation Act” came to light. My doctoral thesis in Chapter One brings to light the work done by MPs such as Sir William Dolben (MP for Oxford University) who, upon inspecting a Slaver in the Thames, with the intention of restricting the numbers carried, described the horrors of slaves chained hand and foot stowed “like herrings in a barrel” and stricken with “putrid and fatal disorders which infected crews as well”.<sup>1</sup> This new Act passed in 1788 and regulated capacity by fixing a ratio of 5 slaves per 3 tons, up to 200 tons. The Act reduced slaves per ton by about 44% and became known as the Slave Regulation Bill (Smith McCrea 2001: 7). First generation abolitionists took advantage of this duplicity by producing and circulating a print of the *Slave Ship Brookes*.

Boxer’s *The Black Books* is additionally implicated in the historical slave narrative discourses through another discursive route. Earlier, in 1773, a poetic narrative titled *The Dying Negro, A Poem* was published by Thomas Day and John Bicknell. Literary historians now consider it as the first abolitionist poem published in England. I mention this poem not only because it was very popular and well circulated in its day, but also because in the Pref-

---

1. SMITH MCCREA, Rosalie, Unpublished Doctoral Thesis, 2001, Ch. I: 7, fn. 8.

ace both authors would inscribe their indictment on slavery as a whole bringing forward just one of its many immoral and inhuman practices, that of concealment. The indictment reads:

How should I rejoice to see [...] that insolence, that successful avarice confounded, which, under the mask of commerce has already ravaged the two extremities of the Globe.<sup>1</sup>

The metaphor associated with the phrase “the mask of commerce” is therefore also at the heart of *The Black Books* project which is discursively related through the copper engraving print to other forms of abolitionist literary production.

Returning to Soto Garcia’s argument concerning the “threshold principle” and its performative composition, upon closer scrutiny of selected images in each volume what strikes the viewer immediately is the measured, precise and orderly way in which each image segment or passages of imagery have/has been placed. Take for instance the visuals for the first page of Volume I, the artist’s overall conception is a classical conception. Furthermore, we may regard separate images and passages of imagery as representing personae in a play, each with their own dialogue. If the viewer accepts my personal interpretation, [one of many] we are made to realize that each visual “character” appears to be stating a “visual case”. The point I make here is that each separate visual component is important. And, ironically, while they all clamour on the surface of the page to be heard, they seem to be making their separate cases in an “orderly” fashion. The artist may not realize this, but for some viewers such as myself, the element

---

1. The quotation is taken from a fragment of a letter on the “Slavery of the Negroes” in Day and Bicknell’s poem. The London 1773 publication was re-issued in 1793 by John Stockdale of London.

of bitter deconstructive critique [colonial vs. the postcolonial] is blunted due mainly to aesthetic reasons such as perhaps a concern for placement, harmony line and texture.

Where we consider Soto Garcia's analysis on the "limen's" power to destabilize as well as to transform, it is, for example, Boxer's fictional year 1762 from Volume III. In this year and for this page the artist has selected image-texts that bring together historical activity recorded in the 16<sup>th</sup>, and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. The title *Septima Musculorum Tabula* refers to a text detail of a plate from a 16<sup>th</sup> century edition of Vesalius's *Anatomical Drawings*. While the nineteenth-century steel engravings of the young blacks at the bottom right are appropriated from an 1857 Jamaican photograph of young black Jamaicans at Fort Augusta; freed Africans from a captured Slaver on its way to Cuba.<sup>1</sup> The entire page therefore, is an example of the rupturing of time as well as space and place. I now turn to Bénédicte Ledent's arguments, placing them alongside some of my own thoughts and applying their relevance to *The Black Books* project.<sup>2</sup>

Ledent's essay raises very interesting hypotheses and questions regarding the old and the new slave novel. One singular difference between the two, she points out, is the aspect of "polyphony". In musical vocabulary, this word has naturally been associated with Baroque counterpoint as heard in some of the

---

1. David Boxer in an e-mail to Rosalie McCrea February 13<sup>th</sup>, 2007. David Boxer has an extensive and rare collection of 19<sup>th</sup> century Jamaican photographs. He has identified the photographer as having been John Savage of Kingston, Jamaica.

2. LEDENT, Bénédicte, "Slavery Revisited Through Vocal Kaleidoscopes: Polyphony in Novels by Fred D'Aguiar and Caryl Phillips", in *Revisiting Slave Narratives*, Judith Misrahi-Barak ed. (Service des publications de l'université Paul-Valéry, Montpellier III): 281-293.

music of Bach. Boxer continues to uphold that visual polyphony is a stated principle in his montage methodology and that he repeatedly uses words such as 'fugal' and 'contrapuntal' in discussing this and other works. The *Fugues* of Bach and the thick contrapuntal textures of some of Beethoven's late works have been highly influential. Boxer continues to uphold that visual polyphony is a stated principle in his montage methodology and that he repeatedly uses words such as 'fugal' and 'contrapuntal' in discussing this and other works. The *Fugues* of Bach and the thick contrapuntal textures of some of Beethoven's late works have been highly influential.<sup>1</sup> Ledent writes that it is one of the main characteristics of new slave novels from Caribbean writers. She mentions Fred D'Aguiar and Caryl Phillips in particular and as a literary historian asks whether the reader may detect or delineate a tradition in its usage. In her essay, she carefully teases out the way D'Aguiar and Phillips flaunt their multi-vocal characters. Both novelists present men/women, blacks/whites, masters/slaves as well as a variety of styles and genres from different media such as diaries, letters, logbooks, prose-poems or extracts from the press (Ledent, in Misrahi-Barak 2005: 285). [Again, we should remind ourselves that *The Black Books* are a kaleidoscope of various genres and media, Xeroxed images of photographs, x-ray plates, sculpture and engravings, and paintings of landscapes, history paintings, portraits and so forth]. Whether woven from the perspective of several voices [the Table of Contents for *The Longest Memory* for instance] or from one voice on an opening page [*Crossing the River*], the reader is made to hear and experience the choric element of "restless voices" of a "common mem-

---

1. David Boxer to Rosalie Smith McCrea in an e-mail dated August 10th, 2007.

ory” perhaps from the deep. Ghosts and their echoes [my viewpoint] seem to be a natural aspect of the slave narrative genre (See also Ledent, in Misrahi-Barak 2005: 284).

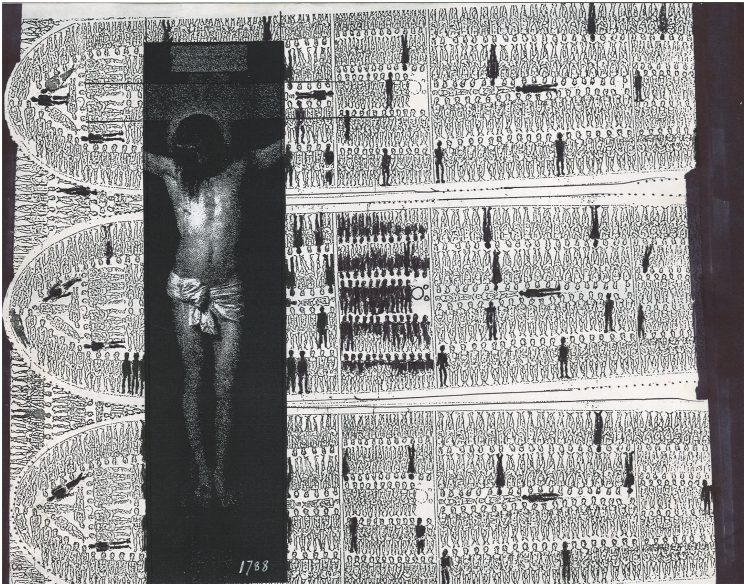


FIG. 2. — Year 1788. Magnification of images from the *Slave Ship Brookes* with superimposed detail from *The Crucifixion* based on *The Christ of San Placido* by Velasquez ca. 1632. Permission the artist.

Correspondingly, the dead manacled bodies of slaves on the *Slave Ship Brookes of Liverpool* within the sea, which, as a backdrop permeates all *The Black Books*, I argue, represent this “choric” element in the work, one falling individual figure appearing and re-appearing several times on pages for separate years.<sup>1</sup>

1. This image first makes its appearance in Volume II for the year 1646. It is

“Slavery Revisited Through Vocal Kaleidoscopes” recalls some of the theories argued by Bakhtin in relation to Dostoievski’s polyphonic conception of the novel.<sup>1</sup> But in her analysis of this mode, one of the interesting paradoxes which she detects in new novels by Caribbean writers who create polyphonic characters, is, for Ledent, the call to internationalise literature, that is, acquiring a cross-cultural facility that is asked of the reader as opposed to the awareness of local knowledges only (Ledent: 282). This, in my opinion seems to be almost taken for granted in Boxer’s project and given political attitudes in the Caribbean, may be read as being “elitist”. Furthermore, Ledent goes on to point out differences between “surface” polyphony and “deep” polyphony adopting the distinctions made by Wilson Harris, who, in an interview with Fred D’Aguiar suggested that in order for literary polyphony to come alive, there should be an opening up to universal variety and a blending of parts; that despite the fact that we can never encompass all the parts, it is sufficient that we are aware of them and strive perhaps for open unity.<sup>2</sup> Whether separate images or segments of imagery in *The Black Books* interact meaningfully with each other in order to allow for “deep polyphony” in a visual sense to occur, is up to the viewer to decide. The fact, however, that despite the fragmented structure of the *montage* process we observe a level of harmony within sections on each page-year suggesting that a kind of “dialogue” or visual connectedness has been achieved between sections. As to

---

appropriated from Theodore Chasseriau’s work, a 19<sup>th</sup> century French artist of colour of Caribbean ancestry.

1. BAKHTINE, Mikhaïl, *La Poétique de Dostoïevski*, traduit par Isabelle Kolitcheff (Paris: Editions du Seuil, n.d.): 83.

2. D’AGUIAR, Fred, “Interview with Wilson Harris”, *Bomb* 82 (Winter 2002/2003): 75-80; 70.

the question posed by Ledent concerning the possibility of a tradition being established unwittingly by Anglophone Caribbean novelists, this can only be fully answered by literary historians. When the question is directed to the visual arts and correspondingly with Caribbean visual culture and specialists in this area, I will only say, that as an art historian, more work needs to be done on this very interesting and significant question. The present analysis of Boxer's work that is concerned with the taxonomy of "Slavery" points to the likelihood of there being such a tradition which is capable of transcending media. A further question we might ask ourselves is: does this capability for polyphonic treatments in Anglophone cultural expression (visual as well as verbal) tend to occur only under the rubric of "Slavery"?

"Intertextuality", writes Ledent, is another strand of polyphonic treatment observed in Caribbean new slave novel writers. Ledent suggests that this is evident in the way the literary characters created by Caribbean writers dialogue or reference outside texts from earlier centuries in the broadest sense, sometimes including even music and painting. I have already brought our attention to the level of appropriation from earlier written and visual archives involved in this work by citing a glossary at the end. Still, an illustration of this kind of intertextuality which has been transformed into the visual, is the inclusion of portions of torn, fractured musical scores in Volume I of *The Black Books* for the year 1518. Glimpses of reproduced notated music in Boxer's work should be understood as an autobiographical reference to a private passion; the fact that from his adolescence Boxer had studied music formally, and, at one point of his life, thought of becoming a concert pianist. His understanding of the works of Beethoven in particular and the dominance of "Theme and Varia-



tions" a recurring subject in his studio practice, has been an influence on much of his *oeuvre*. Bach's *Kunst der Fugue* which is both polyphonic and a set of themes and variations is a key guide as well as all of Beethoven's *Variations*.<sup>1</sup> Like the reader of the neo-slave novel who becomes a "shifting entity" in time, place and space, so too does the viewer browsing, looking or scrutinizing these volumes become a "shifting" entity within visual kaleidoscopes. For, to take one page only, the viewer will have traveled to Genoa, Rome, Amsterdam, Mexico City, and Port Royal. The entire visual experience takes us backwards (Europe's past and its religious imagery) from the Old World into the New World (European colonial arrivals and contact with aboriginal peoples) through the movement and depths of the Atlantic Ocean (dead African manacled slaves) into the present (autobiographical reminders from the artist in terms of music the collecting of art and medical x-ray plates).

In this final section I turn towards the work itself as an experience, stylistically and iconographically. Stylistically, *The Black Books* are indebted, (and not slavishly so) to two former artists: Dada characteristics as professed by the French modernist conceptual artist Marcel Duchamp and the British modernist painter Francis Bacon. Then too, after looking or 'reading' the volumes, viewers may be reminded of looking through a neo-Surrealistic frame. As a body of work, *The Black Books* convey a sense of emotional claustrophobia, a *horror vaccui* contained by an acute aesthetic formal awareness. On this score, I point out that although the selected images from which this essay has been written did not include the entire number and sequence of images for all the

---

1. David Boxer to Rosalie Smith McCrea in an e-mail dated Friday, March 16, 2007.

years, Boxer maintains that his selection of Pre-Columbian Taino 'quotations' occur seven times throughout, while, 'quotations' for African sculpture occur at least fifty times throughout the volumes. He specifically asserts that they were utilized for aesthetic and symbolic reasons as they represent 'presences'. According to Boxer, the specific meanings of the African art works are not particularly important, rather, it is for their expressive qualities that they have been drafted into serving *The Black Books*.<sup>1</sup> The three volumes, as well, bring forward the richness of Europe's visual culture [sacred and secular] and written archives. The artist, by the *montage* process, has created a postmodernist allegory that goes beyond the "local". I shall briefly explain what is meant by this.

In 1936, in an influential and one of his major works on new forms in modernity such as the technology of mass reproduction, Walter Benjamin would argue that the "aura" of an original unique work of art is lost to reproducibility; still, it is far from being something to mourn; that progressive possibilities are opened up in the process.<sup>2</sup> Have "possibilities" been opened up in *The Black Books* due to mechanical reproduction? The answer is decidedly "yes". However, the scope of this essay does not allow for a discussion on the theoretical question as to loss of power (aura) contained within an "original" as opposed to the

---

1. The main exceptions where original meaning is important are the Fang reliquary figures which are tied to 'Ancestor Worship'. David Boxer to Rosalie Smith McCrea in an e-mail dated August 10th, 2007.

2. Originally published in the Frankfurt Institute Journal *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*, V, no. 1 (New York, 1936). Benjamin, Walter, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" is taken from the English translation by Harry Zohn in *Walter Benjamin, Illuminations*, H. Arendt ed. (London, 1973): 219-53.

copy when applied to Boxer's project.

In an essay in 1980, following on the work of Benjamin and other writers, Craig Owens, art historian and critic, revived the question and importance of allegory in contemporary culture.<sup>1</sup> An essay now regarded as seminal for cultural workers, Owens's treatment of "allegory" as a traditional literary mode revises its usage by arguing for allegory as an attitude, a technique, a perception and procedure. Two main points from this important essay stand out in regards to Boxer's project. The first, is that for Owens the allegorical impulse and image, is appropriated imagery. This imagery may range from film still, photograph or drawing and often is already a reproduction "emptied of resonance or claim to authority" (Owens, in Harrison & Wood 2005: 1027). Despite the fact that allegory is seen to be attracted to the "fragmentary, the imperfect, the incomplete" and finds its true expression in the ruin, which, for Benjamin, was the allegorical emblem *par excellence*; ruins thus connoting history as an "irreversible process of dissolution and decay, a progressive distancing from origin", images in *The Black Books* remind us once more of those ignoble origins within slavery, bringing them into forward vision. Boxer is not interested in "returning" to, or "recovering" this past; a desire that is futile for Stuart Hall. Hall writes that in these contexts one may only gain understanding of traumatic histories through actual experience.<sup>2</sup>

---

1. OWENS, Craig, "The Allegorical Impulse: Towards a Theory of Postmodernism" in *Art in Theory 1900-2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, Charles Harrison & Paul Wood, eds. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005): 1025-1032. The essay was originally published as a two-part article in *October*, Cambridge, MA, no. 12 (Spring 1980): 67-86 and no. 13 (Summer 1980): 59-80.

2. HALL, Stuart, "The New Ethnicities" in *Ethnicity*, Hutchinson, John, and Smith, Anthony D., eds. (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).



FIG. 3. — Year 1518. Emphasising the Taino male figure from Jamaica presently in the British Museum, London as well as torn, fractured sections of musical scores. Permission the artist.

Rather, his work expands and comments upon the state of 'hybridity' as mentioned earlier.

The second point concerns allegory's disregard of aesthetic categories. Owens argues that the allegorical impulse pays little heed to essentialist genres or media; that the visual is often offered as a text to be deciphered while the verbal is often treated as visual phenomena. This reciprocity therefore creates synthetic crossings and a confusing of genres that appears today as hybridization which according to Owens was anticipated earlier by artists such as Marcel Duchamp (Owens, in Harrison & Wood, 1028). I should

also point out that due perhaps to this reciprocity, it has been easier to discuss *The Black Books* in relationship to the literary texts compiled in Judith Misrahi-Barak's *Revisiting Slave Narratives*.

David Boxer's project is particularly suited to the technique of *montage*. For like canonical works such as T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, this strategy, so dependent on the fractured, multi-voiced and metatextual, best articulates emotional states of anguish, trauma and displacement. When seen against the background of other Caribbean postmodernist expressions work from "iconic" artists in the region such as Chris Cozier from Trinidad, *The Black Books* represents a work of an immense epic imagination.<sup>1</sup>

Christopher Cozier's studio practice in relationship to David Boxer's aesthetic, embodies a similar and dissimilar strand in contemporary Caribbean visual formation. Like Boxer, the artist has not migrated to the North but has remained in his home territory "meddling" through cultural production in the local affairs of Trinidad & Tobago. Born in Trinidad & Tobago of Barbadian parents, Cozier is the owner of an impressive *curriculum vitae* and it is clear from its contents that as a conceptual artist, he has, engaged with a wider audience in the Caribbean and internationally.<sup>2</sup>

---

1. The word "epic" is used here to mean: an imaginative work of any form embodying a nation's history. See THOMPSON, Della, ed., *The Concise Oxford Dictionary*, 453.

2. The artist received his early education in Port-of-Spain. He obtained a B.F.A. from the Maryland College of Art, Baltimore in 1985 and a M.F.A. which included studies in Florence, Italy, in 1988 from Rutgers University, New Jersey. Cozier's installations, performances and videos have been shown in the Caribbean in the following countries: Trinidad, Cuba, Santo Domingo, Guadeloupe, Curacao, Haiti, Barbados. Internationally, he has shown in Spain, the USA, France, South Africa, Holland, Canada, Norway and Mexico. His works have been reviewed in many prestigious journals and magazines and he is on

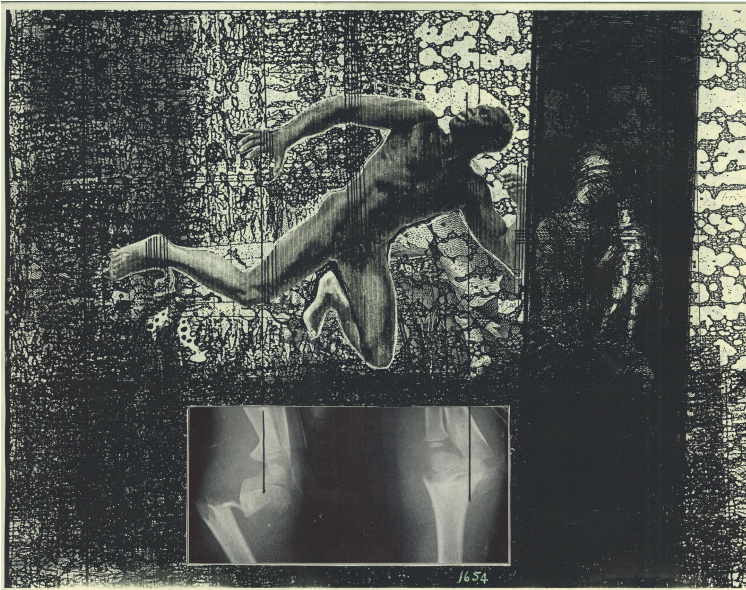


FIG. 4. — Year 1654. Illustrating the recurring “falling African” and a medical X-Ray plate from the artist’s collection. Permission the artist.

Cozier has remained committed to drawing, performance, installation and video, media associated with him that have created barriers and discomfort amongst the citizens of post-colonial and now national Trinidad & Tobago. In an interview with Nicholas Laughlin, the artist described Trinidadian society

---

the editorial collective of *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism*, published and distributed by Indiana University Press. Cozier has acted as editorial advisor to *BOMB Magazine* for their Americas issues, 2003-2005. In 2004 he was awarded a Pollock-Krasner Foundation Grant. He has taught at many institutions and works closely with younger generation Caribbean artists, illustrators and designers.

as “a world with two coups, murders, kidnappings, wrought iron and queen shows”.<sup>1</sup> Cozier’s work, as in Boxer’s case is understood and appreciated by a small number of their respective populations only. This paradox and dichotomy allows us to see that whether wittingly or unwittingly, artists of Cozier’s and Boxer’s calibre have for sometime been directing their art to a wider international “visually literate” audience. It is safe to say that for quite some time, the more specialized English speaking Caribbean viewer and collector have had great difficulty with conceptual art, these trends are however changing, while the wider and majority non-specialist audiences are far more comfortable with the ease and lack of mental rigor involved with traditional media and representation.

Still, what are the correspondences between Christopher Cozier’s practice and themes which allude to “Slavery” or reference the literary media in general? Cozier explores “Slavery” as a capitalist institution mainly in synopsis as well as in its significant relationship to its post-modern consequence and form. His *Crosscurrents Project* and his *Terra Stories Project* are examples of these explorations in installation form.<sup>2</sup> The main images in *Crosscurrents* are: the eighteenth-century image of the runaway slave, a slave-owner (perhaps appropriating Blake after Stedman) and Cozier’s postcolonial version of a migrating businessman ‘running away’. They are framed images or drawings from private conversations the artist carries out with himself about the

---

1. LAUGHLIN, Nicholas, “Discomfortzone: How do you make contemporary art in the contemporary Caribbean? View from Trinidad” in *Modern Painters*, 102-103. Mimeograph copies sent in an e-mail attachment from Christopher Cozier to Rosalie McCrea Tuesday and Wednesday, March 3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup>, 2007.

2. Christopher Cozier to Rosalie McCrea in an e-mail dated Wednesday, March 14, 2007.

aftermath of the trauma of slavery wreaked on populations in the Caribbean at large. He is particularly concerned to investigate slavery and its effects on the post-colonial Caribbean condition as it translates into migration and Caribbean diasporic cultures globally. A leading question asked is: why have post-colonial societies such as Trinidad & Tobago or other islands in the archipelago (my addition) failed to deliver meaningful states of independence for their citizens?<sup>1</sup> In this, his work is a conceptual enterprise linking it with Modernism as in Boxer's case to Marcel Duchamp, who, earlier had revised traditional ways of art-making in his approaches to collage, or his privileging the everyday object or readymade/modified artefact. The abundant note-taking, scripting of visual/verbal ideas by Cozier may be understood as being the creation of pictures and writing or picturewriting which is at the heart of his practice. One of the artist's leading critical interpreters, Annie Paul, refers to his methodology as a "visual stenography" in which he "sketches his location and state of mind".<sup>2</sup> I would like to see this also as a type of "hieroglyphic" or "ideogram" which, as in ancient contexts, stood not only for symbols of things and sounds of words, but also for thoughts and concepts. This is clearly seen in his recent *Tropical Nights* (2006) which is about the very act of drawing:

Drawing is my handwriting, my thought process [...] notes on little pieces of paper. I often use the word note-taking. Note-taking to me is conceptually very important. This has to do with notions

---

1. Paul, Annie, "Framing the Postcolonial: Annie Paul on Chris Cozier 2002" in e-mail from Christopher Cozier to Rosalie McCrea, Wednesday, March 14, 2007.

2. Paul, Annie, "Framing the Postcolonial: Annie Paul on Chris Cozier's 2002" in e-mail dated Wednesday, March 14, 2007.



of being sure and unsure [...] I feel an empathy with the ephemeral [...] When I make those marks, there's a sense of being alive. It's a domain of possibility.<sup>1</sup>

In the case of *The Black Books*, Boxer's tools have been the archives of the historical past, modernity's mechanical reproduction and postmodernist appropriation. In Cozier's *Tropical Night* series the tools have been the colliding of the literary imagination itself; pieces of text reminiscent of "Harris, Naipaul and Lamming"<sup>2</sup> with his personal visual hieroglyphic glossary of forms. These visual forms are discursive and intertextual as well, some speculating on local Trinidadian polemical political and economic culture, which, hopefully for the artist, will take him beyond his familiar vocabulary arriving at new syntaxes. After the recent busy years of traveling, giving workshops and exhibiting, Cozier began this nine x seven inch series in 2005 in order to rid himself of the rhetorical.

Nicholas Laughlin, it should be pointed out, begins his article on this series by quoting passages from Cozier's imaginative text (Laughlin 2006: 21). The writer observes that Cozier's visual images call up "questions of property ownership and contested space". As he sifts through the drawings, he senses a "narrative struggling to emerge" [...] I feel like I am still on the outside of the story trying to get in—it is very much like a literary enterprise" (Laughlin 2006: 21). Viewed *en masse*, the drawings for Laughlin associate with a state of being that is "unresolved", or at a crossroads (my word), "snapshots of a stream of consciousness, things

---

1. LAUGHLIN, Nicholas, *CRB: The Caribbean Review of Books*, No. 9 (August 2006): 21,26, Cozier to McCrea, Wednesday, March 14, 2007.

2. LAUGHLIN, Nicholas, "Taking note" in *CRB*, 21.



FIG. 5. — Christopher Cozier Detail from “Tropical Night” series. Ink, pencil & stamps on paper. Size variable 2005 - ongoing. Permission the artist. <http://tropicalnight.blogspot.com/> Courtesy the Brooklyn Museum.

felt more than understood” (Laughlin 2006: 26). After reading the quoted passages, my own view is that the artist is in search through writing, of another facet of the creative spirit, the poetic and powerful, created by his delineation and image of water, an island, human loss and a protagonist in the process of making “a small story about hunger and survival in a small place”.<sup>1</sup>

In conclusion, therefore, questions as to how rich and unexplored the theme of “slavery” is for Anglo-Caribbean artists, or, for that matter, correspondences and treatments between literary media no matter the genre, and, contemporary Caribbean visual culture, awaits extensive research and enquiry. Future writers may want to focus on the small but growing number of conceptual artists of David Boxer’s and Christopher Cozier’s generation some of whom, for example are: Petrona Morrison, Roberta Stoddard and Laura Facey from Jamaica, Annalee Davis, originally from Barbados who has now relocated to Trinidad and, Joscelyn Gardner from Barbados. More notable names from Jamaica’s younger generation include: Christopher Clare, Charles Campbell and K. Khalfani Ra.

#### *Glossary of Some of the Images Referenced and Appropriated*

1. Vol. I—Year 1496: Images of the *Madonna and Child with Donor* - an engraving after Mantegna’s *The Madonna della Vittoria*, Louvre, Paris.
2. Images of Indians being burned at the stake top right 1496 is an image of an *Indian being burned on a spit by Conquistadores*

---

1. These are some of my thoughts after reading Cozier’s imaginative pieces which are integral to the *Tropical Night* series.

- by Theodore DeBry for Bartolomeo da Las Casas's *A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies* 17<sup>th</sup> century edition.
3. Vol. II—Year 1654: X-Ray image of the femurs are the x-rays of broken bones from a mid-20<sup>th</sup> century manual on medical procedures in the artist's library collection.
  4. Image of the "Falling African" re-occurring several times throughout is taken from a study by Theodore Chasseriau, a 19<sup>th</sup> century French artist of colour.
  5. Vol. III—Year 1762 the reference title *Septima musculorum tabula* is a detail from a plate in Vesalius's *Anatomical Drawings*.
  6. Vol. III—Year 1762 Images of young black slave boys are taken from an engraving after a Jamaican photograph of 1857. The photographer is thought to be John Savage of Kingston, Jamaica [Identification by David Boxer].
  7. Vol. III—Year 1788: The image of The Crucifixion is based on the *Christ of San Placido* ca. 1632 by Velasquez, Prado, Madrid.
  8. Vol. III—Year 1790. The kneeling engraved figure represents Jonah [the whale's tail is barely visible] from a cover illustration of *The First Oratorio published in the New World, 1775 composed by the Jamaican Samuel Felsted, organist of St. Andrew Parish Church. The artist commissioned to do the illustration was Benjamin West and the engraving was done by Francisco Bartolozzi* [both artist and engraver from the Royal Academy, London].

*Works Cited*

- AUERBACH, Eric. *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*. German publication, 1946. English Translation, 1953.
- BAKHTINE, Mikhaïl. *La Poétique de Dostoïevski*. Traduit par Isabelle Kolutcheff. Paris: Editions du Seuil, n.d.
- BENITEZ-ROJO, Antonio. "Three Words Towards Creolization", in *Caribbean Creolization: Reflections on the Cultural Dynamics of Language, Literature and Identity*, Kathleen Balutansky and Agnes-Marie Sourieau eds. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1998.
- BENJAMIN, Walter. "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction", in *Walter Benjamin: Illuminations*, H. Arendt, ed. London, 1973.
- GATES, Henry Louis, Jr., and Charles T. Davis. *The Slave's Narrative*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.
- GILROY, Paul. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. Cambridge Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1993.
- HALL, Stuart. "The New Ethnicities", in *Ethnicity*, John Hutchinson and Anthony D. Smith eds. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1996.
- LEDENT, Bénédicte. "Slavery Revisited Through Vocal Kaleidoscopes: Polyphony in Novels by Fred D'Aguiar and Caryl Phillips", *Revisiting Slave Narratives / Les avatars contemporains des récits d'esclaves*. Judith Misrahi-Barak, ed. Montpellier: Service des publications de l'université Paul-Valéry, Montpellier III, 2005.
- MISRAHI-BARAK, Judith, ed. *Revisiting Slave Narratives / Les avatars contemporains des récits d'esclaves*. Montpellier: Service des publications de l'université Paul-Valéry, Montpellier III, 2005.
- OCVIRK, G. et al. *Art Fundamentals: Theory and Practice*. Tenth Edition. New York and Boston: McGraw Hill, 2006.

- OWENS, Craig. "The Allegorical Impulse: Towards a Theory of Postmodernism", in *Art in Theory 1900-2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, eds. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005.
- POUPEYE, Veerle. *David Boxer Interviewed*. March to June 2000. Privately printed publication of Limited Edition.
- PRATT, Mary Louise. *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*. London and New York: Routledge, 1992.
- SCHARFMAN, Ronnie. "Africa Has Her Mouth On Moses: Zora Neale Hurston Rewrites The Exodus Narrative", in *Revisiting Slave Narratives: Les avatars contemporains des récits d'esclaves*, Judith Misrahi-Barak, ed. Montpellier: Service des publications de l'université Paul-Valéry, Montpellier III, 2005.
- SCOTT, Sam. *Thresholds: Contemporary Art From the Caribbean*. Exhibition catalogue. Peabody Essex Museum, Salem Massachusetts, 2005.
- SMITH MCCREA, Rosalie. *Antislavery and British Painting of the Black, 1760-1841*. Unpublished doctoral thesis. The University of Manchester, England, 2001.
- SOTO GARCIA, Isabel. "The Threshold as Organizing Principle in Neo-Slave Narrative", in *Revisiting Slave Narratives: Les avatars contemporains des récits d'esclaves*, Judith Misrahi-Barak, ed. Montpellier: Service des publications de l'université Paul-Valéry, Montpellier III, 2005.
- THOMPSON, Della, ed. *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English*. Ninth Edition. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995.
- \*\*E-mail letter with attachments from Christopher Cozier to Rosalie Smith McCrea dated Tuesday 3<sup>rd</sup> and Wednesday 4<sup>th</sup> March, 2007.



*Les Carnets du Cerpac* n° 6, 2007, 439-449.

## SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

### *Primary Works*

#### Just a Few Among the Antebellum and Postbellum Original Slave Narratives

BIBB, Henry. *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, an American Slave*. 1850. New Hampshire: Ayer Company Publishers, Inc., 1991.

CRAFTS, Hannah. *The Bondswoman's Narrative*. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., ed. London: Virago, 2002.

DOUGLASS, Frederick. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*. In *The Classic Slave Narratives*, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., ed. 1845. New York: Penguin Books, 1987.

EQUIANO, Olaudah. *The Interesting narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African*. In *The Classic Slave Narratives*, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., ed. 1789. New York: Penguin Books, 1987.

GRONNIOSAW, James Albert Ukawsaw. *A Narrative of the Most Remarkable Particulars in the Life of James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, An African Prince, Written by Himself*. (c1770). In Potkay, Adam and



Sandra Burr, eds. *Black Atlantic Writers of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century*. New York: St Martin's Press, 1995.

JACOBS, Harriet. *Incidents in the life of a slave girl*. In *The Classic Slave Narratives*, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., ed. 1861. New York: Penguin Books, 1987.

PRINCE, Mary. *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.

WASHINGTON, Booker T. *Up from Slavery*. c1901. Norton, 1995.

WILSON, Harriet. *Our Nig*. Gates, Henry Louis, Jr., ed. 1859. London: Allison & Busby, 1984.

Fictionalized Neo-Slave Narratives—and a few other related works too

ALEXANDER, Elizabeth. *The Venus Hottentot*. Graywolf Press, 2004.

BRADLEY, David. *The Chaneyville Incident*. New York: Avon Books, 1982.

BRAND, Dionne. *At the Full and Change of the Moon*. Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf Canada, 1999.

BRATHWAITE, Edward. *Rights of Passage*. London: Oxford University Press, 1967.

BRINK, André. *Chain of Voices*. Morrow & Co, 1982.

BUTLER, Octavia. *Kindred*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1988.

CHAMOISEAU, Patrick. *L'esclave vieil homme et le molosse*. Paris: Gallimard 1997.

CHASE-RIBOUD, Barbara. *Hottentot Venus*. Doubleday, 2004.

CLIFF, Michelle. *Free Enterprise*. New York: Dutton, 1993.

CONDÉ, Maryse. *Moi, Tituba, sorcière noire de Salem*. Paris: Mercure de France, 1986.

- D'AGUIAR, Fred. *The Longest Memory*. London: Chatto & Windus, 1994.
- D'AGUIAR, Fred. *Feeding the Ghosts*. London: Chatto & Windus, 1997.
- D'AGUIAR, Fred. *Bloodlines*. London: Chatto and Windus, 2000.
- DABYDEEN, David. *Turner: New and Selected Poems*. London: Cape, 1994.
- DABYDEEN, David. *A Harlot's Progress*. 1999. London: Vintage, 2000.
- DURHAM, David Anthony. *Walk through Darkness*. Doubleday, 2002.
- EAKINS, Patricia. *The Marvelous Adventures of Pierre Baptiste, Father and Mother, First and Last*. New York: New York University Press, 1999.
- ELLISON, Ralph. *Invisible Man*. 1952. New York: Vantage International Edition, 1990.
- GAINES, Ernest. *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*. Doubleday, 1971.
- GARCÍA, Cristina. *Monkey Hunting*. 2003. New York: Ballantine Books, 2004.
- GILROY, Beryl. *Stedman and Joanna — A Love in Bondage*. New York: Vantage Press, 1991.
- GILROY, Beryl. *Inkle & Yarico*. Leeds: Peepal Tree Press, 1996.
- GLISSANT, Édouard. *Le Quatrième siècle*. Paris: Seuil, 1964.
- GREY-JOHNSON, Nana. *I of Ebony*. The Gambia: Vinasha, 1997.
- HALEY, Alex. *Roots*. 1976. London: Vintage, 1991.
- HAYDEN, Robert E. "Middle Passage". *Phylon*, 6 (1945): 247-253.
- HEARNE, John. *The Sure Salvation*. St Martins Press, 1982.
- HERBSTEIN, Manu. *Ama: A Story of the Atlantic Slave Trade*. Ereads.com, 2002.
- JOHNSON, Charles. *Oxherding Tale*. 1982. New York: Grove Press, 1984.
- JOHNSON, Charles. *Middle Passage*. New York: Macmillan, 1990.
- JOHNSON, Charles. *Soulcatcher*. New York: Harvest, 2001.

- JONES, Edward P. *The Known World*. New York: Harper Collins, 2003.
- JONES, Gayl. *Corregidora*. 1975. Boston: Beacon, 1986.
- MCCAFFERTY, Kate. *Testimony of an Irish Slave Girl*. New York: Viking, 2002.
- MCCAULEY, Robbie. "Sally's Rape", in *Moon Marked and Touched by the Sun: Plays By African-American Women*, Sydné Mahone, ed. New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1994.
- MAJOR, Clarence. "The Slave Trade: View from the Middle Passage". *African American Review*, 28 (Spring 1994): 11-22.
- MARSHALL, Paule. *The Chosen Place, the Timeless People*. Harper Mass Market Paperbacks, 1976.
- MORRISON, Toni. *Beloved*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1987.
- NELSON, Marilyn. *Fortune's Bones: The Manumission Requiem*. Notes and annotations by Pamela Espeland. Asheville, North Carolina: Front Street, 2004.
- PARKS, Susan Lori. "Venus". Theatre Communications Group, 1997.
- PERRY, Phyllis. *Stigmata*. 1998. London: Piatkus, 1999.
- PHILLIPS, Caryl. *Cambridge*. London: Bloomsbury, 1991.
- PHILLIPS, Caryl. *Crossing the River*. London: Picador, 1994.
- RANDALL, Alice. *The Wind Done Gone*. Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2001.
- REED, Ishmael. *Flight to Canada*. New York: Scribner, 1976.
- SCHWARTZ-BART, Simone, et André SCHWARTZ-BART. *Un Plat de porc aux bananes vertes*. Paris: Le Seuil, 1967.
- SCHWARTZ-BART, André. *La mulâtresse solitude*. Paris: Le Seuil, 1996.
- STRAIGHT, Susan. *A Million Nightingales: A Novel*. New York: Pantheon Books, 2006.
- STYRON, William. *Confessions of Nat Turner*. 1967. New York: Vintage International Editions, 1992.

- TADEMI, Lalita. *Cane River*. Warner Books, 2002.
- WALCOTT, Derek. *Dream on Monkey Mountain and Other Plays*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1970.
- WALKER, Margaret. *Jubilee*. Boston & New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1966.
- WIDEMAN, John E. *The Island: Martinique*. Washington, D.C.: the National Geographic Society, 2003.
- WILLIAMS, Sherley Anne. *Dessa Rose*. New York: Berkeley Books, 1987.
- WILSON, August. *Gem of the Ocean*. New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2006.
- WILSON, August. *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*. New York: Plume, 1988.
- WILSON, August. *The Piano Lesson*. New York: Plume, 1990.
- WRIGHT, Richard. *Uncle Tom's Children*. 1938. New York: Harper Perennial, 1993.
- WRIGHT, Richard. *Native Son*. 1940. London: Picador, 1995.
- X, Malcom. *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, with the assistance of Alex Haley. 1965. London: Penguin, 1968.

### *Secondary Works*

#### On Slavery, the Slave Trade and Slave Revolts: a few reminders

- APTHEKER, Herbert. *American Negro Slave Revolts*. New York: International Publishers, 1963.
- BECKLES, Hilary. *Black Rebellion in Barbados: The Struggle Against Slavery, 1627-1838*. Antilles: Bridgetown, 1984.
- BECKLES, Hilary. *White Servitude and Black Slavery in Barbados, 1627-1715*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1989.
- BECKLES, Hilary and Verene SHEPHERD, eds. *Caribbean Slavery in the Atlantic World*. Kingston: Ian Randle Publishers, 2000.

- BERGMAN, Peter M. *The Chronological History of the Negro in America*. New York: Harper & Row, 1969.
- BLACKBURN, Robin. *The Making of New World Slavery: From the Baroque to the Modern—1492-1800*. Blackwells, 1997.
- FRANKLIN, John Hope. *From Slavery to Freedom*. New York, Knopf, 1988.
- FRYER, Peter. *Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain*. London: Pluto Press, 1984.
- LOVEJOY, Paul E., ed. *Identity in the Shadow of Slavery*. London: Continuum, 2000.
- THOMAS, Hugh. *The Slave Trade*. London: Picador, 1997.
- WALVIN, James. *Black Ivory: A History of British Slavery*. London: Harper Collins, 1992.
- WILLIAMS, Eric. *Capitalism and Slavery*. 1942. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994.
- WOOD, Peter H. *Black Majority*. New York: Norton, 1975.

#### Books, essays and articles<sup>1</sup>

- ANDREWS, William. *To Tell a Free Story: The First Century of Afro-American Autobiography, 1760-1865*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986.
- ANDREWS, William, ed. *African American Autobiography: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1993.
- BAL, Mieke, Jonathan CREWE and Leo SPITZER, eds. *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present*. Hanover, NH and London: University Press of New England, 1999.
- BAUCOM, Ian. "Specters of the Atlantic". *South Atlantic Quarterly* 100 (Winter 2001): 61-82.

---

1. Specific books, essays and articles about particular writers have generally not been included here, but can be found in the papers about those authors, in the footnotes for instance, or in the papers' bibliographies.

- BERRY, Mary and John W. BLASSINGAME. *Long Memory: The Black Experience in America*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982.
- BEAULIEU, Elizabeth Ann. *Black Women Writers and the American Neo-Slave Narrative: Femininity Unfettered*. Greenwood Press, 1999.
- BELL, Bernard. *The Afro-American Novel and its tradition*. Amherst: U of Massachussets Press, 1987.
- BOIME, Albert. *The Art of Exclusion: Representing Blacks in the Nineteenth Century*. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Press, 1990.
- BRAND, Dionne. *A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging*. Toronto: Doubleday Canada, 2001.
- CLARKE, George Elliott. *Odysseys Home: Mapping African-Canadian Literature*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002.
- CUDER-DOMÍNGUEZ, Pilar. "African Canadian Writing and the Narration(s) of Slavery". *Essays on Canadian Writing* 79 (2003): 55-75.
- D'AGUIAR, Fred. "The Last Essay About Slavery". In *The Age of Anxiety*, Sarah Dunant and Roy Porter, eds. London: Virago, 1996; 125-147.
- DABYDEEN, David. *Hogarth's Blacks: Images of Blacks in Eighteenth Century English Art*. Mundelstrup: Dangaroo, 1985.
- DABYDEEN, David. *Hogarth, Walpole and Commercial Britain*. London: Hansib, 1987.
- DAVIS, Charles and GATES, Henry Louis, Jr., eds. *The Slave's Narrative*. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1985.
- DU BOIS, W.E.B. *The Souls of Black Folk*. Reprinted in *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Nellie Y. McKay, eds. 1903. New York: W.W. Norton, 1997; 613-740.
- DUNANT, Sarah and Roy PORTER, eds. *The Age of Anxiety*. London: Virago, 1996.

- ECKSTEIN, Lars. *Re-Membering the Black Atlantic - On the Poetics and Politics of Literary Memory*. Cross-Cultures 84. Amsterdam & New York: Rodopi, 2006.
- FABRE, Geneviève and Robert O'Meally, eds. *History and Memory in African American Culture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994.
- GATES, Henry Louis Jr., *The Signifying Monkey*. New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988.
- GATES, Henry Louis Jr., and Charles T. DAVIS. *The Slave's Narrative*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985.
- GATES, Henry Louis Jr., and Carl PEDERSEN, eds. *Black Imagination and the Middle Passage*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.
- GILROY, Paul. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1993.
- GILROY, Paul. *Small Acts: Thoughts on the Politics of Black Cultures*. London: Serpent's Tail Press, 1993.
- GLAUDE, Eddie S. *Exodus! Religion, Race and Nation in Early Nineteenth-Century Black America*. Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 2000.
- GRAHAM, Maryemma, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to the African American Novel*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.
- GYSSLS, Kathleen. *Sages sorcières? Révision de la mauvaise mère dans Beloved (Toni Morrison), Praisesong for the Widow (Paule Marshall), et Moi, Tituba, sorcière noire de Salem (Maryse Condé)*. New York: America University Press, 2001.
- HAMILTON, Cynthia S. "Revisions, Rememories and Exorcisms: Toni Morrison and the Slave Narrative". *Journal of American Studies*. 30 (1996): 429-445.
- HANDLEY, George B. *Postslavery Literatures of the Americas: Family Pictures in Black and White*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2000.

- HARMS, Robert. *The Diligent. A Voyage through the Worlds of the Slave Trade*. New York, NY: Basic Books, 2002.
- HARRIS, Wilson. *Tradition, the Writer and Society*. London: New Beacon, 1967.
- HIRSCH, Marianne. "Past Lives: Postmemories in Exile", in *Exile and Creativity: Signposts, Travelers, Outsiders, Backward Glances*, Susan Rubin Suleiman, ed. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1998; 418-446.
- HIRSCH, Marianne. "Surviving Images: Holocaust Photographs and the Work of Postmemory". *Yale Journal of Criticism*. 14:1 (2001): 5-37.
- JOHNSON, Charles. *Being & Race. Black Writing since 1970*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988.
- LEDENT, Bénédicte. *Caryl Phillips*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002.
- LIONNET, Françoise. *Autobiographical Voices: Race, Gender, Self-Portraiture*. New York: Cornell University Press, 1989.
- MCDONNALD, Sharon and Gordon FYFE, eds. *Theorizing Museums: Representing Identity and Diversity in a Changing World*. Blackwell Publishers: The Sociological Review, 1996.
- MCDOWELL, Deborah E. and Arnold RAMPERSAD, eds. *Slavery and the Literary Imagination*. Baltimore: The John Hopkins Press, 1989.
- MISRAHI-BARAK, Judith, ed. *Revisiting Slave Narratives*. Coll. Les Carnets du Cerpac n° 2. Montpellier: Service des publications université Paul-Valéry, 2005.
- MITCHELL, Angelyn. *The Freedom to Remember: Narrative, Slavery, and Gender in Contemporary Black Women's Fiction*. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2002.
- MORRISON, Toni. "Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature," *Michigan Quarterly Review* 28 (Winter 1989): 1-34.



- MORRISON, Toni. *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1992.
- NORA, Pierre. "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Memoire". In *History and Memory in African American Culture*, Geneviève Fabre and Robert O'Meally, eds. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994.
- OLNEY, James. "'I was born': Slave Narratives, their Status as Autobiography and Literature". In *The Slave's Narrative*, Davis, Charles and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., eds. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1985; 148-174.
- PHILLIPS, Caryl. *The Atlantic Sound*. London: Faber, 2001.
- PHILLIPS, Caryl. *A New World Order*. London: Secker & Warburg, 2001.
- POTKAY, Adam and Sandra BURR, eds. *Black Atlantic Writers of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century*. New York: St Martin's Press, 1995.
- PRATT, Mary Louise. *Imperial Eyes. Travel Writing and Transculturation*. London and New York: Routledge, 1992.
- RICE, Alan. *Radical Narratives of the Black Atlantic*. London: Continuum, 2003.
- ROCHMANN, Marie-Christine. *L'esclave fugitif dans la littérature antillaise. Sur la déclive du morne*. Paris: Karthala, 2000.
- ROSELLO, Mireille. *Littérature et identité créole aux Antilles*. Paris: Karthala, 1992.
- RUSHDY, H. A. *Neo-Slave Narratives: Studies in the Social Logic of a Literary Form*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999.
- RUSHDY, H. A. *Remembering Generations: Race and Family in Contemporary African American Fiction*. University of North Carolina Press, 2001.
- SALDÍVAR, José David. *The Dialectics of Our America: Genealogy, Cultural Critique, and Literary History*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1991.

- SHARPE, Jenny. *Ghosts of Slavery. A Literary Archaeology of Black Women's Lives*. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2003.
- SHAW, Gwendolyn DuBois. *Seeing the Unspeakable: The Art of Kara Walker*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2004.
- SOTO GARCIA, Isabel. "Form as Ideology: The Antebellum Slave Narrative". In *Popular Texts in English: New Perspectives*, Mora, Lucía and Antonio Ballesteros, eds. Cuenca: Ediciones de la Universidad de Castilla-La Mancha, 2001; 103-111.
- SPILLERS, Hortense. "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book." *Diacritics* (Summer 1987): 65-81.
- STEPTO, Robert B. *From Behind the Veil: A Study of Afro-American Narrative*. 1979. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1991.
- STERN, Julia. "Excavating Genre in *Our Nig*", *American Literature* 67 (September 1995): 439-466.
- STILZ, Gerhard, ed. *Colonies, Missions, Cultures in the English-Speaking World: General and Comparative Studies*. Tübingen: Stauffenburg, 2001.
- WOOD, Marcus. *Blind Memory: Visual Representations of Slavery in England and America, 1780-1865*. Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2000.
- WOODARD, Helena. *African-British Writing in the Eighteenth Century: The Politics of Race and Reason*. Greenwood Press, 1999.



*Les Carnets du Cerpac* n° 6, 2007, 451-458.

## CONTRIBUTORS

*William Etter* Ph.D, is an Assistant Professor in the School of Humanities and Languages at Irvine Valley College where he teaches courses on dramatic literature and multicultural literature. He has published articles on race in the short stories of Edgar Allan Poe, on Civil War literature, on the eighteenth-century Black clergyman Lemuel Haynes, and on David Walker.

*Wendy Harding* obtained a PhD from the University of Connecticut in 1985 and an H.D.R. from the University of Paris-Sorbonne in 1999. She is currently Professor of English at the University of Toulouse, France, where she is co-director of the North American Research Group (G.E.N.A.). She has written extensively on Medieval English literature and contemporary American literature. She has published a book on *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (under her previous name, Clein) and co-authored with Jacky Martin *A World of Difference: An Inter-Cultural Study of Toni Morrison's Nov-*

els (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1994). She is currently working on a study of alterity in contemporary American literature.

*Anna Hartnell* has recently completed her PhD in American literature at Goldsmiths College, University of London. Her project is entitled “*Exodus* as postcolonial narrative: excavating the promised land in religious rhetoric of ‘the elect’ in the United States”. Her research centres on the intersections between race and religion in American writing, and combines interests in the cultural histories of the black and Jewish diasporas and the ways in which we might view the United States in a postcolonial context. She is now teaching at the University of Birmingham.

*Dinah Holtzman* is currently a Ph.D. candidate in the program of Visual and Cultural Studies at the University of Rochester. She has also received a Master’s degree in Cinema Studies from New York University and a Master’s Degree in Art History from the State University of New York, Purchase. Her Master’s thesis explored the artistic career of Amrita Sher-Gil the founding figure of Indian Modern art. She also attended the Whitney Museum Independent Study Program as a studio artist in 1995. Dinah has taught an introductory Modern Art survey course as well as other classes on “Bollywood Cinema” and “Passing Narratives in Contemporary Film.” She is currently developing her dissertation that is focused on representations of race in contemporary American art.

*Iris Nicole Johnson* is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Literature and Languages at Texas A&M University-

Commerce. She received her B.A. and M.A. from Texas A&M University-Kingsville and has an interest in exploring the ways in which modern literature addresses multi-ethnic issues and is currently doing dissertation research on contemporary slave narratives. She has pursued professional development by presenting her work at various conferences and recently had a review essay entitled *Public Exposure: Lelchuk's American Mischief and Ziff: A Life?* published. She is also graduate assistant editor of the *Philip Roth Studies* journal.

*Mélanie Joseph-Vilain* read English at Aix-Marseille I. In 2003, she defended a doctoral thesis on “(Af)filiation and Writing in Five Novels by André Brink: *Looking on Darkness, Rumours of Rain, An Act of Terror, Imaginings of Sand* and *Devil's Valley*”. She is a Lecturer at the Université de Bourgogne. Her fields of interest include Southern African Literatures (South Africa, Zimbabwe), translation in literature and issues of linguistic interference.

*Claude Julien* (Professor Emeritus, université de Tours) started research on African-American fiction as a social discourse with his dissertation « L'Enfance et l'adolescence chez les romanciers afro-américains, 1853-1969 » (université de Paris VIII, 1981). He has taught American as well as African-American studies at the Universities of Le Mans and Tours in France, as well as at several American universities as an exchange professor. He has contributed articles to a number of journals, and edited or co-edited collections of essays on Jean Toomer (*Ellipses*), John Edgar Wideman (*Callaloo*) and African-American detective fiction (*CRAFT-2*).

His most recent contribution is the editing of a collection "Reading Percival Everett: European Perspectives" (CRAFT-4). He is a member of the CAAR committee.

*Barbara Lewis* (Associate Professor) is the Director of the William Monroe Trotter Institute for the Study of Black History and Culture at the University of Massachusetts-Boston, where she holds a joint appointment in the Departments of Africana Studies and English. As a theatre historian, she has published on lynching and performance, minstrelsy, and the black arts movement of the sixties. As a playwright, her work has been presented at festivals and on professional stages nationally and internationally. As a Francophone scholar, she co-translated *Faulkner, Mississippi* by Edouard Glissant, which was published by Farrar, Straus & Giroux (1999). Dr. Lewis has taught at City College, Lehman, and New York University. Prior to being named Director of the Trotter Institute, she was Chair of the Department of Theatre at the University of Kentucky.

*Stephanie Li* is currently an assistant professor in the Department of English at the University of Rochester. She received her Ph.D. in English Language and Literature in May 2005 and her M.F.A. in fiction writing in 2003, both from Cornell University. In 1998, Stephanie graduated from Stanford University with honors and distinction. Her undergraduate thesis written through the Department of Comparative Literature was a comparative study of the works of Fyodor Dostoevsky and Ralph Ellison.

Stephanie's dissertation, "Resistance Through the Body: Power, Representation, and the Enslaved Woman," is both a historical study of black women in antebellum slavery and

a literary analysis involving such authors as Harriet Jacobs, Hannah Crafts, William Faulkner and Gayl Jones. This project explores tactics of resistance employed by enslaved women and analyzes opposition as both a form of bodily resistance and as a set of ideological strategies involving literary representation. Stephanie is currently preparing her dissertation for publication while pursuing other research interests in literary representations of women and war and emerging trends in autobiographical narratives.

*Marta Lysik* holds an M.A. in English and a B.A. in Journalism. Currently she is a doctoral candidate at Humboldt University in Berlin, Germany, writing a dissertation on the intersections of religion and gender in Louise Erdrich's fiction. Her research interests include contemporary American literature, especially multicultural American literatures, American college novel, neo-slave narratives, California literature, Caribbean literature, religion in literature.

*Ana Nunes* completed her PhD in November 2005 at University College Dublin. Her thesis is entitled "Representations of History in the Fiction of African American Women Writers". She has published several essays on African American women writers. Recent publications include articles on authors such as Paule Marshall, Gayl Jones, and Sherley Anne Williams. Her current research includes a monograph based on her doctoral dissertation. She is also co-editing a volume of essays which explores the relationship between oral traditions and the written word. Ana Nunes is a lecturer in the School of English at University College Dublin, where she teaches American literature both at undergraduate and postgraduate levels.



*Ada Savin* is Professor of American Studies at the University of Versailles, France. She is the author and editor of several books and articles in the field of African American, Hispanic and Jewish American fiction and autobiography. Her latest publications include *Journey into Otherness: Essays in American History, Culture and Literature* (Amsterdam University Press, 2005), *Villes d'exil* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2003) and (with Paule Lévy) *Philip Roth (Profils américains, Montpellier III, 2002)*. She is currently at work on a book about American autobiography.

*Rosalie Smith McCrea* is an art historian of Jamaican origin. She received her B.A. (Hon.) and M.A. from Carleton University in Ottawa, Canada, and, her Ph.D from the University of Manchester in England (2001). Her area of specialization is concerned with the representation of Blacks within British visual culture of the eighteenth century during the period of Antislavery. Rosalie has taught art history as a part-time lecturer at Carleton, the University of British Columbia, Vancouver, and at the University of Ottawa. She has also taught art history at the Edna Manley College for the Visual and Performing Arts in Kingston, Jamaica. She also worked as Head of Education and as Assistant Curator at the National Gallery of Jamaica during the 1980s. Since obtaining her doctorate, her interests have extended to the area of Atlantic Studies and the critical analysis of visual culture produced within the colonial and post-colonial Caribbean contexts. She presently teaches art history on contract at Kuwait University in the Gulf.

*Željka Švrljuga* , Dr. art. Associate Professor of American Studies

at the University of Bergen, Norway since 1995. Research interests and publications are divided between the rhetoric of pain in literature and arts (hysteria, melancholy and physical pain in women's writing/painting), and the neo-slave narrative genre. Current research: parody and the carnivalesque in neo-slave narratives; postmodernist tendencies in the slave-narrative novel; the Black Atlantic and cultural hybridity; and writing black bodies/writing difference.

*Kerry-Jane Wallart* wrote her dissertation on Derek Walcott's drama as well as several articles on both Derek Walcott's poetry and drama. She now works on various authors from the Caribbean (Fred d'Aguiar, Wilson Harris, etc). She is a former student of the École normale supérieure (Ulm) and the Sorbonne (Paris IV), and is currently a Maître de conférences at the University of Paris IX-Dauphine.

*Abigail Ward* is Lecturer in Postcolonial Studies at Nottingham Trent University. She is finishing a monograph on representations of slavery in selected works of Caryl Phillips, David Dabydeen and Fred D'Aguiar, and has work published on Phillips's novels *Cambridge*, in *Perspectives on Endangerment*, ed. by Graham Huggan and Stephan Klasen (2005), and *Crossing the River*, published in *Moving Worlds*, 7: 1 (2007). She has an article on Dabydeen's poem "Turner" in *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 42: 1 (2007), and a paper exploring his novel *A Harlot's Progress* published in the *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 43: 1 (2007). Forthcoming work includes a chapter on "psychological formulations of the postcolonial" in the *Routledge Companion to Postcolonial Lit-*

*erature* (ed. by John McLeod, 2007). Other research interests include visual representations of slavery and the ethics of memorialising this past.

## ABSTRACTS

### **William ETTER: Legacies of Enslavement and Emancipation: American Slave Narratives and August Wilson's Plays.**

In a collection of ten plays, August Wilson has dramatized African-American life in each decade of the twentieth century. This paper argues that Wilson's dramatic representation of slavery and its legacies is related not only to the historical experience of enslavement but also to antebellum African-American slave narratives. By juxtaposing the specific presentations of African-American history and culture in *Gem of the Ocean*, *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, and *The Piano Lesson* with American slave narratives, we can see Wilson has constructed contemporary dramatic works that parallel these nineteenth-century texts and thus stand as present-day slave narratives. This essay will consider these three plays alongside three of the most widely read slave narratives in the United States: Frederick Douglass' *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845), James W.C. Pennington's *The Fugitive Blacksmith* (1849),

and Henry Bibb's *Narrative of the Life of Henry Bibb* (1850). Formally, Wilson's plays revisit some of the most characteristic elements of the classic slave narratives, including these narratives' typical critiques of the slave system and their representation of "freedom." Rhetorically, the goals of affirming the human and cultural value of African Americans through oral and physical, extra-linguistic expression are also comparable.

**Wendy HARDING: The Remains of the Slave Narrative in Marilyn Nelson's *Fortune's Bones: A Manumission Requiem*.**

Marilyn Nelson's volume of poems, *Fortune's Bones: A Manumission Requiem* (2004), was commissioned to commemorate Fortune, a Connecticut slave who died in 1798. His master, a doctor, dissected him in order to use his skeleton for anatomical study. Until scientists and historians identified the skeleton as Fortune's, it was an anonymous exhibit in Connecticut's Mattatuck museum. Much of what was discovered about the slave's life is told through the book's "paratexts"—the copious notes and images that accompany the poems. Through the paratexts, and through various motifs appearing in the poems, Nelson's book evokes the slave narrative, but it appropriates elements of an outmoded form to say something new. Rejecting the suspense and linearity of the slave narratives, the poems imitate the form of the requiem mass. They also mock the empirical epistemology of the slave narratives, downplaying the slave's material existence in order to endorse the spiritual life. Like *Beloved*, Nelson's book moves beyond the slavery period to deal with the problem of surviving history's traumas. This contemporary African American requiem can be seen as a kind of ritual exorcism designed to liberate readers from the horror of the past and put Fortune's story to rest.

**Anna HARTNELL: Narrating slavery, narrating America: freedom as conversion in *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*.**

Malcolm X's *Autobiography* casts his life in the shape of a slave narrative. Its inexorable move towards freedom charts a path away from a corrupt American Christianity and instead forges spiritual identifications with the world's non-white nations. This alternative spiritual geography is captured in the figure of Egypt, the symbolic meeting point of African and Muslim worlds. This essay explores the series of conversions that structure *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, and assesses the extent to which Malcolm truly escapes from America and its religious culture. Through an examination of the two major religious transformations in Malcolm's life, I suggest that the text's invocations of "freedom" are irrevocably tied to a sense that the moral vision of Islam projects a route out of America's long history of slavery.

**Dinah HOLTZMAN: "Save the Trauma for your Mama": Kara Walker, *The Art World's Beloved*.**

In the 1990s Kara Walker was the focus of contentious public debate around contemporary black artists' recuperation of racist imagery. Elder artists Betye Saar and Howardena Pindell denounced Walker and her art as products of a "plantation system and mentality." Viewing the conflict between the three women as a dialogue-as-battle between two generations of female artists reframes the debate as an intriguing subversion of the white male Modernist artistic cliché "In art one must kill one's fathers." This essay reexamines the debate through the lens of Mae Henderson's model of black women writer's tradition as dialogism, arguing that Toni Morrison's *Beloved* can be read as inverting the classical psychoanalytic

Oedipal complex, recast with three black women. Rather than a battle between father and son for access to the mother's body, *Beloved* details the struggles of a mother and her two daughters to claim ownership over one another in the wake of slavery. Because *Beloved* posits a struggle to come to terms with the ghosts of slavery and ancestors, I propose that the struggles between Walker, Saar, and Pindell should be interpreted as an inevitable dialogue between generations about how to negotiate histories and representations of slavery and ancestral trauma. I argue that it is not just Walker's grotesque tableaux that performs a "return of the repressed" but that the artist has chosen to embody a Beloved-like persona in her role as controversial art celebrity, so that, like Morrison's *Beloved*, Walker attempts a metaphorical matricide of her artistic mothers.

**Iris JOHNSON: Contemporary Ownership: the Master, the Slave, and the Self in Edward P. Jones's *The Known World*.**

In the past, slave narratives served to critique and reconstruct a given identity; contemporary applications of this genre demonstrates the growth of this identity as it grapples with questions of silence and authority. The question of silence is multi-layered in that it addresses many of the following: the silence of critics concerning certain aspects of the slave narrative, the silence of characters on the institution of slavery, and the silence of African American writers on the contemporary incorporation of this literary inheritance. The question of authority is also one that can be examined from different angles: authority of the African American character, authority of the African American individual, and ultimately, the autho-

rity of the African American artist/writer. Edward Jones's *The Known World* offer examples of how these elements function to inform and deform not only characters, but the African American literary community. The texts also reflect the critical shift of the slave narrative genre from a largely descriptive perspective of slavery to one that is more prescriptive in nature. Contemporary authors, like Jones, seem to view some of the silences incurred by slavery as ones that cannot and will not ever be articulated by anyone. However, this position is juxtaposed by another argument that of all writers, it is the African American who is best authorized to probe and communicate these silences.

**Mélanie JOSEPH-VILAIN: *A Chain of Voices*: a “masters and slaves” narrative.**

Because no less than thirty different narrators take turns to tell us the story of a slave revolt, *A Chain of Voices* can be read as Brink's attempts at revisiting the classical “slave narrative”, turning it into a polyphonic “masters and slaves” narrative in which everyone is given a say.

This article examines how this polyphonic, and even multi-focal, mode of narration enables Brink to write back to both classical slave narratives and to their twentieth-century counterparts, the neo-slave narratives. What it suggests is that although *A Chain of Voices* bears many resemblances to neo-slave narratives in terms of *form*, especially because of its recourse to polyphony, it is also extremely close to traditional slave narratives in terms of *function*, since by implicitly drawing parallels between slavery and apartheid, it seeks to convince readers of the necessity to fight such evils, and there-



fore also establish intertextual connections with contemporary accounts of life under apartheid.

**Claude JULIEN: *The Island Martinique: a Narrative of the Long Shadow of Slavery.***

The Homewood trilogy has established Wideman's reputation as a writer drawing — reconstructing — material from his own experience and family life, a creation process that of course also primarily applies to his memoirs. *The Island Martinique*, his third non-fiction book, resulted from a National Geographic commission "to go anywhere and write about it" — a carte blanche he has used freely to bring forth a challenging book (part diary, part fiction and part rumination) in which personal and historical matters merge or, rather, in which past inequities submerge, islandize the modern individual. Wideman has produced a new meditation that follows the probing of the effects of slavery denounced in *Fatheralong*. Whereas the earlier book focused on family relationships (the deleterious effects of past dehumanization on the rapports between fathers and sons) on American soil, *The Island Martinique* looks more generally at the long-lasting effects of slavery and racism on attitudes and psyches. World history is brought under consideration as the advent of Christianity is designated as the great divide at the origin of the "either/or" social stratification affecting modern societies.

**Barbara LEWIS: *Antebellum Revisitations: Insurrectionary Interventions in Sally's Rape and Kindred.***

Robbie McCauley in *Sally's Rape*, a performance piece, and

Octavia Butler in *Kindred*, a science fiction novel, cast a latter day look back at slavery, the motherlode of African American genealogy. In presenting slavery as a living legacy, both put their bodies into the experience, McCauley actually and Butler figuratively.

McCauley performs the role of Robbie, the embodied keeper of memory in *Sally's Rape*, who brings voices from the past into conversation with today. Dana, in *Kindred*, rides the lightning rod of time into yesterday and back to today, commuting to antebellum Maryland from California in the bicentennial year on a mission of intervening in the past to safeguard the present.

In the antebellum era, the black woman's body was so little valued in custom and in court that hardly anyone rallied to her defense when she was raped. The raped female slave who acts independently to counter slavery's assaults is the focus of both neo-slave narratives that foreground not just the vulnerability of the female slave but also her insurrectionary resolve to stop or undo the damage of slavery on her person.

**Stephanie LI: Racial Alliances in a White Neo-Slave Narrative: Susan Straight's *A Million Nightingales*.**

The subject matter and political import of neo-slave narratives lends itself to African American writers, but the imaginative possibilities of antebellum slave voices have also attracted the creativity of non-black authors. However, in the wake of the heated controversy surrounding William Styron's *Confessions of Nat Turner*, there has been a significant absence of white writers venturing into this politically fraught literary genre. Con-

sequently, Susan Straight's recent novel, *A Million Nightingales* marks an important foray into the growing body of neo-slave narratives.

Though Straight has adopted the perspective of black characters in many of her previous novels, *A Million Nightingales* is her first work narrated by an African American living in the antebellum South. Moinette is a young girl conceived through the rape of a female slave by a white planter. While the novel shares such prominent neo-slave narrative themes as concern with black female agency and the subjectivity of slave mothers, it is distinguished by its examination of interracial alliances and suggestive parallels between the condition of slaves and disenfranchised whites.

By examining critical links between persecuted groups including women of both races, homosexual men and Jews, *A Million Nightingales* suggests that antebellum slavery and the mores of nineteenth-century America entrapped a whole host of individuals. Slavery certainly left its deepest impress upon blacks, but in her exploration of the conventions governing gender roles and sexual behavior as well as the deep-seeded prejudices against non-white ethnic groups, Straight implies that bonds forged across categories of social identity foster both constructive resistance and lasting forms of community.

**Marta LYSIK: Multiple Trajectories of Slavery: Cristina Garcia's *Monkey Hunting* as a Trans-national Neo-Slave Narrative.**

The bicentennial anniversaries of slave trade abolition constitute a perfect context to reflect on the legacies and representations of chattel slavery in the 20th and 21st century. Contemporary renditions of slavery, i.e. neo-slave narratives, are numer-

ous and penned by writers across the globe, bent on revising and reclaiming oppressive historical moments. This article is informed by the “New Americanist” approach of inquiring into American literature, attempting to position America in a context of hemispheric, transnational and global terms embracing the hemisphere’s diversity and multiple migrations, rather than in a single national perspective. By analyzing Cristina García’s *Monkey Hunting*, I intend to show how the novel participates in emerging transnational paradigm of neo-slave narratives concerned with slavery under many guises, taking place in diverse timeframes, locations and cultures. This article strives to establish and inaugurate a variation of neo-slave narratives which responds to the burning issues and dilemmas of the modern day, a transnational neo-slave narrative. The transnational neo-slave narratives are novels set in modern or contemporary contexts, and are concerned with modern-day versions of slavery and their impact on modern-day subjects and societies worldwide.

**Ana NUNES: From the Fantastic to Magic Realism: The Spectral Presence in Phyllis Perry’s *Stigmata*.**

This paper will examine how Phyllis Perry’s *Stigmata* (1998) reworks traditional narrative devices in order to recreate a partially lost and fragmented history of the female slave. I will consider how Perry engages with the magical in order to rework the narrative model presented by Toni Morrison in *Beloved* (1987). In *Stigmata*, the protagonist’s journey is one from the fantastic, the estrangement from her family and society at large, to magical realism—signalled by the acceptance of the supernatural and her return to the community. In *Stigmata*,

Perry interrogates both the nature of reality and its representation, introducing an innovative narrative form that reflects an imaginative world where the boundaries between the earthly and the ghostly become blurred. I will examine how magical realism provides the necessary narrative strategy through which a lost history can be recreated and how the ancestral spectre can function as a means of translating the absences of African American history into tangible presences, revising the tradition of the ghost tale in the search for new modes of representation.

**Ada SAVIN: Rituals of re-memory in Paule Marshall's *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People*.**

Set on a fictive Caribbean island, *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People* (1969) branches out across three continents probing the effects of the past on a wide range of issues—the aftermath of slavery and colonialism, Black and Jewish Diasporas, post-colonial societies and First World relations. Well ahead of her time, Marshall explores interconnections between the local and the global in our transnational world.

This essay focuses on Marshall's extremely original evocation of the Middle Passage and notably on her interweaving of Black and Jewish diasporic destinies. It also argues that *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People* appears as a generically hybrid novel. If Marshall reworks some widely used tropes of the (neo)-slave narrative, she ultimately strays away from the canon and produces a unique, original fictional work.

Through a close analysis of the text, the article attempts to decipher the various layers of meaning underlying the persistence of rituals and haunted presences on Bourne Island.

While this imaginary place is a paradigm for impoverished, post-colonial countries it also acts as a resonance chamber, reverberating with the effects of past and present vicissitudes across continents. The novel is marked by the irreconcilable tension between cyclical and progressive conceptions of time, suggesting that the history and memory of this “repeating island” leave but little hope for redress and reconciliation.

**Rosalie SMITH McCREA: Postmodern Caribbean Image-Text Correspondences: Visual Constructions from David Boxer and Christopher Cozier.**

David Boxer's *The Black Books*, it is proposed in this essay, is an engagement in a “midrasic” form of visual exegesis, whereby the artist, in a formal visual sense, explores and deconstructs while at the same time illuminates upon the richness of Western cultural production as it co-existed with the cruelty and dehumanizing features of the human condition within the institution of British Atlantic Slavery. The artist achieves an ongoing commentary on fragmented and discursive narratives through the modern practices of mechanical reproduction and montage. Together with this proposition, my essay will argue that despite the differences in media (text vs. the image), *The Black Books* correspond more with features common to the neo-slave narrative novel than with the original slave narrative as a genre. Christopher Cozier's work, like Boxer's is conceptual and serial in nature. His work is defined around a signature subjectivity as observed in his “picturewriting”. I argue that Cozier in collaborating with writers, collides drawing with written ideas on the postmodern Caribbean scene that become visual, creating a kind of new genre which

is very hybrid and close to the “memoir”. Saidiya Hartman’s *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Route* (2007) a visual novel/commentary/memoir, comes to mind. In this sense, Cozier’s recent works, like Boxer’s also shares features in common with the neo-slave narrative as opposed to the traditional narrative.

**Željka ŠVRLJUGA: The Science/Fiction Carnival in Barbara Chase-Riboud’s *Hottentot Venus*.**

This article discusses Barbara Chase-Riboud’s redemption politics in *Hottentot Venus* (2003) through the prism of Bakhtin’s carnivalesque politics of contestation and reversal. With its dialogical structure of two contesting discourses—the scientific and the fictional—of which the former motivates the latter, the author transforms Sarah Baartman—the repressed object of history and scientific examination—into the subject of narrative. By carnivalesque inversion, the novel fronts the repressed half of the subject/object, master/slave, culture/nature, science/fiction, humanity/animality nexus, demonstrating that George Cuvier’s polygenetic racism that pathologizes African female sexuality is itself primitive and predatory in its scientific pursuit. The pronounced focus on the body, its parts and functions, scatology and obscenities included, transforms the text into a literary carnival, which relies on a general participation in debasing activities. In line with its politics of reversal the novel gives primacy to the cyclical time of rebirth and renewal before the linear time of history and science, demonstrating that carnival time is both progressive (utopian) in its subversive tendencies and conservative in its politics of preservation. The analysis shows how this dual carnivalesque quali-

ty functions at the level of the story, genre and textuality at large.

**Kerry-Jane WALLART: Derek Walcott's *Dream on Monkey Mountain*: crossroads, crosswords and cross-purposes, or the impossible straight line into freedom.**

In an account of Derek Walcott's *Dream on Monkey Mountain*, Errol Hill deems it « a tangled, incoherent piece ». Yet, the plot seems unrecondite enough: a poor Black man living in the mountains, Makak, goes to town and ends up in a jail. From there, along with his fellow-prisoners Tigre and Souris, he travels back to his « monkey » mountain and endeavours to recreate an ideal African state until he commits murder and renounces. Set under the sign of manumission and recounting thrilling adventures reminiscent of slave narratives, the play grapples with the possibility of escape. Nevertheless, the latter is taken to its utmost instability, providing indeed for a « tangled, incoherent piece », describing a mad circle rather than a straight line into freedom. *Dream on Monkey Mountain* is, as the title indicates, a dream, a reverie, a hypothetical marronage, a journey which goes nowhere. However, we will attempt to show to what extent the play merely draws upon a deviousness which was already there in traditional narratives, a genre also indebted to the picaresque tradition. A text dealing with passages, metamorphoses, the surprise of contingency, the mutability of the world, *Dream on Monkey Mountain* also points to an ontological and ideological absence. The final part of this paper will then scrutinize the ways in which linguistic predicaments and metaphysical uncertainties depart from the genre of slave narratives, taking the rebellion one step farther,



turning its back to didactic and moralizing discourses too far compromised with the white society.

**Abigail WARD: Postmemories of Slavery in Fred D'Aguiar's *Bloodlines*.**

In this essay I explore Fred D'Aguiar's long poem *Bloodlines* (2000). I shall consider why I believe *Bloodlines* is not merely, as several critics suggest, one of D'Aguiar's weaker texts, but makes an important contribution to his continuing concerns with the ethics of representing slavery and the remembrance of this past.

I shall suggest that much of the motivation behind the violent opening section of *Bloodlines* is derived from D'Aguiar's attempt to persuade his reader of the difficult nature of relationships between black and white people during the time of slavery and the ultimate failure of inter-racial love as a vehicle for transforming the legacies of this past. D'Aguiar indicates in *Bloodlines* that the trauma of slavery can never be entirely worked through; slavery, he repeatedly tells us, persists in the racism of today.

*Bloodlines* arguably offers the kind of postmemorial mourning suggested by Marianne Hirsch. Postmemory, as conceptualised by Hirsch, is not restricted to actual descendants of trauma but is expanded to include the "ethical" and multiple connections between twentieth- or twenty-first-century readers and the past of slavery. In the absence of living witnesses or accounts from slaves, and where history fails him in returning to the past of slavery, D'Aguiar is also compelled to creatively imagine this past.

## CERPAC

Centre d'études et de recherches sur les pays du Commonwealth / Research Center for Commonwealth Studies

This research center was created at Paul-Valéry University, Montpellier III in 1978. At first interested in African Studies (Cerpac), it later opened up to other countries of the Commonwealth in 1996 (Cerpanac). Then, in 2002, it became the Cerpac (Centre d'études et de recherches sur les pays du Commonwealth). Its members work in such various fields as Africa, Australia, the Caribbean or Canada . . . The Cerpac aims at organizing interdisciplinary research work in the field of Commonwealth civilizations and literatures written in English.

The Cerpac has a web site with information about the Centre, the publications and conferences:

<http://recherche.univ-montp3/mambo/cerpac>

*Ce centre de recherche a été créé à l'Université Paul-Valéry, Montpellier III en 1978. Tout d'abord intéressé par l'Afrique sous le sigle Cerpana, il s'est ensuite ouvert aux autres pays du Commonwealth, en devenant le Cerpanac en 1996. Puis, en 2002, le même centre devient Cerpac (Centre d'études et de recherches sur les pays du Commonwealth). En font partie des chercheurs dont les champs de recherche sont aussi bien l'Afrique que l'Australie, la Caraïbe ou le Canada . . . Le Cerpac se fixe comme objectifs l'organisation de recherches interdisciplinaires et inter-universitaires sur les littératures et les civilisations des pays du Commonwealth.*

Les informations sur le centre, les publications et les colloques passés et à venir sont sur le site:

<http://recherche.univ-montp3/mambo/cerpac>

LES CARNETS DU CERPAC

1 — *V. S. Naipaul: a World in Tension*

Textes réunis par Judith MISRAHI-BARAK

Montpellier, 2004 – 15 × 21 – 262 p.– ISBN 2-84269-618-2

2 — *Revisiting Slave Narratives. Les avatars contemporains des récits d’esclaves*

Textes réunis par Judith MISRAHI-BARAK

Montpellier, 2005 – 15 × 21 – 576 p.– ISBN 2-84269-648-4

3 — *Religious Writings & War. Les discours religieux et la guerre*

Textes réunis par Gilles TEULIÉ

Montpellier, 2006 – 15 × 21 – 458 p.– ISBN 2-84269-734-0

4 — *Transport(s) in the British Empire and the Commonwealth. Transport(s) dans l’Empire britannique et le Commonwealth*

Textes réunis par Michèle LURDOS et Judith MISRAHI-BARAK


Montpellier, 2007 – 15 × 21 – 510 p.– ISBN 2-84269-767-9

5 — *Sciences & Races*

Textes réunis par Gilles TEULIÉ

Montpellier, 2007 – 15 × 21 – 520 p.– ISBN 978-2-84269-794-5





Cet ouvrage a été mis en pages par les  
PRESSES UNIVERSITAIRES DE LA MÉDITERRANÉE  
(*université Paul-Valéry, Montpellier 3*)

publications@univ-montp3.fr

<http://publications.univ-montp3.fr>

Dépôt légal : 3<sup>e</sup> trimestre 2007

