



HAL
open science

Introduction

Judith Misrahi-Barak

► **To cite this version:**

Judith Misrahi-Barak. Introduction. Judith Misrahi-Barak. Revisiting Slave Narratives 1. Les avatars contemporains des récits d'esclaves, 2, Presses universitaires de la Méditerranée, pp.11-18, 2004, Les Carnets du Cerpac, 9782842696481. hal-03723337

HAL Id: hal-03723337

<https://hal.science/hal-03723337>

Submitted on 27 Jul 2022

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.

Les Carnets du Cerpac n° 2, 2005, 11-18.

INTRODUCTION

Judith MISRAHI-BARAK
Université Paul Valéry, Montpellier III

This collection of essays springs from an international conference held at Paul Valéry University, Montpellier III, in April 2003, organised by the Cerpac (Centre d'étude et de recherche sur les pays du Commonwealth / Research Centre on the Commonwealth). First and foremost, I would first like to address my warmest thanks to Fred D'Aguiar and Caryl Phillips for accepting my invitation and initiating a true interaction between the critical and the creative fields. Fred D'Aguiar's keynote address opened the conference and put it on the right track; the reading by Caryl Phillips, who was granted the Commonwealth Writers Prize in 2004, a year after our conference, for the very book he read an extract from, gave it its proper conclusion. My gratitude also goes to Glenn Ligon and his gallery in New York for letting me use one of his "Runaways" as a frame for the poster of the conference and the cover of the proceedings.

The conference was made possible thanks to the support of the University and particularly the Conseil scientifique, the Équipe d'accueil, as well as the Pôle universitaire européen du Languedoc-Roussillon. My thanks also go to the Centre régional des lettres Languedoc-Roussillon, for their generosity and hospitality in hosting the conference in the château de Castries. Moreover, the conference could not have been held without the active help of the members of the Cerpac — Chantal Kwast-Greff, Michèle Lurdos and Gilles Teulié.

The list of thanks would of course not be complete without mentioning my gratitude to all the participants for their presence, friendship and enthusiasm, as well as for the very high quality of their papers.

I also want to add that the conference was held at a particularly trying time, exactly two weeks after the beginning of the war in Irak, and although the war was constantly in our thoughts throughout the three days, all the participants were extremely sensitive to the symbolic fact that the Atlantic had been crossed once more, but by people coming together in collegiality through ideas, words and texts, instead of violence.

When the call for paper was launched the year preceding the conference itself, I had no idea it would circulate so widely and receive such a warm welcome from academics across the world. There had been conferences and of course an impressive quantity of books and articles on slave narratives and neo-slave narratives over the past decades, but what was probably new in this conference call for papers was the fact that the focus was on the one hand exclusively on the neo-slave narratives (although the original slave narratives could not be but a constant reference); and on the other hand, that the American neo-slave narrative, which

is generally granted pride of place, was considered side by side with the new generation of Caribbean neo-slave narratives, be they francophone or anglophone.

One cannot fail to be impressed by the number of works of fiction related to slavery and the slave trade that have been written and published in the past decades, more precisely since 1966, when Margaret Walker published *Jubilee*. It has obviously not been possible to include fiction written by all the writers who took up the mould of the slave narratives. If there were only a couple of papers on pre-fifties writers, Robert Hayden and Zora Neal Hurston (by Wendy Harding and Ronnie Scharfman respectively), there were many papers about the sixties and post-sixties writers in the United-States — Ernest Gaines, Gayl Jones, Ishmael Reed, Margaret Walker and Shirley Ann Williams (by Benoît Depardieu, Christina Sharpe and Dominique Aurélia). Those novels find an echo in works written more recently, in the eighties and nineties, by American, African or African-American writers such as Patricia Eakins, Nana Grey-Johnson, Charles Johnson, Kate Mc Cafferty, Clarence Major, Toni Morrison, Alice Randall (by Kathie Birat, Pierre Gomez, Bella Brodzki and Claude Julien, Evelyn O'Callaghan, Wendy Harding, Kathleen Gyssels, Isabelle Roblin). The papers on Caribbean contemporary authors writing in English constitute half the collection: the fiction by Fred D'Aguiar has come under close scrutiny (from Dave Gunning, Bénédicte Ledent, Ferentz Lafargue, Louise Yelin) as well as that by David Dabydeen (Lars Eckstein and Louise Yelin), Dionne Brand (Pilar Cuder-Dominguez and Jerome Teelucksingh) and Caryl Phillips (Pilar Cuder-Dominguez and Bénédicte Ledent). The francophone Caribbean writers are represented by Maryse Condé and Patrick Chamoiseau (Lydie Moudileno, Jean Arrouye

and Marie-Christine Rochmann). The list is long, and yet necessarily incomplete. There could also have been works by André Brink, Beryl Gilroy, John Hearne, Manu Herstein, Edward P. Jones, Valerie Martin, Robbie Mc Cauley, Lawrence Scott, André and Simone Schwarz-Bart, Lalita Tademi, among others still. Some of these names can be found in the bibliography, alongside the writers who were the focus of attention during the conference.

The long list of works of fiction related to slavery is only equalled by the continuity and persistence of the critical works both on the original non-fiction slave narratives and their fictional rewritings in the form of the neo-slave narratives. This 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. As Fred D'Aguiar puts it in his keynote address, this revisiting is both an act of memory and an act of the historical imagination, but first and foremost, it is our present that we feel the need to examine and re-examine through the prism of slave narratives. This is also a point that is made by Caryl Phillips — what is it then that makes it so necessary today for writers and readers alike to revisit, reassess and reappropriate the canonical texts of slavery literature? Helped by a few introductory papers, brought together under the title of *Thresholds* (Alan Rice, Ashraf Rushdy, Ronnie Scharfman, Isabel Soto Garcia, Helena Woodard), the essays are organized along thematic and geographical lines, the Americas, with the now classic African-American neo-slave narratives, the anglophone Caribbean, Africa and the francophone Caribbean, pointing the way to a new generation of writers who have been opening new vistas in slavery literature.

The aim of this collection of essays, as that of the conference, is

to lead us to interrogate the present-day abundance of fictional and critical writing in the wake of the classic slave narratives as well as the many different aesthetic and political aspects of the memorialisation of the historical trauma of slavery. Indeed, the movement has to be a movement backwards and forwards, projecting oneself to the past but also to the present and future, so that different layers of time are revisited — different layers of memory, fact and imagination, in a process of *signifying*. What can be called the original slave narratives and the neo-slave narratives are bound by their differences as much as by their commonalities, and this paradoxical link never ceases to provoke and perturb the contemporary readers that we are. In the case of the former, it is often granted that it is to be defined first by the period in which they were written and published, most definitions, and particularly the one of H. L. Gates Jr., giving as an end date 1865, the date of the end of the American Civil War¹ — even if oral and written testimonies of thousands of former slaves were recorded until 1940 — and second, by the fact that the slave narratives are first-person contemporary accounts of the reality of slavery as it was experienced. The first instance given by H. L. Gates Jr. is Briton Hammon's *Narrative of the Uncommon Sufferings, and*

1. Henry Louis Gates Jr. opens his introduction to *The Slave's Narrative* by saying: "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. The bibliography given by H. L. Gates Jr. at the end of the book for the slave narratives themselves goes from 1760 to 1865.

Surprising (sic) Deliverance of Briton Hammon, a Negro Man . . . in 1760. In the case of the latter, most critics abide by H. A. Rushdy's definition of "neo-slave narratives" — or, according to another denomination, "new slavery novels" — as "contemporary novels that assume the form, adopt the conventions, and take on the first-person voice of the antebellum slave narrative."¹ It tends to be Margaret Walker's novel *Jubilee* in 1966 that is considered as launching the sixties and seventies wave of African-American authors revisiting the 18th and 19th century slave narratives. *Cambridge*, a novel by Caryl Phillips, published in 1991, inaugurates another stage in slavery literature, when a younger generation of novelists of Caribbean descent take up in their turn the two-fold mould of the slave narratives and of the neo-slave narratives, *signifying* on both of them — writers such as Fred D'Aguiar, Dionne Brand or Michelle Cliff for the anglophone Caribbean. In the case of the francophone Caribbean, it is all the more surprising and / or significant to find neo-slave narratives under the pen of Patrick Chamoiseau, Maryse Condé or Simone Schwartz-Bart, whereas there were no slave narratives in the French islands to start with, no models to work around and back to.

One could think at first that categories are fairly easy to establish — the 18th and 19th century narratives vs. the 20th century novels; fact, experience and eye-witness accounts vs. novels feeding on imagination, fictionalization and recreation. And yet — wasn't the slave narrative as genre always a very hybrid one,

1. 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.

fusing the oral and the mediated written discourse? Wasn't it always made up of a narrative discourse, offering a mediated rendering of reality? Wasn't doubleness always one of its idiosyncrasies — political and literary, rhetorical and metaphysical, individual and collective, made up of mimicry and originality, feeding the debate over authenticity and appropriation, casting blame on 'the peculiar institution' and hankering for freedom and selfhood? What are we to do with a narrative like *Our Nig*, written by Harriet Wilson in 1859 on the model of the slave narratives, considered to be the first novel written by an African-American and maybe the first instance of a precocious neo-slave narrative, an early stage of *signifying*? Again, the boundaries between the different types of neo-slave narratives may not be so solid either, between the third-person historical slavery novel, the pseudo-autobiographical slave narrative and the novel of trauma and legacy to the further generations. What is even more prevalent in the most recent new slavery novels written by the authors of Caribbean descent is 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.

It is not the object of this introduction to explore again in detail the generic specifics, conventions and principles of slave narratives and neo-slave narratives that have already been analysed by eminent specialists and will be reviewed by the authors of the papers of this collection — simply to throw light on the persistence and vitality of slavery literature and criticism, and on the way the timeline has been stretched over more than two centuries, from the late 18th to the late 20th century. If the slaves, by establishing the link between the use of language and their own human-

ity, were writing themselves into being, to borrow an expression from H. L. Gates Jr. (xxiii), the neo-slave narratives by the African-American writers of the sixties needed that reference to the past in order to open a new perspective onto their present at the time of the Civil Rights. Each and every paper here, taking different angles, addresses the issue of understanding why and how such a need is still manifest at the end of the 20th century and has even been pursued, or reactivated, by the Caribbean writers we know. This re-creation and re-presentation of the slave subject's history and story reveals, in Toni Morrison's words, that there are still too many *unspeakable things unspoken*. That the trauma still remains to be healed, not through memory any longer but through what is for Paul Gilroy the imaginative appropriation of History and for Wilson Harris the historical imagination and intuitive fiction. The slaves had a past they had to live through, we have to live through a past that has been transmitted to us. The permanence or recovery of that past is not a goal in itself, until it enables us to understand, bear and better our present too.