
H-France Forum, Volume 3, Issue 3 (Summer 2008), No. 3

Christopher L. Miller, *The French Atlantic Triangle: Literature and Culture of the Slave Trade*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2008. xvi + 571 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, and index. \$27.95 (pb.) ISBN 978-0-8223-4151-2. \$99.95 (hb.) ISBN 978-0-8223-4127-7.

Review essay by Carolyn Vellenga Berman, The New School.

In this book, Christopher Miller, an eminent scholar of “Africanist discourse in French” and “Francophone literature and culture in Africa” (to quote from his previously published book titles) turns his meticulous critical gaze upon a formative period in the French-African encounter that both sides have long sought to forget: the French slave trade, which forced more than a million Africans across the Atlantic. As the figure of the triangle reminds us, to be sure, there were more than two sides to this encounter, and the timeliness of Miller’s scholarly move—in tandem with the French government’s official recognition of slavery and the slave trade as crimes in 2001 (p. xi)—testifies to the crucial impact of the third point in the oceanic triangle: the Francophone Caribbean and its writers. *The French Atlantic Triangle*, as Miller explains, “flows from a desire to consider metropolitan France and the ‘Francophone’ polities that used to constitute the French Empire within the same analytical field” (p. x), and it succeeds in so doing—beautifully, persuasively, and indelibly.

Miller makes a pivotal contribution to the history of French and Francophone literature and culture by focusing on the slave trade connecting Europe, Africa, and the Caribbean, rather than on slavery as a practice (mostly) confined to the colonial Caribbean. We have, it seems, been putting the cart before the horse in our discussions of slavery in literature: looking at slavery, while forgetting the trade.

With the benefit of hindsight, it is easy to see why. First, since the trade was abolished separately (on more than one occasion) and slavery outlived it, we have tended to see it as an adjunct to slavery rather than its motivating engine. Second, on a more pragmatic level, the Caribbeanists and Americanists who discuss slavery in literature are not usually knowledgeable about Africa. Third, even if they were, the slave trade would be treacherous ground for them, since it typically depended upon African trading partners, whose collaboration furnished talking points both for defenders of slavery and for the (subsequent) colonization of Africa. Miller emphasizes that eliminating the slave trade not only served as an alibi for the subsequent invasion and colonization of Africa by European governments (who claimed they were there to suppress the slave trade), but it also actually inspired dreams of African colonization, as if “bringing sugar plantations to Africa would somehow, paradoxically, end the slave trade” (p. 249). As Baron Roger, the French governor of Senegal, wrote in an 1828 novel, “Here are free men . . . cultivating, producing the same crops as those African slaves who had been ripped out of Africa. Blessed be the prince who works such marvels in the interests of humanity!”[1] Finally, unlike colonial slavery, the slave trade comes painfully close to the French “home,” casting a sinister light on the wealthy classes and cultural institutions of port cities from Bordeaux to Nantes.[2]

The first part of Miller's book introduces the French slave trade to "readers who have not studied this history" (p. xi). Since I am not a historian of the slave trade, I will leave it to others to judge this "critical synthesis" (p. xi). What I can affirm is that Miller tells a compelling and urgent story. The French did not invent, but they certainly embraced, the slave trade as a remunerative import/export business, in which a captive worth "one twenty-fifth of a horse" in late-seventeenth-century Senegal could be sold for "nine thousand pounds of sugar" in the Antilles—"and that of course is before said captive is put to work" (p. 16).

Miller's sensitivity to language allows him to link this economic history with the diasporic consciousness articulated by Aimé Césaire, as he juxtaposes the impossibility of the slave's *retour au pays natal* with the multiple French *retours*, a word not only used to describe "the journey home to France" but also "used constantly to indicate the merchandise brought back from the islands; the 'returns' on the original investment made by the *armateurs* months or even years earlier" (p. 55).^[3] Never neglecting the third angle, Miller also attends to the ways in which "the Atlantic triangle (along with the Eastern slave trade) stimulated the slave market in Africa, which in turn spread the social mayhem of war, kidnapping, and depopulation ever deeper into the continent" (p. 61). That the "triangular trade" has a rich history all its own, connecting the "colonizing" past to the "globalizing" present, becomes clear in Miller's scrutiny of the history of the French slave trade with its unique switchbacks and illicit expansions.

In the long wake of the triangular trade, Miller uncovers a new trove of essential texts for literary study, shaping a whole new canon. But literature, in this account, does not remain in the wake (or the hold) of a boat piloted by history for long. "What might a reading of literary texts add to the now considerable historiography on the slave trade?" Miller asks in the conclusion to part one. His answer, elaborated in subsequent chapters, is that "literature has surprising perspectives to add to the questions that history raises" (p. 93). This may be self-evident in the case of neglected literary works from the era of the slave trade such as Baron Roger's *Kelédor*, which illustrates the "connectivity" of "circum-Atlantic revolutions" by highlighting "an African war that took place in 1796—thus, in the wider Atlantic context, at the time of both the French and the Haitian revolutions" (p. 260).^[4] Such novels are themselves historical artifacts. Yet Miller also makes this case for latter-day imaginative works like director John Berry's 1958 film *Tamango*, a "distinctly B picture" which was, in the words of the *Village Voice*, "suspended between trash and truth."^[5] For Miller, Berry's film "offers a stunning response" to the Prosper Mérimée story it purports to re-enact (p. 241); it also highlights a "homosexual subtext," featuring both an "apparently loving and consensual relationship" between "mates" and the specter of a "taboo within a taboo: homosexual rape within the context of the slave trade, a subject that no historian or novelist has touched" (p. 237). As Miller emphasizes, "acts of projection by French authors . . . by no means fill the historical void nor remedy the silence of the captive or the slave. But they try to" (p. 93). Carefully historicizing each work with an analysis of its production and reception (from authors' lives to "sources" and audience responses), Miller establishes a nuanced "dialogue" (or rather, "trialogue") between "the various imaginations at work on all points of the triangle" (pp. 96, 92).

This is not a balanced triangle, as Miller admits. Seven chapters delve into the histories and works of French authors, followed by one chapter on Caribbean writers (Césaire, Glissant, Condé) and one chapter on what Miller dubs a "rather noisy" "African 'Silence'" (p. xiii). Miller claims that "the preponderance of metropolitan French literature on this subject, in terms of the sheer number of texts, over writings from both Africa and the Caribbean, is of course one of the principal asymmetries of the triangle. It is an imbalance that I have not been able to fully overcome in this study" (p. 93). But this seems disingenuous. After all, many critics of, say, Caribbean literature have had no problem overcoming (by ignoring) this "imbalance." In fact, the French writings he discusses are far less widely read today than the Caribbean ones. (His

primary texts include works by women writers mostly studied in the U.S.—Olympe de Gouges, Madame de Staël, Claire de Duras—as well as non-canonical works by the *feuilletoniste* Eugène Sue, the colonial governor Roger, and the trader Edouard Corbière, together with a popular tale by Mérimée and a little-known play by Voltaire.) It would be simpler to say that a renewed attention to the work of French writers on the slave trade is Miller's primary contribution to the "trialogue." In this case, we would not be surprised to find the Caribbean writers jammed together in one chapter with, for example, no more than a mention of Condé's novel *Ségou*, a significant work described briefly as "a historical narration of slavery, the rise of Islam, and the dawn of French colonialism in West Africa, with glances across the Atlantic to Jamaica and Brazil" (p. 363).

Interestingly, the three literary parts of *The French Atlantic Triangle* are thus not devoted to French, African, and Caribbean writings but rather to "French Women Writers," "French Male Writers," and "The Triangle from 'Below.'" This truncated triangle is, at times, constrained by its tight center. Why, for example, focus only on the Atlantic? The French slave trade, as it happens, served not only the Caribbean and American plantations but also those off the coast of Africa in the Indian Ocean. It is thus somewhat arbitrary to exclude works concerned with passages to Mauritius (Ile de France) or Réunion (Ile Bourbon), now a French slave colony-turned-*département*, from the history of the slave trade's geographical imaginary.[6] (To his credit, Miller does allow his survey to go off-course once or twice, as when "Gouges takes us, willy-nilly, into the Indian Ocean" (p. 102).

The French Atlantic Triangle is also defiantly myopic in exploring the *French* Atlantic in mostly French-language representations. This allows Miller to dispute over-generalizations from the British experience: "In Britain in the eighteenth century and the early nineteenth a genuine and very modern mass movement united intellectuals, clergy, and hundreds of thousands of ordinary people in opposition to slavery and the slave trade. No such thing happened in France, where a relatively small and elite group had a limited impact" (p. 84). As he polemically concludes, "any suggestion that there was ever a popular abolitionist movement of women (or men) in France is particularly unwelcome, given the belated, derivative, elitist, and generally anemic nature of the efforts that were made" (p. 108). But why did the French elites belatedly imitate ordinary British people? And if (some of) the French sought to imitate British anti-slavery discourse, did they not imitate British pro-slavery discourse as well? Did those French imitations, moreover, have no impact on the English? To take one widely-circulated example: Jean-Jacques Rousseau exposes his ideal student, the eponymous Emile, to just one text in his early years: *Robinson Crusoe*, an English novel which features a would-be-slave-trader shipwrecked in the Caribbean, where he learns to distinguish use-value from exchange-value, but never regrets his slaving venture.[7] Omitting novels like *Robinson Crusoe* from this survey rends the fabric of (even) French Atlantic culture.

Yet this is already a large book, and we cannot expect it to do all things. Replacing the geographical divide with a gender divide (in the table of contents) is, moreover, a fascinating move in its own right. Part two ("French Women Writers") was, as Miller notes, originally intended as a "short critique" of *Translating Slavery*, an important feminist anthology (p. xii).[8] Miller locates the paradoxes surrounding women's anti-slavery writing and translations, ranging from women writers' familial debts to the slave trade to the etymology of the word *traduire*, referring to the moving of "*persons only*" (p. 101). An eighteenth-century slave trader's journal, for instance, recounts that "the male captives are translated [*traduits*], attached at the wrists." [9] Reading French writing about the trade in this way allows Miller to trace continuities between (supposedly) abolitionist works and their less-earnest successors—sea adventure stories, for example. It also significantly alters the history of sexuality in literature, adding to "homosocial" contexts and canons.

The division between “women writers” and “male writers” lines up a bit too neatly with chronology for my comfort since the women are found only in the early period of anti-slavery writing (1783-1823) and the men only in the Restoration. (Margaret Cohen’s theory of a “hostile takeover” of sentimental literature by men in this period provides a rationale for this gendered chronology, but it begs to be tested by a comparative reading of men in the earlier period and women in the later one.)[10] Nonetheless, this fork is fruitful, allowing us to rethink the “triangulated family romance” (p. 5) with something else in mind—perhaps, anachronistically, a pink triangle. New histories begin to emerge here, as Miller’s survey evokes not only the continuities of the slave trade with aspects of the global immigration and trade system today but also with tourism and “sex tourism.”

The French Atlantic Triangle thus enriches the historical record on slave-trading with provocative and compelling new perspectives. (I will never read the name of a ship with indifferent eyes again.) A masterpiece of historicist literary criticism, it uses history to tell us what we are seeing in a wide variety of cultural texts, including the “postmodern funhouse refractions of the horrors of earlier times,” (p. 91) while employing literature to articulate why we should care. Bracingly, it ends with a call for more fiction in the service of French historical memory—without which “the heritage of the French Atlantic triangle will be continuing inequality and a failure of reckoning” (p. 389). Christopher Miller’s timing is impeccable, and his word is urgent. This elegant, groundbreaking book will surely incite a dialogue between voices on all sides of the triangle as it inspires writers of fiction, criticism, and history for years to come.

NOTES

[1] Jacques-François Roger, *Kelédor, histoire africaine* (Paris: Nepveu, 1828), quoted on p. 263.

[2] Miller’s work thus complements recent work by literary and cultural critics of British and American literature, e.g., Ian Baucom’s *Specters of the Atlantic: Finance Capital, Slavery, and the Philosophy of History* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2005) and Saidiya Hartman’s *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2007).

[3] Miller argues forcefully for the misunderstood “Atlantic consciousness” of Césaire’s *Cahier d’un retour au pays natal*; see 332 ff.

[4] Miller notes that “Africans from the Senegambia who, like Kelédor, were veterans of the Muslim Revolution in West Africa could surely have been among the slaves who rose up and fought in the Haitian Revolution,” although “I have found little attention to the connectivity of these circum-Atlantic revolutions among historians” (p. 260). He does cite one historian, however: John Thornton, “African Soldiers in the Haitian Revolution,” *Journal of Caribbean History* 25: 1-2 (1991).

[5] J. Hoberman, “Film: Tamango,” *Village Voice* 1 July 1997, quoted on p. 228.

[6] The Atlantic focus accounts for the exclusion of Alexandre Dumas’s 1843 “tale of race and slavery in the Indian Ocean,” *Georges*, despite its “themes of the slave trade” (p. 277) and works like George Sand’s *Indiana* (1832). Bernardin de Saint-Pierre’s widely-read novel *Paul et Virginie*, his travel accounts, and discussions of slavery are briefly explored due to their Eastern geography.

[7] “Puis qu’il nous faut absolument des livres, il en existe un qui fournit à mon gré le plus heureux traité d’éducation naturelle. Ce livre sera le premier que lira mon Emile; seul il composera durant longtemps toute sa bibliothèque, et il y tiendra toujours une place distinguée... Quel est donc ce merveilleux livre? Est-ce Aristote, est-ce Plin, est-ce Buffon? Non; c’est *Robinson Crusöé*.” *Emile ou, de l’éducation*, livre III (Paris: Gallimard, 1969), 291.

[8] Doris Y. Kadish and Françoise Massardier-Kenney, eds., *Translating Slavery: Gender and Race in French Women’s Writing, 1783-1823* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1994).

[9] Jean-Pierre Plesse, *Journal de bord d’un négrier* (Paris: Le Mot et Le Reste, 2005, orig. ed. 1762), quoted on p. 101.

[10] Margaret Cohen, *The Sentimental Education of the Novel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), xii.

Carolyn Vellenga Berman
The New School
BermanC@newschool.edu

Copyright © 2008 by H-France, all rights reserved. H-France permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. H-France reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of *H-France Forum* nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France.