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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 John D. Garrigus, University of Texas at Arlington.

Christopher L. Miller has chosen an opportune time to publish *The French Atlantic Triangle*. In the English-speaking academic world since the late 1980s, interest in the concept of Atlantic histories and cultures has generated a new journal (*Atlantic Studies*, founded in 2003), undergraduate and graduate courses, and a survey textbook, to say nothing of dozens of monographs, scholarly articles, and dissertations.[1] Yet the term “French Atlantic” has received relatively little use from historians, for whom French Atlantic historiography still overlaps heavily with studies of France’s North American and Caribbean colonies.[2]

French historians were among the first to write about “Atlantic” history—one thinks immediately of Jacques Godechot, Pierre and Huguette Chaunu, and more recently Paul Butel.[3] But they defined the concept in ways that had little to do with the French trade in African slaves or French plantation slavery. Until the 1950s those topics tended to be the domain of French maritime and imperial historians who studied these Atlantic activities to better understand—and promote—French imperialism in Africa and Asia. After World War II some scholars, such as the prolific Gabriel Debien, rejected this imperial tradition to investigate plantation society and the slave trade on their own terms. But their work was seen as marginal to French history, properly speaking.[4]

That is changing. France’s role in the transatlantic slave trade has become a critical issue in an ongoing debate over the nature of the Republic, since (at the latest) May 10, 2001, when the Loi Taubira recognized slavery and the slave trade as crimes against humanity.[5] Are the official “race-blind” policies of the French government a rejection of racism, as Republican tradition has long insisted? Or are they a way to avoid or minimize the nation’s 200-year history of enslaving Africans and trafficking profitably in their bodies? Because Great Britain and the United States have an even more terrible Atlantic legacy of this kind, many black and white Americans and Britons would stand with Miller, a scholar of the literature of Francophone Africa, “to marvel at the ability of France to keep the problem of slavery out of sight and out of mind” (p. x).

Miller’s ambitious book, like Paul Gilroy’s *Black Atlantic*, is an “Atlantic” study in that it takes French maritime culture, or rather literature about the maritime aspects of the commerce in slaves, as its main subject.[6] In describing the impact of the slave trade on the wider culture of France and its former colonies, Miller scrutinizes and in some measure explains France’s cultural amnesia about the slave trade. And that is the most obvious reason historians of metropolitan France should read this important book: Miller reveals how French authors from the 1780s to the 1830s portrayed Atlantic slavery and slave trading and illustrates how Enlightened humanitarianism and a profound disregard for the humanity of enslaved people could coexist, sometimes within the same text.

*The French Atlantic* might be divided into three main sections. The first (part one) describes France's role as one of the great Atlantic slaving powers of the eighteenth century. The second (parts two and three) focuses on the years from the 1780s to the 1830s and studies seven French authors that critics have often labeled "abolitionist," though Miller raises questions about that label in nearly every case. In the final section (part four), following "the persistence of the triangle in French Atlantic civilization," he examines how writers and filmmakers from Antillean France and Francophone Africa have grappled with the issue of the slave trade.

Although he wants "to evoke a dialogue among all three points of the French Atlantic triangle ... in several different historical periods" ( p. 92), Miller's analysis is heavily historical. His engagement with the historiography is assertive enough to expose the origin-story of the French slave trade as a myth, invented by the early eighteenth-century priest and chronicler Jean-Baptiste Labat. Labat claimed that in 1643 Louis XIII only reluctantly authorized the slave trade because he understood it was the best way to Christianize Africans. For Miller, this oft-repeated story reveals the early and ongoing conflict between France's self-image as a liberating force and the deadly reality of its slave trade.

While providing an up-to-date synthesis of the historiography of slavery in the Caribbean, Africa, and France, and a by-now familiar description of how Montesquieu, Voltaire, and Rousseau largely overlooked the inhumanity of France's Atlantic economy,[7] Miller shows how Enlightened texts travelled around the grim triangle. He finds slave traders, sugar planters, and others performing or attending performances of Voltaire's anti-slavery play *Alzire* in Nantes, Senegal, Saint-Domingue, and in Rousseau's Geneva with little recognition of how the work's underlying message applied to them. What he looks for and does not find, however, are French texts produced by enslaved people. There is no Francophone equivalent of Olaudah Equiano's 1788 *Interesting Narrative*, unless one accepts the theory that that this is a work of fiction.[8]

In his second section, Miller turns to post-1780s authors associated with French abolitionism, dividing his treatment into a section on French women writers from 1783 to 1823 and another on French male writers in the 1820s and 1830s.

Miller begins by criticizing the suggestion that women dominated French abolitionist writing in these years.[9] Nevertheless he organizes his sections around gender because he finds the literature of the 1820s and 1830s to be so deeply masculinist. For the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, he devotes a chapter each to the abolitionist works of Olympe de Gouges, Germaine de Staël, and Claire de Duras. His portrayal of their ideas within a French abolitionist movement that he acknowledges was "belated, derivative, elitist, and generally anemic" (p. 108) will not surprise historians of the period. But their central contributions to the sentimental literature critiquing slavery and racism in this earlier period expose how very different depictions of the slave trade were in the 1820s and 1830s in the hands of four male authors (Prosper Mérimée, Jacques-François Roger, Eugène Sue, and Edouard Corbière) writing tales of travel and adventure.

At the heart of this section and of Miller's entire book is Prosper Mérimée's 1829 short story "Tamango", which he characterizes as "perhaps the most influential representation of the French slave trade of any kind" (p. 179). In a thinly veiled allegory of the Haitian Revolution, Mérimée portrays a slave ship rebellion in which the captive Africans take control of the vessel. Under the leadership of the ignoble African antihero Tamango, the rebels die because they cannot master European navigational technology. In his most powerful illustration of the cultural cohesion of the French Atlantic, Miller traces the influence of this image on other

French and Francophone texts, most notably Aimé Césaire's 1939 masterwork *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*.

The rest of Miller's nineteenth-century "masculine" chapters are equally striking illustrations of how muted French anti-slavery ideology was in the 1820s and 1830s, the very years that France began to prosecute slave traders and officially recognized Haitian independence. The novel *Kelédor* by Baron Jean-François Roger, the former French governor of Senegal, narrates the odyssey of an African prince who fondly remembers being enslaved in Spanish Santo Domingo, fights for but eventually rejects Toussaint Louverture's revolution in Saint-Domingue, and returns to Senegal to work on an experimental French plantation. Miller shows how Eugène Sue and Edouard Corbière achieved popular success with adventure novels that used the slave trade as an exotic backdrop, with slave trading pirates as heroes. Miller's reading of Sue and Corbière is particularly notable for its depiction of how the homosocial and homosexual aspects of maritime life intersected with the slave trade.

Miller is not trying to explain France's failure to produce a popular mass movement to end slavery.<sup>[10]</sup> But his nuanced portrait of these authors and texts does suggest some answers. Some of these are based in the Revolution, whose events he summarizes but whose texts he does not examine in depth, except for the writings of Olympe de Gouges. The Revolution's anti-slavery laws were largely forced upon Paris by enslaved and free people of color in the Caribbean working with a handful of French activists, most of whom favored only gradual emancipation. Napoleon turned the Revolution against people of color by attempting to restore central control over France's colonies. Black liberation in Haiti became a symbol of French failure or, more palatably, victimhood. After 1815 a renewed though technically illegal slave trade was justified as a way for France to rebuild some of its Caribbean prosperity, while abolitionism was increasingly identified with the British.<sup>[11]</sup>

Miller describes these events, but it is the 1820s that he captures best. Without a strong popular movement to counteract the nostalgia of Saint-Domingue's refugee planters, the idealization of the plantation world could flourish among self-proclaimed abolitionists. And despite French readers' empathy for Africans like Duras's orphaned Ourika, the horror of the slave trade remained distant and largely unacknowledged. This meant that an author like Edouard Corbière could present a true-to-life episode in which slave trading pirates murdered their African captives at sea to escape arrest as "an entertaining tale of adventure, cleverness and derring-do" (p. 317).

In most of his book Miller follows French authors and their texts around the Atlantic; in his third and final section he turns to Antillean and Francophone West African texts. The writers of the Antilles have thought most about the French Atlantic, and Miller compresses this rich field into a discussion of the region's four most prominent voices: Aimé Césaire, Edouard Glissant, Maryse Condé, and, through his screenplay for Guy DesLaurier's 1999 film *Passage du milieu*, Patrick Chamoiseau. For lack of space, one imagines, the rich historical context that informed his treatment of nineteenth-century French authors is missing here. His account of how Césaire and Glissant appropriate and transform Mérimée's image of the rebel Africans at the helm of a slave ship they cannot control helps organize this section. But the treatment of Condé especially seems abridged; Chamoiseau and the Creolists appear primarily to illustrate how Césaire's *Cahier* has been misread.

For Francophone Africa, Miller faces a different challenge: a literary silence about the transatlantic slave trade. In his discussion of Mérimée's "master text" on French slave trading, Miller describes Boubacar Boris Diop's 1981 "wildly postmodern" treatment of Tamango in his novel *Le Temps de Tamango*. He pulls more from an earlier response to "Tamango": the

Senegalese writer Ousmane Sembene's 1956 novel *Le Docker Noir* about the suffering of African maritime workers in France long after the end of the transatlantic slave trade. But for the rest of his African material, Miller turns to historical films about the internal African slave trade: Sembene's 1976 *Ceddo* [The Outsiders] from Senegal, the 1983 *Le Courage des autres*, filmed in Burkina Faso by the Frenchman Christian Richard, and Roger Gnoan M'Bala's *Adangaman* (2000) from the Ivory Coast.

In a recent essay about disciplinary tensions within Atlantic studies, Eric Slauter argues that historians have become less likely to read and cite what literary scholars write about the Atlantic, even as literary scholarship has become more "historical." [12] This will not be the case for Christopher L. Miller's work, whose ambitious geographical and historical trajectory confirms the explanatory power of the French Atlantic.

## NOTES

[1] Eric Slauter counts 119 English-language books, articles, and dissertations with titles containing the word "Atlantic" appearing between 2000 to 2006: Eric Slauter, "History, Literature, and the Atlantic World," *Early American Literature* 43, no. 1 (2008): 154. See also William Boelhower, "The Rise of the New Atlantic Studies Matrix," *American Literary History* 20, no. 1-2 (December 24, 2007): 83-101; Bernard Bailyn, *Atlantic History: Concept and Contours* (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2005); and Douglas R. Egerton et al., *The Atlantic World: A History, 1400-1888* (Wheeling, Ill.: Harlan Davidson, 2007).

[2] Two important exceptions are Kenneth Banks, *Chasing Empire Across the Sea: Communications and the State in the French Atlantic 1713-1763* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2006) and the Mellon-funded French Atlantic history group which has been bringing together historians and others in Montreal since 2006. See <http://atlantique.mcgill.ca>.

[3] Jacques Godechot, *Histoire de l'Atlantique* ([Paris]: Bordas, 1947); Huguette Chaunu and Pierre Chaunu, *Séville et l'Atlantique: 1504-1650* (Paris: Sevpen, 1955); and Paul Butel, *Histoire de l'Atlantique: de l'antiquité à nos jours* ([Paris]: Perrin, 1997).

[4] Anne Pérotin-Dumon, "Historiography of the French Antilles and French Guiana. Part A: Martinique and Guadeloupe," in *Methodology and Historiography of the Caribbean*, ed. Barry W. Higman, *General history of the Caribbean* (London: Unesco Pub.; Macmillan Education, 1999), 631-664; and David P. Geggus, "Gabriel Debien (1906-1990)," *The Hispanic American Historical Review* 71, no. 1 (February 1991): 140-142.

[5] Françoise Vergès, *La mémoire enchaînée : questions sur l'esclavage* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2006); and Jean-Yves Camus, "The Commemoration of Slavery in France and the Emergence of a Black Political Consciousness," *European Legacy* 11, no. 6 (October 2006): 647-55.

[6] Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double-Consciousness* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993); and Boelhower, "New Atlantic Studies Matrix."

[7] The classic study is Michèle Duchet, *Anthropologie et histoire au siècle des lumières: Buffon, Voltaire, Rousseau, Helvétius, Diderot* (Paris: F. Maspero, 1971); more recently, see Louis Sala-Molins, *Dark Side of the Light : Slavery and the French Enlightenment* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006).

[8] Vincent Carretta, *Equiano, the African: Biography of a Self-Made Man* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2005).

[9] This suggestion is made in 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).

[10] Seymour Drescher, "British Way, French Way: Opinion Building and Revolution in the Second French Slave Emancipation," *The American Historical Review* 96, no. 3 (June 1991): 709-734; Seymour Drescher, "The Ending of the Slave Trade and the Evolution of European Scientific Racism," in *The Atlantic Slave Trade: Effects on Economies, Societies, and Peoples in Africa, the Americas, and Europe*, ed. Joseph E. Inikori and Stanley L. Engerman (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1992), 362-396; and Lawrence C. Jennings, *French Anti-Slavery: The Movement for the Abolition of Slavery in France, 1802-1848* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

[11] Laurent Dubois, *Avengers of the New World: The Story of the Haitian Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 2004); Laurent Dubois, *A Colony of Citizens: Revolution and Slave Emancipation in the French Caribbean, 1787-1804* (Chapel Hill N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); and Yves Benot, *La démenche coloniale sous Napoléon : essai* (Paris: Editions La Découverte, 1992).

[12] Slauter, "History, Literature, and the Atlantic World," 53.

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