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H-France Forum, Volume 3, Issue 3 (Summer 2008), No. 4

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.

Response by Christopher L. Miller, Yale University, to the review essays of his book by John Garrigus, Nick Nesbitt and Carolyn Berman.

I am grateful to these fine scholars—each of whom has influenced my work—for their careful and generous readings of my book. In each review, there are numerous stimulating suggestions regarding paths that I did not take, or take very far, in *The French Atlantic Triangle*. I will not attempt to respond to every suggestion.

I appreciate John Garrigus's placement of my book within the context of Atlantic scholarship, with its relative dearth of attention to France and the French Atlantic. His closing thoughts on the need for more cross-pollination between literary scholars and historians are most welcome.

Nick Nesbitt's comments about Victor Schoelcher point not only to a limitation of *The French Atlantic Triangle* (since, as an abolitionist of slavery itself rather than the slave trade, Schoelcher was not a focus) but also to a wider lacuna in scholarship. The fact is that the institution of French slavery, and especially its cultural ramifications in literature and other arts, remains seriously underexamined. Many dozens of additional texts would belong in a study of French slavery, which would, in terms of chronology, pick up in the intentional gap in *The French Atlantic Triangle* between the end of the French slave trade (1831) and the beginning of Francophone responses to the trade such as Césaire's *Cahier* (1939). A comprehensive reading of Schoelcher would be integral to any such project. Still, Nesbitt's comments about Schoelcher's exceptional perspective and its relevance, even to the earlier abolition of the slave trade, are well taken.

The issues of balance and imbalance raised by Carolyn Vellenga Berman, and to a lesser extent by John Garrigus, preoccupied me during the writing process. Berman's critique contains some rather strong accusatory language that relates strangely to her words of praise in other passages. Most significantly, she suggests that I merely made a "disingenuous" excuse for giving short shrift to the non-metropolitan-French sides of the triangle—as if I had chosen to ignore equal amounts of extant, relevant materials on the two southern points, Africa and the Caribbean. But I am not sure that the book, restructured with a forced equilibrium among the three points on the triangle, would actually have been able to say what needed to be said about the French slave trade. It seemed to me that the most work that needed to be done, for better or for worse, was on the largely unknown corpus of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century French writers (the female side of said canon having been established by Doris Kadish and her collaborators in *Translating Slavery*)<sup>[1]</sup> and what they actually said about the slave trade. It is all too easy to forget—as Berman sometimes appears to have forgotten—the specificity of the slave trade (the subject of my book) as opposed to slavery itself (a closely related but not identical topic).

It was precisely because, as Berman puts it, “the French writings [I discuss] are far less widely read today than the Caribbean ones” that I chose to devote so much space to them. Novels like Sue’s *Atar-Gull*, Corbière’s *Le Négrier*, and Roger’s *Kelédor* are virtually unknown, even in the United States where the works of Glissant and Condé are frequently read and taught in colleges and universities. In France everyone has read some Mérimée, and many recognize the title of “Tamango,” but few have read the story or given it serious thought.

Berman does not name any texts that I could have or should have included, except for Condé’s *Ségou*, which I (rather perversely, indeed) mentioned but chose not to discuss in detail. This is not the place to draft a chapter on that novel. To the brief comments that I made in *The French Atlantic Triangle*, I would add these remarks: *Ségou* is, generically speaking, a historical novel and as such is written in a style that is quite different from that of the novel that I still consider to be Condé’s best, *Hérémakhonon*. The complex architecture of memory and free-indirect reflection that is so compelling in *Hérémakhonon* is replaced in *Ségou* by a much more transparent, accessible structure—which made the latter novel a best-seller. (Not that there is anything wrong with that!) The relatively thin thread of reflections on the slave trade in *Hérémakhonon* is, I think, more significant in the long run than the more extensive treatment in *Ségou*. This is because *Hérémakhonon* is an enormously important, revolutionary text; it set the new agenda for a post-negritude attitude in Caribbean literature. As I attempted to show, its narrator’s, Véronica, evolving thoughts on the slave trade are a bellweather of that shift.

Still, more attention to *Ségou* alone would not have created “balance.” I carefully considered other novels of the Caribbean—where, let us remember, Patrick Chamoiseau says there is “peu de littérature” on the subject [2]—but in no case is there, to my knowledge, another major, significant treatment of the slave *trade* (as opposed to slavery). So I am not sure what Berman means to suggest when she writes, “After all, many critics of, say, Caribbean literature have had no problem overcoming (by ignoring) this ‘imbalance.’” Have any of these (unnamed) critics focused on the slave *trade*? No; again the specificity of the subject seems to have been forgotten. My chapters on Caribbean and African writings do not claim to be all-inclusive, but if they missed any major, significant Caribbean or African Francophone texts on the slave trade (other than *Ségou*), I would like to know what they are.

John Garrigus also mentions the relative brevity of the chapters in part four of *The French Atlantic Triangle*. I would suggest that that comes less from a lack of attention to history in those chapters than from the fact that the relevant history had been dealt with in earlier chapters. The detailed attention to history and historiography in, for example, chapter nine, on the Restoration and slave-trade abolitionism, is the very same background that is exploited by Césaire, Sembene, Condé, and Glissant. The primal scene of the French slave trade—captives being throw overboard to evade prosecution by the British—was evoked at length in its original historical context, that of the Restoration, then recalled as the images were revived by Francophone African and Caribbean authors.

Returning to Berman’s concerns, I am sure that a treatment of *Robinson Crusoe* would have been interesting, but my inclusion of Defoe’s *Captain Singleton* (1720), a novel explicitly concerned with the slave trade, was, I think, more apposite (even if Rousseau’s Emile did not read it). Berman is half right when she says that my gendered division of literature (women before and men after) “begs to be tested by a comparative reading of men in the earlier period and women in the later one.” A reading of men in the earlier period was, in fact, one of the tasks of chapter five, “Gendering Abolitionism,” where I sought to correct the gender imbalance of *Translating Slavery*. As for the women writers of the Restoration, Duras is of course one such. Further

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work on Sophie Doin will undoubtedly extend our understanding (for my critique of Doin, see *The French Atlantic Triangle*, 216-17).

If, as Berman puts it, my triangle seems “truncated,” with a “tight center,” where do the frequent comparisons (which Berman mentions) to the British experience come from? Her description of *The French Atlantic Triangle*—a 500-page book concerned with the enslavement of one million individuals and their descendants, and spanning several centuries of cultural representations—as “defiantly myopic” is, frankly, bizarre. It is, however, reflective of a double standard that sometimes obtains in Anglophone academia: a book—a long book—dealing with the French Atlantic is accused of “myopia,” but those that focus on the Anglophone Atlantic (*The Many-Headed Hydra* by Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, for example) are not.[3] The French Atlantic, I would maintain, is an ample subject, deserving further, extensive exploration.

#### NOTES

[1] 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).

[2] Patrick Chamoiseau, *L’Esclave vieil homme et le molosse* (Paris: Gallimard, 1997), 17.

[3] Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000).

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