

H-France Review Vol. 17 (June 2017), No. 88

Rachel Danon, *Les Voix du marronnage dans la littérature française du XVIIIe siècle*. Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2015. 421 pp. Bibliography and indexes. 49.00€ (pb). ISBN 978-2-8124-3711-3; 79.00€ (cl). ISBN 978-2-8124-3712-0.

Review by Charles Forsdick, University of Liverpool.

In the introduction to *Les Voix du marronnage*, her study of the articulation of Maroon voices in eighteenth-century French literature, Rachel Danon focuses on the contemporary political context of debates about the memorialization of slavery in France and the wider Francosphere. She cites *Mémoires des esclavages*, Edouard Glissant's 2007 report commissioned by then President Jacques Chirac, and underlines its author's commitment to a project of recovery of the plural but silenced voices of the enslaved: i.e., an attempt "de repérer, partout dans les espaces de nos sociétés, et de neutraliser, ces trous noirs des histoires des humanités" (p. 23).^[1] Under Chirac's successor, Nicolas Sarkozy, these plans for a national center and museum of slavery appear to have been shelved in a wider climate of hostility to what were presented as various forms of colonial "repentance," but on May 10, 2016—the tenth anniversary of the inaugural "journée nationale des mémoires de la traite, de l'esclavage et de leur abolition"—François Hollande restated a commitment to the creation of a "fondation pour la mémoire de l'esclavage, de la traite et des abolitions."^[2] The earlier years of Hollande's presidency had been marked by controversies around the question of reparations, triggered by ambiguous and contradictory comments he had made in speeches in Guadeloupe and Senegal, in 2013 and 2014 respectively.^[3] His commitment to symbolic, cultural reparations was evident, however, in the inauguration of the Mémorial ACTe in Pointe-à-Pitre in May 2015, and his plans for a similar site in France—along the model originally proposed by Glissant—were reiterated on May 10, 2017 in his final presidential speech marking France's national slavery memorial day. The intervention was in many ways a symbolic handing over of the responsibility for this project to Emmanuel Macron, in the aftermath of a presidential campaign that had focused on racism, xenophobia, and the extent to which France would (or would not) continue to process memories of the violence, suffering, and inequality it had imposed on others in the contexts of colonialism and its aftermath. The establishment of the foundation first mooted by Glissant will now be a task for Macron, and its realization might depend on the extent to which the incoming president does or does not wish to distance himself from his predecessor. In quoting Glissant in the conclusion to his speech, Hollande nevertheless set a clear agenda according to which—in his decidedly *anti-frontiste* vision for a community based on equality and the respect of individual difference—a recovery of histories and voices from the past would permit the preparation of possible futures previously unimagined: "nous entrerons alors dans l'archipel inédit où les communautés humaines pourront se connaître, s'équivaloir, et changer en échangeant, sans pour autant se perdre ni se dénaturer."^[4]

These political shifts have been mirrored not only in recent literary production but also in critical efforts to understand it. "L'imaginaire du marronnage," writes Yves Citton in his preface to the book under review, "est à la mode depuis quelques décennies" (p. 9). It is unlikely that modishness is the most appropriate way to explain the emergence of reimagined voices of the enslaved in the French-language

literatures of the Caribbean, not least because such a tendency reflects the ways in which—as has repeatedly been the case in France in a variety of different contexts—the fictional provides a vanguard space in which historically sensitive or politically taboo subjects have received an initial public airing. The recent proliferation of historical and cultural research on the Haitian Revolution has now brought to wider attention the role of resistance in the ending of Atlantic slavery, challenging the self-congratulatory commemorative practice of European nation states—evident, for example, in France in 1998 or Great Britain in 2007—to foreground understandings of abolition as a legislative, philanthropic process. The practices C.L.R. James dismissed in *The Black Jacobins* as the “prose poetry and the flowers” minimize and even on occasion disavow the active refusal on the part of the enslaved of the condition imposed on them, whether that manifested itself in the series of events of world historical importance known as the Haitian Revolution or in the repeated acts of everyday resistance evident at every stage of enslavement and exploitation to anyone willing to explore the archive of Atlantic slavery. For Citton, marooning is privileged as “un exemple d’insoumission fluide et insaisissable, disponible même face à la domination la plus cruelle, la plus brutale et apparemment la plus inéluctable” (p. 9), and in the absence of direct accounts of the practice, representations of *marronage* imagined by French authors become a source of a *parole indirecte* relating to resistance and flight.

The wider context required for understanding such reflections is that of the absence of a tradition of slave narratives in France and the wider French-speaking world. The reasons for this lacuna have, in the frame of a wider interest in literary representations of slavery, attracted increasing levels of scholarly attention in recent years. As major publications such as the *Cambridge Companion to the African American Slave Narrative* have underlined, the genre is constituted primarily of written accounts of enslaved Africans produced in English and disseminated in Great Britain and its colonies.[5] The lack of a Francophone tradition is linked to a range of factors, including the very different politics of abolition in evidence in France and its colonial empire, but reflects a silencing—at once historical, philosophical, and methodological—that has shaped understandings of slavery in a French context. As Christopher Miller notes in his *Atlantic Triangle* (a book on which the study under review draws extensively): “In the English-speaking world, and especially in the United States, the problem of silence is significantly offset by testimonies and narratives, beginning with Equiano’s. But in French the problem is far more serious, for there are no real slave narratives in French—not as we know them in the Anglophone Atlantic, not that have yet been discovered. That absence, for now at least, haunts any inquiry into the history of slavery” (p. 34).[6] Recent responses to this lacuna have been twofold: in addition to attempts to explain this textual absence, some scholars have sought the presence of alternative corpora, beyond the conventional slave narrative, in which the voices of the enslaved can be heard; others have shifted their focus, analyzing the compensatory gesture evident in the exceptionally rich Francophone tradition of the neo-slave narrative produced by Caribbean authors such as Patrick Chamoiseau, Maryse Condé, and Edouard Glissant.

Rachel Danon’s *Les Voix du marronage* is a valuable addition to this scholarship on the French-language slave narrative and its absence, providing a historical dimension often lacking from previous discussions. In her introduction, she quotes Philippe Monge, curator in 2012 of an exhibition at the UNESCO HQ entitled: “Paroles d’esclaves, mémoire des lieux.” In its prospectus, Monge called on visitors to: “[s’]arrêter quelques instants pour écouter les cris et les chuchotements que livrent encore’ des documents venus du passé” (p. 23). Delving into French literature of the eighteenth century, the primary contribution of Danon’s study—in response to this invitation—resides in a rigorous and searching identification and analysis of a core body of French texts that take slave rebellion and the practices of marooning as their subject matter. What distinguishes the study from many other accounts of slavery and the Enlightenment is a commitment to integrating the traces of “les cris et les chuchotements” into a wider frame and to understanding literary representations of marooning as a type of “détour” (p. 13) in a search for the voices (and by extension traces of agency) of the enslaved. This is a tendency most evident in the book’s comprehensive introduction, in which Danon provides an excellent overview of research into the presence and absence of the voices of the enslaved in the Francophone

tradition, as well as in the long conclusion, where she connects her reading of pre-revolutionary material to contemporary work emerging from a Caribbean context.

It is striking that Danon draws on much Anglophone material in her analysis, underlining the extent to which much research on slavery as it existed or has been represented in the French-speaking world has been conducted elsewhere. Her recurrent points of reference in the early stages of the book are works by the pioneer of Francophone postcolonial studies Richard Burton, as well as other scholars such as Christopher Miller and Marcus Rediker. Danon is reliant here on material translated into French, an illustration of the extent to which this work in the Anglophone academy has influenced research on slavery in France, but also a reminder that untranslated work on the voices of the enslaved, by for example Laurent Dubois, Deborah Jenson, or Julius Scott, might have been equally pertinent.^[7] The primary works referred to in the introduction (and indeed more widely throughout the study) also reveal the debt of those active in the study of the Francophone Black Atlantic to Roger Little, formerly Professor of French at Trinity College Dublin, whose “Autrement mêmes” series with L’Harmattan has now made available (at the latest count) over 130 out-of-print texts relating to slavery and colonialism more generally.^[8] Such a frame of reference provides an indication of the increasing impact, after several decades of relative hostility, of a body of criticism loosely framed as “postcolonial” among a new generation of scholars active in the French academy. Danon situates herself directly in the context of postcolonial and subaltern studies, eloquently suggesting a need for a historical broadening of the purview of both fields: “Nous serons dans le ‘postcolonial’, dès les années 1750, avec ses problèmes de liminalité, d’hybridité, d’ambivalence et de la multi-culturalité” (p. 35). This interest in material from outside France also reflects a key element of Danon’s analysis, the centrality of translation—or the “multiples modalités de transmission, traduction, trahison” (p. 13)—to the processes of textual production she describes.

Danon also provides a compelling historical and cultural overview of *marronage*, exploring the differences between its “petit” and “grand” manifestations, and also outlining the extent of the everyday practice—in dance, language, religious practices, scarification, and other non-verbal forms—of *marronage culturel*. As such, she underlines the importance of recognizing the place of resistance as an integral element of enslavement, from the moment of capture (for those known as *bossales*) or birth (for those known as *créoles*), accepting a thesis widely held among Haitian historians that the desire for freedom was the principal motivation for marooning. Danon draws on key historical accounts, most notably the work of Jean Fouchard, to suggest the ways in which marooning is not a “fuite subie” but is to be seen as “une forme de résistance à l’oppression et à l’exploitation” (p. 25). Shifting her focus to literary material, she is careful, however, to underline the extent to which “la parole *sur* les marrons n’est pas la parole *des* marrons” (p. 20), and sees creative writing as the means available for readers to “envisager *de l’intérieur*—même si c’est seulement de façon fictive—à quoi pouvait ressembler l’acte du marronage” (p. 56). Her corpus is made up of nine French texts published between 1735 and 1792, to which she adds the French transcreation of Aphra Behn’s *Oroonoko* (1688) published by La Place in 1745. A number of the works studied are translations and adaptations from English-language sources, although the growing importance of the Francophone context in the shape of Saint-Domingue becomes apparent as the eighteenth century evolves and as focus on the figure of Makandal increasingly foresaw the outbreak of the Haitian Revolution.

The chapters that make up the main body of the study—in focusing on sources and intended audiences—seek to “problématiser les structures et les forms de l’énonciation” (p. 63). The emphasis is on engagement with a range of different genres, analyzed sequentially, but revealing the various ways in which *marronage* is explored discursively and deployed to a range of different ends. The first chapter focuses on journalism, specifically a text translated from English by Prévost in 1735 on a rebellion of the enslaved in Jamaica, and an article on Makandal published in the *Mercure de France* in 1787. In the first, there is an exploration of the role of the figure Moses, a discussion that might also have drawn in consideration of Toussaint Louverture’s executed nephew Moïse, not least because Danon’s analysis

reveals the ways in which the text—written half a century before the outbreak of the Haitian Revolution and presented as a “Manifeste...plus audacieux” (p. 109)—stresses through its protagonist the need to “se donner *les conditions* de la puissance et du bonheur avant de pouvoir prétendre à la puissance et au bonheur” (p. 107). Danon also discovers in texts ostensibly hostile to the maroon figure an ambivalence that in the case of Makandal suggests a challenge to the customary demonization of his character and a recognition of his role as strategist and nascent “Jacobin noir” (p. 130). The study in the following chapter of the French translation of Aphra Behn’s *Oroonoko* provides evidence of a similar awareness of the ways in which marooning is “une réaction contre une situation concrète” (p. 151)—a factoring into the literary account of historical circumstances—a process rendered more complex in La Place’s version than in the original, in that he introduces additional voices, not least those of a key female figure, Imoinda.

The opening analyses of journalistic and dramatic texts ground the analysis firmly in an eighteenth-century context of French colonial slavery, reflecting on the ways in which English-language narratives are adapted to the cultural and social specificities revealed by this shift. The following three chapters draw on a trio of different genres—the *conte philosophique*, lyrical poetry, and the epistolary novel—to consider the extent to which, with the evolution of Enlightenment and pre-revolutionary attitudes to slavery, the works analyzed propose “une juxtaposition de la fiction et de la revendication” (p. 183). *Ziméo*, by Jean François de Saint-Lambert, is read as a reformist text, denouncing the excesses of slavery “pour mieux légimenter la possibilité d’un meilleur ordre inégalitaire (sinon esclavagiste)” (p. 192), whereas lyrical poetry—in particular Lemonnier’s *Discours d’un nègre marron* (published in 1777)—is presented as having a more radical potential (i.e., of imagining, on the lips of a maroon on the point of execution, “un discours...qui accuse les Européens de leur oppression, et qui les menace de vengeance” (p. 229)).

Danon concludes the main body of her study with an exploration of the epistolary novel and theater, with the former seen as a genre particularly suited to conveying the ambiguities of later eighteenth-century representations of and reflections on marooning on the grounds of its novelistic structure: “une suite de lettres qui rompt avec les récits à narrateur unique pour nous introduire au cœur d’une démultiplication de foyers optiques du fait des épistoliers multiples aux tons et styles divers” (p. 287). Such narrative maneuvers lead to the final example, Olympe de Gouges’s *Esclavage des nègres*, a play censored as a result not only of its subject matter, but also on the grounds that its author occupied “une position de marronage” (p. 318) in French society as a result of her gender. De Gouges’s drama was staged in the context of the French Revolution and reveals a political radicalism that distinguishes it from the rest of Danon’s corpus, not only in terms of the positive representation of its black characters, but also by the way it projects *marronage* as part of “une atmosphère générale de rébellion contre l’oppression” (p. 343). As such, by presenting an understanding of marooning as warning and threat, the play anticipates numerous representations of the Haitian Revolution that would follow in its wake: “elle met en scène la menace du marronage (violent et sanguinaire) pour neutraliser le marronage” (p. 345).

Danon’s conclusions provide a succinct synthesis of the varied corpus of representations studied in the main body of her book. She surveys the types of *marronage* represented, but perhaps more importantly analyses the typologies—positive and negative; just and unjust; justified and unjustified—of the *esclave marron* she discerns. *Les Voix du marronage* closes with a consideration of French-language neo-slave narratives, most notably by Edouard Glissant and Patrick Chamoiseau. Danon explores in these the (dis)continuities of historical and modern discourse central to her study and draws on the figure of the rhizome to understand such representational genealogies: “horizontalement et dans de multiples directions simultanées, parfois contradictoires entre elles, et fréquemment ambivalentes” (p. 354). It is the Chamoiseau of *Ecrire en pays dominé* whom she deploys, however, to discern “les propriétés marronnes de l’écriture,” the ultimate potential of which is to bridge the gap “entre les dénonciations de l’esclavage au XVIIIe siècle et nos propres situations de dominations contemporaines” (p. 373).

NOTES

[1] See Edouard Glissant, *Mémoires des esclavages: la fondation d'un Centre national pour la mémoire des esclavages et de leurs abolitions* (Paris: Gallimard, 2007).

[2] See Laurent Joffrin, "Esclavage, un musée pour une mémoire plus vraie." *Libération*, May 10, 2016.

[3] See Charles Forsdick, "Compensating for the past: debating reparations for slavery in contemporary France," *Contemporary French & Francophone Studies* 19.5 (2015): 42-29.

[4] See "Mémoires de l'esclavage: Hollande transmet le flambeau à Macron." *Libération*, May 10, 2017. The text of Hollande's speech is available at: <http://discours.vie-publique.fr/notices/177001044.html>.

[5] *Cambridge Companion to the African American Slave Narrative*, Audrey A. Fisch, ed., (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

[6] Christopher L. Miller, *The French Atlantic Triangle: Literature and Culture of the Slave Trade* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008).

[7] See, for example, Laurent Dubois, "An Enslaved Enlightenment: Re-Thinking the Intellectual History of the French Atlantic," *Social History* 31.1 (2006): 1-14; Deborah Jenson, *Beyond the Slave Narrative: Politics, Sex, and Manuscripts in the Haitian Revolution* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2012); or Laurent Dubois and Julius Scott, *Origins of the Black Atlantic* (New York: Taylor and Francis, 2013).

[8] For details of "Autrement mêmes," see: <http://www.editions-harmattan.fr>.

Charles Forsdick
University of Liverpool
craf@liv.ac.uk

Copyright © 2017 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies 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. The Society for French Historical Studies 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 Review 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. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172