

To cite this article: Misrahi-Barak, Judith. "Post-*Beloved* Writing: Review, Revitalize, Recalculate." *Black Studies Papers* 1.1 (2014): 37–55. Web.

To link to this article: <http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:gbv:46-00103775-17>

Abstract: Twenty-five years have elapsed since the publication of *Beloved*. In all its complexity, Toni Morrison's novel forms a peak, both concluding the previous decades of neo-slave narratives and introducing the following ones. As the following article argues, reviewing the many ways the novel has closed a period and opened a new one will help us gain a new perspective and understand new articulations and developments in slavery literature. Misrahi-Barak contends that the genre of the neo-slave narrative has ceased to be African-American only, but has become transnational and global, dialogic, polyphonic and trans-generic. It has also been instrumental in implementing a *rapprochement* between disciplines that used to be watertight.

Keywords: *Beloved*, *rapprochement*, neo-slave narratives, trans-national, trans-generic

Author: Judith Misrahi-Barak is an Associate Professor at Paul-Valéry University Montpellier 3, where she teaches English and Postcolonial Literatures. Publications include a variety of articles on Caribbean writers and the Caribbean diaspora, published in *Commonwealth*, *Moving World*, *Postcolonial Writing*, *Atlantic Studies* among others. They also encompass book chapters in: *La Ville plurielle dans la fiction antillaise anglophone* (2000); *Lignes d'horizon* (2002); *Voices and Silence in the Contemporary Novel in English* (2009); *Hybridation Multiculturalisme Postcolonialisme* (2009); *Littérature et esclavage* (2010). She is the General Editor of *PoCoPages*.

Post-*Beloved* Writing: Review, Revitalize, Recalculate

Judith Misrahi-Barak

Twenty-five years have elapsed since the publication of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. And in 1987, twenty-one years had elapsed since the publication of Margaret Walker's *Jubilee* in 1966, which launched the wave of African-American neo-slave narratives. Twenty-one years that had also seen the publication of some of the major African-American literary works such as Ernest Gaines's *Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* in 1971, Gayl Jones's *Corregidora* in 1975, Alex Haley's *Roots* and Ishmael Reed's *Flight to Canada* in 1976. The same span of time also saw the publication of Octavia Butler's novel *Kindred* in 1979, David Bradley's *The Chaneysoville Incident* in 1981, Charles Johnson's *Oxherding Tale* in 1982 and Shirley Anne Williams's *Dessa Rose* in 1986.

These names and titles are well-known but whenever the period between 1966 and 1987 is considered, one never fails to be impressed by the number of slavery-related works that were published, by their abundance and diversity, as well as by the number of original slave narratives published between 1760 and 1865, according to the dates defined by Henry Louis Gates Jr., giving Briton Hammon's *Narrative of the Uncommon Sufferings, and Surprising Deliverance of Briton Hammon, a Negro Man [...]*, published in 1760, as the first slave narrative. And these lists are only equaled by the continuity, the wealth and persistence of the critical and academic works both on the original non-fiction slave narratives and on their fictional rewritings in the form of the neo-slave narratives in the 1960s and in the following decades. The continuity of the development of what I call "slavery literature" is also striking in the latter part of the 20th century, but one can wonder at the specific economy, the specific energy, of these different waves of slavery writing. The very title of the conference where this article was originally presented as a paper seems to suggest that there is a pre-*Beloved* and a post-*Beloved* period. The twenty-one years between the publications of *Jubilee* and *Beloved* seem to point to 1987 as a watershed, a moment when the publication of *Dessa Rose*, *Kindred* and particu-

larly *Beloved* may be said to have brought slavery literature to something of a peak, all the more so since it is in that same year that Bernard Bell coined the phrase of the “neo-slave narrative” in his book on *The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition*. The phrase was taken up some twelve years later by Ashraf Rushdy in his book *Neo-Slave Narratives: Studies in the Social Logic of a Literary Form*, where neo-slave narratives are defined as “contemporary novels that assume the form, adopt the conventions, and take on the first-person voice of the antebellum slave narrative” (3).

It is very tempting to consider that the period between 1966 and 1987 forms a sort of whole, almost a second matrix, in which the echo of the African-American *Ur*-texts of the 18th and 19th centuries resonated. *Beloved* would then represent a crystallizing stage, a sort of conclusion beyond which one may consider there is a post-*Beloved* period, which would necessarily be different. I will take this path for a while—does *Beloved* provide a radical break with the previous publications, as well as with the following ones? Does it bring a certain period to a conclusion, does it launch a new one?

For a few years after *Beloved*, no ‘slavery novel’ was published, as if it had brought a certain period to its climax and conclusion. And when another wave surged, four years later, it did not come from African-American writers, which is an interesting phenomenon to notice. If Margaret Walker’s *Jubilee* launched the period of the African-American neo-slave narratives of the 1960s and 1970s, a new stage was inaugurated by the publication of Caryl Phillips’s *Cambridge* in 1991. Even if it had less immediate and global success, one should also mention the publication that same year of *Stedman and Joanna: A Love in Bondage* by Beryl Gilroy. Neither writer is African-American, both were born in the English-speaking Caribbean and emigrated to the UK. The third, post-*Beloved*, wave of slavery writing in the 1990s and 2000s, seems to have been amplified by writers from the Caribbean and the Caribbean diaspora, seeing among others the publication of Caryl Phillips’s *Crossing the River* in 1993 and Fred D’Aguiar’s *The Longest Memory* in 1994, as well as Michelle Cliff’s *Free Enterprise* in 1993, David Dabydeen’s poem “Turner” in 1994, Beryl Gilroy’s *Inkle and Yarico* in 1996, Fred D’Aguiar’s *Feeding the Ghosts* in 1997, Dionne Brand’s *At the Full and Change of the Moon* in 1999, Fred D’Aguiar’s *Bloodlines* in 2000, and David Anthony Durham’s *Walk Through Darkness* in 2002¹.

Instead of installing waterproof categories between post-*Beloved* African-American writing and post-*Beloved* Caribbean writing, I would like to insist on the crossing-over and the cross-pollinating process that took place in the 1990s and enabled writers, scholars and readers to review the writing, revitalize the creation and recalculate the routes taken so far and those to be taken subsequently. In the late 1990s more slavery novels came

to be published by African, African-American, and non-African-American writers: one thinks of Nana Grey-Johnson's *I of Ebony* (1997), Phyllis Perry's *Stigmata* the following year, Patricia Eakins's *the Marvelous Adventures of Pierre Baptiste* (1999), Alice Randall's *The Wind Done Gone* (2003), Kate McCafferty's *Testimony of an Irish Slave Girl* (2002), Barbara Chase-Riboud's *Hottentot Venus* (2004), as well as Valerie Martin's *Property* (2006), Susan Straight's *A Million Nightingales* (2006), Lawrence Hill's *Any Known Blood* (1997) and *The Book of Negroes* (2007). There is also a trend of neo-slave narratives or slavery novels being published in other parts of the world, the Indian Ocean for instance, as if a certain form of globalisation participated in the persistence and regeneration of the genre. Thus the genre may be at risk of loss and dilution, but so far this does not seem to be the case.

The purpose of the lists of names, titles and dates given above is meant to highlight two aspects I would like to foreground. First, the fact that African-American neo-slave narratives stopped being only African-American: they became Caribbean, Black British, African, African-Caribbean-Canadian, etc. In a sense, after having used the strategy of what Glissant calls a *detour*,² they became transnational and global. Second, these neo-slave narratives stopped being first-person prose narratives only. They became plays and poems as well as third-person novels, pseudo-autobiographies and pseudo-testimonies. In a way they detached themselves from one of the definitions of the neo-slave narrative as "contemporary novels that assume the form, adopt the conventions, and take on the first-person voice of the antebellum slave narrative" (Rushdy, *Neo-Slave Narratives* 3). In both cases, African-American slavery writing was pried out of its original form, written specifically by African-American writers, in the first-person voice of the ante-bellum slave narrative. They became transnational and global, polyphonic, dialogic and transgeneric. Why should this be important? What impact does this observation have? Is it a loss or a gain? Both aspects should point us ultimately in the direction of a third kind of cross-pollination, bringing together academic fields, which also used to be seen as watertight compartments: African-American studies, postcolonial studies and trauma studies.

How the African-American Neo-Slave Narrative Became Transnational and Global

The specificity of African-American neo-slave narratives and their special status in the very constitution of American literature are undeniable. But one cannot fail to wonder at the fact that the mould of the slave narrative was taken up once again for the third time, in the 1990s and 2000s, by

writers who were not African-American. As far as the Caribbean is concerned, since the revival was augmented and supplemented by Caribbean writers, this is all the more interesting and intriguing, as the original genre of the slave narrative never existed as such in the Caribbean, except for *The History of Mary Prince, a West Indian Slave* (1831). Contemporary Caribbean writers have thus (re)visited a genre that the Caribbean had never, or hardly ever, visited in the first place. They borrowed the genre from African-American writers who had themselves reactivated a genre that was active in the 18th and 19th centuries and had fallen into disuse for almost a century.³

The case is even more notable with French slave novels, since no original slave narratives were written in the French Caribbean. And yet, the (re)visiting did take place and neo-slave narratives were written by French Caribbean authors in the 1980s and 1990s: among them, *Moi, Tituba, sorcière noire de Salem* by Maryse Condé (1986), *La Mulâtresse Solitude* by André Schwartz-Bart (1996), *L'esclave vieil homme et le molosse* by Patrick Chamoiseau (1997), *Rosalie l'infâme* by Evelyne Trouillot (2003) and *Nègre Marron* by Raphaël Confiant (2006). It has to be noted, however, that a few neo-slave novels were written and published by French Caribbean writers as early as the 1940s and 1950s, even if the readership was quite small at the time: *Bagamba, nègre marron* by René Clarac (1947), *Dominique, nègre esclave* by Léonard Sainville (1951), *D'Jhébo, Le Léviathan noir* by César Pulvar (1957), *Au Seuil d'un nouveau cri* by Bertène Juminer (1963), *Le Quatrième siècle* by Edouard Glissant (1964), and finally *Un Plat de porc aux bananes vertes* by Simone Schwartz-Bart (1967). Even if some of these novels can appear dated, it is interesting to note that these novels preceded the first wave of African-American neo-slave novels of the 1960s and 1970s. Paradoxically, these neo-slave narratives in French can even be said to have been pioneers in the (re)visiting of slavery and slavery narratives, even if the question of who was the true pioneer is not what matters most, compared to the reasons why and the modalities according to which such a genre has kept re-emerging.

The difference is mostly in the context and in the scope of the readership. Questions linked to the Négritude movement were at the origin of the renewed interest in slavery and slave literature, particularly in the run-up to the 1948 referendum on independence or *départementalisation* in the French Antilles. But immediate post-war France was not concerned with those questions and the neo-slave novels that were published then did not have much impact, if any at all, contrary to the African-American neo-slave narratives that had an impact in the 1960s and 1970s because of the Civil Rights movement. The genre was the same, the context turned it into something radically different that eventually expanded beyond the African-American frame.

One has to wonder why the genre was once again given a new lease of life in the 1990s and 2000s, and a more global one too, and why the post-*Beloved* period differs from the other periods, referring back to a double tradition, that of the 18th and 19th centuries as well as that of the 1960s and 1970s. If the enslaved, by establishing a link between the use of language and their own humanity, were *writing themselves into being*, to borrow an expression from H. L. Gates, Jr.⁴, the neo-slave narratives by the African-American writers of the 1960s needed that reference to the past in order to open a new perspective onto their present at the time of the Civil Rights Movement. The need to address such a tradition is still manifest and vivid at the beginning of the 21st century, pointing to the lasting effects of slavery, and the continuation of slavery itself in certain countries. As Fred D'Aguiar wonders in "The Last Sonnet about Slavery" or "The Last Essay about Slavery," how many texts are going to be enough?⁵ It is quite obvious that such constant revisiting does not talk back to the past but talks to our present day, as if the trauma were never going to heal and had infected all the descendants' generations, and not only the descendants' generations but also the wider community. It has to be visited again and again in order to be healed.

How the African-American Neo-Slave Narrative Has Become Dialogic, Polyphonic and Transgeneric

The original slave narratives were first-person accounts of events that had been directly experienced by the enslaved. They were thus based on facts, direct testimony and a direct appeal to the sensitivity of the prospective readers, in the context of the antebellum period. Audiences in Europe and the northern United States should be made aware of the horrors of the slave trade and of slavery, and abolitionists encouraged slaves and former slaves to write and publish their life stories, following the well-established pattern of – "I was born a slave" – even if it meant that some 'guidance' was introduced. Thus, if those first-hand accounts were foregrounding personal experiences, they were also, as Robert Stepto put it, "full of other voices" (3): the voices of other enslaved Africans who did not have the possibility of publishing their life stories, and the voices of abolitionists who used the former slaves as mouthpieces. Even if the collective, dialogic and multiple dimensions can be seen as underlying elements, they are not necessarily explicit. These narratives are polyphonic, but one has to listen carefully to hear all the voices.

In the slavery writing of the 1960s and 1970s, the modalities of rewriting the canon already began to vary, and we can follow Rushdy when he establishes "three primary forms of representing slavery in the post-civil

rights era: the historical novel, the pseudo-autobiographical slave narrative, and the novel of remembered generations" ("The Politics of Neo-Slave Narratives" 96) Rushdy examines three examples of how the neo-slave narrative modifies slavery discourse: *Jubilee* sets the standard for the third-person historical novel of slavery; *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* renders the life story of a slave in her own words, producing a pseudo-autobiography; *Corregidora* takes as its subject the continuing traumatic legacy of slavery on later generations and tells the story of the descendants. Rushdy also takes other examples so as to show the different modalities of the recuperation and production of a "choral and communal voice":

[...] Gaines, Reed, Williams, and Johnson appreciatively and respectfully attempt to recuperate those voices. The strategy they all share is that of producing a voice that is discontinuous and part of a larger communal voice. Gaines has others' voices supplement Miss Jane's, as he declares this story to be theirs as theirs is hers. In *Flight to Canada*, Reed gives us a narrator who, in an act of Voudun possession, tells his own life story and the life story of the slave who has commissioned him as a writer. In *Dessa Rose*, Williams produces a chorus of texts—the writing of the white "expert" on slave behavior, the stories of the white plantation mistress, and the recorded memories and voice of the slave Dessa—all of which we discover, only at the end of the novel, to have been the oral rendition of Dessa written down by her son. In *Oxherding Tale*, the story is interrupted by metafictional digressions on the form of the book, and in *Middle Passage* the text is both a record of commercial traffic in slaves and a statement of the slaves' resistance to being commodified. ("The Politics of Neo-Slave Narratives" 98)

In the more recent, post-*Beloved*, wave of neo-slave narratives, the dialogic dimension has been claimed in an increasingly self-conscious and deliberate way, flaunting the multiplicity in front of the reader's eyes. After a brief glance at the table of contents of Caryl Phillips's *Crossing the River* or Fred D'Aguiar's *The Longest Memory* or *Feedings the Ghosts*, the reader quickly realises that narration is more dialogic and polyphonic than ever, each character being granted one or several chapters. The text is built on the inner echoes that resonate throughout the books.

Echoes resonate between the characters of these neo-slave narratives, they also resonate with earlier texts. If trans-textuality was already a component of African-American neo-slave narratives, with writers of the 1980s entering in a dialogue with writers of the 1960s, these contemporary texts implement it in a more forceful, deliberate and obvious way⁶. In *Cambridge* for instance, Phillips never forgets to refer, implicitly and explicitly, to *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African, The History of Mary Prince, a West Indian Slave*, but

also to *The Journal of a West India Proprietor* by Matthew Lewis, or Lady Nugent's *Journal*. Other texts are also referred to that do not necessarily belong to slavery literature: *The Longest Memory* can be read as a modern-day version of *Romeo and Juliet*; John Donne, William Blake are also present in the text; *Feeding the Ghosts* is partly a response to Derek Walcott's poem "The Sea is History." *L'Esclave vieil homme et le molosse* establishes a very particular bond with the writings of Edouard Glissant.⁷ Slavery literature in the late 20th and early 21st centuries has gained a new, enriched perspective, and because of its position in time, the angles it has taken have multiplied the possibilities of interpretation. *Relation* (in the Glissantian meaning), interconnectedness and interdependence have also become a poetical and a political form, thrusting the neo-slave narratives deep into the global literary canon so that they belong, as they should, to all and everyone. The relations that post-*Beloved* neo-slave narratives entertain with their antecedents have to be different. A dialogic consciousness now exists that probably did not exist on such a scale thirty years ago. Juxtaposing or superimposing earlier and modern-day texts requires an ethics of rewriting and revisiting, leading the way towards constant re-interpretation and re-reading. The text has become multiple and diverse while remaining unique.

This multiplicity of form is reflected in the content too, and the desire to explore its diversity further. If it has always been the purpose of neo-slave narratives to bring to light aspects that had remained hidden and silent, this is even more so in post-*Beloved* writing, taking the novel by its word, endeavoring not to leave *unspeakable things unspoken* and to *pass on the story*. Other examples can illustrate this desire to highlight new aspects in the history of slavery. I will take two examples in Canadian literature, Lawrence Hill's *The Book of Negroes* (2007), and Austin Clarke's *The Polished Hoe* (2002, deliberately chosen from a postcolonial corpus).

The Book of Negroes was published in Canada in 2007. It won the Rogers Writers' Trust Fiction Prize and the Overall Commonwealth Writers' Prize for Best Book. It was also long-listed for the Giller Prize. The novel became a national bestseller in Canada. In previous fiction and non-fiction works, Lawrence Hill had already focused on African-Canadians and the little known history of slavery in Canada. Hill's earlier novel *Any Known Blood* (1997) spans five generations from slavery times to the present-day. *The Book of Negroes* narrates the epic story of Aminata Diallo who survives the Middle Passage and slavery, escapes to Canada, travels back to Africa, and comes to play a major role in the abolition debates in England in the years that precede the abolition of the slave trade in 1807. She had been kidnapped by slave traders from Bayo, her native village in Africa, in 1756, and was taken to Bance Island, one of the ports where the Africans were shipped to the plantations of the New World. The novel presents the

strategies Aminata uses to organize her survival throughout the years she spends on an indigo plantation in Carolina, and later in Charles Town, Virginia. Her skills as a midwife and, later on, as a scribe, and of course her strong will and determination, are the keys to her survival. After finding herself in Manhattan, Aminata becomes involved with the 3,000 enslaved Africans who sided with the British in exchange for the promise of land and freedom. Fleeing Manhattan in 1783, a slave could only be granted a passage to Canada if s/he was registered in "The Book of Negroes," the official document that was kept by British naval officers.

Thus Lawrence Hill mainly focuses on an under-studied aspect of Canadian history – the Black Loyalists and the British treatment they faced when they migrated to Nova Scotia. The connection of Canada to slavery is often only believed to concern the Underground Railroad, showcasing the positive side of Canada's involvement in slavery and foregrounding the role of Canada as savior for enslaved Africans in the US, but suppressing the responsibility for slavery on Canadian soil. Hill addresses this reluctance to face the totality of its history. Out of those 3,000 Black Loyalists, 1,200 Africans, disillusioned with Nova Scotia and England, boarded ships to establish the colony of Freetown in Sierra Leone in 1792, in the first 'back to Africa' exodus.

The novel has a solid foundation in historical detail and documents, from dates and facts, to places, to ways of behaving, eating, believing, speaking etc. Fictional versions of historical figures like William Wilberforce, Granville Sharpe, John Clarkson or Alexander Falconbridge are seamlessly woven into the fictional plot. It took Hill five years to do the research necessary for writing the book, and he insists he got as much from first-hand narratives written by former slaves like Olaudah Equiano, or by colonists like John Newton, the author of *The Journal of a Slave Trader 1750–1754*, as from critical or historiographical work. Part of the intertextual construction of the novel comes from its direct references to formerly published texts: Aminata becomes acquainted with *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African* (1789) through Anna Maria Falconbridge, the wife of Alexander Falconbridge, the slave-ship surgeon turned abolitionist, who helped establish the colony of Freetown in Sierra Leone. Falconbridge's *Account of the Slave Trade on the Coast of Africa*, published in 1788, was one of the early abolitionist texts⁸. His wife's letters were published as *Narrative of Two Voyages to the River Sierra Leone During the Years 1791–1792–1793*. These texts and characters are built into the diegetic progression of Aminata's life.

Narrating the slave's lifestory from enslavement to liberation is very much in keeping with the conventions of the slave narrative – no doubt about that. And yet, Lawrence Hill organizes the narrative in ways that reinvent the tradition once again. Two particular aspects can be under-

lined: the fact that certain topics are foregrounded in ways unusual for slave narratives or novels, and the circular diegesis that makes use of the differences and connections between *story* time and *text* time. First, about twenty pages are devoted to Aminata's childhood in Bayo, her African village, where she learns the skills of a midwife ('catching babies') by accompanying her mother. Some eighty consecutive pages focus on the march to the sea after she has been kidnapped by the slavers and separated from her people. Three months ('three revolutions of the moon') are necessary for the coffer to reach Bance Island and board the ships that will take the Africans to American plantations. This is not a theme that slave or neo-slave narratives generally dwell upon, but in *The Book of Negroes*, it is made into a moment of its own, perceived through the eleven-year-old child's consciousness and mediated through the adult narrator's voice. Second, a further aspect on which generally neither slave narratives nor slave novels focus are Black Loyalists fleeing slavery to Canada, as well as their exodus back to Africa and the settlement of Freetown in Sierra Leone in 1792. This section constitutes a fourth of the 470 pages of the novel, and almost takes Aminata back to her birthplace, Bayo, which enables the first-person narrator to wonder about the person she has become, after years spent in slavery or working with white abolitionists:

[...] I wondered just who exactly I was and what I had become, after more than thirty years in the Colonies. Without my parents, my husband, my children or any people with whom I could speak the languages of my childhood, what part of me was still African? (Hill 386)

One is reminded here of the fact that the original slave narratives are geared towards freedom, towards the moment when the slave regains the status of a free man or woman. This is also the case in *The Book of Negroes*, but in a more complex way, since the aged narrator opens the narrative by saying "I seem to have trouble dying" (1), explaining her role in London, in 1802, alongside the abolitionists. It is only in the second chapter of Book One that the analepsis goes back to Africa, in 1745. Four chapters covering the period from 1802 to 1804 in London intersperse the narrative—London in 1802, 1803, 1804 and the concluding chapter—at the end of Aminata's life. Such an organization of time emphasizes the narrative's drive towards freedom, since the reader knows from the beginning that Aminata will eventually end up in London. It also introduces another aspect of freedom—the narrator's freedom to organize her own text. Instead of writing a linear and chronological narrative, Aminata's voice and presence have agency in organizing her text as she wants to, not as a white editor could have dictated. Even if the metafictional device has already been used by Sherley Ann Williams in *Dessa Rose*, the issues of author-

ship, authenticity, amanuensis and more generally speaking, voice, are evoked by Lawrence Hill when he has Aminata, at the end of the book, explain to the abolitionists that she will write the story of her life, “[w]ithout guidance, thank you very much”. And she adds: “My life. My words. My pen. I am capable of writing” (Hill 455).

Regenerating the genre through the way molds are handled, the narrative is shaped and organized, references are claimed, and influences appropriated, is at the heart of the novel. *The Book of Negroes* derives its power from the response it offers to the double tradition of slave narratives and neo-slave narratives. It is not just one more novel about slavery; it revisits and renews the genre of the neo-slave novel. As such, it is an example of post-*Beloved* writing.

One more point needs to be made about *The Book of Negroes*: it was published at the same time and under the same title in Great Britain, India and South Africa, but as *Someone Knows My Name* in the USA, Australia and New Zealand. After the book won the Commonwealth Writers’ Prize, *The Guardian* asked Lawrence Hill to write a blog about the title change. Even if the American title was imposed on him, the writer explains how he came to understand and accept, even respect, the choice of the American publisher;⁹ probably another instance of the complex relationship between constraint and freedom. We can only be glad that the book, by changing its title, has reached a wider audience.¹⁰

Like *Corregidora*, Austin Clarke’s *The Polished Hoe* (2002) is a novel about the descendants of slaves and as such it recalculates a certain number of elements. Although its background is set in the Caribbean of the 1950s – on the fictitious island of Bimshire, fashioned after Clarke’s native Barbados – it still reeks of the harsh conditions that had been the daily lot of plantation slaves. Clarke also constructs time in ways that regenerate the genre: twenty-four hours of diegetic time cover five hundred pages. The novel begins with Mary-Mathilda delivering a statement to a Constable, but it is only much later that the reader understands that Mary-Mathilda confesses she has killed, in revenge and disgust, the plantation owner and father of her children. The reader will follow her leading the Sergeant to the maimed body of Mr Bellfeels after more than four hundred pages of a circuitous, seemingly verbose and digressive confession in which the narrator walks a tight-rope between the legal and judiciary (it is a statement), and the intimate (it is a confession).

Peter Brooks, in his study *Troubling Confessions*, points to the problematic between “confession according to the law and confession according to literature” (4). In *The Polished Hoe*, Mary-Mathilda delivers her confession in the shape of a police statement, but her confession is multi-levelled: she murdered Mr Bellfeels, admits to the murder, but she also pleads for self-defense, as she is the victim turned murderer who fights on behalf of

thousands before her. Also, her confession prompts Sergeant Percy's confession: first, Percy confesses to his enduring love for Mary-Mathilda—it is then the reader who becomes the confessor—and second, Mary-Mathilda's confession turns into an accusatory statement. It is here that she blames her listener for his guilt and ignorance of Mr Bellfeels's acts and manners and for having gradually turned into an unwitting accomplice. Percy represents all the people who choose to remain ignorant of the horrors of slavery simply because of the benefits they derived from it. Concerning narrative technique, large segments of the narrative feature direct speech, which ties in with the ethos of the direct statement / confession. The reader is also allowed into Percy's psyche, thus multiplying alternating perspectives.

What I consider regenerative about the novel is the interplay between different genres such as the neo-slave narrative, the detective novel and the confessional novel. *The Polished Hoe* blurs generic boundaries and forces its reader to bridge generic gaps. Such an ethics of multiplicity and diversity attests to the generic and trans-generic diversity at work in other post-*Beloved* writing. Many writers resort to genres that the authors of the original slave narratives did not use. Their writing does not aim at revisiting for revisiting's sake but in order to create and recreate, envision and reimagine, drawing on what Fred D'Aguiar, after Wilson Harris, has called the *intuitive imagination*. Some texts stretch the generic limits to what would have been hardly imaginable in an earlier period. Examples are Clarence Major's poem "The Slave Trade: View from the Middle Passage" and Robbie McCauley's play *Sally's Rape* in 1994, Susan Lori Parks's play *Venus* in 1997, Elizabeth Alexander's *Venus Hottentot* in 1990 and Marilyn Nelson's poem "Fortune's Bones" in 2004, as well as Dorothea Smartt's "Ship Shape" and Marlene Nourbese Philip's poem "Zong" in 2008. Fred D'Aguiar's *Bloodlines* (2000) is a novel in verse. It takes us back to the period of slavery and the context of the plantation through an improbable love affair between a Black slave, Faith, and her white rapist, Christy, the son of the plantation owner. However, it relies on a rhetoric that distances the reader from that very past and shows how any desire for historical reconstitution can only be illusory. There is no easy access back to slavery, nor to slave narratives, this is how the constraint of the novel's *ottava rima* should be heard. The reader soon realises that the first-person narrator is Christy's and Faith's son, thus raising the question of legacy and filiation. *Bloodlines* is a text of *working through*, of taking stock of the trauma of slavery without necessarily trying to heal wounds at all cost.

Because I have highlighted the diversity and multiplicity in post-*Beloved* writing, I may have given the impression that pre-*Beloved* writing, and maybe *Beloved* itself, are monologic and monophonic. Such misunder-

standing should be dissipated: such a variety of form and content, of perspectives and narrative voices can already be read in *Beloved*, particularly in the chapters at the end of the novel that are focalized through different characters. It is also worth noting that the diegesis is mostly organized in the post-abolition period of the 1870s, and that slavery is represented in an analeptic mode, outside the diegesis. The main character is a survivor. The diegetic structure and the time-scheme of Morrison's novel implement the variations at play in post-*Beloved* slavery writing, reinforcing the flexibility that was already part of Octavia Butler's *Kindred*. In that respect, *Beloved* defies Rushdy's definition. Let us keep these elements in mind so as to avoid any binary approach. *Beloved* in all its complexity forms a peak, both concluding the previous decades and introducing the following ones, closing and opening perspectives, probing possible new articulations.

The Question of *Multidirectional Memory*

In *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (2009), Rothberg employs the concept of "multidirectional memory" (5) to articulate different histories of trauma and victimization through what he calls "the comparative approach" (6). It brings together different historical traumas and opens up the borders of memory that had formerly hinged on group identity and been closed up by "competitive memory" (*Multidirectional* 5). Rothberg suggests that memory itself is *multidirectional*, "subject to ongoing negotiation, cross-referencing, and borrowing; [...] productive and not privative" (3). A deeper understanding of a given trauma may emerge through the comparison with other traumas; traumas like "the Holocaust, slavery, and colonialism [may appear] singular yet relational" ("Decolonizing" 225).

Caryl Phillips, one of the writers who have most often revisited the trauma of Atlantic slavery, has also explored the ways it is linked to other histories, bringing the Shoah and Atlantic slavery into resonance. Other writers preceded him: as Rothberg demonstrates, W.E.B. Du Bois and André Schwarz-Bart both had the "desire to develop aesthetic and discursive strategies adequate to linking different minority histories" (Rothberg, *Multidirectional* 136).¹¹ In texts that deal with Black and Jewish history and the diaspora, neither author simply juxtaposes the histories of those two "perennially displaced peoples" (136). Both use what Rothberg calls "anachronistic aesthetics" (135–172) so as to offer a meditation on what African-Americans and Jews share. Phillips does this in a deliberate way – most notably in *The European Tribe* (1987), in *Higher Ground* (1989) and in *The Nature of Blood* (1997). It is this notion, I think, that presents one

of the major developments in the literature of the past two decades: prizing the history of the African diaspora out of its solely African-American context and multiplying the *contact zones* (to apply Mary-Louise Pratt's concept to a different context) in time through anachronism and in space through anapopism, or spatial displacement (Multidirectional 146), *The European Tribe* provides several keys to understanding Phillips's investment in the history of the Shoah, as if it had provided him with a metonymic process of displacement and identification in order to refigure what it means to be growing up in racist Britain.¹² Again, in Rothberg's words: "[t]he other's history does not screen out one's own past, but rather serves as a screen for multidirectional projections in which solidarity and self-construction emerge" (*Multidirectional* 156). The point is not to establish an "equation between black and Jewish history, but rather to highlight both similar structural problems within those histories and missed encounters between them" (159).

Higher Ground is organized into three distinct novellas that suggest contact across the different (hi-)stories – "Heartland" is set during the slave trade and introduces an African man who acts as a go-between and interpreter between the British and the Africans; "Cargo Rap" is made up of the letters written by an African-American in prison in the 1960s; "Higher Ground" focuses on Irene, a Polish Jewish refugee and survivor of the death camps. The stories of the "novel in three parts" constitute "radical acts of de-proprietation" (Rothberg, *Multidirectional* 158). At the same time, *The Nature of Blood* comes as a single narrative, which spans four hundred years and connects Nazi Germany, 15th–16th century Venice, and contemporary Israel. The highly fragmented and rapidly shifting text explores "new possibilities for thinking the relatedness of the unrelatable" (164). Such hyper-connectivity would have been impossible to such a degree a few generations ago.

Conclusion: The Cross-Pollination of Academic Disciplines

Academics should learn from writers. Such hyper-connectivity, such desire for relatedness, has a direct impact on the academic fields which are solicited in the reading and analysis of literary works and which cannot be as restricted, separated and watertight as they used to be. The relationship between postcolonial and African-American studies has been difficult. African-American writing was completely excluded from such foundational books as *The Empire Writes Back* in its 1989 edition. The spatial, linguistic and cultural displacement and dislocation of African Americans was not considered by Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin to belong to 'the postcolonial,' nor would African-Americanists have accepted to

brush shoulders with scholars in postcolonial or trauma studies.¹³ John Cullen Gruesser even spoke of “an insularity or what might be called the territorialization of postcolonial and African American literary studies” (3) in the year 2005. There is still a lot of resistance and mistrust between African-American studies and postcolonial studies, but the academic re-configuration is bound to gain momentum. The writers, as usual, are showing the way.

More recently, trauma studies and postcolonial studies have also implemented a *rapprochement* in spite of their different approach—trauma studies generally posit an internal and abstract cause of individual trauma, one that has been repressed and remains unsayable, while postcolonial studies largely insists on historical, political and socio-economic causes for historical and cultural trauma. The “narrativization of trauma” (Visser 274) I see at work in most neo-slave narratives tends to go against the aporia of trauma theory which rejects the very possibility of a therapeutic current. Such a therapeutic current, in postcolonial studies, “poses that narrativization of trauma is necessary and possible, as an ‘organized, detailed, verbal account, oriented in time and historical content’” (Herman, qtd. in Visser 274).

As I have tried to show, the genre of the neo-slave narrative cannot be considered purely African-American any more, nor can the academic fields dealing with the genre be sealed tight against one another. Nothing can prevent literary accounts of history from remaining “singular” when histories are “relational.” One might also add that the increasing number of translations from English and into English have participated in expanding the readership and helping texts to migrate. Translations carry texts further, over and across, onto a more global stage, bring them more forcefully into full view, and contribute to transformative and mobilizing processes, increasing the dynamics of publication in all fields and reaching an ever-wider audience—the recalculation to which I alluded in the title. Contemporary writers and their translators disseminate the words of slavery, same and different, repeated and reactivated, rejuvenated through their iteration in a different context, during a different period and in a different language. The literature of slavery has gone global, and far from diluting the African-American specificity of neo-slave narratives, this opening up ultimately contributes to purging what Judith Butler calls “the traumatic residue” (2). It is my hypothesis that such globalized *re-reading* and *translating* in all meanings of the terms, implies a process of *working through*. This *working through*, linked to questions of the representation, transmission, re-articulation, iteration and reverberation of texts, contributes to a potential emptying of that “traumatic residue”, to a re-appropriation of “linguistic agency” (Butler 2). Examining the double tradition of the original slave narratives and the neo-slave narratives of the

1960s and 1970s enables us to go back to a representation of the site of trauma, the reinvestigation of which cannot but enable us to depart from it¹⁴. The process is a dynamic one, creating through movement in space and time, as well as in genre, the potential leeway for transformation and evolution. Only then can meaning circulate again, dispersing and possibly dissolving, in the chemical sense of the term, the “traumatic residue(s)”, in order to re-signify and begin to heal. How we let the texts resonate is up to each one of us readers. Our present is most certainly shaped by the ways we allow them to echo open-endedly in our collective consciousness.

Notes

- 1 One can also note the publication of neo-slave novels by African-American women writers in the 1990s, such as J. California Cooper (*Family*, 1991), Jewelle Gomez (“Louisiana 1850,” 1991), Barbara Chase-Riboud (*The President’s Daughter*, 1994), Lorene Cary (*The Price of a Child*, 1995), Jewell Parker Rhodes (*Douglass’ Women*, 2002), and Nancy Rawles (*My Jim*, 2005).
- 2 The *detour* in Glissantian thought is a last resort strategy adopted by people whose domination has been occulted and for whom direct confrontation has not been possible; it is a strategy of collective escape: “Le détour est le recours ultime d’une population dont la domination par un Autre est occultée. [...] C’est une ‘attitude d’échappement’ [...] collectivisée” (*Le Discours antillais* 32).
- 3 One can mention the notable exception of Arna Bontemps’s *Black Thunder: Gabriel’s Revolt – Virginia 1800*, published in 1936.
- 4 See Davis and Gates xii–xiii, xxiii.
- 5 See D’Aguiar, “The Last Sonnet About Slavery” 149, and “The Last Essay About Slavery” 125–147.
- 6 Bénédicte Ledent examines these phenomena of inner and outer dialogism (281–293). One can also note that the neo-slave narratives of the 1970s and 1980s also entered into a dialogue with the original slave narratives, or with the neo-slave narratives of the 1960s.
- 7 See Rochmann 455–470.
- 8 I thank the editors for having mentioned early abolitionist interventions by Germantown Quakers in 1622.
- 9 Private email correspondence, dated August 24, 2009.
- 10 “In urban America, to call someone a Negro is to ask for trouble. It suggests that the designated person has no authenticity, no backbone, no individuality, and is nothing more than an Uncle Tom to the white man. [...]. In my country, few people have complained to me about the title, and nobody continues to do so after I explain its historical origins. I think it’s partly because the word “Negro” resonates differently in Canada. If you use it in Toronto or Montreal,

you are probably just indicating publicly that you are out of touch with how people speak these days. But if you use it in Brooklyn or Boston, you are asking to have your nose broken. When I began touring with the novel in some of the major US cities, literary African-Americans kept approaching me and telling me it was a good thing indeed that the title had changed, because they would never have touched the book with its Canadian title" (Hill, "Why" n. pag.).

- ¹¹ See W.E.B Du Bois 45–46 and Schwarz-Bart.
- ¹² "[...] I vicariously channeled a part of my hurt and frustration through the Jewish experience" (*The European Tribe* 54, qtd. in Rothberg 156).
- ¹³ This is discussed by Gruesser 8-10. In the 2002 edition of *The Empire Writes Back*, the added chapter does raise the issue again: "Can we really say that slavery and its effects (e. g., the black diaspora) are not a legitimate element of the colonial and should not be part of what we study to try and understand how colonialism worked?" (Ashcroft, Griffiths, Tiffin 200).
- ¹⁴ See Caruth, "Trauma" 11.

References

- Alexander, Elizabeth. *The Venus Hottentot*. 1990. Minneapolis: Graywolf, 2004. Print.
- Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, eds. *The Empire Writes Back*. 1989. New York: Routledge, 2002. Print.
- Brooks, Peter. *Troubling Confessions: Speaking Guilt in Law and Literature*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2000. Print.
- Bradley, David. *The Chaneyville Incident*. New York: Avon, 1982. Print.
- Brand, Dionne. *At the Full and Change of the Moon*. Toronto: Knopf, 1999. Print.
- Brink, André. *A Chain of Voices*. London: Minerva, 1982. Print.
- Butler, Judith. *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*. New York: Routledge, 1997. Print.
- Butler, Octavia. *Kindred*. Boston: Beacon, 1979. Print.
- Caruth, Cathy, ed. *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*. Baltimore: The John Hopkins UP, 1996.
- . *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 1996. Print.
- Chamoiseau, Patrick. *L'esclave vieil homme et le molosse*. Paris: Gallimard 1997. Print.
- Chase-Riboud, Barbara. *Hottentot Venus*. New York: Doubleday, 2004. Print.
- Clarke, Austin. *The Polished Hoe*. Markham : Thomas Allen, 2002. Print.
- Cliff, Michelle. *Free Enterprise*. New York: Dutton, 1993. Print.
- Condé, Maryse. *Moi, Tituba, sorcière noire de Salem*. Paris: Mercure de France, 1986. Print.

- Dabydeen, David. *Turner: New and Selected Poems*. London: Cape, 1994. Print.
- . *A Harlot's Progress*. 1999. London: Vintage, 2000. Print.
- D'Aguiar, Fred. *Bloodlines*. London: Chatto & Windus, 2000. Print.
- . *Feeding the Ghosts*. London: Chatto & Windus, 1997. Print.
- . "The Last Essay About Slavery." *The Age of Anxiety*. Eds. Sarah Dunant and Roy Porter. London: Virago, 1996. 125-147. Print.
- . "The Last Sonnet About Slavery." *An English Sampler: New and Selected Poems*. London: Chatto & Windus, 2001. 149. Print.
- . *The Longest Memory*. London: Chatto & Windus, 1994. Print.
- Davis, Charles T. and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., eds. *The Slave's Narrative*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1985. Print.
- Du Bois, W.E.B. "The Negro and the Warsaw Ghetto." 1952. *The Social Theory of W.E.B. Du Bois*. Ed. Phil Zuckerman. Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge, 2004. 45-46. Print.
- Durham, David Anthony. *Walk through Darkness*. New York: Doubleday, 2002. Print.
- Eakins, Patricia. *The Marvelous Adventures of Pierre Baptiste, Father and Mother, First and Last*. New York: NYUP, 1999. Print.
- Gaines, Ernest. *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*. New York: Doubleday, 1971. Print.
- Gilroy, Beryl. *Inkle & Yarico*. Leeds: Peepal Tree, 1996. Print.
- . *Stedman and Joanna – A Love in Bondage*. New York: Vantage, 1991. Print.
- Glissant, Edouard. *Le Quatrième siècle*. Paris: Seuil, 1964. Print.
- . *Le Discours antillais*. Paris: Le Seuil, 1981. Print.
- Grey-Johnson, Nana. *I of Ebony*. Banjul: Vinasha, 1997. Print.
- Gruesser, John Cullen. *Confluences – Postcolonialism, African American Studies and the Black Atlantic*. Athens: The U of Georgia P, 2005. Print.
- Haley, Alex. *Roots*. 1976. London: Vintage, 1991. Print.
- Hayden, Robert E. "Middle Passage". *Phylon* 6 (1945): 247-253. Print.
- Herman, Judith Lewis. *Trauma and Recovery: From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*. London: Pandora, 1994. Print.
- Hill, Lawrence. *The Book of Negroes*. Toronto: HarperCollins, 2007. Print.
- . "Why I'm Not Allowed My Book Title: It's called The Book of Negroes in Canada, But Americans Won't Buy That Term." *The Guardian*. The Guardian, 20 May 2008: n. pag. Web. 31 May 2012.
- Hirsch, Marianne. "Past Lives: Postmemories in Exile." *Exile and Creativity: Signposts, Travelers, Outsiders, Backward Glances*. Ed. Susan Rubin Suleiman. Durham: Duke UP, 1998. 418-446. Print.
- . "Surviving Images: Holocaust Photographs and the Work of Postmemory." *Yale Journal of Criticism* 14.1 (2001): 5-37. Print.

- Johnson, Charles. *Middle Passage*. New York: Macmillan, 1990. Print.
- . *Oxherding Tale*. 1982. New York: Grove, 1984. Print.
- . *Soulcatcher*. New York: Harvest, 2001. Print.
- Jones, Gayl. *Corregidora*. 1975. Boston: Beacon, 1986. Print.
- Ledent, Bénédicte. "Slavery Revisited through Vocal Kaleidoscopes: Polyphony in Novels by Fred D'Aguiar and Caryl Phillips." *Revisiting Slave Narratives/Les avatars contemporains des récits d'esclaves*. Ed. Judith Misrahi-Barak. Montpellier: Service des Publications de Montpellier III, 2004. 281–293. Print.
- Major, Clarence. "The Slave Trade: View from the Middle Passage." *African American Review* 28 (Spring 1994): 11–22. Print.
- Marshall, Paule. *The Chosen Place, the Timeless People*. New York: Harper, 1976. Print.
- Martin, Valerie. *Property*. New York: Vintage, 2004. Print.
- McCafferty, Kate. *Testimony of an Irish Slave Girl*. New York: Viking, 2002. Print.
- McCauley, Robbie. "Sally's Rape." *Moon Marked and Touched by the Sun: Plays By African-American Women*. Ed. Sydné Mahone. New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1994. 211–238. Print.
- Misrahi-Barak, Judith. "Fred D'Aguiar and Denise Harris: Novels of Emancipation." *Moving Worlds* 7.2 (2007): 77–88. Print.
- . "Postérités anglophones et francophones des récits d'esclaves: regards vers le XXème et XXIème siècle." *Littérature et esclavage*. Ed. Sarga Moussa. Paris: Editions Desjonquères, 2010. 385–396. Print.
- , ed. *Revisiting Slave Narratives/Les avatars contemporains des récits d'esclaves*. Montpellier: Service des Publications de Montpellier III, 2004. 11–18. Print.
- , ed. *Revisiting Slave Narratives II/Les avatars contemporains des récits d'esclaves II*. Montpellier: Presses Universitaires de la Méditerranée, 2007. 9–23. Print.
- Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. New York: Knopf, 1987. Print.
- Nelson, Marilyn. *Fortune's Bones: The Manumission Requiem*. Asheville: Front Street, 2004. Print.
- Parks, Suzan-Lori. *Venus*. New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1997. Print.
- Perry, Phyllis. *Stigmata*. 1998. London: Piatkus, 1999. Print.
- Philip, Marlene Nourbese. *Zong!* Middletown: Wesleyan UP, 2008. Print.
- Phillips, Caryl. *Cambridge*. London: Bloomsbury, 1991. Print.
- . *Crossing the River*. London: Picador, 1994. Print.
- . *The Nature of Blood*. 1997. London: Faber & Faber, 1998. Print.
- Randall, Alice. *The Wind Done Gone*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2001. Print.
- Reed, Ishmael. *Flight to Canada*. New York: Scribner, 1976. Print.
- Rochmann, Marie-Christine. "L'Esclave vieil homme et le molosse, roman de la réécriture." *Revisiting Slave Narratives/Les avatars contemporains des récits*

- d'esclaves*. Montpellier : Service des Publications de Montpellier III, 2004. 455–70. Print.
- Rothberg, Michael. "Decolonizing Trauma Studies: A Response." *Studies in the Novel* 40.1–2 (Spring & Summer 2008): 224–234. Print.
- Rothberg, Michael. *Multidirectional Memory. Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2009. Print.
- . "Decolonizing Trauma Studies: A Response." *Studies in the Novel* 40.1–2 (Spring & Summer 2008): 224–234. Print.
- Rushdy, Ashraf. *Neo-Slave Narratives: Studies in the Social Logic of a Literary Form*. New York : Oxford UP, 1999. Print.
- . "The Politics of the Neo-Slave Narrative." *Revisiting Slave Narratives, Les Carnets du Cerpac* 2. Ed. Judith Misrahi-Barak. Montpellier: Service des Publications de Montpellier III, 2005. 91–102. Print.
- Stepto, Robert B. *From Behind the Veil: A Study of Afro-American Narrative*. 1979. Chicago: U of Illinois P, 1991. Print.
- Straight, Susan. *A Million Nightingales: A Novel*. New York: Pantheon, 2006. Print.
- Schwartz-Bart, André & Simone Schwartz-Bart. *Un plat de porc aux bananes vertes*. Paris: Le Seuil, 1967. Print.
- . *La mulâtresse solitude*. Paris: Le Seuil, 1996. Print.
- Trouillot, Evelyne. *Rosalie l'infâme*. Paris: Dapper, 2003. Print.
- Visser, Irene. "Trauma Theory and Postcolonial Literary Studies." *Journal of Post-Colonial Writing* 47.3 (July 2011): 270–282. Print.
- Walcott, Derek. *Dream on Monkey Mountain and Other Plays*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1970. Print.
- Walker, Margaret. *Jubilee*. Boston & New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1966. Print.
- Williams, Sherley Anne. *Dessa Rose*. New York: Berkeley Books, 1986. Print.