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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 Nick Nesbitt, University of Aberdeen.

Christopher L. Miller's *The French Atlantic Triangle: Literature and Culture of the Slave Trade* is a path-breaking work that charts the contours of the history and experience of the Middle Passage in the French slave trade. Miller's study brings to fruition the promise of Atlantic Studies inaugurated by Paul Gilroy's *Black Atlantic* (1993), standing as a comprehensive investigation and elucidation of the francophone dimension of Atlantic slavery. Spanning some four centuries, Miller's encyclopedic study manages to combine a compendious grasp with an attention to literary detail and interpretive insight that place the work in a class of its own. My comments will thus be limited to calling attention to a few of the paths of inquiry it opens up and questions it leaves unexplored in its 560 pages.

The French Atlantic Triangle is a profoundly Atlantic work. No mere compilation, the study is structured around the central conceptual problem of the slave-holding Atlantic world: value. Miller reminds us that what drove the triangulation of this infernal intercontinental machine was a perverse economic fact: "the force behind the rise of the slave trade was... the general doubling (or more) of the value of a slave after crossing the Atlantic" (p. 17). From this peculiarity of the early-modern Atlantic world, Miller goes on to investigate the French Atlantic world as a world-system (in the spirit of Immanuel Wallerstein), one that created desire, value, profit, suffering, and death through a generalized process of the commodification of humans and their labor. *The French Atlantic Triangle* thus suggestively juxtaposes "literature and money" as two modes of Atlantic signification linked through their shared creation of desire (p. 10). Ranging broadly across archival and literary sources, Miller describes how Africans' desires, after initial resistance, were hooked into this Atlantic profit machine. While the book's final section describes the rare Antillean and African attempts to represent the slave trade and African participation in it, parts two and three analyze desire as (abolitionist) sentiment, and, most revealingly, homosocial and even explicitly homosexual desire. Miller's detailed exegesis of the homosocial dimension of Eugene Sue's *Atar-Gull* (1831) and his unearthing of the explicit homosexual content in Edouard Corbière's *Le Nègrier* (1832) form an intriguing—if, as Miller says, unexpected—aspect of this Atlantic field of desire.

Since, as Miller reminds us, there is no extant narrative of the French Middle Passage from the subject position of the captives, the author rightly turns, after judiciously surveying the historiography of the French slave trade, to the fictional works that preserve and imaginatively recreate what should rightly take its place as one of the founding events of Western modernity. Miller excels in bringing a critical literary sensibility to bear upon questions of historical and experiential memory. Again and again, *The French Atlantic Triangle* employs etymology to stunning effect. From *traite* and *traire* (p. 11), *retour* (p. 55) and *culture* (p. 81), to the triad *cattle/chattle/capital* (p. 58), and *traduire* (p. 101), Miller draws out the many etymological

dimensions of these and other central signifiers of French Atlantic slavery, paying particular attention to their historical specification.

Miller rightly presents the issue of freedom as historically bearing a class-based, zero-sum character: the freedom of an elite has repeatedly been purchased at the expense of a subaltern community (pp. 56-57). From Plato and Aristotle through the Enlightenment to the present, this has clearly been the case. Against this background, however, the universal, unqualified abolition of slavery under the Haitian Revolution in 1793 deserves mention as the first time this equation was refactored. That said, the conflict after 1796 between the Toussaintian elite and the former slaves over the question of “freed up’ time” (p. 57) (i.e., whether they would return to work on the plantations where they had been slaves) subsequently reintroduced a class-based, differential dimension to the Haitian pursuit of freedom in consonance with the distinction Miller draws.[1]

While it is true that Rousseau’s *Contrat social* “betrays a total disdain and contempt for anyone who has been enslaved” (p. 69), I wonder if the effects of his discussion of political freedom and the *volonté générale* upon readers are as clear-cut as Miller suggests. While Rousseau’s discussion may well nearly “rationalize” slavery for European readers, does it not harbor a certain rhetorical ambiguity? If one were in fact enslaved, might not the effect of Rousseau’s words (regardless of whether he ‘intended’ them as such) be precisely a sense of revulsion that could conceivably *motivate* one to revolt against such abasement? Isn’t the question of reception on the part of the ‘enslaved’ (whether literal Antillean slaves or Rousseau’s metaphoric European ‘slaves’), and not what such words might imply to relatively unimplicated observers like ourselves, the ultimate question? This is precisely the question that Miller poses later regarding Enlightenment theater: “What did *they* think when *they* heard” these words (p. 78)? Though the *Contrat social* seems never to have been read in St-Domingue, other words and phrases, such as those of the *Déclaration des droits de l’homme*, most certainly were, and they were, moreover, understood very differently according to one’s subject position in 1789. As Miller states, “Once in motion, those ideas could not be stopped” (p. 79).

The French Atlantic Triangle employs a wide range of psychoanalytic categories in its analysis—desire, denial, fetishism, displacement, trauma—whose usage and conceptualization might have been more fully explicated. The concept of fetishism in particular might have been more widely employed as a polyvalent analytical tool, extrapolating from its occasional appearance in the literature as the stereotypical trope of African primitivism (pp. 211, 373). The obvious reference here, given *The French Atlantic Triangle*’s analytical economy, is Marxian commodity fetishism, but it is striking as well how phenomena such as the prolonged debate over the choice of a date for the annual French commemoration of slavery (pp. 386-87) function fetishistically to displace attention from the scope and details of historical injustice, legitimizing continued failure to work through the traumatic past.

While readers undoubtedly share the author’s revulsion over slavery, one would have wished for some elaboration of the ethical basis for the work’s critique of slavery and the slave trade. Instead, *The French Atlantic Triangle* takes this condemnation as a given, while at the same time showing its historical indeterminacy via writers such as Corbière, who maintained a decidedly accommodating and even affirmative attitude to the institution. Given this contradiction, as well as the fact that, as Miller points out, slavery continues to exist to this day, can one simply take any given author’s “stance [for or] against slavery or the trade” (p. 93) as an ethical touchstone in no need of defense or theoretical grounding?

The analysis of Sue’s *Atar-Gull* might have profited from another theoretical reference beside Hegel’s “inevitable” *Phenomenology*: Atar-Gull’s systematic, all-consuming search for “revenge”

is a prototypical example of the reactive “slave mentality” that Nietzsche describes in the *Genealogy of Morals*. In contrast to the Haitian Revolution’s active seizure of power and construction of a new state under the rule of universal emancipation, Atar-Gull’s “economics of vengeance” (p. 294) and “reparation” (p. 296) takes the form of a bilious, consumptive “hatred” and “joy as [he] watched [Brulart’s] execution” (p. 295) that might properly be figured as the *unfreedom* of a protagonist unable to escape from a Nietzschean “slave morality.”

I think the one point where *The French Atlantic Triangle* fails to explore one of the fundamental registers of its field of inquiry is in its neglect of Victor Schoelcher. Admittedly, the book’s concern is not abolition per se but rather the slave *trade* in its French Atlantic dimensions. That said, while the author extensively documents the complexities of the French abolitionist movement in the periods of particular interest to him (roughly 1820-35), Schoelcher and the actual abolition of slavery in 1848 garner hardly more than a single sentence (p. 194). This omission leads to a notable silencing of Schoelcher’s fundamental historical role in the destruction of Atlantic slavery. While it is true that emancipation was “construed in the nineteenth century as a *debt* that blacks owed to whites” (p. 89), Schoelcher’s radical, uncompromising universalism was the outstanding exception to this tendency. While it is certainly true that the 1848 abolition was, even more than in 1794, formally *granted* to slaves rather than seized through a Hegelian conflict of master and slave, Schoelcher’s example nonetheless remains fundamental.

Against the compromised gradualism of fellow abolitionists such as Tocqueville in 1848 Paris, Schoelcher was alone in arguing for immediate, unconditional abolition with full accession to the civil rights of the French republic. As a citizen of that republic, he recognized his own implication within the national scandal of slavery and his responsibility to do his utmost to end its injustice through the overthrow of legal particularism. By the time he published *On the French Colonies: Immediate Abolition of Slavery* in 1842, Schoelcher had abandoned his early defense of gradual abolition to call instead for universal and immediate abolition with no intermediary period of “acculturation” to liberty for the slaves. When, on March 4, 1848, Schoelcher met with Minister of the Colonies François Arago, the latter assured him of the need to proceed slowly with any eventual emancipation decree. Schoelcher refused all such compromises and convinced Arago to call on the government to adopt the principle of universal, immediate emancipation with full citizenship rights.

Schoelcher maintained a strict fidelity to uncompromised abolition, a fidelity taken up from the Robespierrean and Toussaintian interventions of 1793. For Schoelcher, any intermediary period between abolition and full accession of former slaves to their civic and human rights would have amounted quite simply to a continuation of slavery under another name. Unlike Tocqueville, who repeatedly based his analysis on the needs of French capital or of the imperial nation-state when discussing the possible modalities of emancipation, Schoelcher analyzed the political question of emancipation and its modality from the perspective of what we now call universal human rights. While Tocqueville recommended forbidding freed slaves from owning plots of land for a limited period, Schoelcher recommended (though his commission refused to endorse) proactive land-reform, the distribution of small plots of land, along with the much more radical proposal for remuneration, not only to the slaveowners but also to the former slaves themselves. Schoelcher explicitly placed human rights and a radical vision of remunerative justice above the economic good of both the state and slaveowners. Like Robespierre before him, he went so far as to call explicitly for the abandonment of the colonies if they should prove to be workable only by slave labor. Schoelcher, alone in his era, concluded his most famous book in visionary and truly prophetic terms with precisely the point that the gradualists like Tocqueville never deigned to consider: *why*, in fact, should the former slaves, if they were to be considered full citizens subject to all human and civic rights, be forced at all to

work on the plantations where they had spent their lives as tortured captives? “All the sophisms in the world cannot go against right. The blacks must be free, because it is just. If, when they are free, they do not wish to cultivate the land beyond their own needs, as we are told, either they should be replaced by immigrants who will work, or we should give back the islands to nature, which did not make them fit for man, since it is impossible to exploit them without violence toward our fellow man” (*Immediate Abolition of Slavery*, p. 387). In light of Miller’s analysis, Schoelcher’s refusal to accept a differential calculus of the costs of abolition (the value of colonists’ slaves and their labor to be indemnified [Tocqueville]; the calculation of the deferred apprenticeship of freedom [Condorcet, Grégoire]) and to defend in its place the undivided universalism of the emancipatory imperative should rightfully reserve him a place in a history of the French slave trade as thorough as this one.

The French Atlantic Triangle’s central chapter, “Tamango Around the Atlantic,” is the thematic and analytical centerpiece of this outstanding study. Prosper Mérimée’s 1829 short story tells the story of the slave trader Captain Ledoux and the mid-Atlantic revolt of the African chief Tamango he has captured. One can only applaud Miller’s judicious recourse to the exploration of literary sources in a work that so elegantly moves from linguistic detail to the elaboration of a pan-Atlantic systematic. Particularly revelatory for this reader was the link made between Mérimée’s “master text” (p. 179) of the French Atlantic triangle and the central lines of Aimé Césaire’s *Cahier d’un retour au pays natal* (1939): “debout et libre” (p. 220). Miller’s analysis of “Tamango” sheds new and important light on *Cahier’s* scope of literary referentiality.[2]

Most significantly, Miller overthrows through detailed textual analysis the prevalent misconception of Césaire’s *Cahier* as a romantic celebration of a mythical Africa. Instead, *The French Atlantic Triangle* fully delineates the “Atlantic frame” of the *Cahier* to rightfully conclude that “[t]he nostalgic, idealized Africa for which Césaire is famous is not to be found in his *Cahier*” (p. 334). Miller’s readings of Edouard Glissant’s *Sartorius* (1999), Maryse Condé’s *Hérémakhonon* (1976), and Ousmane Sembène’s *Black Docker* (1986) are equally innovative in their erudite reappraisals of these neglected and maligned (for the first and third of them at least) texts. The outcome is to inaugurate a new and much fuller understanding of the phenomenon of the French Atlantic slave trade in a book that takes pride of place as one of the signal references of Black Atlantic Studies.

NOTES

[1] The classic references on this struggle to reappropriate labor-free time in St. Domingue are Carolyn Fick’s *The Making of Haiti: The Saint Domingue Revolution from Below* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1991) and Gérard Barthélemy’s extraordinary *Le pays en dehors: Essai sur l’univers rural haïtien* (Port-au-Prince: H. Deschamps, 1989).

[2] And in its reference to *Tamango*, does so, I should add, in a much more convincing fashion than the speculative link I made between these same lines and the Paris exhibition of 1937 in *Voicing Memory: History and Subjectivity in French Caribbean Literature* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2003).

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