

## **THERE ARE NO SLAVES IN FRANCE!?!**

**MILLER, CHRISTOPHER L. The French Atlantic Triangle: Literature and Culture of the Slave Trade. Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2010, 572 p. ISBN: 9780822341512.**

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The history of the 20<sup>th</sup> century has shown how difficult it is for a nation to accept its past and to come to terms with shameful and degrading events practiced in centuries gone by. If even mere apologies are not easily wrenched from post-war Spain and Germany, Australia and New Zealand and the treatment of the Aborigines and Maoris, Latin America and its dictatorship periods, South Africa and its Apartheid policies, just to mention a few, can one imagine the healing processes required for more in-depth reconciliation? More than two hundred years had to pass so that whole nations would grapple with their slave-haunted history. London, Bristol, Birmingham and other British cities are only now accepting their long-term involvement with slavery, the slave trade, transatlantic economy, plantation system, enrichment on slave-produced goods. And Africa has still a lot of research to undertake to understand its almost endemic participation in different slave trades and in the selling of its children to Europeans. If Spain, Portugal, the Netherlands, Britain and Brazil are highly touchy on what they consider a taboo subject, how does France fare in the fray with more than one million Africans in 3,649 recorded trans-Atlantic voyages sent to its Caribbean colonies of Martinique (1635), Guadeloupe (1635), Guyane (1663) and Saint-Domingue / Haiti (1697) during from the 17<sup>th</sup> to the early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries?

Christopher Miller, professor of African-American Studies and French at Yale University, provides readers interested in the history of slavery within the context of literature with a breakthrough book. *The French Atlantic Triangle* is the much required history of France's participation in the colonial and slave systems carefully kept out of mind and sight. In fact, these *lieux d'oubli* are only now coming out of the closet. Whereas Pierre Nora's *Les lieux de mémoire* (1984), does not mention the slave trade,

Marc Ferro's *Le livre noir du colonialisme* (2003), translated into Portuguese in 2004, gives only scanty information on the subject. This gap in the collective memory of France has been recently discussed by François Vergès in *Cahiers d'Études Africaines* and by the report of *Comité pour la mémoire de l'esclavage* published as *Mémoire de la traite négrière, de l'esclavage et de leurs abolitions* in 2005.

The importance of Miller's book does not merely consist of conscience-raising on and the insertion of France within the context of the European history of slavery and the slave trade through the naming of families responsible for the French triangle (France-Africa-Caribbean colonies) or the acknowledgement of Bordeaux, Nantes, La Rochelle and Le Havre as slave-trading posts, but how the fictional literature from the late 18<sup>th</sup> century to mid-19<sup>th</sup> century dealt with the subject and 'brought' slaves within the sight and ken of French society. *The French Atlantic Triangle* is divided into three parts. The first part consists of a critical and historical analysis of the French slave trade to the Caribbean colonial possessions after its unsuccessful *France Antarctique* in Brazil, a discussion of the Code Noir, French policy in Senegambia, private entrepreneurship on the islands, the ambiguities of pre-Revolutionary literature, the abolition of slavery and its reintroduction by Napoleon. It fills in many gaps and clarifies terms which English-speaking readers are wont to confound or underrate due to French colonial idiosyncrasies. The second part is an analysis of texts authored by women who brought the slave trade under the nose of the French through their fictional literature. Miller critically discusses the newly-recovered literature of Olympe de Gouges, Germaine de Staël and Claire de Duras and interprets them, with their assets and hesitations, as *littérature négrière* and as positively pro-abolition. The third part is a criticism of the fictional literature by French males, such as Prosper Mérimée's *Tamango*, Jacques-François Roger's *Kéledor*, Eugène Sue's *Atar-Gull*, Edouard Corbière's *Le Négrier* and their counterparts in 20<sup>th</sup> century films dealt with in the fourth part of the book. In fact, this section also features the fiction by Aimé Césaire, Edouard Glissant and Maryse Condé with regard to the French slave trade and, with great creativity, the African literary silence and hesitating strains in Francophone literature and film-makers by Africans, such as Ousmane Sembene's *Le Docker noir* and *Ceddo*.

The above-mentioned fictional literature by French male and female authors is partly a consequence of the lack of slave-narratives as the United States and Britain have. Miller's theory is that French authors, sensitive to the traffic of humans and favorable to the abolition of slavery, had to invent narratives which would show the horrible picture of the Middle Passage and of life on the plantation, to 'sweeten' the well-being of metropolitan France.

The breath-taking 135-page notes coupled to the 19-page bibliography (27% of the book) shows the scholarship Miller put into this still emerging theme in Post-colonial Studies. Up to 2005 France has always been reluctant to engage itself with the inhuman trade and the 'milking' of millions of Africans in the making of the richest sugar-exporting colonies on earth in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The extensive notes and bibliography dealing with the period's philosophical literature and fiction, before and after 1789, and on 20<sup>th</sup> literature and films on the theme are a witness to the seemingly 1750-1830 sanitized period in French history imbued with discussions on human rights and citizenship. In fact, this multi-disciplinary book emerges as a launching ground for further ideas and projects not only within the French milieu but in all the countries which were accomplices in the slave system. In fact the literatures of many societies (Holland, Denmark, Arab countries, the Italian republics) have still to be put under the critical grid so that the whole intersectional history of slavery may be laid bare.

In the wake of current repulsion of non-white immigrants and of waves of Islamophobia, especially in Europe, *The French Atlantic Triangle* is not only an important source of research Human Rights activities and historians but a literary mine for students of Post-colonial studies who are interested in this suppressed theme.