

The French Atlantic Triangle: acute or obtuse?

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Christopher L Miller

The French Atlantic Triangle: Literature and Culture of the Slave Trade

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Christopher L Miller's *The French Atlantic Triangle* is a colossal book introducing readers to the cultural works of metropolitan France and its overseas territories in the Americas and Africa, produced over the last four centuries. Following in the steps of Gilroy's largely Anglophone and Northern Hemisphere-focused *The Black Atlantic*, Miller's work foregrounds the need to pay close attention to other imperial, linguistic and diasporic triangulated networks in this oceanic contact zone. The end result is an impressive and groundbreaking introduction to a new field that nevertheless skims the surface and avoids mapping some of the more challenging and uncharted depths of the cultural production of the French Atlantic. Aware of these lacunae, the author opens a space for others to deepen the study of this region and, in a wonderful feat of altruism, provides in the conclusion some practical suggestions on how subsequent generations of scholars may further this work.

Each of the four parts could very well have been packaged as a separate book, making one wonder whether the volume is thorough and comprehensive or just too broad in its thematic and chronological scope to be truly manageable. Ambitiously, the author affords his readers four chapters on 'The French Atlantic', four on 'French Women Writers', four on 'French Male Writers', two on 'African and Caribbean writers', nearly 150 pages of detailed notes, and an exhaustive bibliography. The volume achieves unity through the deployment of Césaire's *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* as a leitmotif and through the careful, almost novelistic inter-textual stitching of the chapters. It also achieves unity through restraint. The logical lure to include relevant material from the Indian Ocean francophone territories in an already overflowing work on the Atlantic is a temptation that Miller manages aptly. His book reaches climactic peaks in two particular sets of chapters. Chapters Seven and Nine are quite possibly the finest examples of applied cultural studies work in current francophone studies. In Chapter Seven, Miller superbly synthesizes the exotic names of various protagonists associated with slavery in the works of Montesquieu, Voltaire, Saint-Lambert,

Staël, Duras, Verdi and Gouges through the /x/ and /z/ phonemes, and their 'connoted strangeness'. This linguistic key unlocks the doors that have prevented us from a broader consideration of francophone Atlantic cultural production. This discovery unifies many of the chapters and stands as a crystallizing and convincing point in Miller's hypothesis that the French Atlantic is a continuous, constructed cultural network spanning the periods of exploration and slavery to decolonization and globalization. Chapter Nine studies the various iterations of a slave rebel 'Tamango' in nineteenth-century French theatre; twentieth-century poems from Martinique; novels from Senegal; and films from the United States. The circum-Atlantic, interdisciplinary, and macro-historical execution of the elucidation and evolution of this character is truly outstanding. However, the most original contribution of the work is to be found in Chapters Eleven and Twelve, in which Miller provides queer readings of Eugène Sue's *Atar-Gull* and Edouard Corbière's *Le Negrier*. He does so through *matelotage*, or the practice of deep homosocial and para-marriage relationships among sailors and buccaneers. His analysis is provocative and forces us to extend his line of reasoning by asking ourselves how the erotic solidarity between slave traders and sailors might not be dependent on the subjugation of slaves.

However, Miller's glittering ocean is brimming with unresolved issues. His focus is clearly a national one, and a French one at that. He studies the history of the French Atlantic world through the narrow and anachronistic lenses of French nationality as it exists today. He neglects to study the cultural works from territories that are no longer territories or overseas departments of France. Why should the cultural products of former colonies that have severed their political connection to the Hexagon be excluded without any explanation from a work that purports to chart the full extent of the French Atlantic project? After all, these territories were integral to the French overseas empire during several of the centuries that the book explores. What are the roles of Quebec and Louisiana in Miller's *French Atlantic Triangle*? What about St Lucia and Dominica? Where is the fiction by Haitians? There is very little on Haiti in Chapter Ten, despite it figuring in the title. The slim chapter at the end is mostly summary and a hodgepodge addendum made up of random comments on African literature in French. Given this troubling framework, one is left wondering whether a national history is the most productive way to study the effects of colonization in the post-independence era.

The French Atlantic Triangle focuses mostly on French metropolitan writers. While we learn that many Enlightenment writers came from planter families, rebelled against their racist ideology and became abolitionists, the strong canonical bent of the book is likely to remain a troubling matter for many contemporary readers who have come to expect more of an emphasis on postcolonial voices. The few Black francophone writers are lumped together in two chapters at the tail end of the book, while each of the metropolitan writers has his or her own independent chapter. This Eurocentric emphasis and structure replicates the marginalization of African diasporic peoples that the text purports to overcome through its critique of slavery. While French scholars are likely to be enriched through a novel discussion of French

expansionism, Africana studies scholars will find the book disappointing in its peripheralization of Black intellectual and creative work.

For all the discussion of gender, this is only a priority in the case of metropolitan writers. Miller includes fiction by only one Black female writer, Maryse Condé, and lumps her with the Créolité writers with whom she is at odds, without alluding to their ideological differences. The work contains a few regretful errors, such as the statement that the triangular trade involved 'exchanges moving counterclockwise from France to Africa to the islands and back to France' (p 314). In reality, ocean currents and trade winds in the North Atlantic forced ships to travel in a clockwise manner. Miller also states that, 'only one narrative, from Cuba, written by a slave during the time of slavery, came out of the entire Caribbean' (p 34). This statement does not seem to take into account the 1831 *History of Mary Prince*. Similarly, the lack of rainfall and the persistence of diseases are the only reasons Miller provides for the inability of Europeans to enslave Africans and develop plantations in Africa. His analysis fails to take stock of the ways in which the plantocracy was dependent on the psychological consequences of uprooting and the culturally disorienting results of dislocation through forced migration. While the francophone focus of the study might necessitate a certain linguistic exclusivity, at times the work could have profited from making some connections to literatures of the region in other languages. When Miller discusses the peculiarities of Duras' *Ourika* as an African woman in France, one only wishes that he had made relevant connections—at least an endnote—to the Anglophone Caribbean 'mad-woman in the attic' literary tradition of Charlotte Brontë, Jean Rhys and Jamaica Kincaid.

Miller's reticence to make connections with the Anglophone world is likely the result of the relative monopoly that works in English have had on the shaping of academic discourse on the Atlantic world. Miller's *The French Atlantic Triangle* functions as a daring icebreaker in this nascent field, paving the way for others who will write histories of the Dutch, Spanish, Danish and Swedish Atlantic in years to come.