2016

Slavery and Historical Memory in Late Twentieth-Century Fiction

Ashraf Rushdy
arushdy@wesleyan.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://wesscholar.wesleyan.edu/afamfacpub

Recommended Citation
Rushdy, Ashraf, "Slavery and Historical Memory in Late Twentieth-Century Fiction" (2016). Faculty Scholarship. 4.
http://wesscholar.wesleyan.edu/afamfacpub/4

This Contribution to Book is brought to you for free and open access by the African American Studies Program at WesScholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Scholarship by an authorized administrator of WesScholar. For more information, please contact ljohnson@wesleyan.edu.
Three important developments shaped the representation of slavery in late-twentieth-century American literature, starting in the 1960s. First, a revolution in the streets, as the long Civil Rights movement developed new strategies for confronting racial injustice and earned wide and sympathetic media coverage. Second, a revolution in the universities, as newly enrolled African American students demanded curricular options that took seriously the history and culture of people of African descent, at the same time as newly hired historians and sociologists devised research programs devoted to studying previously under-represented groups (the working class, women, and ethnic minorities). Finally, a revolution in publishing, as editors sought to produce a body of literature for the new courses in Black Studies, and added black authors to their lists. These three developments – political, academic, and cultural – define the social context in which late-twentieth-century fiction about slavery flourished. Two generations of writers since then have produced a body of literature on slavery to rival the two great earlier waves of such literature in the 1850s and the 1890s. African American authors in particular have joined and extended this long literary tradition, but also found that doing so meant confronting new questions about the relationship between fictional form and historical memory.

What most obviously distinguishes this corpus of works from the earlier ones, of course, is the distance from the actual historical experience represented. When Frederick Douglass wrote “The Heroic Slave,” or Williams Wells Brown Clotel, they were writing about an experience through which they had lived, and in a time when the institution reigned. When Frances Harper wrote Iola Leroy, or Pauline Hopkins Contending Forces, they wrote about experiences from which the country was one generation removed, and about which they knew firsthand from relatives and friends who had lived through them. Those who wrote fiction about slavery in late-twentieth-century America had no personal or parental connection to it, although a good many of them did have an extended generational
connection that informed their writing. That fact of historical distance, and that idea of transgenerational continuity, fundamentally shaped some of the narrative and formal features of this body of writing.

Writing about slavery at a historical remove also shaped the way these works were received, for they found themselves subject to a set of questions about how an author could respect the legacy he or she represented. That issue took different forms in different debates. In some cases, the discussion focused on the matter of authenticity; controversies over major publishing events like that of William Styron’s *Confessions of Nat Turner* (1967) and Alex Haley’s *Roots* (1976), for example, revolved around questions about who could, who should, and who was empowered to write about slavery in America. In other cases, it led to debates about representational approach: how should enslavement be “written,” and to what end should modern authors represent events that might be misunderstood by contemporary readers? Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987) and Edward Jones’s *The Known World* (2003), for example, encountered questions about the value and dangers of certain narrative choices (in the former case, the decision to represent maternal infanticide in a society that agreed with the Moynihan Report that African American families were matriarchal “tangles of pathology,” and, in the latter, the choice to write about African American slaveholders in the midst of the contemporary debate over reparations). To fictionalize slavery meant to navigate complex questions about the ethics of literary representation. Did authors writing about slavery have unique responsibilities to the forms and substance of the past, or might they enjoy the same aesthetic prerogatives as those who wrote about other topics? Was Ishmael Reed’s flippancy and humor in *Flight to Canada* disrespectful, or Octavia Butler’s play with time travel in *Kindred* inappropriate, and, if so, did that imply that an author writing about slavery was obligated to occupy a space of circumscribed artistic possibility? Or, on the other hand, could contemporary authors make positive use of their distance from antebellum slavery to take liberties and assume freedoms in their playful innovation and experimentation with form, genre, and tone?

Margaret Walker’s *Jubilee* is in many ways the fulcrum on which the new body of literature turned. Published in 1966, it nonetheless belongs to an earlier epoch since it was begun in the 1930s and was inspired by the oral accounts told to Walker by her own grandmother. This was a novel, then, that did not have the same kind of historical distance from its subject as the novels published just a few years after it. As a historical novel, it was traditional in form, although Walker did perform a revolutionary shift of narrative perspective by focusing the reader’s attention through the eyes of the slaves themselves. In this way, Walker anticipated what historians would
do later that decade – write history as seen “from the bottom up,” drawing on oral accounts of the enslaved – and, likewise, she established some of the crucial themes that would mark the writing on slavery that followed, especially the topics of the scarred, multiracial, commodified body of the enslaved woman (anticipating Corregidora, Beloved, and Dessa Rose).

Jubilee is in many ways a story of family – an account drawn from a family member, a story about the formation of family, and about the vexing case of families that are created across racial lines – and this narrative orientation would continue to exert considerable influence in the next decade of writing about slavery. It might seem unsurprising, banal even, to mention that the theme of familial relations is important to late-twentieth-century American fiction on slavery, since family has been a staple *topos* of every national literature from Biblical narrative to classical Greek tragedy, to early-modern prose narrative, to the modern French novels of Balzac and the American ones of Henry James. The difference, however, is that when Gayl Jones, Alex Haley, and Octavia Butler write about enslaved and free families in the 1970s, they are implicitly, sometimes unwillingly, participating in a crucial contemporary social dialogue about African American life. Haley’s *Roots*, a novel subtitled “A Saga of an American Family,” was published in the same year as Herbert Gutman’s massive tome, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom* (1976), which was itself written in response to Daniel Patrick Moynihan’s *The Negro Family: A Case for National Action* (1965). Whereas Moynihan saw the black family as a political problem that needed a political solution, Gutman challenged Moynihan’s conclusion that slavery had destroyed the black family by showing the strength and resilience of African American families during the long travail of slavery. Haley’s “Saga of an American family” was enrolled or conscripted into that same debate.

What all three fiction writers did to complicate the contemporary debate was to make the case that African American families contain a multitude of others. Jones’s *Corregidora* tells the story of how the Corregidora family can be traced to an interracial, incestuous rape perpetrated by the novel’s eponymous Brazilian slaveholder. The heroine Ursa, living in the 1940s through 1969, comes to terms with this “family secret.” This also turns out to be case in Butler’s *Kindred*, a novel that likewise reveals that Dana’s family begins with a coercive sexual relationship between an enslaved woman and a slave owner. The novel thus challenges the meaning of “kindred” as a set of biological, social, or romantic affiliations that can be accepted or modified. Haley, too, makes the case that the family of his saga is multiracial – it is, in his terms, an “American” one for perhaps that very
reason. Whatever else these works of the 1970s may have to say about the contemporary debate over the black family, then, they insist on showing us that “the black family” does not exist as an isolated kin group, much less as a singular social problem. The families they represent – families that would simply be labeled as “black” on the census – have their origins in early white crimes, endure with resilience in the face of later white crimes, and sometimes incorporate white members through love and marriage (Dana, for instance, marries a white man). The real “family secret,” then, is that there is no such thing as “the black family,” just as there is no such thing as “the white family.”

These works also share a concern with the repercussions of slavery, which reverberate across generations. Butler does so most boldly, using time travel to show us how the past implicates and affects the present. Jones, too, gives us a narrative engaged in a complex dialogue with the past; its narrator, Ursa, receives stories of slavery from her grandmother and great-grandmother, and is haunted by nightmares of the Brazilian slave master who raped them both. There are moments in the novel when it is not clear whether Ursa is talking with the slave master Corregidora or her lover Mutt, and that very ambiguity reveals how forms of abuse and trauma can be passed on transgenerationally like stories. Haley’s take on this topic is the most traditional, since the saga form itself is premised on the very idea of generational change. But all three novels reveal that what happens in and to a previous generation lives on in a later one. Slavery in these works thus exerts an indefinable force on those who are forced or choose to claim it as a familial legacy. Yet since these authors also insist that family in America is a multiracial reality, they also suggest that it does not fall only on “black” families to claim that legacy.

The representative narratives of American slavery in the 1980s continued to focus on the family as a mechanism of cultural transmission, as a social form that is both biological and willed. In *The Chaneysville Incident*, David Bradley has a narrator who has had to delve into his family’s historical past in order to understand and find sanction for his romantic relationship with a white woman. In doing so, he discovers that “family” is composed of those who have a social connection to him as well as those who have a biological tie – those who share stories as well as those who share blood. In *Dessa Rose*, Sherley Anne Williams shows us how black families can be almost obliterated by slavery, and how white families manipulate language in order to delude themselves into thinking of their enslaved retainers as family members (Uncles, Aunts, Mammies). In *Beloved*, the most celebrated narrative of slavery of the late twentieth century, Toni Morrison dealt with the question of family in an original way by asking us to consider how we make a
family with those we have harmed and with those who have passed on. How do we establish a kinship with hurt ghosts, those ephemeral presences of past pains?

The novels of the 1980s, though, also added newer concerns to their treatment of the subject of slavery. Some used the slave past to understand contemporary social relations, as did Bradley explicitly, and Williams implicitly. *Dessa Rose* presents us with the tense but ultimately warm friendship between a white woman who used to own slaves and a fugitive slave woman who had led a coo passage; by outlining the promise and the tensions in that emerging relationship, the novel echoes a contemporary conversation between white and black feminists. *Dessa Rose* appeared in the midst of an ongoing, sometimes acrimonious, debate over the role played by white feminists in promoting the film version of Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*, a film that was derided and defended for its representation of black men’s treatment of black women. It was also a film that raised questions about the relationship of a white feminism that supported it and a black feminism that, in the words of Michelle Wallace, found that the film “banished, or ridiculed beyond repair” virtually “all signs of a Black feminist agenda.” Against this background, *Dessa Rose* might be seen as reflecting on this contemporary debate within feminism by taking us to an earlier moment, preceding even the similarly tense relationship between black and white women in the abolitionist movement, to the very origins of that division. In the character of Rufel, the former slave mistress, Williams demonstrates the difficulty—and necessity—of overcoming beliefs ingrained by a hegemonic social system that depended on animosity and distrust. As the white woman comes to realize that she was not the favored daughter of her “Mammy” Dorcas (a destructive fictive kinship), the rupture in what had been the most important relationship of her early life enables Rufel to understand what deviations slavery had caused in all her personal relationships, and thereby opens the door to her interracial friendships.

These novels raised questions about the possibility of recovery, in two senses: how to discover anew the history of slavery, and how to recuperate from its effects. Bradley’s narrator, a professional historian, needs to understand how the past that formed him is ultimately more complicated than he had thought. Only when he comes to recognize the limitations of a certain documentary approach to the past, and burns the index cards on which he imagined that he could capture the story of the past through a relentless series of “facts,” does he find himself liberated to imagine a far more capacious and more illuminating sense of the past. Moreover, only when he comes to appreciate that other, untold past—one he cobbles together from familial tales, diary accounts, and other underappreciated sources of information—is
he able to let go the anger, hatred, and fear that had disabled him from achieving genuine human connection.

Williams, in her novel’s meditation on recovery, stages a battle between the oral story of Dessa and the writing of her antagonist pursuer, Nehemiah Adams, a white Northerner who has written books on slave management, and is exploiting Dessa in his account of how to prevent slave revolts. In the confrontation between the two characters, Williams represents the dynamic she describes in her prefatory note between the oral storytelling of African Americans – who have “made of that process a high art” – and “literature and writing,” which have often “betrayed” the black lives they misrepresented. To whose accounts should we turn in order to understand slavery, Williams asks – those who wrote in an attempt to consolidate the institution by managing mastery of a people, or those who told stories to each other to survive and to remember the survivors? As the novel itself adjudicates the question, Dessa’s account wins in the end; Nehemiah’s papers, with their illegible writing, are scattered to the winds, while her oral tale is inscribed for posterity by her son. That book, written by a descendant and narrated by a survivor, provides the present and future generations the salve they need in order to know, as Dessa puts it, “what it cost us to own ourselves.”

The recovery of story leads to the story of recovery – of self and the future of family.

Morrison, too, in Beloved, examines the dynamic between a literacy that attempts to dehumanize and an orality that liberates. On the Garner plantation, Sweet Home, the white overseer, schoolteacher, instructs his nephews to write down on a sheet of paper what he describes as the slaves’ “human” characteristics in one column and their “animal” ones in the other. Writing here becomes a feature of the machinery of slavery, as much a part of the apparatus of domination as the whip and sale block. This writing has profound effects on the subjects it presumes to record. Even though they know better, the enslaved people on Sweet Home find themselves enmeshed in the coils of that ideology of dehumanization. At various points, Paul D chastises himself for his human failings by wondering “if schoolteacher was right.” The master’s writing has power, even – maybe especially – over those who best know that it is nothing but lies. “No notebook for my babies,” Sethe tells herself as she plans her escape. In the end, Sethe feels guilt, but not in the simple way we might assume for someone who has, after all, killed one of her daughters to prevent her being recorded in schoolteacher’s notebook. At the end of the novel, Sethe sees herself as complicit with schoolteacher’s exercise by noting to Paul D: “I made the ink … He couldn’t have done it if I hadn’t made the ink.”

Writing for Sethe is such a force for destruction, such a part of the regime...
of slavery, that even the implements associated with it (notebook) or which make it possible (ink) have assumed the properties of evil.

*Beloved* also presents an alternative communicative means, a more whole and attuned orality that counters the power of the literary. Oral storytelling becomes the way Denver establishes a connection with the alienated community in order to save her mother. Only when Denver steps beyond the stoop of her house and goes to the community to share the story of what was happening inside the house can the healing begin. As Morrison puts it, “Nobody was going to help her unless she told it – told all of it.” Likewise, Paul D knows that it is the sharing of such oral stories – stories told, and retold, to each other and to the generation that follows – that gives the experience meaning, and provides the survivor salve. As Paul D puts it, his “story was bearable because it was hers as well – to tell, to refine and tell again.” At the end of the novel, that image becomes the final icon of reconciliation and love: “He wants to put his story next to hers.” Each of the novels, then, shows us the two forms of recovery: the unearthing or valuing anew of one method of discovering the past (orality, imagination, storytelling), and the healing that comes with telling the story properly, attentively, and respectfully.

Perhaps the most important development in the novels of the 1980s is their renewed focus on strategies and forms of resistance. The question of resistance had been one of the standards by which the social history of the 1960s and 1970s measured its distance from the previous generations’ work on the lives of enslaved peoples. Countering the caricature of the contented, happy-go-lucky slave that proslavery apologists had promoted since the 1830s, a stereotype to which early-twentieth-century historians from Ulrich Phillips (1929) to Stanley Elkins (1959) had, in different ways, succumbed, the new social historians drew inspiration from earlier leftist and liberal historians like Herbert Aptheker and Kenneth Stampp and produced a history of enslavement that took seriously both the threat and incidence of slave resistance, of enslaved people who fled, who fought, who rose up and killed. Along with a sense of community and of culture – two other concepts valorized in the 1960s and 1970s – resistance became the hallmark of the new social history.

The three representative novels of the 1980s show us the range of activities that constituted resistance to slavery. In *The Chaneysville Incident*, the thirteen fugitives who are surrounded by slave patrollers at the end of the novel take their lives in order to escape. It is not framed as “suicide,” because the novel has given us new terms for thinking about the end of life for an African-descended people. As the historian turned griot, John Washington tells his fiancé, for those enslaved peoples what others “called Death” was in
fact for them “not an ending of things, but a passing on of spirit, a change of shape, and nothing more.” Drawing on the traditions associated with the Igbo people’s response to American slavery – especially at Ibo Landing in St. Simon’s Island, Georgia – Bradley shows us how death permits the formerly enslaved to fly home. It is the final escape from a nation that enslaved them, an ideology that attempted to inscribe them, and a hypocritical religious system that attempted to deny their immortality. There “was always escape, always . . . so long as one believed.”

In such a belief system, where the taking of one’s own life was liberating, the taking of the life of one’s child assumes new meaning. In her novel, Morrison meditates on the historical case of Margaret Garner, who did in Ohio what Sethe does in Beloved, and finds rationale for the terrible act she feels compelled to commit. Morrison gives us Sethe’s lyrical rationale of that harrowing moment:

And if she thought anything, it was No. No. Nonono. Simple. She just flew. Collected every bit of life she had made, all the parts of her that were precious and fine and beautiful, and carried, pushed, dragged them through the veil, out, away, over there where no one could hurt them. Over there. Outside this place, where they would be safe.

It is life and safety she seeks for her children and herself, not death, and escape, not oblivion. Morrison’s genius is to tell her story in such a way as to have us withhold premature judgment so that we can understand in a calm way just what drives Sethe to do what she does. That moment in the story is called “The Misery,” and it is left up to us to appreciate how much misery preceded and proceeded from it.

In Dessa Rose, Williams represents a more conventional form of slave resistance, namely escape and revolt. Even so, she transforms that traditional narrative of resistance in significant ways. Those escaping do so with the active help of the slave mistress, Rufel, who assists them in a scheme in which the slaves sell themselves to other plantation owners and escape as a way of raising money for their final flight; in this way, they at once mock their commodified status and rob the plantation of labor and capital. Moreover, the final flight is not to the North, as in the traditional political geography, but to the West. Finally, Williams also challenges our gendered preconceptions about slave revolt by having an enslaved woman kill her rapist and inspire the subsequent revolt on the coffle. She alerts us to the particular crimes against enslaved women as she simultaneously reveals how those crimes do not quell the desire for freedom and control over their own bodies.
Above all, all these novels of the 1980s insist that survival by enslaved people in the midst of a dehumanizing institution is itself a form of resistance. Slavery was purportedly a system of organizing and exploiting labor, of course, but American chattel slavery, like other forms of enslavement throughout world history, was also premised on what Orlando Patterson calls “social death.” The process of enslaving people was the process of dehumanizing them by removing them from a social context in which their lives had a vibrant meaning, and reducing them to the status of a lifeless chattel. Surviving that process was effectively to show that it did not work, that slavery as an institution had not rendered these people servile. These novels thus carefully render for us a group of individuals who survive and flourish, who form loving bonds with each other, and who tell and retell the story of their experiences as a way of establishing community. To love, to survive, to tell – in the face of slavery, these basic human achievements are, this literature insists, acts as resistant as to flee or to fight.

Two narratives of the early twenty-first century – Edward P. Jones’s *The Known World*, which won the Pulitzer, and Valerie Martin’s *Property* – were marked by something almost entirely new in the treatment of the subject. Both Jones’s and Martin’s novels assume the voice and perspective of the slave masters and mistresses (intermittently in the first, fully in the second). A form that had almost forty years before emphatically taken the ideological position that the story of slavery must be told from the viewpoint of its victims, represented as the slaves themselves lived and felt it, was now revealed as seen by the master class. And yet both these novelists complicated that easy dichotomy, with Jones representing African Americans, and Martin a white woman, as slave masters. These narratives of slavery as seen by the master thus reveal both the range and altered meanings of “mastery” when that class status crossed traditional racial and gender lines.

In *The Known World*, Jones shows us the particular afflictions, tensions, and complicated choices made by a small class of black slave owners. The character most torn about what he calls the crime of owning “people of our Race,” Calvin, wants badly to “free” the thirteen slaves his family owns, but his mother, considerably less troubled by her property in people, calls them the family’s “legacy,” and notes that no reasonable person “sell[s] off” a legacy. What he thought of as humanitarian manumission, she could see only as an economic consideration. Other black slave owners find other strategies for denying or evading the premise that they belong to the same “Race” as their slaves. Caldonia, after she has had sexual relations with her slave Moses, wonders whether what she was doing was a “kind of miscegenation.” By having her ruminate on whether the same term for sexually transgressing racial lines applies to the transgression of class lines, Jones highlights the
more profound question of whether mastery confers racial privilege. That is for the reader to ponder. For Caldonia, the question serves as a form of disavowal: it enables her to evade the dilemma Calvin daily faces by virtue of recognizing himself and his slaves as members of “our Race.”

The novel also demonstrates how this evasion is accomplished socially. Oden Peoples, one of the patrollers of Manchester County, is a full-blooded Cherokee who owns and is married to a woman who is half-Cherokee, half-African American. Harvey Travis, another patroller, is married to her half-sister, a freed slave who is a full-blooded Cherokee. Oden and Travis control the movements of the enslaved population, protect the property of the master class, and ensure the stability of the county. And we are shown that the most important factor in that stability is the sense of identification with whiteness, with which both men have a complicated relationship, by virtue of their persons and their spouses. At one point, they eat the free papers of Augustus Townsend and then sell him back into slavery. When their fellow patroller, Barnum Kinsey, the poorest citizen in Manchester, owner of only one slave, confronts them with the illegality and injustice of what they have done, and refuses the gold coin they toss him as a bribe for his complicity, they taunt and confront him with whiteness. “You takin the nigger side now? Is that it? You steppin away from the white man and takin the nigger side?” When he later tells the sheriff what happened, he concludes by wishing for a world in which one could tell the truth “without somebody sayin he standin on the nigger side.” Here, then, is how whiteness comes to be policed by people who do not seem fully to belong to it. To act justly towards all people is to be accused of failing to be fully aligned with being white, and this, recall, is the mandate and demand of the aptly named patrollers who, ironically, are not white themselves, nor are they married to people who are white.

Finally, in the Townsend family Jones reveals all the roles that the society provided around slavery in order to show how the law, and the forces that enforce and uphold the law, give racial value to those roles. The father Augustus purchases his freedom and is then re-enslaved, while the mother Mildred uses her house as a station on the Underground Railroad. Their son Henry becomes the slaveholder who abides by his former master’s advice of recognizing and forcing the slave to recognize “the line that separates you from your property.” In this one family, then, we have members who are enslaved, freed, abolitionist, and slave owner. Augustus and Mildred are killed for acting free; the legal apparatus that protects property in slaves in the case of the son Henry does not protect the property in self for his father or his mother.
Manon Gaudet, the slave-mistress narrator of Valerie Martin’s novel *Property*, begins her account of life on the plantation by showing us the deep sadistic sexual desires that haunt those who would be masters of others. The book opens with the slave master forcing a group of young black youth to play together naked until one of them shows signs of arousal. The master begins this exercise by reading from the Bible and concludes it by whipping the sexually aroused youth. The master, now aroused, stalks to the quarters to find the boy’s mother whom presumably he will rape. Here, we see the full panoply of the master’s sensibilities – a false sentiment of piety, a false feeling of superiority, and a genuine fetish for black flesh, sexualized and punished and violated.

Manon criticizes slave society as a whole by referring to “the lie at the center of everything, the great lie we all supported, tended, and worshiped as if our lives depended on it.” As she ponders the source of that lie, she wonders if perhaps being nursed at the breast of those one owned “was how the poison entered us all.” And yet, despite her criticism of the social order of slavery, her loathing for her husband’s lusting for black flesh, her sense of the original corruption at the fount of an enslaved woman’s breast, Manon herself manifests precisely the same inclinations as her despised husband. On the day her mother dies, Manon, intrigued by a “drop of milk [that] still clung to the dark flesh of [her slave Sarah’s] nipple,” cups her slave’s breast, guides that nipple to her mouth, closes her eyes, and swallows greedily. “How wonderful I felt, how entirely free. My headache disappeared, my chest seemed to expand, there was a complementary tingling in my own breasts.” Looking at her unwilling slave, Manon thinks: “If she looked at me, I would slap her.” Like her husband, Manon is sexually aroused by her power over her slave’s body, which she can dally with or punish, with impunity in either case.

Martin does several things in these scenes. For one thing, she is echoing scenes familiar to us from earlier African American novels. Ralph Ellison revealed the fascination white Southern men have for the aroused black phallus in the scene in *Invisible Man* when they force the young black men to watch a naked white woman, and then engage in a battle royale. And what Manon does in stealing Sarah’s breast milk recalls the scene in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* where schoolteacher’s nephews steal Sethe’s breast milk. While Martin pays homage to those writers who had earlier diagnosed the sexual perversity at the heart of American race relations, she does so to diagnose this sickness from the perspective of the sick. Manon simultaneously abhors and succumbs to the lies at the heart of her society.

In the end, Manon becomes precisely like her husband in almost every way, short of holding the power he has as a man in a patriarchal society.
She, like him, and like her father, too, has become “obsessed with the negroes.” And, like most obsessions, it leads her to irrational behaviors and is supported by and produces a profound incomprehension. Manon pursues the escaped Sarah even when it makes no economic sense for her to continue the pursuit. The slave society as a whole suffers from this same irrationality. Even though the massive killing of enslaved people in the wake of the slave revolt “cost the state so much the treasury was bankrupted, and the reimbursements had to be paid in installments,” the state nonetheless supports that kind of bloodthirstiness because its right to exert violence against black people was a more important property than any held in its coffers. The value of property in slaves, the novel suggests, is not an exchange value, not even a use value, but an incalculable psychological value. When the freed black man Mr. Roget offers to buy Sarah, whom he wishes to marry, Manon rebuffs him: “You seem to think I care for nothing but money. I am going to considerable expense to recover what is mine, by right and by law, and recover her I will.” What is hers “by right and by law” is not a piece of chattel, merely, but a disposition that allows her to determine another’s fate. As Ishmael Reed puts it in Flight to Canada: “Did you really think that it was just a matter of economics?” Their owner, one slave tells another, “didn’t want money. He wanted the slave in you.” The allure of the species of property in Martin’s Property is precisely the power that her father wished for explicitly, and her husband and other plantation owners implicitly, to have his slaves “believe he was a God.”

Because the perspective in The Known World and Property is that from the Big House, because they reveal the “known world” as it seen from the view of the masters, it is not surprising that the characters in the former and the narrator of the latter are baffled by their property, whom they see as frankly enigmatic. In The Known World, for instance, the slave Alice is an absolute mystery to everyone who tries to control her. When she finally escapes, she becomes what she has always been, an artist who paints a canvas that is a “map of life of the County of Manchester,” a work of art that represents “what God sees when He looks down on Manchester.” Here is a rebuke to those who fancy themselves God, from an artist who knows she creates things, not fancies that she can make people. In Property, Manon is “puzzled” by why slaves would revolt, unable to comprehend what drives Sarah to escape from her after Manon’s husband is dead. “Why would she run now, when she is safe from him? It didn’t make sense.” She cannot conceive that Sarah wishes for freedom, just as she, Manon, does, nor can she understand how she has sexually exploited Sarah just as her dead husband had. Her final words in the novel exemplify her continuing incomprehension: “What on earth did they think they were doing?” Her property...
has baffled her at the same time, and, for the same reasons, it has obsessed her: because deep down she knows it is not hers, and because she is unable to understand that those enigmatic enslaved people seek precisely what she has been seeking – freedom, love, and a chance to respond creatively to the world. Jones and Martin, then, reveal what imperatives and what deviations of human need make people into masters, and to what blindness mastery inevitably leads.

The late-twentieth-century narratives of slavery performed unparalleled cultural work. They revealed anew the utter importance of slavery in any assessment of the origins and future of the nation, the traumatic effects of enslavement for the generations that rose from it, and the perverse imperatives that drove mastery and the savage effects of it. They have also mined all the forms and techniques they had available to demonstrate how slavery as a literary subject can transform those forms and techniques. We see how ingeniously and creatively these authors have altered what are traditional forms – the saga, the historical novel, the fictive documentary novel, the ghost story, the planter’s journal – and also how they have devised new forms: the inscribed oral tale critical of writing, and what has been called elsewhere the “neo-slave narrative” and the “palimpsest narrative.”

No doubt, many things inspired that kind of formal innovation and experimentation, but at least one of them, arguably a paramount one, has been the question of respect: how can one tell a story of suffering slaves without seeing only victims; how can one tell a story of inhumane masters without showing what in humanity has produced them; how, in the end, can one tell a story that did not appropriate, that did not in itself replay the master-slave dialectic? How can one tell a story of death that was not death, Bradley asks; how can one protect a story so that no one could steal the enslaved person’s soul, ask Reed and Williams; how do you tell a story that, in the end, was both the way to create love and community (a story to put next to a beloved’s) but was yet fraught with pain, a story, as Morrison concludes, that was just “not a story to pass on”? The answer, to judge by that growing body of work on the historical memory of slavery, seems to be: through plentitude, by telling the story in different forms, with different emphases, and different foci, and not, ever, being indifferent to it.

NOTES

2. Michele Wallace, “Blues for Mr. Spielberg,” *The Village Voice*, March 18, 1986, 27. There were, of course, many black feminists who defended the film.


5. Ibid., 253, 99, 273.


11. Ibid., 155, 217, 303.

12. Ibid., 123, 212, 365, 377.


15. Ibid., 17.
