PROJECT MUSE®

The Power of the Neo-Slave Narrative Genre

Joan Anim-Addo, Maria Helena Lima

Callaloo, Volume 41, Number 1, Winter 2018, pp. 1-8 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/cal.2018.0000>

➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/736806>

THE POWER OF THE NEO-SLAVE NARRATIVE GENRE

by Joan Anim-Addo and Maria Helena Lima

One of the many reasons and necessities for the mass movements of peoples, war leads them all. It is estimated that when the final numbers of the displaced come out—those running from persecution, conflict, and generalized violence in today's world (including refugees, asylum seekers, and internally displaced persons)—the number will far surpass sixty million. Sixty million. And half of all refugees are children. I don't know the number of the dead.

—Toni Morrison, *The Origin of Others*

Do the slave narratives in fact represent a distinct literary genre? If not, why not? If so, what are its distinguishing characteristics? Are these characteristics relatively uniform throughout its history? What are the sources of variation and change? Is change great or small during that history? Are the narratives a popular or an elite literary form? Do they represent a species of autobiography? Why (and how) do they begin? Why (and how) do they come to an end? Such questions converge in the cluster of meanings implicit in the term *authority*: the condition of begetting, beginning, continuing, and controlling a written text. In Hegelian terms, the issues are parentage, propriety, property, and possession.

—John Sekora, *"Black Message/White Envelope"*

Since the last decades of the twentieth century, writers across the Black Atlantic have attempted to recover elements of the narrative structure and thematic configuration of slave narratives. The main reasons for this seemingly widespread desire to rewrite a genre that officially lost its usefulness with the abolition of slavery are the will to re-affirm the historical value of the original slave narrative and to reclaim the humanity of the enslaved by (re)imagining their subjectivity. While the initial questions John Sekora asks of antebellum slave narratives (our second epigraph) can be starting points in the exploration of almost any literary genre, he identifies the issues of authority and property as applying mostly to the writing that had freedom as its immediate telos. Indeed, slave narrators often took great liberties in the telling of their presumably distinct and peculiar stories of bondage and escape, shaping their narratives in such a manner as to produce the greatest political and emotional effect. Even if some of the antebellum narrators did not own their own bodies, they managed to have some authority in constructing the version of their lives they wished known. Because of such silences in slave narratives due to authorial

compromises to white audiences and to self-masking from a painful past, the neo-slave narrative works as “a kind of literary archeology,” as Toni Morrison describes it, a need to access the interior life of slaves via her imagination to bear witness to “the interior life of people who didn’t write [their history] (which doesn’t mean that they didn’t have it)” and to “fill in the blanks that the slave narrative left” (“Site of Memory” 192, 193).

Writing about neo-slave narratives, Ashraf Rushdy defines such “palimpsest narratives” as fiction in which a contemporary African American character is “forced to adopt a bi-temporal perspective that shows the continuity and discontinuities from the period of slavery” (5). In these narratives, “the present is always written against a background where the past is erased but still legible” (Rushdy 8). The genre has been deployed to redress the gaps and misrepresentations of dominant history through narrative to fulfill what Clarisse Zimra describes as “the ethical imperative of inventing a past that would otherwise disappear” (60). These gaps and silences reflect the fact that part of the history of slavery is irretrievable. In such an approach to retelling history, one is forced to relive the past by becoming immersed in it. Rememory, as Morrison defines it, is an active process of reconstitution that involves passing on the story in such a way that it becomes real, embodied, lived through the storyteller’s mediation. Attempting to differentiate the slave narrative from autobiography, James Olney identifies symbolic memory as the process by which people not only repeat their past experience but also reconstruct that experience, imagination becoming a necessary element of true recollection. For Olney, “Memory creates the *significance* of events in discovering the pattern into which those events fall. . . . It is in the interplay of past and present, of present memory reflecting over past experience on its way to becoming present being, that events are lifted out of time to be resituated not in mere chronological sequence but in patterned significance” (Olney 47–48).

The neo-slave narrative genre is particularly relevant to Black British writing since most received historical accounts have downplayed, or completely ignored, Britain’s role as a slaving nation. If slavery is remembered, as Abigail Ward writes, “the focus falls on the abolitionists, so Britain’s role in this past is remembered only in terms of ending, rather than perpetuating, the trade” (1). According to James Walvin, “historians of Britain have persistently overlooked or minimized the degree to which British life in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was integrated into the Atlantic slave system,” as they have tended to “regard slavery as a distant (colonial, imperial, American, maritime) issue, of only marginal or passing interest to mainstream Britain” (x-xi). This is not to say that slavery has entered the imagination only recently. Coming to terms with the legacy of slavery has been a central concern in Black Atlantic writing. “In cultivating an empire,” Ian Baucom writes, “England has made itself host to a thousand and one narratives of belonging” (221). Writers like Fred D’Aguiar, Caryl Phillips, Grace Nichols, David Dabydeen, Dorothea Smartt, and Joan Anim-Addo (to name only a few) have imaginatively returned to the past of slavery in order to revise the way in which British history is understood and remembered. Their writing explores the continuing legacies of slavery into twenty-first century realities—economic and social inequity, racism, and the impossibility of fully belonging—which suggests that it is only by the full avowal of the past of slavery that the present might be understood and the future imagined.

Slavery has become a counter-history of modernity, a history that has been erased from the European Enlightenment teleological narrative of rationality and progress. In *The Black*

Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness, Paul Gilroy observes that the re-examination of the material and representational histories of slavery forms a key element of African diasporic modernisms and the specific forms of “minority modernisms” they embody. Gilroy introduces the idea of a displaced slave poetics that captures the notion of continuity amidst discontinuities. Given the existence of the Black Atlantic as a historical reality and a theoretical framework to account for the circulation of bodies and ideas between Africa, the Caribbean, the United States, and Europe, its scope needs to be extended to include the Lusophone world, the Anglophone, Francophone and Hispanophone Africa and the Caribbean, as well as different parts of Europe. George B. Handley’s comparative analysis of works from the Anglophone and Hispanophone Americas offers a good starting point for transnational comparisons. Within the non-Anglophone traditions one can think of Maryse Conde’s *I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem*, Andre Schwarz Bart’s *La Mulatresse Solitude*, Marta Rojas’s *Santa Lujuria o Papeles de Blanco*, Marcel Cabay’s *Marie-Joseph Angelique, Incendiaire*, and Micheline Bail’s *L’esclave* as powerful examples of the neo-slave genre which have carried representations of slavery beyond the boundaries of the Anglophone world. It is also important to acknowledge numerous museum exhibitions on slavery as variants of the genre, albeit in a different way. Visual artists like Faith Ringgold, Steve Prince, Kara Walker, Tom Feelings, Lubaina Himid, and Carrie Mae Weems, playwrights and performance artists like Robbie Macauley and Lorena Gale, filmmakers like Charles Burnett, Zeinabu Irene Davis, and Haile Gerima, poets like Rita Dove, Robert Hayden, Afua Cooper, and Elizabeth Alexander have all re-imagined slavery in their own work, evidence that the neo-slave narrative genre is not restricted to the printed page. Oscar-winning director Steve McQueen (*12 Years a Slave*) reminds us that the Second World War lasted five years, but there are hundreds of films about World War II and the Holocaust, while slavery lasted 400 years and yet there are fewer than two dozen films attempting to represent it. McQueen writes that Northup’s story is, essentially, a narrative about today:

Look at the prison population. Look at the mental health issues, the poverty, the unemployment. You could go on and on and on. The evidence of slavery is all around. This is not a coincidence. There’s a cause and there’s an effect. It’s one of those things; someone asked me the other day, “What was it like when you first discovered slavery?” And I couldn’t remember when I first discovered slavery. It’s like asking me, “What was it like when you first discovered your name?” It’s one of those things where I thought about it, and I thought about the question, and the only answer you can give was a sense of shame and a sense of embarrassment—and that’s how a young person, as a kid, one starts off their life, because you’re embarrassed about that part of your history. (qtd. in George)

Neo-slave narratives, whether literary, poetic, performative, or visual, not only demand that we re-evaluate a vexed history of trauma and violence but also urge us to re-consider the modern history of the representation of black bodies and selves.

Not every critic agrees on what to call such texts, however. Arlene Keizer chooses to define them as “contemporary narratives of slavery” because for her, while contemporary works are informed by slave narratives and their speaking silences, many move so far beyond traditional generic conventions to explore the formation of black subjectivity that

they do not qualify as slave narratives (in her opinion). Keizer uses point of view—the first person is not often chosen—to anchor her argument (3). It all boils down to different understandings of the genre function. Many of the questions Adena Rosmarin asks in *The Power of Genre* are central to conceptualizing the neo-slave narrative genre: “Are genres found in texts, in the reader’s mind, in the author’s, or in some combination thereof? Or are they not ‘found’ at all but, rather, devised and used? Are they ‘theoretical’ or ‘historical’? Are they ‘prescriptive’ or ‘descriptive’? How many genres are there? Where do they come from? How, exactly, do they work? And change?” (7). While reading a work through a generic paradigm indeed offers distinctive possibilities of vision, it may also impose distinctive (and severe) limitations. Because genres are part of a culture and have themselves a history, they reveal the constitutive traits of the society to which they belong. The notion of genre is itself central to reading texts of the Black Atlantic, to understanding how different cultures, at different times, (re)produce literary genres to serve culture-specific purposes, but to be of real value, generic categorizations require frequent re-contextualization to account for differences of experience and its representation within apparently similar generic boundaries. As the world assumes different configurations, narrative forms will require new topographies. They are transformed as one of the ways in which changing subjects create themselves as subjects within new social and political contexts. As Heather Dubrow emphasizes, moreover, genre constructs an interpretive context within which both the reader and text are situated and which determines to a large extent the way that the two interact. Not only does the genre function constitute how we read certain elements within the discourse, allowing us to assume certain subject positions as reader, but it also constitutes the roles we assign to the actors and events within the discourse. According to John Frow, “genre is not a *property* of text but is a function of reading” (111). Assigning a text to a particular genre, he adds, is “a step in deciding how to interpret it” (133).

While we will argue against the easy universalization of the neo-slave narrative genre, we are interested in extending the genre’s reach to acknowledge more recent refugee accounts, migration testimonials, and prison narratives, and to map different theoretical exchanges. It seems to us that the genre requires us to attend to relationality, simultaneity, and history all at the same time. The genre’s central impulse—a political re-narration of history toward the present—recalls what Glissant characterizes as the “quarrel with history,” a counter-history of what makes particular formations as they are. The neo-slave narrative requires that we “read history anew,” in Wendy W. Walters’s formulation (1). Walters probes the archives of the slave trade to uncover literary contestations of official accounts of historical events. In the chapters analyzing the persistence of the *Zong* massacre in the Afro-diasporic historical consciousness, for example, she shows that literary interventions into an established historical archive uncover forgotten resistant subjectivities, expose the limits of legal knowledge, and unmoor fixed representations of historical actors. The main strength of her argument (based on close readings of Fred D’Aguiar, Michelle Cliff, and NourbeSe Philip) is to illustrate the ways in which literature probes the internal instabilities of historical archives to find instances of rebellion and survival and, more important, to reaffirm the centrality of the Black Atlantic for questioning (neo) colonial epistemologies.

Black Atlantic Writing is the critical umbrella bringing together the neo-slave narratives that are the focus of this special issue, which explores (among many other things) the role

of the genre in creating and transforming history, inviting a contemporary audience to see the past in terms of the present. While African Diaspora seemed sufficient in bringing together Caribbean, African American, African, and Black British literature and art until recently, the critical category “Black Atlantic” enables more fluid, transnational explorations that allow for a truly multicultural, multidisciplinary, and broader historical focus. Despite differences in approach and focus, the writers in this volume agree that (neo-)slave narratives are still being written to expose systemic inequality and the unjust treatment of (black) peoples everywhere. For, as Lars Eckstein writes, “while most colonial testimonies of slavery have long disappeared from the working memory of today’s Black Atlantic societies, the prejudices and stereotypes they conveyed [unfortunately] have not” (113).

The writers and critics this issue brings together stem from four continents and the Caribbean, to produce a new cultural arena—the Atlantic World. Paul Gilroy’s theoretical framework, which still dominates diaspora studies, as we mention above, is not enough to tackle the complexity of contemporary neo-slave narratives. Winfried Siemerling’s *The Black Atlantic Reconsidered* (2015) adds Black Canadian writing to Gilroy’s paradigm, offering a thorough exploration of the presence of the past in the region’s cultural history. As John Maddox argues, while Afro-Brazilian Ana Maria Gonçalves’s neo-slave narrative *Um defeito de cor* [*A Color Defect*] (2006) reaffirms some of Gilroy’s claims regarding double-consciousness (being a hybrid of Western “values,” “subjectivity,” and “reason,”) the novel’s breadth and complexity go beyond Gilroy’s Anglocentric approach by focusing on Brazilian slavery from a woman’s point of view. The novel creates a more dynamic understanding of double-consciousness and Slave Coast history by portraying Brazil, where most enslaved Africans ended up and for the longest period of time (early 1500s to 1888).

But what of the writer or artist? Part 2 of this special issue calls attention to the many ways of representing slavery that currently proliferate. While mention of the neo-slave narrative readily conjures up writing by Toni Morrison, whose novels—perhaps particularly *Beloved*—have had a phenomenal impact on readers, as well as writers, this volume reveals how by questioning who else is writing neo-slave narratives, in which medium and some of the key meanings of this practice, a hinterland of new writing in several languages begins to be revealed. We are delighted to include extracts written in French, Spanish, and Portuguese as well as English, representing original neo-slavery publications from Martinique, Cuba, and Brazil alongside writing from Ghana, Puerto Rico, South Africa, the United States, the Anglophone Caribbean, and the United Kingdom. We suggest that the reminder that English is by no means the single language of diaspora is a healthy one, especially for those of us who are Anglophones. Fiction, poetry, theater, and art similarly add to the polyphonic representation that is surely issuing from the latter day footprints of plantation slavery. Thus the reader might gauge the extent to which the neo-slave narrative today—by writers such as Alba Ambert, Nancy Morejón, Dannabang Kuwabong, Grace Nichols, Lorna Goodison, Toni Stuart, Fred D’Aguiar, Andrea Levy, Marcelo D’Saete, Rita Dove, and Patrick Chamoiseau, for example—may be considered truly transnational. That *Callaloo* rightly prides itself on its diaspora focus needs hardly be reiterated and this issue takes to heart the commitment to diaspora. Holding true to the promise, our spread of writers is as representative of the wider diaspora as it is possible to feature in any one volume.

Finally, we need to raise the possibility that neo-slave narratives will continue to be written until far overdue reparations are earned. While most historians, scholars, and activists agree that the trans-Atlantic slave trade and the institution of chattel slavery in the Americas in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries were without doubt the most heinous crimes against humanity in modern history, no agreement has been reached on how to offer justice for the millions of enslaved Africans (and their descendants). The social, economic, and psychological wounds of slavery have been passed down through the generations, open wounds that remain raw and continue to fester. People tend to think that reparations can only be paid in the form of cold cash, but reparations can be found in better funding for schools where “minorities” constitute the majority, having programs for self-growth or allocating resources for fixing up mostly black communities. As Ta Nehisi Coates has documented in “The Case for Reparations,” segregation has prevented African Americans from attaining a reasonable standard of living and job access. The blatant redlining of African Americans, who were confined to live in extremely overpriced areas, meant that they have been legally cheated into being less than white Americans. The core of Coates’s argument for reparations is that while Africans were initially stolen from Africa, the theft has continued in the present when African Americans have been denied their rights, education, and proper livelihood. According to the Caribbean historian Sir Hilary Beckles, reparation is not just an issue of repaying the enormous debts owed to the descendants of enslaved Africans. Reparation, he writes, “is part and parcel of the global movements for racial justice, for social justice and for economic justice.” The legacies of white supremacy and racism, both of which are vestiges of slavery and colonialism, are still prevalent throughout the region and they continue to be serious impediments to the full realization and practice of democracy, racial equality, and access to economic opportunity. These vestiges, Sir Beckles concludes, “must be confronted and expunged from our societies as we forge ahead with implementing reparatory justice.” As Joan Anim-Addo emphasizes, “the end of slavery in the British West Indies had created an already pre-destined class, largely dispossessed of land and the means to thrive. Traveling from a once wealth-producing but now impoverished West Indies governed by the British crown, the Windrush generation has nonetheless made a remarkable contribution to Britain. The achievements and positive contributions, principally in areas of health, the cultural industries, sport, and so on, made by that generation and their offspring are generally well known. There remains much to think about regarding their experience in Britain and our shared British history. Central to this should be a consideration of justice, specifically, I suggest, that of reparative justice” (“Windrush”).

Re-imagining the subjectivity of enslaved peoples by telling their stories, using narrative as a way towards telling that history, may educate the present generation into accountability for that sordid past. For instead of thinking of identity as an already established fact, which cultural practices then represent, we need to agree with Stuart Hall and think of identity as a “production,” which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted *within*, not outside, representation (“Cultural” 222). This is the power of the neo-slave narrative genre.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

We would be remiss if we failed to thank all the anonymous reviewers who have read all the submissions we have selected, sometimes more than once. *Callaloo* would not be able to preserve its valued reputation if it were not for your dedication. Thank you.

WORKS CITED

- Anim-Addo, Joan. *Imoinda: or She Who Will Lose Her Name*. Mango Publishing, 2008.
- . "Windrush Anniversary Reflections: Hauntings and the Longer View." *LW Blog*. 18 July 2018. Web. <<https://www.lwbooks.co.uk/blog/windrush-anniversary-reflections>>.
- Baucom, Ian. *Out of Place: Englishness, Empire, and the Locations of Identity*. Princeton UP, 1999.
- Beaulieu, Elizabeth Ann. *Black Women Writers and the American Neo-Slave Narrative*. Greenwood Press, 1999.
- Beckles, Sir Hilary. "Address delivered to the NAARCS' Reparations Town Hall in Atlanta." 11 June 2016. Web. <<http://caricomreparations.org/address-sir-hilary-beckles-naarcs-reparations-town-hall-atlanta/>>.
- Bell, Bernard W. *The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition*. U of Massachusetts P, 1987.
- Coates, Ta-Nehisi. "The Case for Reparation." *The Atlantic* June 2014. Web. <<https://www.theatlantic.com/projects/reparations/>>.
- Dabydeen, David. *Slave Song*. Peepal Tree Press, 2005.
- Dubrow, Heather. *Genre*. Methuen, 1982.
- Eckstein, Lars. *Re-Membering the Black Atlantic: on the Poetics and Politics of Literary Memory*. Rodopi, 2006.
- Frow, John. *Genre*. Routledge, 2015.
- George, Nelson. "An Essentially American Narrative: A Discussion of Steve McQueen's Film *Twelve Years a Slave*." *New York Times*. 11 Oct. 2013. Web. <<https://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/13/movies/a-discussion-of-steve-mcqueens-film-12-years-a-slave.html>>.
- Gilroy, Paul. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1993.
- Glissant, Édouard. *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays*. Caraf Books, 1999.
- Hall, Stuart. "Cultural Identity and Diaspora." *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*. Ed. Jonathan Ruthford. Lawrence & Wishart, 1990. 222–37.
- . "Negotiating Caribbean Identities." *New Left Review* 209 (1995): 3–14.
- Handley, George B. *Postslavery Literatures in the Americas: Family Portraits in Black and White*. UP of Virginia, 2000.
- Keizer, Arlene R. *Black Subjects: Identity Formation in the Contemporary Narrative of Slavery*. Cornell UP, 2004.
- Levy, Andrea. *The Long Song*. Headline Review, 2010.
- . "The Writing of *The Long Song*." Web. 20 Nov. 2014. <<http://www.andrealevy.co.uk/content/Writing%20The%20Long%20Song.pdf>>
- Lima, Maria Helena. "Decolonizing Genre: Jamaica Kincaid and the *Bildungsroman*." *Genre* 26.4 (1993): 431–59.
- . "A Written Song: Andrea Levy's Neo-Slave Narrative." *Entertext: Special Issue on Andrea Levy* 9 (2012): 135–53.
- Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. Plume, 1987.
- . *The Origin of Others*. Harvard UP, 2017.
- . *Paradise*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997.
- . "The Site of Memory." *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir*. Ed. William Zinsser and Russell Baker. Houghton Mifflin, 1998. 102–24.
- Olney, James. "'I Was Born': Slave Narratives, Their Status as Autobiography and as Literature." *Callaloo* 20 (1984): 46–73.
- Roberts, Neil. *Freedom as Marronage*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2015.
- Rosmarin, Adena. *The Power of Genre*. U of Minnesota P, 1986.
- Rushdy, Ashraf H. A. *The Neo-Slave Narrative: Studies in the Social Logic of a Literary Form*. Oxford UP, 1999.
- Sekora, John. "Black Message/White Envelope: Genre, Authenticity, and Authority in the Antebellum Slave Narrative." *Callaloo* 32 (1987): 482–515.
- Sharpe, Christina. "Black Studies: In the Wake." *The Black Scholar* 44.2 (2014): 59–69.
- Siemerling, Winfried. *The Black Atlantic Reconsidered: Black Canadian Writing, Cultural History, and the Presence of the Past*. McGill-Queen's UP, 2015.
- Smartt, Dorothea. *Ship Shape*. Peepal Tree Press, 2008.
- Spaulding, A. Timothy. *Re-Forming the Past: History, The Fantastic, and the Postmodern Slave Narrative*. The Ohio State UP, 2005.

- Vint, Sherry. "'Only by Experience': Embodiment and the Limitations of Realism in Neo-Slave Narratives." *Science Fiction Studies* 34.2 (2007): 241–61.
- Walters, Wendy W. *Archives of the Black Atlantic: Reading between Literature and History*. Routledge, 2013.
- Walvin, James. *Black Ivory: A History of British Slavery*. Howard UP, 1994.
- Ward, Abigail. *Caryl Phillips, David Dabydeen, and Fred D'Aguiar: Representations of Slavery*. Manchester UP, 2011.
- Zimra, Clarisse. "Mapping Memory: Architectural Metaphors in Djébar's Unfinished Quartet." *L'Esprit Createur* 43.1 (2003): 58–68.