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Lire et narrer le post-esclavage

Introduction

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Introduction

Mads Anders Baggesgaard and Lotte Pelckmans

I see de people gittee kill so fast! De old ones dey try run 'way from de house but dey dead by de door, and de women soldiers got dey head. Oh, Lor'! (Hurston 2018: 45)

- 1 These are the words of Oluale Kossola, known as Cudjo Lewis or just Cudjo, as they were told to and recorded by Zora Neale Hurston in 1927, then a young anthropologist, not yet the famed author she is today. However these words were not to be read by a wider audience until more than 80 years later, when they were finally published under the title *Barracoon: The Story of the Last Slave*. As we will show shortly, the reasons for this temporal discontinuity makes Cudjo's story a highly interesting example of the complications that surround the reading of narratives of slavery in the period that, for lack of a better word, we here refer to as post-slavery. Narratives of slavery are never simply that, but are very much subject to negotiation in the light of the cultural and historical settings in which they are read.
- 2 This special issue aims to investigate the varied ways in which memories and experiences of slavery have been, and continue to be, *negotiated* in the light of different cultural and historical framings of slavery around the globe in the long period following the complicated and in itself long process we know as "abolition". The main point is to highlight the complexity of this negotiation process in different parts of the world and at different times, and emphasize the difficulties and challenges that it poses for the reading and understanding of narratives on slavery in post-slavery.
- 3 Through this approach we aim to nuance our understanding of the importance of these narratives for cultural history. The significant problems inherent in the desire for 'true' or 'authentic' slavery narratives, persistent over centuries, have often been discussed in research. Narratives have been criticized for a perceived 'lack of originality' or 'historical imprecision' (Olney 1984). And slave narratives have been said to cater to a desire by readers, be they black or white, to get a first-hand 'impression' of the realities of slavery, creating a genre 'in which the combination of representations of sensationalistic violence and high moral tone created an effect of what Robin Winks has called 'pious pornography' (Jenson 2012: 38). The approach we are suggesting here is somewhat different, putting emphasis not on the question of the authenticity and

direct effect of the narrative, but rather on the *afterlives* of narratives as they travel through time and space. We propose to focus on a second order reading of the circulation, translations and reinterpretations of these narratives, and how these may in fact sometimes disclose more about the social and cultural impact of modern forms of slavery across the Atlantic, than does a *stricto sensu* (first) reading in and of itself.

- 4 These repercussions and the complexity of the literary afterlives of slavery in post-slavery settings are apparent when looking at Cudjo's story. The line cited above is a description of the horrendous scenes Cudjo witnessed when female Dahomian slave raiders pillaged his hometown Banté, and took Cudjo and many others prisoner to be sold as slaves in Ouidah at the Bight of Benin. In 1860 he was shipped to the US as one of 110 enslaved Africans on the *Clotilda*, which is understood to be the last slave ship to reach the US.
- 5 The scenes are clearly violent and maybe even sensationalist, but are also the starting point for a life lived in the shadow of slavery. By 1860 the practice of slave trading had for long been declared illegal. The Atlantic slave trade had been banned by the US Congress in 1807 and was made a capital offence in 1820, but it was not actually stopped until shortly after the landing of the *Clotilda*, when another slaver, the *Erie*, was intercepted in 1862 with almost 900 enslaved people aboard, and its captain Nathaniel Gordon became caught up in events that were to culminate in the Civil War. Cudjo lived through all of this, through Reconstruction, Jim Crow, World War I and the Great Depression. For five and a half years, he was enslaved on the plantations of Jim Meaher; then, after abolition, he and fellow-slaves were able to buy land to establish the settlement Africatown near Mobile, Alabama, where he lived until his death in 1935. 'How does one sleep with such memories beneath the pillow?' (Hurston 2018: 16), Hurston asks in declaring her motivation for talking to Cudjo and putting his story into writing, thus highlighting that what is interesting is not only Cudjo's testimony about slavery, but also, the story of living with this violent memory in the post-slavery decades following abolition.
- 6 And to make matters worse these memories, among some of the last recorded ones of slavery available in the US, were to be kept under the pillow for another 80 years before they came into circulation. The reasons for this delay are significant, even if not entirely clear. Hurston tried to place the manuscript with different publishers, among them Viking Press, which was willing to print them 'in language rather than dialect' (Hurston 2018: xxii) as is stated in a letter from Hurston to Lewis, cited in Deborah Plant's introduction to the book. A sacrifice Hurston was not willing to make, having promised to preserve the voice of Cudjo intact.
- 7 But there may also have been more political reasons for the failure to publish the manuscript. In her foreword to the book, Alice Walker suggests that it is precisely the violence of the scene in the passage cited above that was a problematic political statement, in particular for descendants of the enslaved: 'Who could face this vision of the violently cruel behavior of the "brethren" and the "sistren" who first captured our ancestors?' (Hurston 2018: x). As shown by Walker, Cudjo's narrative, which focuses very much on the perceived injustice committed by fellow Africans, played poorly into the necessary narrative of black power and the fight against racial inequality dominating the middle of the 20th century in the US. The violence experienced by Cudjo, and transmitted across decades, was just as real, but not recognizably the same as, the traumatic violence caused by colonizers and felt by generations of descendants

of slaves in the US and elsewhere, even though both experiences have shared roots in European imperialism.

- 8 Even in more recent years the narrative has met with criticism on the same grounds. In her analysis of this text, Genevieve Sexton paraphrases Hurston scholar Lynda Marion Hill, who rejects *Barracoon* as ‘a toothless document that lacks a political program’(Sexton 2003: 192) precisely because it does not follow the familiar path of the slave narrative ‘structured around events leading toward escape’(ibid.). Cudjo’s insistence on dwelling on the details of atrocities committed by Africans in Africa may perhaps not fit into the specific version of the slave-narrative largely modelled on the writings of Frederick Douglass, but it does highlight an important and all too often neglected aspect of transatlantic slavery, that was undoubtedly more relevant to the majority of slaves in the Americas who were born in Africa and lived African lives before being transported across the Atlantic.
- 9 The case of Cudjo Lewis and his narrative thus highlights some of the complexities inherent in narrating slavery *after* the end of slavery. It clearly shows how the act of narration can never be seen as isolated from a context, and is itself historical, as narratives are read and interpreted over years, decades and even centuries. And it shows how abolition can itself obscure certain aspects of the narrative. After abolition the act of freeing oneself became impossible in a simple, legal sense. As a result the political act of freeing yourself, an act that carries important connotations such as a spirit of rebellion and self-creation, is no longer immediately available for communities of former slaves, but must be recreated in political, literary or artistic gestures: ‘Emancipate yourself from mental slavery’, as Bob Marley sings. These powerful attempts at formulating mental or symbolic emancipation in the history of former slave communities have been caught up in a state of permanent struggle with a history of clear-cut abolition, which dominates official historical narratives in particular (Reinhardt 2006).
- 10 In this way the politics of Cudjo’s story also show us how cultural and historical differences, notably the cultural divide created by the Atlantic Ocean, continue to complicate the reading of narratives and their shifting meanings through space and time. A recent example from the other side of the Ocean makes this complexity even more clear. Last year the government of Ghana proclaimed 2019 as the Year of Return, inviting descendants of Africans from all over the world to come to Ghana to take part. ‘The “Year of Return, Ghana 2019” is a major landmark spiritual and birth-right journey inviting the Global African family, home and abroad, to mark 400 years of the arrival of the first enslaved Africans in Jamestown, Virginia’, as the Ghana Tourism Authority states on the project website.¹ Taking the US quadricentennial of slavery as the vantage point for the commemoration of slavery in Ghana is—to say the least—remarkable, considering that the history of selling enslaved Africans to Europeans and loading them on ships, many of which left from what is today called Ghana, goes back at least another 100 years on African coasts.
- 11 The feeling that something is wrong is not lessened when the official description of the event goes on to state that ‘one of the main goals of the Year of Return campaign is to position Ghana as a key travel destination for African Americans and the African Diaspora. In 2019, the events planned throughout the year will serve as a launch pad for a consistent boost in tourism for Ghana in the near and distant years’ (ibid.). This approach reveals itself to be ultimately about securing revenue from tourists, by

catering to what Saidiya Hartman has termed as the desire for afrotopia (Hartman 2007: 46–7). And the campaign thus serves as a reminder that there are still significant financial, cultural and political inequalities, not only between the Global North and South, but also between different parts of the so-called Black Atlantic (Gilroy 1993) and global South Atlantic (Bystrom & Slaughter 2018).

- 12 These inequalities are often economic, but some are also related to the different politics involved in the historical, moral and ethical negotiations over the past atrocities of slavery. Christina Sharpe exemplifies this when invoking the issue of race: ‘While all modern subjects are post-slavery subjects fully constituted by the discursive codes of slavery and post-slavery, post-slavery subjectivity is largely borne by and readable on the (New World) *black* subject’ (Sharpe 2010: 3). So, while the transatlantic slave trade has left its mark on the modern world in its entirety, the descendants of those transported and abused are clearly in a unique position to experience and reflect on this history, whether it be from an extremely racialized position, as is often the case in the US, or from a position marked by less virulent and outspoken perceptions and ideologies of inequality, as it is often the case for descendants of slaves in the African context.
- 13 This does not, however mean that other positions are not also relevant and interesting for those trying to understand the history of slavery and its representation in all its complexity. Sandra Greene (2017) for instance, reminded us of the importance of the perspective of slave owners, and the ambiguous positions of both slave traders and abolitionists, while Bayo Holsey pointed to the real need for some Africans and African nations to forget or at least downplay the history of slavery in order to situate themselves as legitimate subjects in different situations: ‘Minimizing the slave trade within national history protects the narrative flow of colonial oppression and nationalist victory that allows Ghana to be viewed as a member of a community of nations rather than as “a race of slaves”’ (Holsey 2008: 235). This need has at least two sources. On one hand, the notion ‘slave’ has a derogatory component in many contexts, both because it reduces the subject to a certain passivity or victimhood which is considered shameful, and because slaves are traditionally understood as being at the bottom of the social order. On the other hand, the current African ruling classes are often descendants of those very people who were in power at the time of legal slavery. In other words, those who were complicit in the trade managed to continue their positions of power and wealth into the present. In both cases Holsey reminds us that ‘protecting one’s identity from pathologization whether it is the identity of the occupants of the same house, region, or nation, is an important and empowering act’ (ibid.). Dealing with a legacy of slavery could, in some of these cases, mean not talking about it, not bringing it to life or, as in the case of the Year of Return, providing room for others to commemorate in the way preferable to them, which perhaps excludes the political implications of the historical details being commemorated.

Post-slavery

- 14 In this special issue we analyze the afterlives of different narratives of slavery under the heading of ‘post-slavery’ as a catch-all for all of these different situations in which slavery is either perceived to be over, abolished, forgotten, or is actively erased. Post-slavery refers back to the ways in which legacies and continuities beyond the legal and

temporal marker of abolition have remained alive, commemorated and active. The ~ used to connect post and slaveries in the title of this journal, *Esclavages & post~esclavages/Slaveries & Post~Slaveries*, questions the links between slavery and its aftermath from the vantage point of chronology putting emphasis on the (dis)continuities between systems and representations. Indeed, much like the term post-colonial, post-slavery is often not only used to distinguish analytically between the chronological and temporal rupture before and after (post) slavery, but also to distinguish between the ever-changing genealogies of the categories of slavery and freedom (see also Cooper, Holt & Scott 2000: 4). Post-slavery includes not only legacies but also continuities reaching from the era of slavery and the slave trade into the contemporary context, such as e.g. racism (Lecocq & Pelckmans forthcoming).

- 15 The term post-slavery and its uses seem to have different user-genealogies from one continent to another. The question remains whether European countries can be seen as post-slavery societies, in view of their very low levels of clearly delineable ex-slave subjects. This in contrast to countries and continents like Brazil, Africa and the US, where a large portion of the population is often still discernable and categorized as composed of the descendants of slaves. But apart from these spatial dimensions, there are also differences in focus when it comes to defining the concept. Some scholars have emphasized its moral and ethical implications and its politics, while others have chosen to focus on its analytical use and value. Regarding the ethical implications of using a notion like post-slavery in the African context, Rossi (2015) has argued that the understanding of post-slavery as a critical, normative and moral rupture, which exposes 'the continuing legacies of a state of affairs that should have ended' (Rossi 2015: 303), is arguably 'neo-abolitionist in intent'. This unilinear, neo-abolitionist bias reinforces representations in which the temporal rupture from slavery to post-slavery is universally desirable and possible, and thereby risks turning an analytical blind eye to the contemporary 'denial of coevalness' (Fabian 1983: 37) of both slavery and post-slavery. This becomes especially apparent in certain African societies, where the colonial abolition of slavery and/or international anti-slavery interventions have been, and often continue to be, seen as undesirable, romantic, exotic or even instrumental paternalistic projects from outside, mingling with and imposed upon regional (e.g. West African) power balances. For scholars concerned with post-slavery as an analytical approach, scholars like Lecocq & Pelckmans (forthcoming) have defined post-slavery as a continuum, ranging from symbolic legacies, over actual but fragmented continuities and into contemporary forms of outright (modern) slavery.
- 16 In the US context, recent 'post-slavery' Black theoretical trajectories (Sharpe 2010: 3) have stressed the varied ways in which the 'afterlife' (Hartman 2007: 6) of New World slavery continues to structure Black existence in the United States and beyond. Radical afro-pessimist scholars have engaged with earlier theories on slavery as 'social death' (Patterson 1982) and have made blackness as the absence of subject-status their theoretical point of departure (e.g. Sexton 2011, Wilderson 2010). These radical afro-pessimistic views focus on the antagonistic relation between Blackness and the white, male, 'Western' subject (Wilderson 2010; Sexton 2011). Still in the US context, post-slavery is far from signifying a society 'without slavery'. Many authors have demonstrated how aspects of the carceral system in the US from World War II onwards have reproduced racial aspects of exclusion highly akin to historical slavery as a system of exploitation and surplus production (Blackmon 2008). Others have underlined

‘slavery’s haunting possession of neoliberalism’ (Dillon 2012: 2) within contemporary prison life (James 2005; Alexander 2010; Dillon 2012) and ghettos (Wacquant 2002). In Hartman’s words ‘black lives are still imperiled and devalued by a racial calculus and a political arithmetic that were entrenched centuries ago’ (2007: 6).

Negotiating narratives of slavery in Post-slavery settings

- 17 These repercussions of slavery are clearly the reason for a marked increase in (post-)slavery narratives over recent decades, and the recirculation of older slave narratives in literature, but also in film, poetry and so on. Several black novelists, poets, artists and film-makers have made their way on the international scene and contributed to countering the forces of silencing and erasure that are ever-present adversaries in the narration of this past. Citizens across the globe have by now engaged with such cultural products, ranging from Toni Morrison’s *A Mercy* (2008), to books and poetry like M. NourbeSe Philip’s *Zong!* (2008), to Kara Elizabeth Walker’s paper-cut silhouettes, to televised series like *The Book of Negroes* (2015) and movies such as Steve McQueen’s *12 Years a Slave* (2013). In view of this new flow of narratives on slavery in post-slavery, we argue for the importance of an analysis of how such narratives are negotiated, contextualized, put into (re-)circulation, translated, and put to political use.
- 18 In all these cases, debating the politics of post-slavery raises questions about how and to what extent narrative can represent and do justice to slave and post-slavery subjectivities, especially since there is no clear comparative counterpoint in time, there is in other words a lack of a narrative moment *prior* to slavery (Hartman 1997; Wilderson 2010). Cudjo’s narrative may be the ‘last’ slave narrative, but this in no way means that the history of slavery is over—even the history of that narrative itself is far from written. On the contrary, the act of narration is here hardly more than the starting point for a series of reflections, translations and negotiations of Cudjo’s story. In this special issue we explore similar instances of narration and re-narration of slavery in different cultural and historical settings of post-slavery through four articles dealing with different cultural and geographic configurations of post-slavery.

Contributions

- 19 We have four contributing articles that give more flesh and blood to the idea of how exactly to analyze and reimagine narratives of slavery in post-slavery societies.
- 20 The first contribution by Pietro Deandrea (in English) deals with how contemporary forms of slavery can be best translated from fictional works in English (among others Chris Cleave’s *The Other Hand* and Marina Lewycka’s *Two Caravans*) into the Italian language. The article discusses which translation strategies might most effectively convey the narrations related to the phenomenon of new slaveries, and it does so by reviewing Translation Studies in relation to both postcolonial literatures and British new slavery narratives, with a special focus on Gordon’s concept of ‘complex personhood’. This concept emphasises the need to consider the enslaved subjects’ complex personhood in translating practices, through techniques based on ‘foreignization’ in order to avoid translating non-standard usages of English into

outright caricatural representations. The second section of the article points to unexplored complexities—such as titles, interlingualism, linguistic creativity—in published Italian translations of British narratives of new slaveries, such as Ruth Rendell's *Simisola* and Ian Rankin's *Fleshmarket Close*, Abi Morgan's play *Fugee* and Ali Smith's short story *The Detainee's Tale*. Alongside the required linguistic skills, Deandrea argues that it is vital for a translator to be knowledgeable about the historical context and facts around British new slaveries, in order to do justice to the important ethical and political dimensions that narratives about these slaveries entail.

- 21 Adriana Ramírez Gutiérrez' contribution is written in Spanish and introduces us to the ways in which novel and film engage with forms of recirculating, renegotiating and rereading the ideological nature of narratives of slavery. More specifically, Ramírez focuses on the case of what has been presented as an 'anti-slavery novel' of 19th-century Cuba, namely *Francisco* (1839/1880), written by Anselmo Suárez y Romero. The cinematic translation of that novel into a trilogy in 20th-century post-slavery Cuba by Sergio Giral is intertextual, extending from the novel to its epitext (letters and personal archive of the author), and fits into the political framework of the cultural policies of the beginning of the Cuban Revolution. Ramírez demonstrates how *The Other Francisco* is not a filmic adaptation of the novel, but rather a very loose re-interpretation that reveals and criticizes the romanticized ideological contents of the novel; she supports her argument with an analysis of the historical context of its emergence and genesis. While the novelist constructs an image of the slave as a sentimental hero, a stoic victim of slave violence, a discursive strategy aimed at winning the empathy of the reader, the filmmaker goes against this idealized image and exposes the highly moralizing and ideological context in which the text emerged. The filmic discourse contrasts with several scenes from the novel's main plot and provides epitext that significantly transforms the image of the slave central to the text of the novel. The film replaces the image of the slave as victim with that of the slave as subject who is the protagonist of his own story of liberation. The film demystifies the stereotype of the submissive slave of 19th-century Romanticism, replacing it with the figure of the rebel slave. It constructs a narrative about slave resistance. Clearly, both the novelist and the filmmaker configure images of the slave in accordance with their own intellectual projects in specific time-settings: the first represents a sentimental hero as a persuasive rhetorical strategy in 19th-century Cuba; while the second visually portrays a collective hero central to an important emancipatory struggle in post-slavery Cuba of the 1970s.
- 22 Moving away from the strictly literary assessment of slave narratives, Lotte Pelckmans' article, written in French, discusses the difficulties of interpreting the voices and narratives of women subjected to historical continuities of slavery that often collapse into contemporary forms of exploitation, in this specific case the tradition of slave concubinage in the Niger-Nigerian borderlands. Basing herself on a report by a contemporary African anti-slavery organization, Pelckmans shows how difficult it is to find a representative voice and read between the lines of the written narratives central to the activist report, especially in view of the highly politicized context surrounding the phenomenon of concubinage and the activism involved. Access to the voices of concubine women in these regions has always been rather complicated, but it has become even more so due to the deteriorating security situation in these borderlands and also because of an increasing awareness by the actors involved that human rights groups (for instance) condemn this as an illegal practice, which in turn leads to the practice being increasingly concealed. Such factors have made it increasingly difficult

to access these women's narratives, which showcase their own views and opinions and relate their experiences and emotions as concubines in their own voices. The article argues that it is their physical and embodied movements, called 'kinetic narratives', which convey, and come to stand for, their own emic understanding of protest, of disagreement and unacceptable forms of suffering. By fleeing and moving away, these women clearly embody their voice and opinion, indicating that concubinage is neither honourable nor acceptable. Pelckmans argues that their 'fugitive movements' can be seen as 'kinetic narratives' in and of themselves, conveying female voices /narratives without discourse or words. Given the lack of written sources, and because of the complicated access to these concubines' oral narratives, it is important to investigate how this subaltern group's kinetic narrative gives voice to their personal understanding—often counternarratives to prevailing dominant ideologies of concubinage as an honourable religious tradition to be respected.

- 23 Last but not least, and returning to the cultural product of the novel, Samira Spatzek's contribution in English hints at the post-slavery discussions in a US setting, and through her focus on the figure of the enslaved mother she diverges from earlier analyses made of Toni Morrison's novel *A Mercy* (2008). This novel is set in the historical context of the earliest days of slavery on a rural New York farm; the bulk of critical readings of *A Mercy* interpret it as part of 21st-first century 'post-racial' discourse, not least since it was published one week after Barack Obama was elected President of the US in 2008. Spatzek goes against such readings and establishes how this novel's explicit frame of reference and signification is more about the sexual economies of Atlantic slavery than about racial interactions. Her reading is original in its unique focus on the figure of the enslaved mother *minha mãe* as a character that needs to be examined in its own right, rather than a character in close relation to the others in the novel. By showing how this character revisits the African-American slave narrative tradition, and by reading it in line with the groundbreaking work on the entanglements between slavery, property, and reproduction done by Black feminist scholars, Spatzek's close reading of the *minha mãe* character convincingly demonstrates how *minha mãe* allegorizes the slave narratives authored by Mary Prince and Harriet Jacobs, creating intertextual moments with the tradition of the women-authored African-American slave narratives. She proposes to read in the *minha mãe* figure an outright challenge to the generic script of these narratives, which are strongly invested in an ethos of liberation. Unlike the protagonists of women-authored slave narratives, the *minha mãe* does not gain freedom at the end of her text. In conclusion, the original and almost exclusive focus on the *minha mãe* figure allows Spatzek to engage in alternative readings and ideological connections with the contemporary US tradition of post-slavery black theorizing.
- 24 We hope that these very different contributions inspire our readers to get more insights into how the afterlives of certain narratives of slavery can take shape, transform the post-slavery landscape, and bring about valuable insights.

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NOTES

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