Troubled Legacies

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Heritage/Inheritance in American Minority Literatures

Edited by

Michel Feith and Claudine Raynaud

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INTRODUCTION

THE TRIALS OF PASSING (ON): HERITAGE/INHERITANCE IN AMERICAN MINORITY LITERATURES

MICHEL FEITH
UNIVERSITÉ DE NANTES
AND CLAUDINE RAYNAUD
UNIVERSITÉ PAUL-VALERY MONTPELLIER

Heritage: 1. Property that is or can be inherited; an inheritance.
2. Something that is passed down from preceding generations; a tradition.
3. The status acquired by a person through birth; a birthright: a heritage of affluence and social position.
4. A domesticated animal or a crop of a traditional breed, usually not widely produced for commercial purposes.

Inheritance: 1.a. The action of inheriting something: the inheritance of property from a relative.
b. Something inherited or to be inherited: Her inheritance included a large estate.
2. Something regarded as a heritage: the cultural inheritance of Rome. *See Synonyms at heritage.*
3. *Biology*
a. The process of genetic transmission of characteristics from parent or ancestor to offspring.
b. A characteristic so inherited.
c. The sum of genetically transmitted characteristics.

Heritage/inheritance: as illustrated by the above definitions, aptly garnered from the thesaurus of the *American Heritage Dictionary*, the semantic fields of these two words overlap to a large extent, all the more

so if we read the small print. “Heritage, inheritance, legacy, tradition: These nouns denote something immaterial, such as a practice or custom, that is passed from one generation to another” (“Heritage”). It is only when they are paired in creative tension, as in the title of this introduction, that the process of *différance* widens the gap between the two terms. Inheritance for our purposes will shift towards the passive voice: it will be the shaping determinism of transmission and things transmitted; whereas heritage will rather represent the traditions claimed and transformed by the subject or community into materials for their self-definition. Together they represent what is passed down, willy-nilly, from the past, which rarely amounts to the whole of the past.

The question of heritage—and the division between heritage and inheritance—are particularly acute in the field of minority literatures. Are the works of “hyphenated” writers necessarily hyphenated themselves, special-interest literatures to be pigeonholed on the side-shelves of libraries? Does this typographic emblem symbolize the bridging of diverse traditions, mainstream and ethnic, or is it a divisive slash that radically questions, from the sidelines, the ideological and literary canons of the nation? Some inheritances are claimed; some are imposed. In the African American field, for example, the filiation with Africa is often valorized, whereas the slave past weighs down with a conjunction of individual and collective trauma, survivor’s complex, and indebtedness, upon texts that become archaeologies of the unspeakable. “Not a story to pass on”: the ambiguity of the concluding formula of Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987) is laden with the contradictions of an impossible inheritance of suffering and dehumanization. Memories of oppression, alienation in the Other’s gaze or, on the contrary, the praise of the cultural wealth of the minority group; the tribute, in family sagas or family romances, to the survival instinct and endurance of generations of founding ancestors; all these themes constitute the common ground of minority literatures.

The texts often stage situations of transmission, oral or written, which flesh out the importance of heritage, not only as patrimony, but also as process. Humor is a key feature in these minority traditions, as confirmed by the choice of the figure of the trickster as a defining trope of Black and Native literatures by critics such as Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Gerald Vizenor. Humor and derision are survival strategies, as well as a veiled critique of an unfair social and symbolic order. But the tradition of subversion may quickly be reversed into the subversion of tradition: when fixed in essences, heritage can become stifling. The politics of pride, for example, may fulfill a much-needed revaluation of minority heritance, yet runs the risk of unanimism, conformity, even fetishization. The literary

debates on authenticity visible in Frank Chin and Maxine Hong Kingston's argument on the subject of faithfulness to the Chinese literary and mythic canon (1991)—or in Percival Everett's parodic revisiting of the "black experience" school of writing (2001)—are part of a very American dilemma: the right and feasibility to reinvent inherited traditions, or to dispense with them altogether.

Yet minority literatures do not result only from a face-off or a compromise between mainstream and ethnic traditions. If inheritances are to be remade constantly, one can frame "usable pasts" out of a splicing of multiple traditions, as in the classic parallel between African Americans and Jews, one of whose latest avatars is Philip Roth's *The Human Stain* (2000) or the presence of Ancient Greece in Percival Everett's writings as evidenced by his novel *The Water Cure* (2007). Could such eclecticism pose a threat of dilution into the mainstream or, as suggested by Chicano literature, does not *mestizaje* open up a promise of permanent renewal for minority literatures and traditions?

Taken together, the ten essays gathered here offer, when one focuses on the notion of inheritance, a synthetic view of what minority literatures question in contemporary America and how they project and envision the future.[1] This specific prism is a way of assessing the transformations that America as a nation is going through, a long way from its inaugural dream of unity among diversity, as expressed in the motto *E Pluribus Unum*. If integration still finds its way in Sergio Troncoso's *From this Wicked Patch of Dust* (2011), the contemporary itineraries of the younger generation in this novel stress globalization and its attendant problematics. Eugenides's *Middlesex* (2003) similarly explores through the legacy of a double origin, a third way out of the limitations of binary thought. The texts are the loci and the mirrors of a new questioning of multiculturalism beyond the binary opposites of assimilation and difference, consent and descent. They help reflect upon and displace Werner Sollors's famous distinction:

> This tension between the rejection of hereditary old-world hierarchies (embodied by European nobility) and the vision of a new people of diverse nativities in the fair pursuit of happiness marks the course that American ideology has steered between descent and consent. It is this conflict which is at the root of the ambiguity surrounding the very terminology of American ethnic interaction. (Sollors 1986: 4-5)

[1] The following essays originated as talks presented at the 2012 Perpignan AFEA Symposium "Héritage(s)." We wish to thank our colleagues Ada Savin and Michel Imbert for soliciting this double workshop attended by plenary speaker Werner Sollors.

Added to the opposition race/ethnicity which structures the volume and begs the question of the continued (irreducible?) exceptionalism of the African American community or the black/white division, postmodernity dislodges ideology, fractures identification and identity within a context of hypermobility and superdiversity (Vertovec 2007; 2010). Projecting new configurations, these narratives are the expression of an aesthetics that translates these interrogations and in so doing invents a new writing that remains nonetheless heir to the autobiographical tradition of American letters. More often than not, ethnic and racial "identities" are juxtaposed like so many cards that the protagonists play with, in a postmodern distancing from the actual violent experiences of ordinary racism. This does not mean that the legacy of a harrowing past does not haunt the texts, but it shows that another model is emerging beyond the "salad bowl" or the concept of diversity. The fluidity—often a flight forward—as well as the "performance" of identity switching or the appropriation of ethnic labeling translate a lack of adherence to fundamental transcendental national ideals that the concept itself of nation no longer offers. That remark applies to both the country of origin and the country of election. One needs to turn to transnationalism, cosmopolitanism, diasporic identities, constantly renegociated, restructured, reexamined. The Deleuzian rhizome yoked as it may be to a poetics of relation (Glissant) must also be rethought in light of contemporary events and conjuncture (wars, crises, forced migrations, the North/South divide, unbridgeable economic gaps). Another option could be to enlist Jean-Loup Amselle's theory of connections ("*branchements,*" 2001) that offers a way out of the opposition between vertical and horizontal orderings. It privileges lateral outgrowths, offshoots, or/and side derivations within an overall framework that relies on breaks in continuities and shuns a singular fixed origin (Mangeon 2015). The recent events in France—the January 4th, 2015 murderous attack of the *Charlie Hebdo* satirical magazine and a kosher supermarket by homegrown jihadists—and their replica in Copenhagen shed an alternative light on these redistributions of power and tensions on a world scale, with "religion" playing a central role and "national" identity being under siege. Frontiers are broken down in a world of instant multiple multidirectional connections, the Internet, networks and multimedia: a horizontal organization prevails over a vertical hierarchical structuring of power relations and control. In this new dispensation one must indeed think together *La Frontera* (in its dichotomic sense of "walls" against immigrants), and the porosity of territories (the arrival of new waves of migrants fleeing war zones, dictatorships). In the case of Islamic fundamentalism the logic of postmodern flexibility is not liberating: the

rhizome is the means, and the end is the crudest logocentric, hierarchical, exclusive between "us" and "them."

In other words, the novels under study, although not representative of what writer Bharati Mukherjee has called "The Literature of the New Arrival," point to conclusions that she herself draws in an appeal to rethink US migrant literary history: "The newly arrived immigrant-artist is likely to be less a petitioner for inclusion in America as had been the European immigrants of Philip Roth's grandparents' generation, and more an edgy critic." Speaking in 2011, she adds: "I feel that the academy has not yet developed the grid and the grammar to explore American works that are not quite 'American' in a canonical sense."[2] Not quite American or American in a new way?

In the game of hide-and-seek, the one looking for the others is the "it". Using and reversing that metaphor to understand the new distribution of ethnic/racial labeling, one can say that the place of the "it" is that of the reference to a WASP identity as the crucible for the nation. While narratives of integration have helped sustain and consolidate the American model (cf. Antin's *The Promised Land*, 1912), "minority" literatures in essence are also necessarily run through by a destabilization of that model. They point at the arbitrariness and the violence of a normative whiteness of Anglo-Saxon ancestry. The model has been eroded, emptied out; "whiteness" exposed as a racial construction. The actual demographics of the country—the "changing" face of the nation—are a point of no return. In contemporary minority texts, the impossible ideal could be said to be replaced by an "it": the other identities are then shown as constructed, the product of performances, while readers remain aware of the limits of the performativity of ethnicity and race. Can anyone pass for Jew (Philip Roth and Gish Jen)? Why does one convert from Catholicism to Islam (Sergio Troncoso)?

In a sense, "biology is destiny": inheritance is after all not first and foremost a symbolic process, but the blood that runs through your veins (third heading in the *Heritage Dictionary* definition). The body and its irreducible visibility inhabit the texts, driving a wedge within the concept of "minority" literature. The richness of this collection of essays is that it brings together works by African, Chinese, Jewish, Greek American authors; yet can they all be called "minority" to the same degree or, for

[2] She goes on to name the following authors: Cristina Garcia, Junot Diaz, Edwidge Danticat, Ha Jin, Yi-Yun Li, Chang-rae Lee, Geling Yan, Dao Strom, Monique Truong, Garry Shteyngart, Olga Grushin, David Bezmozgis, Aleksandar Hemon, Téa Obreht, Walter Abish, Ariel Dorfman, Nuruddin Farah, Lan Cao, and Jessica Hagedorn (2011: 688-89).

some of them, at all? One might argue that African American narratives tend to be less playful or distanced, as suggested by an emphasis on the victimization of the body, often reinforced by a focus on women's status as a "double minority." Indeed a profound questioning of the place of the female body as the locus of the compulsive reiteration of an original sin (slavery, rape, the repetition of oppression through procreation) and a decidedly historically grounded vision (historical metafiction) distinguishes these productions. Yet literature by recent immigrants (cf. among others, Tan, Danticat, Díaz) also focuses on women's experiences. A markedly sexualized and gendered modality of thinking and imagining transmission emerges. Trapped in their bodies, can the women survive?

In *Corrigedora* (1987), the women must perform a ritual of giving birth that ensures the memory of rape in slavery, or one could say slavery as rape, in a literalization of the horrors of chattel slavery. Trauma is inscribed in the flesh as much as in the psyche, as the very title of Perry's *Stigmata* (1998) makes plain. Inheritance is a wound, repeatedly opened up until that compulsion to repetition comes to a halt, until the festering stops. Women's novels such as *Beloved*, *Corrigedora* and *Stigmata* stress the specificity of the female body as bearer (generator and reproducer) in the flesh—one recalls Hortense Spillers's distinction between body and flesh (1987). That undeniably female inheritance is a marker of sexual difference in writing that needs to be probed. Yet *The Cattle Killing* (1996) also places the ambivalence of blood (*sanguis* versus *cruor*) at the center of the text that questions inherited discourses and ventures re-vision through the invention of a new language.

This elusive question of the shifting grounds of minority status is one that is addressed by the texts themselves, often in an intertextual relation with African American literature and culture. The deep "subject matter" of the novels *Middelesex* or *The Human Stain* also revolves around the genetic inheritance, for the former, and the one drop of "black" blood, for the latter, that plague the protagonists. Roth imagines a Black professor "passing" for a Jew and whose "racism" is exposed in a politically correct America. In other words, a member of a "racial" minority, passes into a minority that in the Fifties had just crossed the divide between "race" and "ethnicity," and is at the time of writing hardly considered a minority at all. Gish Jen's Mona, a young Chinese American woman who converts to Judaism in the Seventies, is confronted to the much more limited opportunities available to her black protégé. Eugenides places the figure of the hermaphrodite at the center of his novel: even though he/she constitutes a sexual minority of one, Callie is more ethnic than racialized. Her family is situated on the white side of the divide during the 1967 race

riots in Detroit. Yet in a mind-boggling episode the reader is given to surmise that the founder of the Nation of Islam, Elijah Muhammad himself, might be no other than the protagonist's maternal grandfather, a dark-complexioned Greek from Turkey and an incurable con artist! In all these cases, normativity is marginalized by downright subversion. The malleability of (gender, racial, ethnic, religious) categories is exposed while the power they exercise through their policing and formatting of individual selves is made palpable. The modality may be ironic, satirical, or festive, carnivalesque (in the case of Gish Jen or of Robert Colescott's painting), the end result is a profound troubling of clear-cut divisions: the boxes on the census forms, the stereotypes of racist discourse and the neat definitions of authentic racial and ethnic selves. With *Middlesex*, a third way is paved towards a hybrid culture made of compromises, crossings, and *métissages*.

An aesthetic of palimpsest and fragment, of *mise en abyme* and abrupt reversals, emerges from these texts that globally, in the vein of Maxine Hong Kingston's pioneering *The Woman Warrior* (1975), break away from the psychological novel. They can also be seen as heirs to James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912), whose central question of passing and racial categories they *de facto* revisit. The postmodernist slant of these fictions fits the apprehension of ethnicity as de-essentialized. It also translates the priority given to memory and its workings, to transmission and its travails. The essays point the exploration of in-between-ness, hybridity, *mestizaje*, but also to stereotyping, to the relation between master-discourses of American identity (Enlightenment, Puritanism, the prophetic mode) and the inscription of difference within it. The American other, freed from the constraints of hyphenation, runs the gamut of all the origins of its immigrants. Does it mean that we are beyond ethnicity? Beyond race? Against race? (Gilroy 2011). Whereas liberal individualism defeats collective belonging and could mark the end of a true political recognition of ethnic and racial groups—an analysis that Marcel Gauchet makes of liberal democracy—these fictions do not end up being mere word plays or gentle or bitter-sweet comedies.[3] *The Water Cure* is as much a reflection on torture and our current humanity as it is on language, philosophy and "our" ancient Greek heritage. The very claim on that heritage made by an African American writer constitutes a powerful disclaimer of what John Edgar Wideman has called "the paradigm of race" (Wideman 1994: xxiv). In other words, the works' postmodern aesthetics,

[3] Another analysis is that of the shifting construction and the simultaneous belonging of the individual to several "groups" in what Jan Blommaert names "polycentricity" (2012).

their metatextuality, their references to History, their gender bending, bear a political message. The reader seizes it in the very reflexivity of the writing.

The first section focuses on the inheritance of past history, previous discourses, the treasure of Western philosophy, in works by African American writers and moves from two studies of writers from the older generation (Jones, Wideman) to an analysis of a more contemporary intervention (Everett) whose inclusion in this "racialized" section is in itself as unsettling as his own novel. Valérie Croisille's article highlights the ways in which the women in Gayl Jones's *Corrigedora* repeat the trauma until the heroine's barrenness becomes a point of no return. She shows how the Corrigedora women, prey to a lethal matriarchal "myth," were themselves the perpetrators of their own annihilation in alienation. Paradoxically yet understandably, infertility opens up the way for creation—here the polyphonic blues novel—and a reclamation of self, and beyond, of community. It helps move beyond the dictatorship of inheritance.[4]

Flora Valadié's intervention consists in a reading of *The Cattle Killing* that explains how the novel's questioning of inherited discourses (prophecy, Puritanism, the Enlightenment, abolitionist rhetoric, i.e. "Modernity") reveals the shadow that they contain: the contradiction inherent in the "white" light that they pretended to bear and the presence of the racial and cultural Other (cf. Morrison's "Africanist presence," 1992). Synesthesia means that voices must be seen—hence her attention to the "colors" of language—and images heard. A witness-language must be created that makes room for the dead, welcomes them. It proceeds through dislocations, reversions, and imbrications and as such mirrors the shifting definitions of being and belonging.

Michel Feith's reading of Percival Everett's *The Water Cure* focuses on the use of Greek philosophy in its relation to violence, a reflection akin to Wideman's reflexive return on the master-discourses of the Enlightenment. The topic of torture in the novel is the occasion for a meditation on the status of language itself between *Logos* and *Mythos* and on the core tenets of Western culture (i.e. essentialist rationalism). This investigation into the relation, or rather the divorce between words and world, enters in correspondence with Wideman's own pursuits. It also echoes the trauma and the "arrested" time of *Corregidora*'s myth and, bearing on the daughter's rape, places yet again the female body at its

[4] In her dissertation (Montpellier, 2014), Josette Spartacus has uncovered this recurrent image of the refusal/inability to bear children at the heart of eight out of the nine novels of her corpus (Morrison, Kincaid, Danticat).

core. The text probes the notion of "identity" (if fragmented, decomposed, can it still be identity?) and globally "Signifies" on the old masters. The parody is melancholy rather than vengeful. Ultimately, it is the tension between fiction and philosophy that the novel illustrates. Yet it begs the question: where is the cure or rather is there one? Notions of race and ethnicity, which are apparently not foregrounded by the text, are nonetheless submitted to the global re-thinking of the complex inheritance of Western philosophical culture.

The three articles that follow illustrate the postmodern aesthetics of contemporary fiction in their relation to Black History. Monica Michlin's reading of *Stigmata* echoes Croisille's analysis of *Corrigedora* by exploring the postmodern slave narrative of haunting. "Rememory" (Morrison's word) or traumatic memory translates into trauma-writing, as voices rise from the hold of the slave ship. The unspeakable speaks from the wound. The challenge is to bury the dead properly by bringing them back to life and hence end the haunting. Yet as Michlin observes, the ending of *Beloved* in its very ambivalence—"This is not a story to pass on"—underlines the danger of literal entrapment in the past. A reincarnation thriller, the novel operates a rewriting of *Beloved* and *Corrigedora* in an exacerbated palimpsestic mode. It offers a transformation of the fragmentation of narratives that reflects the shattering of trauma into a piecing together of the past. The novel inscribes other media (quilting, painting), remediation, or a change of medium, as the solution. Like Morrison who invokes touching (the body), tactile metaphors conjure the readers' empathy.

The postmodern strain of Colson Whitehead's works (*John Henry Days* [2001] and *Apex Hides the Hurt* [2006]) allows Frédéric Sylvanise to trace the author's questioning of the choice between refusing to inherit and inheriting a past that becomes commodified through the creation of museums and marketable objects. The heroism of the past (John Henry's struggle) is no longer sustainable—myths, legends, become objects in a material culture—while the disillusion of the publicist allows for a reflection on how responsibility vis-à-vis the racial group has changed. As such Whitehead charts the troubling loss of the political import of African American literature that Kenneth Warren (2011) sees as coterminous with its existence. He is also a chronicler of the African American middle-class dilemma in a so-called "postracial" America.

Eliane Elmaleh's analysis of Robert Colescott's painting *George Washington Carver Crossing the Delaware* (1975) offers a way to trace a postmodernist response to inheriting a past of invisibility and violent stereotyping as early as the 70s New Black Aesthetic. Colescott's re-vision

of a "historical" landmark—a comment on the American school of painting of the 19th century—via parody, *signifying*, and downright irreverence questions both the rewriting of African American history (famous yet tokenized individuals) and the permanence of black domesticity (the shoeshine, the cook, the mammy, the hussy). If the past cannot be destroyed, its farcical revision through quotation undoes stereotypical constructions in a Derridean way and uncovers the ideologies at work in representation.

The third section garners articles that deal with Greek-American, Jewish-American, Chinese-American and Mexican-American novels. While they may be thought to distinguish themselves from the African American works of the previous sections, they nonetheless entertain a close relationship to them through their major thematics: the indictment of commodification, the losses inherent in assimilation or integration, and the "tricks" one must play and pull to survive. Nicole Ollier's essay on Eugenides's *Middlesex* analyzes how mythology, biology and metafiction constantly interact. The figure of the hermaphrodite places the question of division (male/female, North/South, East/West) as the source of a permanent dilemma that will only be solved in the deconstruction of either/or through the election of an in-between, the hybridity of a third culture. Heritage may be thought of as the endless repetition that produces doom or the circle that endlessly loops back; the immigrant must also reinvent himself/herself in multiple identities.

Laura Muresan's article on Roth's *The Human Stain* analyzes how passing, a trope of the Harlem Renaissance, is renewed by the writer's treatment. The protagonist Coleman Silk has reinvented a new life for himself as a Jew and is caught at his own game when he is accused of racism. Passing means escaping the past (and the blood), refusing biology and "race." It also pertains to masquerade. As such, it bridges the gap with the stereotypes that Elmaleh analyzes in Colescott's painting and the masks and ruses of the Greek classics invoked in *Middlesex*. The tattoo (a bodily mark) resurfaces echoing the stigmata of Perry's text: what is in the flesh and cannot be erased. Roth's *The Human Stain* explores the illusory freedom of the individual who attempts to think outside of the categories imposed by language and finds himself in an array of camouflages, coverings, and concealments. History finally destroys him. The narrator Nathan Zuckerman undertakes the telling of Silk's tragedy in another twist on identity and authenticity as he himself is haunted by the specter of passing. As Muresan explains, the answer lies in writing itself, even if historical conditions limit possibilities.

Alina Sufaru's analysis of Gish Jen's *Mona in the Promised Land*

(1996) stresses its belonging to the genre of "socially regenerative narratives" through its use of irony and parody. In this novel, humor is both a means of self-deprecation, but also self-empowerment. The daughters of the family, and their friends, instead of being unhyphenated Americans play with at least two ethnic labels. Ethnicity is "invented" as their choices make clear: one of them converts to Judaism while the other plays at being the ultimate cliché of Chinese girlhood. They perform an identity that they either select or that the others impose on them as stereotypes become a means of mediating identities as well as a source of humor. The mask of a borrowed ethnicity reflexively makes the characters understand who they are. Paradoxically it is her Americanness that the second daughter asserts through her Chineseness since the latter identity is filtered through Western eyes. The essay uncovers both the limits of "ethnicity-as-performance" but also the transcendence of the either/or, since identity is *both* consent and descent. The reader becomes a player in this game of hide-and-seek that also points the bitter reality of discrimination.

Diane Sabatier's intervention centers on Sergio Troncoso's novel *From this Wicked Patch of Dust* (2011) which deals with the lives of the Martínez family over a period of 40 years in a realistic vein that shuns textual experimentations. The four children's destinies simultaneously illustrate the myriad ways of negotiating the burden of familial heritage (language, gendered stereotypes): an American education (Harvard), the US army, conversion to Islam and relocation in Iran, flight into Judaism. These characters express "dissidentities"—the discontinued identities of contemporary American lives—as they refuse to be responsible for their parents' legacy, itself in a process of transformation. While they do not erase their culture in their day-to-day lives, they want to introduce adjustments. Although the parents may lament a sense of "unbelonging," the rhizome, zigzag patterns, horizontal bends are the models of these new configurations. Overall, the novel revises the trope of the Mexican-American "border" as transnational, intercultural, inter-religious and multi-linguistic by projecting it towards the future. Heirs to postmodernism, the Martínez children "operate in a pluralistic mode" (Anzaldúa 1987) in keeping with the changing dynamics of globalization.

Kenneth Warren's provocative essay, entitled *What was African American Literature?*, brings a new twist to the question of heritage. According to him, black literature was intimately linked with the Civil Rights struggle from the end of the Civil War onwards, and lost its specific rationale at the end of the Nineteen Sixties. In a sense, when African Americans became "ethnic" subjects like others their literature

became part of the multiethnic literature of the United States, a literature whose main focus is identity. The only problem was that it was not aware of its own demise, and pursued its course in the same track, in the works of Toni Morrison, Caryl Phillips, to whom we could add Gayl Jones, John Edgar Wideman, etc. According to Warren, African American literature had become "heritage" literature, in the antiquarian sense, ceaselessly revisiting its former justifications, in the genre of neo-slave narratives for example. This divorce from the contemporary world is coming to an end under the impetus of a new generation of "post-soul" writers who are closing the era of black exceptionalism.

While there might be some truth in this description of the contemporary evolution of African American literature, recent police killings of young black men like the Ferguson case suggest that there is some "post-haste" in prophesying an immediate jump into the realm of the "post," be it "post-soul" or "post-race." If sociology and history are as much of a determining factor in literary matters as Warren implies, there might still be some place for a specific black literature, just as there might be a place for a Native American literature characterized by a little more than an "ethnic" focus on identity. If literature has its own specific dynamic, the current postmodern emphasis on revisiting the past and its influence on the present may warrant another lease of life to the probing of heritage in minority literatures. Yet, as amply demonstrated by the following essays, ethnic boundaries are more and more fluid, on the model of the Borderlands, or *Frontera*, described by Gloria Anzaldúa, which are not mere dividing lines, but dynamic spaces of encounters and hybridity. "A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition" (1987: 3). To all probabilities, the territory ahead for minority American literatures will shift from placement under the sign of the "New Frontier," to that of the "New *Frontera.*"

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PART I.

INHERITING THE PAST IN AFRICAN AMERICAN FICTION

CHAPTER I

DE LA TRANSMISSION DU TRAUMATISME AU TRAUMATISME DE LA TRANSMISSION : LA DICTATURE DE L'HÉRITAGE DANS *CORREGIDORA*

VALERIE CROISILLE
UNIVERSITÉ DE LIMOGES

Corregidora, premier roman de Gayl Jones[1], s'inscrit dans la tradition des néo-récits d'esclaves, qui témoignent du poids insupportable de l'héritage ancestral sur des personnages censés évoluer dans la société américaine contemporaine. Parce que le passé traumatique[2] de l'esclavage

[1] L'édition utilisée est : Gayl Jones, *Corregidora*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1987. [C]. Artiste intimement impliquée dans ses œuvres, il semblerait que Jones ait été inspirée par les récits de ses propres ancêtres maternelles.

[2] Selon Freud, le traumatisme (du grec « trauma », la « blessure ») survient à la suite d'un « événement vécu qui, en l'espace de peu de temps, apporte dans la vie psychique un tel surcroît d'excitation que sa suppression ou son assimilation par les voies normales devient une tâche impossible ce qui a pour effet des troubles durables dans l'utilisation de l'énergie » (Freud 1998: 26). Cet événement ouvre alors une « brèche » dans le « pare-excitations », provoquant chez le sujet un défaut de « liquidation » de l'événement douloureux : « Devient traumatisme psychique toute impression dont la liquidation par travail mental associatif ou réaction motrice offre des difficultés au système nerveux. » (Freud 1998: 28). Il se caractérise généralement par son caractère violent et soudain, *une mise en échec des « mécanismes de défense habituellement efficaces », « produi[sant] le plus souvent un état de sidération et entraîn[ant] à plus ou moins long terme une désorganisation dans la vie psychique »* (De Mijolla 2002: 64). Nous verrons dans le présent article à quel point le traumatisme est indissociable de la notion de mémoire : comme l'a rapidement pressenti Freud, dès son étude sur les cas

n'a pas été assimilé par les générations précédentes et ricoche de mère en fille, il revient désormais à Ursa Corregidora, jeune chanteuse de blues du Kentucky et légataire sacrifiée de la mémoire de ses ancêtres maternelles, d'enfanter une fille pour en faire à son tour l'héritière d'une histoire familiale hantée par l'esclavage, le viol et l'inceste. En effet, la loi édictée, génération après génération, par les femmes de la famille, impose à chacune d'entre elles de donner vie à une petite fille pour lui transmettre la lourde histoire des anciennes esclaves de Corregidora, planteur brésilien d'origine portugaise. Or, alors que l'héritage se perpétuait ainsi depuis plusieurs décennies, enfermé dans le cercle vicieux d'un souvenir jamais assimilé infectant chaque nouvelle génération, la jeune mariée Ursa devient la proie de la violence jalouse de son époux Mutt, qui refuse qu'elle continue de chanter le blues dans les cabarets : un soir d'ivresse, celui-ci la précipite dans l'escalier. Blessée, elle doit subir une ablation de l'utérus, alors qu'elle est secrètement enceinte d'un mois. La jeune femme se trouve donc dépourvue de ce qui donnait un sens à sa vie depuis l'enfance : devenir mère pour pouvoir transmettre l'histoire des femmes Corregidora. La loi régissant l'héritage familial devenant alors caduque, Ursa, par ce nouveau traumatisme qui l'affecte dans sa propre chair, est amenée à prendre à bras le corps cette histoire familiale qu'elle entend depuis sa naissance.

Après avoir montré que l'histoire des Corregidora fonctionne comme un mythe « fondateur » modelé par les aïeules d'Ursa et qui conditionne chaque génération de femmes, mon analyse tentera de démontrer que la transmission forcée du traumatisme familial, et ses modalités imposées de façon systématique par la lignée matriarcale, génèrent de mère en fille un traumatisme reproduit à l'infini. De la transmission du traumatisme au traumatisme de la transmission, la dictature de l'héritage Corregidora condamne pour l'éternité leurs descendantes à être prisonnières d'un cercle infernal de répétition du trauma originel. Ce n'est que quand Ursa reprendra le fil d'une histoire laissée en suspens à la génération de sa mère, pour en combler les béances, voire les mensonges, qu'elle pourra se libérer et inventer d'autres modes de transmission de la mémoire, qui ne passeraient plus par l'instrumentalisation du corps féminin. Tandis que la lignée Corregidora est vouée inexorablement à s'éteindre en raison de la stérilité accidentelle d'Ursa, le patrimoine d'histoires familiales deviendra néanmoins mémoire collective au travers des morceaux de blues qu'elle

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d'hystérie, qui, comme il le découvrira, naissent d'un traumatisme, « c'est de réminiscences surtout que souffre l'hystérique » (Freud 1914: 5).

écrit et interprète[3]. Du simple statut d'objet reproducteur auquel elle était réduite, Ursa devient sujet, parlant, chantant, pensant, et se réappropriant son histoire qu'elle régénère.

L'héritage Corregidora : un mythe traumatisant

Du grec « *muthos* », qui désigne une « fable », le mythe est une histoire enracinée au cœur d'une culture, relatant des événements extraordinaires, traitant de questions profondes telles que le bien et le mal, et servant de repère ou de modèle aux générations futures. « [G]erme d'un monde » (Bachelard 1968: 29) sur lequel la lignée repose, il « est censé exprimer la *vérité absolue*, parce qu'il raconte une *histoire sacrée*, c'est-à-dire une révolution trans-humaine qui a lieu à l'aube du grand temps, dans le temps sacré des commencements » (Eliade 2002: 21). La saga familiale contée dans le roman est une histoire sinon sacrée, du moins sacralisée, constituant pour la famille maudite d'Ursa un véritable mythe des origines. La genèse des Corregidora[4], c'est l'histoire de ce planteur portugais du

[3] On pourrait reprendre la très sombre définition du *blues* donnée par James Baldwin, qui résonne avec une grande justesse dans le roman de Jones, dont l'intrigue est de façon quasi systématique noircie par de perpétuels relents de désespoir, de violence, de souvenirs sordides et d'inquiétantes dérives vers la folie : « I am talking about what happens to you if, having barely escaped suicide, death or madness, or yourself, you watch your children growing up and no matter what you do, no matter what you do, you are powerless, you are really powerless, against forces of the world that is out to tell your child that he has no right to be alive. » (Baldwin 2011: 73). Pour Baldwin, la grâce de la musique *blues* réside dans sa faculté à transcender la détresse par le recours à ce qu'il nomme, dans un bel oxymore, un « détachement passionné. » (Baldwin 2011: 73).

[4] Il est intéressant de constater le paradoxe qui se joue dans l'attachement extrême d'Ursa à son patronyme « Corregidora » : la jeune femme se cramponne au nom de l'ancêtre bourreau, refusant de prendre celui de ses deux époux, comme si seul ce nom-là pouvait la rattacher à une identité familiale, fût-elle monstrueuse. On pense à l'histoire des Noirs américains, pris entre le désir d'abandonner le nom du maître au lendemain de l'Emancipation, et la crainte de ne pas retrouver les leurs s'ils changent effectivement de nom. Par ailleurs, la consonance féminine du nom du bourreau, Corregidora, interpelle le lecteur. Historiquement, le « corregidor » était le fonctionnaire de la couronne d'Espagne, maire ou gouverneur, et en tant que tel, le terme devient dans les Amériques synonyme d'oppression. Etymologiquement, il est celui qui donne la loi, qui édicte la règle. La terminaison féminine du nom de famille d'Ursa laisse, d'une part, envisager un retournement des forces et une prise de pouvoir féminine : en effet, ce sont les femmes Corregidora qui « font », voire « refont » l'histoire, et par là-même, font symboliquement la loi ; d'autre part, elle insiste sur la part sombre de ces femmes,

même nom, figure maléfique du mythe familial qui, s'installant au Brésil au XIX[e] siècle, se fait esclavagiste et proxénète. La malédiction Corregidora s'enracine dans un viol, acte criminel fondateur plus tard complété par la perpétration du tabou archétypal qu'est l'inceste[5]. Des viols répétés de l'arrière-grand-mère d'Ursa, naît une petite fille qui, violée à son tour par son père, met au monde la mère d'Ursa, probablement elle aussi victime d'actes incestueux. Au moment de l'émancipation, tous les documents officiels attestant des activités de Corregidora sont brûlés, d'où la nécessité pour ses victimes de laisser une trace de l'exploitation sexuelle qu'elles ont subie, trace qui ne survit plus que par leur témoignage. Un mode de vie immuable s'est ainsi bâti sur les fondations de ce mythe, la transmission de l'histoire familiale devenant un rituel, qui ne se limite pas à la symbolique d'une histoire narrée, mais se concrétise dans cet acte d'enfantement dont doit s'acquitter chaque femme de la famille.

Comme les mythes, cette histoire s'est figée. En passant du statut de réalité vécue à celui d'*artefact*, d'histoire contée et modelée par des relais narratifs trop nombreux, le passé des aïeules d'Ursa[6] a progressivement

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qui peuvent aussi se révéler de redoutables tyrans, mettant à mal l'équilibre de leurs descendantes. Le patronyme détesté se transmue au fil des générations pour devenir un matronyme revendiqué.

[5] Le nombre élevé d'actes transgressifs qui émaillent le roman renforce encore la dimension mythique de l'histoire des Corregidora. Le mythe, en effet, se construit souvent sur la transgression des tabous qui sont au cœur du récit de Jones : le viol, l'inceste, ou l'émasculation. Comme les grandes mythologies grecques qui témoignent des grands chaos de la Création, le mythe conté par les aïeules d'Ursa s'enracine sur les dysfonctionnements originels qui ont présidé à la naissance de la dynastie féminine des Corregidora.

[6] Le nom de la protagoniste appelle à bien des interprétations possibles. D'abord, « Ursa » renvoie à la Grande Ourse et la Petite Ourse (« Ursa Major » et « Ursa Minor ») ; or, la traduction d'« ourse », le substantif « bear » en anglais, est l'homonyme du verbe « bear », qui signifie « porter », suggérant ainsi en filigrane la mission qui a été allouée à la jeune femme : porter des enfants, du moins une fille. Mais ce prénom rappelle aussi diverses variantes du mythe grec de la Grande Ourse et la Petite Ourse. Dans l'une des versions du mythe, c'est la femme de Zeus, Héra, qui voulut se venger de la relation de son époux avec la nymphe Callisto : elle la changea alors en Grande Ourse, transformant aussi son fils Arcas en Petite Ourse, et demanda à l'Océan de lui rendre justice : celui-ci les condamna alors à tourner pour l'éternité autour du pôle Nord. Ce mythe fait donc explicitement référence à la notion de châtiment éternel, comme dans Corregidora où les femmes comme Ursa sont condamnées à enfanter et transmettre leur histoire, enfermées pour toujours dans le cercle vicieux d'une mémoire pathogène. Dans une autre version du mythe, le fils de Callisto et Zeus, Arcas, chassant dans

perdu de son aspect dynamique et vivant : répétée à l'envi et à l'identique dans un tourbillon obsédant, l'histoire s'est sclérosée, pétrifiée dans la stase du mythe, de la légende familiale, immuable, fixée pour l'éternité. Elle se présente sous un jour simplifié et manichéen, où le mal s'incarne dans la figure d'ogre sexuel de Corregidora, qui dévore symboliquement les jeunes femmes fragiles que furent Great Gram et Gram. Parce que la mémoire déforme les faits, et plus encore la mémoire traumatique[7], l'histoire familiale est devenue le produit de la douleur subjective des femmes Corregidora, de la perception de leur drame, de son intériorisation, puis de son extériorisation. Paradoxalement, à trop vouloir en imprégner leur descendance, les aïeules ont fait de leur histoire dans leur chair un conte déshumanisé, impersonnel car figé dans un moule inaltérable et finissant par être dénué d'affect, tel un récit historique. Il n'y a dans la construction et la perpétuation de cette histoire nulle influence dialogique : aucune contribution personnelle n'est tolérée, la légende familiale doit être appropriée telle quelle par Ursa et sa mère, sans pouvoir y instiller la moindre subjectivité, s'y investir réellement en tant que sujet.

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la forêt, rencontra sa mère et, ne la reconnaissant pas, tenta de la tuer, avant que son père ne transforme sa bien-aimée et leur fils en Grande Ourse et Petite Ourse ; dans le roman, le mythe se trouve inversé, puisque ce sont les aïeules qui tuent symboliquement leur progéniture. Dans une troisième version, Zeus engrossa la nymphe vierge Callisto, à l'insu de la jeune fille ; quand sa grossesse fut visible, la déesse Artémis transforma la nymphe Callisto en ourse avant que celle-ci n'accouche de l'enfant de Zeus, et, avec d'autres nymphes, la poursuivit pour la dévorer. Sa carcasse fut ramassée par Zeus, qui l'exila en la plaçant dans le ciel, où elle donna naissance à Arcas, qui ne cessa de la suivre. La souillure imposée à une vierge, l'anéantissement de la victime qui s'ensuit, et la condamnation à être éternellement poursuivi par la conséquence de l'acte traumatique font clairement écho à l'histoire des Corregidora, esclaves violées par leur maître et à jamais pourchassées par le souvenir de leur histoire (un mythe indien va aussi dans le sens de la poursuite, la Grande Ourse étant un cervidé en proie à une chasse cosmique, contraint de se transformer dans le ciel en constellation). Enfin, selon un mythe arabe, trois filles tirent depuis l'éternité dans le ciel le cercueil de leur père (créant un rectangle qui forme la constellation), assassiné par la Petite Ourse ; la délivrance ne viendra que le jour où elles parviendront à capturer le meurtrier : c'est donc la progéniture qui est en l'occurrence chargée de venger l'aïeul lésé, tout comme dans *Corregidora*, où chaque fille est censée prendre le fardeau de la mémoire pour que le crime dont les ascendantes ont été victimes ne soit jamais oublié.

[7] Comme le note Cathy Caruth, se référant plus particulièrement à la tragédie du peuple juif, « historical memory […] is always a matter of distortion, a filtering of the original event through the fictions of traumatic repression » (Caruth 1996a: 15).

Ceci est rendu d'autant plus explicite par la confusion des voix dans le texte, et plus particulièrement par le phénomène de quasi hantise subie par la mère d'Ursa lorsque celle-ci lui raconte enfin l'histoire de son mariage avec son père : « Mama kept talking until it wasn't her that was talking, but Great Gram. I stared at her because she wasn't Mama now, she was Great Gram talking. » (C 124)[8]. La vampirisation de l'arrière-grand-mère sur ces descendantes ne saurait être plus explicite.

Ursa, endoctrinée comme sa mère par la « geste » des Corregidora, est tenue prisonnière du mythe familial : à la captivité de l'esclavage a succédé la captivité de l'héritage imposé. « I'd go to school and come back and *be told.* » (C 101), avoue ainsi Ursa, employant une forme passive qui en dit long sur son degré d'embrigadement. Ce récit fantasmé, répété de génération en génération à la virgule près, ne tolère aucune remise en cause : ainsi la petite Ursa, âgée de cinq ans, comprend-elle très vite que l'histoire familiale est univoque, monologique et intouchable:

> "You telling the truth, Great Gram?"
> She slapped me.
> "When I'm telling you something don't you ever ask if I'm lying. Because they didn't want to leave no evidence of what they done—so it couldn't be held against them. And I'm leaving evidence." (C 14)

C'est donc par une violence renouvelée par les anciennes victimes de Corregidora que se transmet l'épique saga familiale, dans une pédagogie de la gifle[9] qui en renforce encore la dimension mythique : il s'agit bien

[8] Le passage peut rappeler plusieurs scènes du roman *Stigmata*, de Phyllis Alesia Perry. Dans ce néo-récit d'esclave, les voix des femmes de diverses époques s'entremêlent, réunissant au-delà des limites imposées par les lois terrestres les défuntes et leurs descendantes. Ainsi, par-delà la mort, l'arrière-arrière-grand-mère de Lizzie (Ayo, Africaine arrachée à son continent pour être vendue comme esclave au Nouveau Monde), et sa grand-tante (Grace, qui a abandonné sa famille dans l'espoir de mettre fin au phénomène de possession dont elle était victime), retrouvent-elles leur voix en hantant la jeune fille, « empruntant » physiquement sa bouche pour transmettre leur histoire traumatique. Possession et réincarnation sont également au centre de la préquelle, *Sunday in June*, qui se focalise sur la vie de trois sœurs, grand-mère et grands-tantes de Lizzie. Comme dans *Corregidora*, le corps sert de véhicule à la mémoire de l'esclavage, qui, des décennies après l'Emancipation, n'en finit toujours pas de hanter le descendant d'esclave.

[9] Dans *Beloved*, Sethe donne aussi une gifle à sa fille Denver, lorsque cette dernière réclame d'avoir la même marque que sa mère sous la poitrine :

> [Sethe] opened up her dress front and lifted her breast and pointed under it. Right on her rib was a circle and a cross burnt right in the skin. She said, 'This is your ma'am. This,' and she pointed. 'I am the only one who got

d'une vérité qui se veut « absolue », conformément à la définition du mythe proposée par Eliade. En assénant celle-ci à son arrière-petite-fille, la vieille femme prend symboliquement possession d'elle, lui créant artificiellement et par la force une mémoire qui n'est pas la sienne. Cette appropriation brutale de la psyché d'Ursa s'apparente aux viols que Great Gram elle-même a subis. En outre, les gestes accomplis machinalement par la vieille femme sur la petite fille, assise sur ses genoux pour écouter l'histoire qui lui est une fois de plus contée, est un rappel explicite de l'acte sexuel, comme si Great Gram revivait le viol, en en devenant cette fois l'auteur :

> She told the same story over and over again. She had her hands around my waist, and I had my back to her. While she talked, I'd stare down at her hands. She would fold and unfold them. She didn't need her hands around me to keep me in her lap, and sometimes I'd see the sweat in her palms. (C 11)

À son tour, c'est l'arrière-grand-mère qui, dans un phénomène de transfert, s'approprie le corps de la fillette, littéralement « pétrie » de l'histoire de son aïeule[10]. Au vu de l'effet traumatisant de la transmission du mythe familial, l'entité maléfique représentée initialement par

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> this mark now. The rest dead. If something happens to me and you can't tell me by my face, you can know me by this mark.' Scared me so. All I could think of was how important this was and how I needed to have something important to say back, but I couldn't think of anything so I just said what I thought. 'Yes, Ma'am,' I said. 'But how will you know me? How will you know me? Mark me, too,' I said. 'Mark the mark on me too.' Sethe chuckled.
> "Did she?" asked Denver.
> "She slapped my face." (B 26-28)

Dans ce passage, la peau scarifiée de Sethe est un marqueur physique de la mémoire de l'esclavage, trait d'union de toute une communauté dont elle est la seule survivante. Mais, contrairement aux aïeules d'Ursa dans *Corregidora*, Sethe cherche à protéger son enfant, et à établir clairement une distinction entre elle, qui a passé une grande partie de sa vie dans l'esclave, et sa fille qui est libre : la cicatrice est précisément ce qui permet de distinguer l'histoire des deux femmes, et son absence sur le corps de Denver signe sa liberté. Au contraire, dans le roman de Jones, la gifle sert à renforcer en Ursa la mémoire de l'histoire familiale, quelque sclérosante fût-elle.

[10] Parce qu'il ne connaît de l'histoire que la version donnée par les aïeules, le lecteur se trouve lui aussi objet de manipulation, condamné à servir – tout comme Ursa et sa mère – de réceptacle à la propagande familiale.

Corregidora semble migrer pour se loger dans l'histoire même, comme si c'était le récit, la narration faite par l'arrière-grand-mère, qui venait étendre ses bras de pieuvre autour d'Ursa pour l'enfermer, générer en elle (comme en sa mère) des troubles pathologiques dans sa vie psychique et affective. D'ailleurs, Tadpole, patron et futur mari de l'héroïne, ne s'y trompe pas : lorsqu'il lui demande ce qu'elle désire, l'ancienne petite fille endoctrinée devenue femme violentée réplique : « What all us Corregidora women want. Have been taught to want. To make generations. » (C 22) ; la réaction de Tad fuse alors dans un éclair de bon sens : « Procreation. That could also be a slave-breeder's way of thinking. » (C 22). Les victimes sont, indubitablement, devenues les bourreaux de leur propre descendance.

La répétition du trauma : quand la narration du trauma en crée un autre

À la suite des abus sexuels perpétrés par Corregidora, c'est une nouvelle appropriation du corps féminin, un nouveau vol, voire viol, de ce corps, en tout cas un asservissement masqué, que doit subir chaque descendante de la famille. En ne pouvant se définir autrement que comme simple génitrice, la femme perd de son humanité dans un processus comparable à celui que ses ancêtres esclaves ont connu. Or, le v(i)ol du corps féminin n'est plus le fait direct du maître blanc sadique, mais est symboliquement perpétré par des femmes traumatisées par la violence que leur propre corps a subie, dans un transfert qui condamne leur progéniture féminine à une éternelle réplique de leur propre souffrance. Les femmes Corregidora sont, aujourd'hui comme hier, dépossédées de leurs propres corps, devenus biens collectifs, propriétés du clan. Le corps est ainsi une construction née de ce passé, une archive vivante, censée porter la trace de la tragédie qui a monopolisé tout l'espace familial et pris en otage Ursa et Irene. Elles sont littéralement les produits d'une histoire d'oppression de la femme noire, non seulement parce qu'elles sont issues d'une série de viols et d'incestes, mais aussi parce que la narration qui leur a été imposée compulsivement depuis l'enfance les a conditionnées et programmées à devenir ce qu'elles sont. Sa vie durant, Ursa a baigné dans l'obsession des crimes commis par son ancêtre portugais, Corregidora, et a fini par s'y noyer, emportée dans les flots tumultueux d'un drame qui la dépasse : le roman explore ce processus de mort symbolique de l'héroïne, et laisse entrevoir son hypothétique résurrection.

De même que les identités de femmes de Great Gram et Gram ont été mises à mal, Ursa et sa mère, réduites au statut asservissant de simples