

SLAVERY AND THE AFRICAN IMAGINATION

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IFEOMA KIDDEO NWANKWO, *Black Cosmopolitanism: Racial Consciousness and Transnational Identity in the Nineteenth-Century Americas*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005, 296 pages, ISBN: 0-8122-3878-8, Cloth, \$59.95.

ADELEKE ADEKO, *The Slave's Rebellion: Literature, History, Orature*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2005, 203 pages, ISBN: 0-253-34596-0, Cloth, \$50.00, ISBN: 0-253-21777-6, Paper, \$21.95.

One of the most interesting developments in recent years in the field of African American studies has been the expansion of its horizons beyond the North American theater of Black life and expression that has for so long been featured as its principal focus, and often, in many academic departments, as the only one. Yet, as the early scholarship which serves as the foundation for the field demonstrated, the Black experience in the New World has always presented a continental dimension that provides the concrete grounding for the historical perspective from which that experience must be viewed and understood. This was the methodological premise underlying the work of scholars such as Melville Herskovits (1941) and Roger Bastide (1967), who ranged throughout the Black world in quest of the lived connections that gave an original African imprint to the Black experience, while providing theoretical validity to the very concept of a *Black world*. In the works of such scholars, the consciousness of a continuum that connects Africa to the Black experience in the New World underlies the effort to comprehend the Black diaspora itself in its manifold wholeness.

There is a sense in which recent developments in African American studies represent a return to this earlier model, one which reflects a sense of the historical contours mapped out by the Atlantic slave trade itself and which has been registered in studies such as Robert Edgar Conrad's *World of Sorrow: The African Slave Trade to Brazil* (1986), and especially in the work of Herbert Klein (1986) and Philip Curtin (1967). These scholars conceived their works within an Atlantic frame of reference, a

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category in which Joseph Inikori's *Africans and the Industrial Revolution in England* (2002) must now be included. These works have lent impetus to the movement towards a reintegration of African American Studies into a general diaspora perspective defined by a fundamental Atlantic experience, a trend of which J. Lorand Matory's *Black Atlantic Religion* (2005), with its deliberate echo of Paul Gilroy's work, may be said to be the latest manifestation.¹ One might remark too that this trend has further provoked an increased attention to the Indian Ocean as a defining area of African and Black diaspora experience, an area that, given the developing interest it has attracted, is likely with time to challenge and modify the Atlantic paradigm (Larson 2006).

Ifeoma Nwankwo's *Black Cosmopolitanism* (2005) and Adeleke Adeeko's *The Slave's Rebellion* (2005) exemplify the extension and redefinition of the field of African American studies, betokened by the developments evoked above, leading to its reconfiguration as "Africana studies" and resulting in the broad diaspora emphasis that the field now assumes. Both works testify to the increasing scholarly attention to the interconnections between the different areas of Black experience that this new scholarly orientation has promoted.

Nwankwo's work is marked by a specific concern to bring the literary expression and intellectual formulation of Black experience in the Caribbean and Latin America into significant relation with similar movements among Blacks in North America. She cites the work of scholars like Paul Gilroy, Brent Edwards, and Carol Boyce Davies, who she claims have pointed her in the direction that her own research has taken. At the same time, one senses in her book an effort to transcend these scholars and to chart a new course, one which accords to the Spanish-speaking areas of the Caribbean and Latin America the prominence they deserve in scholarship devoted to the Black experience. Nwankwo thus draws attention anew to the crucial importance of these areas, and the multiple linkages they either determine or presuppose, for the elaboration of Black discourse in its proper continental perspective across the Americas. As she says, her juxtaposition of readings from various spheres of the Black experience "is intended to illustrate the productive possibilities inherent in having these spheres intersect." It is this project that finds impressive elaboration in *Black Cosmopolitanism* and gives meaning to the book's title.

Nwankwo is well served by the extensive range of her expertise. While literary studies and criticism can be said to comprise the essential disciplinary grounding of her work, intellectual history also provides an important perspective for her exploration of the discourse of Black figures concerned with the racial experience as manifested during the nineteenth century in both the United States and Latin America. Here the study is marked by an original approach which consists in the use of the historic slave revolt in Saint Domingue, which culminated in the birth of Haiti in 1804, as a leading theme and the sounding board, as it were, for the varied responses that she brings to light, from the experiences of Black subjects and White apologists of slavery reaching to the lived realities of the institution throughout the Black diaspora in both North America and the Caribbean. This approach gives to her work a central focus that enables her to construct a coherent view of the quest for emancipation and a coherent sense of identity all through this vast area of Black life and consciousness.

Her discussion of the work of the Cuban poet Plácido provides an entry into her project by seeking to place his poetry in its specific historical context, bound up as this work was with the vicissitudes of a life devoted to the twin revolutionary causes of Cuban nationalism and Black emancipation, all at a moment when the island itself was the object of American expansionist ambition. In a complementary chapter, Nwankwo offers an assessment of Plácido's career and fate as martyr of the antislavery movement through the prism of Delaney's novel *Blake, or The Huts of America* (1970)

in which Plácido is represented as the lyrical voice of a gathering spirit of revolt embodied by Blake, Delaney's eponymous hero. The two images we are offered of Plácido, first, as a historical figure reconstructed through his actual writings and, second, as a character in Delaney's fiction, coalesce to establish the significance of his poetry as part of a dissident discourse that derives its primary impulse from the fundamental radicalism of the age but is also sustained on a note of racial affirmation across the linguistic and cultural boundaries of the total Black experience. The double reading that Nwankwo offers of Plácido provides an especially vivid sense of the context to which his work is related. This is a welcome feature of Nwankwo's study, especially given the present climate of literary studies, which is dominated by abstract theorizing. It is refreshing to encounter a mode of interpretation that takes account of the concrete experience from which literary expression proceeds.

The discussion of Delaney's *Blake* would seem to afford an opportunity to examine his African vision as a distinctive component of his cosmopolitanism, which finds expression in the later episodes of the novel. However, Nwankwo does not pursue the ideological and symbolic value with which Delaney invests his fictional character, especially as this has to do with what Robert Levine has identified as a proto-pan-Africanism implicit in his emigrationist activities (Levine 1997, pp. 176–223; Carr 2002, pp. 25–67). Levine's study juxtaposes the contrasting personalities of Martin Delaney and Frederick Douglass, and their disagreement concerning the possible meaning of the African homeland for the Black subject in the diaspora. This observation prompts a consideration of the centrality of Frederick Douglass to Nwankwo's study, her painstaking account of the ambiguities inherent in his quest, as an emancipated Black consciousness, for a self-apprehension anchored in an unhindered claim to full participation in the American polity and of the firm location within the social and cultural spheres of action it may be said to open up for individuals of his endowments and disposition. What emerges from Nwankwo's chapter is the intensity of the drama of identity that Douglass was obliged to live through. As the chapter demonstrates, despite his strongly articulated position regarding the need to embrace the promise of America, Douglass was continually confronted with what seemed the impossibility of being both Black and American. Thus, to the very end of his life, he lived the implacable logic that informs his celebrated address "The Fourth of July": the incompatibility between the American ideal as articulated in the founding documents of the nation—an ideal that Douglass had passionately taken to heart—and the actualities of the Black situation, with all the objective dilemma of conflicting loyalties it entailed and the inward stresses it generated.

Adeleke Adeeko's *The Slave's Rebellion* plumbs the depths of this situation in its exploration of the turbulence the slave condition determines within the Black consciousness. Despite their different premises, Adeeko's study complements Nwankwo's work admirably by reorganizing the theme of "cosmopolitanism" which serves as the keynote of the latter. For both scholars, a major consideration is an awareness of the wide expanse of the Black experience on both sides of the Atlantic. It is pertinent in this regard to consider an earlier publication by Adeeko, "Négritude, Afrocentrism, and the Black Atlantic," which, in its conjoining of the fate of the Black communities in the New World to the African experience, bears a direct relation to the theme of *The Slave's Rebellion*. Adeeko begins his article recalling the debates provoked by Senghor's exposition of *négritude* at the historic conference of Black writers and artists held in Paris in 1956. Adeeko's interpretation of Senghor's postulation of a collective Black personality as a form of "Black existential ontology" reduces Senghor's concept to an abstract essentialism, with hardly a relation to the facts of African experience and especially lacking, as Richard Wright was to object,

relevance for the Black American. Adeeko sees in Wright's objections to Senghor's theory the antecedents of Paul Gilroy's transnationalism, with its vehement rejection of a Black affirmation grounded in the recognition of a cultural connection from Africa to the Black diaspora. At the same time, Adeeko discerns in Gilroy a lurking complicity with global capitalism, to which he opposes a positive appraisal of Molefi Asante's *Afrocentrism*, which seems to him to mobilize the imaginative resources of an expressive mode that binds the Black diaspora to Africa in an active way.

It is this identification with Asante's *Afrocentrism* that leads Adeeko to posit a commonality that provides the conceptual thread linking Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, based on the figure of the *ogbanje*, which, he avers, functions as the organizing trope of both novels. But it is doubtful that the figure of the *ogbanje* can be interpreted as a substantial reference for either writer. In the case of Achebe, his ironic distance to the structures of belief in indigenous Igbo culture, evident throughout the novel, precludes an identification of the writer with the representations of this culture in the novel. And, as regards Morrison, her investment in the *ogbanje* figure is never established beyond its function as a narrative device that lends imaginative depth and formal coherence to the "magic realism" of her tale. Adeeko's thesis thus strains visibly at the seams. Nonetheless, his article is important not only as a major contribution to current debates in Africa and the Black diaspora regarding questions of cultural identity and agency—debates that also run like an undercurrent through Nwankwo's *Black Cosmopolitanism*—but also as a preliminary sounding of the imaginative ground that Adeeko himself explores more extensively in *The Slave's Rebellion*.

The book itself is remarkable for its range of references. In the first place, it marks a striking departure from conventional scholarship on Black literature by drawing attention away from the narratives of slave experience as embodied in the classic texts of the genre as it evolved in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, in order to focus on the other tradition of Black writing in which slave revolts have been celebrated, a tradition whose importance in the diaspora context Adeeko is at pains to stress. Secondly, it links this body of literature to specific indications of the way in which, in the African—specifically Yoruba—imaginary, slavery, both as a social institution and as a moral condition, has profoundly marked the collective consciousness on the African continent itself, despite the silences that have surrounded the subject.

The opening chapter, "Hegel's Burden," sets out the theoretical framework of the study. After a brief section on Paul Gilroy, which recalls some of the observations on his concept of the "Black Atlantic" already touched upon above, and on Achille Mbembe, whose "Necropolitics" serves to anchor some of his arguments concerning the "social death" that Orlando Patterson (who is referred to) has identified as the essential condition of the slave, Adeeko proceeds to an exposition of Hegel's celebrated excursus (in his *Phenomenology*) on the master/slave relationship. Like most previous commentators on Hegel, Adeeko privileges what one might call the adversarial, agonistic aspect of his philosophy, the rigid antinomies that he seems to set up, rather than the dialectical account that Hegel himself provides of the confrontation between master and slave, which leads to a reversal of situations in which the slave comes to affirm his will against his master.² Indeed, this latter reading, which casts Hegel's philosophy in a progressive light, is perfectly in consonance with Adeeko's emphasis on the emancipatory significance of the African American, Caribbean, and African texts he discusses. These range from C. L. R. James's classic account of the Haitian revolution in *The Black Jacobins*, to Charles Chesnutt's *The Marrow of Tradition* and Arna Bontemps's *Black Thunder*, works of fiction constructed around the inspiring figure of a Black rebel hero.

It is particularly in his analysis of Martin Delaney's *Blake*—which establishes an interesting convergence between his study and Nwankwo's—that Adeeko brings out most clearly the affirmative thrust of the slave's rebellion as projected in these texts. Adeeko stresses the radicalism of the novel, which imparts to it a force of vision that makes up for the rambling quality of the narrative. Here again, it would have been useful to place the radicalism of the work in the wider context of Delaney's emigrationist campaign, which accounts not only for the broad canvas of the narrative but also for its utopian dimension. These two aspects of the novel are rightly noted in Eric Sundquist's observation that Delaney "connects the freedom of American slaves with Black aspirations throughout the New World" (Sundquist 2006, p. 217), a feature of all his work which, in another observation quoted by Adeeko, the same Sundquist interprets as an essential component of Delaney's "vision of a modern black state that unites the splintered aspirations of the peoples of the African diaspora."

It is important to note, however, that *Blake* represents for Adeeko the quintessential text of the slave's rebellion, with a political message of immediate import for its time and place. It is thus possible to consider Delaney's novel an important precedent for the imaginative staging of Black revolt in the fiction that Adeeko examines in his study, as indeed for W. E. B. Du Bois's *Dark Princess* (1995), which unfortunately Adeeko does not discuss. Although its grave disabilities (from an artistic point of view) have debarred it from serious consideration, Du Bois's work offers interest as a fictional projection of the insurrectionary dream and utopian impulse that together mark the imaginative response to the depressed condition of Black people in America.

The last two chapters of Adeeko's study are devoted to an examination of Yoruba texts and offer a different kind of interest: an excavation, so to speak, of the spaces of articulation within both the oral tradition and the new literate convention in Yoruba expression related to the theme of slavery. Adeeko has earned a well-deserved reputation for the insights contained in his essay "Oral Poetry and Hegemony," in which he unravels the extensive ideological implications of the Yoruba praise poem, *oriki*. The essay is folded into his book as a reflection upon the centrality of slavery as a determining social practice with deep cultural resonances within the indigenous Yoruba social and political system. Adeeko argues that, while the oral tradition registers the traumatic effect of the slave trade, scholars have been slow to recognize its lasting imprint on the collective imaginary and sensibility. It is this intuition of a discreet but pervasive informing presence in the collective memory that he seeks to demonstrate in the final section of his book, which is devoted to two classics of modern Yoruba literature, Adebayo Faleti's *Omo Olokun Esin* and Akin Isola's *Efunsetan Aniwura*, both of which serve to confirm Adeeko's intimation of the peculiar resonances of the theme of slavery in Yoruba culture. These chapters, devoted to an African/Yoruba subconscious permeated by the imprint of slavery, demonstrate the depth of understanding that Adeeko brings to his examination of slavery both as a historical fact and, especially, as a significant reference of the African imagination, as this finds expression both on the ancestral continent and in the Black diaspora.

The breadth and force of scholarship displayed in the two books by Ifeoma Nwankwo and Adeleke Adeeko reviewed here confirm the pertinence and value of the direction in which Africana studies as a discipline has become firmly engaged, impelled as it is by the necessity to embrace the Black experience in its full historical and geographical scope.

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NOTES

1. As has often been observed, despite its title, the range of Gilroy's work is severely limited, confined as it is largely to the North American frame of reference, with some peripheral treatment of Black Britain as supplementary support for his thesis of an emergent Black modernity. Apart from the fact that Africa enters not at all within his field of vision, Gilroy pays scant attention to the non-English-speaking Black world to which his concept necessarily refers, displaying in this respect a curious and disabling lack of historical perspective. Bernard Bailyn offers a more comprehensive coverage of the same area in his recent essay, *Atlantic History* (2005).
2. The interpretation suggested by these remarks is entailed by the very terms of Hegel's philosophy, the "dialectical restlessness" that he discerns in the world, and our apprehension of its processes, in which entities are constantly related to their opposites and categories are experienced as "passing" from one state into another (1967, pp. 156–157, passim, p. 248). For a reappraisal of Hegel in this progressive light, see Tzevan Todorov (1996) and Susan Buck Morss (2000).

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