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Review of The British Slave Trade and Public Memory

Babacar Mbaye

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Traces 3: Impacts of Modernities. Edited by Thomas Lamarre and Kang Nae-Hui (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2004), 308 pp. $49.50 cloth; $24.95 paper.

Impacts of Modernities is a successful attempt at producing research across the boundaries of fields of knowledge and cultures. While on a thematic level the broad unifying element is a focus on the modalities through which socio-economic modernization and cultural modernity have unfurled in East Asia, the breadth and diversity of topics and methodological approaches covered by the contributors foster a sense of interdisciplinary dialogue. The volume comprises three sections: essays in the first part address the interlinking of modernity with comparative disciplines and the production of space. The second section explores the connections between literacy, speech and the consolidation of hegemonic narratives; in the third group of essays the notions of subjectivity and sovereignty are investigated.

On a theoretical level, I would suggest that the underlying element of cohesion informing these contributions is a preoccupation with the totalizing tendencies of modernity. As Thomas Lamarre writes in the long and comprehensive introduction to the volume, tackling the problem of socio-economic modernization and cultural modernity entails a confrontation with "a tireless systematization, homogenization, unification, standardization and globalization of resources, exchanges, institutions and people" (3). In metaphysical terms the idea of totalization has been associated with notions of logocentrism, foreclosure and the assimilation of the Other under the banner of the Same. Actualizations of this assimilatory power in modernity are highlighted for instance in Law Wing-Sang's admirable essay on Derrida, Levinas and Chuang Tzu, where through a "para-comparative reading between Derrida and Chuang Tzu" (80) the author engages with the problems of comparativism and post-colonial identities.

The volume significantly problematizes the very notion of totalization, as well as the strategies to counter it. As it emerges from a number of contributions, efforts aimed at the construction of local identities have turned out to reproduce, at another level, the very logic on which Western modernization is predicated. By striving to construct seamless self-consistency they have ended up mimicking the characteristics of Western discourses, and have ultimately lent themselves to recuperation. Kang Nae-Hui's and Atsuho Ueda's essays on linguistic modernity in Korea and on the emergence of the modern novel in Japan, respectively, are exemplary in mapping this tendency.

The resources and analytical tools of deconstruction, detectable in many essays, appear central to the book's rethinking of local identities and to its engagement with and problematization of post-colonial theory. Thus one of the issues emerging most forcefully from the book is how to construct strategies that may disrupt the process of cultural homologization without relapsing into the same assimilatory violence and essentialism that they seek to counter. Evidently multiplying sites by fragmenting the totality does not automatically generate fields of resistance qualitatively different from the model they oppose. And it is indeed difficult to see what the gain would be if instead of one grand totalizing narrative we had many equally violent micro-fundamentalisms.

Bids to go beyond the logic of binary oppositions and essentialized identities are not missing. For example, while critically discussing Benedict Anderson's The Spectre of Comparisons, Harry Harootunian chooses to counter the production of spatial abstractions such as the West versus local identities, allegedly reinstated in subaltern narratives, by focusing on the complex temporality of everyday life and on the spectral dimension embedded in it. Similarly, in the last section of the book, a possible way out of the impasse is suggested by a joint reading of Michael Godard's and
Lamarre’s essays. Goddard engages with Deleuze’s notion of subjectivation. He first considers how in *Foucault* Deleuze grappled with the problem of the all-pervasiveness of the power regimes and with the unavoidable reterritorialisation of “acts of resistance...in new relations of power” (211), a preoccupation that by now we have come to recognize as central in *Impacts of Modernities*. He subsequently explores how Deleuze developed a notion of subjectivity as a folding of the outside into an absolutely singular point of view, as an act of creative self-constitution: crucially, “this folding creates a space no longer dependent on the external forces from which it emerged, and therefore allows for an immanent conception of subjectivity” (217). Lamarre builds on the notion of folded subjectivities seen as the actualisation of new points of view—of new dimensions—each incommensurable to the others and independent from power. In his essay on religious rituals in southeast China he argues that these rituals can be seen in terms of creative subjectifications, “as a kind of fabulation or creative involution” whereby we are urged “to think differently from capital but not oppositionally, which implies very different forms of resistance and of transformation” (284).

Doubts may be raised on the political efficacy of these ways to rearticulate resistance and to think “beyond modernity.” A critical discussion of these issues is clearly beyond the scope of this brief review. The volume, however, is a welcome contribution to the ongoing debate on identity politics in a globalized world and will be of interest in particular to scholars in East Asian and Post-Colonial Studies.

VIOLA BRISOLIN
Centre for European Studies, University College London, UK


It is not every day that a major university press republishes a historical work written some 70 years earlier in a field that has seen constant and sometimes intensive work. Nor is it usual for historical works, distinguished though they are, to be translated by a leading historian of another culture. Yet Georges Lefebvre’s *Quatre-vingt-quinze*, first published in French in 1939, was translated by R. R. Palmer, one of the most incisive historians of the twentieth century, and published with a preface by him as *The Coming of the French Revolution* in 1947. The book, which has been in print continuously since its first appearance, is now republished in a “classic edition” by Princeton, with a new and useful introduction by Timothy Tackett, today the leading American historian of the French Revolution. Lefebvre’s book, then, is a classic, but a classic with a curious history.

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Lefebvre was a master of his subject, having produced a long series of articles, monographs and syntheses that made him the acknowledged leader in French Revolutionary studies. Indeed, it is doubtful whether there has been another historian of the French Revolution whose knowledge of the archival sources equaled Lefebvre’s. But the significance of *The Coming of the French Revolution* extends well beyond the author’s encyclopedic knowledge of his subject. This is a little book with nothing superfluous about it. It is also beautifully constructed, moving in ever wider and more inclusive circles from the aristocracy (Part 1) to the bourgeoisie (Part 2) to the urban masses (Part 3) to the peasantry (Part 4), which included 80 per cent of the population of France, but was often overlooked. The almost mystic unity of the French people on 14 July 1789 described by Jules Michelet is given by Lefebvre a firm social base tied to the interests and mentalities of the people and classes involved. But Lefebvre’s analysis is not restricted to economic and social categories alone.
as a whole and reflect the clarity and balance of the editorial policy. Rather than a handbook as such, it works as a useful historical snapshot of the state of a number of areas in analytic philosophy. It is inevitable that this book cannot but be much more limited than the authoritative pretension its appearance suggests, and this is indeed a subtext of many of the contributions themselves.

INNES KENNEDY
Orkney College, Scotland, UK

Baroque Fictions: Revising the Classical in Marguerite Yourcenar. By Margaret Elizabeth Colvin (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2005). 177 pp. €36.00/$45.00 paper.

A taste of the approach in this slim volume can be gained from the cover. It is contended that Marguerite Yourcenar’s fiction exhibits “numerous characteristics of the neobaroque.” The aim is to cast doubt on the “presumed transparency of her text as associated with the French neoclassical tradition.” Rather, Yourcenar possesses a “subversive postmodern aesthetic” that “privileges extravagant artistic play, flux and heterogeneity.”

Margaret Elizabeth Colvin offers an extensive account of how she sees this as working. Yourcenar’s oeuvre is seen as employing “amazingly circuous aesthetic strategies… both to disguise and to indulge in a liberating, transgressive revolt against certain Western notions of humanism and classicism” (143). This is a hint that the so-called neobaroque tendencies of the fiction do not jump out at the reader (Colvin repeatedly claims that Yourcenar should be seen as a modernist, and that her classicism is not transparent (e.g., p. 38). Colvin believes that Yourcenar’s status as the first woman member of the French Academy underlines her complexity, and she cites her biographer Josyane Savigneau on her subversiveness and the difficulty of classifying her corpus (14).

The question after reading this book remains whether there is anything in the kind of approach taken by Yourcenar that is inconsistent with the neoclassical label that has been applied to her. The very constricting definition of the classical tradition that Colvin adopts helps her case, but the reader may doubt that Yourcenar felt so constrained:

The classical tradition, in whose line Yourcenar is generally situated, tells us that form may neither stand alone nor dictate content; it should blend so unobtrusively with content as to be virtually invisible (159).

Yourcenar was, of course, a cultured European who was influenced by many quarters including the East, but eschewed adhesion to any of the major literary movements of her day. Individualism was paramount. I think she would have been surprised to be hailed as a hero of postmodernism. Her Hadrian, the product of her eccentric European background with whom it may be psychologically interesting to compare his author, here “exhibits not so much signs of classical stability and unity as the centrifugal forces of difference and marginality.” Her own personal history goes far towards explaining her interest in marginality, and this focus is far from inconsistent with the neoclassical tag.

Readers may wonder what advantage might accrue from applying the tag neobaroque to Yourcenar. Colvin cites Christine Buci-Glucksmann’s “Baroque Reason” in which she claims that in a baroque world there is:

A regress towards or of history: since it cannot be totalized or mastered, history is acted or frustrated against a background of wars and absolute power. It presents itself as a catastrophic... the great disorder of the world, or the cosmic disaster of the end of the world so dear to the baroque poets (161).

Colvin thinks there is a good match between Yourcenar’s domain and the baroque world. There are some grounds for this view, and some readers may find this essay provides a compelling argument, but the label seems to me to help little in the classification of Yourcenar’s productions.

HUGH LINDSAY
University of Newcastle, Australia


The British Slave Trade and Public Memory is an excellent study of how the transatlantic slave
trade has been represented in selected museum exhibits, television programs, and literature from Britain since 1990. The book summarizes key works on the role of Britain in the slave trade, written between 1970 and 1990, to interpret the impact of the representation of slavery in British public memory.

Elizabeth Kowaleski Wallace begins her analysis with an acknowledgement of the seminal work that prominent scholars of English history and literature such as James Walvin and F. O. Shyldon, Peter Fryer, Prabhu Guppatra, Fred D’Aguiar, Stuart Hall, Paul Gilroy, and the editors of Black British Cultural Studies: A Reader and The Parsek Report have done to give visibility to the Black experience in Britain’s history. For instance, Wallace points out that Walvin’s Black Ivory: A History of British Slavery (1992) uses a methodology that combines the views of both Blacks and Whites about British slavery, notably the records on slave ships and on the writing of early Black writers such as Olaudah Equiano and White writers such as Alexander Falconbridge (6). A related book is Shyldon’s Black People in Britain, 1555–1833 (1977) that gives a survey of biographies of famous Blacks in Britain prior to the mid-nineteenth century, such as James Albert Ukawsaw Groniowsaw, Equiano, Ottobah Cugoano, and Ira Aldridge.

The first chapter explores how two communities in the United Kingdom bring the history of slavery back to public memory. The author uses two examples, “The Transatlantic Slavery: Against Human Dignity” exhibition, displayed at the Merseyside Maritime Museum in Liverpool in 2004, and the “Bristol Slave Trade Trail,” a self-guided walking tour through the city’s connections with the history of the slave trade. Describing both the forms and meanings of the events as well as individual reactions, Wallace shows that commemoration sites help people connect their everyday lives with their traumatic historical past. Yet, while she credits “The Transatlantic Slavery” exhibition for working hard to oppose “the essentializing and dehumanizing notion of the African ‘slave’,” Wallace criticizes it for failing to help viewers understand Africa on its own terms (38). She laments the lack of artifacts depicting the ordeal of life under slavery, specifically “the instruments of torture—not only the shackles, chains, and branding irons but also a ‘punishment dollar,’ a cast iron brace designed to keep the head tortuously upright” (39). Alternatively, Wallace describes the “Bristol Slave Trade Trail” as differing from the former, since it put live bodies in action and allowed the White visitors to be “implicitly enjoined to imagine themselves as ‘coeval,’ or as sharing the same time of city fathers, purveyors of the slave trade” (54). Wallace’s main goal in this chapter is to show the need of British museum curators and other agents of public memory to involve visitors in the history of the slave trade in which they are accountable and implicated.

The second chapter, “Fictionalizing Slavery in the United Kingdom, 1990–2000,” provides a fresh interpretation of the theme of hybridity, the resistance to binary thought, the danger of the totalization of history, and the inevitable contradictions and biases in the narration of history. Using major British novels, written between 1990 and 2000, including, among others, Caryl Phillips’s Cambridge (1991), Barry Unsworth’s Sacred Hunger (1992), Phillips’s Crossing the River (1993), and Graeme Rigby’s The Black Cook’s Historian as examples, Wallace shows how these books, which differ in genre, fictionalize slavery in the United Kingdom. These works oppose racism and binaristic treatment of themes and characters while expressing a multi-voicedness that Wallace describes as “a polyvalence that may not center on a particular assertion but that allows for more than one truth to exist simultaneously” (123). This theory suggests the impossibility of one stable, unifying narrative of history and thus offsets the power of hybridity in story telling.

The third chapter deals with the representation of the British slave trade in films such as the 1995 short biopic on the life of Equiano, A Son of Africa, the 1999 Channel 4 broadcast of the series Britain’s Slave Trade: Telling the Untold, and the BBC production of A Respectable Trade. Wallace credits these films for rendering “a visually accessible history of the transatlantic slave trade” (128), presenting an image of “Black agency” and “otherness” that was “already a part of the fabric of English daily life,” and for providing alternative versions of an “authentic” England (128). Yet Wallace criticizes the manner in which these films may play into “a scopophilic impulse” by eroticizing the representation of the slave trade and attempting to make viewers “love visually
the very world we have been asked to judge intellectually” (147).

The fourth chapter interprets Biyi Bandele’s 1999 adaptation of the play based on Aphra Behn’s Onomoko, or the Royal Slave (1688) to show how he reweaves the original narrative into a modern and cosmopolitan performance about the African Holocaust in Britain’s history. The Nigerian-born and London-based playwright, Bandele, appropriates and revises the story that was performed by White British actors in the eighteenth century, linking early forms of transnationalism and representation of race, the body, and identity with their later portrayal in twenty-first-century England. Bandele sells the story of British participation in the slave trade without falling into the traps of global capitalism. This marketing of the history of slave trade reflects the power of human beings to have agency, to be capable of doing evil, to be perpetrators or victims of violence, and to suffer injustices.

BABACAR M’BAYE
KENT STATE UNIVERSITY, USA

Homecomings: Returning POWs and the Legacies of Defeat in Postwar Germany.

In a masterful blend of social, political, cultural, gender, and identity history, Frank Biess examines the consequences of the return of two million German soldiers and prisoners of war (POWs) from Soviet captivity in the decade after the Second World War. The book revolves around a comparison of the construction of postwar identities in East and West German society, tracing the efforts in each state to transform former POWs into model citizens. In each case, we see a shift from the issues of the Second World War and the struggle against Nazism to new postwar narratives linked to the Cold War. To support his arguments, Biess relies on a wide range of archival sources, oral history interviews, and a number of contemporaneous publications, such as medical journal articles from the postwar decade.

The account begins with an examination of the post-Stalingrad phase of the Second World War. The Nazi regime had attempted to glorify dead soldiers as fallen heroes of the Reich, but the large number of German prisoners taken by the Soviets at the conclusion of the Battle of Stalingrad created a dilemma. These prisoners occupied a liminal space between the fallen hero and the soldier on active duty. Removed from German society from 1943 to 1945, Biess examines the implications of the separation of this population group from the homeland (Heimat) and its return in the postwar era.

The defeat and incarceration had lasting effects on the POW population, many aspects of which were not apparent until their return. Biess explores the negative influence of these experiences on the masculinity of the POW population, particularly when combined with the postwar return to a German society marked by increased roles for women both in the home and the workplace. The POWs also returned with widespread medical problems, most notably dystrophy, whose highly politicized diagnosis and treatment is described by Biess in Chapter 3.

Biess traces parallel efforts in West and East Germany to reintegrate former POWs into society, each recasting the returnees as both victims and heroes in newly constructed narratives of the Second World War. The development of redemptive memories in West Germany, the focus of Chapter 4, had its origins in a range of different sources, most notably in the Association of Returnees, the Verband der Heimkehrer, or VdH. This organization served as a political mouthpiece for former POWs in the early 1950s, advocating a POW compensation law based on former service to the German state, as opposed to remuneration for suffering while in Soviet captivity. The Western narrative which emerges is that of survival under two totalitarian regimes, first Nazism then Stalinism. The memories of the East revolve around universalizing the experience of anti-fascist resistance, enabling a remasculinization of returnees in the East and East Germans as a whole.

In summary, Biess provides the reader with a fascinating examination of the postwar
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On a theoretical level, I would suggest that the underlying element of cohesion informing these contributions is a preoccupation with the totalizing tendencies of modernity. As Thomas Lamarré writes in the long and comprehensive introduction to the volume, tackling the problem of socio-economic modernization and cultural modernity entails a confrontation with “a tireless systematization, homogenization, unification, standardization and globalization of resources, exchanges, institutions and people” (3). In metaphysical terms the idea of totalization has been associated with notions of logocentrism, foreclosure and the assimilation of the Other under the banner of the Same. Actualisations of this assimilatory power in modernity are highlighted for instance in Law Wing-Sang’s admirable essay on Derrida, Levinas and Chuang Tzu, where through a “para-comparative reading between Derrida and Chuang Tzu” (80) the author engages with the problems of comparativism and post-colonial identities.

The volume significantly problematizes the very notion of totalization, as well as the strategies to counter it. As it emerges from a number of contributions, efforts aimed at the construction of local identities have turned out to reproduce, at another level, the very logic on which Western modernization is predicated. By striving to construct seamless self-consistency they have ended up mimicking the characteristics of Western discourses, and have ultimately lent themselves to recuperation. Kang Nae-Hui’s and Atsuko Ueda’s essays on linguistic modernity in Korea and on the emergence of the modern novel in Japan, respectively, are exemplary in mapping this tendency.

The resources and analytical tools of deconstruction, detectable in many essays, appear central to the book’s rethinking of local identities and to its engagement with and problematization of post-colonial theory. Thus one of the issues emerging most forcefully from the book is how to construct strategies that may disrupt the process of cultural homologization without relapsing into the same assimilatory violence and essentialism that they seek to counter. Evidently multiplying sites by fragmenting the totality does not automatically generate fields of resistance qualitatively different from the model they oppose. And it is indeed difficult to see what the gain would be if instead of one grand totalizing narrative we had many equally violent micro-fundamentalisms.

Bids to go beyond the logic of binary oppositions and essentialized identities are not missing. For example, while critically discussing Benedict Anderson’s The Spectre of Comparisons, Harry Harootunian chooses to counter the production of spatial abstractions such as the West versus local identities, allegedly reinstated in subaltern narratives, by focusing on the complex temporality of everyday life and on the spectral dimension embedded in it. Similarly, in the last section of the book, a possible way out of the impasse is suggested by a joint reading of Michael Goddard’s and
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Alternatively, Wallace describes the “Bristol Slave Trade Trail” as differing from the former, since it put live bodies in action and allowed the White visitors to be “implicitly enjoined to imagine themselves as ‘coeval,’ or as sharing the same time of city fathers, purveyors of the slave trade” (54). Wallace’s main goal in this chapter is to show the need of British museum curators and other agents of public memory to involve visitors in the history of the slave trade in which they are accountable and implicated.

The second chapter, “Fictionalizing Slavery in the United Kingdom, 1990–2000,” provides a fresh interpretation of the theme of hybridity, the resistance to binary thought, the danger of the totalization of history, and the inevitable contradictions and biases in the narration of history. Using major British novels, written between 1990 and 2000, including, among others, Caryl Phillips’s Caubridge (1991), Barry Unsworth’s Sacred Hunger (1992), Phillips’s Crossing the River (1993), and Graeme Rigby’s The Black Cook’s Historian as examples, Wallace shows how these books, which differ in genre, fictionalize slavery in the United Kingdom. These works oppose racism and banalistic treatment of themes and characters while expressing a multi-voicedness that Wallace describes as “a polyvalence that may not center on a particular assertion but that allows for more than one truth to exist simultaneously” (123). This theory suggests the impossibility of one stable, unifying narrative of history and thus offsets the power of hybridity in story telling.

The third chapter deals with the representation of the British slave trade in films such as the 1995 short biopic on the life of Equiano, A Son of Africa, the 1999 Channel 4 broadcast of the series Britain’s Slave Trade: Telling the Untold, and the BBC production of A Respectable Trade. Wallace credits these films for rendering “a visually accessible history of the transatlantic slave trade” (128), presenting an image of “Black agency” and “otherness” that was “already a part of the fabric of English daily life,” and for providing alternative versions of an “authentic” England (128). Yet Wallace criticizes the manner in which these films may play into “a scopophilic impulse” by eroticizing the representation of the slave trade and attempting to make viewers “love visually
the very world we have been asked to judge intellectually” (147).

The fourth chapter interprets Biyi Bandele’s 1999 adaptation of the play based on Aphra Behn’s Oroonoko, or the Royal Slave (1688) to show how he reweaves the original narrative into a modern and cosmopolitan performance about the African holocaust in Britain’s history. The Nigerian-born and London-based playwright, Bandele, appropriates and revises the story that was performed by White British actors in the eighteenth century, linking early forms of transnationalism and representation of race, the body, and identity with their later portrayal in twenty-first-century England. Bandele sells the story of British participation in the slave trade without falling into the traps of global capitalism. This marketing of the history of slave trade reflects the power of human beings to have agency, to be capable of doing evil, to be perpetrators or victims of violence, and to suffer injustices.

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Homecomings: Returning POWs and the Legacies of Defeat in Postwar Germany.

In a masterful blend of social, political, cultural, gender and identity history, Frank Biess examines the consequences of the return of two million German soldiers and prisoners of war (POWs) from Soviet captivity in the decade after the Second World War. The book revolves around a comparison of the construction of postwar identities in East and West German society, tracing the efforts in each state to transform former POWs into model citizens. In each case, we see a shift from the issues of the Second World War and the struggle against Nazism to new postwar narratives linked to the Cold War. To support his arguments, Biess relies on a wide range of archival sources, oral history interviews, and a number of contemporaneous publications, such as medical journal articles from the postwar decade.

The account begins with an examination of the post-Stalingrad phase of the Second World War. The Nazi regime had attempted to glorify dead soldiers as fallen heroes of the Reich, but the large number of German prisoners taken by the Soviets at the conclusion of the Battle of Stalingrad created a dilemma. These prisoners occupied a liminal space between the fallen hero and the soldier on active duty. Removed from German society from 1943 to 1945, Biess examines the implications of the separation of this population group from the homeland (Heimat) and its return in the postwar era.

The defeat and incarceration had lasting effects on the POW population, many aspects of which were not apparent until their return. Biess explores the negative influence of these experiences on the masculinity of the POW population, particularly when combined with the postwar return to a German society marked by increased roles for women both in the home and the workplace. The POWs also returned with widespread medical problems, most notably dystrophy, whose highly politicized diagnosis and treatment is described by Biess in Chapter 3.

Biess traces parallel efforts in West and East Germany to reintegrate former POWs into society, each recasting the returnees as both victims and heroes in newly constructed narratives of the Second World War. The development of redemptive memories in West Germany, the focus of Chapter 4, had its origins in a range of different sources, most notably in the Association of Returnees, the Verband der Heimkehrer, or VdH. This organization served as a political mouthpiece for former POWs in the early 1950s, advocating a POW compensation law based on former service to the German state, as opposed to remuneration for suffering while in Soviet captivity. The Western narrative which emerges is that of survival under two totalitarian regimes, first Nazism then Stalinism. The memories of the East revolve around universalizing the experience of anti-fascist resistance, enabling a remasculinization of returnees in the East and East Germans as a whole.

In summary, Biess provides the reader with a fascinating examination of the postwar