Bridges to the Past

The Influence of Slavery on the Contemporary Diaspora

THE HISTORIOGRAPHICAL REPRESENTATION of traumatic experience directly relates to the negotiation of contemporary identity. In order to emphasize the ambivalent nature of contemporary artists’ struggle with their community’s traumatic history, I earlier introduced the notion of trauma(d)dition. The term has two implications: Caribbean literature, according to one sense, can be regarded as a form of poetic diction struggling to express the traumatic past of the Afro-Caribbean. If we assume that literary has the potential to introduce symbolic codifications of otherwise suppressed experiences, what follows is a positive outlook on opportunities for a literary revision of the past. Adding the second “d,” however, makes a quite different and much less optimistic suggestion: If the backward glance, and thus the return to the historical role of the victim of colonization and slavery, becomes an addiction, the ability to solve current problems and direct one’s perspective to the future is at stake. This second aspect directs our attention to the risks of self-victimization: emphasis on past trauma may mean socio-cultural paralysis.

If Caribbean national literature is understood as trauma(d)dition, the focus is on its potential to provide access to the psychological and affective dimensions of the history of slavery. One major strength of literary writing is that it is free of claims to authenticity. In contrast to historiographical writing, it does not depend on historical evidence. Free of the necessity to prove its methodological soundness or empirical objectivity, it permits fresh approaches to the negotiation of past, present, and future. Literary representations of the diaspora’s past can thus address intimate personal experiences that would otherwise have dropped out of the stock of canonized events forming the core of History in the singular. Although many creative writers spend just as much effort researching the historical settings of their fictions as any professional
historian would; it makes a major difference that they are not forced to do so by external pressure. Literature can deal with experiences of contingency in a way that remains inaccessible to a scholarly discipline such as historiography. In neo-slave narratives, individualized micro-perspectives on the past replace the relative constriction of historiographical objectivity. Whether from the point of view of a single narrator or by opening up this angle to a polyphonic narrative, the presentation of subjective memories facilitates psychological introspection. It thus provides an important counterbalance to the anonymous macro-perspective of a reconstruction of history based on supra-individual social structures. This emphasis on individual experience allows the reader to access more fully the psychological dimension of historical processes. For the subjects of diaspora, it thus opens up a fictional journey into the founding episodes of a community, with a strong symbolic repertoire encoding diasporic trauma. It is one of the central assumptions of trauma studies that, in contrast to traumatic events that linger as an undercurrent inhibiting individual and collective agency, symbolic codification of events can have a redemptive function. Recalled African surroundings offer a framework for the revaluation of the African homeland despite the traumatic conditions of the Middle Passage. African spatiality has maintained its identificatory power to the present day.

1 For instance, Phillips’s preliminary research for his novel Crossing the River is just as extensive as that of a professional historian:

In terms of pure research, before I did any writing, it took about 16 months of inter-library loans, travelling to Washington to look at documents on the American segregated army in Britain, travelling to Sheffield city library to find out about English villages, communicating with historians in Britain and America who specialised in Liberia and the history of the slave letters, checking out the catalogue of an exhibition of the Smithsonian in the mid-80s called Blacks in the West.


2 At this point it should once more be stressed that the distinction between a ‘real’ and an imagined spatiality is by no means as clear-cut as, at times, may be suggested by the use of the two terms in this volume. It should be obvious that any spatiality, whether imagined or ‘real’, is subject to processes of sensuous perception, and to cognitive as well as emotional processing. Thus, the mental images of their surroundings that individuals develop of their environment are always subjective and, furthermore, dependent on personal experience. Hence, it is impossible to draw a clear line between representations of the ‘real’ spatial surroundings and imagined spatialities as in the imagined African space that functions as a foundational myth of the black Caribbean diaspora. Nevertheless, I would argue that it makes sense to distinguish these two kinds of spatial representation so as to begin to understand what might constitute a nation-building process in a situation in which the nation-state is “unbound” (as suggested by Basch, Glick Schiller & Szanton Blanc, Nations Unbound) and can no longer be conceptualized on the basis of territorial categories.