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Homage to Michel Fabre

Afterword

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Afterword

Claudine Raynaud

- 1 Afterword. It is a strange irony that these printed words should come “after (the) word,” thus negating that there is an end to speech, yet an irony that I can claim in my relationship with Michel Fabre: an ongoing conversation that lasted from the year I returned to France in 1987 until his death in the summer of 2007. I do not wish this to be a coda, an afterthought, even though it comes after death. *Verba manent*.
- 2 Christian Keita, whom I met on the campus of Oberlin College where I was teaching in 1986-87, was a student of Michel's. Quickly, we became friends. His interest for Stokely Carmichael matched mine in African American Studies: I had been hired to teach female slave narratives, French feminisms and Third World women's narratives in the English department. It was my first official position in the United States at the close of an exciting Ph.D. curriculum in English and Women's Studies at the University of Michigan under the joint guidance of Lemuel Johnson and Martha Vicinus. The position I held at Oberlin was to be filled the following year by bell hooks and Chandra Mohanty. The reigning orthodoxy of identity politics issued a firm signal that it was high time for me to go back “home.” By then, my “Frenchness” had become more a hurdle than an asset. In Paris, Christian introduced me to Michel at the beautiful home he shared with his wife Geneviève on the rue du Square Montsouris. Upon hearing of my interest in African American Studies and Women's Studies, Michel called Geneviève, who was busy in the kitchen. This is how we met.
- 3 From then on, my intellectual life became bound with Michel and Geneviève's academic and personal world. I organized a conference in Tours in 1991 (“Ethnic Voices”) that they both honored with their presence. The joy of gathering together African American scholars (such as Cheryl Wall, Mae Henderson, as well as my Michigan friends Rafia Zafar and Kate Shanley) and my French colleagues was a feeling that the many conferences we later organized with the CEAA repeatedly renewed in a series of intellectual encounters that were the highlights of our cooperative work.
- 4 Around Michel and Geneviève gravitated a large number of French scholars, all specialized in African American Studies, both in the Paris-based CEAA, presided by Michel since its creation in 1994 and for which I acted as Vice-President until 2004, and in the

official institutional research centers headed over the years, first by Michel at the Sorbonne Nouvelle (CETANLA), then by Geneviève at Paris VII (JE Diaspora) and finally by myself at the François-Rabelais university in Tours (JE Etudes Afro-Américaines). These research centers drew together academics, for the most part former students of Michel's or Geneviève's, who taught in French universities. From Nice to Montpellier, from Caen to Rouen, from Aix to Nantes: they covered the whole country. The CEAA is now working under Geneviève's presidency on Alain Corbin's essays as a theoretical framework for African American and Diaspora Studies. When at Charles V, she had also been engaged in a project on Pierre Nora's *lieux de mémoire* and their application to our field of research: *Les Amériques noires*.

- 5 The bi-annual international conferences that took place in Paris in 1992 (“African Americans in France”), 1994 (“Visual Arts Conference: African Americans Artists and Europe”), 1996 (“April in Paris: African Americans Music and Dance in Europe”), and 2000 (“African Diasporas in the Old and the New Worlds: Consciousness and Imagination”) were the fruit of our collective work, with meetings at the Fabres' home to launch the projects and to follow them through. These international events were conducted in collaboration with the Du Bois Institute at Harvard and culminated with the homage to Michel and Geneviève held in Paris in 2004, “African American and Diasporic Research in Europe.” Michel and Geneviève drew to Paris hundreds of African American intellectuals and artists, to the point where walking along the Boulevard St Michel and meeting the participants in the cafés and the shops, one felt that the spirit of the Harlem Renaissance was back in town: Paris was in vogue.
- 6 Alongside these international activities, Michel and Geneviève were instrumental in placing *Beloved* (1993), Jean Toomer's *Cane* (1998) on the syllabus for the *Agrégation*, the competitive national examination that helps select high school teachers in France—lately *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* (suggested by a former student of theirs, A-M. Paquet-Deyris) has also found its way on this prized list (2005). For each of these works, conferences were held in Paris (1993, 1998) and in Tours (1998, 2005), which led to the publication of anthologies and more recently the journal *CRAFT* that have been highly influential and widely distributed both in France and in the United States. Previous to that effervescence, only Baldwin's *Go Tell it on the Mountain* and Ellison's *Invisible Man* had managed to be included in that syllabus, in 1970 and 1984 respectively.
- 7 Both the logistics of the large national and international conferences and the year-long meetings and scholarly work were prepared by a large group of academics and friends as part of a clearly defined scientific program, firmly established at the beginning of each year. We started with the concept of migration, broadly understood to cover African American culture at large (history, but also literature and the arts), moved on to a reflection on the “word in shackles” (1999, Caen) and finally focused on the notion of “event” as defined by historian Arlette Farge (2001, Tours). Complementing the work conducted in Paris, the GRAAT, and then the African American Research Center in Tours (JE), held conferences on the African American detective novel (2001), and invited writers, such as John Edgar Wideman, Percival Everett, and Sonia Sanchez. It also hosted CAAR in 2005 (Claude Julien acted as its organizer on behalf of the JE) and the Tocqueville-Fulbright Distinguished Chair in 2006. This last award, jointly funded by the French and American governments and the first granted to a provincial university, went to Charles P. Henry, Professor of African American Politics at the University of California at Berkeley.

- 8 During this time, Michel was instrumental in promoting my academic career. In November 1993, he served as a member of my “habilitation” defense committee directed by Claude Julien. His kind words still resonate with me as he granted me his full scientific support and praised my work on Toni Morrison. When my French doctoral work in metaphysical poetry was mentioned, he was quick to stress that he himself had worked on John Donne, which had not stopped him from dedicating his own dissertation to Richard Wright. I was not alone in the French educational system! I was following in Michel's footsteps. I was lucky to become a full professor early in my career and could thus sit with him on dissertation committees, which he always illuminated with his learning, sense of humor and humility. But Michel was also the mentor with whom I peeled apples in the kitchen; whom I visited at Geneviève's family house in Corrèze with my husband Laurent when I was pregnant with our first child; with whom I ate oysters and watched films at their house on the île de Ré, where the Fabres welcomed me and my daughters, after my husband's untimely death. Although in pain and very ill, Michel made a point of coming to Laurent's funeral. I will forever be extremely grateful. I also vividly remember the walk we all took that August to look at the clear bright sky during the “night of the stars”... and peals of laughter as Laurent drove us straight into a ditch, a harmless accident, which, Geneviève remarked jokingly, would have endangered the future of African American studies in France!
- 9 Michel set an example of scholarship, but also high standards for kindness and friendship. At the last conference he attended in New York in September 2006, he delivered a talk on the black cabaret singers and dancers at the time of Josephine Baker's *succès de scandale*. Although Parkinson's disease made it difficult for Michel to speak, his dignity and courage commanded respect and were a lesson to us all. Many a time, I have held his arm and walked along with him, as the dreadful disease would make him stop, halt for long moments, until his strength of character would take over, and there we were, briskly walking down the rue de la Sorbonne or along one of New York's avenues, talking about everything and nothing. Life had taught me about illness and death.
- 10 The work must go on, humbly. I think that all those who have come in contact with the Fabres, their friends, their students, their colleagues know that we must carry on in the same spirit, one of generosity and excellence in collaboration. Although I had worked on the autobiographies of African American women writers in the United States (Hurston, Brooks, Angelou and Lorde), Michel accompanied my early work in France on Toni Morrison. The obscure marginal character of this early research for French academic circles—it was, after all, on a minor genre, autobiography, on women, and on African American women at that—meant that I had to multiply my research interests to respond to the demands for what was visible in France. When Toni Morrison was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 1993, I was commissioned to write a short monograph, *L'Esthétique de la survie* (Belin, 1996), which I wrote in fits and starts as I was breastfeeding my first child. At the same time, my doctoral work on autobiography found an echo in the newly established research unit on autobiography and manuscripts at the Institute for Texts and Modern Manuscripts (ITEM) at the CNRS. Both Philippe Lejeune and Daniel Ferrer invited me to co-direct that unit with Catherine Viollet on the basis of the work that I had conducted on Zora Neale Hurston's *Dust Tracks on a Road* at the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library. Robert Hemenway, Hurston's biographer, had generously encouraged me to carry on the research that he had initiated on Hurston's autobiography. Comparing the final published version to the manuscript and the proofs, I

have tried to assess the many editorial interventions and changes. An addendum to that article, “Sharpening her Oyster Knife,” is still in my drawer, waiting for an opportunity to appear in print, the blade no less blunter with the passing of time.

- 11 Both these directions, researching African American contemporary autobiography, with incursions into the slave narrative, and responding to the many demands of the French academic world, are the guidelines of my scholarly activity. When asked to sum up what I “do,” I say that I work on the inscription of sexual and racial difference in self-writing. My theoretical training in Women's Studies, in psychoanalysis and literature, and in textual analysis defines the specificity and the limits of my approach, as I am heir to structuralism, semiotics and deconstructionism, but also Marxism and cultural studies, a hybridity that is not without its difficulties. Faced with the dictum that everything is text —*il n'y a pas de hors texte*—I have nonetheless tried to explain how sexual difference, which I oppose to gender, and writing “race,” negotiate the horrors of History, violence against women, the amphibology of the subject: both subjectivity and subjection. The history of slavery and the evidence of texts that men and women who had been reduced to chattel could claim as “written by himself/herself” tell of the resilience of the human subject, against all odds. Language falters, but in that attempt, it also ceaselessly tries to account. It is this accountability that I track down at the core of what one can say about oneself in his/her relationship to others and to the Other (language, the Father, the Institution). “Race” and the enigma of woman are the realities and the conundrums that have become a cherished obsession in article after article. The arbitrariness of the former and the slipperiness of the latter, combined with their inescapable and very palpable “effects” in real life, are the elusive “objects” of my scholarly pursuit.
- 12 Unanimously praised as Richard Wright's biographer, Michel was receptive to my work on autobiography and knew more than any other that it is the core of African American literature and creativity. Autobiography as a genre rests precisely at the crossroads of the textual ineluctability stressed by Roland Barthes and the affirmation of a necessary link with a referent. In such a context, Roland Barthes is not only a critic whom I often quote or use in epigraphs, but also the theoretical framework of most of my critical endeavors. The “insistence of the referent,” its stubbornness, is the formula that helps me out of the dilemma that life stories are fictional, no matter how buttressed the demands of truthfulness, authenticity and veracity, and regardless of how firm the equation is between the name of the writer on the title page, the main character and the “I” in the text. The *bios* cannot be easily evacuated: it is there. It has been there. *Interfuit*. Barthes's work on photography in *Camera Lucida*, itself a profoundly and movingly autobiographical text, introduces the intimacy of the *punctum* that unexpectedly shoots out like an arrow to touch/hurt him. It tells of the (failed) encounter with the unconscious. In the series of texts produced as drafts in autobiographical writing, or in the different versions of the same event in one's life, the concept of *biographème* has proved helpful more than once, both as unit for analysis and as theoretical tool. I can isolate an “event,” cut out what has been written about it, and trace the attempts at telling (or hiding) what happened and explain why it constitutes a recurring trait in an author's life-writing. The first theoretical attempt of that sort was delivered in presence of Michel and Geneviève at one of the CEEA meetings. It bore on the gatepost episode as *biographème* in Hurston's autobiographical space as that passage recurs in her essays, her main novel and her autobiography. I have also worked on editorial censorship (Hurston, Wright) as the most obvious constraint that bears on writing race and sexuality throughout African American

history. What does all this work amount to? Why this compulsion? It is as if I were engaged in an indefatigable work against death, thus mirroring the gesture at the core of autobiography itself in my own critical analyses. Before that final moment, much can be said, and I hope much can be changed. I share with Michel a belief in the political commitment of the critic-scholar, a dedication to life and intellectual thought as agents of transformation.

- 13 I never venture far from this preoccupation with self-writing. The twin notions of memory and writing actually unite the field of autobiography and that of the fiction that I have chosen to analyze. I have, for instance, traced the autobiographical roots of Morrison's writing in *Beloved*. Entitled "The Site of Memory," this article is included in *GRAAT 27* which Claude Julien coordinated in homage to Michel. Scholars of Morrison know that she writes fiction and refuses to embrace the autobiographical genre. Yet the source of her creativity stems from images that hover in her mind, linked in that instance to specific childhood memories. Autobiographers remember and bear witness; they also, in the case of African American writers, poets and playwrights, link the individual act of remembering one's life to the vicissitudes of black History, its being written against oblivion, its distortions, and its necessarily ideological posture. They above all invent and create. The theoretical approach known in France as critical genesis (ITEM-CNRS), which posits the text in motion and creativity as a process, is at the core of my understanding of autobiographical writing. It directs my choices and informs my reflection. The precariousness of these definitions of self which I contrast to notions such as "subject formation," goes hand in hand with the strength of their ideological impact. African American autobiography tells the history of the black "subject," its changing expression and definition, its choice of powerful and forever renewed forms, the trials and the travails of the black self (*l'être-noir*). To that quest, I add an inquiry into *l'être-femme*, and I always ponder on both as they emerge in writing.
- 14 My work on African American autobiography has consequently taken many shapes, tackled many media, as I have written on dramatist Adrienne Kennedy's *The People who led to my Plays*, filmmaker Isaac Julien's *Looking for Langston*, John Edgar Wideman's short story about Charles Chesnut "Surfiction," Ernest Gaines's fictional *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* and Gloria Naylor's troubling last novel, part fiction, part fact, *1996*. Lately, I have focused on the notion of autobiographical material vs. fiction in such diverse instances as Josephine Baker's *Princess Tam-Tam*, James Baldwin's essays and novels, and Richard Wright's classic *Native Son*. With this last article, I humbly pay tribute to Michel, whose groundbreaking work I read and re-read for the occasion, thus enabling me to carry on my dialogue with him.
- 15 I continued working on Zora Neale Hurston when Jean Toomer's *Cane* was on the syllabus for the *agrégation*. I have also written several essays on Toni Morrison, the most recent a chapter of the *Cambridge Companion to Toni Morrison* entitled "Beloved or the Shifting Shapes of Memory". In order to go beyond the constraints of the 1996 monograph, when I spent the fall of 2005 as a Fellow at the Du Bois Institute, I drafted the blueprint of a book-length study on Morrison's oeuvre around the notion of a poetics of the "racial subject," tentatively entitled *Pondering Color*. There, again, Michel and Geneviève Fabre had preceded me. Their names are inscribed on a plaque in the Institute's brand new building in Cambridge along with those of prominent scholars and Nobel Prize laureates, such as Wole Soyinka, Toni Morrison and Derek Walcott.

- 16 I am now engaged in a project on African American autobiography from the Civil Rights era that focuses on the violence of the times and the “fierce urgency of now,” as reflected in the life-writings of the period, and accounts for the vast array of autobiographical materials and stances. At the same time, doctoral students continue under my guidance the work that Michel inaugurated. My first doctoral student is now a colleague at the University of Cocody in the Ivory Coast and another one, a French woman of African descent, teaches at Barnard College in the department of Africana Studies. Michel Fabre, it must be stressed, also initiated Commonwealth Studies from his Chair at the Sorbonne. In these days when African American Studies have become Studies in the African Diaspora, our work as teachers is a vital link in this diasporic chain. Others continue the work begun by Michel for there is no end to this transmission. Michel would love to see that today's most promising young American writers are of African descent (Ishmael Beah, Uzodinma Iweala, Dinaw Mengestu, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie), and he would be thrilled to know that the Senator of Illinois Barack Obama is about to enter the White House. I am busy imagining the lively discussions that we would have with him as we are being told that we are now entering a “postracial” era.
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