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Lars Eckstein, *Re-Membering the Black Atlantic - On the Poetics and Politics of Literary Memory*

Judith Misrahi-Barak

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## REFERENCES

Lars Eckstein. *Re-Membering the Black Atlantic - On the Poetics and Politics of Literary Memory*. Cross-Cultures 84, Amsterdam/ New York: Rodopi, 2006. 289 pp. ISBN 90-420-1958-1. £44 / €120

- 1 Original eighteenth and nineteenth-century slave narratives have long been recognized as foundational in African-American literature, and internationally renowned critics have made the reading public aware of American literature's debt towards its ancestors. During the Civil Rights movement in the 1960s, when such a legacy was acknowledged and claimed, the slave narratives were revisited by writers, historians, and critics in light of the evolution in twentieth-century society. The proof that such revisiting is still primordial today is to be perceived in the emergence of a third wave of slavery-related literature written not only by African-American but also Caribbean writers in the last two decades of the twentieth century, writing back to a double tradition – the original slave and the neo-slave narratives. Lars Eckstein's study *Re-Membering the Black Atlantic - On the Poetics and Politics of Literary Memory* is to be read with that unquenchable individual and collective interest in mind. Yet while it has its place in the tradition of the Black Atlantic, it also illustrates a very new type of approach to slavery-related novels and for this reason, it deserves a special mention.
- 2 Eckstein's book is based on his doctoral dissertation (University of Tübingen, 2003), "Der 'Black Atlantic' in Gedächtnis der Literatur: Zur Poetik und Politik Narrativer Erinnerungsverfahren bei Caryl Phillips, David Dabydeen und Toni Morrison." Eckstein also published interviews with Phillips and Dabydeen, and presented papers at

conferences such as “Revisiting Slave Narratives,” Montpellier III (2003), even though the proceedings of the conference (2005) are not mentioned in his bibliography.

- 3 This in-depth reading of *Cambridge*, *The Harlot’s Progress* and *Beloved* has several merits. First, it puts side by side an African-American and two Caribbean novels, thus enlarging the tradition of Black Atlantic critical studies. Second, the complexity of the relationships between memory and literature is tackled with great clarity on the theoretical and textual levels. It is also a thorough examination of the mnemonic strategies used in each novel — references to previous texts in Phillips’s *Cambridge* ; to eighteenth-century paintings in the case of Dabydeen’s *Harlot’s Progress* and its ekphrastic dialogue with painters; and to the African-American musical tradition in Morrison’s *Beloved*. At the heart of each writer’s choice resides both a poetic and a political strategy, and Eckstein delves into the texts to illustrate how inseparable poetics and politics are. For instance, when Phillips engages in a complex montage (and pastiche) of previous texts, be they former slave narratives or planters’ journals (source texts are given in the Appendix), his aim is also to expose their underlying racism. What is foregrounded in Dabydeen’s novel is the impossibility of getting a clear, linear and definitive version of the past — it cannot be but contradictory and multiple, thus eschewing an essentialist approach. The dramatization of a jazz-aesthetic in Morrison’s case functions as an empowering tool for the Black community. In all three cases, the slave narrative serves as a frame of reference but comes in a variety of textual, visual or musical forms, transformed and recreated as it is by the writers. Eckstein takes great delight, and so does his reader, in examining the different strategies of the three writers: Phillips’s constitution of a social memory; Dabydeen’s individual anamnesis and its subversive potential; and Morrison’s collective *re-membering*.
- 4 The three novels are examined in the second part, one after the other. A more theoretical beginning constitutes the first part (“Towards a Poetics of Mnemonic Strategy in Narrative Texts’), in which Eckstein lays the trappings of his study, while indulging in an excursus into one of the original slave narratives, Olaudah Equiano’s *Interesting Narrative*. What is most interesting is that Eckstein openly claims, and this is worth noting because it is unusual, that he wants to ‘find ways of analyzing literature in its historical, political and social contexts without ignoring the achievements of the modern and postmodern periods. There is a crucial need for approaches that combine analysis of the politics of literature with a thorough understanding of its aesthetic and poetic strategies’ (xiv). Mikhail Bakhtin’s dialogism, Gérard Genette’s palimpsest, Paul Ricoeur’s and Pierre Nora’s analyses of cultural memory all serve to analyze the complexities of literary memory. It is also good to have access to the work of Renate Lachman or Aleida Assman through Eckstein’s translation from the German into English.
- 5 In a way, it is reassuring to see that young researchers can simultaneously follow in the footsteps of their elders and have the freedom of mind to move away from them when the time comes.

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## AUTHORS

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**Judith MISRAHI-BARAK**, Maître de Conférences HDR, Université Paul Valéry Montpellier 3 (France), read English Literature at the University of Paris III and at the Ecole Normale Supérieure of Fontenay-aux-Roses. She wrote her Doctorate on *The Writing of childhood in Caribbean literature* (1996) and she has published articles on Caribbean writers and/or on the Caribbean diaspora. She has contributed a chapter to *La Ville plurielle dans la fiction antillaise anglophone* (Presses Universitaires de Toulouse-Le-Mirail, 2000), as well as to *Lignes d'horizon - Récits de voyage de la littérature anglaise* (PU de Provence, 2002). She is the director of the Cerpac, Centre d'Etudes et de Recherches sur les Pays du Commonwealth, and General Editor of *Les Carnets du Cerpac* (latest publication: *Revisiting Slave Narratives II*).