

Les mémoires de nos lauréats

Selon une tradition désormais établie, nous demandons aux diplômés ayant obtenu les meilleurs résultats dans chacune des langues germaniques de résumer les lignes de force de leur mémoire.

Kevin Heyeres : *Testimony and the Trauma of Slavery in Fred D'Aguiar's The Longest Memory and Feeding the Ghosts – A Voyage into History, Memory, and Identity*

In my dissertation I discuss two novels by the British Guyanese writer Fred D'Aguiar, *The Longest Memory* and *Feeding the Ghosts* first published in 1994 and 1997. In both novels we find the fictional accounts, oral or written, of survivors of the horror of slavery and my purpose is to explore these testimonies of traumatized individuals from various perspectives, i.e. that of history, memory, identity, and trauma.

In the first part of my work I establish a solid background to the concept of testimonial writing mainly, a genre relating closely to autobiography. The main argument of this section is to demonstrate that we can establish a link between the novels and testimonial narratives at two levels. On the one hand D'Aguiar provides us with the fictional testimonies of some of his characters, on the other the novels can supplement our knowledge of history and thus function as testimonies of the past. Globally I underline the specificities of testimony and try to prove that the accounts of D'Aguiar's protagonists have the same characteristics as non-fictional stories. Next I tackle the role of fiction once more when I sustain D'Aguiar's idea that fiction can paradoxically be a means to fill in the gaps of history, of our collective memory.

The actual body of my analysis is made of three chapters. In the first one my task is to delimit the testimonial account composed by Mintah, the heroine of *Feeding the Ghosts*, and to apply trauma theory to her text and see the impact the atrocities she has gone through have on her life and on her testimony. Then an important part of this chapter is devoted to the question whether or not testimonial writing can empower the subaltern. Altogether I would claim that my analysis here is textual, psychological, as well as sociocultural. My second main chapter focuses on testimony in *The Longest Memory* and on Whitechapel's, one of the central protagonists, confessions especially. More precisely I strive to understand how the old man's trauma is linked to the processes of remembering and forgetting, in other words to his personal memory. Finally what interests me in my last chapter is to show that most of D'Aguiar's characters, because of the trauma of slavery, have to face a form of in-betweenness. The ordeals they have experienced have a huge impact on their sense of self and even threaten to erase their identity. This is true for the slaves as well as for the whites who both reflect upon the past and have to alter the present in its light in order to know who they are.

On the whole I insist on the fact that in their testimonies the slave heroes speak about a rupture, the passage from freedom to slavery, the loss of their loved ones, the separation from their land entailing the loss of their traditions, of their roots and first and foremost of their identity. When engaging with that form of backward-looking narrative they wish to explore the ordeals of their life and at the same time they need to analyse the implications the traumatic rupture has on their present and future. Through their accounts, which can be oral or written, they hope to develop an understanding of the world and of their place in it. Mintah, a marginalized individual representative of a whole community, also wants to assert herself through testimonial writing. Testifying, narrating a significant traumatic life experience, is relevant for her when it comes to denounce injustices and bear witness to the loss. With his use of polyphony D'Aguiar gives voice here to those who have been rendered silent in history. In this perspective he also demonstrates that white society was not interested in the accounts of slaves, especially if they questioned and criticized the political, economic and judicial system of the time. Consequently his characters fail to be heard, and they do not manage to preserve their identity and the memory of the victims of the slave trade.