

## Editor's Column

# Reading at the Limits

**A**S AN UNDERGRADUATE AT THE UNIVERSITY OF NAIROBI, I DECIDED to “read” literature because I believed, perhaps naively, that this was a field of intellectual free play without the analytic limits set by the other fields I was considering, most notably law and philosophy. But arriving in graduate school in the United States in the early 1980s, I found myself in the middle of a cultural war in which the lines of battle were marked by centers and margins. I found myself in a department, university, state, and country in which literature, ordinarily dismissed as a soft discipline even in the humanities, had become pivotal in a bitter conflict over who belonged to a presumed center, the custodians of a Western civilization, quarantined from the threat of those consigned to margins, which were clearly defined in racial, ethnic, or other terms designed to exclude. Nothing in my experience had prepared me for this struggle between the assumed center and its margins. I had, after all, always defined myself in relation to centers—centers of culture, of literary texts, and, above all, of higher education—as sites for cultivating sweetness and light. Indeed, when the University of Nairobi nominated me for a British Council Fellowship to study at the University of Edinburgh, my teachers had concluded that I was ideally suited for what they saw as the imperative to study and understand the literatures and cultures of Europe in order to advance the project of decolonization. I was being sent out there to understand what constituted European knowledge and how this could be either affirmed or rejected in postcoloniality.

My teachers, all products of the colonial university, were operating under the belief, which had become almost a dictum in late colonialism, that understanding what made Europe different was an important step in displacing its logic. My *Bildung* would hence be the ambiguous adventure of the African trying to understand the

logic of European modernity—and the basis of its hegemony—in order to transcend it. The demand made on me by my teachers might as well have come out of Cheikh Hamidou Kane's novel *Ambiguous Adventure* (*L'aventure ambiguë*): "We must go to learn from them the art of conquering without being in the right" ("il faut aller apprendre chez eux l'art de vaincre sans avoir raison" [37; 47]). Now, in the United States, I was being told that there were texts—canonical texts—that belonged to a civilization that went under the name Western, and that because one belonged to this tradition through ancestral claims rather than education or achievement, I, even with my proper postcolonial education, was not part of it. My role, it seemed, was to name the margin and to be its voice.<sup>1</sup>

Marginality did not, however, sit well with me, nor did the idea that people, including a former member of the Ku Klux Klan running for president at the time, could own a tradition just because of a dubious invocation of ancestry. Still, I was interested in the project of what would later be called the "provincialization" of Europe (Chakrabarty), and in order to justify the reading of European texts, a process that would lead to the writing of a PhD dissertation on Charles Dickens and ironic discourse, I had to address two urgent questions. First, there was the question of necessity: Did literature answer a need? How was it to be understood? Literature? The need?<sup>2</sup> Second, there was the question of reading: What would happen if the European text was read, not from its assumed center, or what Derrida would call its "controlled margin," but at the point where the book, as he puts it, "overflows and cracks its meaning"? ("Tympan" xxiii). My encounter with Derrida's *Margins of Philosophy*, during a difficult year in graduate school, was revelatory. "Tympan," Derrida's preface to this work, held me by the hand and helped me understand what was at stake in the dispute over

centers and margins and the torsion of anxiety that it had generated.

[ I ]

What did I learn from "Tympan"? I learned that philosophy was a discourse meant to name and circumscribe the limit, and that mastering the limit was part of the condition of possibility of philosophical discourse. Philosophy, Derrida noted, has "recognized, conceived, posited, declined the limit according to all possible modes; and therefore by the same token, in order better to dispose of the limit, has transgressed it. *Its own limit* had not to remain foreign to it. Therefore it has appropriated the concept for itself; it has believed that it controls the margin of its volume and it thinks its other." Derrida's key argument was that philosophy had always insisted on "thinking its other"; but this other was also the source from which it derived "its essence, its definition, and production" (x). The first conceptual lesson I learned from Derrida, which applied to literature as much as it did to philosophy, was that what appeared to be the limit, one whose ascriptions were tied to the other, was inherent in the project that went under the sign of the philosophical. The literary critics who had been seduced by the idea that there was a center constituted by canonical texts, and that these texts represented a "Western" vulgate, had missed the essential lesson that the center derived its essence from what it had created as part of its operative mechanism.

There was a second conceptual lesson that I learned from "Tympan," one that I later found indispensable to what was to become postcolonial criticism: philosophy (one can read "literature") had always maintained a relation with the nonphilosophical, or the anti-philosophical—"the practices and knowledge, empirical or not, that constitute its other"—which it considered anterior to its design. In this sense, the belief that one could establish "a place of exteriority or alterity from which one

might still treat of *philosophy*" was an error (xii). Derrida's conclusion was that "exteriority and alterity" were concepts that had never surprised philosophical discourse because philosophy "*by itself has always been concerned with them*" (xxiii). For a would-be young post-colonialist like me, this claim was the beginning of a true induction into reading with, and in, difference. I learned that to secure the authority of the texts of the margins, one had to reject the idea that they were sources of authenticity and read them as works already implicated in the project of domination. The task of reading "otherwise" depended on rejecting the distinction between exteriority and interiority, margins and centers.<sup>3</sup> The task of a post-colonial criticism was not simply to read the inscription of the colonial margins in the European text or to celebrate the texts of difference but also to read the European text against itself, to make the margin not the exteriority that marked it in the discourse of the fashioning of Europe but an operative mechanism of what was assumed to be the center. Derrida's lesson, then, was simple: in reading the great texts in the history of philosophy or literature or historiography, we had to ask "the question of the margin" (xxiii). But could these lessons be transported to the practice of reading texts that were exterior to the project of European self-fashioning in the modern period?<sup>4</sup>

## [ II ]

Consider, for example, the figure of the slave in an archive dominated by the writing of the masters. Whether one is dealing with the ethnography of the West African coast, the inventories of the slaveholding companies, or even the social history of the plantation in the Americas, one is constantly confronted by archiving projects functioning as tools of regulation and control. And wherever one travels in the Atlantic world, from the West African coast to the American plantation, one encounters slave masters, gentlemen

scholars, who seek to assert their authority through record keeping. Archiving seems to be driven by the desire to close down the voices of the dominated. And thus, in the records they keep, or the histories they produce, the plantocracy focuses not on its own deeds and achievements but on the lives of the enslaved, whose personhood they seek to control through writing. From Edward Long's *History of Jamaica* to Thomas Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia*, the archiving gesture is a form of violent control; the authority of the archive is pegged on the mastery of enslavement as an event, and the archive derives its legitimacy from natural history. In this archive of domination and subjection, the men of power seek to reduce the enslaved to a lower order of being.

How, then, can one contemplate the possibility of African agency and freedom in these places of symbolic internment? Or, to put it another way, how can the voices of the enslaved be recovered from the deep crypts in which the masters' words have buried them?<sup>5</sup> Unlike freed slaves (the most prominent names are Equiano, Wheatley, and Douglas) who produce narratives as evidence of their objectification and as a testimony to the violence of the letter of the law, African slaves in what I have called the Atlantic crypt cannot create a counterarchive in writing. Like the colonial subaltern, the slave cannot speak (Spivak, "Subaltern"). How do we read an archive without a subject or witness?

If the researcher's goal is to discover the presence of the subjected in the site of enslavement, the archive has to be read in the space between the masters' demand for unquestioned obedience and the strategies developed by the enslaved to resist their subjection. A useful starting point, perhaps, is to learn to read that which is consigned to the margins of the discourse as a counterpoint to the statements given provenance by the record keepers. For while the middle passage might appear to be an empty space for

the enslaved—a space of death and deep silence—it is, for slave traders and agents alike, an invitation to documentation (Patterson). For those charged with the task of turning African bodies into chattel, the archive is what Derrida described in *Archive Fever* as a site of commencement and commandment (1). But this is also a site of deep anxiety, an anxiety that arises from enslavers' need for a place of beginnings as a source of their own mastery of the contingent and contiguous (Said). The act of mastering by recording the enslavement of others can hence be seen as a means to secure the authority of a beginning and “the power of *consignation*”—the gathering together of signs of difference into a single corpus, “in a system or synchrony in which all the elements articulate the unity of an ideal configuration” (Derrida, *Archive Fever* 3).

But this archive is a disciplinary formation that constantly comes up against the limits of the act that necessitates it—namely, the fact that slavery is not the singular event that record keepers assume it is. A good illustration of the limit here is that while the narratives of the slave master often set out to write the slave as nonhuman, they cannot escape the bodiliness of the enslaved. What are we to make of the slave master who during the day describes the slave woman as an orangutan in his clinical writing and sleeps with her at night?<sup>6</sup> Writing and archiving gestures are perhaps intended to sort out this contradiction; the event that is inscribed survives in the record while the unwritten and unspoken disappears. But it is in the process of reconciling antinomies that the texts of domination seem to overflow their enforced limit and to crack.

### [ III ]

How do we undo the logic of an event? Since we cannot reverse history or undo the damage done to others through documentation, we can perhaps try to read the limit as the site of a repressed knowledge, of a meaning that

seems regressive or at odds with what the record keeper intended. Consider, then, the account of slave trading meticulously recorded by Peter Blake, captain of the slave ship *James*, owned by the Royal African Company, on a journey from the West African coast to the island of Nevis in the Caribbean. From March 1675 to June 1676, in the early years of the restoration of the English monarchy, Blake will provide his readers (presumably the directors of the company and maritime authorities) with a running record of his activities and encounters, the routes and lanes of his travels, the roads and streets of the West African towns where he exchanges slaves for a variety of goods, and his conversations with local agents. He will provide a detailed account of everyday relationships, forms of exchange, and, of course, an inventory of his purchases. Blake's logbook will become an important source of evidence for historians of the middle passage. Here we have an archive that provides a lexical reality and fulfills a cataloging impulse.

*Sunday 16th.* . . . came to anchor athwart Anamaboe. I sent my pinace ashore to the Factory to know if they would deliver me any Slaves and Corne, they sd they had no orders, but would have had goods, and I had no Ord'rs to goe into the road, I also sent for 30 paire of shackells I lent them and they told my mate they had slaves in them and could not let them out lest they should run away. . . .

*Wednesday 19th.* Anchored in Cape Corso road, went ashore and applied myself to Ag't Mellish, also made my Compl't of the Slaves I rece'd at Wyemba by his ord'rs, he replied they were paid in by the King for a debt and it could not be helpt. . . .

*Monday 24th.* . . . sent ashore the remains of all the goods, except Powd'r and Brandy, I went ashore, gave the Agent an acc't of the sales of what goods I had disposed of, and what slaves I have bought. . . .

*Thursday 27th.* . . . Capt. Eaton (in the *Merchants Delight*) sett saile from this place bound for Anamaboe and Agga there to take in Slaves

and Corne, and from thence to Accra and Wyemba, to take in their Slaves, this morning W<sup>m</sup> Bartlett and . . . by ord<sup>r</sup> of Agent Mellish came aboard and counted and marked all our Slaves. . . . went ashore and we adjusted my acc<sup>t</sup> w<sup>ch</sup> was all right onely 1 Chest of Knives wanting. . . .

*February, Tuesday 1st.* . . . the Generall replied he would not deliver him upon w<sup>ch</sup> I demanded leave to come into the road w<sup>th</sup> my ship. He sd I might come into the road but he would not suffer me to touch the Interloper. Grible, the Master of the Interloper, made great Compl<sup>t</sup> how he tooke his goods and gave him w<sup>t</sup> price he pleased for them, also he made him pay extraordinary prices for slaves, I demanded by w<sup>t</sup> Commission he brought the sd Grible downe, he being an English man and English vessel. The fiscall sd . . . [they] thought him to be a hollander . . . he was brought down by mistake. I replied I did think he had affronted the King of England in seazing his subjects and imprisoning them in at Axem in time of peace and that he had affronted the Royall Compa. in harbouring and protecting English Interlopers w<sup>ch</sup> were the Companies enemies.

Slaves are Blake's most valuable cargo; the success of his mission depends on his capacity to affirm their presence as property and to deliver them from the West African coast to the Caribbean. Crucially, the terms—indeed, the moral economy—of trade demand strict bookkeeping. But Blake's cargo presents problems of perception and representation. Are the slaves to be identified as persons or commodities? We know that Blake cannot represent them as persons because to do so would undermine the moral claims on which Atlantic slavery is built. And yet he cannot simply represent slaves as commodities, reduced to the status of the other goods that he carries on his ship, things such as ivory. In fact, like other captains of slave ships on the West African coast, Blake goes out of his way to segregate goods, gold, and slaves.

In Blake's representation of slaves, the focus is on their physical condition, which affects their exchange value: we learn, for

instance, that there are thin slaves and fat slaves. Describing them in terms of exchange value, he avoids assigning them the quality of the human—thoughts, feelings, language. On board the slave ship, then, the slaves don't have a perceptual or phenomenological presence; and yet they seem to have desires and demands that challenge the fetishism of commodification. Here we can recall Karl Marx's famous claim about the mysterious character of the commodity form, the act of substitution whereby products of labor become commodities and "sensuous things which are at the same time supersensible or social" (165). It is this substitution—or its impossibility—that creates the problem of representation: slaves are commodities. They don't exchange the products of their labor. Indeed, they are the ones exchanged for other commodities, in this case sugar. The exchange assumes equal value between the commodities exchanged, but this equation is challenged by the slaves' insistence on their supersensible or social form. As the following example illustrates, the slaves demand recognition; they make demands that other commodities cannot make:

*Monday 7th.* . . . Anchored in Suckindee road . . . Mr. Fowler Aylmore came aboard and said I should have my Corne as fast as I would take it . . .

*Tuesday 8th.* . . . they would have given my men old Corne w<sup>ch</sup> was not fitt for o<sup>r</sup> Slaves to eate—after some dispute I had other Corne. . . .

*Wednesday 9th.* rec'd 100 Chests of Corne. . . .

*March, Wednesday 8th.* Sett saile from Dickey's road bound for the Barbadoes.

*Thursday 16th.* . . . a Turnadoe—w<sup>th</sup> much thund<sup>r</sup> lightening and raine this day I put all my slaves out of Irons. . . .

*Wednesday 22th.* . . . I called all my thin Slaves aft. w<sup>ch</sup> came from Wyemba and found 25 of them . . . gave my slaves tobacco and pipes. . . .

*Tuesday 28th.* Caught fish and agreed to give for every 10 fish pt. of brandy, gave my Slaves 10 fish in their suppis.

*Wednesday 29th.* Caught albycours and sharks. gave the Slaves albycours.

*Thursday 30th.* . . . gave the Slaves tobacco and pypes and albyc'r in their Suppis. . . .

*Friday 31st.* . . . gave the Slaves fish in their suppis. . . .

*Monday 17th [April]* . . . a stout man slave leaped overboard and drowned himself.

*May, Sondag 21st.* Made the Island of Barbadoes Att Anchor in Kerley Bay.

*Monday, 22nd.* Mr. Steed went aboard and looked on o'r Slaves

*Tuesday 23rd.* orders to prepare the Slaves for sayle on Thursday.

*Wednesday 24th.* o'r Slaves being shaved I gave them fresh water to wash and Palme Oyle and Tobacco and Pipes.

*Thursday 25th.* Mr. Steed and [blank] came on board to sell o'r Slaves—wee sould 163 Slaves.

*Friday 26th.* wee sould 70 Slaves.

How does one represent the body whose needs must be met so that it can be preserved as a commodity?

Blake's deepest anxieties concern the difference between the rate of exchange set by the company (the ratio of slaves to sugar), which is constantly unsettled by market forces. In this context, his archiving project is not intended to recuperate histories and experiences, or simply to record the event for posterity; it is a powerful mechanism for rationalizing the terms of exchange. In the West Indies, Blake finds himself against the wall as

competing trade agents and government authorities accuse him of subterfuge, of working against the code that governs the slave trade:

*Wednesday 14th.* . . . Went on board of His Majesty's Friggott the *Phoenix*, being sent for by General Stapleton, the Governor of this Island . . . the General asked mee wherefore I brought downe byte Slaves and did not bring down mine owne Gold Coast Slaves Also said he did believe that I had on boord all the refuse of the Shippes that were att Barbadoes. I did assure him that they were the whole cargo of the *John Alexander*. Had they come downe in their owne shipp, it had been much moore for the Company's Interest—was always my opinion.

*Thursday 15th.* I went ashoare, to discourse about the disposall of o'r Slaves and they (the Agents) shewed mee the Company's instructions which was not to sell good Slaves under 19 *l.* per head and if they could not gett their price that then they should send their shippes downe to Jamaica and that they said that the Man of Warr had given out that they were refuse Bite Slaves soe that they could not sell them but att an Under Rate soe wee continued to Consider of

To justify his voyage in market terms, and to defend himself against the charge of under-selling slaves, Blake has to provide a comprehensive account or catalog of the mortality of slaves on his ship. And it is here, amid the economies of death, that the body of the slave emerges:

[Account—continued:]

1675	Day	Men	Women	Boys	Girls	
Ditto	24			1		Received from Wyembah with a dropsy and departed this life of the same disease
Dirkey's Cove —March	26		1			Rec'd from Wyemba thin and soe Continued Untill Death
Ditto	5		1			Miscarryed and the Child dead within her and Rotten and dyed 2 days after delivery.
Att Sea	13	1				Rec'd from Wyembah very thin and soe Continued untill hee departed this life.

	Day	Men	Women	Boys	Girls	
Ditto	15	1				Rec'd from Wyembah very thin and fell into a flux and soe Continued untill his death.
Att Sea	1676	18	1			Rec'd from Wyembah very thin and soe fell into a Consumption and dep'ted this life.
Ditto	30	1				Rec'd from Wyembah very thin and soe Continued Wasting untill death.
Ditto	31			1		Very sick and fell overboard in the night and was lost
Ditto	Aprill	6	1			Rec'd from Wyembah thin and Consumed very low and after dyed of a Great Swelling of his face and head.
Ditto	14	1				Rec'd from Wyembah thin and dyed of a flux
Ditto	15		1			Rec'd from Wyembah Sickened and would not eat or take anything.
Ditto	16	1				bought by mee and died of a flux
Ditto	17	2				The one rec'd from Wyembah and dyed of a flux. The other rec'd ditto who Leaped Over boord and drowned himself.
Ditto	20		1			rec'd thin at Wyembah and dyed of a Consumption.
Ditto	21			1		rec'd from Weyembah with a dropsy and soe dyed.
Ditto	26		1			bought by myselfe and being very fond of her Child Carrying her up and downe wore her to nothing by which means fell into a feavour and dyed.
Att Sea	May	1	1			Rec'd from Anamabooe departed this of a flux.
Ditto	2		1			Rec'd from Agga and departed this life of a flux.

Alive the slaves are anonymous; in death they are embodied. In the records of their death, we have details about their bodies, their ways of living and dying.

I find myself fixated by that unnamed woman who died on 5 March. Blake had acquired her at Wyemba when she was already thin and wasting. She miscarried and then died two days later. Who was she? What was her name? Where did she come from? Who were her people? Blake does not answer these questions, but he does not foreclose them either; in providing us with an aggregation of death to justify his losses, his ledger enables us to imagine bodies. With the bodies before

us, we imagine the ontological status of what was supposed to be chattel. But this imagining, the reanimation of the dead, as it were, still confronts us with the double bind of the archive and its conceptual limit: we try to imagine the bodies in Blake's logbook as subjects but come up with an inventory; at the same time, this record of death seems to open up the past and to release some unintended possibilities. There are no names, just numbers or, better still, figures. Can these figures be imagined as bodies or even selves? Can the voices of the subjected rise out of, or beyond, the inventory that was intended to encase them in the Atlantic crypt?

One could, of course, animate the invisible archive of the slaves from the experience of the present, as Michael Harper does in "American History":

Those four black girls blown up  
in that Alabama church  
remind me of five hundred  
middle passage blacks,  
in a net, under water  
in Charleston harbor  
so *redcoats* wouldn't find them.  
Can't find what you can't see  
can you?

Or put the archive under the pressures of what Diana Taylor would call the repertoire of "embodied expression" (16). One could follow the example of NourbeSe Philip and try to undo the archive through performative gestures that return us to the archive without acceding to its mandate. Here, through graphological displacements, the event comes to be inseparable from its limit:

*Zong! #17*

there was  
the this  
the that  
the frenzy  
leaky seas and  
casks  
negroes of no belonging  
on board  
no rest  
came the rains  
came the negroes  
came the perils  
came the owners  
master and mariners

*Zong! #18*

the this  
the that  
the frenzy  
came the insurance of water  
water of good only

came water sufficient  
that was truth  
and seas of mortality  
question the now  
the this  
the that  
the frenzy

not unwisely

If Blake wants a ledger in which everything is intelligible, Philip undoes this project by insisting on what Édouard Glissant would call "the right to opacity" (189).

[ IV ]

An insistence on opacity leads me back to where I began. Does literature answer a need? How is it to be understood? Literature? The need? I started my editorship of *PMLA* five years ago with a column that raised the questions posed to me by my grandmother on my departure for the university: "What is this thing called literature? What work does it do?" For the last five years, I have been engaged with the best that is thought and written about literature in the profession as it is practiced in North America and beyond. I don't think these years have given me a definitive answer about what literature is, or what work it does, but they have provided me with the best possible education on both the singularity and the multiplicity of the literary experience. Editing *PMLA* has taught me that literature is many things, takes different forms, and speaks different languages but also that it is unified by reading. It is in the literary text that writers, readers, and critics meet. And although I'm not sure what need literature fulfills, I'm convinced that we keep on reading and writing about literature, often in what seems to be defiance of its presumed death, because it meets a need that evades simple naming. This being my last column as editor of *PMLA*, I leave you in the good



hands of my successor, Wai Chee Dimock, and I thank you for having given me the opportunity to be at the center of a remarkable community of readers.

*Simon Gikandi*

## NOTES

1. Gayatri Spivak explores the cultural implications of the demand that one name the margin and be its voice ("Marginality" 55).

2. This is an adaptation of the opening of Jacques Derrida's "Tympan": "Does philosophy answer a need? How is it to be understood? Philosophy? The need?" (x).

3. Kyoo Lee provides an exemplary model of reading otherwise.

4. I address these questions in greater detail in "Rethinking the Archive of Enslavement" and in *The Atlantic Crypt: The African in the Archive of Slavery*, a book I am completing. Versions of the argument that follows have been presented to audiences at New York University (5 Mar. 2014), George Washington University (28 Oct. 2014), Brown University (4 Mar. 2015), and Connecticut College (13 Apr. 2016).

5. My use of the crypt metaphor follows Abraham and Torok.

6. To assert the radical and moral differences between blacks and other races, Jefferson claims that in matters of beauty and desire even the black's own judgment is "in favor of whites declared uniformly as is the preference of the Oranootan for the black women over those of his own species" (265). Where would Jefferson locate Sally Hemmings in the order of nature? I owe this question to a conversation with Faith Smith, who elaborates how sexuality functioned in economies of slavery in "Caribbean Literature and Sexuality."

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