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Homage to Michel Fabre

Introduction

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Introduction

Hélène Le Dantec-Lowry et Anne-Marie Paquet-Deyris

- 1 It is an honor and a pleasure to present this collection in memory of Professor Michel Fabre, who passed away in August 2007. His contribution to the study of American literature and to the field of African American studies is immense and long-lasting. He directly influenced many among us: some of us had been his students, others were his colleagues, and some were both. We read and cited his work, worked under his guidance during our doctoral studies, and, we hope, partially inherited some of the passion he always showed.
- 2 We felt a desire to demonstrate the admiration and the acknowledgment of the members of the *Association Française d'Etudes Américaines* through this volume of its on-line journal, as Michel had been one of the association's founding members and was one of its scientific directors. Along with his wife Geneviève Fabre, he was also a co-founder of the *Cercle d'Etudes Afro-Américaines*, a group of scholars involved in African American and diasporic studies, who invited numerous Black artists, from the United States, the Caribbean and elsewhere. Among other memorable speakers including prestigious visual artists from the US and the Caribbean, was African American novelist Ernest J. Gaines whom we had the pleasure of welcoming and hearing at the Sorbonne in 1996.
- 3 The constant care Michel gave to organizing international conferences, research symposia in France and abroad, and to supervising the work of his doctoral students naturally fostered a very specific dynamic, which still unites a diverse group of researchers all over the world. As an example, Geneviève Fabre¹, Anne-Marie Paquet and Arlette Frund will soon organize a research symposium at the Du Bois Institute of Harvard University, bringing together a group of international scholars to work on "Sense and Sensibilities in African American Culture," focusing on Toni Morrison's work², the public response to Richard Wright's novels or the representation of the Black subject in African American cinema³, among other subjects. Most of the pieces written by Michel and Geneviève Fabre will lay the foundation for further exploration in very diverse fields. Henry Louis Gates Jr., Director of the Du Bois Institute, one of the first internationally-acclaimed scholars to pay homage to Prof. Fabre, provided us

with the moving and vibrant text included in the present volume, originally given as a speech when he was made Doctor *Honoris Causa* by the University of Caen in 2007. As Skip Gates underscores, “Michel was one of the first scholars to show that African American literature was world literature”. Gates’s contribution reflects the wide variety of tributes paid here to Michel.

- 4 We also chose to insert poems by James Emanuel, an African American poet and retired professor who has been living in voluntary exile in Paris for the last decades. Michel knew Emanuel well and particularly admired the short *Haiku* form he adopted from Japanese poetry and adapted to his own needs. Emanuel’s most personal piece, suggestive of the mutual admiration and friendship between the two men, is probably “Syllables for Michel”. Jazz suffuses Emanuel’s poetry, functioning as further recognition for Michel’s love of music, in the piece called “Chansse Evanns”, a jazz musician, who also lives in France. Evans gave one of the most moving live performances during “Michel Fabre: A Gathering of Friends” at the Ecole Normale Supérieure d’Ulm last January.
- 5 Trinidadian-born artist Kenneth Alfred’s engravings also demonstrate the wide-ranging facets of Black culture and the breadth of Michel Fabre’s interests. His two series of blue-tinged, watery motifs entitled “Blue Bottle” and “Maljo” are part of a rich variation on forms and materials Alfred has been working on since permanently settled in France [kenalfred@yahoo.fr].
- 6 Such a strikingly broad spectrum of works testifies to Michel Fabre’s eclectic and vivid tastes, literally turning him into a universal Renaissance man. He not only wrote and showed incredible depth of knowledge about African American literature, but he was also interested in the history, sociology, and artistic production of Blacks in the United States and across the African Diaspora.
- 7 Beyond literature, Michel Fabre showed insatiable curiosity for many aspects of American and African American life and history. In his teaching, indeed, he was also a professor of American Studies. In the 1970s, language departments in French universities began to teach not only advanced technical language skills and literature but also “civilisation américaine” offering students classes about the history and culture of the country they were studying. Thus, Professor Fabre taught courses on the history and culture of the United States. Again, his interests were varied, ranging from history and sociology to painting, music and the cinema, and several of his students wrote doctoral dissertations related to those fields.
- 8 His studies also led him well beyond the United States. He was one of the first to pay close attention to the literary productions of people in the Caribbean and in Africa through what was then called “Post-colonial literature”. As Kathie Birat reminds us in her essay, he made the fiction and poetry of many Caribbean – and also African – authors part of the research interests in both Europe and the United States [Birat]⁴. This systematic effort to bring hitherto poorly-known writers to the fore is very much a part of Fabre’s legacy and further proof of his generosity.
- 9 In this regard, Fabre was a precursor in a way: he paid attention to varied geographic areas and did not limit his interest to the United States, bringing together many writers who were descendants of slaves within a diasporic community. While recognizing the specificities in each region, he also demonstrated some common threads that bound together the various peoples of the Black Diaspora. This attitude is in some ways reminiscent of the approach used by Paul Gilroy’s, the Black sociologist, who theorized

this transnational vision in his 1993 groundbreaking *The Black Atlantic. Modernity and Double Consciousness*. In it, Gilroy considers a space, the *Black Atlantic*, which includes the Black populations from Africa to the Americas, following the routes of the slave trade, and also comprising European cities where migrants from the Caribbean islands and various other parts of the world went in search of better opportunities. He describes the constant migrations of millions of people uprooted from Africa as a foundation for an identity and a tradition that had long been ignored, despised and erased by a dominating western world. For Gilroy, it is within this Atlantic space that Black culture is constantly being constructed and deconstructed through continuities and fractures that bind Black populations in the Americas and in Britain with the African mother-continent and with each other. It is fluid and mobile and is constantly being processed and not simply tied to one specific community or national territory. This vision of a Black Atlantic site thus redefines a “political geography of race,” to use Eric Lott’s words from his review of Gilroy’s book in *The Nation* (Lott, 1994). Languages, traditions, and culinary ways are thus transported and transformed [Kekeh-Dika].

- 10 In such a view, Black culture is transnational; it is not limited by the constraints of national boundaries and it transcends ethnicity, proving that the different identities in the Black Atlantic are not mutually exclusive. Various manifestations and representations of this Atlantic culture are reflected in music and writing, which create a shared narrative. Gilroy thus (re)explores the transnational dimension of Du Bois’s “double consciousness” and Richard Wright’s “double vision”. Gilroy clearly sets out to demonstrate the constant mutations in Black culture across time and fixed borders:

...the Black Atlantic can be defined, on one level through a desire to transcend both the structures of the nation-state and the constraints of ethnicity and national particularity. These desires are relevant to understanding political organizing and cultural criticism.

(Gilroy, 1993:19).

- 11 A diasporic vision emphasizes Blackness as a “common ground” [Julien]; it also stresses the commonalities of Black history. Slavery is at the heart of Black culture as it was an experience shared by the various communities within the Atlantic space; it created a sense of transnational identity among Blacks, while simultaneously leading to economic and cultural hegemony in the western world⁵.
- 12 Some of the essays included in the present volume echo these concerns by inscribing the literatures and the visual representations of different populations in a Black diasporic community that ranges from the United States to the Caribbean, Africa, and Europe. We see not only the literary and artistic productions of authors and visual artists, we also discover the various transfers and interactions between countries. For example, Marc Mvé Bekale examines the resonance and divergence between fictional works by Richard Wright and Cheikh Hamidou Kane, respectively from the United States and Senegal [Mvé Bekale], while Melvyn Stokes analyzes the political stands of Dahomey (now Togo)—born Kojo Touvalou Houénou as he travels back and forth between France, Africa and the United States in the first quarter of the twentieth century [Stokes], and while Maïca Sanconie examines the presence of African American artists in France [Sanconie]. The variety of the articles presented here and the sites they represent—be they countries of origin or places traveled—clearly stress the diasporic dimension of Black creations and echo the multifaceted interests in Michel Fabre’s own work.

- 13 The pluri-dimensional aspects represented here, as well as in Michel Fabre's own work, also echo another aspect of research on Blacks in various places on both sides of the Atlantic, that of *hybridity*. This term, borrowed from biology, actually takes different forms depending on the topic examined and the angle of approach, whether fiction or history, for example. Various synonyms have thus been used, including miscegenation, interaction, mixing, creolization and even "mongrelization" – or also "mélange" and "métissage" in French. Depending on the period considered or the point of view, hybridity has been viewed negatively or, on the contrary, has carried very positive meanings of creativity and resistance. It is sometimes a slippery concept that avoids simple definition and keeps evolving. Still, hybridity has been crucial to the understanding of diasporic cultural mixture, where "the diasporized meets the host in the scene of migration" and hybridity is thus "logically entwined within the coordinates of migrant identity and difference, same or not same, host and guest" (Hutnyk, 2005: 79-80)⁶.
- 14 Hybridity is sometimes portrayed in problematic terms when it is conceived in relation to the mixing of different "races", a mixing that, for a long time, was perceived as threatening the sanctity of white hegemony. The nationalistic movements in Latin America in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and the pro-slavery and, later, Nativist movements in the United States clearly frowned on any idea of condoning creolization. For example, forty states in the U.S. legally sanctioned miscegenation by officially condemning interracial marriages, and it was only in 1967 that a Supreme Court decision, *Loving v. Virginia* 388 U.S., ended these interdictions. The *one-drop rule* in the United States also categorized people on the basis of any trace of African ancestry, and thus set apart those who would be classified as non-whites. It helped a slave-owning society bring together a heterogeneous group of people—especially during the first decades of enslavement on American soil—into an easily identifiable (and "enslavable") population⁷. In such contexts, hybridity was thus rejected because of the fear of racial mixing and the notion of white superiority, but, as Didier and Eric Fassin convincingly argued recently, it must also be seen in terms of "domination and exploitation". Indeed, in devising racial categorization, "class prejudice and economic interests were at work" (Fassin & Fassin, 2006: Introduction, 23).
- 15 Elizabeth Cunin, a specialist on Latin America, further notes that hybridity was perceived as a biological menace endangering the European conception of racial hierarchy, a political threat in terms of the demands by mulattos and, finally, a danger to social organization (Cunin, 2001). Thus, in the United States at least, children of mixed couples could not be recognized and were included into an undifferentiated "Black" group.
- 16 Behind the rejection of racial mixing and the setting of legal barriers to prevent it, there was the fear of perverting the purity of the white "race". As anthropologist Jean-Louis Amselle warns, there is still sometimes an underlying notion in the concept of hybridity that "humanity is composed of separate lines that, finally, are going to merge. Behind the theory of hybridity (*métissage*), there is that of cultural purity" (Amselle, 2000). Hutnyk further stresses that for some theorists "the idea of 'hybrid identities' relies upon the proposition of non-hybridity or some kind of normative insurance", of anterior purities (Hutnyk, 2005: 82). Thus "hybridity" can entrap its user into the vision of essentialist categories that would sexually mix and necessarily

deteriorate and weaken. This is reflected in the use of categories and of numerous words (bi-racial, half-caste, quadroon, octoroon, mulatto, mestizo, métis, etc.) to classify people of mixed parentage, which “tend to pathologize those who cannot easily be fitted into the taken-for-granted racialized binary opposition” (*ibid.*, 90).

- 17 Instead, we should consider hybridity as “a process of transformation [...] fed by successive confrontations” and shocks created “by the contact of different temporalities” that “upsets the routine of social relations” (Bureau & Mbia, 2001: 3, 26). Indeed, hybridity is a dynamic process, ever changing depending on the specific context⁸. It can lead to pain and suffering and a feeling of entrapment in a “double consciousness”; it can also give birth to guilt and maladjustment. These feelings are often represented in Black writing [Julien; Mvé Bekale]. However, as an evolving process, it can also be seen in creative terms through which new shapes and meanings are formed into what Homi Bhabha calls a “third space” (Bhabha, 1994) [Mvé Bekale]. This can also be done deliberately, as when a writer uses the language of his people by recreating patois, créole, or other dialects and even “fabricating” them, thus freeing indigenous language from European stronghold and stressing orality [Birat]. Cooking and its representation also offer a space for creativity and liberation. Andrée-Anne Kekeh-Dika examines for example how Barbadian writer Austin Clark recomposes his past and his self through culinary reminiscence about his own life and about the cuisine of the former slaves forcibly taken to the islands of the West Indies [Kekeh-Dika]. Some writers also revisit conventional genres as John Edgar Wideman and Percival Everett have done with the baroque, reworking strategies of representation [Feith].
- 18 In this sense, writing must not be dissociated from the social and political environment in which it is produced. As Claude Julien reminds us in the introduction of his essay on John Wideman’s memoirs, Michel Fabre believed that a work of fiction was not an isolated object. In some ways, the writer may become a “translator” who provides meaning about a world and feelings that encapsulate a different experience, putting two different worlds in contact, in communication. Visual artists may function also as “passeurs,” or as messengers.
- 19 This also raises the question of recognition: some authors and visual artists are categorized as Black writers or painters only, fixed in an all-encompassing identity that stresses their Blackness above and to the exclusion of all else, verging sometimes on “exoticization,” as was often true for many of the artists shown in Paris galleries [Sanconie]. The Black Atlantic, hybridity, and creativity must indeed also be perceived in relation to power: in terms of access to publishing or to shows and exhibitions. More than that, we must raise the question of exclusion concerning all Blacks in the diaspora. Who is accepted, who is rejected? On what grounds? What does this imply for interethnic relations as well as for intra-communal differentiation? The possibility of *mélange*, hybridity – often only recently admitted or accepted – should not erase the acceptance of some at the expense of the many who are still systematically oppressed.
- 20 Moreover, envisaging the commonalities of the varied people in a Black Diaspora should not erase their specificities. The slave trade and its forced migration, the obligatory settlement in the Americas as well as a continued history of oppression based on skin color, are beyond any doubt factors that have forged bounds of recognition and shared destiny. Still, local historical contexts, different notions of caste, class or color gradation⁹, and varying degrees of resistance definitely challenged

the all-encompassing idea of one undifferentiated Black culture. Thus, the cultural production of one specific location should not systematically be amalgamated with that of all other sites of the diasporic migration [Ledent]. Obviously, much work still needs to be done to define the Black Atlantic, to understand concepts such as hybridity, and to examine their influence and implications.

- 21 To raise one last point on this question, it seems interesting to consider hybridity in terms of passages and interactions, from one theory to the next, one writer to another, and also over different sites. Sabine Broeck considers for example the way Toni Morrison utilizes some of Ralph Ellison's theories and conclusions, while managing to select and suppress them and to rename them with a different agenda in mind. Memory—including its transformations and its suppression or emphasis—also participates in a “genealogy” that keeps Black discourse alive. Indeed, memory should also be part of the analysis when studying the culture(s) and traditions of Blacks in the Diaspora. Bénédicte Ledent, for her part, describes the growth of Black literary studies in Belgium—and by extension in Europe—showing the constant interactions and exchanges within another “diasporic” community: academia. Michel Fabre was the perfect example of an academic who stressed sharing and exchanges: as an intellectual, he constantly brought different people into contact, generously provided information about the recent works he had read, and he participated diligently in meetings and conferences dealing with various subjects during which his input was greatly appreciated. In his personal work, he also managed to accentuate passages and interaction as he studied the presence, reception, and influence of Blacks from the Americas and from Africa in France, and especially in Paris, in a multidisciplinary fashion. The international conference he organized in February 1992 at the Sorbonne Nouvelle University in Paris, in collaboration with the Du Bois Institute from Harvard University, Columbia University, and the University of Mississippi, is exemplary of this. He brought together scholars, novelists, poets, visual artists, and musicians from all over to discuss “African Americans and Europe” in a five-day gathering that was not only fascinating and intellectually invigorating but was also a joyful event fondly remembered by all its participants. His own work also crossed disciplinary lines as he analyzed fiction and biographies, but also tackled socio-historical analysis¹⁰.
- 22 Another point common to most of the essays presented here is that of *resilience and agency*. These notions became more common in the late 1960s and early 1970s as a growing number of scholars tackled the history and cultural productions of African Americans, often with a militant stand. Previously, Blacks had mostly been described as people without a proper culture, as dehumanized Sambos, who were dependent on the dominant white group for survival. There had been exceptions to this simplistic vision of course. In the United States, for example, sociologists such as Du Bois and Frazier, and historians such as Woodson, had offered a much less stereotypical vision that often took into account the variety of Black experience—including class and geographical differences—and the incredible challenges and difficulties most of them had to face (racism, exploitation, poverty). Still, the notion of helpless individuals restricted by a hostile environment was dominant. As universities first accepted African American students after the passage of anti-discrimination measures in the 1960s and then later recruited African American professors, and also as more white students and scholars demonstrated increasing interest in Black studies, publications that stressed the resistance of African Americans and their creativity became more frequent. Michel

Fabre's studies participated in this transformation by emphasizing the incredible wealth and endurance of Black literature and culture in a harsh context.

- 23 While the notion of *agency* has had different meanings depending on the author and the context¹¹, it has always defined the capacity of people to act and react and to resist the coercion of power in an often hostile world. This notion means that African Americans have been able to devise means to face exploitation while keeping their cultural specificities alive. For example, scholars focusing on the agency of slaves have underlined the fact that enslaved people were able to fight the *peculiar institution* and its consequences in various ways—through rebelling, working less efficiently, stealing from their masters, etc.—but also that they managed to preserve some of their cultural characteristics or devise their own ways of looking at the world in terms of religion, folklore, kin structure and gender relations, among other aspects. The line between preservation of original patterns and reaction to situations of enslavement and domination has not always been clearly demonstrated. Moreover some more recent writers have wanted to emphasize agency so much—sometimes as a way to counter the earlier racist and simplistic representation of slaves as helpless—that they have tended to downplay the harshness of the slave system. Still, most observers today agree that there were at least some forms of agency and resistance in spite of extremely dire circumstances¹². Over time, this fact has been recognized about several aspects of African American history, for example concerning political struggles—with the fight by African Americans to obtain rights as urbanized migrants and industrial workers from the 1920s and 1930s or the civil rights struggle of the 1950s and 1960s—or relating to women's history.
- 24 The incredibly rich body of work on the history of Black women since the 1970s has indeed shown the related problems of racial and sex discrimination they have had to face throughout American history. Studies have also demonstrated the ways they have devised to face the difficulties related to a position defined at the intersection of racial, gender, and class impositions¹³. Thus sociologist Megan Comfort examines the ways in which women, whose male partners are incarcerated in California's San Quentin State Prison, develop strategies to mitigate the consequences of incarceration that so deeply affect African American individuals, couples, families and communities. She never ignores the negative aspects linked to imprisonment and their impact also on those who remain "outside"¹⁴. However, she also examines the enduring communication between inmates and their female companions, showing the strategies created to maintain ties beyond prison bars at a time when a growing percentage of African American men spend a non-negligible proportion of their time in prison [Comfort].
- 25 Throughout their history in the Diaspora, Blacks in the United States and elsewhere have consistently devised means of resisting and surviving that took various forms, from collective struggle to individual or family strategies. The cultural productions of Blacks also testify to their resilience.
- 26 Much work has been done in the Americas, in Europe and in Africa to describe and analyze the various communities of the Black Diaspora, their history and their culture. African American and diasporic studies have become very exciting fields with new sources and theories emerging regularly. Claire Parfait and Laurence Cossu-Beaumont provide another example of the possibility for researchers to examine Black history and literature in yet another novel way [Cossu-Beaumont & Parfait]. Their own research on book history clearly shows how much the examination of the making and

distribution of a particular work or of the literary production by a specific author can add to our understanding of Black history. Their focus on William Wells Brown's *The Narrative of William Wells Brown, A Fugitive Slave, Written by Himself* (1847) and on the Richard Wright Papers at the Beinecke Library of Yale University complements well the work started earlier in France on the history of African American books. Michel Fabre's examination of the reception of Black writers in France was part of this, as is the work recently conducted on the publishing history of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by Claire Parfait (2007)¹⁵. Cossu-Beaumont and Parfait convincingly show that much remains to be done in this area, including analyzing the publication and distribution of African American nonfiction, and especially history¹⁶.

- 27 Michel Fabre was without question one of the pioneers in the quest for knowledge about Black populations and he constantly shared his enthusiasm about them with us all. His curiosity was boundless and, in the last few months of his life, Michel showed great excitement about continuing his work on the *Revue nègre*, which premiered on October 2, 1925 in Paris and led Josephine Baker to fame. Unfortunately, this new endeavor remained incomplete, but his legacy is still very much alive, and it is our hope the diverse collection of contributions presented here will help ensure that it carries on for many more years.

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NOTES

1. See for instance G. Fabre's seminal article "Genealogical Archeology or the Quest for Legacy in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*", *Critical Essays on Toni Morrison*, Nellie McKay Ed., 105-114.
2. See A.-M. Paquet, *Toni Morrison. Figures de Femmes*, 1996.
3. See also, on African American cinema, A.-M. Paquet, «The Gullah Kaleidoscope: *Daughters of the Dust* (1991) by African American Film Director Julie Dash », 2006, in *www.Cercles.com* No. 15.
4. The names in brackets here and elsewhere in this introduction refer to the articles and essays published in this issue.
5. See also *Between Camps* by Gilroy (2000).
6. In "Hybridity," John Cutnik offers an analysis of the notion of hybridity and a historical summary of its changing terminology and uses [Hutnyk, 2005]. The British anthropologist thus recalls the evolution from an ethnocentric point of view that regarded indigenous customs and traditions as fading through contact and acculturation to a later stress on the resilience and adaptation of original cultures.
7. Historian Ira Berlin, whose work focuses on North America, has analyzed the transition and multiple passages from African to Creole identities for the slaves imported from Africa as early as 1619. (Berlin, 1998; 2003).
8. On this notion of "métissage" as a dynamic process see also Gruzinski (2001) and Le Dantec-Lowry (Forthcoming).
9. For example, while the U.S. defined all descendants of slaves, whether they had any white ancestry or not as "Blacks," some forms of "métissage" were admitted and enforced in other countries such as Brazil, including sometimes related definitions that included other groups such as Native American populations.
10. One of his early books for instance dealt with the historical and cultural background of Harlem in *Harlem, ville noire*, written with Paul Oren (1971). See also *La Rive noire* (1999) and *From Harlem to Paris* (1993) on the presence of black American writers in Paris.
11. Cynthia Kraus, who has translated Judith Butler into French, gives a concise and clear explanation of the various meanings of this term (Kraus, 2005).
12. Starting in the 1990s, works on slavery tried to offer a more balanced view of the slaves who were trapped in a terrible system of terror and intimidation, but who still managed to define their own life up to a point. See for example Stevenson (1996), Franklin & Schweninger (1999), and Dunaway (2003).
13. Much has been published on African American women and it would be impossible to cite all studies here. We may refer to the editorial work done by Darlene Clark Hine, who has made a tremendous effort to give an exhaustive view of Black women in the United States in the last thirty years (Hine, 1990).
14. See her recent book on the subject: *Comfort*, 2008.
15. Laurence Cossu wrote a doctoral dissertation on Richard Wright that included much on the publication of the writer's works. As for Cécile Cottenet, she devoted her Ph. D. to the publication and reception of the writings by Charles Chestnutt and Jean Toomer. Both were students of Geneviève Fabre at Paris VII University.
16. Of course, very pertinent studies have already been published concerning the writing of Black sociologists such as Du Bois and Frazier (in French, see for instance the recent books by Chapoulie, 2001 and Saint-Arnaud, 2003). Still, much remains to be written about them and other Black intellectuals and especially on the distribution and reception of their work in the United States and elsewhere.

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