

Culture-Crossing in Madison Smartt Bell's Haitian Trilogy and Neo-Captivity Narrative

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Abstract. This article investigates Madison Smartt Bell's Haitian trilogy as a neo-captivity narrative that combines in new ways the conventions of the slave (captivity) narrative and the Barbary captivity narrative. Furthermore, it examines the culture-crossing of the character of Doctor Hébert in the course of the successful slave uprising of Saint Domingue (1791-1804). Captivity, I argue, constitutes the central theme and structuring device and also triggers Hébert's culture-crossing in a reversed Hegelian master-slave dialectic that needs to be read together with Riau's enslavement. Lacking the social recognition of a free subject, Riau attains his independent self-consciousness through physical resistance and Saint-Domingue's distinct black culture. Whereas Hébert learns to actively resist slavery as he crosses over into the Haitian society. In their struggles, both undergo the three phases (preliminal, liminal, post-liminal) of rites of passage.

Keywords: captivity narratives, Hegelian dialectic of master and slave relationship, Haitian Revolution, Madison Smartt Bell, rites of passage

INTRODUCTION: THE TRANSNATIONAL TURN IN CAPTIVITY STUDIES

When in 2004 American novelist Madison Smartt Bell completed his trilogy about the Haitian Revolution, he anticipated the “transnational turn in captivity studies” (Sayre, 2010: 347). Set on the Caribbean island Saint-Domingue during the overthrow of the French colonial regime, the trilogy includes *All Souls' Rising* (1995), *Master of the Crossroads* (2000), and *The Stone that the Builder Refused* (2004). In Bell's novels, captivity is a central aspect, running the gamut of neo-slave narratives to hostage-taking to prison narratives and gender-related bondage. Predominantly represented as a tool of oppression, captivity also involves culture-crossing and the reversal of black slaves and white masters analogous to the Barbary captivity narrative. Only this time the “Barbarians,” i.e. the African slaves, overturn the socio-political structures without the characteristic return to the allegedly superior civilization.

Bell's Haitian trilogy does not concur with the more recent shift to the eastern hemisphere, or "Barbary," after 9/11. Instead, Bell's fiction targets Haiti which, according to Thomas Reinhardt, has remained a greatly underrated presence in western historiography, memory studies (Reinhardt, 2005: 246-261), (historical) fiction (Nzengou-Tayo, 2007: 184; Munro, 2007: 163ff) and even Black Atlantic scholarship (Celucien, 2012: 43). Considering the present emphasis on the eastern hemisphere, one could argue that Bell's Haitian trilogy reminds us of the limitations that "hold captive" scholarship in this field.

So far, scholars have examined the trilogy in relation to historical fiction (Trouillot; Munro; Nzengou-Tayo; Peabody). In this context, Jeremy Popkin has explored captivity materials during Haiti's revolutionary years. By contrast, this article focuses on the literary and cultural significance and representation of captivity in what I call Bell's "neo-captivity narrative." Since Bernard W. Bell coined the term in 1987, the genre of "residually oral, modern narratives of escape from bondage to freedom" (Bell, 1987: 289) has been extended to texts dealing with slavery and the contesting cultural forces inherent in the making of national narratives, marginalized subjectivities, and the constructions of race and gender (Rushdy, 1999: 95; Smith, 2007: 168-185; Newman, 2013: 26ff). In Bell's neo-captivity narrative, captivity constitutes the central theme and structuring device, which is reflected in the use of genre-typical tropes. I will therefore provide an analysis of the culture-crossing of the character of Doctor Hébert, which is triggered by his captivity by the Haitian slave rebels. I argue that, when read with respect to the neo-slave narrative of Riau, a dualistic version of the Hegelian master-slave dialectic emerges. While Riau, as former slave, lacks the social recognition of an independent subject, he derives his own independent self-consciousness from physical resistance and Saint-Domingue's rich slave culture. Whereas Hébert, as a free subject, learns to actively resist slavery as he crosses over into the solidifying Haitian culture. Captivity, then, is revealed not as a test through which national or individual exceptionalism is attained, but as part of an existential human life experience: it can only be overcome once humans are willing to risk their lives.

BELL'S HAITIAN TRILOGY AS NEO-CAPTIVITY NARRATIVE

Captivity in Bell's trilogy encompasses physical, psychological and intellectual imprisonment, and culturally confined states of consciousness. Captivity is situational, multifaceted, and polysemic. It is a force that shapes the identities of Bell's characters, most notably those of the French doctor Hébert and Riau, the "Eternal Maroon" (Nzengou-Tayo, 2007: 193).

Hébert's story includes conventional tropes of the Barbary captivity narrative, such as the reversed status of black and white bodies within a larger racial and political struggle, "barbarity"/"savagery" versus "civilization," religious conflict, and culture-crossing. Bell intersperses motifs from slave narratives and plantation literature, e.g. the lascivious, callous white master and the jealous, equally callous white mistress (e.g. Michel and Claudine Arnaud), but dissolves clear distinctions into unexpected, even uncomfortable alliances. For example, driven to alcoholism and self-hatred by her abusive husband, Claudine projects her own oppression onto one of the female slaves. In one of the most violent scenes, she tortures Mouche and her unborn baby to death (Bell, 1995: 91ff). Haunted by this deed, Claudine mutilates her hand and begins to participate in the vodoun ceremonies. Through her self-mutilation and spiritual border-crossing she (re)gains recognition, even respect, from Haitian society (Bell, 2000: 405).

The attacks of the "Barbarians" invoke the stock figures of the "vengeful blacks" by blending the figures of "devilish Native Americans" and "savage Africans." Burning cane fields dramatically illuminate the faceless "host of devils" (Bell, 1995: 158) as they maraud and kill on the plantations. But these scenes are complicated when narrated and focalized by Riau. Without diminishing his involvement in murder, rape, and violence – scenes that are as difficult to read as Claudine's murder of Mouche – Riau juxtaposes the atrocities of black vengeance to those of slavery, thus correlating the violence of the institution of slavery with the violence of the black revolution. According to Riau, Claudine's self-mutilation and willingness to shed her own blood is a powerful act of psychological liberation, which he himself reenacts over and over again as long as he lacks the socio-political recognition of a free subject. Thus, Bell's representation of the slave's uprising intertwines revenge with the deliberate choice and psychological liberation of physical resistance.

The trilogy is framed similar to Frederick Douglass's famous *Narrative* (1845) with its prologue by white abolitionists and Douglass's final pledge to the sacred cause of black emancipation. However, Bell replaces the conventional abolitionist voices with that of an unnamed French soldier who makes no pretext of his racist-national biases. With this disclaimer of the usual white "editorial apparatus" (Gould, 2007: 19), Bell emphasizes that the genre is not free of partiality and claims to (false) authority. The trilogy's epilogue similarly inverts Douglass's appendix. Riau adds his afterword in 1825, the year when Haiti agreed to compensate former French plantation-owners for their losses in exchange for being officially recognized as independent nation. Compared to Douglass's final pledge, Riau's appendix questions rather than affirms any specific narrative as he unites the white plantocracy and black revolutionaries of the past with freedom fighters – of all skin colors – of the future.

Bell further reinforces the persistence of captivity with intermittent episodes of Toussaint's prison narrative, a strategy reminiscent of Eduard Glissant's play *Monsieur Toussaint* (1961). However, the roles of jailor and captive, interrogator and interrogated are reversed. Themselves entrapped in an oppressive system, interrogator and jailors increasingly comply with the "imperial" (Bell, 2000: 340) Toussaint. The result is a prison narrative that interrelates the personal hardships of the prisoner with the systemic mechanisms of internment, highlighting the larger political struggle that reaches from Fort de Joux in the Alps to Paris and further across the black Atlantic.

Master of the Crossroads and *The Stone that the Builder Refused* increasingly characterize Toussaint in terms of the black trickster and shape-shifter, which counterbalances the fact that, in spite of his literacy and the carefully composed political correspondence, his defiance against the colonial empire does not include the triumphant prose of other black prison narratives (Babson, 2012: 107ff). Instead, Toussaint's need of scribes highlights the collaboration between black leaders, soldiers, and white prisoners, persisting even within prison walls. Through figures such as the guardsman Franz, or Riau and Hébert – deracinated characters, maroons, renegades – Bell's trilogy rewrites the Barbary captivity narrative into a complex neo-captivity narrative.

HÉBERT AND THE HEGELIAN MASTER-SLAVE DIALECTIC

Bell's introduction of Hébert foreshadows his later culture-crossing: one moment the doctor looks over the shoulders of the white master Arnaud, participating in the torture of a slave mother and her child through his gaze; the next he finds himself in the position of a runaway slave pursued by Arnaud's bloodhound. As yet, his culture-crossing has barely begun, and the chapter concludes with Hébert's recognition of Arnaud as white master, "standing just as the doctor had first seen him," as if Hébert's chase like a runaway slave had been "an illusion" (Bell, 1995: 26). Although Hébert comprehends, at least theoretically, the difference between the instinctive resistance of an animal and a slave mother's cognitive decision to kill her child rather than have it enslaved, he even apologizes for killing Arnaud's bloodhound. Paradoxically, then, Hébert understands what is at stake concerning issues of bondage, freedom, and violence, but still affirms Arnaud's status as white master.

Contrary to Hébert, Riau has chosen active resistance over submission or mere self-defense. What Riau lacks, however, is the recognition as free human being by the society in which he lives. Arnaud, for instance, only sees in him "something [...] like a chicken or a horse or an ox" (Bell, 1995: 40). Riau himself distinguishes between those blacks that are instinct-driven and those that consciously decide to resist against their will to self-preservation. He describes runaway slaves whose goal is survival as animals, e.g. Jean-Pic, who breathes "with his sides blowing in and out like the skin of a frog"; and Aiguy, who "jerk[s] away like a horse" (Bell, 1995: 41; 42).

Bell thus establishes Hébert and Riau as "dual protagonists" (Bell, 2001: 203) within a Hegelian master-slave dialectic in the context of Caribbean colonialism. Hegel's dialectic of lordship and bondage stems from *The Phenomenology of Spirit* and is rooted in "the French (master) and the German (slave) cultures in the early nineteenth century in his native Prussia" (Villet, 2011: 40). Even so, Susan Buck-Morss considers Hegel's master-slave dialectic to be directly related to Haitian events which were disseminated in German newspapers and political journals. She argues that Hegel brought "into his text [*The Phenomenology*] the present, historical realities [of the Haitian Revolution] that surrounded it like invisible ink" (Buck-Morss, 2000: 846).

According to Hegel, master and slave are related in mutual bondage through a struggle for self-consciousness and recognition. With the help of a regime of dominance and fear, the master gains self-consciousness through the slave's recognition and material abundance through the slave's labor (Hegel, 2010: 221). By contrast, the slave is denied social recognition and assigned the legal status of a mere object, or thing. For the purpose of self-preservation, the slave acquires a fearful self-consciousness and even negates the consciousness of self altogether. Since, however, any consciousness of self requires the presence of an "Other," the master's self-consciousness turns out to be utterly dependent on that "Other," i.e. the slave. The slave's bondage becomes the master's bondage. Indeed, according to Hegel, it is the slave who emerges as the one possessing independent consciousness, because as a "thing" existing for another, the slave withdraws entirely into "thinghood" so that he is no longer dependent on the master. As Hegel postulates, the recognition of his independence comes about through slave labor (Hegel, 2010: 69).

Production as a means of self-liberation has remained highly contentious among postcolonial theorists. Orlando Patterson asserts that the master's recognition derives not from the slave but from other masters (Patterson, 1982: 99). According to Frantz Fanon the master does not seek recognition from the slave but only his labor (Fanon, 1986: 216ff), and the slave does not find liberation in his work and is, therefore, unable to develop an independent self-consciousness (cf. footnote 8, Fanon, 1986: 220-221). In his trilogy, Bell likewise departs from Hegel's postulation. But unlike Fanon, Bell does not stress the slave's desire of being like the master. Instead he underscores the fundamental difference between the colonial culture of the whites and the lived practices and culture of the blacks.

In Hegel's dialectic, the slave is given an external reflection of his self as subject, as opposed to a mere "thing," in the product of his labor. Work brings about the slave's transformation from "thinghood" into an independent self-conscious being for whom the master functions as "Other." From here, it is only a small step towards demonstrating subjectivity through a "life-and-death struggle" which, Hegel insists, is the only way to freedom:

And it is solely by risking life that freedom is obtained. [...] The individual who has not staked his life, may, no doubt, be recognized as a Person; but he has not attained the truth of this recognition as an independent self-consciousness. (Hegel, 2010: 66)

The Hegelian dialectic illuminates Hébert and Riau's "life-and-death struggles," even though they set out from diametrically opposed positions. Momentarily cast into the position of the runaway slave, Hébert experiences the master's domination and his own "thinghood." But his apologetic self-defense shows that he remains complicit with the mindset of the master. Whereas Riau uses violence without apology, but lacks the social affirmation of his highly conscious and independent self. However, opposed to Hegel's idea of self-liberation through labor stands Saint-Domingue's vibrant black culture.

THE THREE STAGES OF HÉBERT'S CULTURE-CROSSING

Both Hébert's culture-crossing and Riau's attainment of social recognition can be divided into the three transitory phases, or rites of passage, that ethnographer Arnold van Gennep has identified: the separation rite (preliminal), the transition rite (liminal), and the rite of (re)incorporation (post-liminal) (van Gennep, 2004: 11). I base my use of these phases for culture-crossing on Robert N. St. Clair and John H. Koo's assessment that van Gennep's classification well captures the stages of "separation from one's mother culture," the "transition into a host society, and the eventual acculturation and incorporation into the new host culture" (St. Clair and Koo, 1991: 132). These rites of passage illuminate Hébert's dramatic and dynamic transformation contrary to Martin Munro's contention that

Hébert changes by *not changing* and by remaining the same, by remaining true (if inscrutable), and constant (if open and evolving), in his morals and in his unfailing commitment to care for the sick and wounded, no matter their color or race. (Munro, 2007: 171; emphasis in original)

Bell fashions the separation rites of Hébert and Riau as tales of death, loss, and enslavement. Both transgress boundaries and leave behind known cultural realms. Considering their opposite positions in colonial society – Hébert belonging to the master class, Riau to the slaves – their

experiences differ drastically. Where Riau is forcibly abducted from Africa and suffers the trauma of the Middle Passage before he joins the black revolutionaries on Saint-Domingue, the doctor's preliminal phase begins with a love affair and ends with his release from captivity.

While the tropes of death and the loss of self-consciousness in Hébert's love relationship with Nanon reflect his separation from his former self (Bell, 1995: 106ff; 138), the affair itself is described in the terms of a master-slave relationship in which the doctor becomes Nanon's "slave." This status is reinforced by the monkey that he presents to Nanon as a gift. Amusedly, she notes the monkey's resemblance to "a little man," which makes Hébert – who is a little man – feel "uncomfortably apelike" (Bell, 1995: 108). The monkey not only showcases the doctor's reversed status in this relationship, but also the arbitrary racist assumptions of colonial rule based on "the Linnaean system," according to which "[t]he Negro was neither ape nor man, but [...] somewhere between the two" (Bell, 1995: 136). Hence, the doctor's seemingly independent self, as in Hegel's dialectics, turns out to be the opposite: he is a captive to the epistemological violence of the colonial discourse of slavery.

During his captivity by the black rebels, his captors decide that he only briefly wears "slave shackles" (Bell, 1995: 313). He remains "at liberty to go more or less where he like[s]," even though he is not "truly free" (Bell, 1995: 236). He is also reeducated: he is taught alternative medical practices to become an herbal doctor or "dokté-feuille"; he learns about the history of the native Caribs who are extinct because they "would not be slaves" (Bell, 1995: 253); and he becomes one of Toussaint's scribes. Hébert even begins to identify with his captors and their cause: "We – *they* ask so little" (Bell, 1995: 310; emphasis in original). But the new knowledge unhinges the doctor, and throughout his captivity he feels "a fear that twisted his vitals" (Bell, 1995: 247), indicating the preliminal phase with all its uncertainties. The end of his captivity also concludes his rite of separation, and he is left "deracinated" (Bell, 1995: 250):

Someone was calling *Antoine, Antoine!* [...] The doctor remained as if rooted [...]. He looked over his shoulder to where Toussaint sat his horse, his face sealed away in the shadows; he looked for Riau but could not find him. He was free, alone, his freedom was equal to his isolation. After a long time, [...] he broke from his place and began walking [...] to join the other white people. (Bell, 1995: 325)

Hébert no longer identifies with the master class and instead looks to Toussaint and Riau for orientation, but they do not recognize him as one of their own yet. In fact, Riau's absence from the scene marks his own liminal status. Although Hébert "returns" to his former home culture, like Riau, he now occupies a liminal position.

According to cultural anthropologist Victor Turner, liminality signifies "a confusion of all the customary categories" (Turner, 1967: 97). This means that the status of those who occupy the transitional stage is ambiguous, paradoxical, even scandalous, and that the normative categories of a culture and society are confounded. Individuals undergoing this rite of passage are "neither here nor there," and "*betwixt and between* all the recognized fixed points" (Turner, 1967: 97; emphasis in original) of the social structures.

Hébert's liminality manifests itself when the doctor finds himself in a state of invisibility and nakedness betwixt the socio-cultural structures of both societies, black and white. When greeting an African *dokté-feuille*, he is "looked at [...] as if he were some apparition" (Bell, 1995: 328); and when thrown in with a crowd of French supporters of the revolutionary cause who wave "the *pompon rouge*; the doctor rather [feels] naked without one of his own" (Bell, 1995: 367). Although Hébert's liminal status resembles Riau's literal nakedness during his vendettas against whites, Hébert still refuses to engage in violence except for self-defense.

Meanwhile, Riau is given the hitherto lacking social recognition in Toussaint's army. Still, he frequently defects to the liminality of *marronage*, because he disapproves of the "whiteman" ways in Toussaint's rebel army. As Nzungou-Tayo notes, Bell uses Riau's character to question Toussaint's political choices, e.g., the "crushing of Moysé's rebellion" (Nzungou-Tayo, 2007: 186). But Riau also rejects Toussaint's socio-economic vision which perpetuates gross inequalities along color lines. What these structures lack, Riau's defection suggests, is a visible black culture and a syncretistic way of life that meshes African with indigenous Haitian and Creole practices and beliefs – the life that Riau leads as *maroon* at Batoruco Mountain (Bell, 2000: 161ff). Hence, in spite of his recognition as captain, Riau chooses to remain in a liminal position.

During their states of liminality, Riau and Hébert share the experience of being in-between life and death. Riau calls it the state of being a *zombie* who performs his battle duties as a dead slave "cutting cane" (Bell, 2000: 240). Hébert as camp doctor likewise turns into "a blood-soaked *zombi*

carpenter of shredded flesh and bone” (Bell, 2000: 273). According to Turner’s concept of liminality, the bonds that subsequently develop between them are signs of “*communitas*”: a direct, equal, and supportive relationship between individuals that bypasses the established hierarchical social structures, but that can only be understood in direct relation to it as a kind of non-hierarchical anti-structure (Turner, 1969: 94ff). However, *communitas* is a transient phenomenon, and Riau is the first to be (re)incorporated into Haitian culture.

Central to Riau’s final rite of passage is his fight with Guiaou, since in Guiaou he meets an equal. According to Hegel, the slave’s “life-and-death struggle” with the master involves the highest state of independence, but may lead either to the master’s destruction or to a reversal of the power structure, i.e., the slave’s domination over the master. If the first, no recognition is forthcoming; if the latter, the struggle begins anew. Only the meaningful recognition by an equal, Hegel asserts, can resolve the impasse of the master-slave dialectic (Hegel, 2010: 65-66). In short, freedom is achieved only through mutual recognition.

Guiaou presents an equal because he has “already died at least one time before” (Bell, 2000: 395) in the struggle for emancipation, and his recognition of Riau is meaningful because he is part of the distinct Haitian culture that begins to take root in the course of Toussaint’s campaign. Therefore, Riau “hold[s] his empty hands out to [him]” (Bell, 2000: 395) in a gesture of mutual recognition, which is the key to his full liberation and the end to his liminality. As Riau puts it in retrospect: “Riau and Guiaou had each made the other more free than either one had been before” (Bell, 2000: 648). Not only is he able to bury the zombie in himself, Riau now effortlessly slips into his captain’s rank.

The end of Hébert’s liminal phase is once again related to Nanon. After rescuing her from her lover and quasi-owner Choufleur, Hébert suggests that she returns to him as if nothing had happened. As in his encounter with the slave owner Arnaud, Hébert keeps the master-slave relationship firmly in place. Arguably, Nanon’s is one of Bell’s most ambivalent representations of captivity in the nexus of race and gender (Nzengou-Tayo, 2007: 193; Trouillot, 2001: 194). Nanon seems to be another tragic mulatta who escapes from bondage only with the help of a white male. However, Bell underlines the doctor’s rejection of male dominance in his quest to liberate her. Hébert symbolically relinquishes his possession of her before a priest (Bell, 2000: 509), while a black Hai-

tian woman healer (as opposed to the white French doctor) ensures Nanon's survival (Bell, 2000: 529). Furthermore, by flouting all dueling conventions – Hébert aimlessly fires into the sky or behind himself – Hébert subverts his chivalric rescue mission into a “circus” (Bell, 2000: 535). Although the characteristic confusions of the liminal phase are still at work here, the episode triggers Hébert's marriage to Nanon and the acknowledgment of their son Paul. Still, to be fully (re)incorporated into the newly emerging Haitian society, he needs to physically resist the colonial regime, even at the risk of his life.

Hébert's liberation from the mindset of the master takes place at the Battle of Crête-à-Pierrot (1802). This historical event is best remembered for its unequivocal black resistance against the overpowering reinforcement of the French troops (Popkin, 2012: 124). Bell contrasts Hébert's deliberate commitment to Haitian independence with the historical impressment of Doctor Descourtilz who, “taken captive by Dessalines [...] was forced to treat the black soldiers” (Popkin, 2012: 124). Hébert's decision to stay demonstrates that instead of choosing self-preservation à la Descourtilz, he consciously places himself inside of an independent black Haitian society, openly rejecting French colonial rule and slavery. For him, there is “[n]o surrender” (Bell, 2004: 474), only fight until death.

Hébert's recognition of the slaves' independence through his own “life-and-death-struggle” is, in turn, met with his recognition by the Haitians. He is now identified as “pa blan,” even “nèg” (Bell, 2004: 548; 699). Parallel to Riau, Hébert is (re)incorporated into black society through a vodoun celebration that leads to literal self-effacement. As Riau leaves behind his zombie-like state, Hébert realizes that this “troublesome creature,” the monkey, has also “escape[d]” (Bell, 2004: 573). From now on, he no longer hesitates to physically resisting enslavement; or, as he states: “There are certain injuries which can only be washed out in blood” (Bell, 2004: 591).

CONCLUSION: “*WETÉ MÒ AMBA DLO: HAITI*”

To conclude, let me return to Riau's epilogue by considering Bell's enigmatic final tableau, which shows neither Riau nor Hébert in a Hegelian “life-and-death-struggle,” but in the ambiguous poses betwixt attack and defense. Hébert is unable to shoot at any of the men and his pistol

“drop[s] from his slackening hand and discharge[s] as it hit[s] the ground” (Bell, 2004: 688). Meanwhile,

[...] Maillart flung himself on Riau and [...] covered Riau so entirely that it was not clear whether he meant to attack or somehow to shield him. [...]. Guaiou moved first, his *coutelas* rising to strike at Maillart's back, but Daspir, [...] swung his saber with a force that [...] sent Guaiou's severed head tumbling to a stop against the hedge. [...] the headless body took two steps forward, past the white man and the black one entwined on the muddy ground, and then as though its intention had changed, stabbed the *coutelas* deep into the earth as it collapsed. (Bell, 2004: 690)

Why do neither Riau nor Hébert strike back as Guaiou does? I want to suggest that this tableau highlights Riau and Hébert's paradoxical poses betwixt resistance and protection in a last moment of *communitas* outside of the hierarchical power constellations of both colonial and post-colonial Haitian society. This emphasis on *communitas* amplifies the ambiguity of Riau's epilogue, signaling that moments such as these are short-lived at best and quickly forgotten. By placing the renegades' *communitas* next to Guaiou's “life-and-death-struggle,” Bell underscores that the struggle for independent self-consciousness and social recognition is existential to being human. Hegel's master-slave dialectic, it seems, will not cease.

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