



Dix-Neuf

Journal of the Society of Dix-Neuviémistes

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/ydix20>

Precursors of Antislavery: Reassessing the Académie Française Poetry Competition of 1823

Helen McKelvey

To cite this article: Helen McKelvey (2021) Precursors of Antislavery: Reassessing the Académie Française Poetry Competition of 1823, *Dix-Neuf*, 25:1, 70-89, DOI: [10.1080/14787318.2021.1900501](https://doi.org/10.1080/14787318.2021.1900501)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14787318.2021.1900501>



© 2021 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 20 Mar 2021.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 776



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Precursors of Antislavery: Reassessing the Académie Française Poetry Competition of 1823

Helen McKelvey 

School of Arts, English and Languages, Queen's University, Belfast, Northern Ireland

ABSTRACT

Focussing on a selection of the poems from the 1823 Académie Française's *Prix de Poésie*, which had for its title *l'Abolition de la traite des noirs*, this article will explore the key imagery underpinning representations of slavery and arguments for abolition at the time, answering the critical neglect of antislavery poetry and bringing fresh insight to our understanding of the perceptions and representations of early nineteenth-century slavery. Using postcolonial theory, I will interrogate and problematise the narratives the poets have reproduced, as well as analyse the development of abolitionist discourse over the course of the early nineteenth century.

KEYWORDS

Slavery; abolition; poetry; Victor Chauvet; postcolonial theory; Académie Française; Néali

Introduction

In 1823, almost exactly halfway between the initial and final abolitions of French slavery, the Académie Française welcomed entries for its poetry competition on the subject of *l'Abolition de la traite des noirs*. Fifty-four poems were entered into the competition, of which five were published. Whilst the last two decades have seen several important studies on nineteenth-century literature of slavery published by scholars such as Christopher L. Miller and Doris Y. Kadish, as well as work on prior centuries from Michael Harrigan, Doris Garraway and Madeleine Dobie, nonetheless, 'the institution of French slavery, and especially its cultural ramifications in literature and other arts, remains seriously underexamined' (Miller 2008b, 67). This is particularly the case when it comes to poetry. Whilst this is in part due to the relative scarcity of slavery poetry, this article seeks to challenge the traditional absence of poetry in nineteenth-century Francophone slavery studies, where it often receives little more than a cursory review. The article takes as its primary source five published poems from the 1823 Académie Française competition: Edouard Alletz's 'l'Abolition de la traite des noirs' and Anne Bignan's 'l'Abolition de la traite des noirs, Epitre aux souverains de l'Europe' (both of which received *mentions honorables*), as well as Martial Barrois's 'Les Temps sont arrivés où le ciel plus propice', Ange-Benjamin Marie Dumesnil's 'l'Esclavage' and, in particular, the winning entry, Victor Chauvet's 'Néali, ou la traite des nègres.'¹

CONTACT Helen McKelvey  hmckelvey02@qub.ac.uk  School of Arts, English and Languages, Queen's University, University Square, BT7 1NN, Belfast, Northern Ireland

© 2021 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way.

With the exception of Yvan Debbasch's 'Poésie et traite, l'opinion française sur le commerce négrier au début du XIXe siècle' (1961), there have been no sustained critical analyses of these poems. I argue that this corpus, small though it may be, allows us to interrogate some of the main propositions and limitations of abolitionist thought and to build our understanding of slavery and its perceptions in the early nineteenth century. While these poems are far from canonical works, Roger Little (2008, 18) argues that it is not within the canon that we find the reflection of 'real' attitudes towards slavery. As Christopher Prendergast (1990, 25) notes: 'poetry articulates "reality" only by way of its reworking of prior literary and linguistic forms.' As such, this article will explore the complex relationship between these poems and the reality they sought to represent, or as Prendergast (1990, 24–27) puts it, the problem of 'history in poetry.' In these poetic rewritings of slavery narratives, we find French writers drawing on a range of intertexts in order to grapple with the issue, not just of the *slave trade* (the capture of people on the coast of Africa for transport across the Atlantic, made illegal in 1815), but of *slavery* (the economy in the Americas based on the labour of enslaved peoples) itself, and by extension we can learn more about these poets' understanding of race and their contribution to a larger global movement towards abolition.

The *Prix de Poésie* itself was created in 1660 and was the oldest of the *Académie Française*'s competitions. Throughout the eighteenth century, the purpose of the competition shifted to being a '« leçon profitable au public », souvent sur des sujets de piété ou de morale, mais aussi sur des thèmes classiques' (Sabourin 2014, 146). After the restoration of the *Académie* in 1803, the *Prix de Poésie* continued to run competitions that reflected these ideals, especially during the Restoration. At this time, many of the themes of the competition aimed to glorify charity and religious piety, such as the 1822 *prix extraordinaire*, awarded to Édouard Alletz for his poem 'Le Dévouement des médecins français et des soeurs de Sainte-Camille dans la peste de Barcelone' (Sabourin 2014, 147), and the 1826 and 1827 prizes, which dealt with the Montyon prizes and 'L'Affranchissement des Grecs' respectively.

In her survey of poetry in the *Académie Française* during the nineteenth century, Lise Sabourin (2014, 155) illustrates how the *Prix de Poésie*, despite continuing to be awarded throughout the century, was considered to be a relic that was 'passé de mode, tantôt usé par la prégnance du pouvoir, tantôt dévalué par les lauréats récurrents.' Chauvet, Bignan and Alletz frequently submitted entries to the competition, yet none of them would become *académiciens* or gain great fame as poets. Nonetheless, these poems were published in individual volumes following the competition. All of the poems are in the alexandrine form, the typical form of poems submitted to the competition (Sabourin 2014, 146), and, since the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries 'the preferred form of elevated and even "noble" genres of epic and tragedy' (Peureux 2012, 36). Furthermore, the *Secrétaire Perpétuel* of the *Académie Française*, François-Juste-Marie Raynouard, suggests that poetry is the ideal site to engage with 'de hautes questions de morale ou de politique,' and that it is beneficial 'de consacrer dans le langage poétique ces principes sacrés, ces maximes généreuses qui doivent rester gravées dans tous les cours' (Raynouard 1823), highlighting the contemporary belief that poetry provided a unique space in which to engage with moral, political and ethical debates. Although the *Prix de Poésie* diminished in significance over the course of the century, this competition clearly tapped into the long traditions of the *Académie Française* and the value that this institution conferred

on poets and subjects alike. However, this is a two-edged sword, as these poets sought (evidenced by their repeated entries to the competition over the years) to gain some reputation for their poetic efforts, rather than being motivated by deeply held abolitionist convictions. Ardent abolitionist Abbé Grégoire, in an 1826 publication, wrote: ‘Si, à défendre la cause des esclaves et de tant d’autres infortunés, il y avait à gagner des pensions, des parchemins, des cordons, des titres, le ban et l’arrière-ban de la littérature voleraient à la curée; mais les malheureux ne peuvent offrir que des bénédictions et des larmes d’attendrissement’ (1826, 70–71). At first sight, this damning indictment reflects poorly on the poems of our study. Nonetheless, whilst their abolitionism may have been self-serving rather than altruistic, I argue that these poems are, in fact, important sources that reveal the reworkings of contemporary discourses on slavery and abolition.

Yvan Debbasch, in his 1961 article ‘Poésie et traite,’ argues that ‘c’est bien en 1822 [when the competition’s title was announced] que le tournant est pris; et c’est au succès, déjà prévisible, du nouveau mouvement abolitionniste, que l’Académie Française avait entendu la même année apporter sa contribution’ (333–34). However, in light of the weakness of French abolitionism, and the fact it would be another twenty-five years before slavery would finally be abolished, it seems too strong an assessment to contend that at this time the success of abolitionism was inevitable. Even so, it is evident that the Académie was indeed responding to something in the zeitgeist that once more drew attention back towards slavery, making this corpus of poems a particularly rich resource for investigating this turn. Debbasch remarks that they allow for an examination of the average nineteenth-century French person’s opinion: ‘on saura ce qu’il lit [...] ce qu’il assimile et ce qu’il rejette; on connaîtra, en d’autres termes, les sources et le contenu d’une opinion moyenne en formation’ (338). Yet Debbasch’s work does not analyse the more deeply held biases and contradictions that plagued France’s abolition movement. Although these poems are inherently inclined towards abolitionism, and so it is impossible to use them as a barometer for public support for abolition, they do provide important insights (334–35). This article will therefore pick up from where Debbasch ended his brief and limited survey of the competition, analysing and discussing the many ways these poems can shed fresh light on antislavery rhetoric at the beginning of the nineteenth century by placing them within their socio-historical context, and bringing them into conversation with postcolonial scholarship for the first time. As illustrated by a recent issue of *French Studies*, the intersection of postcolonial studies and nineteenth-century studies has been particularly fruitful (Forsdick and Yee 2018), and so by reading these poems through the lens of postcolonialism, I will build on the existing scholarship on this corpus.

Firstly, I will examine the wider context of slavery and abolitionism, before exploring tropes such as the ‘Black Venus’ myth played out in the rewriting of the story of an enslaved woman, Nealee, and consider the role of voice in these poetic rewritings. Though the appropriation of slave voices is extremely problematic, since it can misrepresent the slaves and become a conduit for the poet’s own anxieties rather than a voice for the slave, I will consider how, in these abolitionist works, it might nonetheless be an effective means of rehabilitating nineteenth-century French attitudes towards black people, by reassigning agency to the enslaved people and challenging the hegemonic white voice. The second part of the article will investigate some of the key images and tropes used to describe slavery and the slave trade, as well as represent the enslaved.

These include motherhood, utopian visions, and animal imagery, as well as the ever-present fear of slave rebellion. Thus, I will question the ways in which the poets of this competition use imagery to push an abolitionist agenda yet are simultaneously self-contradictory in their representation of enslaved characters. Moreover, I will reveal the underlying discourses in these poems that shaped how society viewed black people. The approach to these poems taken in this article will therefore shed new light on the questions of slavery, abolitionism and race in the early nineteenth century, and make a valuable contribution to our understanding of the development of antislavery writing. Whilst they could be little other than abolitionist, given the nature and title of the competition, were these poems truly antislavery works, or are they merely precursors of a discourse that would take many more years to develop?

A Turning Point for the Trade?

It would be inappropriate to read these poems without due reference to the socio-political context of the 1820s. The history of the abolition of the slave trade in France is long and complex. With increasing pressure from enslaved populations in the colonies, the French Revolution of 1789 and the Enlightenment values of *liberté*, *égalité* and *fraternité* seemed to promise an immediate end to slavery. Indeed, in 1794, slavery and the slave trade were abolished in theory, if not in practice, with the exception of Martinique. However, the tumultuous years that followed these events soon gave way to the reinstatement of slavery under Napoleon in 1802. Having been one of the first European nations to abolish the trade, France also became one of the last. Whilst David Brion Davis (1975, 563) argues that, globally, ‘by 1823, the black slaves of the new world had completed at least the initial stage of their long ordeal of emancipation,’ in France the abolitionist movement was not at the forefront of politics; rather, it was seen only as a part of a larger colonial and economic problem (Démier 1995, 282–83). Furthermore, the violence of the Haitian Revolution and the shock of the loss of France’s most profitable colony lived long in the memories and literature of the French, hardening French attitudes against emancipation and leading to the censoring of the antislavery movement (Kadish 2005, 108). Davis also proposes that the reluctance to push forward with abolitionism was due in part to the instability caused by the French Revolution itself. He argues that ‘the bewildering pace of revolutionary events left little time for antislavery organisation’ and that, as such, emancipation would further damage already shaky institutions of power (Davis 1975, 345).

Under increasing pressure from England’s ‘forward-thinking parliament’ (Démier 1995, 280), France made promises in 1814 to abolish the trade within five years. Following the defeat at Waterloo and the subsequent impositions and restrictions placed on France, anti-British feeling was widespread in France, and the weakness of French abolitionism by comparison to its British counterpart may be considered in part an outworking of this sentiment. Francis Démier (1995, 280–81) argues that French abolitionism was a moderate movement, focussing on reform rather than abolition, and led to France’s marginalisation in the European context of growing antislavery. The laws and decrees passed in 1815 following the Congress of Vienna were largely ineffective, allowing the trade to continue almost completely unhindered, with over three hundred illegal expeditions leaving the port of Nantes alone between 1814 and 1831 (Daget 1971, 54–

55). Despite the loss of Haiti, the trade remained profitable enough for the French to stall the progress of the abolitionist movement (Démier 1995, 281–82). There was some growth in antislavery sentiment and writing in the earlier decades of the nineteenth century in spite of its controversial and censored nature: Abbé Grégoire was outspoken against the trade, publishing several critical works which argued for the intellectual and moral equality of black people, while Germaine de Staël, her son Auguste and her son-in-law, the Duc de Broglie, were key spokespeople for the antislavery movements that developed in the early 1800s. The 1820s, however, saw a marked increase in writing dealing with slavery. Following the publication of Thomas Clarkson's *The Cries of Africa to the Inhabitants of Europe* (1822),² there was a significant upsurge in the volume of literature dealing with the slave trade from a diverse range of authors. This increase in literary output on the topic suggests a certain reinvigoration of, if not abolitionist fervour, at least interest in the slave trade.

On the political front, the *Société de la morale chrétienne* (of whose abolitionist committee the Duc de Broglie would later become President) was formed; this was a society noted for its antislavery fervour and strongly linked to English abolitionism. By addressing the Chamber of Peers in 1822 on the issue of the slave trade, Broglie established himself as a new champion for the cause, rendering the cause of abolition more respectable (Cohen 1980, 188). Nevertheless, there remained some reticence within French society, even within abolitionism itself, regarding slavery. William B. Cohen (191) suggests the reasons for this were twofold: the debate was perceived as premature, in the absence of widespread support for abolition, and there was an ambiguity in the abolitionists' attitude towards black people; emancipation, it was claimed, could not come at the cost of endangering the planters. The July Monarchy, starting in 1830, would produce conditions that were much more conducive to the antislavery cause. Although slow, and crippled by contradictions (Miller 2008a, 199), the 1820s were a decade of quiet growth for the antislavery movement, and provided a new, discreet beginning, rather than a dramatic turning point. By paying attention to understudied poems penned during these years, we encounter the sources and arguments that drove antislavery rhetoric in the early stages of France's new abolitionism and confront the ambiguities inherent within discourses of French abolitionism.

The availability of English abolitionist work in French is evidenced across the entries to the poetry competition, with frequent reference made to Mungo Park – the Scottish explorer – whose accounts of travels in Africa were reproduced in English abolitionist Thomas Clarkson's essays; the widespread availability and reproduction of these two works gave Park's tales, which by 1822 were almost 25 years old, 'une seconde jeunesse' (Debbasch 1961, 343). Dumesnil's poem follows Clarkson's work very closely, mirroring almost exactly the preface of *Cri des Africains* by referring to slavery in ancient and biblical times, as well as more contemporary accounts. Debbasch (1961, 337, 340–42) argues that since the authors wanted their poems to be realistic, they each rely on the accounts available to them, and highlight the basic themes of the horror of the trade, hopelessness and death without adequate engagement with moral and philosophical questions surrounding the trade. This echoes the criticism levelled at the English Romantic poets who wrote against the slave trade: despite encompassing a larger period and many more poets (including some of the foremost poets of the age),³ contemporary critics accused such poetry of challenging 'vapid sentiment, stock description, stereotyped

characters and situations, and patently false portrayals of Africa and of Afro-Caribbean slaves' (Richardson 1999, x). Nonetheless, these rewritings of the reality of the slave trade and slavery through the lens of poetry facilitated an engagement with slavery that otherwise did not happen. Indeed, despite the formal criticisms that may be levelled at these poems, one of their distinguishing features as abolitionist texts is the attempt to mobilise slave voices and reassign agency to their protagonists.

Nealee, Néali or Néala: Black Heroines, Slave Voices and Agency

Nowhere is the reliance on historical sources more evident than in the winning poem: Victor Chauvet's 'Néali, ou la traite des nègres', predicated entirely on a rewriting of a Park story. In April 1797, Park's diary recounts a journey undertaken alongside a Muslim slaving caravan. In the entry for April 24th and 25th of that year, we find mention of an enslaved woman named Nealee who, having refused food, collapses on the march. After the party is attacked by bees whilst drinking at a stream, Nealee is left badly injured, and then refuses to proceed. Nealee is whipped twice for her defiance, after which Karfa, the slave master, commands she be carried to the campsite. The following day, there being no improvement in her situation, Nealee is strapped to the ass, but is unable, or perhaps refuses, to prevent herself falling off. The slave caravan turns against her and, stripped of her garments, she is left to die in the road. Park ([1799] 2011, 331–34) notes that Nealee's fate increased the pace of the march, since all feared a similar fate. Variations on this story are to be found throughout the poetry competition and wider slavery literature. Chauvet's 'Néali' resituates the narrative of slavery, desire and rebellion in the Middle Passage. The poem follows an explorer, a French Mungo Park, a first-hand witness to Africa and the trade. At the beginning, Chauvet's explorer-narrator identifies himself with the Europeans and, by extension the slavers, using the first-person plural – 'nos pas curieux' ([1823] 1864, 317), 'où pour nous' (318) – to indicate his complicity both in the events he is recounting, and in the slave trade. However, by the close of the poem, the narrator becomes disconnected from his white, European audience: he now refers to 'Français, vous tous [...] / Qu'à ma voix dans vos cœurs naissent l'horreur profonde' (327), suggesting that his experiences aboard the slave ship have now separated him from his compatriots.

This retelling of the explorer's experience highlights the distance between most Europeans and the trade, attempting to bring the reader into contact with the trade so as to lead him to the same conclusion that he himself has reached: understanding of the trade should lead to abolition, underlining the emotional response that Chauvet invokes through the poem. This change of heart is provoked by a relatively simple narrative which finds parallels elsewhere in literature. Aboard a slave ship the vicious and cruel captain, Belmar, spots a particularly beautiful enslaved woman – Néali – and desires her. Néali resists, instead elaborating on what she has endured at the hands of slavers. Incensed, Belmar tortures her, at the sound of which her husband Sélim, tethered in the hold below, breaks his bonds and leads a doomed revolt in which he and his fellow rebels are massacred. Néali chooses to end her life and that of her daughter rather than endure life as Belmar's slave.

The storyline of this tragic black heroine may be read in two opposing fashions and reveals the complex and often internally incoherent discourse within abolitionism. The

negative connotations of such a plot and the characterisation of the slaves cannot be avoided. For Doris Kadish (2009, 49) this plot emphasises ‘the rivalry between two men for the body and the affection of a black woman’; thus, she places it alongside other male-authored texts which over-simplified the slave narrative. There is, nonetheless, a complexity to the representation of Néali that must be considered more carefully. Hoffmann (1973, 156) accuses the poets in this competition of being primarily interested in the abuses perpetrated by the slave trade, rather than by the victims of slavery themselves. Raynouard (1823), in his report on the competition, notes that ‘les concurrents (sic) ne se sont pas assez attachés à la partie morale et philosophique du sujet’; rather, ‘[ils] se sont appesantis sur les funestes effets de la traite, et peignant en détail les divers tourmens de ses victimes, ont voulu émouvoir par *d’afreuses vérités*.’ Chauvet proves himself to be the exception to this rule: whilst the story of Néali is undoubtedly riddled with the inhumanity of the slave trade and the abuses she endures at the hands of the slavers, and lacks a moral engagement with the issues of slavery and abolition beyond these abuses, his characterisation of Néali goes far beyond that of mere victim: she is an enslaved black character whose voice and agency are developed to a far greater extent than the black characters that feature in the works of his fellow poets.

Whilst her voice and actions are important, descriptions of her play into established tropes. Chauvet is fixated on her physical appearance, describing her as beautiful, but her beauty is qualified as ‘sauvage.’ Chauvet apologetically compares her beauty, which is so black that ebony would appear pale beside it with that of white Europeans, as if such comparisons would have been offensive to his audience:

Blanches filles d’Europe, excusez mon langage:

L’ébène pâlerait auprès de son visage;

Mais qu’importe qu’il soit ou d’ébène ou de lis?

D’un sentiment divin tous ses traits embellis

Révèlent un cœur tendre; en ses yeux, en son âme,

L’astre qui la brunit a répandu sa flamme. ([1823] 1864, 320)

In this excerpt from the poem, we see that Chauvet presents Néali’s blackness as shocking, but that her blackness does not prevent her from displaying an inner beauty which aligns with whiteness. When focussing upon her beautiful character – her pride, generosity, grace, modesty, goodness – he appeals to those feminine charms with which European women could identify and which were lauded as the pinnacle of (white) beauty. Her beauty is thus described in the very terms that defined Western whiteness and beauty (Dyer [1997] 2017, 72–74), and as such maintain the aesthetic standards of the time. Despite the colour of her skin, she is nonetheless worthy of attention because she exhibits the traits of whiteness.

This constant comparison of black and white in order to define the value of black and enslaved persons is also exemplified in Dumesnil’s treatment of Néala, another literary incarnation of the Park (hi)story. Dumesnil’s heavily footnoted poem ‘L’Esclavage’ points out that she does not have ‘le nez épaté, ni les grosses lèvres, ni les cheveux crépus des autres négresses; elles ont les cheveux lisses et les traits du visage d’une parfaite

régularité,’ (1823, 33–34). He must ‘justify’ Néala’s beauty, for had she been any ‘blacker’ in her appearance, such a positive assessment of her beauty would not have been acceptable (Kadish 2009, 49). Furthermore, the descriptions of Néali’s physical form are indicative of another trend in early nineteenth-century writing: the obsession with the black female body. Robin Mitchell notes that despite the small number of black women in France, ‘their bodies attracted a disproportionate amount of attention’ (Mitchell 2020, 3). Both Néali and Néala are subjected to thorough descriptive dissections, which serve to reveal the depths of the (white) male fetishisation of black women. Presented as beautiful savages, we can see how these two poetic recreations of Mungo Park’s Nealee are victims of the male gaze, ‘fixed’ in place, coded and imprisoned by the imitation of them created by white men, which T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting (1999, 6, 10) describes as the Black Venus narrative. In this way, they illustrate how one woman’s story could be ‘appropriated, deployed, recycled and repurposed’ (Mitchell 2020, 3), in accordance with the whims and desires of white male authors.

Chauvet’s *Néali* is set apart from the other poems of the competition precisely for its presentation of the heroine, making her stand out from the other male-dominated, Eurocentric narratives of the time. Despite her life being narrated by a white man, who highlights the ‘faiblesse’ of Néali, Chauvet’s eponymous heroine is resolute in the face of adversity and she ultimately has the strength to define her own destiny. Just as Nealee, in the original Mungo Park account, is defiant and refuses to be dominated by the slavers, so too does her literary reincarnation, Néali. However, rather than dying silently on the trek across Africa, Chauvet gives Néali a voice. Indeed, Miller (2008a, 107) argues that the way in which the competition “‘gives voice” to slaves, putting hundreds of (mostly awful) verses in their mouths’ illustrated that ‘giving voice to slaves [is] no longer a marginalised gesture; it is quite fashionable.’ It is important, therefore, to problematise the creation of a voice for Néali by a white, French male. Whilst harangue and prosopopoeia had been popular in writing about the issue of slavery throughout the eighteenth century, this manner of ‘fictively ventriloquizing’ (Garraway 2005, 4) requires further interrogation. Does Chauvet reduce Néali to the position of a mere puppet in creating a voice for her, or can this action be read as a subversive and powerful technique to reassign agency (albeit in poetry, rather than reality) to a people so often silenced?

In her oft-cited work ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1994) argues that the subaltern is a figure of shadows (and the female subaltern even more so), that the authentic voice of the oppressed cannot be heard and thus, cannot speak. Yet these poems attempt to bring the subaltern voice of the enslaved out of the shadows. Linda Alcoff (1991, 7) notes, in a similar vein to Spivak, that such appropriations can potentially be dangerous; indeed, they can ‘[result] (in many cases) in increasing or reinforcing the oppression of the group spoken for,’ a fact which is amply illustrated in how representations of slaves in early nineteenth-century texts compounded and supported existing racial prejudices. Alcoff reads the practice of speaking for others as yet another instance of European hegemony, ‘born of a desire for mastery, to privilege oneself as the one who can champion a just cause and thus achieve glory and praise’ (Alcoff 1991, 29). Applying Alcoff’s assertion here to suggest that these poets engaged in the debates surrounding the slave trade simply to appear philanthropic seems to render the sympathetic representation of the ‘Other,’ in this case, Néali, impossible. Yet, for the privileged society of Europe, and the writers and poets who no doubt

benefited from the wealth accrued and trade facilitated by the Atlantic triangle, it would have been equally, if not more, morally corrupt to ignore the trade completely. The active choice not to speak for those worse off is often associated with the increase of exploitation (Alcoff 1991, 17). As we have seen, this poetic version of Néali's story was based upon a real account of slavery and can be considered a genuine attempt to recreate a slave voice in the absence of an authentic one. In order to fully evaluate if this attempt to speak for others and represent Néali exemplifies the exploitation and constraint of slaves, or if it can contribute, in some small way, to the metaphorical liberation of the slaves, we must 'look at where the speech goes and what it does there' (Alcoff 1991, 26).

Néali's discourse in Chauvet's poem is measured and intelligent instead of being expressed in the 'Africanised' French or 'pétit nègre' that, along with pidgin English, were enduring stereotypes in literature used to suggest ignorance and the inability to speak either of the colonisers' languages correctly (Massardier-Kenny 2009, 149). 'Pétit nègre' was also used to denote a childishness or simplicity of spirit, reflective of white attitudes towards black peoples. The absence of this, coupled with the rendering of her discourse in verse as opposed to prose, therefore allows Néali's discourse to eloquently and emotively unveil the barbaric nature of the trade, and highlights the very 'dramas of loss of freedom, disrupted families, and sentimental bonds' that Kadish (2009, 49) accuses the poem of lacking. Furthermore, compared to the detail provided on either Belmar or Sélim, Néali is given much more central treatment, making her, rather than the male characters or the narrator, the protagonist, and not simply an accessory or anecdotal evidence, as she would become in other abolitionist works. Néali's voice challenges that of Captain Belmar: her initial silence is broken in order to silence Belmar. Even when he wrestles back control, her voice continues to be heard. Chauvet deliberately gives her voice dominance over male voices (her husband Sélim speaks but two lines), and crucially, a defiant domination over the white male slave trader's voice. Such action redefines her value and humanity and sets her up as an equal to her masters. Thus, Néali's voice may be read as a defiant challenge to the status quo.

Chauvet then uses her death, which traditionally marks a silencing of the subversive voice, to reinforce Néali's agency. From the end of the first stanza, Chauvet leaves us in doubt that death will feature: 'L'Europe n'eut pour eux que les fers et la mort' ([1823] 1864, 318). Death comes as part and parcel of their enslavement, but equally, it provides the only means of escape: 'Dans leur adversité / La mort, c'est l'espérance, et c'est la liberté' (318). It is frequently presented in a positive light, as 'un éternel repos,' a release and respite as opposed to the toil of a difficult existence as an enslaved person in the New World. Countering the arguments of the positive impact of slavery (Cohen 1980, 183–84), Chauvet leaves no room for any benefit to be brought to the slaves as a result of the trade – it brings only tortured existence and death. Néali highlights the inevitability of the slave's death and accuses Belmar of being even crueller for postponing death for them: 'C'en est assez, cruels! Achevez vos victimes; / Différer leur trépas c'est prolonger vos crimes' (324). Where Park's Nealee dies at the order of the slavers, the suicide committed by Chauvet's Néali is much more complex. Slave suicide was a fundamental trope of abolitionist writing, especially in the United States. Often, a dichotomy was established between male suicides, representing rebellion, and female suicides, which were used to elicit an emotional response and compel readers into action against slavery (Bell 2012, 545). Indeed, Margaret Higonnet (2000, 230)

shows that the ‘sympathetic narrative’ often sought to render suicide less shocking ‘by attributing it to an inexorable logic of reaction to pain, political oppression, or emotional loss.’ Néali is treated inhumanely by Belmar and his crew: first as they seek to possess her, then, when she resists, beating her mercilessly:

D’orgueil et de courroux à ces mots transporté,
 L’ardent marin se livre à sa férocité
 Commande son supplice; innocente ou coupable,
 de chaînes des tourments ordonne qu’on l’accable. (324)

The death of her husband breaks Néali. Throughout the poem, Néali’s great love for her husband is clear, from her idyllic description of their married life in Africa – ‘Epouse de Sélim, près de lui chaque jour / Souriaient à mes vœux la fortune et l’amour’ (321) – to her assertion that she will be faithful to her husband – ‘Je suis à mon époux’ (324). At his death, she loses all hope, and is ready to beg for ‘homocides secours’ (326) for herself and her daughter. As such, Néali’s death may be read as an act of desperation. However, as Higonnet (2000, 230–31) argues, the act of suicide is an ambiguous act that creates multiple readings, and inscribes ‘parallels and contrasts, foils and mirrors that channel the meaning of the protagonist’s plot.’ Even if Belmar’s unwanted advances push Néali towards taking her own life, suicide allows her to ‘reaffirm her autonomy’ (Higonnet 1985, 109), and forms a natural continuation of her defiance in the face of his torture and commodification of her as an enslaved African woman. The juxtaposition of her death with Sélim’s can then be read as an inversion of the ‘usual gendering of modes of death (which men are commonly thought to meet actively; women, passively).’ (Higonnet 2000, 238) Sélim may be powerful, ripping his bonds apart with his teeth, and rousing his fellow slaves into action, but his strength is in vain: outflanked by the armed sailors, they do not stand a chance. Although they die martyrs, Chauvet writes, ‘Morts pour la liberté, la gloire les oublie’ (326), and, even worse, ‘Leur sang demeure esclave’ (326). Chauvet suggests that even in death these men are not free, as the timing and the means of their death are in the hands of their captors. Néali, by contrast, shows agency and choice: although she is the victim of the slave trade, she escapes it, purchasing her own freedom by choosing the means and timing of her own death, her last words being: ‘maître de son trépas, l’esclave est libre encore’ (326). In this, death, agency and voice are all bound together in order to liberate Néali. Chauvet’s Néali is not only a powerful heroine, but through her agency and her voice, Chauvet presents an emphatic challenge to the status quo, forcefully condemning the horrors of the slave trade.

The Imagery of Slavery

However unequivocal the denouement of Chauvet’s poem is in denouncing the ‘commerce inhumain’ ([1823] 1864, 327) of the slave trade, it remains curiously ambiguous about denouncing slavery itself. This reflects the reality of the time: whilst the slave trade had, in law, if not in practice, been abolished by the Congress of Vienna in 1815, slavery was considered to be a different issue, and the debate around slavery in the Americas remained open. In the closing stanzas of his winning poem, Chauvet imagines a utopian vision of repopulation of the African coast in a post-slavery world, but

ultimately proves himself a product of his time. Chauvet pays lip-service to the typical abolitionist ideals of the brotherhood of man: 'le dieu qui pour tous répand ses dons pères / Bénira ses enfants dans des peuples des frères' (328), presenting all mankind as equal before God, and blessed because of this harmonious family. Yet, the poet's utopian solution does not liberate the slaves; rather, it presents a state of colonial bliss, in which the white man is still dominant over his fellow man as a *colon*, a planter: 'le planteur pour les serfs sur sa glèbe nourris / saura par le bonheur féconder l'hyménée' (328). Even slavery still has its place: 'le maître conduira l'esclave à tes autels' (328), although it is a benevolent, paternal slavery, in which the Master brings his Slave to a true religion. However, as Frantz Fanon ([1961] 2002, 45) suggests, this version of Christianity 'n'appelle pas l'homme colonisé dans la voie de Dieu mais bien dans la voie du Blanc, dans la voie du maître, dans la voie de l'opresseur.' The post-slavery utopia and religious harmony imagined here is no less oppressive than what has gone before: Chauvet has simply accepted the colonial order in which the European remains dominant over his African 'brother'. This type of religious imagery is particularly pervasive in the competition (an idea to which we will return) but here it once more reveals how Chauvet cannot break free from the stereotypical view of Africa as a place of ignorance, which requires European religion and culture in order to become civilised and prosperous. Frequently used in antislavery poetry and literature, this paternalistic version of abolition with its focus on the innocence of Africa, though well intended, became 'patronising and unintentionally derogatory' (Brantlinger 1985, 170). Despite his attempts to envisage a new world order, Chauvet unintentionally rewrites and replicates the same tropes.

Nonetheless, when compared with the characterisation of the slavers, the innocence of the Africans can be interpreted in a more positive light. Chauvet repeatedly refers to the slavers as guided by 'l'avarice inhumaine' ([1823] 1864, 318) and as 'moins humains qu'avares' (319), dehumanising them and reducing them to animals governed by their basest desires and greed: the enslaved person becomes prey, 'l'homme partout dans l'homme a vu sa proie' (322), and Belmar is described as 'sanguinaire' (325). Throughout the competition's poems slavers are dehumanised, incapable of human kindness, ruled by greed, love of money, and they express this rule in tyranny and cruelty. Not just the stereotypical evil captain, but the entire slave ship crew, are 'tyrans' (Alletz 1823, 6, 8; Bignan 1823, 9), 'monstres' (Bignan 14; Dumesnil 1823, 19, 23), 'soldats inhumains' (Barrois 1823, 8), 'cruels' (Barrois, 5; Bignan, 10; Dumesnil, 23), and 'barbares' (Barrois, 5). Barrois even goes as far as to add in a bloody image of cannibalism: 'monstres nourris de sang' (8). Bignan compares them to 'le tigre du Sahara' '[qui] déchire, impatient, sa palpitante proie' (10), reducing the barbarity of the slavers (and by extension, those who support the slave trade) to animals. Bignan then, having highlighted this animal-like ferocity in the slavers, ironically notes: 'Votre orgueil pense-t-il, outrageant leur faiblesse, / au rang des animaux rabaisser leur noblesse' (11) – it is the pride of the European to try to reduce their enslaved Africans to the position of animals, and yet it is the European himself who becomes animal-like through his actions.

These images are particularly striking and rich because of the way in which they invert the norm. The backwardness of African society was frequently portrayed through cannibalism and animal savagery, and so the inversion of this motif presents a clear challenge to European civilisation: the slavers, though representatives of 'civilisation,' are entirely uncivilised when compared to the slaves. Fanon ([1961] 2002, 45) notes that the

European tendency to dehumanise the racial ‘other’ through animal imagery is a key tenet of the narrative of his superiority over and control of the ‘other.’ Inverting this dichotomy is an attempt to rehumanise the slaves, and the emphasis placed upon the innocent Africans as victims creates a clear delineation between the slavers and the slaves. Fanon (46) argues, ‘dans le même temps qu’il découvre son humanité, il commence à fourbir ses armes pour la faire triompher.’ The inversion of the ideas so prevalent in public discourse, literary depictions and scientific racism (Cohen 1980, 238–45) regarding the humanity of enslaved and black people is striking in these poems as their re-humanisation justifies and paves the way for their liberation struggle. Rehumanising the subjects of their poems is another way in which these poets sought to challenge the beliefs and assumptions of their society and promote abolitionism.

A theme that is recurrent throughout the competition, but is most evident in Chauvet, is that of the representation of Africa itself. Raynouard (1823) notes in his report on the competition that the winner’s strength lay in his use of ‘accessoires ou conséquences nécessaires’ of the trade, as opposed to focussing on the brutal and gory truth in the same way that other competitors did. One of these ‘side effects, or necessary consequences’ is the severing of the bond between Africa and her inhabitants. Where the Africans are presented as at one with their land, slavers are, by contrast, identified with the sea. Chauvet repeatedly returns to this idea, representing Africa as a mother by describing the Africans as ‘Niger [...] tes enfants’ ([1823] 1864, 318), and referring to the ‘champ natal,’ (322) the ‘pays natal’ (322) and the ‘palmier natal’ (326). By binding the Africans to their continent, Chauvet creates for the reader a profound sense of distress at the enforced separation of the two. Christopher Miller (2008a, 49) shows that, throughout the literature of the time, the removal of the slaves from their homeland was used emotively to bring about greater empathy with the plight of the slaves. As Edouard Glissant notes in *Le Discours antillais* (1981, 30), the idea of ‘retour’ is ‘la première pulsion d’une population transportée’ and Chauvet plays on this desire to return by transforming the untamed Africa into Paradise for his protagonists, suggesting return is possible.

The first stanza presents Africa as wild and uncivilised but free and exotic – a sort of savage Eden. Before killing her daughter, Néali tells her child, ‘Enfant, réjouis-toi! Sous le palmier natal, / Ce soir tu reverras le plus tendre des pères’ ([1823] 1864, 323), promising return and reunion in the land of their birth, despite the separation that has been endured. The power of this image as a vessel for abolitionism is its idyllic suggestion that Africa was paradise before white man ever came, and that the arrival of white man and slavery have destroyed this Eden, to which we, the readers, now know there can be no physical return. The repeated use of ‘natal’ also suggests Africa as a Mother. The Mother Africa trope has been extensively used throughout twentieth-century African literature as a response to French colonialism, but Florence Stratton’s description of the trope as ‘a relationship of possession’ between the male author and the passive, feminised Africa affords us a fresh insight into the motherhood symbolism in these poems (Stratton 1990, 122). By representing Africa as a Mother, these white, male poets are further stamping their authority on the continent, reducing it to the position of a woman to be dominated and colonised. Once more, then, the tension between the freedom that the poets claim to desire for slaves and their unconscious biases and desire to dominate Africa is brought to the fore.

The ambiguities that define the corpus are evident in the conflicting uses of motherhood. Whilst initial readings reveal the negative connotations of the Mother Africa trope, there are other ways to comprehend motherhood in these poems. Motherhood is revisited in the motif of water throughout the competition. In Chauvet, water has two contrapuntal meanings. The image of the river correlates with home, and safety. It forms part of the rich tapestry that Chauvet weaves of Africa, and is juxtaposed, and so equated, in Néali's speech, with the idea of the mother: 'O ma mère, en tes bras, libre j'ouvris les yeux! / Le Grand Fleuve, aux seuls Noirs accordé par les cieux' ([1823] 1864, 321). Thus, Chauvet reinforces the link between the Africans and their country – a bond of family, not possession. This river 'mère' is placed in stark contrast to the 'mother' of slavery, 'la mer.' The slavers are referred to as the 'fils de la mer' (321), setting up their parentage in direct opposition with the parentage of the Africans. The river presents an image of safety and providence that is rudely destroyed by the slavers, who leave nothing but fire and death on the riverbank. The river and the sea are mutually exclusive ('le Grand Fleuve [...] / Qui refuse son onde à vos mers étonnées'(321)) and the demarcation between these forces is the repeated imagery of the bank, both 'rive' (323) and 'rivage' (322), which are used to introduce separation between the Africans and their mother, and represent points-of-no-return on the journey across the Atlantic, from the destroyed 'rive' of home to the 'exil sur un lointain rivage' (321). The sea, then, is an image that is instantly and consistently associated with terror, evil and death. The boat is a 'cachot flottant' (318), and the storms of the sea only add to their torment. This is an early example of a motif that appears throughout post-colonial literature,⁴ with the homophones *mer/mère* representing both the genesis of slavers, and the rebirth of the slaves to a new life in captivity, and the Middle Passage as a transformative force. For Sélim and his men, the sea becomes their tomb. In the final stanza, the hope of retribution and justice is also expressed in terms of the sea: 'Vaisseau, fatal vaisseau, témoin de tant d'horreurs, / Puissent sur toi les vents épuisent leur fureurs / Unir au fond des mers les bourreaux aux victimes!' (327) This water imagery is reflective of the idyll of a new beginning, for the former slaves, in which, rather than the victims of the 'mer,' they become those who benefit from it – the *mer/mère* is transformed once more, a rebirth into yet another new life. This new mother is a vengeful one, who regains mastery over those who have used and abused her children.

In many of the poems submitted to the competition, the morality of the trade is called into question through the role of religion and the church. The five poems taken from the competition did not just address themselves to the leaders and rulers of Europe, but also to Christianity – its leaders and its laypeople – by criticising perceived apathy towards the trade. Although Abbé Grégoire had long been the champion of antislavery in France, the Catholic church was perceived to be in a state of relative apathy towards the trade, closing in on itself after the attacks it received during the Revolution (Brasseur 1986, 335–36). Whilst there were proportionately more Protestants engaged in abolitionism, as well as other reform movements, than were present in French society (Jennings 1994, 323), the involvement in abolitionism of the Christian church in all its forms appeared lacklustre. Rather, the complicity of Christianity in slavery and in maintaining the slaving world order was a ready target for those writing against slavery.

This stance is the culmination of Raynouard's diatribe on slavery in his report on the competition. Summarising attitudes towards slavery throughout Antiquity and Scripture,

he builds to the declaration: ‘on s’étonnerait davantage que les chrétiens fussent parvenus à établir la traite des Noirs; on se demanderait comment des princes et des sujets chrétiens avaient cru concilier avec la prédication de l’évangile, la honte et l’excès d’un semblable trafic.’ (1823) Within the poems we find both an explanation and a condemnation of the entanglement of Christianity and slavery. Evangelisation and the spread of Christianity were routinely used as a justification for the pro-slavery movement: Christianisation of slaves was both a duty and blessing and by presenting them with the Gospel, the white man was doing the black man a service, even by enslaving him (Cohen, 19). Chauvet’s Captain Belmar personifies such a stance, proclaiming proudly: ‘Ils sont noirs [...] / C’est pour eux un Bonheur de servir les Chrétiens’ ([1823] 1864, 319). In addressing Christianity, and perhaps specifically in criticising Catholicism, these four poets recognised the hypocrisy of such a stance; both Bignan and Alletz speak of the futility of presenting to an enslaved people a God who loves them yet allows their suffering to continue. Alletz’s pontiff, drawn to Africa to share his faith, is challenged by a young black slave, Naolès. Naolès’s declaration that ‘Nous sommes tous égaux, vous l’attestiez vous-même, / En versant sur mon front l’eau sainte de baptême’ (1823, 3), later becomes ‘Laissez-moi; Du Dieu de mes tyrans j’abandonne la loi; / Si je servais ce Dieu que leur patrie adore, / Il faudrait, dans le ciel, les retrouver encore’ (8). For Alletz’s Naolès, the involvement of the Christian religion, and the God it worships, in his enslavement was an impossibility. It is unconscionable that he should spend eternity with the tyrants who have tormented him on earth. Dumesnil accuses Christians of ‘souillant la gloire de leur nom’ (1823, 17) and acting in a way that is completely contrary to their beliefs. Repeatedly the imagery of the brotherhood of man and equality before God is used. However, whilst some of the poets call on Christianity to break with slavery and practice the equality about which they preach, not every poem posits religion as the key to abolitionist fervour. Hastened by the Revolution, the society that had produced some of the greatest Enlightenment thinkers was increasingly turning its back on a politically powerful church, and these poems reflect this humanism. Barrois opens his poem with an openly humanistic dream in which ‘L’humanité triomphe’ (1823, 3), whilst Bignan, almost parodying the religious discourse, claims at the end of his poem: ‘Dans l’univers entier qu’un seul cri retentisse: Gloire’ – not à Dieu, but – ‘à la bienfaisance’ (1823, 16). The justice, goodness and victory so often associated with the glory of God are now offered instead to the glory of man. The close of almost every poem has the suggestion of a utopian society in which white and black live alongside each other, and justice is brought to those who have been abused, but for Bignan and Barrois at least, this is born of a very human sense of justice, rather than one driven by Christian values.

These poems and the images therein are of further interest because of the parallels that appear with later prose texts. It is not clear to what extent these works may have been available or read by contemporary authors, but Hainsworth suggests that the slave captain Ledoux in Mérimée’s *Tamango* ([1829] 2012) was heavily influenced by Belmar in Chauvet’s *Néali* (Hainsworth 1967, 21). Although it is impossible to prove that these poems were influential to these works, the existence of other, more conspicuous similarities show that these poems are indeed reflective of widely held belief. Néali, in her monologue, refers to an African king who sells his own people for nothing more than trinkets and alcohol, an image mirrored in the transaction between Ledoux and

Tamango, where Tamango, drunk on the eau-de-vie brought by Ledoux, happily sells his people for less than they are supposedly worth. Another idea that may have been borrowed from *Néali* is that of the reduction of the African lives to their sale value; Néali recounts that in the plundering of their village, the older members were brutally murdered – ‘on les égorgea tous’ – simply because ‘qui les eût achetés?’ ([1823] 1864, 323) Once again, this idea echoes around *Tamango*: the slaves that Ledoux refuses to buy are threatened, and some brutally murdered, by Tamango in his drunken rage. Miller notes that the idea of revolt looms large in Chauvet’s poem, another idea that will permeate into *Tamango*; specifically revolt because of an attack on an enslaved woman (Miller 2008a, 202). This theme of revolt is repeated in much male-authored writing about the slave trade. As noted by Cohen (1980, 182), the ‘Saint-Domingue uprising was decisive in strengthening Negrophobia’ and the inclusion of this theme in other literary works such as Hugo’s *Bug Jargal* ([1826] 1970) or Sue’s *Atar Gull* ([1831] 2015) highlights the fear of rebellion in the French psyche.

Slave revolt is a central theme in Dumesnil’s poem, underlining the belief that Africans were violent and unruly; white dominance of the black peoples was still a necessity if revolt was to be avoided. Dumesnil describes slave revolt thus:

Ainsi, cueillant les fruits de ses sanglants succès,
L’oppression expire en ses propres excès.
La révolte à son tour implacable, inhumaine,
Écrase les tyrans des débris de sa chaîne.
De ses flancs sont sortis de nouveaux Spartacus,
Qui, fiers et triomphants, attendent un Crassus. (1823, 27)

Both oppression and revolt are given the same disdain. Dumesnil’s reliance on classical tropes is clear from this passage: by referencing Spartacus and Crassus, he builds the slave revolts of the transatlantic trade into a tradition of bloody and violent revolts by slaves against their oppressive masters. Dumesnil’s slave revolt is presented as an evil that is as great as that of slavery itself, and in his footnotes, he speaks of the Saint-Domingue revolution – an event that destroyed the fledgling abolitionist movement in 1791 (Cohen 1980, 182) – in unequivocal terms:

L’histoire des temps modernes est pleine de ces atrocités enfantées tour à tour par l’oppression et par la révolte, deux choses également criminelles, condamnées par la parole du Christ, et que tous les gens de bien voient avec un même effroi et une égale douleur. (36)

By consistently representing the Africans as barbaric, and revolt as unjustifiable, they reinforce the paternalistic idea of slavery having gradually given way to the colonial project – an abolition led and directed by the white man, in which the white man retains his dominance over the other races. For Dumesnil, this is ‘la Philanthropie, ici-bas descendue,’ followed by ‘La Charité’ and ‘la Foi’ (27) just lines after his descriptions of violence. The vision is clear: Dumesnil is calling upon his white metropolitan readers, the hegemonic force, to exhibit these characteristics in their dealings with those they once enslaved, in order to avoid further rebellion in the colonies.

Although all the poets were willing to denounce the horrors to which the slaves were subjected, and no doubt believed that the institution of slavery was to be destroyed, they did not appear to have been willing to accept the slaves' right to self-determination. These reservations underline the prevailing belief – which endures even today – that is referred to as the 'abolitionist myth': that abolition was brought about by the generous, white, male heroes of the Western world (Cubitt, Smith, and Wilson 2011, 3) rather than as part of a struggle initiated by and developed alongside slaves. The perpetuation of this myth removes all agency from the slaves and highlights again the ambiguity often expressed surrounding the character and reliability of the slaves. All of these poems, with their heavy reliance on the idea of the white man's duty to his fellow humans, allow no place for the enslaved to save himself, or contribute to his own liberty. They call on 'les Rois de l'Europe' (Bignan 1823, 3; Barrois 1823, 3–4; Chauvet [1823] 1864, 327 and Dumesnil 1823, 30) to act, declaring that 'l'amour des rois soit le salut du monde.' (Bignan, 4) Bignan's use of this image of salvation, which comes at the end of a passage full of religious motifs, thus creates a messianic duty for white men; a world-view in which the black man is cast as the sinner, completely unable to save himself. This bizarre tension between the utopian visions these poems present of a world without slavery in which the black Africans are returned to a state of independence and harmony, and the reality, underpinned by the poems under consideration in this article, of the deep-seated belief in African inferiority is entirely in keeping with the zeitgeist. As Miller states, the 1820s were a decade of contradictions (Miller 2008a, 199) during which condemnation of the slave trade steadily grew, yet it remained profitable, and the representations and stereotypes of the black slaves proved particularly difficult to shake off.

Conclusions

Although the title given to the candidates entering the 1823 Académie Française poetry competition was *l'Abolition de la traite des noirs*, Raynouard notes in his report that many of the poets 'ont trop confondu l'abolition de la traite sur les côtes d'Afrique avec l'abolition de l'esclavage dans les colonies de l'Amérique; question importante sur laquelle les gouvernemens (sic) n'ont pas encore prononcé.' (Raynouard 1823) These poems are certainly, and unsurprisingly, by their very definition anti-*trade*, but Alletz, Bignan and Dumesnil are very clearly also anti-*slavery*, a view which appears to put them ahead of the French consensus on the issue, although, as Debbasch (1961, 346) notes, it is difficult to have one without the other, since 's'attaquer à la traite, c'est déjà s'en prendre à l'esclavage.' However, the forward thinking of these poets in some areas was nonetheless constrained by their assimilated racism: they present curious versions of the attitudes towards the slave trade and are permeated with the predominant perceptions of black people themselves. Self-contradiction and ambiguity abound, illustrating David Brion Davis's (1966, 108) theory that the history and discourses of slavery were plagued by dualisms, and none more evident than in a period marked by its enthusiasm for liberty in Europe but clinging to an economic system founded in the labour of enslaved black Africans that required them to be seen as inferior. For all that they are 'égaux,' capable of 'la force,' 'la génie' (Dumesnil 1823, 11), 'des passions' and 'plaisirs' (Barrois 1823, 5) like the white man, they are still just 'un naturel sauvage.' (Barrois,

5) The equality of African and European, albeit that it is paid lip service by these poems, is frequently undermined by the norm of European superiority. The dominant ideology of the time, though at odds with the abolitionist intent of these poets, is implicit almost at every turn, reinforcing itself and the hierarchy out of which it was born (Hogan 2011, 183). Cohen (1980, 209) notes that after 1848, and within abolitionism, there persisted ‘a generally low opinion of Africans’ and that for all the ideals, they were ‘not enthusiastic upholders of racial equality.’ In many ways, even whilst seeking to promote the cause of abolitionism, these poems continued to perpetuate the myths of so-called racial difference and demonstrate how these two contrasting attitudes (racism and abolitionism) could be held in constant tension. However, another aspect of these poems enhances their abolitionist endeavours: the ways in which they attempt to liberate the voice of the enslaved and assign their protagonists agency. Even though she is a highly fictionalised, stylised character, coded by her white male author, Chauvet’s Néali exemplifies the attempt made to provide a vehicle for the lost and silenced slave voice.

The poems discussed in this article, despite their overtly abolitionist stance, clearly illustrate the limitations and ambiguities of authors in the early nineteenth century. Although the official report from the Académie Française expressed disappointment at what was produced for the competition, these poems do show engagement with the prominent literature, rhetoric and prevalent ideas of the time and, to a certain extent, reveal a desire to go beyond the principal debates of the time, auguring well for the development of the abolitionist movement throughout the rest of the century. Yet they also highlight the struggles that nineteenth-century abolitionists faced: popular apathy, lack of leadership, a racialised society and underlying fears of instability. Such debates over race and equality would continue long beyond the end of abolitionism (Cohen 1980, 197). From this point of view, Debbasch’s idea of 1822 being some sort of ‘turning point’ is somewhat premature. Nevertheless, this was indeed ‘l’occasion ... pour certains de réfléchir déjà sur la moralité et la rentabilité d’un système de travail fondé sur l’asservissement de toute une race.’ (Debbasch 1961, 351) By presenting a novel reading of largely neglected texts and their representations of the issues underpinning slavery at a time when the moral, social and economic viability of that world order was beginning to be questioned, we gain important insights into the development of a movement that would take another 25 years to bear the fruit of abolition. As such, these poems are merely precursors of antislavery: whilst they go some way towards abolition, they are nonetheless limited by their apparent ambiguities.

Notes

1. ‘Néali ou la traite des nègres’ was first published in 1823 in Paris by Firmin Didot as a pamphlet of the poem itself. Chauvet would republish an edited version of the poem along with his play ‘Arthur de Bretagne’ in 1824. The version to which I am referring was published in Edmond Biré and Émile Giraud’s *Les Poètes lauréats de l’Académie française* (1864). The other four poems were all published by Firmin Didot in 1823, although Dumesnil’s was heavily edited before publication. Whilst a reproduction of Alletz’s poem is not available online, a copy of the poem may be found at: http://slavery.uga.edu/texts/abolition_poetry/alletzabolition.pdf
2. Thomas Clarkson’s work *The Cries of Africa to the Inhabitants of Europe, or, A Survey of that Bloody Commerce called the Slave-Trade* appeared in French in 1822, translated by Benjamin

Laroche, under the title: *Cri des Africains contre les européens, leurs oppresseurs, ou coup d'œil sur le commerce homicide appelé Traite des Noirs*.

3. English poets who dealt with slavery include William Cowper, Hannah More, William Blake, Robert Burns, Samuel Taylor Coleridge and William Wordsworth.
4. Examples of *mer/mère* in contemporary postcolonial literature are explored through Daniel Maximin's *Tu, c'est l'enfance* (2004) (see McCusker 2006) and Fatou Diome's *Le Ventre de l'Atlantique* (2003) (see Brown 2017).

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributor

Helen McKelvey is an AHRC Northern Bridge DTP-funded student at Queen's University, Belfast. Her PhD project, entitled 'Religious Imagery in Nineteenth-Century French Slavery Narratives,' examines the way in which slavery is represented through the use of religious imagery and narrative in nineteenth-century French novels and novellas, exploring how this reflects the involvement in the slave trade of various religious traditions from around the Atlantic Triangle.

ORCID

Helen McKelvey  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2614-7337>

References

- Alcoff, Linda. 1991. "The Problem of Speaking for Others." *Cultural Critique* 20: 5–32. doi:10.2307/1354221.
- Alletz, Edouard. 1823. *l'Abolition de la traite des noirs*. Paris: F. Didot. http://slavery.uga.edu/texts/abolition_poetry/alletzabolition.pdf.
- Barrois, Martial. 1823. *Les temps sont arrivés où le ciel plus propice*. Paris: F. Didot.
- Bell, Richard. 2012. "Slave Suicide, Abolition and the Problem of Resistance." *Slavery & Abolition* 33: 525–549. doi:10.1080/0144039X.2011.644069.
- Bignan, Anne. 1823. *l'Abolition de la traite des noirs, Epitre aux souverains de l'Europe*. Paris: F. Didot.
- Brantlinger, Patrick. 1985. "Victorians and Africans: The Genealogy of the Myth of the Dark Continent." *Critical Inquiry* 12: 166–203. doi:10.1086/448326.
- Brasseur, Paule. 1986. "Libermann et l'abolition de l'esclavage." *Revue française de l'histoire d'outre-mer* 73: 335–346. doi:10.3406/outre.1986.2548.
- Brown, Marissa. 2017. "Writing Hybridized Identities in Fatou Diome's *Le Ventre de l'Atlantique*." In *Odyssées / Odyssées: Travel Narratives in French / Récits de voyage en français*, edited by Jeanne M. Garane, 198–209. Leiden: Brill | Rodopi.
- Chauvet, Joseph Joachim Victor. [1823] 1864. "Néali, ou la traite des nègres." In *Les Poètes Lauréats de l'Académie française, Volume 1, 1671–1830*, edited by Edmond Biré, and Émile Giraud, 317–328. Paris: A Bray, Librairie-Éditeur.
- Clarkson, Thomas. 1822. *Cri des Africains contre les européens, leurs oppresseurs, ou coup d'œil sur le commerce homicide appelé Traite des Noirs*. Translated by Benjamin Laroche. London: Harvey and Darton.
- Cohen, William B. 1980. *The French Encounter with Africans*. London: Indiana University Press.
- Cubitt, Geoffrey, Laurajane Smith, and Ross Wilson. 2011. "Introduction: Anxiety and Ambiguity in the Representation of Dissonant History." In *Representing Enslavement and Abolition in*

- Museums: Ambiguous Engagements*, edited by Laurajane Smith, Geoff Cubitt, Kalliopi Fouseki, and Ross Wilson, 1–19. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Daget, Serge. 1971. “L’Abolition de la traite des noirs en France de 1814 à 1831.” *Cahiers d’Études Africaines* 11: 14–58. doi:10.3406/cea.1971.2811.
- Davis, David Brion. 1966. *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press.
- Davis, David Brion. 1975. *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, 1770–1823*. London: Cornell University Press.
- Debbasch, Yvan. 1961. “Poésie et traite, l’opinion française sur le commerce négrier au début du XIXe siècle.” *Revue française d’histoire d’outre-mer* 48: 311–352. doi:10.3406/outre.1961.1338.
- Démier, Francis. 1995. “Esclavage, économie colonial et choix de développement français durant la première industrialisation (1802–1840).” In *Les Abolitions de l’esclavage: de L. F. Sonthonax à V. Schoelcher, 1793, 1794, 1848*, edited by Marcel Dorigny, 273–283. Vincennes: UNESCO/Presses Universitaires de Vincennes.
- Dobie, Madeleine. 2010. *Trading Places: Colonization and Slavery in Eighteenth-Century French Culture*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press.
- Dumesnil, Marie. 1823. *L’esclavage*. Paris: F. Didot.
- Dyer, Richard. [1997] 2017. *White, Twentieth Anniversary Edition*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Fanon, Frantz. [1961] 2002. *Les Damnés de la terre*. Paris: Éditions La Découverte & Syros.
- Forsdick, Charles, and Jennifer Yee. 2018. “Towards a Postcolonial Nineteenth Century: Introduction.” *French Studies: A Quarterly Review* 72 (2): 167–175. doi:10.1093/fs/kny005.
- Garraway, Doris. 2005. *The Libertine Colony: Creolization in the Early French Caribbean*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Glissant, Edouard. 1981. *Le Discours antillais*. Paris: Seuil.
- Grégoire, Henri. 1826. *De la noblesse de la peau ou Du préjugé des blancs contre la couleur des Africains et celle de leurs descendants, noirs et sang-mêlés*. Paris: Badouin Frères Librairies.
- Hainsworth, G. 1967. “West African Colour in Tamango.” *French Studies* 21: 16–23. doi:10.1093/fs/XXI.1.16.
- Harrigan, Michael. 2018. *Frontiers of Servitude: Slavery in Narratives of the Early French Atlantic*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Higonnet, Margaret. 1985. “Suicide: Representations of the Feminine in the Nineteenth Century.” *Poetics Today* 6: 103–118. doi:10.2307/1772124.
- Higonnet, Margaret. 2000. “Frames of Female Suicide.” *Studies in the Novel* 32: 229–242. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/29533392>.
- Hoffmann, Leon-François. 1973. *Le Nègre romantique, personnage littéraire et obsession collective*. Paris: Les Éditions Payot.
- Hogan, Patrick Colm. 2011. *Affective Narratology: The Emotional Structure of Stories*. Nebraska: UNP.
- Hugo, Victor. [1826] 1970. *Bug-Jargal*. Paris: Gallimard.
- Jennings, Lawrence C. 1994. “French Anti-Slavery under the Restoration: The Société de la morale chrétienne.” *Revue française d’histoire d’outre-mer* 81: 321–331. doi:10.3406/outre.1994.3229.
- Kadish, Doris Y. 2005. “Haiti and Abolitionism in 1825: The Example of Sophie Doin.” *Yale French Studies* 107: 108–130. doi:10.2307/4149313.
- Kadish, Doris Y. 2009. “Translation in Context.” In *Translating Slavery Volume 1: Gender and Race in French Abolitionist Writing 1780–1830*, edited by Doris Y. Kadish, and Françoise Massardier-Kenny, 19–61. Kent: Kent University Press.
- Little, Roger. 2008. “Les Noirs dans la fiction française, d’une abolition de l’esclavage à l’autre.” *Romantisme* 139: 7–18. doi:10.3917/rom.139.0007.
- Massardier-Kenny, Françoise. 2009. “Germaine de Staël, Translation and Race.” In *Translating Slavery Volume 1: Gender and Race in French Abolitionist Writing 1780–1830*, edited by Doris Y. Kadish, and Françoise Massardier-Kenny, 141–152. Kent: Kent University Press.
- McCusker, Maeve. 2006. “Small Worlds: Constructions of Childhood in Contemporary Postcolonial Autobiography in French.” *Romance Studies* 24: 203–214. doi:10.1179/174581506X147614.

- Mérimée, Prosper. [1829] 2012. "Tamango." In *Mateo Falcone et autres nouvelles*, 19–39. Paris: Librio.
- Miller, Christopher L. 2008a. *The French Atlantic Triangle: Literature and Culture of the Slave Trade*. London: Duke University Press.
- Miller, Christopher L. 2008b. "Response to John Garrigus, Nick Nesbitt and Carolyn Berman." *H-France Forum* 3: 67–69. <https://www.h-france.net/forum/forumvol3/MillerResponse4.pdf>.
- Mitchell, Robin. 2020. *Vénus Noire: Black Women and Colonial Fantasies in Nineteenth-century France*. Athens: University of Georgia Press.
- Park, Mungo. [1799] 2011. *Travels in the Interior Districts of Africa, Performed under the Direction and Patronage of the African Association in the Years 1795, 1796, and 1797*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Peureux, Guillaume. 2012. "Alexandrine." In *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics: Fourth Edition*, edited by Stephen Cushman, Clare Cavanagh, Jahan Ramazani, and Paul Rouzer, 35–36. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Prendergast, Christopher. 1990. *Nineteenth Century French Poetry*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Raynouard, François-Juste-Marie. 1823. *Rapport sur les concours de poésie de l'année 1823*. <http://www.xn--acadmie-franaise-npb1a.fr/rapport-sur-le-concours-de-poesie-de-lannee-1823>.
- Richardson, Alan. 1999. *Slavery, Abolition and Emancipation: Writings in the British Romantic Period*, edited by P. J. Kitson, and Debbie Lee, IV. London: Pickering and Chatto.
- Sabourin, Lise. 2014. "Poètes et poésie à l'académie française au xix^e siècle (1803–1914)." *Francofonia* 67: 139–156. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24808483>.
- Sharpley-Whiting, T. Denean. 1999. *Black Venus: Sexualised Savages, Primal Fears and Primitive Narratives in French*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. 1994. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" In *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*, edited by Patrick Williams, and Laura Chrisman, 66–111. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Stratton, Florence. 1990. "'Periodic Embodiments': A Ubiquitous Trope in African Men's Writing." *Research in African Literatures* 21: 111–126. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3819304>.
- Sue, Eugène. [1831] 2015. *Atar-Gull*. London: FB Editions.