Creolized Histories: Hybrid Literatures of the Americas

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Creolized Histories: Hybrid Literatures of the Americas

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This dissertation is about a hemispheric understanding of the Americas by foregrounding hybrid literatures written both by Caribbean and U.S. American authors as the space where a transnational slave past of diversity, relation, and cross-cultural influence can be revealed and discussed. I use the term hybrid because these imaginary writings engage with actual events and real-life people that have shaped the history of the Americas, the interpretation of which is re-negotiated here though both history and literature. And literatures because it is not only novels but also epic poetry and oral stories that writers resort to in order to restore narratives that have long been silenced, forgotten, or ignored in official narratives. In this literary analysis creolization, the cross-cultural merging of peoples and their histories, emerges as the characteristic event of American history, allowing for the parallel but different histories of the Americas to come to light. From an American Studies perspective, I thus argue that such is the nature of creolized histories, being parallel in their content and protagonists with the established narratives but perpetually different in their equally valid readings and interpretation.
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Introduction

Creolized Histories

In January 1891 Cuban internationalist José Martí was contemplating the widening gap between the mentalities of the expansive North and Latin America from his exile in New York: “The scorn of our formidable neighbor, who does not know us, is the greatest danger for our America; and it is imperative that our neighbor know us, and know us soon, so she shall not scorn us, for the day of the visit is at hand.”¹ A committed patriot, Martí was hoping to warn the “long-suffering republics of America” of U.S. American imperialism that would officially manifest itself in the Cuban-Spanish-U.S. American war in 1898.² But at the same time Martí would not lose sight of his vision of a transcendental, pan-American identity – inclusive even of (a non-expansive) U.S. America – that could be achieved “by timely study and the tacit, immediate union of the continental soul… found in Nature’s imperturbable harmony.”³ An exile and traveler throughout the Americas for the longest period of his short life, the

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² Ibid., 140. Mary Renda in Taking Haiti: Military Occupation & the Culture of U.S. Imperialism, 1915-1940 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001) was the first to coin the term ‘U.S. America’ (xvii) and many others have followed ever since, to the extent that a synecdochic use of ‘America’ as referring to the United States is considered parochial.


³ Ibid., 151, 146.
“Apostle” of pan-Americanism was forever faithful to his rhetoric of a continental politics that respected national boundaries and yet crossed ethno-racial divisions in light of a common American culture and history. However prophetic Martí may have proved, one hundred years would be necessary for Americanists to contemplate his call for a hemispheric, transnational understanding of the continent; and with it, its inherently ambivalent nature of both national and transnational narratives.

This dissertation is about a hemispheric understanding of the Americas by foregrounding hybrid literatures written both by Caribbean and U.S. American authors as the space where a transnational slave past of diversity, relation, and cross-cultural influence can be revealed and discussed. I use the term hybrid because these imaginary writings engage with actual events and real-life people that have shaped the history of the Americas, the interpretation of which is re-negotiated here though both history and literature. And literatures because it is not only novels but also epic poetry and oral stories that writers resort to in order to restore narratives that have

4 Gordon Lewis in Main Currents in Caribbean Thought explains that the title of ‘el Apostol’ was attributed to Martí because his life as a writer and traveler in the Americas, as well as his martyred death, resembled that of Saint Paul in the Mediterranean. See Gordon K. Lewis, Main Currents in Caribbean Thought: The Historical Evolution of Caribbean Society in Its Ideological Aspects, 1492-1900. 2nd ed. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004), 295.

5 For the full spectrum of Martí’s complex politics, see Jeffrey Belnap and Raul Fernandez, eds., José Martí’s “Our America:” From National to Hemispheric Cultural Studies (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998).

6 I take the idea from Linda Hutcheon who describes historiographic metafictional novels that involve a number of discourses as ‘hybrid.’ See Linda Hutcheon, A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction. 8th ed. (New York: Routledge, 2000), 21.
long been silenced, forgotten, or ignored in official narratives. In this literary analysis creolization, the cross-cultural merging of peoples and their histories, emerges as the characteristic event of American history, allowing for the parallel but different histories of the Americas to come to light. From an American Studies perspective, I thus argue that such is the nature of creolized histories, being parallel in their content and protagonists with the established narratives but perpetually different in their equally valid readings and interpretation.

The long history of American Studies in service of U.S. American exceptionalism officially came to an end with the collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s. Already in 1986 Sacvan Bercovitch had inaugurated “a period of ‘dissensus’” hoping to break the discipline’s alliance with Cold War politics that served the scenario of the United States as harbinger of democracy and liberalism around the world. Gregory Jay soon followed to remind us that “the anxiety to invent an American nation and the anxiety to invent a uniquely American literature were historically coincident” and cautioned against the uncritical use of the adjective ‘American’ as representing “a transcendental core of values and experiences” that refer to U.S. America only. For her part, Carolyn Porter in her seminal American Studies Association address of 1994 exposed the discipline’s insular focus on national history and literature and called for the study of cultures, apart from those with European antecedents, that have existed all along in a


reciprocal relationship with the United States. More interesting, Porter suggested would be “a historicized politics of location… [that] should open onto the Pacific as well as the Atlantic and should address the pre-colonial cultures of Aztec and Algonquin as well as the postcolonial careers of Quebec and Haiti,” provided, though, cultural and historical specificity is sustained.⁹

It was that new wave toward a transnational understanding of U.S. America that led George Handley to warn in 2000 that the reconceptualization of American Studies as a transcultural discipline, while valuable and praiseworthy, had still to “demonstrate how it [would] avoid a neoimperialist expansion in the field of Latin American studies.”¹⁰ Handley was concerned that, given the suspicious past of the discipline, the rediscovery of Latin America and the Caribbean could once again be articulated in the centuries-old light of “fixed identities of exotic difference” that would only reinforce the notions of a magnanimous U.S. America.¹¹ As a precautionary corrective, and in the spirit of Edouard Glissant, Handley proposed a focus on the hidden dynamics of U.S borders and the parallel histories and common presents of a hemispheric America, or what José Saldívar had earlier described as “the historical, ideological, and cultural

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¹¹ Ibid.
simultaneity in the imaginative writing of the Americas.” In 2008, and with a hemispheric American Studies gaining constant ground, Caroline Levander and Robert Levine moved one step further; they modified the concept of nation to understand it not as an essentialist category but as “a relational identity… fluid and ever-changing,” contingent on historical circumstances, and they explicitly called for a reframing of disciplinary boundaries that would allow for “different national histories” to reveal the overlapping frameworks of race and nation from the colonial times to the present (9, 5, 3, emphasis added). Indeed, as recently as 2016 and with the notion of culture as “dynamic, nomadic, flowing” now established, John Lowe explored the permeability of U.S. southern borders to produce a new map of the Americas as a space of cultural infiltration and interdependence. “I want to pursue narrative as it cuts across maps that create artificial lines around peoples

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12. David José Saldívar, *The Dialectics of Our America: Genealogy, Cultural Critique, and Literary History* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), 22. This quotation came to my attention through Handley’s reference (31). It should be mentioned, though, as Myriam Chancy argues, that Saldivar’s approach is based on an oppositionist model of hemispheric studies that essentially reconfirms binary divisions. See Chancy’s *Framing Silence: Revolutionary Novels by Haitian Women* (New Brunswick: Rutgers, 1997), 17-18. Indeed, in an almost Hegelian dialectic, Saldívar argues that by perceiving “the historical and cultural conflicts between Our America and the West… it is possible to perceive what the literatures of the Americas have in common” (*Dialectics* 21, 5).


and cultures,” Lowe argued, drawing new directions in the study of literary history in the region.¹⁵

This emphasis on “relational,” “parallel,” and/or “different” histories, as well as Levander and Levine’s suggestion for interdisciplinary study – like the emphases in Saldivar, Handley, and Lowe’s work – carries particular problematics when applied to the southern American hemisphere, namely the nature of historical source and narrative. Witnessing the denial of any aspect of identity formation in Latin America, due to slavery past and colonial present, nineteenth-century Venezuelan poet Andres Bello could see no alternative but a call for fiction writing. In ‘Historical Method,’ an essay written in 1848, Bello appeared confident that “[W]hen a country’s history doesn’t exist, except in incomplete, scattered documents, in vague traditions that must be compiled and judged, the narrative method is obligatory. Let anyone who denies it cite one general or particular history that did not start this way.”¹⁶ His essay, renamed and reprinted ever since as ‘Cultural Autonomy of America,’ signaled an unprecedented production of novels in Latin America, which meant to serve their function as nation-building narratives. Not surprisingly, in 1882 an ecstatic José Martí would herald in the pages of one such novel “a brand-new and enchanting way to write our American history.”¹⁷ The American North had succeeded in a similar enterprise a

¹⁵ Ibid., 7.


¹⁷ Quoted in ibid., 10.
century earlier, transforming (hi)stories of King Philip’s war and captivity narratives into the national history of a (white) republic.

This was the period when a radical change had started taking place in U.S. American (and European) historiography, a development that meant to shape the discipline of academic history today. In the 1820s, the German historian Leopold von Ranke decided to contest Hegel’s transcendental dialectic and philosophical conception of history. Hegel believed that since language is the medium between reality and consciousness, the historical fact is unavoidably shaped by the historian’s aesthetic or individual views. Thus, the historian naturally shared the same epistemic space with the poet, and especially the dramatist.18 Ranke disparaged the mythopoetic inclination of the philosopher historian to emphasize instead the significance of the documentary record as the foundation on which a truthful analysis of events can be sustained.19 In the introduction of his first book, “History of the Latin and Teutonic Nations” (1824), Ranke drew the line that would separate history and literature for the decades to come: “We cannot expect from the writing of history the same free development as is, at least in theory, to be expected in works of literature…. A strict presentation of facts, contingent


19 It is very interesting that, according to Hayden White in “The Westernization of World History” (2002), the reason why history turned to empiricism and moved into the university was to invent the legitimate genealogy necessary for the nation-state to stand (116-17). For a detailed account on Ranke’s background and thought in the context of German national politics of the time, see John Barrow, A History of Histories: Epics, Chronicles, Romances, and Inquiries from Herodotus and Thucydides to the Twentieth Century (New York: Knopf, 2008), 428-33.
and unattractive as that may be, is the highest law."20 Dismissing poetic inclinations as antithetical to historical veracity, Ranke then pronounced the foundational principle of modern historiography: the mission of the historian is to describe "what actually happened [wie es eigentlick gewesen.]"21

Arguably, the influence of Rankean empiricism remains widespread even to our days, particularly in Anglo-American historiography,22 but beginning in the 1960s with the Civil Rights Movement and the debate on the fictional representation of U.S. slavery, as well as the rise of poststructuralist thought in Europe, a number of philosophers and historians engaged in a fiery exchange on the borderlines between fiction and history. For instance, French critic Roland Barthes accused professional historiography of a "referential illusion," according to which historians consciously efface their active authorial presence in the text so that the reader gets the impression that s/he has a firsthand experience with the reality of the historical fact.23 The implied classification of history as literature was fully expressed shortly after that by the U.S. historian Hayden White, who boldly declared: "[I]n general there has been a reluctance to consider historical narratives as what

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21 Quoted in ibid.

22 So argue Willie Thompson in Postmodernism and History (27) and Simon Gunn in History and Cultural Theory (8). Robert Nye pursues a rare analysis on the reception of Ranke in U.S. American historiography from the nineteenth to mid-twentieth century. See his article "History and Literature: Branches of the Same Tree" in Robert H. Bremner, ed. Essays on History and Literature (Columbus: University of Ohio Press, 1966), 123-59.

they most manifestly are: verbal fictions, the contents of which have more in common with their counterparts in literature than they have with those in sciences." For such a challenge to come from a historian, the harsh critique, if not unofficial dismissal, from historiographic circles to which White was subjected to indicates the commitment of U.S. American historians to the Rankean dictum. But regardless of White’s controversial views and polemics on both sides, White deserves credit for instigating the so-called ‘linguistic turn’ in historiography, breaching – after a century and a half – the seemingly vast gap between history and literature.

This postmodernist discourse that has dominated the writing of the past in recent decades raised fundamental doubts as to the existence of a single historical truth that waits necessarily for the professional historian to reveal.

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24 Hayden White, “The Historical Text as a Literary Artifact,” in The Critical Tradition: Classic Texts and Contemporary Trends, ed. David H. Richter (Boston: Bedford, 2007), 1385. In his prolific career over the last three decades, White has been changing his argumentation to the extent that it is difficult to discern what his exact views are. For instance, in Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe (Baltimore: University of John Hopkins, 1975), his magnum opus, White supported a largely structuralist theory – drawing from Northrop Frye – on the tropes of metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony as predetermining the historian’s writing skills. Moreover, he suggested the styles of romance, tragedy, comedy, and satire as inherent to narrative emplotment (for a detailed account see 1-42). Yet as Willie Thompson in Postmodernism and Theory (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2004) shows, by 1995 White had abandoned his theory of tropes and, in fact, identified himself as a postmodernist (59). Another interesting case is raised by Mary Fulbrook in Historical Theory (London: Routledge, 2002) who argues that such a position as the one I quote in the text flirts with historical relativism; indeed, White later on admitted that, for instance a comic or satiric emplotment of the Holocaust is not possible (22). Finally, Richard Vann, in his methodic essay “The Reception of Hayden White,” History and Theory 37, no.2 (1998): 150-51 reads Fredric Jameson and Dominick LaCapra who, among others, expressed their inability to understand what exactly White’s position is. But overall, Kalle Pihlainen is right to suggest in 2006 that what White tries to achieve, after all, is to make history as “emotionally [and thus politically] effective” as fiction. See “The Confines of the Form: Historical Writing and the Desire that It Be what It is Not,” in Tropes for the Past: Hayden White and the History/Literature Debate, ed. Kuisma Korhonen (New York: Rodopi, 2006), 56.
Postmodernists rejected all sorts of metanarratives – the teleological view of history as marching to an ideal end – for a multitude of parallel stories which a priori eschew the possibility of offering accurate representation and/or stability in meaning. Neo-slave narratives written by a generation of authors who had long lost access to verifiable sources as to the past of slavery – if these existed at all – resorted to the fictional representation of events and raised new questions about the nature of the historical narrative.

Historiographic metafiction, a term coined by Linda Hutcheon, refuses to see the historian as the sole judge of the past and distinguishes between fact and event to suggest that, while an event cannot be denied, its discursive construction as a fact is open to multiple explanations and representations and is not restricted to academics only.25

To be sure, professional historiography should not be taken as a monolithic discipline that has remained stuck in reified archival positivism; on the contrary, historians have proven themselves to be remarkably adaptable to periodical cultural and historical demands requiring constant redefinition of what constitutes documentary evidence. As Willie Thompson observes, Ranke could probably not have imagined that his emphasis on high politics and war diplomacy would be replaced by the mid-nineteenth century research on localities and economics due to the rise of the middle-class, or that later class histories would require a focus on labor organizations, or

25 Linda Hutcheon, A Poetics of Postmodernism, 55, 93, 122. Alan Muslow explains that “for historical fact(s) to exist there must be a consensus among historians that a particular statement about a historical event is true,” and therefore the various ways of its description do not alter its truth value (Routledge Companion 107).
even the *Annales* School would start scouting the landscape for environmental details and eating habits.\textsuperscript{26} Besides, long and critical cross-examination of sources and its authors has always been the *sine qua non* of historical research. As Linda Gordon suggests, "it is wrong to conclude, as some have, that because there may be no objective truth possible, there are not objective lies."\textsuperscript{27}

Should we recall the solipsistic past of American Studies, however, history has played its own part in the sustenance of an exclusionary and nationalist rhetoric,\textsuperscript{28} not only in the now richly studied silence of non-white U.S. Americans, but significantly in the marginalization of women, irrespective of ethnicity or color - and not solely in terms of professional admission. Bonnie Smith directly connects the professionalization of history under Rankean guidelines with historical constructions of masculinity and femininity that attributed the diminishment of the latter to "value-free" scientific process.\textsuperscript{29} According to this reasoning, since the truth exists out there, neither gender nor color, nor any other factor could possibly affect the narration of ‘what actually happened.’ Again, such criticism does not imply

\textsuperscript{26} Willie Thompson, *Postmodernism and Theory*, 27-29.


\textsuperscript{28} For a full account see David Noble, *Death of A Nation: American Culture and The End of Exceptionalism*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 1-78.

that archival research should be abandoned or that institutional
historiography is now without purpose or meaning; rather, as Joan Wallach
Scott nicely puts it, “we do have to change some of the ways we’ve gone
about working” on the study of the past.30

But still, the issue of the nature of historical narrative and its epistemic
status, as presented so far, remains unresolved. Is history fiction? Can fiction
stand as history? And if so (or not,) in which disciplinary house can these two
coexist so that a hemispheric America settles in? Perhaps the answer lies
where it has long been. In a magisterial article Leo Marx narrates the birth of
American Studies in the politically tense moments of the 1930s and the
inability of Americanists to abide by a distinctive disciplinary methodology.
Trying to establish “the definition of our non-discipline,”31 Leo Marx reads
Henry Nash Smith’s 1957 description of American Studies as “the study of
American culture, past and present, as a whole” to remind us of the
foundationally unrestricted possibilities of American Studies for
interdisciplinary research.32 It is precisely this “loosely defined, untheorized
way of doing history,” Leo Marx continues, that allows Americanists to
differentiate from the prerogatives and inflexible guidelines of professional
historiography and embark on “our subject matter, not our mode of
expression. For students trained in American Studies, the counterpart of that

30 John Wallach Scott, Gender and the Politics of History, rev. ed. (New York:
Columbia University Press, 1999), 42.


32 Henry Nash Smith, “Can ‘American Studies’ Develop a Method?” American
Quarterly 9, no.2 (1957):197, emphasis added.
rich store of historical literature to which the historians are heirs is a body of modern writing definable only by its subject matter – America.”

In fact, Leo Marx locates the forefathers of American Studies in such figures as Alexis de Tocqueville, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Charles and Mary Beard, among many others, to underline that it is personal involvement and not prescribed rules that should determine the study of the Americas “as a whole.”

In this light, Henry Nash Smith and Leo Marx allow two crucial insights for my purposes here; on one hand, the coexistence of history and literature within American Studies as integral subject matters to the study of the Americas and, on the other, the now established reconceptualization of “America” as the study of the culture of the whole continent, both in its national and transnational or hemispheric aspects. It is this “doctrinal doubleness” that inheres in American Studies, in Leo Marx’s words, and “the moral complexity it embodies,” that find expression in Emory Elliott’s ASA 2006 address and his call for a transnational and literary understanding of America, with a rhetoric that denies the core of Rankean methodology: “When people say that they do not read fiction because it is not about real life, they deny themselves access to imagined parallel worlds in which

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34 Ibid., 128.
35 Ibid., 131.
readers can vicariously encounter the intimate lives of characters who are unlike themselves but are very much like real people."\textsuperscript{36}

Elliott’s point touches on a recent phenomenon which Eric Slauter describes in a 2008 \textit{William and Mary Quarterly} issue as the “trade gap” between historians and literary scholars, meaning that nowadays the latter tend to find in historical studies a lot more to cite than their historian colleagues do in literary studies.\textsuperscript{37} Presumably, this may be a self-conscious defensive reaction against the linguistic turn that understandably shook the foundations of historiography. Slauter acknowledges the important role that literature played in the past in orientating historians toward the recovery of excluded voices,\textsuperscript{38} and he proposes that in order for historians to renew their interest in literary analyses literary scholars should “advance a powerful theoretical claim to be further developed and historicized, or showcase a methodological tool that can be of use beyond local examples."\textsuperscript{39} Besides, Slauter meaningfully concludes, “literary history and history are both historicist enterprises: \textit{they are simply committed to historicizing different things."}\textsuperscript{40}


\textsuperscript{39} Ibid., 159
Caribbean history, in particular, follows a pattern of incoherence and
gaps, lost narratives of slavery and exile, and one-dimensional archival
documentation that altogether refuse compatibility with the standards of
Western historiography. Linear chronology, causality, and order are not an
issue in the Caribbean; for Edouard Glissant, the most prominent novelist
and theoretician of the francophone Caribbean, “History [with a capital H]
ends where the histories of those peoples once reputed to be without history
come together.” Glissant particularly targets Hegel and Marx, and with
good reason; both were devotees of a conflictual and teleological march of
history to an ideal state, whether it be the realization of Spirit or the creation
of a communist utopia, but in any case a philosophy of history that
naturalized colonization. And both denied African voice and agency, either
directly classifying Africa as ahistorical, as Hegel did, or by following the
Marxian credo that class revolution would necessarily start from the industrial
nations, thereby ignoring the rise of African and Creole slaves in the Haitian
Revolution of the prior century. Writes Glissant, “it is this hierarchical
process that we deny in our own emergent historical consciousness, in its

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40 Ibid., 152, emphasis added. Slauter acknowledges that his owes this formulation
to Jay Fliegelman, leading scholar in American literary studies.

41 Edouard Glissant, Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays, trans. Michael Dash,
3rd ed. (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1999), 64.

42 In his Eurocentric Lectures on the Philosophy of World History, trans. H. B. Nisbet
(Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 1975), Hegel describes Africa as a
place where “man has not progressed beyond a merely sensuous existence,”
without a “historical interest of its own, for we find its habitants living in barbarism
and savagery in a land which has not furnished them with any integral ingredient of
culture” (172, 174). For a good discussion together on Hegel and Marx’s ideas on
history, where partly I draw from, see Mary Fulbrook Historical Theory 12-18.
ruptures, its sudden emergence, its resistance to exploration.” Conversely, he coins the term *non-history* to describe the unexhausted diversity of accounts, the impossibility of establishing linear narratives with a stable beginning and end, the perpetual presence of an opaque past that eschews epistemic grounding, all to portray that, by its very violence and negation on which it was founded, Caribbean history affirms its presence.\(^{44}\)

What is of great interest is that to recuperate his land’s lost histories, Glissant calls for a “prophetic vision of the past” through an *imaginative* reconstruction of Caribbean history *through* literature and, importantly, storytelling.\(^{45}\) Only a literary resurrection of the past can release the author from the confines of linear narration and allow for imagination to fill in the gaps, and it is only literature that can provide the space for the voices of resistance to speak and inspire the future generations. This view does not imply that Glissant is dismissive of historians; what he questions is their *exclusive* access to the past, for their “rigid demands” in doing scientific history unavoidably relegate the Caribbean to a people without one.\(^{46}\) Such is the case as well with literary realism because realistic narratives aspire to the same reified objectivity and “total representation” that ironically silence...

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\(^{43}\) Edouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, 64.

\(^{44}\) Ibid.

\(^{45}\) Ibid. “The time has come to ask oneself,” argues Glissant in a footnote, “whether... the written record is ‘adequate’ for the archives of collective memory” (64).

\(^{46}\) Ibid., 65, 61.
fissures the moment they appear. Glissant argues, “it is the duty of the writer” to embrace “the assumption of history as passion” and explore the past through a poetics that will celebrate the people’s relationship with the land, their stories of slavery and repression, and their fragmented narratives of resistance and marronage (escape). In literature, Glissant concludes, “lie histories and the voice of people. We must reflect on a new relationship between history and literature [and] we need to live it differently.”

Glissant’s rhetoric represents only another stage in a long continuum of Caribbean intellectuals from diverse linguistic and cultural spectra who have suggested a similar approach to the past. To the enthusiasm of José Martí for Latin America’s literary revolution of the prior century, another Cuban, Alejo Carpentier, would add by proposing the concept of magical realism as the tool with which the past of the whole continent could be retrieved; for “what is the entire history of America if not a chronicle of the marvelous real,” Carpentier wondered in 1949, and he set to write the history of the Haitian Revolution. Wilson Harris, the Guyanese writer and poet, followed in 1970 by suggesting that for the Caribbean to escape from “the historical stasis”

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47 Ibid., 73, 105.

48 Ibid., 76, 63, 81.

49 Ibid., 77.

and move beyond the “apparently real world or prison of history,” writers should concentrate on “a philosophy of history [that] may well lie buried in the arts of the imagination.”

Two decades later, Martiniquan nationalists Jean Bernabé, Patrick Chamoiseau, and Raphaël Confiant would appear confident too that Caribbean history is not “totally accessible to historians…. only poetic knowledge, fictional knowledge, literary knowledge… can discover us, understand us and bring us, evanescent, back to the resuscitation of consciousness.”

Similarly, as will be extensively shown in chapters one, two and three, contemporary Derek Walcott, Maryse Condé, and Michelle Cliff respectively resorted to imagination as the sole means to recapture what official narratives had long obscured. The critical notion in Caribbean poetics that underlines this re-conceptualization of history and literature, and which largely constitutes the theoretical background of the works that will be discussed here, is that of creolization. The term is derived from what Keith Cartwright rightly calls as “this most American of words,” Creole, a definition of which appears in one of the earliest pieces of American literature, “La Florida” by Inca Garcilaso de la Vega, in 1605, where the author provides the meaning that is largely valid

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53 I owe the insight to the unique homology of Caribbean writers with literature as history writing to the graduate seminar of Richard Price at the College of William and Mary in spring 2007. For a similar analysis, see Richard Price The Convict and the Colonel (Boston: Beacon, 1998), 168-70.
today: “The Negroes designate all persons crio\llos who have been born in
the Indies of either pure Spanish or pure Negro parents, thus indicating that
they are natives of the Indies.”\textsuperscript{54} According to Antonio Benitez-Rojo, the birth
of Creole culture should be estimated between 1575 and 1625. Some first
instances of creolization can be discerned in 1573, when the Town
Government in Havana decided to allow participation of free blacks in the
celebration of Corpus Christi. Their songs and dances, the result of
improvisation,\textsuperscript{55} were already a mixture of African and European elements.
Roughly a century later, a distinctive Creole identity began to emerge among
both whites and blacks, as well as among Native Americans.\textsuperscript{56}

Creolization as an analytic concept enters scholarly discussion in 1971
with Edward Kamau Brathwaite, Barbadian poet, historian, and theoretician,
who defined it as “a way of seeing the society, not in terms of white and

\textsuperscript{54} Keith Cartwright, \textit{Reading Africa into American Literature: Epics, Fables, and
Gothic Tales} (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2002), 15. It is interesting
that scholars keep discovering even earlier uses of the term. According to Ralph
Bauer, writing in 2008, the word Creole first appears in the pages of \textit{Geografia y
descripcion universal de las Indias}, a work by the royal chronicler Juan Lopez de
Velasco written in 1570. Bauer rightly assumes that the word must be coming from
the Latin verb \textit{creare} (to create something new). See “The Hemispheric
Genealogies of ‘Race” in \textit{Hemispheric American Studies}, 40. Still, de la Vega’s text
remains the earliest source that provides a concise definition of the term.

\textsuperscript{55} Joseph Roach, in his groundbreaking \textit{Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic
Performance} (New York: University of Columbia Press, 1996), shows how
performances function as sites of memory through improvisation; in their attempt to
imitate a practice of the past, performers engage in a process of both remembrance
and unavoidable forgetting. Repetition is change, and “that is why the relentless
search for purity of origins is a voyage not of discovery but of erasure” (6).

\textsuperscript{56} Antonio Benitez-Rojo, “Three Words toward Creolization,” in \textit{Caribbean
Creolization: Reflections on the Cultural Dynamics of Language, Literature, and
Identity}, ed. Kathleen M. Balutansky and Marie-Agnes Sourieau (Gainesville:
black, master and slave, in separate nuclear units, but as contributory parts of a whole.” Of course, the fundamental aspect of Caribbean society was slavery, and for Brathwaite “the friction created by this confrontation was cruel, but it was also creative.” Chris Bongie detects in the aforementioned quotations the first signs of a self-contradictory rhetoric, since Brathwaite’s latter argument presupposes the very existence of two separate identities in conflict with each other. Indeed, shortly afterwards Brathwaite would supplant his theory with a poetics that pondered a process of victorious “acculturation,” expressing the assimilatory policy of European Creoles, versus that of a halted “interculturation,” by which the multitude of Creole identities, including post-slavery indentured East Indians, were involved in mutual cultural exchange against metropolitan pressure. And this time Brathwaite was clear enough; “interculturation” was never completed because the Creoles failed to take “the culture of this black ex-African majority as the paradigm and norm for the entire society.”

Brathwaite’s gradual homology with an exclusively Afrocentric understanding of creolization was fully expressed with his theorization of

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58 Ibid.


such concepts as *nation language* and *nam*, both of which underline the surviving yet unsettled African psyche in the Caribbean. More performative than textualist, “nation language” is found in religion and folk tradition as a predominantly African yet unavoidably creolized medium through which ‘nam’ is expressed, “an indestructible culture-core, imparting to each group and identity which in normal times one is proud enough of, but which, at times of crisis, may be fiercely defended by its possessors.”61 Brathwaite is confident, however, that ‘nation language’ survived the Middle Passage and was only creolized during the process of assimilation that Euro-Creoles imposed. “To discover a literature of negritude and with it, a literature of authenticity,” the Barbadian scholar argues, it is necessary that oral histories and folk culture be reintegrated in national history;62 and the space where this redefinition of culture can take place is novels, for these are “essentially the expression of a society.”63

Brathwaite’s essentialist rhetoric cast a shadow on an otherwise complex yet parochial poetics that meets with relatively little attention in U.S. American literary and historical scholarship. Understandably, his model

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63 Kamau Brathwaite, “Roots,” in *Roots*, 54.
hardly coincides with the deconstructionist aura of transnationalist analyses, yet it should be underlined, as Glen Richards does, that Brathwaite’s theories were mainly developed during a time when the “Frazier versus Herskovits” debate on the survival of African elements in the New World refused to subside. Bill Ashcroft nicely puts it when he argues that “what it means to have a history is the same as what it means to have a legitimate existence: history and legitimation go hand in hand, history legitimates ‘us’ and not others.” As I argue further below, the existence of a centripetal force, whether it be the idea of nation or ancestral soul, either individually or collectively conceived, is an integral element of creolization, even in its transnational manifestations.

Glissant’s divergence from Brathwaite becomes apparent in his long abstention from providing a definition of creolization, as such a description would try to specify that which for him is diverse and indeterminable. But in Caribbean Discourse he makes sure to clarify that “it is no longer valid to glorify ‘unique’ origins that the race safeguards and prolongs.” Such mentality, Glissant continues, mimics “Western tradition [where] genealogical descent guarantees racial exclusivity…. To assert peoples are creolized, that creolization has value, is to deconstruct in this way the category of ‘creolized’


that is considered halfway between two ‘pure’ extremes.” It is only a decade later, in a poetic language and, importantly, amidst his admiration for William Faulkner, that Glissant does describe creolization as “the unstoppable conjunction despite misery, oppression, and lynching, the conjunction that opens up torrents of unpredictable results..., the unpredictability that terrifies those who refuse the very idea, if not the temptation, to mix, flow together, and share.” Indeed, the notion to which Glissant has remained committed throughout his career is the denial of any sense of traceable origins.

Thus Glissant was never convinced of the centrality of the ancestral land in a New World context, despite the fact that he was, though indirectly, acquainted with the rhetoric of Aimé Césaire in Martinique at an early age. To the core politics of Negritude, of Aimé Césaire, Leopold Senghor, and Leon Damas, who dismissed Western values and sought racial pride and cultural validation in the ties of the African diaspora with the mother continent, Glissant proposed instead the idea of Antillanité. The sole definition of the term is found in the glossary of Caribbean Discourse and, not surprisingly, it consists of two short sentences: “More than a theory, a vision. The force of it is such that it is applied to everything.” If we were to

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66 Edouard Glissant, Caribbean Discourse, 140. Besides, Glissant goes on, “creolization as an idea means the negation of creolization as a category” (141).


68 For an overview on Glissant’s biography and early stages, see Michael Dash, Edouard Glissant (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 1-25.

69 Edouard Glissant, Caribbean Discourse, 261.
come up necessarily with a more manageable description, Antillanité’s obvious connection with Glissantian creolization and its contradiction of Negritude would imply a state in which all cultures and ethnic groups that are found in the Antilles, now and in the past, contribute equally and diversely to a perpetually changing Caribbean identity. As Glissant writes in *Poetics of Relation*, in one of his rare references to the term, “antillanite… represents quite simply the will to rally together and diffract the Ante-Islands confirming us in ourselves and joining us to an elsewhere. For us *antillanite*, a method and not a state of being, can never be accomplished, nor can we go beyond it.”\(^70\)

Glissant does not sustain the same degree of indeterminacy for Africa and coins the notion of *retour* (reversion) to suggest that a return to the motherland is not possible.\(^71\) He compares the Jewish diaspora “*that maintains its original nature*” to the African one “*that is transformed… into another people*,” in order to show that it is only as “dim traces or… spontaneous impulses” that memories of Africa survive in the New World.\(^72\)

Glissant’s position owes to the absence of a sense of collective past and identity in his native Martinique due to the island’s departmentalization. In 1946, at a time when the first signs of decolonization begun to appear worldwide, the French National Assembly announced the consensual


\(^{71}\) Edouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, 14.

\(^{72}\) Ibid., 15.
integration of Guadeloupe, Martinique, Guyane, and Reunion into the metropolitan state, a decision that meant to shape the francophone Caribbean into a (theoretically) European region that bears little connection with Africa, if at all. Even worse for Glissant, it was Aimé Césaire as President of Martinique who fully supported this option, ironically the same person who, a few years earlier, had inspired millions in the (francophone) African diaspora with the vision of return to the African land.\textsuperscript{73} For Glissant, this has never been a meaningful option and, in a rhetoric that sharply contradicts Kamau Brathwaite, he suggests, “Reversion is the obsession with a single origin… [and to] revert is to consecrate permanence, to negate contact.”\textsuperscript{74}

Glissant proposes instead an idea of \textit{errance} (errantry), characteristic of an endlessly wandering people in a ceaseless process of creolization. Yet as Betsy Wing, the translator of \textit{Poetics of Relation}, notes, this wandering should not be perceived as an aimless, “idle roaming,” but rather as “a sense of sacred motivation” to meet the world and define one’s position in relation to the other.\textsuperscript{75} Indeed, writes Glissant, “the thought of errantry is not apolitical nor is it inconsistent with the will to identity.” On the contrary, “one who is errant (who is no longer traveler, discoverer, or conqueror) strives to know

\textsuperscript{73} Nick Nesbitt, \textit{Voicing Memory: History and Subjectivity in French Caribbean Literature} (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2003), 6-7. Especially with his influential “Notebook of a Return to the Native Land” (1939). When departmentalization soon translated to neocolonialism, Césaire regretted his decision, but it was too late.

\textsuperscript{74} Edouard Glissant, \textit{Caribbean Discourse}, 16.

\textsuperscript{75} Edouard Glissant, \textit{Poetics of Relation}, xvi, 221.
the totality of the world yet already knows he will never accomplish this – and
knows that is precisely where the threatened beauty of the world resides.”76
For Glissant, to ‘comprehend’ the world is not desirable, because the very
meaning of the word implies a tendency to ‘grasp;’ so has been the case with
the mania of the explorers.77 The errant does not wish to see the world “as
something obvious and transparent… but willingly renounces any claims to
sum it up or to possess it.”78 This is why Glissant objects to transparency and
demands “the right to opacity for everyone,” by which he means not
necessarily “the obscure” but “that which cannot be reduced, which is the
most perennial guarantee of participation and confluence.”79 Here Glissant
directly touches on the issue of the interrelationship between the Caribbean
and the West, by foregrounding not simply the maintenance of “difference” –
that would mean an adjustment of the excluded to the standard solipsistic
norm – but also the sustenance of an “irreducible singularity” as a
prerequisite for cross-cultural communication.80

This particular point is of crucial importance to this study, for
Glissantian creolization should not be considered – as often becomes the
case – as the Caribbean version of only another melting-pot theory that
fosters globalization. Nor is it the case that in his rejection of origins Glissant

76 Ibid., 20.
77 Ibid., 26.
78 Ibid., 20-21.
79 Ibid., 194, 191.
80 Ibid., 190.
dismisses the concept of nation. What escapes attention, with the notable exceptions of Chris Bongie and Christopher Miller, is that Glissant does not oppose *unique* origins, even though these can never be traced, but the perpetuation of *fixed* identities which are by definition constructed and inflexible.\textsuperscript{81} *Caribbean Discourse* is a cultural nationalist manifesto that calls for the awakening of Martiniquan historical consciousness to self-definition, as well as “a national literature” of history writing that “emerges when a community whose collective existence is called into question tries to put together the reasons for its existence.”\textsuperscript{82} Glissant does not see nation “as the product of divisiveness”; for him it is “the promise of future sharing with others,” a substantial criterion that allows cross-cultural communication on a global scale.\textsuperscript{83} And he is aware that his model of creolization may easily divert into a theory of globalization that, in fact, suppresses rather than respects difference. Thus Bongie rightly locates in him this “paradoxical coexistence of two differing logics… [as] fundamental to the Creolizing process.”\textsuperscript{84} As Glissant concludes, in his familiar, succinct manner, “One can reject the nation, if one already has one.”\textsuperscript{85}

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\textsuperscript{81} Bongie has proved very influential in my reading of creolization. Also, Christopher Miller has shown in *The French Atlantic Triangle: Literature and Culture of the Slave Trade* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008) that for Glissant “multiplicity and singularity are not in contradiction with each other” (355).

\textsuperscript{82} Edouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, 104.

\textsuperscript{83} Ibid., 235.

\textsuperscript{84} Chris Bongie, *Islands and Exiles*, 69.

\textsuperscript{85} Edouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, 218.
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Glissant's creolized identitarian politics become clearer in his use of the term *detour* (diversion), by which he describes the impossibility of the Caribbean to ever reach established roots. His example is that of the Martiniquan migrant who is unaware of the non-existence of his island's identity until he arrives in France and then the diminished status of the Caribbean strikes him in full force; for he soon realizes he cannot return to his island, as “there he will find that the situation is intolerable, his colleagues irresponsible; they will find him too assimile, too European in his ways,” Glissant argues, “and he will have to migrate again.”\(^{86}\) However, this struggle for identity through exposure to a constant “elsewhere,” an endless migration and exile in which the individual realizes there are pieces of his/her identity dispersed everywhere s/he has been, a “psychic torture” indeed, is not meaningless.\(^{87}\) There is an Ithaca of collective consciousness, which is actually nurtured by the very need for *retour*, the futile desire for sacred origins. *Retour* and *detour*, unavoidable, inseparable and one feeding on the other, will lead to “a return to the point of entanglement, from which we were forcefully turned away; that is where we must ultimately put to work the forces of creolization, or perish.”\(^{88}\) In short, searching for *retour* does not end in the rediscovery of an ancestral essence; rather, it instigates a process of endless migration, literal and metaphorical, that leads to the realization of an *inter-related* origins, characteristic of the Americas.

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\(^{86}\) Edouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, 23.

\(^{87}\) Ibid., 19, 23.

\(^{88}\) Ibid., 26.
It is this notion of relation (cross-cultural poetics) that ultimately comes to describe Glissantian creolization and that will serve as this dissertation’s model of a hemispheric understanding of the Americas. “What took place in the Caribbean,” writes Glissant, “which could be summed up in the idea of creolization, approximates the idea of Relation… as nearly as possible. It is not merely an encounter, …but a new and original dimension allowing each person to be here and elsewhere, rooted and open.” Precisely this dimension of cross-cultural contact among peoples in America is what I will be exploring here as revealed in the pages of historiographical novels that breach the epistemological gap between the United States and Caribbean history. Through such foundational yet creolized histories as the American Mediterranean, the Salem witch trials, Maroon resistance, Harpers Ferry, and the Haitian Revolution, what emerges is an interrogation of hegemonic, and often masculine, versions of North American history in favor of a relational past of cultural infiltration and gender mobility. Consensus on such historically loaded narratives is not an issue, nor has it ever been one, for that matter. Instead, what I hope to foreground, attending to historical specificity, are communal (hi)stories of American dissent, a creolized past.

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89 Edouard Glissant, Poetics of Relation, 34. Perhaps no other concept better describes this imagery than that of rhizome; drawn from botany, the single root signifies vertical and stable foundations, the source that defines existence, yet the rhizome is horizontal, incessantly variable and unpredictable. “Rhizomatic thought is the principle behind what I call the Poetics of Relation, in which each and every identity is extended through a relationship with the Other,” Glissant explains (PR 11). Glissant acknowledges that he takes the concept from Deleuze and Guattari, but he is critical of their nomadism for ignoring cultural specificity (11).

90 I draw the idea of “dissent” from the announcement of the American Studies Association’s annual meeting, November 21-24, 2013.
of Glissantian undertones where conventional boundaries between literature and history, oral stories and established events, clash to celebrate an otherwise irreducible, that is, singular, and yet common heritage. Besides, inherent to such understanding of *creolization as relation* is the very notion of identity itself, as inextricable yet by definition multiple, flirting with fixed singularity yet aware of its interdependence; “but it is hard to keep the balance,” Glissant closes meaningfully.\(^91\) According to Bongie’s algebraic formulation, what lies in the heart of Glissantian poetics is, after all, a fundamental ambivalence, since the vacillation “between fixed and relational identities is not a matter of *either/or but (and also) of both/and.*”\(^92\)

Among the most influential successors to Glissant, Cuban novelist and critic Antonio Benítez-Rojo built on his poetics to produce a more postmodernist version of creolization as “not merely a process (a word which implies forward movement), but a discontinuous series of recurrences, of happenings, whose sole law is change.”\(^93\) Benítez-Rojo’s description is inspired by the unique diversity that characterizes the Caribbean – in terms of languages, religions, ethnicities, customs, and the list could be endless –

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\(^91\) Edouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 142. Glissant’s identitarian politics become obvious when he argues that “identity as a system of relation is... a form of violence that challenges the generalizing universal.” Moreover, in a footnote to this quotation, he writes disapprovingly that “there is a growing tendency in Western aesthetic theories, from ethnopoetics to geopoetics to cosmopoetics, to make some claim of going beyond notions or dimensions of identity” (142).

\(^92\) Chris Bongie, *Islands and Exiles*, 66, emphasis added.

that initially renders any attempt to narrate the region as a stable referent impossible. This is why in his magnum opus *The Repeating Island* Benítez-Rojo appropriates the scientific theory of *chaos* to suggest that the Caribbean is not a chaotic society, in the vernacular use of the term, but a space in which certain trends that appear at one point, may be absent the next time one looks back, but present in another one and all the way back, in a vertiginous dynamic that unfolds endlessly and uncontrollably.\(^9^4\) In other words, each island in the Caribbean archipelago holds histories and literatures that can be found again and again in any other island of the basin, but always different and in flux, which is exactly what brings them together as a whole. “This is again because the Caribbean is not a common archipelago,” Benítez-Rojo explains, “but a meta-archipelago (an exalted quality that Hellas possessed, and the great Malay archipelago as well,) and as a meta-archipelago it has the virtue of having neither a boundary nor a center.”\(^9^5\) Thus the ‘repeating island’ can never function as a stable origin or as an essence, but instead follows the “rhythm” of the sea, sometimes turbulent, other times serene, yet always in motion.\(^9^6\) For the Caribbean

\(^9^4\) In *The Repeating Island: The Caribbean and the Postmodern Perspective*, 3rd ed. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 2. Glissant’s influence is most evident here, as two years earlier he had coined the term *chaos-monde* to describe the “turbulent confluence” of peoples and cultures around the world, but free from hierarchical notions: “The *chaos-monde* is only disorder if one assumes there to be an order,” says Glissant, and “the aesthetics of the chaos-monde (what we were thus calling the aesthetics of the universe but cleared of a priori values) embraces all the elements and forms of expression of this totality within us” (*Poetics of Relation* 94).

\(^9^5\) Ibid., 4.

\(^9^6\) Ibid., 75.
people are among the People of the Sea, and “every person of the
Caribbean is in exile from his own myth and his own history, and also from
his own culture and his own Being, now and always, in the world.”
Authentic expressions in the basin, Benítez-Rojo closes, are impossible.

Be that as it may, it was predictably only a matter of time for Glissant’s
delicate ambiguity over the idea of nation and identity to be misinterpreted as
an exclusionary rhetoric, this time in the francophone Caribbean – Brathwaite
is, not to forget, from anglophone Barbados. In 1989, Jean Bernabé, Patrick
Chamoiseau, and Raphaël Confiant – collectively known as the Creolistes –
published *Eloge de la créolité*, a nationalist manifesto that celebrated
Caribbean creolization in its Glissantian and diverse origins but now
perceived Creole identity as an authentic formation, pure in its very denial of
purity, and homogeneous in its heterogeneity. The very first sentence of their
text prescribes the polemics of their arguments: “Neither Europeans, nor
Africans, nor Asians, we proclaim ourselves Creoles.” Creolistes developed
their own literary poetics in which Creole language and oral literature are
inalienable to Caribbean history but also definitive for the narration of créolité
(Creoleness): “We declare that Creoleness is the cement of our culture and
that it ought to rule the foundations of our Caribbeanness…. The Creole
poet, the Creole novelist, both writing in Creole, will have to be at once the

97 Ibid., 217.
98 Ibid., 295.
99 Jean Bernabé, Patrick Chamoiseau, and Raphaël Confiant. “In Praise of
collectors of ancestral speech, the gatherers of new words, and the discoverers of the créolité of Creole.”\textsuperscript{100} The precise nature of \textit{créolité} becomes apparent in its opposition to Negritude and Antillanité, the poetics that in essence it aspires to replace in an evolutionary fashion. “We are forever Césaire’s sons,” they argue, acknowledging their filial relation to the essentialist vision of the Martiniquan poet, but “Negritude replaced the illusion of Europe by an African illusion.”\textsuperscript{101} Glissant may have showed them the way “to apprehend this \textit{Caribbean civilization [sic]} in its American space,” free from Senghorian emotionalism, but Antillanité was too conditional on exterior factors: “We cannot reach Caribbeanness [antillanité] without interior vision. And interior vision is nothing without the \textit{unconditional acceptance of our Creoleness}.”\textsuperscript{102}

Such absolutist ideas that prioritize inner foundational sources of identity have met with the massive critique of scholars to the extent that Créolité is largely considered to be outside of creolization poetics. Glissant himself was forced to openly renounce the Creolistes for their dogmatism in order to remind us that creolization is a ceaseless process rather than a fixed identity: “Creolization, one of the ways of forming a complex mix – and not merely a linguistic result – is only exemplified by its process and certainly not by the ‘contents’ on which these operate.”\textsuperscript{103} Yet the fact remains that

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{100} Ibid., 891, 900.
  \item \textsuperscript{101} Ibid., 888, 889.
  \item \textsuperscript{102} Ibid., 890, 891, emphasis and comment added.
  \item \textsuperscript{103} Edouard Glissant, \textit{Poetics of Relation}, 89.
\end{itemize}
créolité nowadays constitutes an indispensable part of any academic work on creolization,\textsuperscript{104} not only as the most controversial aspect of Caribbean poetics due to its ethnic solipsism, but also as the preeminent example of the – arguably – masculinist nature of creolization.

Richard and Sally Price have recorded a characteristic reaction of the Creolistes to the criticism they received from Annie Lerbrun, French feminist and critic, for turning their movement to an exclusivist club. Raphaël Confiant’s reply exposes the parochial politics of authenticity (and sexism) that inheres in créolité:

While I could accept the arguments you have presented if they had come from an Antillean, an African, or a black American, they are totally intolerable and unbearable coming from you, French woman, Westerner, overblown and wallowing in your colonial smugness… \textit{You have no right – morally or historically – to enter into the debate about Martiniquan identity.}\textsuperscript{105}

This dissertation does exactly that because obviously ‘one does not have to be Greek to understand Homer,’ as an unnamed scholar once put it.\textsuperscript{106} But

\textsuperscript{104} In fact, A. James Arnold finds that créolité is now so popular that the attention it receives far exceeds that on Glissant. See A. James Arnold, “The Erotics of Colonialism in Contemporary French West Indian Literary Culture,” \textit{Sisyphus and Eldorado: Magical and Other Realisms in Caribbean Literature}, ed. Timothy J. Reiss (Trenton: Africa, 2002), 173.


for now what also needs to be underlined is the sexist mentality that runs through the Creolistes’ thought, rightly described by the Prices as “naked sexism.” In a discussion on Simone Schwarz-Bart, noted Caribbean writer (and before the Creolistes refer to her work), they find it proper to note that a meeting with her “is always a pleasure. Beautiful in her inalterable manner, the hair flowing free in the wake of former braids, the blasé look of her eyelids, the wide smile, a simultaneous seductiveness and simplicity….” Such an attitude would be easy to dismiss as a parochial romanticism that inheres in any nationalist movement, were it not to imply a much deeper tendency in Caribbean thought.

A. James Arnold has traced the concealed line of a pan-Caribbean masculine politics that effaces female presence both in terms of participation in the broader intellectual sphere and in the conscious negligence (or perhaps ignorance) of literature written by women. Arnold locates an erotics of colonialism unabashedly at force since colonial times, by which the Other becomes feminized in an economy of “aggressive heterosexual desire” that allows no other space for the Caribbean male than that of the hyper-masculine male. Already in the 1960s, Fanon had appeared more than confident that homosexuality could not ever be found in Martinique, even in

108 Ibid.
the face of contrary evidence, \textsuperscript{110} and as for the other pole of manhood, hegemonic, middle-class masculinity was long occupied by the colonizer. \textsuperscript{111} For Arnold this gendered logic that sustains women in the status of the passive observer remains unchanged, from Aimé Césaire’s agonizing manhood to Fanon’s denial of homosexuality and from Glissant’s hyper-male Maroon hero, which I discuss in chapter three, to the Creolistes’ sexism. \textsuperscript{112}

Female critical literary engagement in Caribbean poetics becomes substantially visible only in the early 1990s with the groundbreaking edition of Carole Boyce Davis’s and Elaine Savory Fido’s \textit{Out of the Kumbla}. The Caribbean womanists/feminists locate an absence of feminist thought in the region and articulate a decades-old suppression of female agency both in terms of representation as well as real-life conditions. \textsuperscript{113} Of central


\textsuperscript{111} James Arnold, “The Erotics of Colonialism,” 170-71

\textsuperscript{112} Arnold’s hypothesis on the Creolistes is that they embrace a primordial masculinity that instructs women to “concern themselves with reproduction or with vernal sexual activity,” as is the case with female representations in Creolistes’ literary work (180).

\textsuperscript{113} Davis and Fido negotiate the concept of ‘womanism’ as this was proposed by Alice Walker in \textit{In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens: Womanist Prose} (Orlando: Harvest, 1983) to signify a black feminist politics in reaction to Western feminism’s tendency to universalize female experience on white women’s standards (xi-xvi). Walker insists on “naming our own experience after our own fashion” (82), and defines ‘womanism’ as follows:

\begin{quote}
Womanist. 1. From womanish. (Opp. of ‘girlish,’ i.e., frivolous, irresponsible, not serious.) A black feminist of color. From the black folk expression of mothers to female children, “You acting womanish,” i.e., like a woman… Responsible. In charge. \textbf{Serious}. 2. \textit{Also}: A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women’s culture, women’s emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counter-balance of laughter,) and women’s strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually. Committed to
\end{quote}
importance is the issue of female participation in Caribbean history that is notoriously absent from established versions, since the Caribbean woman has suffered a “double marginalization or dual colonization,” being both female and Other.\textsuperscript{114} The concept of “voicelessness” is thus presented as the cornerstone of a feminist politics that aims to fight “the historical absence of the woman writer’s text: the absence of a specifically female position on major issues such as slavery, colonialism, decolonization, women’s rights” as well as “the textual construction of woman as silent.”\textsuperscript{115}

What is even more interesting is that Davis and Fido foreground literature as the site “for the reinscription of the woman’s story in history,” and they embrace storytelling as a substantial medium in retracing the stories that their ancestral grandmothers had bequeathed from one generation to the other.\textsuperscript{116} Disruption and gaps should not deter the reader because phallocentric linearity is now substituted by a “quilted” narrative that weaves different parts and themes together, just as the oral story does, healing the wounds of the past.\textsuperscript{117} As to what distinguishes Caribbean female writing, this is “born of the special character of Caribbean life,” David and Fido argue; survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health… (xi).

Walker’s concept aimed to shape black feminist politics and greatly influence literary scholarship in the years to come.


\textsuperscript{115} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{116} Ibid., 6, 4.

\textsuperscript{117} Ibid., 6.
it is “its unity-in-diversity” and with it the struggle for survival in harsh conditions that Caribbean women’s literature has to offer to world feminism.\textsuperscript{118}

And perhaps it can give even more; the problematics of female misrepresentation in history writing have long constituted the fundamental concern in women’s history and feminist historiography worldwide.\textsuperscript{119} But Patricia Mohammed has recently noticed the interesting development of Caribbean feminist writings gradually moving toward the inherently complex field of exploring differences among women.\textsuperscript{120} These differences should not be understood within a politics of a universal feminist dialogue that aspires to resolution and the achievement of a utopian ‘sisterhood’ that paralyzed Second Wave feminism. Rather, they emerge from the unique diversity of the region and the creolized, obscure identities of its people and the past. “Historical paradigms derived from slavery,” argues Hilary Beckles, “such as ‘white women consumed, black women labored and coloured women served’ need to be destabilized” so that the complexities of the colonial past and neocolonial present be revealed.\textsuperscript{121} Indeed, in Carole Boyce Davies’s

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item[\textsuperscript{118}] Ibid., 15, emphasis added.
\item[\textsuperscript{119}] To distinguish between women’s history and feminist historiography, Willie Thompson suggests that the first restores women’s presence in the past in accordance with historiographic demands, whereas the latter rewrites established historical accounts. (45)
\item[\textsuperscript{121}] Hilary Beckles, Centering Woman, 191-92.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
diasporic reading of Caribbean women’s writings, what emerges is a “critical relationality” among migrating women that involves “negotiating, articulating and interrogating simultaneously a variety of resistant discourses relationally and depending on context, historical and political circumstances.”\textsuperscript{122} Davies does not deny attachment to the archipelago but revolts against the assumed fixity of Caribbean female identity in a setting where she is called to face “racial discrimination and foreign bias, Caribbean male phallicism and American imperialism.”\textsuperscript{123} Only a critical relationality, Davies goes on, can “assert the specificity of the other.”\textsuperscript{124} Such argumentation should by now strike a familiar note; although relation as a concept should not be attributed exclusively to Glissant, the two Caribbean scholars seem to be in a similar vein as to a characteristically Caribbean, indeterminate, and relational politics of approaching the region.

The female novelist and critic who has actively engaged in creolization poetics, paradoxically by dismissing the very idea as such, is Maryse Condé. The Guadeloupian writer has curved her own individualized path in writing the Caribbean by rejecting Glissant’s role of the intellectual as inspirer of the society and severely criticizing the Creolistes for their monoculturalist myopia. “I maintain that the beauty of creation resides in its refusal of all constraining canonical rules,” argues Condé meaningfully, and “I maintain

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{122} Carole Boyse Davies, \textit{Black Women, Writing and Identity: Migrations of the Subject} (London: Routledge, 1994), 47.
\bibitem{123} Ibid., 116.
\bibitem{124} Ibid., 56.
\end{thebibliography}
that all writers must choose whatever linguistic strategies, narrative
techniques, they deem appropriate to express their identity. No exclusions,
no dictates.”¹²⁵ Both Glissant in his reification of related cultures and the
Creolistes in their claim to authenticity assume to be representative of
Caribbean society, but as they are “prisoners of their class, their education,
and their ideological inclinations” what they essentially do is “impose on it a
set of rules” ignoring the complexity and subversiveness of popular
culture.¹²⁶ Condé particularly takes the Creolistes to task for their
appropriation of Creole language as definitive of a few, mainly francophone
Caribbean islands, as well as their selective reading of the past: “We must
return to history,” says Condé. “What does it mean to be a Creole? To be a
Creole simply means ‘to be born in the islands.’ From the sixteenth century,
missionaries and travelers alike called “Creole” not only the white people but
also the blacks born on the plantation.”¹²⁷ And she goes on to suggest the
undisciplined spirit that accompanies her writings and her relationship with
the Caribbean all along: “If we accept this historical definition, a Creole


person enjoys the right and the freedom to express his or her Créolité as he or she pleases.”128

If there is one female writer whose work epitomizes the interrelationship between literature and history in the broader hemispheric Americas, it is Michelle Cliff. The Jamaican Creole writer, who has described herself as “not just a Caribbean... but of the Americas,”129 has dedicated her literary career to recapturing those narratives of the past that have long been silenced in the official records. “The past coexists with the present in this amnesiac country [the Americas] in this forgetful century,” writes Cliff, and “I attempt to describe what has not been described. I try to build a story from the most delicate of remains... and it is through fiction that some of us rescue the American past.”130 As I show in chapter three, Cliff’s work concentrates on two revolutionary female figures whose presence has been effaced from History, Queen Nanny of Jamaica, the legendary leader of Windward Maroons, and Mary Ellen Pleasant, the undocumented sponsor of John Brown’s raid at Harper’s Ferry, both real-life historical agents of female authority that re-enter the public sphere through fiction. Cliff reveals the full complexity of her position as a writer of the Americas, as well as her innermost priorities, in a magnificent paragraph that merits quoting here:

128 Ibid.


130 “History as Fiction, Fiction as History,” Ploughsares 20, no.2/3 (1994), n.pag.
Part of my purpose as a writer of Afro-Caribbean – Indian (Arawak and Carib), African, European – experience and heritage, and western experience and education, has been to reject speechlessness, a process which has taken years, and to invent my own peculiar speech, with which to describe my own peculiar self, to draw together everything I am and I have been, sometimes civilized, sometimes ruinate, both Caliban and Ariel. And, underneath it all, the granddaughter Sycorax, precolonial female, landscape, I(s)land: I land.131

And Cliff succeeds in all; for her obsession with history shows the way to a multitude of paths that lead to a richer understanding of the American past, to people and stories that still remain to be discovered in the dustbins of archival history and that can illuminate the immense complexity of this hemisphere, a site of related, national, and transnational creolized histories.

“All history is thus:” Richard Price has brilliantly argued, “a radical selection from the immensely rich swirl of past human activity.”132 But to dive into history is both politically motivated and enacted; the past is always present, and history will always be determining what and who we are, how

131 In “Caliban’s Daughter: The Tempest and the Teapot,” *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 12, no.2 (1991): 36-51. Cliff explains that “ruinate, the adjective, and ruination, the noun, are Jamaican inventions. Each word signifies the reclamation of land, the disruption of cultivation, civilization, by the uncontrolled, uncontrollable forest…. The word ruination (especially) signifies this immediately; it contains both the word ruin, and nation. A landscape in ruination means one which the imposed nation is overcome by the naturalness of ruin” (40).

we think, and what cultural baggage we carry. Thus, who selects what and
by which method will forever be the site of controversy between disciplinary
history and literature, nationalists and internationalists, male and female
scholars. In these dichotomies, neither resolution nor consensus should be
the issue, but relation based on the uniqueness and singularity of each part.

American Studies is privileged nowadays to contain within its
‘undisciplined’ circles an unprecedented variety of people and perspectives
from all over the world that need to respond to Janice Radway’s call in her
ASA 1998 address to “reconceptualize the American as always relationally
defined and therefore as intricately dependent upon ‘others.’” It does not
mean that the nation as a concept can or should be abandoned; people will
always be making sense of the past according to the narratives that make
them feel special and secure, and no reinterpretation will ever be definitive.
Identity, either collective or individual, is what declares someone’s existence.
In this respect, it is not surprising that fifteen years after Radway’s proposal
Americanists are still discussing how to move beyond exceptionalist
narratives. Even if we bear in mind José Martí and his pan-American rhetoric
in the beginning of this dissertation, Handley will remind us that the Cuban
internationalist was also a passionate American exceptionalist that nurtured
deep distrust for Europe, even dismissing the cruelty of American slavery as
only another evil of the Old World. And we have seen that creolization also
nurtures, either implicitly or explicitly, national(ist) identification. This is

\[\text{133 Janice Radway, “What’s in a Name?” 17, emphasis added.}\]
\[\text{134 In “On Reading South in the New World: Whitman, Martí, Glissant, and the}\]
\[\text{Hegelian Dialectic,” Mississippi Quarterly 56 no.4 (2003): n.pag.}\]
exactly the reason why it constitutes a model for a hemispheric America to study, allowing for creative tensions to arise and develop, free from the danger of transforming America into a transnational space of “diffuse globalism” against which Winfried Fluck rightly cautions.\(^\text{135}\)

Accordingly, in Chapter One I delve into Derek Walcott’s epic poem *Omeros* (1990). I argue that in his imaginative historicizing of a hemispheric American world Walcott does not remain attached to a petrified image of ancient Greece that needs to be revived in compliance with the colonial paradigm of the past in which he was raised. Rather, he attends to historical specificity and the indeterminacy of the Mediterranean basin in order to sustain the ‘irreducible singularity’ of each region, in accordance with the Glissantian prerequisite for the connection of two parallel but different worlds. Far from reified constructions of ancient heritage, the mother continent of Africa in this New World imagery is re-integrated as an indispensable part whose original essence has nevertheless been irrevocably lost. Such loss does not imply that amnesia has come to settle in the Caribbean archipelago; history *is* central to *Omeros*, but it is negotiated within the pages of literature so that an epic history of the American Mediterranean world is written. I thus propose that *Omeros* can be read as an epic not only of the Caribbean but of the broader, hemispheric Americas that celebrates in its own Mediterranean basin the history of a *related* world.

In Chapter Two I discuss Maryse Condé’s *I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem* (1994). First I draw a cross-cultural cartography of witchcraft practices in the New World, out of which common histories of female silence and oppression emerge, in order to underscore the realms of nature and magic as the opaque ground in which the empirical Caribbean merges with the enlightened American North. Then, I explore Condé’s feminist poetics of creolization to suggest the erotic body as a source of empowerment for a broader American womanhood. In her imaginative reconstruction of the Puritan era, I argue that Condé does not capture the white woman’s presence as a fixed representation of colonial power that consciously and systematically contributed to black women’s defeminization, in Hilary Beckles’s term. Instead, I suggest that she invests in a feminist politics of relation among white and black women in the Americas grounded on historical specificity, a politics that eschews stereotypical and/or romanticized portrayals of divisive female agency for a hemispheric history of American womanhood infused by both the inalienable gendered nature and the multiple, irreducible histories of the paradigms involved.

In Chapter Three I elaborate on Michelle Cliff’s semi-historiographic projects with Queen Nanny of the Maroons and Mary Ellen Pleasant, in *Abeng* (1984) and *Free Enterprise* (1993) respectively. I begin with *Abeng* by presenting Maroon culture as a creolized space of cultural infiltration and exchange from which Cliff’s Nanny emerges as a heroine who draws her supernatural power both from her gender and heritage, that is, her people’s long suppressed histories of female defiance and resistance. I then proceed
to establish Cliff’s historiographic agenda on the suppression of homoerotic feeling in the Americas by highlighting lesbian connections in the novel as sites of affirmation and endurance. I continue with *Free Enterprise* to negotiate John Brown’s role in American history and suggest Mary Ellen Pleasant as a case study of a woman who managed to cross racial, gender, and class boundaries only to find herself dismissed from the official record. I thus argue that by rescuing the stories of these two real-life heroines and bringing them in the center of scholarly attention, Cliff enacts a paradigmatic approach of American history writing through literature by filling in the gaps of the established narrative with her imagination.

In Chapter Four I focus on Madison’s Smartt Bell’s trilogy of the Haitian Revolution, namely *All Souls’ Rising* (1995), *Master of the Crossroads* (2000), and *The Stone that the Builder Refused* (2004). I start by presenting a map of the Americas as a space of infiltration and interconnectedness that defies fixed ideas and established borders. I then proceed to explore major slave rebellions in the Americas as a network of interrelated acts of resistance that were inspired by the successful Haitian endeavor years earlier but which all failed due to the swift reaction of the alarmed U.S. southern authorities and public. After I discuss new Southern studies as the pattern by which a U.S. white southern writer writing on Black history can be understood, I discuss Bell’s trilogy as only another example of a creolized history of the Americas, where imagination fills in the empty space of a long neglected history of the Caribbean world. By resorting to realism as the means to break the silence that covered the sole successful slave revolution
in the western hemisphere, and by foregrounding violence as the cornerstone on which the relationship between masters and slaves is structured, I propose that Bell invests his characters in a Glissantian relation with each other, until opacity interferes purposefully to prevent the reduction of the creolized world into only another measurable, comprehensible concept by the West.

All four writers discussed in this dissertation have done extensive bibliographical research before writing their (hi)stories – perhaps with the exception of Derek Walcott whose knowledge of the Homeric epics was pedagogical – and historians of the Caribbean often draw from literary texts to supplant their arguments.\textsuperscript{136} What this merging of styles and texts indicates is that dividing lines between literature and history are not as inflexible as they are disciplinarily taken to be. To be sure, history is definitely not fiction, and the specific works that are analyzed here do contain indisputable major or minor historical inaccuracies in their representation of events. But fiction has so often been historical and abundant with meanings that help readers make sense of themselves, their culture, and their history, in ways that professional history often fails to do. This is a creative debate that goes back to Aristotle, but it does not need to be settled.\textsuperscript{137} Creolized

\textsuperscript{136} For instance, Bernard Moitt in \textit{Women and Slavery in the French Antilles, 1635-1848} (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001) suggests that “to get at the slaves’ perception of their own condition, one can draw on some of the literary works on the French Caribbean that are an authentic representation of the Caribbean historical experience” (126).

\textsuperscript{137} Aristotle held poetry to be superior to history in conveying truth, and one might argue that his position sustained literature’s status over history up until the early nineteenth century. In his \textit{Poetics}, trans. Malcolm Heath (London: Penguin, 1996) the Greek philosopher argued, in Malcolm Heath’s translation, that “the distinction
histories are just like that; endlessly repeated and contested but never settled.

[between history and poetry] is this: the one says what has happened, the other the kind of thing that would happen. For this reason poetry is more philosophical and more serious than history. Poetry tends to express universals, and history particulars. The universal is the kind of speech or action which is consonant with a person of a given kind in accordance with probability or necessity; this is what poetry aims at” (16). Interestingly, scholars even today read the respective differences between Herodotus and Thucydides as emblematic of the history/literature debate. See, for instance, Ann Curthoys and John Docker’s excellent work *Is History Fiction?*
Chapter 1

The American Mediterranean: Derek Walcott’s Omeros

“O open this day with the conch’s moan, Omeros, / as you did in my boyhood” (12).¹ So begins Derek Walcott in the epic poem Omeros written for the people of his native St. Lucia and earning him the Nobel Prize in literature in 1992. The massive critical attention that Walcott has attracted ever since has unavoidably concentrated on his comparison with the poet whose epics constitute the fountainhead of Western ‘civilization’ and culture, a tendency that has not abated despite his angry denial of Homeric influence. “[W]hat would be the point of doing that,” Walcott once protested, and he went on to reject what he found as a “stupid historicism” among critics that perpetuates an imagery of “the Caribbean [as] secondary to the Aegean.”² Indeed, the Caribbean poet does have a point in complaining about the connotations that Western readers readily draw when hearing about an epic coming from “a part of the world where it really should not have,”³ but such neoplatonic tendencies do not cover the entirety of critical readings. In a recent article Paul Jay, drawing on Joseph Farrell’s earlier work, has nicely summarized Walcott’s reception by specifying four different positions. First, traditional classicists have no doubt as to the dominance of the Homeric shadow on Walcott and downplay the colonial implications such an approach may hold. A second

¹ Derek Walcott, Omeros (New York: Farrar, 1990). All parenthetical references to the text are from this edition.


³ Ibid., 240.
group of critics acknowledges Walcott’s borrowings from Homer but prefers to locate their own doubts in such aspects of the Homeric epics that have been neglected by traditionalists, such as the importance of oral performance and folk tradition in ancient Greece. The third view identifies with Walcott, and its advocates persistently deny any direct connection with *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*. Finally, another position accepts Homeric influences but underlines Walcott’s postcolonial intention in shaping his epic into a distinct Caribbean narrative.⁴

My study borrows from all four positions by foregrounding the Homeric connections that Walcott purposefully disturbs at the same time as it proposes an additional area that has not been adequately considered so far, namely the cross-cultural waters of the ancient Mediterranean world. In a Glissantian manner, I thus argue that *Omeros* becomes a modern, creolized epic in the pages of which Greece and the Americas merge their waters for Walcott to sing *parallel* with the Mediterranean *but* at the same time *different* stories of cross-cultural influence, colonization, and slavery. The waters of the American Mediterranean become the space where the Caribbean meets with Africa too, so that the ‘submerged history’ that *both* unites *and* separates the two in the tragedy of the New World is recited. In the lines of Homer and Walcott, history and literature then become one for the epic poem of the Americas to tell creolized histories of a porous, hemispheric present and past, an American

Mediterranean of migration and amalgamations of people where nations meet on a perpetually *parallel but different* past.

The crucial issue in Walcott’s poetic historicizing is the dominant influence of classical education and heritage in the Americas. Already by the mid- eighteenth century ancient Greece and Rome were seen upon as the virtuous models for the U.S. American Republic to rise and exceed in perfection. Knowledge of Greek and Latin, what Gordon Wood refers to as a “cult of antiquity,” was a fundamental criterion that distinguished Anglo-American (male) citizenry from its heathen surroundings, and rarely would a text appear in a newspaper or pamphlet that would not cite ancient sources as a means of prestige and validation. Especially in the U.S. South classical education was considered definitive for a gentleman’s standing, and for Thomas Jefferson and Thomas Cooper, president of South Carolina College, no student could be admitted to college without a substantial knowledge of Greek and Latin. Ancient Greek literature would in fact influence U.S. southern intellectual life and provide a thesaurus of arguments in support of slavery. From Thomas Dew, President of the College of William and Mary (1836-1846), to Vice President John C.

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6 Elizabeth Genovese-Fox and Eugene D. Genovese, *The Mind of the Master Class: History and Faith in the Southern Slaveholders’ Worldview* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 250. It needs to be mentioned, however, that such emphasis on classical letters did not reflect on women’s education. U.S. Southern ladies were not required to learn Greek and Latin, though some could claim knowledge of Greek by studying the relevant version of the New Testament (Genovese 256-68).
Calhoun and George Fitzhugh, dozens of U.S. southerners orated on Athens and Sparta as the founding, slave-holding city-states of the glorious civilization that a cavalier society had come to revive two millennia afterwards. Sparta, in particular, was the most “likely” comparison, as it legitimized the seceding states’ demand for city-rights versus an expanding Athens that was seen as paralleling the contemporary North.\(^7\)

Adding to the habit of naming slaves after Greek mythic figures and the adaptation of ancient Greek architecture in mansions, the Greek War of Independence against the Ottoman Empire in 1821 sparked an unprecedented sympathy of U.S. southerners for modern Greece too. Towns and places were named after Greek ones, and committees were established to collect funds in support of the Greek cause. But already some skepticism had begun to develop about the impact of the Greek Revolution on abolitionists and slaves. For instance, in 1826, in response to the passionate calls of a lady in Norfolk, Virginia, for donations to aid Greece, a frustrated John Randolph of Roanoke pointed to two wretched black slaves sitting on the porch, telling her: “Madam, the Greeks are at your door!”\(^8\)

The Greeks were *ante portas*, indeed, if one considers the Caribbean ports as the gateway to North America. From the beginning of the

\(^7\) Ibid., 289.

eighteenth century, the British would follow the French in a policy of violent accumulation of ancient artifacts from Greece, most horribly demonstrated in Lord Elgin’s virtual destruction of the Parthenon and the transportation of its marbles to London, accompanied by a rhetoric that vested colonial rule worldwide in ancestral shrines. As Barbara Goff explains, the British could now claim to be the heart of European civilization, bearers of the emblems of ancient glory; in the words of John Wilson Croker, Irish statesman, at the House of Commons in 1816, “the possession of these precious remains of ancient genius and taste would conduce not only to the perfection of the arts, but to the elevation of our national character, to our opulence, to our substantial greatness.”

By the end of the century, an exasperated José Martí would advise Americans throughout the hemisphere that “Our Greece [the culture of Native Americans] must take priority over the Greece that is not ours: we need it more.”

Martí’s call was heard loud enough for Caribbean intellectuals to embrace a vision of prelapsarian, indigenous origins that coincided with their disillusionment with Greek-oriented European values and ideas after World War I. Proponents of Negritude and Indigenism advocated an

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9 Quoted in Goff, *Classics and Colonialism*, (London: Duckworth, 2005), 7. In her insightful introductory essay to her edition of *Classics and Colonialism*, Goff succinctly presents the rapacious attitude of British and French executives in early nineteenth-century Greece. In a passage that she reads from B. F Cook’s *The Elgin Marbles* the French Ambassador in Constantinople urges his inferiors to “Take away everything you can. Do not neglect any opportunity to remove everything from Athens and its neighbourhood that is removable” (6). For more contemporary sources, as well as an excellent background of today’s demand of Greece for the return of the Parthenon marbles from the British museum, see Goff 1-24.

10 José Martí, *Our America*, 143.
organic connection with nature that released the Caribbean from the confines of classicist time and space in favor of a transcendental union with an innocent, Edenic past.\textsuperscript{11} By the end of World War II, however, this disengagement from ancient history could not possibly serve the rising demands for decolonization; to claim a distinct identity among nations, the Caribbean would once again have to enter (Western) history. In the 1950s a renewed interest in Greece developed, this time not as a sterile attachment to European civilization’s origins but drawing meaning on a porous, archipelagic Mediterranean, one that evolved as a site of democracy, polyglot cultures, and ethnic intermixing that in its unity-in-diversity resembled the Caribbean. C. L. R. James, Trinidadian socialist theorist and one of the leading intellectual voices in the region, best captures this reengagement of the Caribbean mind with Greece when he declares in his autobiography \textit{Beyond a Boundary} (1963): “I believed that if when I had left school I had gone into the society of Ancient Greece I would have been more at home than ever I had been since. It was a fantasy, but for me it had meaning. The world we lived in, and Ancient Greece” (154).\textsuperscript{12} In a similar vein, Eric Williams, prominent historian and

\begin{footnote}
\textsuperscript{11} Michael Dash, \textit{The Other America: Caribbean Literature in a New World Context} (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1998), 61-63. For a detailed view, see 61-81. Dash also reads Alejo Carpentier’s \textit{The Lost Steps} (1953) as the first text in which the transition from an Adamic past to a hybrid, Caribbean Mediterranean present – significantly through the agency of a Greek character, Yannes – emerges in Caribbean literature (see 82-106). Dash’s book and his hemispheric, Glissantian approach to Caribbean literature proved the starting point for me to begin thinking of this dissertation in 2008.

\textsuperscript{12} \textit{Beyond a Boundary} (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993) is a true celebration of Greek heritage to the Caribbean, especially of the Olympic spirit.
\end{footnote}
first Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago, hoped to recreate in his newly independent nation “the ideal of the ancient democracy of Athens which, limited though it was by slavery and the subordination of women, still represents one of the greatest achievements of man.” In fact, Williams took great pride in contemporary British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan’s comment on Trinidad and Tobago as “the Athens of the Caribbean.” This was also the time when Derek Walcott would himself feel attracted to an idea of the Caribbean as the American Aegean. “Homecoming: Anse la Raye” (1969), a poem that Walcott dedicates to his childhood friend Garth St Omer, starts with the poet remembering “whatever else we learned / at school, like solemn Afro-Greeks eager for grades, / of Helen and the shades.” It was only the beginning of Walcott’s references to Greece that would establish the idea of an American Mediterranean, site of cultural relation and amalgamation of peoples, as characteristic of his imagination.

Even today Gordon Lewis’s *Main Currents in Caribbean Thought*, first published in 1983, remains an unsurpassable source with respect to the numerous loci of this metonymic relocation of the Mediterranean to

For instance, at one earlier point, James expresses his admiration for classical education by arguing: “Each [system of education] suited its time, but I have a permanent affinity with only one, the ancient Greek. When I read that the Greeks educated their young people on poetry, gymnastics and music I feel that I know what that means…” (32).

13 Ibid., 136.

14 Ibid. Williams’s interest in Greece came to my attention through Emily Greenwood’s “We Speak Latin in Trinidad” in *Classics and Colonialism* 65-91. Greenwood’s essay has proved very informative for my argument at this point.

Caribbean waters. According to the distinguished Caribbeanist, both basins have experienced similar turmoil from the rise and collapse of *diverse maritime civilizations*, whether these be the Egyptian, Greek, and Roman empires in the Mediterranean or the British hegemony in the American hemisphere (one should add the Central Mexican empires too.) In both regions the sea is considered the creative urge of all, and so *history begins with a voyage*, the story of the Argonauts repeated by Columbus some millennia later. No wonder that both the Mediterranean and the Caribbean are still the richest sites of underwater archaeological research, a fact that brings up the extent to which “*geographical determinism*” has shaped the two seas. The two basins being subject to dreadful earthquakes and hurricanes respectively, nature has always held the power to alter the route of history in their waters. A philosophical approach to nature proved the metaphorical ground of a fourth meeting point as well, allowing *slavery* to become the foundational social system on which history was written. Of course, slavery demands the forceful

16 Writes Aristotle at 1254b39 in his *Politics*: “It is thus clear that, just as some are by *nature* free, so others are by *nature* slaves, and for these latter the condition of slavery is both beneficial and just” (17, emphasis mine). For his part, Thomas Jefferson in his *Notes on the State of Virginia*, 1785 (New York: Penguin, 1999) argued that “It is not their [slaves’] condition, but nature, which has produced the distinction [among races]” (149).

To be sure, as R.F. Stalley shows, Aristotle structured his belief on the reasoning that first, leading a good life presupposes time for leisure, and second, that nature has so ordained its elements that the weaker are in service of the stronger (xvii). Henry Louis Gates, Jr., in his book on Phillis Wheatley has also shown how Jefferson’s ideas were very much influenced by Hume and Kant. “I am apt to suspect the Negroes, and in general all the other species of men... to be naturally inferior to whites” (quoted in Gates 23), argued the Scottish philosopher in 1753, to which ten years later Kant in his *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*, 1799, trans. John T. Goldthwait, 2nd ed. (Berkeley:
relocation of whole societies, and thus the two regions have witnessed the
migration and amalgamation of peoples from all sites of their horizons.
Such cross-cultural contact also affected religious ideas and customs,
instigating *syncretic* processes that have given rise to a multitude of
spiritual expressions.\(^{17}\) And as recently as 2016 John Lowe concludes that
“The circumCaribbean, like the Mediterranean, has been a cradle of
culture and has always been *multiethnic* and *multiracial*.\(^{18}\) So describes
this unique fusion of the two worlds Walcott himself in his Nobel lecture, in
which Port of Spain, capital of Trinidad and Tobago, is imagined as the
ideal Caribbean city that resembles ancient Athens:

> …So racially various that the cultures of the world – the Asiatic,
the Mediterranean, the European, the African – would be
represented in it, its humane variety more exciting than Joyce’s
Dublin. Its citizens would intermarry as they chose, from
instinct, not tradition, until their children find it increasingly futile
to trace that genealogy… its mercantile area would be a
cacophony of accents…. This is Port of Spain to me, a city ideal
in its commercial and human proportions, where a citizen is a

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17 Gordon Lewis, *Main Currents in Caribbean Thought: The Historical Evolution of
Caribbean Society in Its Ideological Aspects, 1492-1900*, 2\(^{nd}\) ed. (Lincoln:
University of Nebraska Press, 2004), 16-22.

walker and not a pedestrian, and this is how Athens may have been before it became a cultural echo.¹⁹

In the pages of Omeros John Lowe underlines this parallel heritage between Greece and the Caribbean, their common histories and living presents of militarism and trade, and their thesaurus of mythologies to celebrate the merge of the two seas. “We recall some of Homer’s opening lines: ‘Many pains he suffered, heartsick in the sea,'” Lowe writes, “lines redolent of the traffic in the Caribbean in human bodies and the Middle Passage.”²⁰

Nevertheless, the appropriation of such a historically informed space as the Mediterranean, let alone its warm embrace by Caribbean intellectuals, does not come without significant questions. Gordon Lewis may have elaborated on the commonalities between the two regions, but in the same section he reminds scholars who enthusiastically perpetuate this connection that the Caribbean was “the victim of Mediterranean capitalist expansion,” and he finishes by suggesting the irreconcilable polarity that separates the two seas: “If, then, the Mediterranean was the cradle of European civilization, the Caribbean was in very truth its graveyard.”²¹ Both literally and metaphorically Lewis is right, for the physically and socially turbulent waters of the Caribbean became the site

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²¹ Lewis, Main Currents, 23-24.
where hundreds of thousands of Europeans soldiers, merchants, and immigrants would lose their lives, while the horrors of the Atlantic slavery with its millions of dead Africans exposed the hypocrisy of Enlightenment values. Of a similar mind is Edouard Glissant; in *Caribbean Discourse* he distinguishes between the two seas by suggesting that “whereas the Caribbean disperses… the Mediterranean had primarily the potential for attraction and concentration,” and he continues in *Poetics of Relation* to explain that, contrary to the Caribbean world of relation and cross-cultural exchange, “a sea that explodes the scattered lands into an arc,” the Mediterranean “is an inner sea surrounded by lands” that has been “imposing [since antiquity] the thought of the One.” Site for the birth of two religions, Judaism and Christianity, and of dominant presence for a third, Islam, the Mediterranean has witnessed the forceful spread of monotheistic beliefs that for Glissant cannot coincide with the indeterminate and improvisational character of the multitude of Caribbean religions.

Equally troubled, if not overtly suspicious, appears Fredric Jameson, who argues that such a comparison cannot possibly be free of colonial undertones: “it is as though this Third World modernism slyly turned the imperial relationship inside out, appropriating the great imperial space of

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22 Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, 221.

the Mediterranean in order to organize the space of the colonial city.”

Jameson’s point becomes even more interesting if we recall that the Mediterranean has been transcribed not only on the Caribbean but also on the broader Americas. One recalls that the United States abounds with Greek place-names; from Athens, Georgia, to Corinth, New York, and from Arcadia, California, to Marathon, Florida, the endless list of ‘Greek’ places and cities is only another indication of early U.S. Americans’ ambition of creating a Mediterranean America, in part by adopting its ‘attractive’ hierarchical structures. Particularly in the U.S. South, and as tensions with the North over the expansion of slavery in the new states constantly increased, planters contemplated the recreation of a slaveholding, Mediterranean empire that would embrace Cuba and even stretch as south as Brazil. As John Lowe rightly warns, “some may take umbrage at the comparison of the Mediterranean and the Caribbean, especially if the [U.S.] South becomes part of the latter [in new Southern studies],” and he

24 Fredric Jameson, “Modernism and Imperialism,” Nationalism, Colonialism, and Literature, eds. Terry Eagleton et al. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990), 64. Jameson’s point came to my attention through Dash’s reference and juxtaposition with Walcott’s Nobel lecture (Other America 82, 97).

25 As Caroline Levander in her excellent study Cradle of Liberty: Race, the Child, and National Belonging from Thomas Jefferson to W. E. B. Du Bois (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006) argues, “The term ‘manifest destiny’ was used, as Oliver Morton recalls, to describe not only U.S. westward expansion but also southern leaders’ ‘daring ambition’ to ‘found a gigantic tropical slave empire’ that would outstrip and finally conquer the ‘free republic’ of the North” (54). In fact, for General Hamilton it was the (short-lived) Republic of Texas that held the promise, in his words, of “a powerful separate empire” that would bring together “the ambition of Rome and the avarice of Carthage” in order to protect southern civilization in the New World (55). For a similar analysis, see Matthew Pratt Guterl’s essay “An American Mediterranean: Haiti, Cuba, and the American South” in Hemispheric American Studies 96-115.
suggests the danger of a discursive neo-colonization of the American archipelago – although, he adds, it is Caribbean scholars themselves (like Walcott) who encourage this union.\textsuperscript{26} Lowe’s point is instructive of the complexities of a hemispheric American approach, but Ian Strachan moves one step further, and in his interesting study on Walcott he concludes that “the conspicuous absence of democracy in ‘the glory that was Greece’ [Walcott’s phrase] and the slavery and colonialism that were that empire’s foundation make it a questionable ideal toward which Caribbeans should strive.”\textsuperscript{27}

Such skepticism about the American Mediterranean is sound enough, provided historical specificity – as in Lewis and Lowe – is maintained, yet a general approach that invokes modern terms to describe ancient events is prone to ahistorical conclusions that do little justice to the immensely diverse region of the Mediterranean and its millennial-old history. Terminology may at times appear to be of little importance, but terms and concepts prescribe the framework within which the analysis of a paradigm occurs. To understand the precise use of the American Mediterranean that Caribbeanists like Walcott make, and of Greece, for that matter, it is necessary that we turn to archaeology and ancient history for a careful overview of how the peoples of the basin interacted with each other. How much of a \textit{colonial empire} was ancient Greece, after all? This


question has become increasingly troubling for scholars to answer, but in the last few years some attempts have yielded intriguing results.

In his edition of the tremendously rich and voluminous work Greek Colonization in 2006 noted archaeologist Gocha Tsetskhladze traces the constantly shifting definitions of the homonymous term from the 1970s onwards to imply that, although Greek expansion in all four directions of the horizon is an indisputable fact, the use of the anglophone concept (colonization) to describe this process “complicates more than it clarifies.”28 Indeed, we now know that the Greeks established about two hundred and thirty “colonies” and settlements all around the Mediterranean and the Black Sea, but their treatment of the locals they found, the sociopolitical structures they established, and the connections these new societies maintained with their metropolis are so unpredictably diverse, with so little evidence, that no general claim can unconditionally stand.29 Though some indication may be found in the distinction that the Greeks made between these places as apoikia (i.e. settlement) and


29 Ibid., li-lxvi. For instance, as Tsetskhladze accurately observes, Thucydides records the fierce resistance that the Athenians met in Sicily, especially at Syracuse (see The Peloponnesian War, trans. Steven Lattimore. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1998), 211), and we know that at Heracleia Pontica on the southern Black Sea the local Maryandinoi were virtually exterminated (xxix, liii). But it is also true that Greeks were sometimes invited by local rulers to occupy land for agriculture, such as at Massalia (modern Marseille, France), or that large numbers of Greeks were actually employed by local rulers to diffuse their skill in architecture, such as in Iberia (liii), where in fact the Phocaean maintained philia (i.e. love and friendship) with the local Tartessian rulers (Adolfo J. Dominguez, “Greeks in the Iberian Peninsula,” Greek Colonization 434). In any case, examples of Greek reception can be numerous and it is believed that even more lies for archaeologists to bring to light.
emporion (i.e. trading post,) an attempt to define these terms meets with the same indeterminacy as with the term polis, each city-state being different from one another and yet constituting an altogether homogeneous, Pan-Hellenic whole – recall the Caribbean here. Further, Tsetskhladze points to a detail so often ignored by scholars, namely that the term ‘barbarians’ used by Greeks to designate all foreigners did not carry cultural connotations, as happens today in the English language, but linguistic ones. This is an important observation to bear in mind because it negates modern cartographies of dividing lines so carelessly applied to the past in favor of a Mediterranean map of cultural interaction and porous borders between mainland Greece and its “colonies” that remains to be explored. No wonder, such terms as “middle ground” and “hybridity” are now becoming increasingly attractive in reading the specific period.

The vagueness of the term “colonial” as well as the need for specificity as to which polis settled/conquered what region under which locals and by what means, problematizes uncritical generalizations when one refers to ancient Greece, but what about the issue of “empire?” Here it

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30 Ibid., xli. According to the Copenhagen Polis Centre, there were fifteen different types of polis in ancient Greece. See Tsetskhladze xl. For a full view on the concept of emporion and its diverse applications in the ancient world, see Mogens Herman Hansen “Emporion: A Study of the Use and Meaning of the Term in the Archaic and Classic Periods” in Greek Colonization 1-40.

31 Ibid., lii. In Greek onomatopoeitics the word ‘barbarian’ came from the incomprehensible sound ‘bar-bar’ that a foreign language made to Greek ears (something which survives even today.) See Neal Ascherson, Black Sea, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1995), 60.

32 Ibid., lvi-lvii.
is Emanuele Greco who is most enlightening. First, he correctly translates *apoikia* in English as “home away from home” to suggest on one hand the fallacy of the metachronous application of the term “colony” to the Greek Mediterranean and, on the other, the latter’s difference “from wholly different types of colonization, be it Roman or more recent.”33 Greco’s implicit distinction between Greece and Rome (and later on the British Empire) becomes clear when he explains that Greek expansion was not structured on a model of metropolitan “duplication,” by which the center maintains strict control of its periphery. In contrast with Rome, by definition a monadic referent, Greek city-states were in constant transformation to the extent that both mother cities and their settlements met with “a parallel evolution” that did not allow for imperial projects to develop.34 To be sure, the Greek Mediterranean may have witnessed an early “empire” after Athens briefly assumed hegemonic leadership of the Delian League in mid-fifth century BC, but proponents of the “Athenian empire” have still to account for the ties of kinship, religion, and language that united the submissive members with Athens.35 A simple comparison with the subsequent Hellenistic Empire of Alexander the Great and the *conquest* of the *barbarian* East suffices to reveal the incongruity of terms. It is indicative that in the turn of the twentieth century British scholars would

33 Greco, “Greek Colonization,” 169.
34 Ibid.
35 Thomas Harrison writes an excellent essay historicizing the debate over “Athenian Empire,” although he concludes by rather embracing the term. See “Through British Eyes: The Athenian Empire and Modern Historiography” in *Classics and Colonialism* 25-37.
invoke centripetal Rome, rather than centrifugal Greece, as the prototype of their empire.  

The apparent difference between Greece and Rome is but a small indication of the overwhelming diversity that characterizes the Mediterranean. In their groundbreaking work, The Corrupting Sea, historians Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell tellingly emphasize that “from whatever theoretical vantage point we view the region it apparently remains ineluctably divided... [except for] that of environmental concern.”

In a Braudelian fashion, Horden and Purcell foreground the sea as the connecting force that “corrupts” established identities through trade, thus transforming the basin into a cauldron of ideas and cultures that make up a whole. Interestingly, and according to David Abulafia’s acute reading, what emerges from the two scholars’ understanding of the region is a thesis of Mediterranean “diversity within unity,” a “mentality” that connotes striking similarities with the American archipelago. Such

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36 See Phiroze Vasunia “Greater Rome and Greater Britain” in Classics and Colonialism 38-64.


38 In The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II, Volume II (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995) Fernand Braudel described “the Mediterranean as a unit, with its creative space, the amazing freedom of its sea-routes... with its many regions, so different yet so alike, its cities born of movement, its complementary populations, its congenital enmities” as the sole “constants of Mediterranean history” (1239). The specific quotation came to my attention through Horden and Purcell’s article “The Mediterranean and the New Thalassology” in The American Historical Review 111, no.3 (2006): 722-40.

documentation of history on landscape and the sea echoes equivalent practices in the Caribbean, but for now what needs to be underlined is the very diversity of the region; since Pax Romana, never has there been a time during which the Mediterranean enjoyed the peaceful coexistence of the cultures that flourished on its shores. Either in terms of language or religion, the two cornerstones of identity formation, the basin has always constituted a Babel of ethnicities and nations to the extent that an all-inclusive referent to the Mediterranean is inherently problematic. “Is there such a thing as a Mediterranean mentality, a Mediterranean way of life, typical Mediterranean cultic practices or rituals, or even Mediterranean values?” Angelos Chaniotis rightly wonders in order to propose that a study on the region should primarily be contextualized before any conclusions are drawn.

Such overwhelming heterogeneity in the basin raises issues as to who defines the Mediterranean and by what criteria; more often than not, its invocation connotes Greece, Italy, and Spain, much less France and sometimes Portugal too, and their respective cultures and heritage, but rarely the Jewish and Islamic nations - not that such a Eurocentric attitude is necessarily complementary to the ‘privileged’ ones. As historian Iain Chambers notes, since the early nineteenth century the imagery of the


Mediterranean has been one of “a lost world of antiquity, uncontaminated nature, and pristine ‘origins’” that sharply contradicts with the developed European north, a picture that I would add resembles the Caribbean too. So embedded is this attitude that not only does it thrive in tourist fantasies, which through Hollywood are today more enchanting than ever, but it also appears in the most bizarre situations; for instance, in credit crunch language, ‘P. I. G. S.’ is the derogatory acronym that stands for Portugal, Italy, Greece and Spain and these countries’ increasing difficulty in coping with the financial crisis, compared to the advanced and prosperous European north.

What current developments in Mediterranean Studies suggest, in short, is that a discussion of the region should primarily be placed within a framework that will attend to historical specificity by acknowledging at the same time the *inter-relatedness* of the agents involved. Recent archaeological research reads ancient Greece as a complicated space that combines both expansive as well as cross-cultural tendencies that altogether dismiss its uncritical classification as a ‘colonial empire’ for a more hybrid and elusive structure of exchange. The archaic Mediterranean that reveals itself is thus characterized as a polyphonic world in constant synthesis and antithesis out of which a model of ‘unity-within-diversity’ emerges. Such a development does not imply the absence of an imperial

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43 See, for example, the article published in *Financial Times* on Sep 1, 2008 under the title “Pigs in Muck” at [http://www.ft.com/cms/s/1/5faf0b0a-778a-11dd-be24-0000779fd18c.html](http://www.ft.com/cms/s/1/5faf0b0a-778a-11dd-be24-0000779fd18c.html).
or ethnocentric politics, which becomes dominant with the rise of Rome and today survives in nationalism, but relates the differences with environmental factors, such as the sea, to suggest the penetrability of core constructions. Distant from a past of imperial splendor, today’s Mediterranean image is compromised by a tourist industry that feeds on stereotypes of paradisal innocence and technocratic deficiency.

In this light, a comparison with the Caribbean and broader, hemispheric American Mediterranean opens a multitude of paths to be taken for a meeting point between the two seas to converge. Like misconceptions about ancient Greece, America was until recently considered to be a compact culture of diverse elements that nevertheless remained content within the inflexible borders of the United States only. This Republican Mediterranean, abounding with Greek names, aspired to rise to the glory of Rome by studying its political system and social structure, and by implementing *Pax Americana* to its periphery. From mid-twentieth century onward, a different relationship with the Greek Mediterranean was proposed, this time converging with the waters of the Caribbean that merged in Walcott’s epic poetry with the streams of the Aegean to tell *parallel but different* histories of cross-cultural communication, slavery, and stereotypical degradation. Differences abound in the American archipelago too and nationalism flourishes, but the sea has always corrupted the borders of a hemisphere that now seeks to retrieve stories of *relation* long forgotten in the past.
In this spirit, Walcott’s choice of epic writing, redolent of an aura of authenticity and sacred origins, could not possibly be a more controversial genre for the merging of two worlds to take place. Early on, Hegel had described the epic as the foundational narrative that declares national existence through military conquest of the other, what the German philosopher epitomized in the Homeric epics as the triumph of European civilization over Asia: “We are made completely at peace by the world-historically justified victory of the higher principle over the lower which succumbs to a bravery that leads nothing over for the defeated,” explained Hegel in *Aesthetics*.44 His feeling of euphoria “arises above all in the Iliad where the Greeks take the field against the Asiatics and thereby fight the first epic battles in the tremendous opposition that led to the wars which constitute in Greek history a turning-point in world-history.”45 This was a reading of national splendor and exceptionalism that Mikhail Bakhtin could not contradict either; in his comparison between epic and novel and his privileging of the latter for its anti-nationalist inclinations, the Russian thinker conceded that the genre had “come down to us already well defined,” and he agreed that “the world of the epic is the national heroic past: it is a world of ‘beginnings’ and ‘peak times’ in the national history, a world of fathers and of founders of families, a world of ‘firsts’ and ‘bests.’”46


45 Ibid., 1061.

Rightly so, but what should be noticed is that the service of the Homeric epics as founding narratives of cultural and national heritage is not restricted within the temporal dimensions of European or modern Greek identity only but includes the elusive time of the ancient Mediterranean and its legends too. During the Hellenistic and Roman years, one typical practice among ancient diasporic Greeks was to attribute the foundation of cities around the basin to Greek heroes returning from the Trojan War.Narrated in the now-lost “Nostoi,” stories of linear genealogy beginning with the victorious heroes of the Trojan War, these epic stories provided Greeks with a mythopoetics of founding fathers that allowed them to legitimize Greek origins to the whole known world. In the words of noted classicist Martin Mueller, “one may well ask whether the Greeks… would have resisted the centrifugal tendencies of such geographical dispersion had it not been for the common past, the common religion, and the common set of values that the ‘Iliad’ created.”

To this extent, and objections to the connection between the two basins notwithstanding, it is not surprising that Edouard Glissant would

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49 Martin Mueller, The Iliad (London: Allen, 1984), 4. I was first made aware of Mueller’s point through Paul Breslin’s Nobody’s Nation: Reading Derek Walcott (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001) where it is quoted as well (241).
initially find Caribbean connections with Greece and the Homeric epics as deeply problematic. “We will not repeat the miracle of Greece,” Glissant accordingly writes in the early 1980s and rejects tragedy as “discriminatory” in its contemplation of a genealogical ancestry that resolved ancient Greek anxiety over continuity with their epic history.50 Against this “line of descent” on which History (with a capital H) walks alone, blind to those who do not belong and assisted only by myths, Glissant proposes instead an emphasis on tales and their ruptures as suggestive of the Caribbean past. Myths “emerge with an absolute view of history through a systematic process,” he explains, but in stark contrast to their use by ancient diasporic Greeks, “the Caribbean tale outlines a landscape that is not possessed: it is anti-History.”51 In other words, myths nurtured the epics and scriptures that maintained a continuity of origins and gave birth to History, whereas in their constant gaps, repetition, and change Caribbean tales tell (oral) stories that refuse to settle in the written text. Of course, for Glissant myths remain “producer[s] of history” and importantly the space wherein history and literature first meet to narrate the past.52 It is, though, in African epics that this union brilliantly takes place, narratives that do not delve into a “creation myth… [as] the Iliad and

50 Edouard Glissant, Caribbean Discourse, 86.
51 Ibid., 85.
52 Ibid., 71.
the *Odyssey* [do.,] but they are collectively structured and performed as repositories of “memories of cultural contact.”

Ten years later, however, the Martiniquan scholar would appear to have a much different insight into the Homeric epics that would radically shape his approach to the two archipelagoes. In his contemplation of *errantry*, the perennial migration of people in their purposeful cause of finding their dispersed origins, Glissant acknowledges the *homology* of such historical works as the African epics, the “Aeneid,” and the Homeric epics. “The epic literature is amazingly prophetic,” writes Glissant, in that epics narrate the eternal exile of its protagonists from their site of roots, with every territory becoming a relative source of origins and site of *relation* among peoples. Contrary to their mission of establishing genealogical and thus hierarchical connections with the past, epics contain “the germ of the exact opposite of what they so loudly proclaim…. The Greek victory in the Iliad depends on trickery; Ulysses returns from his Odyssey and is recognized only by his dog.” Such a reading does not imply that epics are suddenly acquitted of their exclusivist inclinations, and Glissant again criticizes them for their pursuit of filiation and their fostering of violence at the expense of the historicity of the Other. But here he makes a crucial distinction between ancient epics that were deemed

53 Ibid., 135


55 Ibid.

56 Ibid., 50-51.
inefficient after the construction of the “City” and modern epics that may hold the potential “to unite the specificity of nations, granting each culture’s opacity, yet at the same time imagining the transparency of their relations.” Within the diverse space of modernity, the epic may still serve its sacred purpose of providing historical meaning and thus grant the “irreducible singularity” of the culture it sings, but it can no longer capture the entirety of the agents involved. For a modern epic to address the Caribbean, neither filiation nor sacrifices of heroes and Greek choruses are necessary, Glissant observes, but errantry based on the imagining of relation with each other. By 1993, in his “Traité du Tout-Monde,” Glissant’s embrace of the Aegean space would become more implicit than ever, and the Mediterranean archipelago would now join the Caribbean one in a panoramic view of the whole world. “Archipelagic thought is well suited to the ways of our worlds. It draws on their ambiguous, fragile and drifting nature. It is in accord with the practice of diversion,” says Glissant, and in a fashion that precedes recent archeological findings, he concludes that “Archipelagic thought, in its multiplicity opens us these seas to us….”

57 Ibid., 55.
58 Ibid., 55-56.

What is even more interesting, Glissant’s relational approach to the epics and the Greek archipelago unites him with Walcott in a similar stream of thought that
Accordingly, I suggest that the epic story of Philoctete, Achille, Hector, and Helen and their struggle to come to terms with the forces of modernity in the small Caribbean island of St. Lucia should not be understood as a comparison with the Aegean archetype and its glorious namesakes that Walcott rightly rejects; such an approach would only reproduce a hierarchical relationship that the American Mediterranean has witnessed in its northern shores before and a filial line that would relegate Walcott to only another son in Homer’s millennial genealogy. Instead, Walcott is inspired by Homer to narrate the plurality of the American Mediterranean and its habitants’ perennial search for origins through a relational connection with the Aegean world, by which both regions come to know each other and yet retain their distinct aura of singularity.

This new cartography emerges from the very first lines of Omeros, where Walcott foregrounds the figure of Philoctete smiling for tourists “who try taking his soul with their cameras” and showing them “a scar made by a rusted anchor” from which a terrible smell emanates (3, 4, 10). Allusions seems to be verified by brief biographical information that Bruce King in his study on Walcott provides. It appears that before the publication of Omeros Glissant and Walcott gave a joint colloquium in New York on the “Epic as a Genre,” and shortly thereafter Glissant invited Walcott to Louisiana State University on a poetry night. Subsequently, Walcott spent a week in Glissant’s house while revising his epic poem, and soon Glissant’s son became friends with Walcott’s daughters. See Bruce King, Derek Walcott: A Caribbean Life (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 503.

This social interaction might have been ephemeral, yet that the two Caribbeansins developed a close connection with each other (during that period) is evidenced by Glissant himself, who writes in Poetics of Relation that just like other writers of the Caribbean who transgress racial and linguistic boundaries to unite their thought, “I recognize myself in Derek Walcott” (71). Importantly, the first, French edition of Glissant’s book came out in 1990, on the same year that Omeros was published.
to Philoctetes, the Greek hero of the Trojan War, are impossible to escape. In *The Iliad* Homer dedicates only a few lines to the famous archer who was “racked with pain / on Lemnos’ holy shores… / agonized by his wound, the bite of a deadly water-viper” (122), but scholars consistently draw on Philoctetes’s story as dramatized by each of the three great tragedians, Aeschylus, Euripides, and Sophocles, of which only the eponymous tragedy of the last survives today. Accordingly, the odor stemming from Philoctetes’s poisoned leg was so intolerable that his compatriots decided to abandon him in shame and poverty on the Aegean island of Lemnos. Ten years later, however, the prophecy coming from the gods was clear enough; unless Philoctetes and his Herculean arrows joined the Greek army, Troy would never fall, and thus Odysseus travels to the island and tricks an angry Philoctetes into joining the Greek forces.\(^6\) In this respect, the commonalities between the two epic heroes are noteworthy; the Walcottian Philoctete also appears stranded on a forsaken island suffering from a wound that cannot be treated and that makes him hurry away “from the shame of his smell” (*Omeros* 10), while his posture for tourists is accompanied by inner curses against the descendants of colonialists who are responsible for his miserable position (21). Such similarities have been well attended by scholars so far, but what is generally missed is that Philoctetes’s ancient story is narrated at length in the “Epic Cycle” as well, the now-lost epics that complemented the

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Homeric accounts, part of which was “Nostoi.” Walcott thus uses a central figure of ancient Greek diasporic mythopoetics to demonstrate in the face of a dark-skinned Caribbean Philoctete both the diversity of the ancient sea-born world and the singularity of a Mediterranean structured in the Americas. For a water-viper is obviously not to blame for Philoctete’s wound but rather the horror of the Middle Passage for which the ‘rusted anchor’ stands, as I discuss further below. Recalling Glissant’s understanding of the epic as containing the very ‘germs’ that allow for its deconstruction, the Caribbean poet thus restores Philoctete, the prime agent of Greek victory in the Trojan War, in his epic but creolized splendor, by centering on his neglected figure and paying respect to his lowly status.

The creolized nature of Walcott’s epic is fully revealed in the poet’s imagination of a polymorphic Homer, related to the Caribbean and yet retaining his original characteristics. The ancient poet now emerges devoid of his deified status living in the company of a dog in his wretched hut by the seaside in St. Lucia (11), and he first appears as the figure of Seven Seas, lying “as still as marble / with his egg-white eyes, fingers recounting the past / of another sea” (12). Homer thus finds himself with a name by which his ancient contemporaries would describe an unrestrained maritime world in constant flux, seven seas standing for the unfathomable oceans that can never be fully “comprehended” – that is, neither grasped nor possessed, in the Glissantian sense of the word.

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61 Ibid., 194. For more on Philoctetes in the three tragedies, see A. E. Haigh’s magisterial work, first written in 1896, 194-98.
Homer retains his physical blindness, but contrary to his service in the ancient Mediterranean as source of filiation and authority for exilic Greeks, the transcription of his name to the Americas now connotes the diversity and unpredictability of the seas, both modern and ancient ones. But Homer appears as a “marble head” too, “motionless,” “deaf,” and always blind (216), imagery that brings the two archipelagoes even closer together. For like the Caribbean, Greece can also be seen as victim of European colonialism, as I explained earlier, and so Homer’s marble head refuses to sing for the imperial crimes of his possessors by staging a mute critic against those that stole Greece’s ancient masterpieces to carry them throughout the world as emblems of historical glory. Besides, it is not to forget that that the Parthenon marbles that were ripped off their motherland are still exposed to the British museum even today. By constantly alternating Homer’s image throughout the epic, Walcott then does not so much deny his influence as he disturbs the filial, reified authority of the Greek poet in order to signify the impossibility of authentic ancient Greek expressions in the Americas but also the two seas’ parallel but different histories of the past and the present.

Homer’s third metamorphosis further elaborates this point. The ancient poet is now presented as Omeros, whom Walcott’s narrator persona invokes early on as his Muse in a passage that disperses any doubts as to both a Homeric guidance and epic intention of his poem.62

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62 In an interview shortly after *Omeros* was published, and in response to the massive appraisal of its “epic” proportions, Walcott would initially deny the epic structure of the poem. Notice, however, his conception of a diverse ancient
O open this day with the conch’s moan, Omeros,
as you did in my boyhood, when I was a noun

... Only in you, across centuries

of the sea’s parchment atlas, can I catch the noise

of our epic horizon…” (12-13).

Homer does respond to the call, and a Greek girl, Antigone, significantly
with “Asian cheeks,” who sculpts Homer’s marble head, explains to
Walcott the right pronunciation of Homer’s name in modern Greek: “‘O-
meros,’ she laughed. “That’s what we call him in Greek” (14). As David
Hogan accurately explains, “Omeros” is the vernacular of Homer’s name in
Modern Greek (i.e. Ὀμήρος) – the initial inaudible “H” of the ancient name,
“Homeros,” is dropped in current usage.63 This way Walcott acknowledges
Homer’s influence, but he makes sure to compromise the ancient poet’s
presence by the use of the modern, inauthentic name that resists a direct

Mediterranean world: “I do not think of it [Omeros] as an epic…. Certainly not in
the sense of the epic design. Where are the battles? There are a few, I suppose.
But ‘epic’ makes people think of great wars and great warriors. That isn’t the
Homer I was thinking of; I was thinking of Homer the poet of the seven seas”
(quoted in Bruckner 396, emphasis added). Nevertheless, a few years later he
would confirm the creolized epical character of his poem, arguing that “a natural
element is more challenging than an army. You can perhaps face an army. You
can’t face a hurricane. And that’s more epical” (Reflections 244, emphasis
added).

Interestingly, Davis Gregson, noted Greco-Roman literary critic, in “‘With No
Homerian Shadow: ’The Disavowal of Epic in Derek Walcott’s “Omeros,”” Derek
Walcott, ed. Harold Bloom (Philadelphia: Chelsea, 2003) identifies in Walcott’s
ambiguity the technique of recusatio (i.e. refusal), a strategy practiced by the
Augustan poets, such as Horace, Vergil, Propertius, and Ovid, which served
writers a “place for the genuine” by dismissing Homeric associations (137).

63 Patrick Hogan, Empire and Poetic Voice (New York: SUNY University Press,
2004), 175.
connection to the writer of the glorious poems of the past. The Homeric epics, narratives that forever serve as sources of historical lineage, cannot possibly fulfill their historical mission within the immense diversity of the New World, and Walcott is careful to underline the radical departure of the entire hemisphere from its once-idealized point of beginning. “I said: ‘Homer and Virg are New England farmers,” Walcott’s persona tellingly responds to Antigone, and he goes on to recite what the name “Omeros” means to him in a Caribbean setting: “I said, ‘Omeros,’ / and O was the conch-shell’s invocation, mer was / both mother and sea in our Antillean patois, / os a grey bone, and the white surf as it crushes” (14). Paula Burnett suggests that by envisioning a Caribbean, vernacular Homer, Walcott creates a demotic figure released from the “anglicanization” of the ancient poet and the appropriation of his texts as paradigmatic of colonial status. But I would also add that within these lines lies Walcott’s full conception of a creolized epic of the Americas, for the invocation of ancient Greek names and genres on American waters does not imply the transcription of an authentic Aegean space to the Caribbean world. Greece remains an indistinguishable part of the Americas and its echoes will forever be heard in the New World, but they will always be just that, echoes that refer to a relational, parallel but different world lying too far in time and space to reproduce faithfully, if that is necessary at all. As Walcott claims, revealing his hemispheric view of the Americas too, “the

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book [Omeros] is really not about a model of another poem; it is really about associations, or references, because that is what we are in the Americas: we are a culture of references, not of certainties."  

Such rhetoric may resemble José Martí’s approach to the Americas in opposition to the Old World, but Walcott is by no means dismissive of Greece. Instead, he manages to sustain the delicate balance between the two seas. Through a Glissantian logic that accepts the functionality of the ancient epics for parts of the modern world, as well as the opacity of the Caribbean archipelago, Antigone responds to Walcott’s understanding of “Omeros” by expressing her insecurity at the rootlessness and uncertainty of the New World: “I’m tired of America, it’s time for me to go back / to Greece. I miss my islands” (14). Sadly enough, Antigone never appears again in the poem, but her last words are revealing of her immigrant status. She is only another diasporic Greek who follows her ancestors’ practice of tracing her roots to the ancient poet and drawing her ethnic existence from him, not necessarily as a direct, blood descendant; such filial lines would be naïve to believe, and her Asian cheeks betray the

65 Derek Walcott, Reflections, 239.

66 Overall, Walcott’s rhetoric on a hemispheric Americas is quite similar with that of the Cuban inter-nationalist. For instance, in his 1974 essay “The Caribbean: Culture or Mimicry?” in Critical Perspectives on Derek Walcott, ed. Robert Hamner (Washington: Three, 1993), Walcott begins too by warning of the imperialist intentions that the U.S. American interest in the southern hemisphere hides: “We live in the shadow of an America that is economically benign yet politically malevolent. That malevolence, because of its size, threatens an eclipse of identity, but the shadow is as inescapable as that of any previous empire” (51). And like Martí, Walcott also accepts the transnational ambiguity that resides in a hemispheric understanding of the Americas: “Being both American and West Indian is an ambiguity without a crisis… because we share this part of the world, and have shared it for centuries now, even as a conqueror and victim, as exploiter and exploited” (51).
cross-cultural past of her sea-world, but people will always be treasuring narratives of the past that allow them to belong somewhere and feel different, at times even exceptional among others. Preservation of singularity is, not to forget, the *sine qua none* of communication among peoples, as Glissant has brilliantly argued.

Walcott’s creolized poetics that embrace a polyphonic world without losing attention of historical specificity becomes explicit at a point that scholars have rather missed so far. Toward the end of the epic, in book seven, and as the two poets walk together in their joint praise of the Antilles whereby Omeros sings in “Greek calypso” (286), an insightful dialogue takes place between the two:

Omeros: “Who gave you my proper name in the ancient speech of the islands?”
Walcott: “A girl.”
Omeros: “A Greek girl?”
Walcott: “Who else?”
Omeros: “From what city? Do you know?”
Walcott: “No. I forget.”
Omeros: “Thebes? Athens?”
Walcott: “Yeah, could be Athens…. What difference does it make now?”

That stopped the old goat [Omeros] in his tracks. He turned:
Omeros: “**What difference? None, maybe to you…**” (284, emphasis added).
Omeros’s reaction to Walcott’s indifference as to the exact origins of Antigone is evocative of the misunderstandings that may occur in the drawing of transnational maps and the two Mediterraneans in particular. As I argue earlier in this chapter, uncritical generalizations with respect to ancient Greece are problematic of ahistorical conclusions that neglect historical periods and details for a parochial view of the ancient Mediterranean as a space of monoculturalism and imperial expansion.

With respect to the Homeric epics in particular, perhaps we should allow Thucydides to remind us of the polymorphy of the ancient world and how fallacious it is to conceive of ancient Greece without paying attention to historical specificity:

> The best proof of this [diversity among Greeks] is furnished by Homer. Born long after the Trojan War, he nowhere else calls them by that name [Hellenes], nor indeed any of them except the followers of Achilles from Phthiotis, who were the original Hellenes: in his poems they are called Danaans, Argives, and Achaeans. He does not use the term barbarian, probably because the Hellenes had not yet been marked off from the rest of the world by one distinctive appellation.  

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67 Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*, 2-3. Of equal interest are the preceding lines as well, where Thucydides is very explicit on the diversity of the Aegean world. According to the Athenian historian, “Before the Trojan War there is no indication of any common action in Hellas, nor indeed of the universal prevalence of the name; on the contrary, before the time of Hellen, son of Deucalion, no such appellation existed, but the country went by the name of different tribes, in particular of the Pelasgian” (2). The specific excerpts came back to my memory through Tsetskhladze’s quotation of them (ix).
It is precisely this Homeric sea-world of *unity-within-diversity* among Greek peoples that finds its creolized parallel in Walcott’s Caribbean archipelago. “Master, I was the freshest of all your readers” (283), his persona tells Homer, and so indeed Walcott was, because his attention to the diversity of the Aegean world sharply contradicts contemporary “colonial” readings of the past, residues of an imperial politics of the nineteenth-century Anglo-Americas that sought for historical validation in a reified image of the Greek (and Roman) Mediterranean world. Walcott is aware that just as a description of the Caribbean needs to meet the challenge of the overwhelming diversity that characterizes the American archipelago, the ancient Mediterranean calls for a much more careful attention that will attest to its own historical specificity as well, even more in its merging with other regions.

Walcott’s fascination with Homer and the ancient Mediterranean should by no means indicate that the Caribbean poet is imitating ancient Greece, a colonized writer whose Eurocentric education has blinded him to the sharp inequalities inherent in the core of Western civilization. On the contrary, *Omeros* is rife with a harsh critique of the ancient Greek world and its heritage of slavery in the Americas – in itself another point of historical specificity. For instance, in book four, and in an excellent case of Glissantian *errantry*, Walcott travels all around the world in search of his

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To avoid confusion to non-classical readers, perhaps I should clarify that Hellas is the native term for Greece and Hellenes for Greeks. Greeks have always identified themselves by that term. The country’s official name is Hellenic Republic.
roots only to realize that there are pieces of him everywhere, one of which lies in the North Americas. In response to his guide’s indication of the place where the Trail of Tears started in Georgia, Walcott laments the inspiration U.S. southerners drew from ancient Greece in their justification of slavery:

I thought of the Greek revival

carried past the names of towns with columned porches,
and how Greek it was, the necessary evil
of slavery, in the catalogue of Georgia’s

marble past, the Jeffersonian ideal in
plantations with its Hectors and Achilleses,

…past towns named Helen,

Athens, Sparta, Troy. The slave shacks… (177).

Through this imagery of ancient revival in the United States, Walcott contemplates the parallel but different space of an American Mediterranean where the shadow of Greek slavery will forever haunt the region. North Americans may have conceived of ancient Greece as exemplary for the world they aspired to build, but to the Caribbean mind “the Athenian demos” can only be remembered as “demonic” for its heritage of democracy in the name of which the cruel institution was long sustained in the hemisphere (206). His condemnation of Athens may strike one as problematic, if one considers Walcott’s praise of the city as similar to Port of Spain in his Nobel lecture. Yet again, Walcott is most specific as
to the historical period and the meaning of ancient Greece that he draws on; elaborating on the common space between the two archipelagic worlds in an interview, he characterizes the Greeks as “the niggers of the Mediterranean” in their “Puerto Rican tastes” and their habit of painting their marbles in bright colors. “People who praised classical Greece, if they were there then, would consider the Greeks’ taste vulgar, lurid…. They would not be looked at as stately classical painters, but as exotica, barbarous exotica,” Walcott explains, and he continues by suggesting only another common topos between the two regions: “All the purple and gold – that’s what I’m saying is very Caribbean, that same vigor and elation of an earlier Greece, not a later Greece, not the sort of Romanesque Greece, the Greece of Greece.”68 In this parallelism, a comparison between the two seas is not an issue; “everything is reduced, once comparison begins,” Walcott concludes, cautioning against the ready connotations that western readers often draw.69

The denial of stable origins and identities together with the simultaneous acknowledgment of the historicity of each region is a crucial feature in Walcott’s writing of African influences too. It is interesting that

68 William Baer, Conversations with Derek Walcott, (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1996), 183. In a similar spirit and in a 1992 interview with Myron Schwartzman that appeared in print in Sally and Richard Price’s Romare Bearden: The Caribbean Dimension, (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania University Press, 2006), Walcott claims: “If you’re living in the archipelago, the light is there, the rituals – the primal Greek rituals, the pantheism of Greek culture, it’s still there in the Caribbean. You know, sacrifice and ritual and celebration. Plus the figures… very Homeric” (94).

69 William Baer, Conversations, 183.
such an approach departs from Walcott’s early beliefs, which suggested confidence that African elements had not survived the Middle Passage. In his two seminal essays written in 1974, Walcott dismissed any notion of history in the Caribbean, and echoing the Indigenist voices of the prior decades, he proposed an Adamic amnesia as characteristic of the Caribbean archipelago. “In the Caribbean history is irrelevant, not because it is not being created, or because it was sordid; but because it has never mattered,” he writes in *The Caribbean: Culture or Mimicry*, and like other Caribbeanists he continues by suggesting imagination as corrective to the loss of a feeling of the past: “What has mattered is the loss of history, the amnesia of the races, what has become necessary is imagination, imagination as necessity, as invention.” A return to Africa would be meaningless because “we cannot return to what we have never been” since sailors on slave ships had long cut the “cord” that united them with the motherland. Hence, he adds in *The Muse of History*, “in time the slave surrendered to amnesia. That amnesia is the true history of the New World.” Presumably so strong a position came out of Walcott’s notorious dispute with Brathwaite and their radically opposing views on Africa, but it is important that sixteen years later a much different Walcott appears in *Omeros*, in the pages of which Africa emerges as a relational space of

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70 Derek Walcott, “*The Caribbean Culture or Mimicry?*” 53.

71 Ibid.

Caribbean identity to which the archipelago is perennially attached and from which it is forever distant.\textsuperscript{73}

In this light, the central figure that allows Walcott to negotiate Caribbean connections with Africa is understandably not his own poetic persona but Achille. Early on, we find him suffering defeat to Hector over Helen, all creolized heroes who stand for their Homeric counterparts but now struggle to make ends meet in the newly independent island of St. Lucia. The two fishermen respond differently to the rapid modernization of their native land; Hector breaks with the past, and lured by easy profit, he buys a truck to transfer the hordes of tourists arriving at the Caribbean paradise, a purchase that wins him Helen’s heart. Achille is unable to adjust and resorts to diving in the sea in search of conch shells, when for the first time the horrors of the Middle Passage strike him full force: “The shreds of the ocean’s floor passed him from corpses / that had perished in the crossing, their hair like weeds, / their bones were long coral fingers,” images of “deep evil” that move Achille to the realization of the slavery past (45-46). Like the Mediterranean, the Caribbean Sea reveals itself as a site of historicity, the space in which the brutal histories of conquest and

\textsuperscript{73} Walcott’s point can better be understood when juxtaposed with Brathwaite’s absolute belief in the continuity of African identity in the New World, in what evolved into a fierce controversy (actually enmity) between the two Caribbeanists. Charles Pollard in \textit{New World Modernisms: T. S. Eliot, Derek Walcott, and Kamau Brathwaite} (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2004) best captures the radical differences between the two in the following concise manner, the first approach referring to Brathwaite and the second to Walcott: “Afrocentric / Eurocentric, public / private, historical / ahistorical, black / mulatto, authentic / hybrid, popular culture / high culture, political / psychological, protesting / quietist, oral / written, and experimental / formalist” (29). For a full analysis on the two, see 28-40.
division are written, but also the force that allows for irreconcilable gaps to
breach; Philoctete reminds Achille right away that no matter what
separates him from Hector, “they had a common bond / between them: the
sea” (47). Symbol of unity for a Caribbean that vacillates between
modernity and an indigenous past, the sea serves for another connection
to emerge as well, and soon Achille suffers from a sunstroke that wakes
him up in a hallucination by which he sees “the ghost / of his father’s face
shoot up… / Then, for the first time, he asked himself who he was” (130).

Walcott thus decides to negotiate the heritage of Africa in the New
World, and so Achille walks on the “submerged archipelago” that unites
the Caribbean with Africa to cover a period of three centuries and meet
with his ancestor in the past (155). The Glissantian undertones that
surface in the trip are striking, and in a typical manifestation of retour, the
vain reversion to the point of an original essence, Achille finds himself in
the village of his forefathers in Congo where he initially feels “the
homesick shame / and pain of his Africa,” but no matter how hard he tries
he cannot remember the name of the places he sees (134).74 To the
persistent questions of his father, who identifies himself as “A-fo-la-be /
touching his heart” as to what the name Achille means, Achille is unable to
provide an answer: “Everything was forgotten. You also. I do not know. /

74 My reading of Walcott through a Glissantian poetics does not aim for the
substitution of any “Homeric shadow” on Walcott with a Glissantian one, for just
as Glissant seems to be present in Omeros the same could be argued for Walcott
in Poetics of Relation, both books published in the same year (1990) at a time
when the two writers were close. What I hope becomes evident is that the two
Caribbeanists have been on the same ground with respect to the narration of
Caribbean history and literature.
The deaf sea has changed around every name that you gave / us; trees, men, we yearn for a sound that is missing” (137). As literary critic Valerie Loichot suggests on a different occasion, the forgetfulness of names in both Glissant and Walcott is paradigmatic of an absence of fatherhood and by extension of a linear genealogy, a poetics that lies in sharp contrast with Brathwaite’s conceptualization of nam, the original African essence that persists but devoid of its final ‘e’ due to colonization.75

Indeed, Achille’s inability to name himself and his surroundings in his father’s dialect reveals the gap that separates the Caribbean from Africa and, in one of the most stirring moments of the poem, an utterly disappointed Afolabe comes to the realization that a connection between himself and his descendant perhaps never existed:

If you’re content with not knowing what our names mean,

then I am not Afolabe, your father, and you look through my body as the light looks through a leaf. I am not here or a shadow. And you, nameless son, are only the ghost of a name. Why did I never miss you until you returned? Why haven’t I missed you, my son, until you were lost? Are you the smoke for a fire that never burned? (138-39)

Such forceful lines do not meet with a reply from an already shattered Achille. Nevertheless, he is now seen wandering in his ancestral village performing his own errantry in a frustrated search for pieces of a

75 Valerie Loichot, “Renaming the Name: Glissant and Walcott’s Reconstruction of the Caribbean Self,” *Journal of Caribbean Literature* 3, no.2 (n. d.): 2. For more on Glissant and Walcott and their common poetics on names, as well as their difference from Brathwaite, see 1-12.
collapsing past that will help him to understand himself in relation to his land of origin. For what needs to be stressed is that this Glissantian erasure of Achille’s filial line does not imply the irrevocable loss of historical consciousness, much less an amnesiac Caribbean. In the feast prepared in his honor, a deeply shaken Achille recognizes similar cultural elements that did survive the Middle Passage, the same clothing and dances that he finds in St. Lucia, “the drumming the same / ... the same, the same” (143). It is the very idea of stable and sacred origins that Achille cannot locate and identify with, as his reversion (retour) to the motherland does not lead to an affirmation of an African ancestral essence but to a diversion (detour) that exposes him to the multiplicity of his Caribbean identity, which is inclusive of the African past.

What is important here it to recall that reversion and diversion in Glissantian poetics are inseparable processes that can only be completed through “a return to the point of entanglement,” that is, where creolization was first put in process. In this light, the subsequent scene of enslavement that Achille witnesses lends even more credit to Glissantian influences on Walcott. “Then war / came...,” says Achille, “the raid was profitable. It yielded fifteen slaves / to the slavers waiting up the coast” (Omeros 144 and 145). Notice that in the last line Achille implies that the slave raiders were not white but black. According to Walcott’s biographer Bruce King, Walcott held Black Power politics in low disregard and he persistently

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76 Edouard Glissant, Caribbean Discourse, 26.
refused to join Black Studies departments. In a 1990 interview, which King quotes as well, Walcott daringly argues that “black history… only continues to segregate” because it pretends to ignore that African slavery involved “the total cooperation of Africans in selling each other.” “The whole idea of slavery was… black people capturing black people and selling them to the white man. This is the real beginning; that is what should be taught,” Walcott claims, and he continues in the same provocative tone to suggest that “we have to face that reality. What happened was, one tribe captured the other tribe. That is the history of the world.” By including in Achille’s trip this uncomfortable episode that shatters romantic images of the past, Walcott foregrounds Africa not as the reified land of ancestry where the sacred origins of the race await to be found, but as the starting point for an exploration of a Caribbean identity born out of the nightmare of slavery and the process of a Glissantian creolization.

So Walcott recites this heritage, the memories and sorrow of the Middle Passage, during which “each man was a nation / in himself, without

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77 Bruce King, Derek Walcott, 503.

78 Derek Walcott, Conversations, 178-79.

79 Ibid. As if in response to Afolabe’s disinheritance of Achille, Walcott asserted in The Muse of History some fifteen years earlier: “I say to the ancestor who sold me and the ancestor who bought me I have no father, I want no such father, although I can understand you, black ghost, white ghost, when you both whisper ‘history,’ for if I attempt to forgive you both I am falling into your idea of history which justifies and explains and expiates” (64).

mother, father, brother,” but with “the sea-wind tying them into one nation / of eyes and shadows and groans” (Omeros 150-51). Achille now “foresaw their future. He knew nothing could change it,” and crying the name of his enslaved father over the river, he listens to Seven Seas “muttering his prophetic song / of sorrow that would be the past” (146 and 148). Walcott’s epic history of the American archipelago is thus transformed into a Glissantian “prophetic vision of the past,” one that allows literature to fill in gaps of myriad bitter memories of slavery and transportation that no history can ever manage to record. “But they crossed, they survived. There is the epical splendour,” Achille contemplates starting his trip back to the New World (Omeros 149).

The epic figure embodying these memories in the Americas is Philoctete, who “believed the swelling came from the chained ankles / of his grandfathers. Or else why was there no cure” (19). Walcott verifies the sustaining memory of the Middle Passage in the Caribbean world, even more by having Philoctete eventually cured with knowledge that survived the slavery trade. This particular point has been subject to intense critical scrutiny, as Walcott seems to be praising a much more essentialized notion of African heritage than appears in his literature. Philoctete’s healer is Ma Kilman, “a sybil, obeah-woman” (58) who knows that the cure “that precedes every wound” (239) comes from a flower the seed of which was brought from Africa by a sea-swift “centuries ago” (238). We also learn that “all the unburied gods, for three deep centuries dead” now reside in her

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80 Edouard Glissant, Caribbean Discourse, 64.
body, and “as if her veins were their roots / her arms ululated, uplifting the branches / of a tree carried across the Atlantic” (242 and 243). As postcolonial critic Jahan Ramazani argues, Walcott here “flirts momentarily with the concept of race-based blood inheritance of belief”\(^81\) and, indeed, for noted Africanist Isidore Okpewho this is only another indication, along with Achille’s trip, of Walcott’s embrace of “the primacy of the African factor in Caribbean identity.”\(^82\)

Contrary to these views, I wish to argue for an understanding of Ma Kilman through a Mediterranean and creolized context that emphasizes the syncretic form of African continuities in the New World. In this respect, it is important that Walcott introduces her both as a “sibyl” and an “obeah woman,” joining together the Aegean and the Caribbean archipelago this time in the opacity of their spiritual worlds. Understandably, only hypotheses can be made today as to the ancient Sibylline oracles, but the little that we can be sure of is the intimate connection of the prophetesses that bore this title with mother-Earth, as, for instance, with Pythia at Delphi, who delivered her prophesies in a delirium after inhaling gas from a chasm in the sacred of Apollo’s temple. Homer is generally silent on the oracular world, but we can tell from the figure of Cassandra and particularly her brother, Helenus, that the ancient poet adhered to a belief in prophesies


stemming from intuition and private knowledge of the mind of the gods.\textsuperscript{83}

For instance, when Helenus advises Hector to challenge the Greeks to a duel, the winner of which should determine the outcome of the war, it is the goddess Athena who “flashed the word in Helenus’ mantic spirit – the son of Priam sensed what pleased the immortals,” Homer tells us.\textsuperscript{84} As to the Caribbean world, the same privacy of communication between the divine and the mortal that characterized the ancient Sibyls constitutes the fundamental, distinctive element of Obeah practices too. According to critics Margarite Fernandez Olmos and Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert, Obeah differs from other Caribbean religions, such as Voodoo, in that consultation takes place individually and without an established canon, notwithstanding the general Afro-Caribbean elements of “veneration of the ancestors, spirit possession, animal sacrifice, and divination.”\textsuperscript{85}

Far from surrendering to essentialized tendencies, therefore, Walcott’s imagery of African gods rooted in Ma Kilman’s body, as well as his emphasis on her esoteric powers, resembles similar ancient beliefs and practices that now meet in the creolized world of the American


\textsuperscript{84} Homer, \textit{The Iliad}, 216.

\textsuperscript{85} Margarite Fernandez Olmos and Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert, \textit{Creole Religions}, 133. Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert describe Obeah as “not a religion so much as a system of beliefs rooted in Creole notions of spirituality, which acknowledges the existence and power of the supernatural world and incorporates into its practices witchcraft, sorcery, magic, spells, and healing” (131). The privacy of Obeah practices, which largely flourished in the British Caribbean, owes to their prohibition during slavery (in contrast to Haitian Voodoo in the French Caribbean) (15). For an excellent overview on Caribbean religions, see their recent book \textit{Creole Religions of the Caribbean: An Introduction from Vodou and Santeria to Obeah and Espiritismo}, (New York: New York University Press, 2003).
Mediterranean. In this syncretic space Ma Kilman is a believer of the ancient religions, but she takes the Holy Communion too (Omeros 58). The spirits of the gods may be running in her veins, yet “their outlines [were] fading, thinner / as belief in them thinned” (242). Not that they have been forgotten; like the Sybil prophetesses of the Aegean, Ma Kilman can listen to the “sounds” of African gods, “Erzulie / Shango and Ogun” whom she “had never learnt…, though their sounds were within her / subdued in the rivers of her blood // They were there. She called them” (242 and 243). So they respond, and like the ancient gods they reveal themselves from within the earth, “the ants talking the language of her great-grandmother” (244). As Philoctete is about to take the healing bath “in the brew of the root” that the sibyl has prepared (246), the Caribbean resigns itself to the healing memories of Africa, and Walcott admits, “there was no difference / between me and Philoctete” (245). Philoctete is cured and so is Walcott, Achille before them too, all three through their contact with the motherland of Africa that now survives in the New World only as an elusive memory of wounds and healings that will nevertheless be part of the Americas forever.

Walcott’s embrace of Africa and his epic vision of a Caribbean future that interplays with the past is further captured by the fate of Hector, who had early on given in to the temptation of easy money by selling his canoe to buy a van, its leopard seats becoming his sole connection with the past (116). “He’d paid the penalty of giving up the sea,” Walcott’s persona later recollects upon hearing the news of his death in a road accident, “but all of
that money was making him ashamed" of his new life (231).

Unsurprisingly, Hector remains a largely neglected figure in the poem, but his early death acquires an extra level of significance since his fight with Achille over Helen gradually evolves into a symbolic battle – between the forces of modernity and those of tradition over the island’s future respectively. Like Hector, Helen appears rather indifferent to native culture and remains throughout the epic as the “shadow” that she is first introduced (17), but her story too is indicative of Walcott’s intentions. Resembling the island’s route to westernization, Helen abandons Achille and moves in with Hector while being pregnant without knowing which of the two the father is (34). Following Hector’s death, however, she returns to Achille, who now wants to give the child an African name despite her objections. The end of the poem leaves little doubt as to what will follow: “He say he’ll leave it / till the day of christening. That Helen must learn / where she from. Philo standing godfather. You see?” (318). By maintaining the uncertainty of the unborn child’s fatherhood, Walcott envisions a Caribbean future that lacks a linear genealogy and a traceable history but also bears a creolized identity that remains bound to the memories of the past through Philoctete’s spiritual kinship. In the Caribbean archipelago amnesia is thus replaced with memory and history with tales, Africa being forever distant and yet so close to the American Mediterranean shores.

Helen’s submissive portrayal as well as her identification with the island itself has earned Walcott a harsh critique for a parochial gendered
representation that ignores contemporary feminist concerns. As cultural
and feminist critic Patricia Hill Collins explains, women have always played
a fundamental role in male-conceived nationalist poetics by virtue of their
association with images of sexuality, fertility, motherhood, and symbols of
nations. 86 Indeed, Walcott’s writing of an erotic Helen, as attractive as her
Homeric namesake, becomes paradigmatic of this symbolism even from
the very start, when Major Plunkett, a retired British officer of World War II
who now resides in the island with his depressed wife Maud, leers at the
girl thinking that “the island was once / named Helen” (Omeros 31).
Walcott refers here to St. Lucia’s historical nickname due to its beauty and
its status as a prize in the vicious battles between the British and the
French for the control of the Caribbean in the eighteenth century. For
literary critic Giselle Liza Anatol, however, this is only another example of
male literature by which “island topography and female anatomy become
analogous…. Woman cast as land and land cast as woman serve to
civilize, tame and control both,” she complaints, and, in a vein like that of
the Homeric story of the Greeks fighting with the Trojans over Helen,
Walcott propagates a male-centered narrative that presents women as
“silent, passive, and ready for conquest.” 87 Anatol’s arguments are
admittedly sound, especially if we consider that The Iliad was not
necessarily a figment of imagination but arguably born out of the historical


fact of a series of wars over the control of the narrow strait of Hellespont, where Troy was located, and the access to the Black Sea during Mycenaean expansion around late second millennium BC.  

Homer’s later inscription of the metaphor of Troy as Helen, alias the stolen prize, around eighth-century BC proved tremendously inspirational in shaping the gendered fantasies of Western literature, but Walcott’s similar attempt with St. Lucia may not be as successful. Among the subplots of the epic, Walcott’s writing of Helen as symbolic of the island’s identity parallels the narrative of Major Plunkett, who falls in love with Helen and decides to dedicate himself to writing the island’s history, not through literature, as Walcott’s persona does, but in accordance with Western historiographic demands. We learn that since “History saw them [Caribbean people] as pigs” (64), Plunkett will indulge in a passionate archival research determined “to redress / … that desolate beauty [of Helen] / so like her island’s” (30). But because he is trapped within the confines of historiographic empiricism and the crude logic of scientific truth, Plunkett’s desire to give the island “its true place in history” is doomed to bitter failure (64). “History was fact, / History was a cannon, not a lizard,” he speculates, losing his temper over the multitude of legends and folktales that he encounters in what is only the beginning toward his gradual surrender to Homeric connotations and even emotional judgments.

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89 Notice the similarity with the contemporary derogatory acronym of the European Mediterranean countries in credit-crunch language.
too (92). As “the factual fiction / of textbooks, pamphlets, brochures” proves of little value in the narration of the Caribbean archipelago, a frustrated Plunkett now wonders how it can be that “none noticed the Homeric repetition / of details, their prophecy” (95-96). His disillusionment becomes complete one day when, “as the fever of History began to pass,” he comes to the realization that no history can be written free from the author’s concerns: “History earns its own tenderness / in time; not for a navel victory, but for / the V of a velvet back in a yellow dress,” he recollects with an eye to Helen’s sensual appearance (103). Helen’s victory in this respect is not to be ignored, for western historiography succumbs to the radical singularity of a region that refuses to be narrated and grasped at the same time that the Walcott persona fails to disengage from Homeric influence for a more factual representation of Helen and the Caribbean. Equally disappointed, Walcott’s persona thinks to himself in the last pages of the poem:

…Why not see Helen

as the sun saw her, with no Homeric shadow,

All that Greek manure under the green bananas,

What I had read and rewritten till literature
was guilty as History…

…When would it stop,
the echo in the throat, insisting, “Omeros”;

99
when would I enter the light beyond metaphor? (271)  

Notwithstanding feminist views, a more sympathetic approach would acknowledge in the two men’s inability to historicize Helen-as-land as a much more affirmative feminine representation than Walcott is believed to have written. Perhaps in response to such criticism, Walcott protests that “nobody takes the last third of the book seriously…. The answer to both the historian and the poet/narrator – the answers in terms of history, the answer in terms of literature – is that the woman doesn’t need it.”

Proud and independent, in control of her body and life, Walcott’s Helen epitomizes the uniqueness of a Caribbean archipelago within a related American Mediterranean world where history and literature are bound together, both self-cancelling and interdependent, just as in the ancient Mediterranean of Homer too. As the poet argues, drawing this trans-


91 Derek Walcott, Reflections, 232-33.

92 More than two and a half millennia later, on March 25, 2009, commemorating the 188th anniversary of Greece’s independence from the Ottoman Empire in 1821, the President of the United States of America, Barack Obama, celebrated the common “vision of democracy and liberty” and “the strength of the bond between Greece and the United States”: “From the literary classics taught in our children’s classrooms to the gleaming monuments of our Nation’s capital, Greek cultural traditions have also found a home in the United States. In classrooms across the country, many of our students still immerse themselves in the epics of Homer, the dramas of Sophocles, and the philosophical innovations of Plato and Aristotle. Among the Greek-influenced structures in Washington, D.C., our Nation’s Capitol Building draws upon the architectural legacy of the ancient Greeks” (Press Release. For the full proclamation, see The White House. Office of the Press Secretary, Greek Independence Day: A National Day of Celebration of Greek and American Democracy, 2009. By the President of the United States
oceanic map of creolization, his intention was “not to verify the sources, but to accept the references, however ‘wrong’ they may be. And that to me is very… American.”

In a similar vein, philhellene Vice President Joe Biden declared: “The great Greek fabulist Aesop once wrote: ‘In union there is strength.’ Today, both literally and figuratively, we stand together - - a union forged through our history, and a strength that grows each and every day. It’s a strength stemming from, quite frankly, the very core of our existence. When I say I’m Greek every day, it’s not merely because in my first election the Greek community elected me. But the truth of the matter is Greece in America - - Greece and America share common values, common goals, a common philosophical tradition going back to the great scholars of ancient Greece.”


93 Derek Walcott, Reflections, 243-44.
Chapter 2

American Womanhood:
Maryse Condé's *I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem*

If through its epic splendor Walcott establishes the *creolized* historical past in the American archipelago, in other words the space where history and literature are inextricably linked to narrate a porous, hemispheric past, Maryse Condé targets an equally foundational moment in the history of the New World, the Salem Witch Trials and by extension Puritanism, to illuminate the *relational* history of American women in the continent. It is a past of fissures and silences that meets with the same historiographic challenges as with Walcott, yet one that is revealed through the pages of literature as the sole means to recuperate lost voices and neglected details that offer a different understanding of what may have taken place in the past.

During the frosty January of 1692 in Salem Village, Massachusetts, two little girls related to the local pastor, Samuel Parris, began inexplicably to go into fits. As a remedy, Parris’s two Carib Indian slaves, a woman called Tituba and her husband John Indian, allegedly baked a “witch cake” with the girls’ urine to feed to the dog. With more girls becoming hysterical, the local physician’s diagnosis could only confirm what was already in the mind of a theocratic, Puritan community: the patients were “bewitched,” and soon the suspects were recognized in the face of Tituba and two other
local, white women.¹ Brutally interrogated, Tituba confessed in court her close ties with the devil, triggering among local authorities an unprecedented witch-hunt that sent approximately two hundred people of diverse age and status to prison. Of that number, nineteen women died on the gallows, five more in prison, and one man pressed to death.²

The exact causes of the girls’ behavior were never revealed, but historians had little trouble gradually settling on the prime instigator of this embarrassing story in U.S. history. Interestingly, the more distant the event would become, the more confident historians would appear; “in all probability,” wrote Salemite Charles W. Upham in 1867, Tituba and her husband, John Indian, “contributed from the wild and strange superstitions prevalent among their native tribes, materials which… heightened the infatuation of the times,”³ yet for historian Winfried S. Nevins five decades later, in 1916, “Tituba undoubtedly had familiarity with the strange tricks

¹ Writes John Hale in 1702 in “A Modest Enquiry into the Nature of Witchcraft,” *The Salem Witch Trials Reader*, ed. Frances Hill, (Boston: Da Capo, 2000): “He [Samuel Parris] had also an Indian manservant, and his wife who afterwards confessed, that without the knowledge of their master or mistress, they had taken some of the afflicted persons’ urine, and mixing it with meal had made a cake, and baked it, to find out the witch, as they said. After this the afflicted persons cried out of the Indian woman, named Tituba, that she did pinch, prick, and grievously torment them, and that they saw her here and there, where nobody else could” (59).

² Frances Hill, *The Salem Witch Trials*, xix-xxii. Hill’s is an amazing sourcebook on the Salem witch trials that contains writings dating from the fifteenth to the twentieth century, and where I take many excerpts from.

and jugglery practiced by the semi-barbarous races." Equally strong in her judgment - and widely read even today – historian Marion L. Starkey appeared certain in 1949 that “Betty [Paris’s afflicted daughter] was devoted to Tituba, whose special pet she was. The half-savage loved to cuddle the child in her own snuggery by the fire, stroke her fair hair and murmur to her old tales and nonsense rhymes.” One notices the evil versus angelic implications in Starkey’s representation of the two figures. Today, a sign standing at Salem Village – present-day Danvers, Massachusetts – informs visitors that “it was in this house in 1692 that Tituba, Rev. Parris’ slave, told the girls of the household stories of witchcraft which nurtured the village witchcraft hysteria.” A female and a slave, strange to Puritan norms, who confessed her mischief and whose traces have been lost ever since, Tituba has always been the easy victim for the official record to blame – even though no proof was ever found to verify her malicious role, apart from her controversial confession.


7 Even so, and according to Robert Calef writing “More Wonders of the Invisible World” in 1700, “the account [Tituba] since gives of it [her confession] is, that her master did beat her and other-ways abuse her, to make her confess and accuse (such as he called) her sister witches, and that whatsoever she said by way of confessing or accusing others, was the effect of such usage; her master refused to pay her [prison] fees, unless she would stand to what she had said” (The Salem Witch Trials Reader, 61).
For approximately three centuries, Tituba would maintain her guilty status in silence, until her voice was recovered in Maryse Condé’s *I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem* in 1994: “I felt that I would only be mentioned in passing in these Salem witchcraft trials about which so much would be written later…,” she says, certain that “Tituba would be condemned forever! There would never, ever, be a careful, sensitive biography recreating my life” (110). Resorting to fiction-writing as the sole means to recapture the story of yet another silenced woman in American history, Maryse Condé, a Guadeloupian writer, attended to the Salem witch trials’ archival documentation at the same time that she moved beyond the record by allowing her imagination to fill in the gaps. In what I read here as another Glissantian *parallel but different* history of the Americas, where fiction narrates the same, foundational event but from a different, Caribbean feminist perspective, I begin by drawing a hemispheric cartography of American womanhood through the creolized and predominantly feminine space of witchcraft as the context that informs Condé’s feminist historiography. I argue that what emerges from the revision of a *relational*, that is, cross-cultural religious past are common divination anxieties that nevertheless have been ignored and silenced for the voice of Enlightenment’s masculine reason to be heard. In response, I

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suggest that Condé invests Tituba in all her natural sensuality by enacting a politics of erotic autonomy (M. Jacqui Alexander's term) that will allow Tituba to reclaim possession of the erotic, black body and through that of herself in history, at the same time that Puritan women find their unmediated voice against centuries-old male, divinely ordained oppression. Further, I propose that this common female past, contingent on shifting historical circumstances, is then structured on the invariable relation of gender and heritage in the Americas, a connection that replaces western-feminist presumptions of a sisterhood that ignores historical specificities for a notion of American womanhood based on common experiences and stories that are finally told.

Understanding witchcraft practices and traditions in their seventeenth-century hemispheric context is essential for Tituba’s story to follow, as Condé’s representation of American womanhood draws heavily on both Caribbean and Puritan religiosity to negotiate a creolized, feminine world of cross-cultural exchange, infiltration, and barriers as well. The supernatural element has always been present in the syncretic space of the Caribbean, both among African and Creole slaves in the New World and the now-extinct Amerindian (Arawak and Carib) peoples. Born out of a ceaseless process of cross-cultural interaction and religious syncretism,

“What human beings seek to learn from nature is how to use it to dominate wholly both it and human beings. Nothing else counts,” write the two philosophers critically of the Age of Reason, only to warn of the price societies have to pay for their disrespect to nature as a source of knowledge: “Ruthless toward itself, the Enlightenment has eradicated the last remnant of its own self-awareness” (2). Indeed, as I show further below, Tituba will appear drawing strength from and making sense of her surroundings thanks to her intimate connection with nature.
Afro-Caribbean religions are characteristic of a complex body of pantheistic beliefs based on the worship of innumerable deities that intervene between the Supreme Being and the mundane world. Central to these beliefs – and Tituba’s (hi)story – is the eternal presence of the dead as active agents among the living whose lives they influence and often decisively affect. Communication with their spirits takes place through a wealth of endlessly improvisatory rituals, divinatory practices, and animistic beliefs that may involve animal sacrifices, possession, music, and dance. The fundamental practice through which divination occurs is magic; either in the form of spells, conjurations, or ethno-biological medicine, it constitutes the indisputable medium for the world of the living and the dead to merge.\(^\text{10}\) This functionality of magic as a bridge between two worlds may now lie in the realm of the heterocosmic only; importantly, however, it was the same belief in an animistic universe and witchcraft that served as the earthly ground in the past for African and Amerindian groups to meet. For instance, historian Elaine Breslaw observes that both groups were invested in a metaphysics of ethno-medicine that attributed all diseases and cures to supernatural forces, which became intelligible through magic. It was only one feature, along with the similar use of music, dance, and especially of drums in their religious ceremonies that allowed the two groups to merge and influence each other.\(^\text{11}\) Within their rapidly

\(^{10}\) Fernandez Margarite Olmos and Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert, *Creole Religions*, 9-11.

changing world the two populations soon met as well on the common
ground of their anxiety about the future, as divination practices that sought
to predict which misfortune awaited them next were quite similar; the use
of the sieve and the sheer, and especially of the egg were practices that
brought the two cultures even closer together in their status of
oppression.\textsuperscript{12}

In this context, a trans-regional map of the occult that includes the
Euro-American North may strike one as being peculiar; the dominance of
Puritan thought in early U.S. American history has long served to
consolidate a view of New England as the compact ideological foundation
of the U.S. American Republic, while Tituba’s demonization for importing
supposedly alien values to the local population has further solidified the
imagery of the region as a Puritan stronghold in U.S. American
historiography. According to Cotton Mather, however, writing in 1697, the
reality may have been much different. “It is to be confessed and bewailed,
that \textit{many} inhabitants of New England, and young people especially, had
been let away with little sorceries,” writes the famous Puritan minister with
an eye to Salem Village, “wherein they did secretly those things that were
not right against the Lord their God.”\textsuperscript{13} The possible infiltration of the occult
among the members of a dogmatic Christian community can be explained
if we trace the similarities between New England witchcraft and that of the

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 90.

\textsuperscript{13} Cotton Mather, “The Life of His Excellency Sir William Philips,” \textit{The Salem
Witch Trials Reader}, 215, emphasis added.
Old World from which it was imported, as well as that of the Caribbean. Like their ancestors in the villages of old England, and African and Amerindian groups among them in the New World, Euro-Americans would sometimes turn to magic, if timidly, in order to search for an indication as to the future, or for a remedy to cure the sick.  

14 In their constant anxiety about the future, New Englanders would look around them for any indication as to the state of their soul; as historian Elizabeth Reiss suggests, a central paradox of Puritan thought was the debilitating vacillation between salvation and damnation, signs of which could alternate in the mind of Puritans “on any given day.”  

15 This burden would often prove particularly heavy for children to carry, as they would grow up certain of their preborn sinfulness and the cruel punishment awaiting them by a merciless God.  

16 Two verses from the Primer’s, a catechistic book for youngsters to internalize, suffice to describe the spirit of the time:

Q. What is your birth sin?
A. Adam’s sin imputed to me, and a corrupt nature dwelling in me.
Q. What is your corrupt nature?

14 Elaine Breslaw, Tituba, 91.


16 Ibid., 33.
A. My corrupt nature is empty of grace, bent unto sin, only unto sin, and that continually.\textsuperscript{17}

It should not be a surprise, therefore, that Betty Parris, age nine, and Abigail Williams, age eleven, daughter and niece of Salem Village pastor Samuel Parris respectively, gradually fell into the ancestral and cross-cultural habit of trying to get a glimpse of the grim future by dropping the white of a raw egg into a glass. Nor should it raise any eyebrows that the drama of Tituba and more than a hundred women would take place after one day in late 1691 when the girls saw in horror the egg allegedly taking the shape of a coffin.\textsuperscript{18}

For the suspect in these cases was of one specific sex. “A witch is a magician, who either by open or secret league, wittingly and willingly, contenteth to use the aid and assistance of the devil, in the working of wonders,” wrote Cambridge theologian William Perkins in 1608, only to add that “the woman being the weaker sex, is sooner entangled by the devil’s illusions with this damnable art, than the man.”\textsuperscript{19} Indeed, according to modern historian Carol Karlsen’s study, the percentage of female witches in England is estimated at ninety percent compared to male practitioners, the numbers being similar in the colonies too. Witches on both sides of the ocean were particularly feared for their ability to conduct

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{18} Elaine Breslaw, \textit{Tituba}, 89.

maleficium, that is, to perform magic that aimed at a neighbor’s health, progeny, livestock, crops, or any other aspect of one’s well-being and prosperity.\textsuperscript{20} Such a belief in women’s intimate connection with malevolent powers dated back to the demonization of pagan cults in early Christian years but earned significant ground during the Medieval Ages under the Catholic obsession with “the first temptress, Eve.”\textsuperscript{21} Accordingly, female supernatural power was derived from a dual – and in the Puritan mind later on joint – source to which women were believed to have easier access than men, nature and the devil. Inquisitors Heinrich Kramer and James Sprenger’s classic \textit{Malleus Malleficarum} – also known as “the Hammer of Witches,” – written in 1486, sheds light on the mentality inherited by seventeenth-century Protestants and the perverse rationale behind the Salem witch-hunt:

\begin{quote}
They [women] are more credulous…. Women are naturally more impressionable…. They have more slippery tongues, and are unable to conceal from their fellow-women those things which by evil art they know; and, since they are weak, they find an easy and secret manner of vindicating themselves by witchcraft…. All wickedness is but little to the wickedness of a woman…. Since they are feeble both in mind and body, it is not surprising that they should come more under the spell of
\end{quote}

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witchcraft…. Women are intellectually like children…. But the natural reason is that she is more carnal than a man, as is clear from her many carnal abominations…. Therefore a wicked woman is by her nature quicker to waver in her faith, and consequently quicker to abjure the faith, which is the root of witchcraft.22

Arguably, the misogynist attitude of the two inquisitors may not be doing justice to the Puritan doctrine that held both men and women as equally depraved.23 Puritanism developed on the turn of the seventeenth century at a time when a fast-changing England, breaking away from its feudal past, witnessed in dismay the appearance of women in the public domain of streets and shops. To the passionate calls of Protestant ministers for the rapid rehabilitation of women in the private sphere, a number of Puritans responded by praising the benevolence of the female soul, importantly, though, through her predestination to serve her husband in marriage and family. As Karlsen explains, Puritanism claimed the

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22 Ibid., 43-44. I became aware of the *Malleus Maleficarum* in Lillian Manzor-Coats’s article “Of Witches and Other Things: Maryse Condé’s Challenges to Feminist Discourse,” *World Literature Today* 67 no.4 (1993): 741, where an excerpt of it appears as well. So does it in Frances Hill’s *The Salem Witch Trials Reader*, where Hill rightly describes it as “one of the most obnoxious books ever written…. full of sexual terror and a merciless hatred of women… [with] crazed notions about witches” (4). Pope Innocent VIII appointed Kramer and Sprenger as inquisitors in North Germany in 1484 and “gave his blessing” to the book in a Papal Bull that was included in the preface (4). Interestingly, new editions of the book continue to appear in the market.

23 A theological study on Puritanism is beyond the scope of this study, but historian Elizabeth Reiss is right to suggest that neither Puritanism, nor New England Puritanism for that matter, can be considered as an inflexible dogma that was applied evenly to all places and without transgressions (*The Damned Women* xvii).
substitution of external, ministerial authority by inner conscience and self-control, values that were primarily attended not so much by church attendance as by the sanctified realm of family. Within the new religious “Chain of Being” the position of the preacher was now taken by the husband, who was directly responsible to God, both as an individual and as the head of his little ‘church,’ his family, “with husbands superior to wives, parents to children, masters to servants” and all of them in service of God.\textsuperscript{24} In awe and humility Puritan wives were thus expected to show their reverence to God through their husbands and dutifully serve them in the heavy mission they were assigned. Alternative roles were out of the question; even the thought itself for a girl to stay out of marriage or a wife to show insubordination to her husband’s will would mean a challenge to the very authority of God, the most atrocious sin a human could possibly commit.\textsuperscript{25} Eternal damnation, excommunication, and banishment from the village and the colony awaited those provocative, “evil” women, alias witches, who actually dared to follow a different path, whereas for the less brave ones melancholy, hysteria and madness would become the ironic consequence of – or the refuge from – a pious life.

Some centuries later, it is exactly this spirit of insubordination attributed to the witch and/or the madwoman that would elevate these figures as emblematic heroines in modern feminist movements. In 1978 U.S. American radical feminist Mary Daly sharply exposed Puritan

\textsuperscript{24} Carol Karlsen, \textit{The Devil}, 164.

\textsuperscript{25} Ibid., 162.
hypocrisy by arguing that “during the witchcraze the solution was to attribute female power to the ‘fact’ that they were tools of the devil, the rival of the christian god, that is, of males themselves.”26 A few years later, in 1986, it was the turn for French feminists Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément to celebrate femininity in the face of “the sorceress and the hysteric, the witch and the madwoman,”27 at the same time that U.S. American feminist Adrienne Rich would praise “the empirical witch of the European Middle Ages, [because in] trusting her senses [and] practicing her tried remedies against the anti-material, anti-sensuous, anti-empirical dogmas of the Church… [she launched] a rebellion against the idolatry of pure ideas.”28 This was also the time that Condé’s Caribbean feminist account of Tituba appeared - though substantially detached from western-feminist criticism, as I show further below. The novel, nevertheless, similarly aimed to represent the notorious witch of the Americas, in Condé’s words during an interview, as “a sort of female hero, an epic heroine, like the legendary ‘Nanny of the maroons’…. [Besides,] in terms of narrow-mindedness, hypocrisy, and racism,” Condé argued, “little has

26 Mary Daly, Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism (Boston: Beacon, 1978), 194.


changed since the days of the Puritans.” Indeed, Condé’s Tituba would present herself to the twentieth-century reader as the black female witch of Salem in the sardonic, manipulative manner that she had met the expectations of the Puritan judges three centuries earlier, when she claimed responsibility for supposedly signing a compact with the devil. If it was necessarily a “black witch” that people expected to read, Condé provided them with one by resorting to irony and provocation.

Condé’s feminist intentions emerge in the very first lines of the novel where we learn that Tituba, the narrator of the story, is born after her sixteen-year-old-mother’s rape “by an English sailor on the deck of Christ the King… while the ship was sailing for Barbados. I was born from this act of aggression. From this act of hatred and contempt” (I, Tituba 3).

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Reaching a similar conclusion, historian Bernard Rosenthal graphically portrayed Tituba’s representation in U.S. American mythology as that “dark woman, the alien, who enters the Puritan world and plunges it into chaos” (13). See Salem Story: Reading the Witch Trials of 1692 (SUNY: Binghamton, 1993).

In this respect, Condé’s imagery of Tituba as black may appear as unwittingly conducive to the perpetuation of a racist fallacy. Within the hemispheric space of creolization, however, such a debate is pointless, as demarcated racial identities are substituted by the indeterminacy of obscure origins. Besides, nowhere does Condé in her oeuvre distinguish among a distinct black, Indian, or Creole identity in the Caribbean.

31 Condé commented on her complete identification with Tituba in her interview with Ann Scarboro that is included in the novel’s edition: “I had the feeling that Tituba was involved in the writing. Even when I left my pages at night in my
This powerful start is indicative of both the harsh critique of the Puritan establishment to follow and the feminist spirit through which it will be conducted; not only does the name of the ship serve as an ironic reminder of the horrors of slavery perpetuated in order for the City upon the Hill to shine, but it also underlines sexual violence as the cause of Tituba’s very existence. Equally important, the novel’s start points to a New World where notions of racial purity and dogmatic ideologies are substituted by those of Glissantian creolization and uncomfortable truths. Tituba is neither African nor Amerindian, but a Creole born out of the horrors of slavery for which, however, the whites are not exclusively to blame; only ten lines below we find out that Tituba’s mother, Abena, is bought by a plantation master together with two male slaves, “Ashantis as well, victims of the tribal wars between their people and the Fantis” (3). Nor does Condé aim to restrict her feminist critique within racial boundaries; Abena is put to the service of the white mistress who is of a similar, young age and who suffers the hypocrisy of her supposedly elevated status: “She hated this brute she had been forced to marry and who had already fathered a horde of illegitimate children” (3). It is not long before the two young women become friends, sleeping and playing together: “After all, they were little more than two children…” (3).

Yet such idyllic imagery of feminine bonding and color-blind friendship cannot possibly last in a white, masculine-dominated New study, I believed that she would go look at them, read them, and eventually correct what she did not like…. All along during my writing of the novel I felt that she was there – that I was addressing her” (“Afterword” 200).
World where black women are inextricably connected to the heritage of chattel slavery. Soon the first signs of Abena’s motherhood will become the cause of her permanent separation from her friend and return her to the reality of color and gender divisions. Upon finding out about Abena’s pregnancy, which will temporarily reduce his profit, the enraged master forbids her from entering the Great House again and, despite his wife’s pleas for mercy, he passes Abena over to Yao, one of the Ashanti male slaves who has twice attempted to commit suicide: “By offering him a concubine, Darnell [the master] hoped he would be giving him a taste for life and thereby get a return for his money” (4). So temporarily his plan succeeds, and four months later a happy Yao names his adopted daughter in a manner that asserts Tituba’s creolized identity: “TI-TU-BA. It’s not an Ashanti name. Yao probably invented it to prove that I was the daughter of his will and imagination. Daughter of his love” (6). It is a scene of family happiness accompanied by images of childhood innocence and play that will soon be crushed again under the sexual implications of black femininity in the New World. At the sight of a rejuvenated Abena, thanks to the merits of family love, the master attempts to rape her only to collapse after his victim strikes him two blows with a cutlass. Thrice Tituba remarks on the subsequent scene of her mother’s body that will haunt her forever: “They hanged my mother…. They hanged my mother…. They hanged my mother” (8).

Condé’s early and emphatic exposure of the dehumanizing realities of black women’s lives through the price that Abena has to pay for her
erotic happiness is crucial for the development of the story. As literary critic Farah Jasmine Griffin explains, black female writers often feel the need to lay sexual violation bare before they attempt to reclaim the erotic as a possibility for resistance. Subject to the gaze of the repressed European sailors, traders, and plantation owners, the black body became early on synonymous with lasting notions of unrestricted sexuality and uninhibited pleasure, fantasies that became real first on the ships of the Middle Passage and later on in the plantations of the New World.

Following the revival of these atrocities in Abena’s story, I suggest that Condé will attempt to reclaim the black body and its capacity for feeling and love through the same means, the erotic, which becomes the life-giving force denied to generations of black women all along. What is at risk, though, is that such repossession of the sensual, black female body as a source of empowerment and self-affirmation can easily be misread as the stereotypical image of the hyper-sexual object that it seeks to negate. It is for this reason why Condé structures her politics of Caribbean feminism on the historical figure of Tituba and the real event of the Salem witch trials and thereby faithfully reproduces the spirit of the time. As feminist critic Uma Narayan explains, “a useful general strategy for

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resisting cultural essentialism is the cultivation of a critical stance that
‘restores history and politics’ to prevailing ahistorical pictures of ‘culture.’”
Against the (enduring) racist perception of black Caribbean femininity as
an exotic fantasy of sexual promiscuity, Condé invests Tituba in a politics
of erotic capacity that springs from Caribbean spirituality and the history of
black and white womanhood in the Americas. The evil “witch” of the
Puritan world is thus reborn as an American woman in harmony with her
senses and the natural world, who draws from the erotic what black
feminist poet and critic Audre Lorde famously described as “the energy to
pursue genuine change within our world.”

Tituba’s path to the discovery of her inner feminine senses begins
immediately after her mother’s execution when an old Nago woman,
Mama Yaya, initiates her into Caribbean spirituality: “Mama Yaya taught
me about herbs…. [She] taught me to listen to the wind…. [She] taught me
the sea, the mountains, and the hills. She taught me that everything lives,
has a soul, and breathe. That everything must be respected” (I, Tituba 9).
Tituba’s universe is now a space where all elements of nature, animals,
herbs, sacred stones and places interfere between the world of the living
and the dead, and it is not long before Mama Yaya teaches Tituba how to
contact their spirits. “The dead only die if they die in our hearts,” Tituba
recollects upon the first visit of her mother and Yao; “they are all around
us, eager for attention, eager for affection” (10). Tituba thus finds herself in

34 Uma Narayan, “Essence of Culture and a Sense of History: A Feminist Critique

an animistic world free from the hierarchies and the dichotomies of male reason, living on the edge of a swamp where nobody ever goes because the land is useless for profit (11). This intimate connection with nature and the supernatural is only a first step in Condé’s feminist engagement with Puritan dogmatism. In contrast with its masculinist perception of the forest as the wild, feminized space that needs to be penetrated and conquered, Tituba embraces an egalitarian cosmos of natural freedom and bonding that heals the wounds of white, male culture on the black psyche. “I was born to heal, not frighten,” Tituba responds to the initial fear some slaves felt when seeing her for the first time, after which she begins visiting their cabins to cure the sick and console the dying (12).

To be sure, Condé’s critical attitude toward the Puritan establishment should not be taken as a revisionist attempt to remap a divisive American past, which would only fortify the same boundaries her narrative seeks to negotiate. On the contrary, the Caribbean author conforms to the spirit of Tituba’s historical time by representing the heroine as the “witch” of the late seventeenth-century Americas who, nevertheless, finally has the chance to speak her story. Tituba’s erotic awakening exemplifies Condé’s approach. Just as the repressed society of New England lived in fear of nature as the space where female sexuality is let loose, Tituba discovers her female nature in her cabin where body and nature now become one: “I took off my clothes, lay down, and let my hand stray over my body…. As I neared my pudenda, it seemed that it was no longer me but John Indian who was caressing me. Out of the depths of my body gushed a pungent
tidal wave that flooded my thighs. I could hear myself moan in the night” (15). It is with the same defiance of the Puritan dogmatism that Condé narrates Tituba’s flirtation with John Indian too; in accordance with Puritan notions of a black devil lurking in the forest to seduce women into lechery, Tituba meets dark John Indian and rests her imagination on a specific part of his body: “I knew all too well where his main asset lay and I dared not look below the jute cord that held up his short, tight-fitting konoko trousers to the huge bump of his penis” (19). These are only the first instances of Tituba’s erotic language and of her persistent, perhaps even provocative references to John Indian’s sexual potency, which Condé describes by defiantly resorting to the stereotypes of the time. Just as with Tituba’s hypersexuality and its prejudiced connotations of black womanhood, John Indian rises to the standard of animal sexuality that accompanied black manhood too: “Come, my little wild mare, let me tame you,” John Indian addresses Tituba in their first sexual encounter, as if he were a stud horse (23).

What lies deeper, though, in Condé’s use of sexual language and her identification of black sexuality with animal instincts is not a critique of the Puritan establishment as an end in itself but the very capacity of the black body to feel pleasure in a manner that both black men and women were

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36 A good example of Puritan notions of female sexuality as a sign of intercourse with the devil is their practice of examining the body of a suspected witch in search of the “Devil’s mark” or the “witches’ teat.” Any simple dermatological sign, which more often than not was to be ‘discovered’ on a woman’s breasts or around her vagina, was believed to be the spot from where animals sucked on the witch’s body and where the devil signed his compact (Karlsen 12-13).
denied centuries long. According to black feminist critic Patricia Collins, apart from the taxonomy of black people with animals in the Great Chain of Being, the particular reason why black sexuality became synonymous with animal drives is because animals lack the intellect to develop erotic relationships, the capacity to deeply share lasting feelings and emotions.\(^{37}\)

Condé thus foregrounds an erotic Tituba in order to grant her with the power to claim possession of her sensual black body, in a manner that Lorde would have praised as “the open and fearless” capacity of the black woman for feeling and joy.\(^{38}\) Equally important, by drawing infinite pleasure from all her four male companions throughout the novel, Tituba asserts her erotic autonomy as a medium of self-dominance and authority not simply in the pages of fiction but over the historical text as well. In black feminist critic M. Jacqui Alexander’s conception of the term, “women’s sexual agency, our sexual and our erotic autonomy… pose[s] a challenge to the ideological anchor of an originary nuclear family, a source of legitimation for the state… given the putative impulse of this eroticism to corrupt, and corrupt completely.”\(^{39}\) In these terms, Tituba’s eroticism does not contain itself within black Caribbean sexual politics only but, as I suggest below, will exceed racial classifications to encompass a broader


\(^{38}\) Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 56.

American womanhood, inclusive of Puritan women, in the very founding and repressive times of the new nation’s construction.

When Tituba meets Samuel Parris’s wife, Elizabeth, on the boat to Salem, they briefly establish only another feminine, transracial relationship of solidarity and friendship in the novel, during which Tituba uses her healing powers to console Elizabeth for her suffering. “Over twenty physicians have come to my bedside and none has found the cause of my illness. All I know is that my life is a martyrdom,” Elizabeth says concerning the consequences of a sterile, Puritan dogmatism for a white female American soul (I, Tituba 38). Just as black women were either denied or forced to suppress their erotic impulses, white women across the Americas found themselves restricted within an anti-erotic society that conceived sexual intercourse as an undesirable but necessary means for procreation only, strictly within the confines of marriage and certainly between heterosexual couples (Clarke 192). “If you only knew! He takes me without removing either his clothes or mine,” Elizabeth reveals her closeted sexuality to Tituba, “so hurried is he to finish with the hateful act” (I, Tituba 42). So impressive a confession from a Puritan, white mistress to her black slave denotes a common heritage of erotic suppression among American women that Condé builds upon, but importantly it comes after Elizabeth realizes the potential of eros as an act of empowerment against oppressive notions and attitudes. Upon hearing of the Puritan demands on her everyday life, a terrified Tituba seeks comfort in John Indian, yet as their “hands were searching each other’s bodies,” a furious Samuel Parris
breaks in to inform them against black sexuality in the Puritan American North: “I know that the color of your skin is the sign of your damnation, but as long as you are under my roof you will behave as Christians. Come and say your prayers” (41). Tituba daringly refuses to confess her daily sins only to receive the pastor’s strikes, when in a rare moment of feminine bonding Elizabeth “regained her strength, sat up, and said in a rage: Samuel, you have no right…. He struck her in turn. She too bled. This blood sealed our alliance” (41). Against the racial, dogmatic and racist division between black and white women in the ‘enlightened’ world, Condé thus underlines the fundamental similarity among them, (menstrual) blood, the essential element of female bodily nature that defies established rules. Elizabeth and Tituba’s union is doomed to dissolve due to male greed when the witch-hunt hysteria breaks out, presumably a miscalculated result of a dispute over land ownership, but what triumphs over reason, even shortly, is the capacity of eros to heal the wounds of the past and perform real change among women, as Lorde remarks above.40

40 The exact causes of the girls’ behavior that instigated the witch-hunt will probably never be established, but among the numerous valid approaches found in historical scholarship I share Hill’s insightful conclusions that he draws from “The Salem Village Book of Record” (1672-1697) at Danvers Archival Center. Accordingly, the Putnams, who played a leading part together with Samuel Parris in escalating the hysteria, felt their status diminishing after three generations of ‘visible sainthood,’ due to the arrival of prosperous newcomers, such as the Nurses. The latter actively disputed the Putnams’ leadership in the Village and their rights to land ownership in the disputed area between Salem Village and Ipswich. A powerful church authority at Salem Village that would continue to assert the Putnams’ sainthood and right to land titles appears to be a substantial motivation for the spread of religious fear in the region (The Salem Witch Trials Reader 46-53).

See the confession of Ann Putnam, the true prime instigator of the events, if any, twelve years later, in The Salem Witch Trials Reader, 108.
Tituba’s revolutionary image as the defiant Caribbean woman who draws strength from her native environment and stands against her oppressors has proved useful to a large number of critics who read in Tituba only another postcolonial heroine of feminist literature. For instance, in the afterword of the novel’s English edition noted critic Ann Scarboro builds a hagiography of Tituba whose “kindness” sharply contrasts with the Puritans’ “bigotry, insensitivity, and sexism,” although she moderates her admiration by specifying that “the person Condé creates really is too good to be true.”  

This tendency toward the idealization of historical female figures emerged from second-wave feminist movements that sought to document the injustices inflicted on women all along, a politics, however, that once it was applied to women of color, deflected to what Sara Suleri characterizes as “an iconicity” of women that never actually existed. The postcolonial feminist critic explains that “the coupling of postcolonial with woman… almost inevitably leads to the simplicities that underlie unthinking celebrations of oppression, elevating the racially female voice into a metaphor for ‘the good,’” and she calls for attention to “historical specificity” as a precaution against re-essentializing these figures in the reverse. In this light, what I suggest is that Condé’s novel should be read primarily within the

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43 Ibid., 758-59.
problematics of Caribbean female history, where the intersectionality between gender and heritage leads to a much more complex negotiation of female experience in the past than in postcolonial narratives. Central to this politics of historical narration, as it appears in Condé, is a discourse of feminist creolization that negates fixed historical identities and roles for a representation of relation among women, free from prescribed norms or clichés. Contingent on shifting historical circumstances, this relation is structured both on the Caribbean slave’s sympathy for and opposition to the mistress’s sanitized status, what Caribbean feminist critic Carole Boyce Davies more generally described as the “critical relationality” among black women “negotiating, articulating and interrogating simultaneously a variety of resistant discourses.”

Indeed, we have seen that both Abena and Tituba established a unique relationship of feminine bonding and solidarity with their white mistresses, as thousands other real-life young black and white women of their age and status may have done in the past, but things could evolve differently too; Condé’s Tituba may not be “too good to be true,” as Scarboro believes. When Tituba early in the novel decides to abandon her freedom in order to live with John Indian, and even though it means her willful enslavement, she moves into the premises of Goodwife Susanna Endicott, John Indian’s old mistress. “She stared at me as if I were an object of disgust,” Tituba complains, in what marks the beginning of a relationship based on mutual hatred with a bitter end (21). As one day

Tituba enters the parlor, she meets with the scornful eyes of the mistress’s female friends, and the huge gap separating the two feminine worlds strikes Tituba full-force:

You would think I wasn’t standing there at the threshold of the room. They were talking about me and yet ignoring me. They were striking me off the map of human beings. I was nonbeing. Invisible…. Tituba only existed insofar as these women let her exist. It was atrocious. Tituba became ugly, coarse, and inferior because they willed her so. (24)

Growing up in her natural cosmos, Tituba suddenly comes to the realization of the social construction of black womanhood as the repulsive opposite of white femininity and the inherently debased norm of female values. As historian Hilary Beckles shows, by late seventeenth century, when colonial profits had been sustained long enough for the patriarchal structures to relocate firmly in the New World, white womanhood had been defined by the standards of endemic fragility, moral chastity, sexual – and thus racial – purity, self-denial, and respectability that altogether established her figure as the bedrock of the civilized world.45 By definition, then, black womanhood came to epitomize all the invented attributes of the tropical zone; insatiable in her desires, devoid of moral restraint, but rich in sexual drives, she was the constant threat against innocent white males and their vision of establishing a pious society, while her physical strength and ability to survive in the tropics further proved her natural

incapacity to rise to the demands of domesticity. Besides, the black woman could not possibly match the Greek ideal of beauty, whereas the Christian doctrine had long attested to her close ties with the devil.\textsuperscript{46} “She has eyes that turn your blood cold,” the mistress’s female visitors murmur, “the eyes of a witch. Susanna Endicott, do be careful” (\textit{I, Tituba} 24-25). Ironically, Condé will prove the white ladies right; upon realizing that Endicott plans to accuse her of witchcraft, to be punished by burning in the square alive, Tituba decides to meet the expectations of her accusers and rise to her malevolent role: “There was not room enough in this world for Susanna Endicott and me. One of us had to go and it wasn’t going to be me” (28), Tituba thinks before she calls the spirits to her assistance: “I want Susanna Endicott to die!” (30). Indeed, as a result of Tituba’s evil magic, the mistress will soon die in horrible pain and thereby meet the same fate as other slaveholders who died of their slaves’ poison in the New World.\textsuperscript{47}

Tituba’s dreadful revenge on Endicott is a decisive moment in the novel that allows a crucial insight into Condé’s Caribbean feminist agenda, the notion of a \textit{relation} among women that is structured on the accountability of both gender \textit{and} heritage discourse in the Americas. Abena’s solidarity with her white mistress – and Tituba’s later on with Elizabeth – coexists in the same time and space with Tituba’s murder of

\begin{marginnote}[\textsuperscript{46}]{Barbara Bush, \textit{Slave Women in Caribbean Society, 1650-1838} (Kingston: Heinemann, 1990), 12-15.}


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Endicott, exemplifying the irreducible complexity of female history in the hemisphere and, subsequently, the fundamental need for (historical) specificity in feminist discourses. Condé thus firmly grounds Tituba (and the Caribbean woman) in the realm of the historical, first by avoiding the cliché of the heroine’s idealization as the benevolent martyr of her people, which no person ever truly was, and then by capturing the history of white female agency with American slavery too. As Caribbeanist historian Hilary Beckles explains, “the white woman, in both her roles as wife and mother in the slave-owning household, and as principal slave-owner in her own right, did not enter the slave system as a marginalized outsider to masculine power, but as a critical co-creator and collaborator.”

This challenging view of American women’s history was first suggested in the early 1980s by belligerent black U.S. feminist critic bell hooks, who castigated white women as slavery’s “most immediate beneficiaries,” but it is only relatively recently that scholars have discovered in Caribbean feminist writings similar concerns with the obscure relationship among American women in the past.

In the hemispheric context of early American female sexuality, hardly could there be a better couple to discuss these problematics than Tituba and Hester Prynne, Nathaniel

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49 bell hooks, Ain’t I A Woman? Black Women and Feminism (Boston: South End, 1981), 153

Hawthorne’s nineteenth-century fictional heroine who appears anachronistically in Condé’s narrative as well.

After Tituba narrates the Salem events by faithfully reproducing the recorded details of the girls’ peculiar behavior and her own imprisonment, she finds herself in the same cell as Hester, who is accused of adultery and similarly waits for her trial. The introductions reveal the feminist context of their interaction but importantly Hester’s paternalistic stance toward her black Caribbean cellmate as well:

T. “Mistress…”
H. “Don’t call me mistress.”
T. “What shall I call you then?”
H. “By my name: Hester. And what’s yours?”
T. “Tituba.”
H. “Tituba?” She repeated it with delight. “Who gave it to you?”
T. “My father gave it to me when I was born.”
H. “Your father?” Her lip curled up in irritation. “You accepted the name a man gave you?”
T. … “Isn’t it the same for every woman? First her father’s name, then her husband’s?”
H. “I was hoping,” she said musingly, “that at least some societies were an exception to this law. Yours, for example!”
T. It was my turn to muse. “Perhaps in Africa where we come from it was like that. But we know nothing about Africa
anymore and it no longer has any meaning for us.” (I, Tituba 95-96)

This dialogue is a first indication of what literary critic Christopher Breu concisely describes as Hester’s “patronizing authority, both as a historical character and as a metonymic representative of the current canonical status of Hawthorne’s text.”

But I wish to elaborate more on this unique meeting between a white U.S. American and a black Caribbean woman, since a delineation of what I read as Hester’s diachronic white feminist agenda would point to some deeper implications of American womanhood on which Condé draws. For instance, we should notice that in her denunciation of the title “mistress” Hester reveals her intentions to approach the black woman in a fashion similar to that of female abolitionists of her time in mid-nineteenth century U.S. America, yet her “delight” disappears upon hearing Tituba’s response on her name-giving. From the start, then, I suggest that what emerges from Hester’s frame of mind is an exclusive focus on Tituba’s female gender at the same time that Tituba’s heritage is rapidly drawn out of the picture. White female abolitionists were heavily invested in the moral reformation of a society where the dehumanizing institution of slavery could not possibly be sustained, and many a story of white feminine solidarity with the black female slave would occupy their meetings. Yet by

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no means would that female bonding signify a change in racial hierarchy; as bell hooks argues, the vast majority of both male and female abolitionists, "though vehement in their antislavery protest, were totally opposed to granting social equality to black people." Hester’s excitement over Tituba’s name further resembles the romantic manner by which abolitionists propagated the abolition of slavery, if not their exotic outlook on black culture, attitudes that both would disappear after Emancipation and especially after voting rights were first given to black men instead of white women, for that matter. But it is in Hester’s reaction to Tituba’s name-giving that the chasm separating the two women becomes explicit; Hester uncritically concentrates on the gendered aspect of Tituba’s and shows complete indifference as to the problematic heritage of black fatherhood in a slave family. The scene becomes highly ironic, if we recollect that Tituba is not the child of Yao but of a white sailor who raped her mother aboard the ship of the Middle Passage. By reminding Hester that black people in the Americas no longer have connections with Africa, Tituba tries to draw her attention to the heritage of slavery but to no avail; Hester will remain as religiously committed to a color-blind western-feminist idealism as abolitionists were to Emancipation and as equally dogmatic in her beliefs as the Puritan establishment against which she will advocate.

Hester’s solipsistic understanding of American womanhood becomes more apparent in her radical feminist understanding of male-to-female

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relationships through a rhetoric of division that further betrays her ahistorical viewpoint. After she offers her unconditional support to Tituba by proclaiming herself the sole likely person to assist her in their mutual struggle, Hester narrates her life story – which largely corresponds to Hawthorne’s narrative – through venomous references to both her husband and her lover by drawing a map of strict gender dichotomies with which she tries to influence Tituba. “Don’t talk to me about your wretched husband,” an irritated Hester responds to Tituba’s mention of John Indian; “he’s not better than mine. Shouldn’t he be here to share your sorrow? Life is too kind to men, whatever their color” (100). Hester essentially tries to build a female relationship based on a common experience of victimization and shared oppression as the foundation for her concept of feminism into which she hopes to draw Tituba. In this way, however, she remains ignorant of Tituba’s enactment of erotic autonomy, an understanding of which would require the white feminist to include the notion of heritage in her rhetoric and subsequently to reshape her view of black people’s victimization as a given. It is interesting that her spirited narration resembles the same politics of second-wave feminism that was developed in the 1970s, with its advocates aspiring to a notion of ecumenical sisterhood that was nevertheless largely rejected by third-world women exactly because of its disregard of ethnic and racial issues. Indeed, Tituba’s reception of Hester’s words will move along a similar, hesitant line; when Hester asks her to tell her unborn baby a story, Tituba begins to narrate her own life in a covert form, until she recalls a point that her
mother’s spirit made when Tituba first met John Indian: “Can’t we ever keep our daughters away from men?” (99). An enthusiastic Hester suddenly understands this to be Tituba’s real story and urges her to go on. “But something kept me from telling her,” Tituba says and decides to stop, since gender distinctions in the black Americas cannot possibly be understood without first acknowledging their irreducible connection to the heritage of slavery.

Hester does not act differently in her guidance of Tituba on how to defend herself in court either; just as second-wave feminists self-righteously took the responsibility to vindicate the sufferings of colored women in history writing, Hester’s instructions match the historical record of Tituba’s confession, at least as we know it so far:

- Make them scared, Tituba! Give them their money’s worth!
- Describe him [Satan] as a billy goat with an eagle’s beak for a nose, a body covered in long black hair…. Let them tremble, let them quake and swoon…. Tell them about the witches’ meetings, where they all arrive on broomsticks, their jaws dripping with anticipation at the thought of a feast of fetus and newly born babies served with many a mug of fresh blood…. Give names, give names! (99-100)

Although Tituba complies, her reaction to Hester abounds with both historiographical and feminist connotations as to Condé’s frame of mind: “Now look, Hester, all this is ridiculous” (100). So it undeniably is, and yet it is this figment of wild imagination that constitutes not simply the
centerpiece on which Tituba was convicted on trial as an evil “witch” but importantly the “scientific” evidence that professional historiography used to draw a similar conclusion too.\(^5\) If black Caribbean history does not exist because it fails to meet the empirical criteria of western historiography, Condé exposes the fictitious nature of archival documentation by ironically invoking common (western) sense, the basis on which the history of the Salem witch trials stands.\(^4\) Equally ironic is Condé with respect to second-wave feminism; Hester is all too eager to offer her help, but nowhere does her authorship of Tituba's defense show any concern about the Caribbean woman's heritage of spirituality that explains her involvement in the events – her alleged preparation of a witch cake and/or divination practices with an egg. On the contrary, Hester's plot is infused with her own radical politics of gender-hatred against men that cannot effect any improvement in Tituba's case. “We see how Western feminists alone become the true ‘subjects’ of this counterhistory,” postcolonial feminist critic Chandra Mohanty attests, as if with an eye to Hester's account, whereas “Third

\(^5\) See the transcripts of Tituba's confession in Elaine Breslaw's seminal *Tituba, Reluctant Witch of Salem*, 188-97. Breslaw is the first (and so far single) professional historian to attempt an account of Tituba's full life, from her birth presumably in Guiana to the loss of her traces after the Salem trials.

\(^4\) It needs to be underlined, though, that Breslaw's reading of Tituba's confession as “an effective manipulation of their [Puritans'] deepest fears” is nowadays the dominant view on Salem's history (117). A similar point was raised a bit earlier by noted historian Bernard Rosenthal in *Salem Story* too (24). Both books were published in the 1990s, whereas Condé's first, francophone edition came out in 1986.
World women... never rise above the debilitating generality of their ‘object’ status.”

Condé’s detachment from western feminist politics becomes even more explicit in the last part of the two women’s interaction where Tituba tactfully rejects Hester’s vision of sisterhood. In a dialogue that reveals the distance separating the two feminine worlds, Hester presents her radical agenda in full view only to meet with Tituba’s difference of experience:

H. “I’d like to write a book, but alas, women don’t write books. Only men bore us with their prose. I make an exception for certain poets. Have you read Milton, Tituba? Oh, I forgot you don’t know how to read.... Yes, I’d like to write a book where I’d describe a model society governed and run by women! We would give our names to our children, we would raise them alone....”

T. I interrupted her, poking fun: “We couldn’t make them alone, even so!”

H. “Alas, no,” she said sadly. “Those abominable brutes would have to share in a fleeting moment.”

T. “Not too short a moment,” I teased. “I like to take my time.” She ended up laughing and drew me closer to her.

H. “You are too fond of love, Tituba! I’ll never make a feminist out of you!”

T. “A feminist? What’s that?” (I, Tituba 101)

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Literary critics have commented on the passage as indicative of the tensions between western and postcolonial women, but to add to the discussion I propose that we pay attention to the very specifics of this apparent discord, namely Tituba’s *erotic* capacity as this has been described in this study so far. Tituba’s interruptions in Hester’s attempted monologue come right after Hester’s gender-separatist views, and Tituba’s replies focus exclusively on the heightened moments of love-making, while her ironic ignorance of the term “feminism” comes in response to Hester’s recognition of love as the source of Tituba’s independent spirit. To a further extent, Hester’s articulation of her vision betrays her intention to replicate male society in reverse, whether through their emphasis on reason by writing books, or their exclusion of female participation from governance, their name-giving to the children, even their habits of sexual intercourse. But these are all *gender*-exclusive aspects toward which Tituba has a completely different attitude that springs from her history; books and reason are of no use to her. Since knowledge comes from the spirits and the senses, her animistic world does not need any civil authority to govern because all elements of nature coexist harmoniously with each other. Moreover, name-giving and the responsibility of raising the children are the last issues to worry about when all members of the black family have to struggle for their survival in slavery. Besides, she was named by her beloved Yao and raised by Mama Yaya – and, as for love-making, it is a joyful experience that proves as the very source of her empowerment. In the *erotic autonomy* that she draws both from her
gender and heritage experiences Tituba thus already enjoys a state-of-being that Hester can only envision.

Yet by no means should the two women’s relationship be understood in terms of a radical racial opposition that simply reaffirms the stereotypical black and white binaries of the past. On the contrary, I propose that erotic autonomy serves as the ground on which Condé chooses to seal Hester and Tituba’s solidarity and friendship as well. Following her confession, Tituba returns to prison and her first thought is to join Hester in the same cell, “for there is not a kinder soul on this earth,” when the constable informs her of the news: “[B]y now she’s damned because she hanged herself in her cell” (111). Hester’s suicide is redolent with meaning; for in claiming possession of her body and committing suicide, she not only launches her successful revolution against a misogynist world, but importantly she unites with Tituba in a shared sisterhood of “damnation” too free from the confines of both male and racist reason. Hester now becomes part of Tituba’s heritage and joins the world of spirits, whereupon a devastated Tituba has a visit:

That night Hester lay down beside me, as she did sometimes. I laid my head on the quiet water lily of her cheek and held her tight. Surprisingly, a feeling of pleasure slowly flooded over me. Can you feel pleasure from hugging a body similar to your own? For me, pleasure had always been in the shape of another body whose hollows fitted my curves and whose swellings nestled in
the tender flatlands of my flesh. Was Hester showing me
another kind of bodily pleasure? (122)

Through a language that abounds with images of female body and nature
in perfect harmony with each other, Tituba describes her sexual
intercourse with Hester as a moment of intense feeling to which this time
she warmly responds. No longer does Hester aspire to guide Tituba in a
politics of social, solipsistic norms; instead, Hester now instructs Tituba to
the path of lesbian eros, the highest and most intense union two female
bodies can achieve, free from boundaries of whatever sort. As the two
naked women become one, Condé foregrounds the essential similarity
among women in the Americas, their feminine nature, and their capacity
for feeling and love of each other. For only after women become
autonomous and free from their imposed conventions, Condé implies,
whether these be racial, ethnic, or gender ones, can they achieve a
sisterhood that can truly bring change.

It is along these lines of an autonomous body-politics that the
traumatic heritage of American motherhood strikes full force. “I often think
of Hester’s child and of my own,” Tituba declares, “[t]hose unborn children.
It was for their own good we denied them the light of day” (113). Tituba
recollects her departed friend lamenting the tragedy of abortion and/or
infanticide that the two women have now authored in the pages of literary
history. Their parallel line of reasoning in their decision to kill their children,
even though within a different context and at separate times in the novel,
foregrounds Condé’s emphasis on erotic autonomy and feeling as the
fountainheads of a common motherhood in the Americas. “It was shortly afterward [my arrival to Boston] that I realized I was pregnant and I decided to kill the child” (49), Tituba informs the reader in a single, emotionless short sentence, only to speak the tragic, unrecorded stories of countless black women in slavery through an outburst a few lines ahead:

There is no happiness in motherhood for a slave. It is little more than the expulsion of an innocent baby, who will have no chance to change its fate, into a world of slavery and abjection. Throughout my childhood I had seen slaves kill their babies by sticking a long thorn into the still viscous-like egg of their heads, by cutting the umbilical cord with a poison blade, or else by abandoning them at night in a place frequented by angry spirits. Throughout my childhood I had heard slaves exchanging formulas for portions, baths, and injections that sterilize the womb forever and turn it into a tomb lined with a scarlet shroud. (50)

In recent decades scholars have been trying to document the extent of abortion practices among black slaves, and a general consensus now exists that low fertility rates – especially in the Caribbean – must have been partly but significantly a result of this heroic means of resistance. Drawing on a multitude of anthropological sources, feminist historian Barbara Bush has in fact brought attention to an impressive variety of abortive substances and techniques, similar to those Tituba describes, that were secretly shared among female slaves in their attempt to
terminate pregnancy, often by permanently sterilizing themselves.\textsuperscript{56} Such acts of unimaginable courage and inner strength held vital implications both for the cruel establishment and for black womanhood itself. On the one hand, female slaves would refuse to play their imposed role as profit makers for a system of chattel slavery that treated them as nothing more than a reproductive force, given that each child born to a slave followed the legal status of his/her mother. But just as important, abortion and infanticide would become the means for black women to rise against what Hilary Beckles acutely describes as their defeminization too, all those discursive characteristics that portrayed them as the opposite of (white) femininity in the New World and which denied them the right to motherhood as well.\textsuperscript{57} Choosing autonomy for their bodies, killing their children, and suffering this inner torment for a lifetime, black women would thus declare to their inhuman captors their very capacity for feeling and motherhood, exactly what was denied to them all along. Many a time in the novel Tituba will think of her unborn child with unbearable pain, even by singing a lament not only for her own but Hester’s baby as well (\textit{I, Tituba}, 55 and 113).

In this striking departure from Hawthorne’s story, Condé then builds on a common heritage of American motherhood robbed of its capacity for eros and maternal love by a masculinist society that has closed the white

\textsuperscript{56} Barbara Bush, \textit{Slave Women}, 137-42. For a complete view on slave motherhood, childbirth and infant death, as well as other reasons for the low fertility rate among slaves, such as the adverse sex ration, see 120-50.

\textsuperscript{57} Hilary Beckles, “Perfect Property,” 152.
women in upon a passive, procreative role. Just as with Walcott’s Helen, who emerges in the end proud in her defiance of objectification, white women in Condé’s work abandon their solipsistic concern with dogmatism and politics and foreground their closeted experiences to meet with black women on similar grounds of mistreatment; just as Abena and her mistress shared their stories of sexual violence early on, and just as Elizabeth defied racial and religious boundaries by confessing her repressed sexuality to Tituba, Hester moves beyond expectations by revealing her own shocking secret when narrating her life-story to her black cellmate;

[A]t sixteen I was married to a minister, a friend of the family who had laid to rest three wives and five children. His breath was so awful that I was lucky enough to faint as soon as he leaned over me. He revolted me and yet he gave me four children that the good Lord called to him, thank God, for I would have found it impossible to love the offspring of a man I hated. I’ll let you in on a secret, Tituba. The number of potions, concoctions, purges, and laxatives I took during my pregnancies helped me to arrive at this fortunate conclusion.

(97)

No historical evidence has so far been found that could illuminate Condé’s indication of secretive abortive practices among the Puritans, but bearing in mind Hester’s historically loaded name and her role in the novel one can argue that her character speaks for the multitude of white women across
centuries who suffered the alienation of their maternal instincts in the confines of the domestic Americas. As literary critic Mary Dukats succinctly argues in her study on the novel, “the ideal of the ‘good mother’ and the notion of motherhood as duty... have not only denied women access to other ways of experiencing womanhood but have, as well, fantasized an entirely dependent mother, devoid of any independent agency.”58 By granting Hester full autonomy of her body, even allowing her to hang herself while once again being pregnant, Condé invests the white female American with the same politics of body repossession as with her black sister, in what evolves into a common defiance, perhaps provocation too, against fixed roles and standards of feminine behavior.

The various stages in the relationship between Tituba and Hester add significantly to the puzzle of Condé’s Caribbean feminist politics and the history of American womanhood that she narrates. To be sure, Condé has repeatedly expressed her dislike for labels of any sort, and her response during an interview with Francoise Pfaff reveals some cautiousness in her treatment of ‘feminism’ too: “FP. Are you a feminist? MC. I have been asked this question a hundred times, and I don’t know what it means exactly, so I must not be a feminist. If you ask people in the United States, they probably will tell you I am not.”59 Literary critic Dawn


Fulton has recently argued that Condé’s reply indicates her dissatisfaction with ‘feminism’ as a western notion to which colored women are invited to unconditionally apply. I would specify that Condé’s hesitancy to embrace the term – through a direct reference to the United States – springs from the historical indeterminacy of black and white female relationships in the Americas and the complexity that has characterized feminist discourse in the hemisphere for decades, as seen through Hester and Tituba’s story. Within the Caribbean in particular the problematics of gender intersectionality with a number of factors, such as race, ethnicity, class, and so on, appear even more poignantly, given the imperial past and the neocolonial present of western structures that maintain suspicion against the white woman for her distinct, elevated status. What emerges in Condé after all is a vision of sisterhood as “a process of becoming,” in bell hook’s words as if echoing Glissant, a long and cross-cultural dialogue founded on the need for erotic autonomy as the first step for American women to make in order to move toward an understanding of their common and complex stories. Writes Audre Lorde, “the very word erotic

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61 For instance, Indian feminist critic Rawwida Baksh-Sooden criticizes her Caribbean colleagues for their exclusivist Afro-centrist focus that marginalizes Indian, Chinese and white feminist voices in the region. As she claims, “The experience of the white woman has... been left out, deliberately I think, because the discourse has emerged from the viewpoint of people who have been brutally enslaved by Europeans. The white woman is hence perceived as belonging to the oppressor race, class, and culture...” (79). See “Issues of Difference in Contemporary Caribbean Feminism,” *Feminist Review* 79 no.1 (1998): 74-85.

comes from the Greek word *eros,*" the personification of love in all its
aspects – born of Chaos, and personifying creative power and harmony."^63
This could be perhaps the proper epigraph for Tituba’s story, the notorious
black witch of Salem born out of a chaos of cultural and gender
separatism to tell the story of American women in harmony with their
senses and each other. May her spell this time truly work.

^63 Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider,* 55.
"The central role of women in liberation struggles... has been largely obscured," argued Maryse Condé in the late 1970s, a little before her feminist historiographical project on Tituba follows.1 "Frequently living on the plantation as cook, nursemaid, or washerwoman," Condé asserted, "it was often she who was responsible for the mass poisoning of masters and their families, for the setting of terrifying fires, for frequent marronage [escape]."2 Condé’s early call for attention to female marronage coincided with the re-heightened discussion on the figure of the Maroon as the quintessential, masculine hero of the Caribbean, what Glissant described as “the [missing] tutelary hero” in the history of the archipelago.3 With a first successful attempt for the deification of the Maroon figure having taken place during the times of the (masculinist) Negritude movement, the rise of feminist rhetoric in the Caribbean brought to light the decades-old systematic silence of female marronage in the pages of literary and professional history on the region. Indeed, the identification of the heroic (male) Maroon with notions of resistance, uninhibited masculinity, and


2 Ibid.

3 Edouard Glissant, Caribbean Discourse, 87.
open space, critic A. James Arnold observes, sharply contrasted with the accomodationist and feminized space of the plantation and the plains.\footnote{James Arnold, “The Erotics of Colonialism in Contemporary French West Indian Literary Culture,” \textit{Sisyphus and Eldorado: Magical and Other Realisms in Caribbean Literature}, ed. Timothy J. Reiss (Trenton: Africa, 2002), 173.}
The narration of the decisive event in eighteenth century Jamaica, the signing of the peace treaty between the Maroons and the British in 1739, by noted Caribbeanist Selwyn R. Cudjoe offers a case in point; published in 1980, Cudjoe’s account centers on the male protagonists of the event, completely ignoring the formidable presence of legendary Maroon heroine Queen Nanny in the development of the negotiations.\footnote{Selwyn Cudjoe, \textit{Resistance and Caribbean Literature} (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1980), 10.} Only a year later, African American anthropologists Kenneth Bilby and Filomina Steady would break ground by introducing the essentials of female marronage to western academicians. “Although the foregoing stories about Nanny are examples of legend and should not be seen as actual history, there is no doubt that an important personage named Nanny really existed,” the two feminists boldly concluded in their massively cited essay, which fueled the discussion on the demarcation between history and folklore in the New World.\footnote{Kenneth Bilby and Filomina Steady, “Black Women and Survival: A Maroon Case,” \textit{The Black Woman Cross-Culturally}, ed. Filomina Chioma Steady (Cambridge: Schenkman, 1981), 459.}

If Nanny’s figure remained shunned by historians in the continental North, Michelle Cliff’s involvement with Nanny’s legends through the
pages of her feminist fiction would bring Nanny in the spotlight of critical and general public interest for the decades to come. “She is the Jamaican Sycorax. The extent to which you can believe in the powers of Nanny, that they are literal examples of her Africanness and strength,” Cliff argued revealing her politics in mind, “represents the extent to which you have decolonized your mind.” Nanny’s history as presented in the pages of Abeng (1984) was Cliff’s first endeavor in Caribbean feminist historiography, followed some years later by the recuperation of another legendary female figure in the Americas, Mary Ellen Pleasant, and her disputed yet decisive role in John Brown’s raid at Harper’s Ferry in Free Enterprise (1993). “I can’t stand the idea of the novel here, the history there, the biography there. I can’t see why these things can’t be mixed up. We have to bring our imagination to our history, because so much has been lost,” claimed Cliff in an interview, as if capturing in just three lines the very spirit of creolized histories in the Americas.8

Cliff’s novels indisputably constitute a major contribution in the reconstitution of women’s presence in major historical events in the Americas, yet I wish to draw attention to the very choice of her heroines, namely her real-life revolutionary figures that were actively involved in anticolonial and antislavery struggles and whose very presence has been, until recently, silenced in the official record. Following an introduction to


Maroon culture that I portray as fundamentally creolized, that is, a space of hemispheric interpenetration and influence, I propose that Cliff participates in a similar creative politics that characterizes Condé’s fictional historiographic attempts as well: an unavoidably imaginary representation of historical female figures, who are actively engaged in resistance, and infused with feminist undertones that aim to challenge and defy; Abeng is structured on the desire for homoerotic feeling, dismissed in the Caribbean even today, whereas Free Enterprise concentrates on the disturbing issue of black entrepreneurship and compliance with capitalist demands during slavery. Gender and heritage in the Americas appear then interdependent in a Glissantian relation of irreducible particularities that give rise to a quilted synthesis, a creolized female history in the Americas; in other words, save the intercultural past these imaginary histories narrate, they both recuperate women’s presence in the past and secure the incommensurability of injustices inflicted on female historical protagonists in the Americas all along, as their revolutions are doomed to failure.

The phenomenon of marronage (escape) and especially women’s participation in acts of resistance serves as the historical background in which Cliff’s enterprises develop. According to Richard Price, the term maroon derives from the Spanish word chimarrón, of an Arawakan (Taiano) Indian root, originally used to describe cattle taking to the hills of Hispaniola (Haiti) and later Amerindian slaves escaping to the island’s dense, mountainous areas that posed a hard task to the hunting Spaniards. From the 1530s onwards, the term mainly referred to runaway
African and/or Creole slaves, alias “Bush Negroes,” who found refuge in the wilderness, until it came to represent all small and big communities of escaped slaves across the Americas, some of which continue to exist in semi-independent form even today. An infinite desire for freedom was the major driving force for countless individuals or whole bands attempting to escape from the bonds of slavery and risking punishment that awaited them in case of arrest. While the consequences of a short absence for a visit to a friend or family member – what was described as petit marronage – were contingent on the goodwill of the master, longer absences, grand marronage, especially those involving the slave’s arrest, elicited responses with horrible punishments: “amputation of a leg, castration, suspension from a hook through the ribs, slow roasting to death” – all sorts of extreme and perverse punishment was employed as a means of intimidation to deter those left behind from pursuing a similar path. So decided the Dutch criminal court in Suriname, in northeastern South America, on the fate of recaptured slaves:

The Negro Joosie shall be hanged from the gibbet by an Iron Hook through his ribs, until dead; his head shall then be severed and displayed on a stake by the riverbank, remaining to be picked over by birds or prey. As for the Negroes Wierrie

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10 Ibid., 9254.
and Manbote, they shall be bound to stake and roasted alive over a slow fire, while being tortured with glowing Tongs. The Negro girls, Lucretia, Ambira, Aga, Gomba, Marie, and Victoria will be tied to a Cross, to be broken alive, and then their heads severed, to be exposed by the riverbank on stakes. The Negro girls Diana and Christina shall be beheaded with an axe, and their heads exposed on poles by the riverbank.¹¹

For the risks were high on both sides, indeed; marronage epitomized a direct challenge to the very foundation of the colonies. Soon Maroons evolved to semi-isolationist and yet robust societies capable of exceptional skill in guerilla warfare, succeeding in both the preservation of their communities against planters (and authorities’) persistent aggression and the renewal of their population by encouraging hesitant plantation slaves and capturing or abducting unwilling ones, especially women. Raids on plantations thus threatened the very locomotive of the New World with collapse; tools, weapons, animals and produce would change hands overnight, parts, if not whole, of plantations would be set on fire, slaves loyal to the master would pay the price for their allegiance with their lives, grand houses and their members were themselves threatened with slaughter, and the same process could repeat again and again in no time.

It was a vicious circle that Price acutely describes as “the ‘chronic plague’ and ‘gangrene’” of the colonial endeavor.\(^\text{12}\)

Inside Maroon communities, African values, traditions, social organization and military tactics, such as names, amulets, weaponry, kinship patterns, rituals, festivities, dances and music, dominated the newly forged societies in a nostalgic, if not vain, attempt by its members to recreate the black continent in their strange new world. These traits have allowed Afrocentrist proponents of creolization, prominent among whom Kamau Brathwaite, to celebrate the transportation of African essence, or \textit{nam}, to the Americas and its survival even today.\(^\text{13}\) At the same time, however, such traits serve as evidence for the other extreme of creolization theoreticians in the Caribbean, the Creolistes, to dismiss the Maroon figure as a semi-barbarian outcast, steriley attached to Africa, and disrespectful to his companions who took on extra burdens by remaining on plantations – the sole cauldron of creolization in the Creolistes’ imagination.\(^\text{14}\) Such a derogatory view is today prominent among the Creole elite around the Caribbean. Many Maroons face open discrimination, become targets of insulting jokes and epithets, such as \textit{macaque} (monkey), and are pushed to hide their origins and identify with

\(^{12}\) Ibid.


the national whole.\textsuperscript{15} It is a story not at all strange in the Americas; rather, it bears striking resemblances to dichotomies occupying the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s and the desire by the elite to suppress the anxieties of the slave past that stained the future.\textsuperscript{16} Like black U.S. Americans in the past, present-day Maroons constitute a living reminder to the Creole elite that the history of slavery and racial terror is ever-present and thus opens fissures in the narrative of uninhibited, color-free progress of the latter. A highly ironic development, if we consider the fact that Maroon camps were from the very start a characteristic site of cultural infiltration and exchange that defied predetermined racial connections and allegiances, in other words sites of creolization. Write the Prices:

\begin{quote}
[Maroons were] the most thoroughly (and earliest fully)
“creolized” of \textit{all} New World communities. For the central creolization process in those maroon societies was inter-African syncretism (which is based on the multiplicity of African cultures and languages involved), combined with less substantial interactional contributions from Europeans, Amerindians, and others.\textsuperscript{17}
\end{quote}


\textsuperscript{17} Richard Price and Sally Price, “Shadowboxing,” 130. To be sure, the heated debate among historians/ethnographers on creolization, which extends to every single detail that concerns the actual process, continues. For instance, Brathwaite (together with the Creolistes, on this point) holds that creolization took
A number of arguments lead to Price’s direction. For one thing, it is impossible to ignore the religious and cultural syncretism between Maroon communities and Amerindians all over the Americas. Notwithstanding Elaine Breslaw’s impressive findings on common divination practices that were described in the previous chapter, Eugene Genovese suggests that, despite mutual suspicion, the two groups frequently forged alliances and fought against the common enemy, and especially in the U.S. South many a black slave found shelter among Native Americas across centuries.\(^{18}\) So did they turn against each other too; native tribes assisted whites in crushing slave rebellions in South Carolina and Louisiana, and some remaining Native American nations were exterminated by black troops.\(^{19}\)

place on the plantation over a period of one to three years since the arrival of the first slaves, whereas for Mintz and Price creolization begins aboard the slave ship. Historian John Thornton, for his part, focused on Africa as the birthplace of creolization by elaborating on the continent’s largely ignored ethnic groups. So particular details move beyond the scope of this dissertation, but for a good overview, see Douglass Chambers, “The Links of a Legacy: Figuring the Slave Trade to Jamaica,” Caribbean Culture: Soundings on Kamau Brathwaite, ed. Annie Paul (Jamaica: The University of West Indies Press, 2002), 287-312; Richard Price, “On the Miracle of Creolization,” Afro-Atlantic Dialogues: Anthropology in the Diaspora, ed. Kevin A. Yelvington (Santa Fe: American Research, 2006), 113-45; and John Thornton Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998).


In 1993, an excavation in the remnants of Nanny Town, Maroons’ sacred site even today in Jamaica, revealed traces of an earlier Amerindian settlement that predated it. See Jenny Sharpe, Ghosts of Slavery: A Literary Archaeology of Black Women’s Lives, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 159. For a deeper analysis on Afro-Indian religiosity and the syncretic origin of Rada and Petro that formed Maroons’ Voodoo beliefs, see Maya Deren’s masterpiece Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti (1953; London: McPherson, 2004), 61-71.

\(^{19}\) Ibid., 71.
What is even more interesting, Afrocentrist Brathwaite himself spends considerable space in an essay on Maroon heritage describing the Morne Negre Maroons on the island of Dominica and the Black Caribs of St. Vincent and the Grenadines, both Maroon communities that were created through a process of mutual interaction between Carib Indians and escaped black slaves.20

To a further extent, as historian Jenny Sharpe shows, Maroons often took the liberty of visiting the marketplace and mingling with town people, since it was impossible for authorities to tell the status of a black person, whether s/he was a loyal slave or not.21 While a considerable degree of isolation and lawlessness, as well as of self-sufficiency and self-reliance, accurately depicts Maroon societies, the fact remains that these groups neither could nor did they ever achieve full capacity in sustaining an autonomous society, distinct from the established world. Ammunition, tools, food and advanced medicine were consistently scarce among a group that was on constant alert and living in adverse landscape and climate. Should we take into account the numerous raids on the plantations and the constant renewal of their communities with new members as well, either by choice or force, then Maroons do emerge as predominantly African American groups, yet in perpetual ethnic and


cultural infiltration through a selective process of adaptation to the New World that involved both “continuity and discontinuity” with Africa.\textsuperscript{22}

Richard Price explains one typical process of how Saramakas, Maroon societies in Suriname, adapted to their new environment by drawing on the thesaurus of African elements that persisted, though dimly, in their memory. The vast majority of runaway slaves were of African birth (at least so in the early decades of marronage) yet of relatively young age and thus uninitiated into the esoteric knowledge of African religiosity.

Given the widespread belief in West and Central Africa in local spirits and deities as originators of all developments in human life, divination was necessary for a meaningful answer once an illness or misfortune hit the Maroon camp. More often than not, the solution lay in a newly discovered deity of the New World that sought satisfaction with the proper ritual that had to be \textit{invented} through trial and error until its spirit was set at ease. And the same process was repeated over and over again throughout the Americas, giving rise to an immensely rich pantheon of \textit{creolized} deities that differed not simply from Africa but from one region to another despite common trends.\textsuperscript{23}

The predominance of African cultural elements among Maroons is not the sole root of their ambivalent reception in the Caribbean, now and in


\textsuperscript{23} Richard Price, \textit{Travels with Tooy}, 294-95. See a fascinating, detailed account of the invention/discovery of a new female god, Saa, who actually presented herself in front of the people to assert her authority in this new setting, in \textit{Travels with Tooy}, 398-99, endnote 2.
the past. Besides, as Kenneth Bilby and Filomina Steady show, the mosaic of African ethnicities which Maroons initially consisted of soon gave place to a Creole majority of fugitive slaves that amplified inner tensions. At the same time that Maroon culture is celebrated for its resourcefulness and resistance in too hostile a world, what it carries heavily in the passage of time is also a legacy of failed promise and betrayal, an ambivalent history of opportunism and compromises with the authorities – in itself another indication of its relational, creolized nature. The characteristic event (repeated many times in the past with different protagonists around the hemisphere) that provides a case study for this dual heritage is the peace treaty between Maroons and the British in Jamaica in 1739. By the late seventeenth century, Windward and Leeward Maroons had established thriving communities in the hills, launching highly successful attacks against the British colonialists and even building their own, independent “towns.” So read the Address of Governor, Council and Assembly of Jamaica to the King, 21 February 1734:

> We are not in a condition to defend ourselves, the terror of them spreads itself everywhere and the ravages and barbarities they commit, have determined several planters to abandon their settlements, the evil is daily increasing and their success has had such influence on our slaves that they are continually deserting to them in great numbers and the insolent behaviour of others gives but too much cause to fear a general defection,

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which without your Majestie’s gracious aid and assistance must render us a prey to them….

On the other hand, Maroons themselves begun facing great difficulties with accommodating the increasing numbers of runaway slaves and the subsequent demands for more food, shelter, and better security. According to historian Mavis Campbell, from the 1660s onwards many fugitive slaves found Maroon hospitality intolerable and quite a few would prefer to return to their plantations than live with open hostility among their supposed benefactors. The resulting peace treaty signed by the two parties after forty years of clashes that had brought the colony to its knees granted freedom and land to Maroons, at the tremendous price, however, of their responsibility to hunt down and surrender new runaway slaves as well as to suppress any new slave rebellion. In the words of Eugene Genovese, “relations between maroons and slaves after promulgation of such treaties became maddeningly ambiguous,” and as Karla Gottlieb in her study on Nanny observes, by such treaties Maroons “were in a sense denying their own past and eradicating their own history by agreeing to


26 Ibid.


28 Eugene Genovese, *From Rebellion to Revolution*, 51-52
counteract the very means by which they had set themselves free."  

Never again would Maroons in Jamaica cherish so extended freedom as they did before, and it was not long before clashes started again, but with significantly less success for the ambiguous rebels.

The specific treaty has been the subject of intense academic scrutiny for an additional reason since nowhere does the name of the leader of Windward Maroons appear in the record. Heroic for her reluctance to sign until the last minute for most scholars,30 dishonorable for not only signing but also returning slaves for (few) others,31 Queen Nanny "epitomizes the true spirit and role of the Caribbean woman in the fight for freedom and dignity," writes sympathetic Caribbeanist Kofi Agorsah.32 Virtually no piece of her biographical information can be historically ascertained, but scholars now agree that she must have been born in Africa, of the Akan ethnic group, an obeah woman, and childless in service of her people in Jamaica who still think of her as their collective mother, not only during her spiritual and military leadership from approximately 1725 to 1740, but in the centuries to come as well. Her

29 Karla Gottlieb, Mother, 34.


32 Kofi Agorsah, “Preface.” Maroon Heritage: Archaeological, Ethnographic and Historical Perspectives (Barbados: Canoe, 1994), xvi.
name is given to towns, rivers, lakes, birds, and the list can be endless. Though it is only four times that we find her name mentioned in the controversial British archives of the time, her existence is now considered beyond dispute. Responding to a governmental request, a number of professors, prominent among them Brathwaite, conducted independent research that verified Nanny was a real historical agent, and thus in 1976 she was proclaimed a National Hero of Jamaica.

It was an official recognition paradigmatic of the politics of creolization at play; Nanny may be almost absent from written documents, but her presence in oral histories, myths, and legends dominates the island’s collective memory serving as a diachronic source of inspiration that breaks the boundaries between professional history and literature in the Americas. In the end, Sharpe summarizes, “the story of Nanny is the story of contending forms of knowledge: written versus oral histories, colonial versus national cultures, institutional versus popular ways of knowing,” and as I show further below, masculinist versus feminist understandings of the past.

The story of Nanny’s deification as the ancestress of her people reveals the hidden dynamics in non-academic accounts of the past as potentially reliable sources that entail historically valid observations. The legend goes that in the beginning Nanny had a sister, Sekesu or variously

34 Kenneth Bilby, *True-Born*, 38-39
named, and the two lived together in slavery until Nanny decided to escape to the mountains and start rebellion. Her sister refused to follow, and from that day on two communities were created, those living free in the mountains and those preferring to remain slaves in the plantations. As an oral testimony taken by a Maroon in 1978 goes, “one sister say him naa fight, for him no like de bloodshed. Well, de other one say him will fight. That’s how de separation come now. You find you get de Maroon different from [those] you da call de ‘outside niega.’”

The specific account narrates the historically real separation between Maroons and plantation slaves and at the same time acknowledges a certain degree of kinship relationship between the two groups that betrays infiltration and exchange.

These are conclusions that have long been drawn in the official, western record based on documentary evidence, and yet those conclusions are no different from the account transmitted orally across centuries among the Maroons. Supplementing one with the other, history merges with legend in a hybrid text to engage the past and, if the specific event serves as an example of the value that oral histories have, such an event also opens up a multitude of possibilities for the thesaurus of stories that remain buried to the western reader in the name of history writing standards.

Such escape from the confines of history is what Glissant envisions when he calls for literature to recuperate the absence of history in the

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37 Ibid., 110-11.
Caribbean. Identifying writing and telling with the revolutionary act of marronage, Glissant celebrates those bold enough to resist the demands of western reason and to engage with and create history in the archipelago, just as the Maroons before them. “Historical marronage intensified over time to exert a creative marronage, whose numerous forms of expression began to form the basis for a continuity,” writes the Martiniquan scholar to stress the importance of storytelling in the region, “which made it no longer possible to consider these literatures as exotic appendages of a French, Spanish or English literary corpus.”

Different in form yet of the same (historical) value with the written source, the Caribbean tale emerges as an essential tool in search of the hemispheric American past, capable of transmitting knowledge and filling in the gaps of an equally demanding archival investigation, especially when the latter is missing or impartial. To be sure, the two types of sources are not different in their inherent prejudices either; just as with the masculinist historiography of the present and the past, “th[e] tendency towards… ‘putting a woman in her place’ seems to dominate the entire Caribbean oral tradition,” Carol Boyce Davies argues in her research on Caribbean proverbs, folktales, and calypso, where women are consistently presented in negative colors.

38 Edouard Glissant, Poetics of Relation, 71.

39 Carol Boyce Davies, “‘Woman Is a Nation…’: Women in the Caribbean Oral Literature,” Out of the Kumbla: Caribbean Women and Literature, eds. Carole Boyce Davies and Elaine Savory Fido (Trenton: Africa, 1990), 165. Davies reads from the Clews-Parsons collection, “Folktale of the Antilles, French and English” such characters as “witch-spouses, gullible wives, dumb wives, unfaithful wives,
different from storytelling, in the sense that both forms of narrating the
past, their authors, their style, and their content, have had to adapt to
changing social circumstances and draw meaning from constantly new
demands. It is what historians, writers, storytellers, and critics have been
doing all along, breaking away from established norms and daring a
creative response to something new. In a way, and always within the
context of a hemispheric Americas, they are all creative Maroons.

Glissant’s invocation of the Maroons as role models for writers
seeking inspiration relies on a decades-old tradition in the Caribbean
among intellectuals who drew on the rebelliousness of their ancestors to
embellish their writings with the demand for decolonization. From the
1950s to the 1980s, Maroons served as a heroic example of anticolonial
behavior, at the same time dependent on advanced resources and yet
independent in mind from colonial reason. Though later on met with
contempt by the rapidly westernized elite of the islands, especially the
Creolistes, Maroons’ spirit would find new expression in the writings of
female Caribbean authors who committed themselves to reconnect the
fragmented, forgotten stories of women’s resistance and remember the
lost heroines of the past. Such development should not be taken as a
surprise; following the persistent exclusion of female voices from a
masculine politics of decolonization and nation-building that sustained the

wicked mothers, murderous mothers, cruel old women (hags, sorceresses,
witches, soucouyants), vulnerable daughters, and almost no heroic women” (169-70).

40 Richard Price, “Preface,” Maroon Societies: Rebel Slave Communities in the
marginalization of women in society and new history books, Caribbean women writers reacted by turning to the past in order to discover the thesaurus that female heroes had left for them, women-centered stories of solidarity and self-definition, faint traces of motherland Africa, and painful histories of victimization and abuse. The literary outcome of this endeavor would be a powerful feminist historiographic agenda that broadly occupies Caribbean women’s writings from the 1980s onwards by recuperating the historical silence of women in the past and by raising serious objections to the established narratives of the present.

Feminist historian Barbara Bush explains that this “historical invisibility” of slave women in acts of resistance dates back to the eighteenth-century positionality of European women as weak and feeble members of a constantly fighting men’s world.⁴¹ A rebellious woman would thus appear in the eyes of the western chronicler as nothing but a monstrous aberration from the civilized standards of feminine behavior, if not improper and insignificant to study and celebrate. Nanny’s description by Herbert T. Thomas in 1890, written after his journey to Jamaica with the intention of presenting the island as a paradigm of colonial influence, exemplifies this approach: “The notorious Nanny was a woman… and, like all unsexed women who have led a freebooter’s life, ten times more ferocious and blood-thirsty than any man among the Maroons.”⁴² Approximately one hundred years later, a creative female Maroon would


⁴² Quoted in Jenny Sharpe, *Ghosts of Slavery*, 12, emphasis added.
attempt to rewrite this story by reinscribing Nanny’s sex in her
historiographic fiction as a source of inspiration and strength, and by
portraying the Maroon Queen and her legacy ten times more influential
than any male leader among the Maroons. “Most of my work has to do
with revising,” Michelle Cliff closes her interview to Judith Raiskin, “revising
the written record, what passes as the official version of history, and
inserting those lives that have been left out.”

The symbol Cliff uses as title for her novel on Nanny betrays the
endemic ambivalence and mixed feelings that accompany both the
heritage she contemplates and the characters she brings to life. “Abeng is
an African word meaning conch shell. The blowing of the conch called the
slaves to the canefields in the West Indies,” Cliff explains in the preface
and adds “[t]he abeng had another use: it was the instrument used by the
Maroon armies to pass their messages and reach one another” (Abeng,
n.pag). From the beginning, then, we are introduced to an ambiguous
imagery of the New World where a distinct African symbol retains its
formative use but with an additional, decisively reinvented purpose; it is
now a medium of communication born out of the ambiguity of the creolized
world, an instrument of shifting allegiances, of submission and resistance.
Cliff does not take sides; Abeng echoes her call to all people of her island
to listen to the story she has to tell. Above all, it is a call of history and to

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44 Michelle Cliff, *Abeng* (New York: Plume, 1984). All parenthetical references to the text are from this edition.
history itself. And it is a history of sorrow and perseverance, as the
traditional slave lament goes just before the novel starts:

Lord, Lord,

Carry me alone

Carry me when I die

Carry me down to the burial groun’

Hush you, doan you cry. (2)

“Abeng” was also the name of a radical leftist newspaper by students at
the University of West Indies (UWI) in Jamaica in 1969. Committed to
Black Power, the newspaper aspired to awaken the spirit of resistance
among black Jamaicans by drawing people’s attention to the island’s
history.45 For Cliff, however, abeng addresses a much broader audience.
Herself a white Creole, she clarifies her racial politics in the first few lines
of the novel: “This is a book about the time which followed… [a]s the
island became a place where people lived. Indians. Africans. Europeans
(Abeng 3). Neither Afrocentric nor Westernized, as I will be showing, Cliff’s
imagination relates to a creolized poetics of Glissantian undertones that
acknowledges all cultures as contributions to the creation of the Caribbean
world.

Her introduction to the main characters further informs her relational,
that is, cross-cultural understanding of Jamaica. She begins the novel with
a rich imagery of colorful mangos, varieties of which have come from all
over the world and reflect on the liveliness and diversity of races and

45 M. M. Adjarian, Allegories of Desire: Body, Nation, and Empire in Modern
cultures on the island. “The fruit was all over and each variety was unto itself – with its own taste, its own distinction of shade and highlight, its own occasion and use,” she writes, “…and created a confusion underneath” (3). It is within this confusion of mixed origin that Clare Savage, Cliff’s semi-autobiographical persona, finds herself as a light-skinned teenager amid a family of racial and cultural division; her mother, Kitty Savage, is born to a rural family of reds, that is, with some degree of white blood, whereas her father, Boy Savage, is a descendant of a planter’s family, steeped in vanity and prejudice, and ironically unaware of his own biracial past. The novel will evolve around Clare’s frustrating exploration of her creole identity and her inability to relieve herself of the burden of colonial influence that reduces Maroon heritage to silence and invisibility.46 Writes Cliff of her heroine quite descriptively:

Clare Savage’s surname is self-explanatory. It is intended to invoke the wildness which has been bleached from her skin… mocking the master’s meaning, evoking precolonial values, which are empowering and essential to survival, and

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46 Connections between Cliff and Clare are too strong to ignore. Yet in her recent collection of stories, *If I Could Write This in Fire* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), Cliff has expressed her anger at the massive attention critics have paid to Clare as her autobiographical persona, instead of focusing on her narrative’s politics. She writes: “My particular problem… is their determination that they read my fiction – and other Caribbean fictions – as autobiography, diluting and undermining the politics of the narrative. They want to reduce the collective to the individual. They want to define who we are…. I am not a metaphor. My place of origin is not a metaphor. I inhabit my language, my imagination, more and more completely. It becomes me. I do not exist as a text … .I use this speech to craft fiction, which is not a record of myself, which is self-consciously – self-confidently – political” (57-58). I attempt to follow her suggestion by downplaying her obvious autobiographical presence in the novel.
wholeness, her wholeness. A knowledge of history, the past which has been bleached from her mind, just as the rapes of her grandmothers bleached her skin. And this bleached skin is the source of her privilege and power, too, she thinks, for she is a colonized child…. [Her] life, and narrative, is a movement back – ragged, interrupted, uncertain – to that place. She is fragmented, damaged, incomplete.  

So are Creole women in the Caribbean today, Cliff implies, and Clare’s quest into her island’s collective memory will become paradigmatic of the path to female resilience and self-definition. For it is only through such inspirational histories of connections with each other that Caribbean women can hope to bring their fragmented selves together and heal their tormented souls.

Importantly, Cliff’s map to her creole past is inscribed on Jamaica and the landscape itself. Early enough she narrates the powerful story of how workers renovating the High Anglican Parish Church in Kingston Harbor, site of colonial influence and prestige, uncovered “a coffin of huge proportions… shaped like a monstrous packing case… that contained the remains of a hundred plague victims, part of a shipload of slaves from the Gold Coast, who had contracted the plague from the rats on the vessel which brought them to Jamaica” (7-8). Such imagery of history forcefully revealing itself from the earth to sharply contrast with the official narrative.

is a standard trope in Caribbean (and African American) poetics. Vivid descriptions of the past, aimed to raise the reader’s consciousness, appeal to feeling, shock the mind, defy the record, and re-place history, are also paradigmatic of Glissant’s call for imagination to revive memory in the Caribbean. “So history is spread out beneath this surface….,” the Martiniquan scholar writes, “our landscape is its own monument: its meaning can only be traced on the underside. It is all history.” Yet the fact remains that very little of this history has been allowed to come to surface. A plaque on the coffin, Cliff tells us, wrote that it “should be opened on no account… as the plague might still be viable. The vicar commissioned an American navy warship in port to take the coffin twenty miles out and sink it in the sea” (Abeng 8). Order is restored, the colonial version remains intact, and Jamaican people still stay ignorant of, if not indifferent to their past (18-19).

Against this notion of “order” in history and the subsequent classification of knowledge in accordance with the Enlightened mind, Cliff projects a fragmented narrative of leaps and gaps where fiction, history, folklore, and semi-autobiography constantly alternate, by retaining at the

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48 For a classic example of this trope appearing in U.S. African American fiction, see Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*. Cliff has repeatedly acknowledged Morrison as very influential to her imagination. See, for instance, her interview with Judith Raiskin, titled “The Art of History” (4).

49 Edouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, 11, emphasis added

50 Similarly, Glissant complains about modern Martinique’s indifference to history. As he argues in a pointed manner, today “the Martinican seems to be simply passing through his world, a happy zombie” (*Caribbean Discourse* 59). In fact, his prime purpose in writing *Caribbean Discourse* was to awaken Martinique from its disregard for its history.
same time a deeper connection, Jamaica, the landscape. In a highly ironic exposure of colonial (and masculinist) reason, we learn that Clare’s father believes in magic, extraterrestrial life, and Armageddon: “Perhaps, he said to his daughter, the islands of the West Indies… were the remains of Atlantis, the floating continent Plato had written about in the *Timaeus*…. Some say that Crete and Atlantis were one” (9). The absurdity of Boy’s claims allows Cliff to disclose the mythopoetics inherent in the European mind that nevertheless, and contrary to Caribbean myths, remain unquestioned for their test of reason. More importantly, the “trilobite fossil” that Clare finds underscores the island’s prehistoric and undocumented past and leads her father to resort to metaphysical terms, if not wild imagination, as the only solution to the perplexity that the *ruinate* Jamaican landscape poses to his narrative of pure blood lines and uncontaminated civilization (8). Cliff explains her interesting term in her essay “Caliban’s Daughter”:

*Ruinate*, the adjective, and *ruination*, the noun, are Jamaican inventions. Each word signifies the reclamation of land, the disruption of cultivation, civilization, by the uncontrolled, uncontrollable forest…. The word *ruination* (especially) signifies this immediately; it contains both the word *ruin*, and *nation*. A landscape in ruination means one which the imposed nation is overcome by the naturalness of ruin.
As individuals in this landscape, we, the colonized, are also subject to ruination, to the self reverting to the wildness of the forest. (40)

Jamaica’s natural ruins force the colonizer to embrace the supernatural at the expense of his self-definitional Reason, but Cliff’s last reminder allows an additional, precious insight for the development of the story; only toward the end of the novel does Clare begin to understand her connection with her past. Until that point, she remains largely attached to her father’s indoctrination and colonial scheme of things. It is Clare’s ruination through learning the stories that her Western history books dismiss as insignificant, prehistoric, or ahistorical folklore that will eventually trigger her reunion with her ancestors.

In Cliff’s agenda, the path to this reunion goes through the literary yards of grandmotherly figures lying in the heart of the island’s history. The farther Clare will appear walking on this path, the deeper she will be entering the forest of Jamaica’s lost voices of female solidarity and resistance. Early in the novel Clare recollects “Granny,” her great-grandmother, on her mother’s side, who claimed possession of her body “and left her family to run off with one of their servants” to make a life of her own (Abeng 13). Before she dies, Granny makes sure to transmit the knowledge carried from the black continent: forbidden obeah rituals in

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51 “At her most powerful the grandmother is the source of knowledge, magic, ancestors, healing, food,” Cliff writes in her critical essay; “she assists in rites of passage, protects, and teaches. She is the inheritor of African belief systems [and] African languages” (Caliban’s 47).
which still-ignorant “Clare could detect her own reflection” yet could not
grasp the deeper meaning of it (14). At this point, Cliff will again interrupt
her fiction this time to introduce a real-life historical agent, Queen Nanny
(14-15). Her style purposefully recalls that of a professional historian
narrating an event to determine what actually happened; despite the fact
that virtually nothing is established of the Maroon leader, Cliff writes in the
authority of the simple past tense and without using modals: “In 1733,
Nanny, the sorceress, the obeah-woman, was killed by a quashee – a
slave faithful to the white planters – at the height of the War of the
Maroons” (14).\(^{52}\) Cliff’s multidimensional purpose is quite explicit; apart
from apotheosizing Nanny’s authority in Jamaican genealogy and
establishing her existence as an indisputable given among a skeptical
audience of primarily Western readers, she also tries to “emphasize a
temporal continuity along a distinctly feminine historical continuum,” critic
M. Adjarian suggests, by intertwining the lives of her fictional female
characters of the present with those real figures of the past.\(^{53}\) And no other
female historical figure captures the rebellious spirit of Caribbean
femininity, as Cliff understands it, than the Granny of all Jamaican
Maroons.

\(^{52}\) Ironically, Cliff here (and elsewhere) reproduces a version of Nanny’s past
based on British archives, which historian Gottlieb proved wrong in 2000, since
Nanny is reported to have been alive as late as the 1740s. For a good analysis
on the four archival references to Nanny, see Gottlieb, *Mother*, 23-41.

The narrative thread allowing this connection is colored with a specific politics of feminist intervention in history writing that Cliff immediately reveals. “Nanny, who could catch a bullet between her buttocks and render the bullet harmless,” she tells us, “was from the empire of the Ashanti, and carried the secrets of her magic into slavery” (Abeng 14, emphasis added). This particular version of Nanny’s legendary past corresponds to a heated controversy among Caribbeanists concerning its historical verisimilitude. In a fiery (and fairly persuasive) article published in 1994, Brathwaite attacked Maroon historians, writers, and leaders for blindly reproducing Herbert T. Thomas’s account in 1890 that “buttockicized” Nanny and reduced her from the perspective of the Western mind to a shameful body part, “because she was black & therefore a slave no matter what & therefore how could she possibly be a leader, far less a black leader – far less a black woman leader,” Brathwaite concluded in his distinctive style. His observations sparked considerable discussion in the years to come, with a few scholars taking sides with him, such as Gottlieb, but with the majority rejecting his view as hyperbolic. “Why, after all, would Maroons agree to “buttockicize” their founding ancestress and culture hero,” wonders Bilby in his superb research on

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54 Kamau Brathwaite, “Nanny,” 122. As the massively cited account by Thomas goes, “She was possessed of supernatural powers, and spirited away the best and finest of the slaves from the outlying estates. She never went into battle armed like the rest, but received the bullets of the enemy that were aimed at her, and returned them with fatal effect, in a manner of which decency forbids a nearer description” (quoted in Sharpe 12, emphasis mine).

55 Karla Gottlieb, Mother, 51-53.
Maroons, and shows that the version in dispute dates to African rituals and beliefs that held the display of private parts in battle as source of defiance. Precisely this aspect of an African, fearless demonstration of resistance is what Cliff embraces, at the same time that she redefines the female body from a site of sexual violation to a source of feminine strength and retribution.

Apart from her buttocks, it is Nanny’s breast too that denies masculine fantasies of conquest for a purpose that has, unsurprisingly, received scant attention in male historiography. We learn that Nanny “calls on the goddesses of the Ashanti forests. Remembers the battle formations of the Dahomey Amazons…. The forests of the island are wild and remind her of Africa” (Abeng 19). In a reconstitution of the American Mediterranean world, just as Walcott does in Omeros, Cliff thus draws on the suppressed histories of female warriors from the Aegean and Africa in order to attack male historiography on a double level, first, by underlining the cross-cultural and ancestral depth of female resistance, and second, by connecting Nanny in particular to a history of women fighters in the Americas that dates to the early explorers. As Jenny Sharpe shows, amazons (i.e. ‘without a breast’ in ancient Greek) were a female-exclusive society of unbeatable warriors that are said to have existed on the Greek island of Lesbos in the east Aegean. The legend goes that amazons would cut their right breast so as to make their right hand stronger and handle their bows with better precision. When a Victorian traveler met with a

56 Kenneth Bilby, True-Born, 204-07.
similar army in the kingdom of Dahomey in Africa, lesbian connotations as well as the abnormality that the spectacle of a woman fighter presented to his mind shaped his belief that these women were also involved in homoerotic practices. But whereas his impression was meant to belittle these women, the amazons of Dahomey would centuries later be taken up by black lesbian critics as heroic examples of female freedom and power. “Women-bonded women have always been some part of the power of Black communities,” writes Audre Lorde, “from our unmarried aunts to the amazons of Dahomey.” What is even less known, societies of Amazon warriors are reported to have existed in the Americas too, giving their name to the homonymous river in South America. The chronicler of the expedition of Francisco de Orellana in the Amazon in 1541 reports fierce battles between the Spaniards and a powerful army of one-breasted Native American women, the legend of which would remain vivid in the centuries to come among treasure-hunting Europeans in the region. It is on this dual heritage of female autonomy and anti-colonial resistance, just as with the Arawakan women in the Caribbean too, that Cliff draws to present Nanny as heir, owner of her body, creator of society and of history, an amazon in herself who carried the torch of resistance to the


new generations and solidified the bond between gender and heritage in the region.

Caribbean women took the lead, but their stories were also silenced. Clare learns about her great-grandfather’s noble past as judge of the region, but she never hears of his mistress or of the fate that awaited his slaves upon emancipation. As Clare leaves the great house – now a tourist attraction ironically called the Paradise Plantation – with her mind confused between a hint of the misery that hundreds of slaves suffered there and a desire to turn time back and live the romanticized past of the belles, Cliff narrates the heroic, Nanny-like lives of two slave women on that plantation, Inez and her healer, Mma Alli. Like Nanny, Inez was betrayed by a “damn quashee,” after coming to town in order to get a gun for her Maroon father who was hiding in the mountains (Abeng 34). When she was brought into the courtroom, “judge [Savage] intervened and took her home, where he raped her. He raped her for six weeks until he left on one of his trips to London. She was eighteen” (34). But Inez resisted; for two years she was planning her escape and revenge, aided by a “strange woman with a right breast that had never grown,” who kept an abeng in her cabin, another amazon, Mma Alli (35). In a powerful passage, Cliff celebrates the African slave grandmother, the mother of her people in distress, source of encouragement and protection when others would lose heart:

The women came to her with their troubles, and the men with their pain. She gave of her time and her secrets. She counseled
how to escape – and when. She taught the children the old ways – the knowledge she brought from Africa – and told them never to forget them and carry them on. She described the places they had all come from, where one-breasted women were bred to fight. (35)

Beyond a recuperation of grandmotherly figures in Caribbean history that leads to their reconstitution as active and resistant members, what Cliff further seeks to address is the seizure of their bodies and identity, the sexual violation of countless women who were denied the pleasure and the power of the erotic for a colonial economy of passive femininity that reduced Caribbean women to objects. To reclaim their subjectivity and independence, Cliff dares to suggest, these women united their very bodies in relationships of love and friendship, supporting and nurturing each other in bonds of passion and solidarity:

Mma Alli had never lain with a man. The other slaves said she loved only women in that way, but that she was a true sister to the men – the Black men: her brothers. They said that by being with her in bed, women learned all manner of the magic of passion. How to become wet again and again all through the night. How to soothe and excite at the same time. How to touch a woman in her deep-inside and make her womb move within her. She taught many of the women on the plantation about this passion and how to take strength from it. To keep their bodies as their own…. (35)
Through physical touch that grows into lesbian *eros*, women rediscover and redefine their bodies as a means of self-empowerment and feeling amidst a culture that has relegated them as unapologetically given erotic objects, even to the present. In the words of Myriam Chancy, who here reads Lorde, “the lesson to be garnered from the experience of lesbian lives is… the lesson of loving women as women, and not as an extension of men, or of male desires.” Especially for these slave women, learning their bodies and knowing their bodies proves to be a first step towards realizing their value.

Cliff’s emphasis on the knowledge of the body as discussed is further contextualized in Clare and Zoe’s relationship below, but what is even more interesting here is that Cliff elevates lesbian love to a source of resistance through an abortion scene that lacks precedent in American literature. Inez is pregnant to Judge Savage’s child, until Mma Alli “began to gently stroke her with fingers dipped in coconut oil and pull on her nipples with her mouth, and the thick liquid which had been the mixed-up baby came forth easily and Inez felt little pain…. Her tongue all over Inez’s body – night after night – …” (35). In a sharp, ironic subversion of sexual roles, lovemaking between two women thus replaces male aggression and brings about the adverse results; forceful pregnancy is substituted by gentle abortion that heals the traumata of the body’s violation and its shuttering consequences. As critic Farah Jasmine Griffin argues, “Mma

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Alli’s erotic ritual is performed in the service of resistance…. It is not an act that ensures heterosexual reproduction, but instead, because it is an act of abortion, it challenges heterosexuality and male control over female sexuality and reproduction."\(^{61}\) And yet, a narrative of female agency in the Caribbean cannot and should not overshadow women’s cruel subjugation under patriarchy along the centuries. Mma Alli’s rebelliousness, though recorded and dignified as heir to Nanny’s spirit, and transmitted to Inez, is also doomed to failure. Obsessed with news that the Crown plans to set African slaves free and fearful not of his plantation but of “the survival of his race” (Abeng 38), Judge Savage decides to set everything and everyone ablaze. Besides, “at the moment these people were his property, and they were therefore his to burn” (40).

What Cliff does carry through to the end, though, is the possibility of homoerotic feeling and practice as a site of resistance at the core of the masculinist Jamaican nationalist myth. In a text that abounds with accurate historical details, the inclusion of lesbian heroines as prime instigators of rebellion on equal grounds with the National Hero neither raises new boundaries nor shutters romanticized versions of the past. On the contrary, the novel attempts to efface both sexual and gender dichotomies as sources of prejudice and discontent. Artist and poet Rosamond S. King explains: “We are still [in 2005] invisible as lesbians in

our cultures because of the silence around lesbians in Caribbean communities and to some degree even in the growing gay, lesbian, and all-sexual movements in the Caribbean region…. [But] we are still here.”

Amidst this silence, an outside reader could well take the existence of lesbian relationships within a colonial, Jamaican setting as an arbitrary figment of authorial imagination or preference. However, anthropologists Melville and Frances Herskovits have long attested woman-to-woman marriages in Dahomey, West Africa, as socially acceptable, while recent studies by social and cultural anthropologists specializing in gender and sexual studies have shed light on the homoerotic relationships among slaves in the New World. In the end, as Chancy very well puts it, though perhaps too optimistically, bringing lesbianism to the surface of public discussion means “to empower oneself and others to define each one’s personal identity. This freedom, in turn, strengthens the community’s

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63 Cliff has been a couple with Adrienne Rich, noted lesbian critic, since 1976. She has also enjoyed the company of such prominent feminist writers as Betty Friedan and Audre Lorde, both now deceased (Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert, *Literature of the Caribbean* (Westport: Greenwood 2008), 40.


65 See, for instance, Gloria Wekker’s insightful article “Mati-ism and Black Lesbianism,” 368-81.
dedication to the alleviation of all form of prejudice. However, the extent to which the Caribbean community is willing to fight such discrimination is highly dubious, as I suggest below.

Cliff’s purposefully provocative historiographical politics are soon developed full force by the story of only another ancestral woman, Mad Hannah, and the miserable fate of her homosexual son, Clinton, who is left by bystanders to drown in the river and who is also denied burial rituals due to his sexual preferences. The obeah woman seeks to redress the injustice by searching for his *duddy*, his spirit, in order to perform the necessary magic for her son to rest. But “people made fun of Mad Hannah all around and all the time” and dismissed her as insane:

No… no, they said, she had passed through change-of-life too quickly and this had made her fool-fool. They extended their explanation: if she had not been fool-fool her son would not have been sissy-sissy. Because he was a sissy he was drowned. They forged a new chain of cause and effect by which her actions were bound. (65-66)

Cliff’s irony at this point is sharp; the new generations in Jamaica not only prove to be disrespectful to their ancestral heritage, but in mimetic parody of the Western mind they elaborate on Clinton’s death with as much naïveté and malice as the colonizers have been treating them all along. As magic rituals give way to the superfluous eye of reason, Jamaicans themselves contribute to the erasure of their historical past by sending

Mad Hannah to the asylum (66). At this point critic Wendy Walters detects Cliff’s exposure of the falsity that may as well be found in local stories too: “Not only are the colonizers’ histories half-truths, but indigenous versions of history are also shown as partial,” she writes.67

What lies in the center of Cliff’s critique is the perennial homophobia that characterizes the Caribbean, as a result of an economy of compulsory heterosexual erotics that was imposed to nurture and sustain the colonial scheme all along. “To be male was to be the stud, the procreator,” lesbian critic Makeda Silvera explains, “to be female was to be fecund, and one’s femininity was measured by the ability to attract and hold a man and to bear children.”68

Sadly so, and recalling Fanon’s blind faith in the nonexistence of homosexuality in Martinique back in the 1960s, discussed in the “Introduction” of this study, there has been no improvement in the marginalized status of lesbian and gay men in the postcolonial era either. On the contrary, as Caribbean feminist Jacqui Alexander shows, the new nation-states were built on the same dualistic structures of masculinity and femininity that preceded them, “naturaliz[ing] heterosexuality by criminalizing lesbian and other forms of non-procreative sex.”69

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reaction in 2001 of some islands of the British Dependant Territories Overseas (Anguilla, the Cayman Islands, the British Virgin Islands, Montserrat and the Turks and Caicos) to the news of the decriminalization of male homosexuality in accordance with human rights laws provides a study case for the fanatics at play in the region. As critic Alison Donnell comments, for the first time in history it is the colonial power that stood for the right to freedom against the oppressive notions of the colonized – an unthinkable paradox that nevertheless betrays the stigmatization of homosexuality even to the twenty-first century.70 “[T]he family talked of how there was no room for such people in Jamaica” (Abeng 126), Clare recalls concerning her uncle Robert and his relationship with a black sailor, in only another reference to same-sex relations later in the story. “She kept her distance. When he went to kiss her, she turned away,” just as the family had instructed her to do (126). When he drowned too in Kingston Harbor, “the stigma was removed, [and] the family became more relaxed” (126).

Cliff’s stigmatization of homoerotic repression in the Caribbean does not come without a problematics that further intensifies the interrelationship of gender and heritage in the region. Consistent with the

tendency not to simply recover women’s stories but also explore the relational, irreducible differences among them, Cliff focuses on Clare’s friendship with a black girl, Zoe, to unravel the bitter legacy of colonialism among Caribbean women by allowing suppressed inner tensions to come to surface. Clare’s cousins refuse to allow her to eat from a hog’s penis they cook to enhance their potency, and Clare bursts into tears (58), angry with herself because she had “given the boys the satisfaction of knowing she felt left out – that they had the power to hurt her” (61). To recover her wounded pride, she decides to challenge her cousins’ exclusivist norms of masculinity and takes her friend on an armed trip in the mountains in order to kill Massa Cudjoe, a notorious wild boar. Along the way, she meets with Zoe’s strong reaction:

Wunna [you] know, wunna is truly town gal. Wunna a go back to Kingston soon now. Wunna no realize me have to stay here…. Me will have fe [for; of; to] beg land fe me and fe me pickney [child; children] to live upon. Wunna will go a England, den maybe America, to university, and when we meet later we will be different smaddy [somebody]. But we is different smaddy now” (117-18).

For Zoe, daughter of a market woman who struggles to survive amidst the inequalities of too hostile a world, the unthinkable act of carrying a gun coupled with the possibility of a successful hunt signifies a transgression of racial and gender limits that is certain to be met with disastrous

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71 The translated words appear so in the novel’s glossary.
consequences for her life and future. She explains to Clare that, in contrast with white Creole girls, the color of her skin has forever confined her to a small piece of land where she will have to live with her own family too. “Clare was having trouble taking in all that Zoe said; she didn’t want to believe it. She wanted them to be the same” (118). But they never were, nor would they ever be. What Clare fails to understand is that she wishes for them to be the same because only she enjoys the privilege of class and thus the power to include Zoe in her world. In her stubbornness to prove herself equal to the masculine rite of passage from which her cousins exclude her, Clare threatens to condemn Zoe to social and physical persecution. “She [Zoe] didn’t think Clare had any idea of what being poor really meant. What being dark really meant. Why these things would always come between them” (119). Zoe is fully conscious of the limits that her gender and heritage impose on her relationships with white and Creole women. Writes Lorde of the dichotomies between the two feminine worlds in the Americas very concisely:

Those of us who stand outside that power often identify one way in which we are different, and we assume that to be the primary cause of all oppression, forgetting other distortions around difference, some of which we ourselves may be practicing. By and large … white women focus upon their oppression as women and ignore differences of race, sexual preference, class, and age. There is a pretense to a
homogeneity of experience covered by the word sisterhood that does not in fact exist. (116)

There is only one moment, though, that the two girls do come together, even shortly, when they go swimming in a pond. After they bath naked, which Clare has never done with another woman before, “the two girls closed their eyes… and touched hands,” in what becomes Clare’s first experimentation with lesbian love:

Pussy and rass – these were the two words they knew for the space-within-flesh covered now by strands and curls of hair. Under these patches were the ways into their own bodies. Their fingers could slide through the hair and deep into the pink and purple flesh and touch a corridor through which their babies would emerge and into which men would put their thing. Right now it could belong to them. (Abeng 120, emphasis added).

Relieved of the restrictions that colonial rules impose on their existence, the two naked girls can now claim possession of their bodies. By exploring their physicality they will seal their bond through the discovery of their feminine nature and its potential to offer pleasure not only to men but to themselves as well. In this apotheosis of juvenile homoeroticism, neither class nor racial dichotomies can stand but only a vision of female empowerment and love. “Female anatomy …is the primary constituent of our identity and the source of our female essence,” writes feminist critic Linda Alcoff, drawing on Adrienne Rich’s belief in what the latter describes
as a “female consciousness” that resides in the female body.\textsuperscript{72} It is what
the two girls instinctively seek holding each other’s hand in a union that
triumphantly overcomes their constructed divisions.

Eventually Clare will rise to female consciousness as a Jamaican,
but only after she has fully grasped the perplexity of what it means to be a
woman in her creolized world. Following the inconceivable act of
inadvertently shooting her grandmother’s bull, Clare is sent to Mrs.
Beatrice Phillips, an old woman of colonial manners, in order to be
educated in the etiquette of a young Englishwoman. Clare will be exposed
to the crude rhetoric of the metropolitan elite by listening to her mentor
“forever talking about ‘culture’ and what a cultural ‘backwater’ Jamaica
was” (\textit{Abeng} 156), until one day she is introduced to Mrs. Winifred
Stevens, Miss Beatrice’s deranged sister. It is in her company that Clare
will learn all those unspeakable truths that govern contact in the New
World, the silent stories of racial hatred and women’s submission,
whispers of guilty secrets and of traumata that refuse to heal. It appears
that Miss Winifred had given birth to a little girl that was immediately taken
away from her, never to be seen again, because the “father was a coon”
(162). “He was just a nice little Black man who worked for us,” she
laments, “but when my father found out who he [the baby’s father] was, he
did away with him” (163). An overwhelmed Clare is confident in her
juvenile white creole naiveté that such tragedy can only be a figment of
wild imagination, but Miss Winifred’s response awakens Clare to the

pragmatics of the adult world she is entering: “[W]hat I did was wrong, you see. I knew better. I knew that God meant that coons and buckra [white] people were not meant to mix their blood. It’s not right. Only sadness comes from mixture. You must remember that” (164).

For Clare, such blunt exposure to the history of her land and the price a woman has to pay for defying the burdened past comes as a forceful entrance to the real world. In front of her eyes lies a broken woman who bears no resemblance to the brave one who once dared to cross the boundaries; Miss Winifred is now absolutely submissive to the demands of her sterile world, isolating herself in shame and refusing to wash ever since as a means of atonement for her “sins” (164). In her realization of the burden of history that a Jamaican woman has to carry, Clare senses that perhaps time has to come for her to admit what she was always afraid to: “I am mixed too. My mother is red” (164). Miss Winifred will now tell Clare of the island’s slavery past, the horrors of Native Americans’ extermination and of nature’s exploitation, stories Clare would never hear from her father. “Do you know about the ship called the Zong?” she asks Clare. “The Zong was a slave ship and the captain spilled the living bodies of Africans over the side, saying that they were infected. They were not infected. The captain collected insurance money for their souls. That is the sort of thing that went on here day after day.” (165)

73 On November 29, 1781, the captain of the English slave ship Zong, en route from Africa to Jamaica, ordered 132 Africans to be thrown overboard to secure that the strongest of his ‘cargo’ survive the Middle Passage. The subsequent claim of the shipowners for compensation by the insurers on the basis that slaves were disposable cargo heightened abolitionist sentiment in England and led to
That night Clare has a dream that she is fist-fighting with Zoe. As she throws a stone at her, “a trick of blood ran down her friend’s face,” and Clare wakes up in her menstrual blood (165). Informed of her island’s painful, colonial past that will define her very existence from that moment on, Clare is now ready to enter womanhood feeling the mental and physical pain that generations of her women ancestors felt but managed to overcome and persevere.

To be sure, becoming fully acquainted with such forceful past can never be accomplished nor can it ever be comprehended in all its complexity: “She was not ready to understand her dream. She had no idea that everyone we dream about we are” (166). Cliff finishes her narrative, as if warning of the unresolved tensions that will always determine the present and the past of women across races in the Caribbean archipelago. In the spirit of Glissantian poetics, Cliff thus implies the need among Caribbean women for constant search and endless wandering in the perennially haunting memories of their common past. A specific destination is impossible to find, only a fragmented, relational history of betrayal and resistance with bits and pieces of one’s self scattered in stories still unheard of and silences yet to be broken in all corners of the sea horizon. And if Nanny’s story apotheosized the grandmotherly figure in the precolonial Caribbean, Cliff remained faithful to her task of negating the “objective” history and re-conceptualizing the past by bringing to light

the ban of slave trade twenty-four years later. For a detailed study, see James Walvin, *The Zong: A Massacre, the Law, and the End of Slavery* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011).
the story of only another heroine from which women can take inspiration, this time from the broader Americas in the pre-Civil War era, Mary Ellen Pleasant.

Cliff’s particular choice of protagonist in her *Free Enterprise*, first published in 1993, should not surprise. In fact, there could hardly be a more fitting character than Mary Ellen Pleasant for Cliff to exemplify the irreducible singularities residing in the American past: stories about people who crossed class, racial, and gender boundaries creating a multidimensional narrative of contested and, more often than not, uncomfortable truths that still need to be articulated. “Pleasant defeats every stereotype of an African-American woman in the nineteenth century,” Cliff explains in an interview to Renee Shea; “she was a successful businesswoman, an entrepreneur; she was also a revolutionary, and she never gave up the cause, even after the failure of the raid on Harpers Ferry.” What is very interesting is that, just as with Condé’s Tituba, the protagonist of the Salem witch hysteria, Pleasant’s shadowy figure was also reinvented a number of times throughout the twentieth century to help a suspicious public come to terms with the positionality of black people in the American past and the notion of black agency. Cliff’s description of Pleasant, early in the novel, exposes the complexity of all such representations in a concise, if hilarious manner:

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75 Lynn Hudson, *Making*, 99. “Every detail about Mary Ellen Pleasant’s past is contested: her birthplace, her parents, her name, her occupation, and her
“Mary Ellen Pleasant?”

“Wasn’t she a voodoo queen?”

“A madam?”

“A mammy?”

“Didn’t she run a whorehouse for white businessmen in San Francisco?”

“Wasn’t she Mammy Pleasant?”

“Didn’t she work voodoo on that white woman and send her off her head?”

“Wasn’t she Haitian?”

“Didn’t she have a witchmark on her forehead?”

“A cast eye?”

“One blue eye and one brown eye?”

“Wasn’t she ebony?”

“Yellow?”

“Wasn’t she so pale you’d never know?”

“Didn’t she come back as a zombie?”

“Didn’t she have a penis?”

“Couldn’t she work roots?”

“Didn’t she make a senator’s balls fall off?”

“Didn’t she set fire to her own house?”

“Never heard of her.” (18) 76

Such demonization of women who refuse to be classified in accordance with the established norms, also seen in the cases of Tituba and Nanny, is what Cliff seeks to redress through Pleasant, by producing instead an alternative narrative of phenomenal female agency that reshapes an otherwise fictitious historical past. In the pages of her novel the official record is once again to be contested, this time striking at the heart of U.S. American historiography by the intervention of a black woman in the decisive event that triggered the Civil War, John Brown’s raid at Harper’s Ferry in Virginia in 1859.

In the deeply divided U.S. American nation tensions over slavery had been running high, especially after the Kansas-Nebraska Act in 1854, according to which settlers in both territories would have to decide by vote whether slavery would be legal in their newly founded states. To affect the outcome of the election, fanatics of both sides soon swarmed the region, prominent among them an ardent abolitionist, John Brown. Raised with the strictest, seventeenth-century Puritan standards and a core belief in an almighty, vengeful God, John Brown would mark his arrival in radical

76 Michelle Cliff, *Free Enterprise* (San Francisco: City, 2004). All parenthetical references to the text are from this edition.
history by making his intentions clear early on. Following proslavery candidates’ “overwhelming, if fraudulent, victory,” and amid retaliatory violence by both sides, John Brown, accompanied by a group of men among them his sons, slaughtered five proslavery supporters by “splitting skulls and hacking off hands,” as historian Scott Nelson describes it, in what remained in history as the Pottawatomie Massacre. “God sees It. I have only a short time to live – only one death to die, and I will die fighting this cause,” his son Jason would report Brown’s words later on, “[and] there will be no more peace in this land until slavery is done for. I will give them something else to do than to extend slave territory. I will carry the war into Africa [the U.S. South].” For Brown, giving abolitionist talks and assisting slaves to escape to Canada were no longer a viable option; only a bloody slave rebellion, following the lead of Maroons fighting in so many places of the Caribbean, could cut the Gordian knot that kept black people


79 Ibid., 6. For an insightful, complete reading on the events that became known as “bleeding Kansas,” read Nelson 3-37.

80 Quoted in Jonathan Earle, “Introduction,” 19. Brown never pleaded guilty of committing the massacre, yet perhaps under pressure to account for his reputed involvement in raw violence he once gave a personal account of the tempers that ruled the region: “Once I saw three mutilated bodies [in Kansas]; two were dead and one still lived, but was riddled with twenty bullet holes and back-shot holes; the two murdered men had been lying eighteen hours on the ground, a prey to the flies. One of these young men was my own son” (quoted in Lerone Bennett Jr., “John Brown: God’s Angry Man.” Ebony 20, (Dec 1964): 102).
in bondage.\textsuperscript{81} His plans to strike Harpers Ferry had just started taking shape.

Brown’s choice of strategic target reveals the depths at which powerful narratives of slave rebellion from the Caribbean, most prominently in Haiti, had been embedded in the American mind. I read this map of hemispheric revolutions and their influence to the United States in the next chapter, but for now what needs to be underlined is that Brown structured his plan on the successful guerilla tactics of Toussaint Louverture, the remarkable leader of the Haitian revolution, striking a sensitive chord in the minds of his wary audience. As historian John Mead shows, Brown found in the Allegheny mountain range a landscape similar to the Haitian rugged terrain that proved decisive for the victory of the revolutionaries. “God has given the strength of the hills to freedom,” the abolitionist claimed, “… full of natural forts, where one man for defense will be equal to a hundred for attack” and where his army of rebels could “baffle and elude pursuit for a long time.”\textsuperscript{82} Thus, he hoped to strike in the Blue Ridge Mountains and then spread the rebellion to western Virginia, North Carolina, Tennessee, and northern Alabama. Interestingly, Brown


\textsuperscript{82} Quoted in John Mead, “Declarations of Liberty,” 128. Of a similar mind on the centrality of revolutions in the Caribbean as paradigms to inspire from was another white radical abolitionist with whom Brown was deeply connected, pastor Thomas Wentworth Higginson. Inspired by Jamaican maroons, he was particularly active as a member of the Secret Six, the group of abolitionists that furtively supplied Brown with money and weapons. For an insightful analysis on their common vision, see Mead 111-43.
even compared the Blue Ridge to Thermopylae, where Leonidas had tried to stop the Persian invasion of mainland Greece in 480 B.C.\textsuperscript{83} Little did he know that his fate would be no different – nor his posthumous legend, for that matter.

For Brown never received the support and supplies he had expected. Confident of the critical role that a leader such as Frederick Douglass could play in summoning the black masses, a frustrated Brown would try to convince him to take command of the operation: “Come with me, Douglass…. When I strike, the bees will begin to swarm, and I shall want you to help hive them.”\textsuperscript{84} But a pragmatic Douglass refused, in what proved to be the first in a series of disappointments and misfortunes to follow. With suspicion rising among neighbors in the farm where he had settled, Brown took the decision to move the day of his strike eight days earlier than planned, leaving no time for the arrival of any further fighters.\textsuperscript{85} On the night of October 16, 1859, a group of just eighteen men, black and white, easily captured the federal arsenal, but ‘the swarm of black bees’ was nowhere to be seen. Even worse, Brown inexplicably allowed an eastbound train to Baltimore to proceed and spread the news of insurrection to authorities.\textsuperscript{86} Before the coming night was over, the radical

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abolitionist would be captured alive but wounded, having lost ten men, including two of his sons.\(^{87}\) After a short trial of just four days, during which he persistently refused to reveal the identity of his accomplice, he was found guilty of treason and hanged on the gallows.\(^{88}\)

Yet, by all means, the series of events Brown had triggered would prove him triumphant in his purpose, an emblematic figure and a visionary that would dominate the history of pre-Civil War North America ever since. Despite his utter failure in the execution of his plan, the very act of seizure of a federal arsenal on U.S. southern soil would send shockwaves of terror across the American South and at the same time fuel excitement in the North by raising secessionist spirits to a point of no return. Thus wrote the pro-slavery *Charleston Mercury* in response to the raid:

> Where are the white slaveholders of Hayti? Slaughtered or driven out of that grand paradise of abolitionism…. Suppose the object of Northern Abolitionists then accomplished…. The midnight glare of the incendiary’s torch, will illuminate the country from one point to another; white pillage, violence, murder, poisons and rape will fill the air with the demoniac revelry, of all the bad passions of an ignorant, semi-barbarous race, urged to madness by the licentious teachings of our

\(^{87}\) Jonathan Earle, “Introduction,” 27.

Northern brethren. A war of races – a war of extermination – must arise, like that which took place in St. Domingo.\textsuperscript{89} And, indeed, war was what southerners started preparing for, with hundreds of militia companies and secession committees organizing themselves across the U.S. South.\textsuperscript{90} Northern abolitionists, in contrast, had little sympathy for what they felt as southerners’ exaggerated if not well-deserved anxieties about slave resurrection. In his speech “A Plea for Captain John Brown,” only two weeks after the raid, Transcendentalist Henry David Thoreau described Brown as “a man of rare common sense and directness of speech, as of action; a transcendentalist above all, a man of ideas and principles – that was what distinguished him,”\textsuperscript{91} and moved on to apotheosize him in the annals of American history: “No man in America has ever stood up so persistently or effectively for the dignity of human nature, knowing himself for a man, and the equal of any and all governments. In that sense, he was the most American of us all.”\textsuperscript{92} Of a similar mind, Transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson called Brown “the rarest of heroes, a pure idealist, with no by-ends of his own.”\textsuperscript{93} Three years later, amid the ravaging war, the poet Julia Ward Howe would

\textsuperscript{89} Quoted in Scott Reynolds Nelson, \textit{A People at War}, 45.

\textsuperscript{90} Ibid., 46


\textsuperscript{92} Ibid., 117.

\textsuperscript{93} Quoted in Jonathan Earle, “Introduction,” 33.
compose the “Battle Hymn of the Republic,” the song that could be heard in every Union regiment across the country, strengthening soldiers’ spirits and boosting their morale with a strong belief in the righteousness of their cause:

John Brown’s body lies a mouldering in the grave,
While weep the sons of bondage, whom he ventured all to save,
But tho’ he lost his life in struggling for the slave,
His soul is marching on.94

A despicable villain for southerners, and a martyr for northerners, John Brown had rightfully won a central place in the official record for the centuries to come. What never became part of that record, though, was the multitude of individual supporters that allowed Brown to fulfill his daring act, their stories and even names forgotten or lost. With the exception of the so-called Secret Six, Northern abolitionists who assisted Brown in his abolitionist agenda but not necessarily in the Harpers Ferry plan, and whose agency has otherwise received scant attention, never has a figure emerged from the dustbins of history to engage with the formidable stature of John Brown.95


95 Teacher Franklin Sanborn, preacher Theodore Parker, philanthropist Gerrit Smith, manufacturer George L. Stearns, physician Dr. Samuel Gridley Howe, and Transcendental activist Thomas Wentworth Higginson remained in history as the “Secret Six” who most actively collaborated with Brown in his abolitionist endeavors, though under cover. For a full view on their lives, see Edward J.
“I have never made this statement in full to anyone, but before I pass away I wish to clear the identity of the party who furnished John Brown with most of his money to start the fight at Harper’s Ferry and who signed the letter found on him when he was arrested.”96 So argued an enigmatic elderly African American woman in an interview she gave to editor Sam P. Davis of Comfort Magazine in October 1901, three years before she died. “The axe is laid at the root of the tree and after the first blow is struck there will be plenty more money coming,” she moved on, recollecting some words of the letter to the best of her mental capacities.97 Although no historian has ever certified the presence of any note of the sort, Davis does confirm that there was one such letter found on John Brown, but despite authorities’ investigation its author was never located. His interviewee continued by revealing a full account of her abolitionist activity and giving names and exact locations, which Davis later on found traces and at points even evidence for. “I felt very bad over the failure of our mission [Harpers Ferry], but I never regretted the times or the money I spent on the idea…. It seemed at first like a failure, but time proved that the money was well spent,” the eighty-seven year old woman continued and asserted her pride in being part of history: “It paved the way for the war and the war freed the slaves. I always felt that John Brown started the


97 Ibid.
Civil War and that I helped Brown more than any other person financially."^{98} To her misfortune, her testimony would never be considered as valid documentary evidence and her claims have massively been ignored by historians, her name appearing nowhere in the established narration of the event.^{99}

In fact, few details about Mary Ellen Pleasant’s life can be taken for granted. If we trust her own words at a late age, she was born free in Philadelphia in 1814 to a Kanaka father and “a Louisiana negress.”^{100} According to historian Lynn Hudson, however, Pleasant’s insistence that she was born to free parents may have been a conscious attempt to extricate her origins from a subservient past which she never came to terms with.^{101} Married to a wealthy abolitionist, widowed and married again, she moved to San Francisco, California, where she emerged as a leading figure in the Gold Rush investing in real estate and mines. As owner of laundries and boardinghouses, she became acquainted with the elite of business and political circles, learning secrets and gaining access

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^{98} Ibid.

^{99} It would take sixty-one years following her death, in 1904, for one of her last wishes to be granted. In February 1965 the African American Historical and Cultural Society of San Francisco marked the following words on her gravestone in Napa, California: “She was a friend of John Brown” (Lerone Bennett, Jr., “Mystery of Mary Ellen Pleasant: A Historical Detective Story: Part II.” *Ebony* 34, no.7 (1979): 86.

^{100} Quoted in Sam Davis, “How a Colored Woman,” n.pag.

^{101} Lynn Hudson, *The Making of Mammy Pleasant*, 12. Hudson’s magnificent work, from whose sources I heavily draw from, remains to date the sole established scholarly research on Mary Ellen Pleasant, containing every possible detail from the innumerable, often self-contradictory details on her life. For her early years, see *The Making* 11-23.
to precious information that she ingeniously translated into even greater assets.\textsuperscript{102} At the same time, she participated in considerable abolitionist activities by helping scores of black people along the Underground Railroad, by providing them food, shelter, and schooling, and by helping them establish their own small businesses.\textsuperscript{103} Notably, she was persistent in testing Jim Crow laws in court, making the headlines in the \textit{Alta California} in 1866 when one day she purposefully tried to board a street car; once denied access due to her color, she took the company to court which compensated her with the amount of $500 and thereby shook the foundations of segregationist policies in the region.\textsuperscript{104} Perhaps most important of all, her charity network crossed color lines to alleviate the suffering of many women, black and white, who had found themselves trapped in the ruthless expansionist craze of the West. “The woman who fell unsuspectingly into the clutches of operators of whorehouses and dives, the girl who miscalculated and got pregnant, the pretty and weak-willed widow left with no means of support: for all these…,” historian Lerone Bennett concludes, “Mary Ellen Pleasant was a heaven and a lighthouse.”\textsuperscript{105}

\textsuperscript{102} Ibid., 1-2.

\textsuperscript{103} Clotye Murdock, “America’s Most Fabulous Negro Madam,” \textit{Ebony} 9, no.6 (April 1954): 50.


\textsuperscript{105} Lerone Bennett, Jr., “Mystery II, 74
Despite the richness of her account, what remains is the fact that Mary Ellen Pleasant continues to be absent not simply from the official records of Harpers Ferry but from “the canon of acceptable black heroines” too, as Hudson writes.\textsuperscript{106} Pleasant’s decades-old largely contemptuous treatment by the academy, until Cliff’s narrative in 1993 and Hudson’s biography ten years later, can be attributed to a number of reasons that do not necessarily concern the absence of insurmountable documentary evidence as to her whereabouts. “It was said that Mary Ellen Pleasant dominated the Bells [her partners] by voodoo, that her power stemmed from blackmail, and that she trafficked in prostitution and sold babies,” writes Bennett of the disturbing rumors that surround her legend,\textsuperscript{107} and Hudson no less alarmingly adds that “if she profited from sex in the West, it was as a madam, not a prostitute.”\textsuperscript{108} It is also possible that Pleasant took further advantage of fugitives and free colored people by fostering them as servants for rich people’s houses with an eye to sensitive information and thus making profit from the institution she

\textsuperscript{106} Lynn Hudson, \textit{The Making of Mammy Pleasant}, 1.

\textsuperscript{107} Lerone Bennett, Jr., “Mystery of Mary Ellen Pleasant: A Historical Detective Story: Part I,” \textit{Ebony} 34, no.6 (1979): 92

\textsuperscript{108} Lynn Hudson, \textit{The Making of Mammy Pleasant}, 8. Clotye Murdock wrote in “America’s Most Fabulous Negro Madam” in 1954: “A perplexing character who was at once good and evil… Mammy [Pleasant] had her eyes fixed on millions… She set her trap[s] with food, a watered-down version of voodoo, and sex… She set herself up as a voodoo queen in order to control them [colored people]. And she wanted to do this for two reasons – to help them achieve social equality and to use them as spies” (47-8). Interestingly, the title of her photo he includes in the article reads: “Mammy Pleasant, underworld queen of San Francisco in the 1880s” (47).
appeared fighting.\footnote{Lerone Bennett, Jr., “Mystery II,” 74} As to her involvement in voodoo, about which the prejudiced press of the time speculated, a bare reference to the Creole religion would be enough to classify her both as horrible and powerful.\footnote{On July 9, 1899, in the \textit{San Francisco Chronicle} an article titled “THE QUEEN OF THE VOODOOS” appeared, with the unknown author describing in horror the items found in Pleasant’s room: “powdered cork dust, singed feathers, and strips of calico cloth” (quoted in Lerone Bennett, Jr., \textit{Mystery I}, 94). Pleasant had earlier abandoned her house due to her clash with her former partner and housemate, Teresa Bells. The latter is now believed to be responsible not only for the dubious information she provided the unknown author with, but also for the voluminous bad reports on Pleasant’s life that severely affected her first biographer as well, now-discredited Helen Holdredge (Bennett, \textit{Mystery I}, 96)}

An ingenious, capable, and saintly woman committed to the advancement of her people by some accounts and a mischievous, wicked, devilish figure who manipulated her own race by others, Mary Ellen Pleasant defies comprehension “because of the difficulty of fitting her into recognizable categories of the black subject or heroine,” as Hudson writes.\footnote{Lynn Hudson, \textit{The Making of Mammy Pleasant}, 2.} But I wish to argue that it is exactly the singularity of her existence, the fluidity of the racial, gender, and class boundaries she crossed and the manipulation of the traces she left that make Pleasant a real-life heroine of the Americas. For through the self-cancelling accounts on her life, what emerges is the creolized, \textit{relational} story of only another woman who maneuvered through shifting, unholy alliances and self-contradictory subjectivities to survive and tell her story. And if her version was largely ignored, it was Michelle Cliff who brought to the mysterious woman the attention she deserved.
Cliff’s structure of *Free Enterprise* is indicative of her creolized politics of imaginative history writing, a fragmented narrative of diverse protagonists and discontinuous episodes where linearity of action is disturbed by parallel events taking shape in different times and places. As critic Deborah McDowell argues, apart from the name of the restaurant where Pleasant supposedly organizes her abolitionist agenda, the very title of the novel might as well imply the process of history revising Cliff follows, a free enterprise “in which fantasy and history are reflections of each other.”\(^\text{112}\) Indeed, early on in the novel Cliff makes her purposes explicit by taking academics to task for their indifference to the network of women who allowed John Brown to strike Harpers Ferry: “Who has ever heard of Annie Christmas, Mary Shadd Carey, Mary Ellen Pleasant?,” she asks about the invisibility of such women in history (*Free* 16). “The official version has been printed, bound, and gagged, resides in schools, libraries, the majority unconscious,” she moves on, “[and it is] the stuff of convocations, colloquia; [it] is substantiated – like the Host – in dissertations” (16). Cliff’s dismissive attitude regarding the academy may have proved rather unfair, given the explosion of revisionist writings in the last two decades since the novel’s publication in 1993, as well as the integration of such (hi)stories in qualifying exams in departments across the country and worldwide. Yet Cliff returns to the subject matter as late as 2008 with her first book of nonfiction, *If I Could Write This in Fire*, where she includes a rather disturbing anecdotal event of the 1990s:

At the University of Virginia I am informed (by the doctoral student who is my escort) that Thomas Jefferson didn’t own slaves, news to me (sic). ‘Villagers’ – as they’re affectionately known – built the university, Monticello, every rotunda, column, and finial the great man dreamed of. They liked him so much they just pitched in, after their own chores were done. She tells me all this with a straight face. I ask her about Sally Hemings, the slave who bore Jefferson several children. I am told she did not exist; if she did, she was white. History as fiction. But so history has been all along in the Americas, a land of conflicting narratives and contested truths, parallel but different (hi)stories of people from different racial, ethnic, and religious groups, whose accounts of what happened in the past will always differ from each other; as they will always clash with the ever-changing official record on the charge of fiction, for that matter. In a creolized, Glissantian manner, Cliff will remain committed to her “prophetic vision of the past” and attempt to revive historical events by bringing to life its long-forgotten protagonists. “Everything is now. It is all now,” Cliff quotes Toni Morrison in her autobiographical article “History as Fiction, Fiction as history” in 1994, “[and as] artists, Morrison has said, it is our job to imagine the unimaginable…. The history of armed and

[113] Michelle Cliff, If I Could Write This in Fire, 39-40, comment and emphasis added. Cliff also narrates the event in an article titled “History as Fiction, Fiction as History” published in 1994 to which she adds some further details: “I suggest that she [the student] read Barbara Chase-Riboud’s novel Sally Hemings, which, like my proposed book, like Maryse Condé ’s Tituba and Morrison’s Beloved, attempts to rescue an African-American woman from the myth of American history. She does not seem interested” (n.pag).
organized African-American resistance has been made unimaginable by
the official histories of this country," she emphatically concludes, little
before her task with Pleasant begins.\textsuperscript{114}

The figure of John Brown was not incompatible with her purposes
either. It appears that the abolitionist himself was engaged in a similar
endeavor, what John Mead describes as “a creative rewriting of history,”\textsuperscript{115}
as Brown reformulated the Declaration of Independence and the
Constitution in order to correct the fallacies made in the founding
documents against black people. What is of great interest is that in his
Provisional Constitution and Ordinances for the People of the United
States, presented and approved in an abolitionist convention in Chatham,
Ontario, in May 1858, Brown expanded on his revolutionary ideas for a
theocratic society based on proto-Communist ideals. Thus started Article
XXVII on Property: “All captured or confiscated property, and all property
the product of the labor of those belonging to this organization and of their
families, shall be held as the property of the whole, equally, without
distinction; and may be used for the common benefit, or disposed of for
the same object.”\textsuperscript{116}

The particular point abounds with meaning, not only because it
serves as the centerpiece in Brown’s and Pleasant’s meeting in the novel

\textsuperscript{114} Michelle Cliff, “History as Fiction, Fiction as History,” n.pag.

\textsuperscript{115} John Mead, “Declarations of Liberty,” 114.

\textsuperscript{116} John Brown, “Provisional Constitution and Ordinances for the People of the
United States,” John Brown’s Raid on Harpers Ferry: A Brief History with
Documents, 67.
but also because it allows Cliff to reveal Pleasant’s powerful agency with capitalist endeavors. During that meeting, where the two protagonists discuss the aftermath of their revolution should it succeed, Pleasant is angry at Brown’s “notion of an African state as a christo-utopia, a heaven on earth for colored folks…. Dammit, our people knew capitalism intimately, historically. Albeit from the wrong end” (143). Then, she fervently proceeds to defend her belief in property ownership with passion: “What was wrong, I asked Captain Brown, with slaves seizing that which they built, dug, cultivated, designed, maintained, invented, birthed, for which they had been held responsible?” (Free 143). Cliff at this point echoes the dilemma facing the African American community on its positionality within the norms of the United States, which historically varied from full integration into dominant society to less popular departure and return to Africa. “The time has passed for all that,” Pleasant declares in rejecting the second option. “We are no longer African. We are New World people, and we built this blasted country from the country up. We are part of its future, its fortunes” (151). Brown will persist in his objections, and it is not long before Pleasant reveals her full politics at play. “But, my dear friend, … why is private property so important to you?” Brown asks, to which a forceful Pleasant responds with determination: “Because in this world, Captain, property, ownership equals power. And in this world, I cannot and do not wish to contemplate the next, we need as much power as we can get” (144). It is a forceful answer that certainly aims to provoke and defy, for such a warm defense of the right to property and ownership
amounts to an indirect embrace of U.S. southern rhetoric that held millions of slaves in bondage. Time and again U.S. southerners evoked the Founding Fathers’ strong belief in the right to property as an unalienable right of every American citizen, but to them, slaves constituted their property.\footnote{On the notion of property as a founding principle of the United States, see James Huston, \textit{Calculating the Value of the Union: Slavery, Property Rights, and the Economic Origins of the Civil War}, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 3-23. On southerners’ defense of slavery as protection of their right to property, see the same author’s excellent article “Property Rights in Slavery and the Coming of the Civil War,” \textit{The Journal of Southern History} 65, no.2 (1999): 249-286.}

How could Pleasant then appear adopting the slaveholders’ argumentation and further crush Brown’s romanticism by warning him of “the babies seized from the breast and paraded on pikes” (147), once the revolution strikes?\footnote{Cliff here plays with the rumor that held Haitian rebel forces parading with the body of a white baby, earlier ripped from its mother’s body, on a pike. It was an image that was deeply ingrained in the U.S. southern mind causing terror at the very thought of it. I elaborate on the matter in the next chapter.}

Critics have so far been puzzled, largely avoiding addressing the matter in favor of other equally interesting parts of the novel. Of those who have, Lynn Hudson argues that “Cliff makes no apology for Pleasant’s financial ventures…. being a first-class businesswoman meant one necessarily dabbled in the wrong enterprise,”\footnote{Lynn Hudson, \textit{The Making of Mammy Pleasant}, 112.} whereas for Deborah McDowell it is “to her [Cliff’s] credit [that] she has not written a morality play in which the wolf of free enterprise downs the lamb of political dissent.”\footnote{Deborah McDowell, “Taking Liberties with History,” 32.} I wish to add to the debate by suggesting a different path,
namely the possibility that Cliff purposefully allows Pleasant to develop her pro-capitalist rhetoric in order to establish her subjectivity firmly as a black heroine of the time. In doing so, I draw from George Handley’s acute reading on William Faulkner’s view that land ownership erases the history of the unrepresented, in his case of Native Americans, in order to suggest that the opposite might as well be true in such a distinct case as that of Mary Ellen Pleasant.\(^{121}\) Indeed, if “ownership serves to invent identity because it will always keep history at bay,” as Handley writes,\(^{122}\) then Pleasant’s disturbing argumentation in support of property holding serves Cliff to establish her identity at times when official history sustained her in the margins; for it is true that Pleasant’s existence in the archival record can only be verified, beyond any shadow of a doubt, through her ownership of enterprises that established her as a leading figure of the time. “We are not an otherworldly people, Captain,” argues Pleasant to Brown, “We are of this world and this time” (Free 144, emphasis added) – she thereby exposes her astounding if characteristically U.S. American pragmatism that allowed her to thrive under highly contradictory circumstances.

\(^{121}\) George Handley, “A New World Poetics of Oblivion,” Look Away: The U.S. South in New World Studies, eds. Jon Smith and Deborah Cohn (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 37. Handley reads Faulkner’s masterpiece “The Bear” (1942). It is a story of broken lineages, gaps and fissures across five generations in which respect for the land as a common heritage delivered by Native Americans is praised and valued. I discuss Faulkner’s common topoi with Caribbean authors, and especially Edouard Glissant, in the next chapter.

\(^{122}\) Ibid.
Historian Susan Yohn’s thorough research on female entrepreneurs in nineteenth-century America offers precious insights to the point. She suggests that the very concept of entrepreneurship in the Americas “has historically been deeply gendered,” with women systematically depreciated for their capacity for business and relegated suitable for the domestic and consumer spheres only.\(^\text{123}\) Here is what Henry Clews, a businessman of Wall Street in the 1880s, thought of his female counterparts who started becoming all the more visible at the time, as quoted by Yohn:

> Women, he wrote, were too “impulsive and impressionable,” unable to reason in the “way that is indispensable to a successful speculator.” They jumped to conclusions “by a kind of instinct,” or even an “inspiration,” and were “unable to take the broad view of the whole question and situation” as required. They were simply not able to “foresee financial events in the same way as men.”\(^\text{124}\)

Clews’s description is evocative of the ever-lasting foundational doctrine of the U.S. American marketplace as a competitive arena of masculine logic and ethos, the public sphere where men would prove their capacity as bread-winners and managers. In this context, female entrepreneurs could only be seen as aberrations, their fortune presumed to be the outcome of


\(^{124}\) Ibid., 89.
no other but deviant means. And, indeed, Yohn finds many similarities between Mary Ellen Pleasant and her case study of Hetty Green, a multi-millionaire of the late 1800s. The latter’s life is also shrouded in mystery and what remains of her are derogatory newspaper clips that portray her as “the witch of Wall Street.” Moreover, just as Pleasant was vilified by her first biographer, now-discredited Helen Holdredge, so did Green’s writers treat Green two decades after her death by presenting her as no less than a “she-wolf.” “Lord Jesus, they take one look at a successful black woman, and they think she’s either a whore or a voodoo queen,” Cliff emphatically ends discussion by declaring: “Either she got her money by sucking white cocks, or by putting spells on them” (Free 101).

Pleasant’s unapologetic, capitalist spirit becomes then the medium through which Cliff breaks only another silence of the historical record against women in the Americas who dared to transgress foundational boundaries and contest as equal in the marketplace. Yet one crucial difference that sets Pleasant apart from her counterparts needs to be underlined, namely the fact that she was a colored woman carrying the burden of slave heritage. We learn that Pleasant “began her empire

\footnote{Ibid., 91.}

\footnote{Quoted in ibid., 101. Write Boyden Sparkes and Samuel Taylor Moore in their book Hetty Green: A Woman Who Loved Money, published in 1930: “She was nursing them [her babies] in the midst of what must have been exciting business transactions, and it was during their babyhood that she first demonstrated her amazing investment skill. It was as if the pulling of those tiny mouths excited in her a wild hunger for money, no more to be compared with her previous yearning than the normal appetite of a she-wolf is to be compared with the ravenous appetite of that animal when it is nursing a litter” (quoted in Susan Yohn, “Crippled Capitalists,” 101).}
building by embodying Mammydom, as much as she grated against the word, the notion, taking care of the guests in her hotels, washing their linen in her laundries, satisfying them in her restaurants” (Free 105).

Originating in slavery and yet persisting in the American collective unconscious ever since, the stereotypical image of mammy personified the selfless, loving black servant who had proved trustworthy to raise generations of white U.S. southerners, often at the expense of her own family, asking nothing in return but divine reward. As a matriarch, she would prove equally useful to her masters, instilling in her own children the notions of stoicism, servility and obedience to their superiors. Always with a smile on her face, she would set the example of how her people could return the benevolence of their masters. But even as a woman, her sexless nature and obesity would calm the sexual anxiety of the white female who could put her fears of adultery to rest.\textsuperscript{127} Or so the ever-lasting fairytale goes.

“I can hear the city fathers now: “Our Mammy? Armed and dangerous? Not our Mammy,” a highly ironic Pleasant imagines the authorities’ reaction, had the rebellion succeeded (Free 138). By historicizing Pleasant, Cliff grasps the opportunity to debunk another myth of the established record, the blind compliance of black motherly figures with the peculiar institution, in favor of a much complicated story of female agency under cover. Pleasant thus appears to embrace the mammy

\textsuperscript{127} Patricia Hill Collins, \textit{Black Feminist Thought}, 2\textsuperscript{nd} ed. (New York: Routledge, 2009), 80-81.
model only to revise it from within. “To further quell any unease that she
was stepping across, over, and through,” writes Cliff, “Mary Ellen Pleasant
dressed as a dignified, unobtrusive houseservant, no handkerchief head,
but black alpaca dress, white apron, lace cap. So she could move among
them easily, in and out of any station they required. Disguised” (105,
emphasis added). Indeed, both historians and critics have long been
scrutinizing the mammy image, “the most elusive and important black
presence in the Big House,” as Eugene Genovese puts it,128 by searching
for clues as to what was really going on in the mansion. And whereas
holistic arguments could easily drop in the countless singularities across
time, it appears that female domestic slaves did exert considerable power
in their surroundings disguised as mammy figures. According to black
feminist historian Barbara Christian, “[u]like the white southern image of
mammy, she is cunning, prone to poisoning her master, and not at all
content with her lot,”129 to which white historian Micki McElya adds that
“the mammy was – and is – a fiction.”130 As to the real Mary Ellen
Pleasant, in an interview she gave to reporter Isabel Frazer in 1901 she
was clear on the matter: “I don’t like to be called mammy by everybody.
Put that down. I’m not mammy to everybody in California. I got a letter
today from a minister in Sacramento. It was addressed to Mammy
Pleasant. I wrote back to him on his own paper that my name is Mrs. Mary


129 Quoted in Patricia Collins, Black Feminist Thought, 82.

130 Micki McElya, Clinging to Mammy: The Faithful Slave in Twentieth-Century
E. Pleasant.” What Pleasant thus confirms is the use of the mammy image as a veiling strategy for maneuvering through the formidable racial and gender barriers of her hostile world. For her, as for so many other women whose personal stories are forever lost, the mammy outfit did not signify her confinement in the domestic, apolitical sphere but rather a conscious theatrics of normative behavior with a purpose to serve – in Pleasant’s case, her infiltration in the powerful white masculine business world. Even at a later age, once she realized that both her color and gender raised even more obstacles in her business plans than in the pre-Emancipation era, she would not hesitate to serve as a white investor’s housekeeper to “front” her investments, as Yohn suggests. “I am a whole theater in myself,” Pleasant once claimed, and so she was, for the number of roles she was called to play in her life in order to survive would make her both a show woman and a producer of herself.

If her performance as mammy served to hypnotize her rich acquaintances, Pleasant’s practice of voodoo would only awaken them in horror. It is interesting that Cliff spends considerably small space on the matter and critics have understandably ignored the relative excerpts. But we do learn that her mother, Quasheba, “became the pupil of Ogun, master smith” (Free 129) and when Pleasant was born “people [maroons] held a nine-night ceremony for the baby, in which her obtrusive, secret

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131 Quoted in Lerone Bennett, Jr., “Mystery I,” 90, emphasis added.


133 Quoted in Lerone Bennett, Jr., “Mystery II,” 71.
name was spoken, in which she received her soul” (130). Whereas real-life Pleasant’s involvement in voodoo cannot be denied, especially after Susheel Bibbs’s research on Pleasant’s close interaction with Marie Laveaux, famous voodoo practitioner in New Orleans, Cliff’s silence is intriguing and, I suggest, revealing of her detachment from the creolized religion. In a telling passage where Quasheba passes her knowledge of the Middle Passage and voodoo gods over to little Mary, Pleasant asks her mother why “Shango, who carried lightning bolts in her fists, his fists… [doesn’t] scare them [slave traders] all to death,” only to receive Quasheba’s bitter response: “He can’t; she can’t” (127-28). Cliff does not hide her disappointment; real-life resisters, even with supernatural powers, such as Maroon heroine Nanny, have always earned her respect and admiration, but fighting back in the real world is much different from vain invocations to invisible deities. She writes with a certain degree of sarcasm:

There it was: the admission that the transoceanic African, eclipse-demanding, vengeance-hungry gods were helpless.

In the end they became beautiful stories, dazzling imagery, the stuff of bedtime excitement and children’s language, figures drawn with a pointed stick in the sand – useless. (128)

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135 In voodoo practices gods and their spirits (called *loa*) can alternate genders.
Cliff has nowhere become explicit on her views on voodoo, or any other religion for that matter, but the fact remains that Pleasant did practice to the extent that she was reported to an otherwise suspicious press as a “voodoo queen.” It is possible then that in serving the loa Pleasant would discover only another means to open fissures in her confined surroundings and (re)claim her connection with her people by defying prejudiced restrictions. Anthropologist Karen McCarthy Brown explains the attractiveness as well as liberating capacity of voodoo to colored women:

The adaptability of Vodou over time, and its responsiveness to other cultures and religions; the fact that it has no canon, creed, or pope; the multiplicity of its spirits... all these characteristics make women’s lives visible within Vodou.... This visibility can give women a way of working realistically and creatively with the forces that define and confine them.

The irony implicit in Pleasant’s case is sharp. Her white supremacist world may have been constantly trying to keep her within shut doors, but again


137 Maya Deren describes the effects of the voodoo ritual on its practitioner: “That action reaffirms first principles – destiny, strength, love, life, death; it recapitulates a man’s relationship to his ancestors, his history, as well as his relationship to the contemporary community; it exercises and formalizes his own integrity and personality, tightens his disciplines, confirms his morale. In sum, he emerges with a strengthened and refreshed sense of his relationship to cosmic, social and personal elements” (198). For more on the effects of voodoo rituals on the individual see Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti (1953; London: McPherson, 2004), 197-202.

she would manage to make her presence felt, even from within the privacy of her rituals. At a point where Cliff’s Pleasant travels by boat and a storm erupts, an undaunted Pleasant contemplates: “Not knowing my history, and assuming what comes to them [passengers] readily with regard to women of my obvious descent, I can almost hear them whisper ‘voodoo’. Still, at times like these ‘voodoo’ can be a blessing. For they cut me a wide swath and the service is good. (Smile.)” (*Free* 136).

Central to Cliff’s enterprise is also Pleasant’s fictional co-conspirator, Annie Christmas. We find her at the very start of the novel in her isolated house in Carville, Louisiana, crushed by her participation in Harpers Ferry sixty years earlier and the utter disregard of the official record of their efforts. An exile from a Caribbean island for which she never stopped longing, Annie has long been trying to understand the present and the past, but will only find the answers in the place one would expect least to, the lepers’ colony of the region. Sitting among the despised, the outcasts and the forgotten, she will hear untold stories of memory, survival, endurance, and revenge that will allow her to come to terms both with her own personal story and her people’s collective past. First comes a Hawaiian man whose voice alternates with that of his great-grandfather to tell the story of Captain Cook, how his people “had been syphilitized... cured of our [their] savage state” (49). History would only

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139 The location is real and it refers to the Louisiana Leper Home that was established in 1894. Critic Myriam Chancy draws a very interesting parallel among victims of Hansen’s disease and modern-day HIV positive patients who would likely be Cliff’s protagonists had the novel been written for events of the twentieth century. See *Searching for Safe Places*, 172-75.
record that Captain Cook had been roasted and eaten on his second journey, but “the contamination of the people by the venereal disease has not been inscribed,” he laments – and yet he can imagine it on a bone his ancestor left him, as the past will always be present in the American archipelago speaking of truths that can be felt but so few of them can be found in books (51). Annie follows to narrate the life of Alexander Bedward, “a healer, prophet, asylum inmate, early Pan-Africanist, flying African manqué” who is usually remembered as a “madman” and of Nanny, whom Pleasant had told her about earlier on, passing the knowledge of a forgotten past of rebellious women and resisters as so many mothers in the Americas would do whispering stories to their daughters (52). A Tahitian woman comes next to recall how her people were forcefully ripped of their lives when the Bounty reached their shores. “Fletcher Christian and his men, it is said, populated their island colony by taking Tahitian women as their, so to speak, wives. Much is made in this version of bare breasts. The pale Englishman is thrall to the brown tits of Polynesia. We become fetish, drive them mad,” the woman declares of their forceful entry in history as exotic objects of sexual desire (56). “What is not said, never, as far as I can tell,” she continues in a bitter voice, “is that these women had husbands already, and in some cases children by their Tahitian men” (56). Last appears Rachel, a descendant of the Spanish Jews, who tells the story of their eternal wandering in all corners of the earth, rejected and dismissed from anywhere they settled, until she found herself among Maroons in Surinam. “Unknown but known. I don’t
think any official records were kept. Maybe there were songs or something," she recalls of the virtual absence of Maroon establishments from records. And she continues even more forcefully to talk about her camp in the hills as if describing the creolized New World in just two sentences: “Africans mixed with Indians, Cherokee and Creek and all kinds, half-breeds, quarter breeds, whatever. And they traded with my father and other white folks from above the ground” (63).

It is through these oral stories that Cliff pays homage to lost narratives of perseverance and resistance, bits and pieces of scattered narratives about the past that may never become part of the record, and yet they will always be told across time among people in circles who seek to remember, forget, and understand. “Sometimes… too much of the time, I think all we have are these stories, and they are endangered,” Annie argues. “In years to come, will anyone have heard them – our voices?” Rachel responds, “[o]nce something is spoken… it is carried on the air; it does not die. It, our words, escape in to the cosmos, space” (59). And so Annie will tell Rachel about Mary Ellen Pleasant’s story, everything that “did not happen” at Harpers Ferry, how Pleasant escaped, and how “John Brown is written down in the history books as a madman, fanatic… none of which is true” (192-93). There is one story, though, that she will keep for herself and find the strength to share only with Pleasant; how she was disguised as a man trying to escape south but was captured, her identity revealed when “a guard spied a trickle of blood down my leg…. I was cuffed around the neck and led from man to man…. Chain against chain.
Metal and flesh. The profoundly entertained keepers. Memory” (207). For despite these women’s rebellious spirits and active resistance, nothing will ever prove enough to alleviate the pain from centuries of subjugation, humiliation, and defeat. “There is a point of no return, I assure you,” Annie writes to Pleasant, [and] this is the story I do not tell” (208). In the diseased bodies of the wretched and the broken spirits of the defeated ones, all victims of colonialism and slavery, Cliff thus celebrates the irretrievable narratives of people whose voices will never be heard, men and women who struggled with forces beyond their means, and who perished. To recuperate their loss, she produced a fictional narrative that gives those voices back, and most importantly allows them to be heard. “For the only way, to my mind, of maintaining a place for writing... would be to nourish it with the oral,” writes Edouard Glissant,¹⁴⁰ and Cliff has done exactly that, merging her bibliographical research on Mary Ellen Pleasant with countless stories of the Americas that may never find their way to the record.

“For some, this is fantasy; for others, history,” Mary Ellen Pleasant says in response to Annie Christmas’s doubts about Nanny early in the novel (Free 29) and thus captures the meaning of Cliff’s free enterprise with these two legendary heroines that draw the reader into the whirlpool of the relational American past. Through her haunting images of irreducible violence and oppression, but of persisting love and defiance as well, Nanny and Pleasant, and with them countless fictitious characters, ¹⁴⁰ Edouard Glissant, Caribbean Discourse, 101.
are brought to life weighed down with disturbing truths that have long remained in the shadow of history. And they have come holding an abeng to sound their presence across borders and continents. They have come to stay.
Chapter 4

Relational Histories: Madison Smartt Bell’s Haitian Trilogy

“Only the body of Toussaint L’Ouverture… sleeps in the tomb; his soul visits the cabins of slaves of the South when night is spread over the face of nature,” wrote John Brown’s eldest son, John Brown, Jr., soon after his father went to the gallows for attempting to spread the Haitian Revolution on U.S. American soil.¹ “The ears of our American slaves hear his [Toussaint’s] voice in the wind-gusts which sweep over the prairies of Texas, of Arkansas and Missouri;” he continued, and “his voice finds an echo in the immense valleys of Florida, among the pines of the Carolinas, in the Dismal Swamps and upon the mountain tops….² John Brown, Jr.’s statement is indicative of the extent to which the spirit of the only successful slave revolution in the western hemisphere had crossed seemingly sealed boundaries to infiltrate the mind of slaves in the United States. But so had it managed to occupy the thoughts of plantation masters. In the words of an exasperated southerner at the news of Harpers Ferry in 1859, the raid was “nothing more nor nothing less than an attempt to do on a vast scale what was done in St. Domingo in 1791,”³

² Ibid.
when the launch of slave rebellion led to the virtual extermination of the white population on the island some thirteen years later.\(^4\)

The Haitian Revolution (1791-1803) provided not only a solid background for John Brown to try and initiate slaves into his apocalyptic if not delusional mission in 1859, as I discussed in the previous chapter, but it also inspired a number of revolutionaries across Haiti’s northern neighbor to rise against the peculiar institution in no less ambitious aspirations for freedom. In this context, I begin this chapter by discussing the hemispheric relationships that developed in the continent between slave insurrectionists in St. Domingue and the ambiguous responses of the United States’ government and wider public in my attempt to chart a map of cross-cultural infiltration and influence. I then proceed to embellish that map with a cartography of slave rebellions whose instigators were influenced by the unprecedented success of their Caribbean counterparts. I thus hope to further support the notion of the Americas as a relational, cross-cultural and fluid space of movement of ideas and people across established borders, which nowadays both American and Southern studies are called to explore. Accordingly, this time I discuss a white U.S. southerner’s work, Madison Smartt Bell’s Haitian trilogy, as only another

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\(^4\) The wife of the governor of Virginia was quite descriptive in her outrage at the rumors that Lydia Maria Child, abolitionist and women’s rights activist, was taking care of John Brown while in prison: “You would soothe with sisterly and motherly care the hoary-headed monster of Harper’s Ferry! A man whose aim and intention was to incite the horrors of servile war — to condemn women of your own race, ere death closed their eyes on their sufferings from violence and outrages, to see their husbands and fathers murdered, their children butchered, the ground strewed with the brains of their babies” (Quoted in Alfred Hunt, \textit{Haiti’s Influence}, 141).
case of a historical novel that encapsulates the notion of a creolized history of the Americas, in other words a narrative where history and literature merge to narrate shifting categories and alliances, Glissantian returns and diversions, and irreducible violence. Like Derek Walcott, Maryse Condé, and Michelle Cliff, I suggest that Bell’s historical novels of the Haitian Revolution also become a hybrid space, where fictional and historical events alternate, to produce an imaginative historicization of a long neglected past that has always been part of the broader American history. Besides, had it not been for the heroic struggle of slaves in St. Domingue, it is unlikely that Bonaparte would have ever conceded the Louisiana Territory to the United States, much less for a sum of $15 million.

Despite the official policy of non-interference, instigated largely by the delicate balance in international relations and the long wars among European powers, the young United States never really withheld itself from intervening in the insurrection, the reason being simple: trade.\footnote{Alfred Hunt, \textit{Haiti’s Influence}, 30.} Approximately one third of United States’ exports were directed to the Caribbean islands during the turbulent years of 1791 to 1814, a figure evoking the interconnectedness of the New World.\footnote{Gordon Brown, \textit{Toussaint’s Clause: The Founding Fathers and the Haitian Revolution} (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2005), 19.} Concerning the lucrative colony of St. Domingue, according to a contemporary account, local ports abounded with U.S American “flour, corn, oats, rice, biscuits,
salt beef, salt cod, herring, mackerel, salmon, fish, oils, peas, potatoes, onions, and apples,” together with “live animals including pigs, cows, sheep, and turkeys.” At the same time, indirect trade between the West Indies and Europe involved traders exporting their produce first to the United States and then re-exporting them to European markets, thus bringing precious income to U.S. American chests. It was not a surprise, then, that United States’ policy toward the island soon evolved into a clash of interests between the merchants and shippers of the North, whose main concern was to sustain trade irrespectively of whom they would have to deal with, and the slaveholders of the South, who viewed developments in St. Dominique with increasing alarm. Put simply, as historian Gordon Brown explains, “the maritime centers wanted to trade with the Haitian rebels, while the plantation owners wanted to isolate them or squelch them.”

Indeed, the occasional, often radical, shifts in U.S. policy mirrored the internal divisions residing in the U.S. body politic – but importantly, for my purposes here, the proximity of the Caribbean to U.S. culture too. As a

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9 Ibid., 6-7. Ashli White in *Encountering Revolution: Haiti and the Making of the Early Republic* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2010) presents a different case, pointing out the opposing views of Massachusetts and South Carolinian Representatives over the Intercourse Act of 1799 to suggest that “party politics more than regional interests shaped the discussion” (160). Whereas White appears persuasive enough for the particular period, I agree with Brown overall argument that the debate over the Haitian Revolution mainly evolved over the Mason-Dixon line.
slaveholder himself, President George Washington appeared quite sensitive to the pleas of the French colonists for immediate relief, and early on, in 1791, his Secretary of State, Thomas Jefferson, a slave owner too, signed the release of “one thousand stand of arms and other military stores” as well as $40,000, an amount that soon became tenfold, despite the objections of the Secretary of the Treasury, Alexander Hamilton.\footnote{Alfred Hunt, \textit{Haiti’s Influence}, 30-31.}

Once the next President, a strong opponent of slavery, John Adams, realized that the rebel forces were in control of the island, he welcomed official interaction with Toussaint and even suggested the possibility that the latter declare the island’s independence.\footnote{Ibid., 33.} Adams went so far as even to intervene actively in the civil war between the rebel forces on the island with provisions sent to Toussaint’s army and U.S. frigates and schooners bombarding André Rigaud’s (the rival leader) positions.\footnote{Adams’s enthusiastic correspondence with Toussaint can be explained in the context of the undeclared naval war against France his administration had pursued. Of significance was his Secretary of State, Timothy Pickering, who feared that “France with an army of those black troops might conquer all the British [Caribbean] Isles and put in jeopardy our Southern States” (Quoted in Douglas Egerton, \textit{Gabriel’s Rebellion: The Virginia Slave Conspiracies of 1800 & 1802} (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993), (46).} “In order to preserve the trade agreement, white Americans had become complicit in the Haitian Revolution,” historian Ashli White thus recently argued, “actively intervening in the course of war in the colony and doing so in the name of its black leader.”\footnote{Ashli White, \textit{Encountering Revolution}, 163.} No other prospect could be worse for Thomas

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Jefferson, who – already as a Vice President – had strongly opposed, albeit in vain, any agreement with Toussaint, warning of “black crew, supercargoes & missionaries thence into the Southern states.” Once in office as President, and as early as the summer of 1801, Jefferson would thus advise the French chargé d’affaires, Louis A. Pichon: “Nothing would be easier than to furnish your army and fleet with everything, and to reduce Toussaint to starvation.” Yet the sheer size of the French expedition that followed, estimated at twenty-five thousand men, soon made Jefferson have second thoughts on his course of action, given that the likely victory of the French forces might allow Bonaparte to sustain the Louisiana territory that Jefferson had his eyes on. Subsequently, Jefferson once again permitted trade with the island, until rebels’ resilience and the yellow fever reduced Bonaparte’s dream of an American empire to ashes and rendered Louisiana worthless to him. With Louisiana becoming part of the U.S. American territory, Jefferson would manage to pass a “total quarantine” of the newly established state, Haiti, in 1807, in an effort to shield southern shores from insurrectionist influences on U.S. slaves.

14 Ibid., 160.

15 Ibid. Revealing of Jefferson’s strong disagreement with Adams on his Haitian policy is the fact that Jefferson recalled the United States’ envoy to the island only a few days after taking office (Douglas Egerton, Gabriel’s Rebellion, 169).

16 Ironically, historian Douglas Egerton writes, it was Toussaint’s brave soldiers that actually allowed Jefferson to claim Louisiana. He explains that Jefferson had completely missed the fact that Bonaparte planned to use “the Mississippi valley as a breadbasket to feed the reenslaved Dominguans, all of whom would be employed in producing sugar, not grains” (Gabriel’s Rebellion, 170).

17 Ibid., 165. The United States resumed diplomatic relationships with Haiti as late as June 5, 1862 (Douglas Egerton, Gabriel’s Rebellion, 172).
Jefferson's overt disapproval of the course of events in St. Dominque can be contextualized in the waves of immigrants from the Caribbean that swarmed the nation's ports over the turbulent years. According to Governor William C. C. Claiborne of Louisiana (after the territory's acquisition by the United States), a total of 5,754 refugees from St. Dominque – 1,887 whites, 2,060 free colored people, and 2,113 slaves – entered that area alone from 1791 to 1808. With New Orleans still Spanish territory during the 1790s, Virginia and South Carolina became the main entrance points of colonists who sought escape from the horror inflicted on whites by the rebel armies. But whereas southerners were initially quite receptive to the refugees, sympathy for fellow plantation masters from the Caribbean soon vanished at the sight of the latter's accompanying slaves. Like the Virginian legislature that voted against the "introduction of slaves into this country, or the maroons, brigands, or cut-throats from St. Domingo," every southern state passed similar laws in order to curtail the alarming arrival of slaves from the beleaguered region.

As to pleas to the contrary, and despite the fact that relief committees were established in many cities, these appeals had little luck once the news that egalitarian France had abolished slavery in 1794 reached American shores. John Randolph of Roanoke spoke of the "silent but

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18 Alfred Hunt, *Haiti’s Influence*, 47. According to Saint-Méry, a respectable refugee who reached Philadelphia, the total number of French colonists who fled the French West Indies and arrived in the U.S. was estimated at 25,000 people (Ibid., 38).

19 Ibid., 107-08, 44. On charity organizations and their valuable work during that time, see Ashli White, *Encountering Revolution*, 61-70.
“powerful change” that he witnessed among slaves: “When the fountains of the great deep of abominations were broken up,” Randolph declared with an eye to the Haitian Revolution, “even the poor slaves did not escape the general deluge. The French revolution polluted even them.” 20 What rubbed salt in the wound were stories that the Caribbean refugees brought with them, and which spread like fire among suspicious southerners. So went a characteristic account published in the press: “A passage boat… with 44 souls on board, was taken by one of those [Negro] barges, and every soul murdered. The women they put to the ignominious torture of boring out their eyes with a corkscrew, in ripping up the bellies of those with child, and exposing the unborn infants to the eyes of their expiring mothers.” 21

Fate was no better for those who did not manage to escape, either. The Augusta Chronicle in Georgia reported how “some unfortunate planters who were seized by the Negroes were most inhumanely murdered, after which canes were planted as if growing out of their bowels.” 22 As early as 1793, Jefferson was able to predict the course of events that had started developing in the region and warned of the dangers of revolutionary contagion on U.S. soil: “I become daily more and more convinced that all the West India islands will remain in the hands of the people of colour, and a total expulsion of the whites sooner or later


21 Ibid., 39.

22 Quoted in Ashli White, Encountering Revolution, 57.
take place," he argued. “It is high time we should foresee the bloody scenes which our children certainly, and possibly ourselves (South of Patowmac) have to wade through, and try to avert them.”23 And Jefferson did not have to wait long before his words came true. Starting with Gabriel’s rebellion in Richmond, Virginia, in 1800, followed by slaves’ uprising in New Orleans in 1811, Denmark Vesey’s in Charleston, South Carolina, in 1822, and Nat Turner’s in Southampton County, Virginia, in 1831, the Haitian Revolution proved a catalytic event in New World history by inspiring generations of slaves to pursue freedom through bloodshed.

The panic that erupted in Virginia at the news of a slave conspiracy in 1800 is indicative of growing tensions in the region. By a mere adversity of the weather, the slave rebellion planned by Gabriel Prosser, a twenty-four-year-old literate blacksmith, was revealed, and thirty of his comrades and a few weeks later Prosser himself were led to the gallows. In an agitated response, both Thomas Newton, mayor of Norfolk, and John Bracken, mayor of Williamsburg, urgently called out for militia and muskets, at a time when a certain John Minor, riding from Fredericksburg to Richmond, was shocked to find the road swarming with soldiers.24 Rumor had it that the insurrectionists were planning to “take possession of the houses and white women,” and their fear was well calculated, given the news of atrocities that had been occupying their minds since the

23 Quoted in ibid., 1-2.

outburst of violence in St. Dominque.\textsuperscript{25} So went the lines of a poem published in the \textit{New England Palladium}:

\begin{center}
Remember ere too late
The tale of St. Domingo’s fate.
Tho’ Gabriel dies, a host remains
Oppress’d with slavery’s galling chain
And soon or late the hour will come
Mark’d with Virginia’s dreadful doom.\textsuperscript{26}
\end{center}

And whereas no clear evidence exists yet as to a direct connection between Gabriel’s conspiracy and the Haitian Revolution, historians seem to agree that it would have been unthinkable for a black slave living in Virginia at the time not to have been affected by the developments in the Caribbean. As historian Douglas Egerton explains, by 1795 an estimated 12,000 slaves had arrived in the United States from the French colony, about which Governor James Monroe warned: “The scenes which are acted in St. Domingo…. must produce an effect on all the people of colour in this and the States south of us, more especially our slaves, and it is our duty to be on our guard to prevent any mischief resulting from it.”\textsuperscript{27}

Monroe’s warning did not address slaves only – though shrouded in mystery, “two Frenchmen” might have possibly been part of the Gabriel

\textsuperscript{25} Ibid., 78.

\textsuperscript{26} Alfred Hunt, \textit{Haiti’s Influence}, 118.

Prosser plot, thereby underscoring the French Revolution’s “wrong” turn toward egalitarianism.\textsuperscript{28} Whatever the case, Egerton concludes, “For him [Gabriel Prosser], the struggle for freedom in Saint Domingue was a source of inspiration.”\textsuperscript{29}

And so it was for Kook, Quamana, Charles Deslondes, and their accomplices who organized the largest slave rebellion in U.S. history – in New Orleans in 1811.\textsuperscript{30} Louisiana at the time witnessed massive transformation, not simply as to its administration and ethnic consistency, shifting from French rule and Creole residents to a polyglot area of U.S. American authority, but also in terms of its production. Following the collapse of the Haitian economy, due to the massive destruction of its sugar plantations and the extermination of its white population, Louisiana planters turned to sugar production to such an extent that by 1802 the area numbered a total of seventy sugar plantations, compared to none seven years earlier.\textsuperscript{31} Concurrently, a number of exiled French plantation

\textsuperscript{28} For an insightful view on the theories surrounding the matter, which still remains unresolved, see Egerton, 183-85. The fact remains that Jack Ditcher, one of Gabriel’s co-conspirators, attested that “two white French men…. were the first instigators of the Insurrection” (Quoted in James Sidbury, \textit{Ploughshares into Swords: Race, Rebellion, and Identity in Gabriel’s Virginia, 1730-1810} (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 97.

John Randolph of Roanoke was furious with the influence of the French Revolution on slaves. During the 12\textsuperscript{th} Congress, 1\textsuperscript{st} Session, he declared: “God forbid, Sir, that the Southern States should ever see an enemy on these shores with the infernal principles of French fraternity in the van” (Elizabeth Fox-Genovese and Eugene D. Genovese, \textit{The Mind of the Master Class}, 37).

\textsuperscript{29} Ibid., 46.


\textsuperscript{31} Ibid., 47.
masters who arrived in the area introduced their notorious tactics of management. Such was the spread of Caribbean-style slavery and agriculture in Louisiana, as historian Daniel Rasmussen suggests, that “when slaves across the United States spoke with dread of being “sold south” or “sold down the river,” they were speaking of the slave plantations around New Orleans.”

To meet the demands of their rising industry, within a period of twenty years, from 1790 to 1810, planters brought an estimated 20,000 slaves from Africa, a number of them from the belligerent Kongo area. Living under intolerable circumstances and with many of them already trained in guerilla warfare in their native land, slaves had few qualms about following the lead of their Haitian brethren.

Indeed, “[c]olonized by the French and controlled at times by the Spanish,” Rasmussen argues, “Louisiana was more Caribbean than American – a place more similar to Haiti than to Virginia.” But the outcome, again, would be different. The band of 124 slaves that rose in 1811 to raid the German Coast spread panic among its residents who dreaded that their land would become, in the words of a local, “a miniature representation of the horrors of St. Domingo,” yet their short-lived rebellion collapsed in cold

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32 Ibid., 49. For instance, Rasmussen refers to the common devices used by French planters to inflict punishment: Metal masks and collars were usual, common among which “a neck collar with inward-pointing spikes that prevented the victim from lying down and resting his or her head” (79).

33 Ibid., 90.

34 Ibid., 52.
weather, betrayal, and lack of supplies, their heads decapitated and their bodies dismembered.\textsuperscript{35}

Perhaps the most striking case among slave insurrections that were inspired by the developments in the Caribbean, Denmark Vesey’s rebellion in 1822 meant to send shockwaves of terror to the dumbfounded southerners in Charleston, South Carolina. Interestingly, the city’s very foundations lay in the Caribbean, with a group of Barbadians asking for permission from the King of England to establish a colony in 1663 in the vast area south of Virginia, what they described as “Carolina in ye West Indies.”\textsuperscript{36} So they did, historian David Robertson shows, gradually building a city that in many respects resembled its Caribbean origins. For instance, the ruling classes in both areas demonstrated a similar obsession with finery, “sometimes even to the point of ostentatiousness,” reflected in their dresses and the lavishness of their estates, and both societies showed particular preference for the attribution of titles, such as “Captain” or “Major” – just as they did with the imposition of the harshest treatments to

\textsuperscript{35} Ibid., 117 and 150. According to an article in Louisiana Gazette, “for two or three leagues [the road] was crowded with carriage and carts full of people, making their escape from the ravages of the banditti – negroes, half naked, up to their knees in mud with large packages on their heads driving along toward the city” (ibid.).

The uprising of slaves in New Orleans and its treatment by authorities is paradigmatic of the silence imposed on such acts of resistance. As Rasmussen explains, Governor Claiborne chose to strip the event of any political meaning by investing his account in legal terms and presenting it as a mere instance of criminality. In this way, he managed to assure the Government that the federal laws presided in the newly acquired area (159-63 and 204).

their slaves, Charleston becoming the busiest slave market in the U.S. “In both its exercise of law and its physical appearance…,” Robertson declares, “the city could not deny its Caribbean origins.”

Nor could it remain unaffected by the sweeping force that shook the Americas once the rebel forces claimed victory in Haiti. For Charleston shared another commonality with the Caribbean, blacks soon becoming the majority in the local population – according to a census in 1800, whites numbered 15,402 people and blacks 63,615. Within twenty years, Charleston enjoyed the presence of the largest number of “French Negroes” in North America, as slaves originating in the French West Indies were called, providing a friendly environment for Vesey, who had spent his adolescence on the sugar plantations in Haiti. From 1818 to 1822, the sixty-year-old carpenter, who had managed to buy his freedom twenty-two years earlier, carefully planned the reenactment of the Haitian drama on U.S. soil, certain that the insurgents could “conquer the whites, if we [they] were only unanimous and courageous as the St. Domingo people were,” one witness later reported. Another slave testified that Vesey “was in the

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37 Ibid., 17. Even the main streets of Charles Town, as it was originally named after King Charles II, Robertson writes, “were covered with a mixture of sand and finely crushed seashells,” just like in Barbados.

38 Two years before the outbreak of the Haitian Revolution, black slaves on the island numbered 465,000 people, whereas whites 31,000 and free-coloreds 28,000 people. In comparison, the entire United States numbered a total of roughly 700,000 slaves at that same time. (Laurent Dubois, Avengers, 30).

39 Ibid., 34, 52.

40 Quoted in Matthew Clavin, Toussaint Louverture, 33.
habit of reading to me [him] all the passages in the newspaper that related to St. Domingo.” When some co-conspirators regretted the unavoidable bloodshed, Vesey was confident enough: “It was for our safety not to spare one white skin alive, for this was the plan they pursued in St. Domingo.” As to the closure of the drama, again Vesey had managed to persuade his followers that he was in close contact with the Haitian government which would offer them refuge. Accordingly, insurgents were instructed to “take every ship and vessel in the harbor, and to put every man to death except the captains” so that they “sail for Santo Domingo, for he had a promise they would receive and protect them.” Vesey’s promise was never historically verified. Soon after his plot’s betrayal, he went to the gallows.

Vesey was betrayed not only in the literal sense, with fearful comrades revealing his plot, but metaphorically too, when the world of spirits abandoned him on that crucial night in June 1822. For Vesey’s revolutionary concept was based on a spiritual ground similar to that of the Haitian Revolution. Just as Haitian rebels were inspired by the mythological, deified figure of Françoise Mackandal, the one-armed slave who rose against white planters in St. Domingue in 1757 by poisoning

41 Quoted in ibid.

42 Quoted in David Robertson, Denmark Vesey, 68.

43 According to historian David Geggus, Vesey’s promise of Haitian help “was almost certainly a fiction” since Haitian leaders were reluctant to interfere in U.S. politics for fear of a possible response by the U.S. government that would lead to a blockade of Haitian exports (“Preface,” The Impact of the Haitian Revolution in the Atlantic World (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2001), (xiii).
water supplies and wreaking havoc on the island, so did Vesey’s rebels find spiritual guidance in an Angolan slave, Jack Pritchard, alias “Gullah Jack,” “the little man who can’t be killed,” as both whites and slaves described him.\(^\text{44}\) Skilled in the preparation of rituals and medicines, the Obeah-man was only one among countless insurgents – Nanny among them – in the New World who persuaded their comrades of their magical capacities to protect fighters from bullets. During the preparation meetings, Gullah Jack thus prepared rations of corn and nuts with the order to the rebels to “eat that and nothing else on the morning it [the revolution] breaks out.” He assured them, “… when you join us as we pass, put into your mouth this crab-claw, and you can’t be wounded.”\(^\text{45}\) Eventually, Vesey’s divination would fail in the reality of the western world, his fate proving much similar to or different from that of his Haitian inspirators, depending on which version of history one takes. According to established history, once Mackandal was arrested, he was chained and burned at the stake. For slaves, however, the story went differently: once flames surrounded Mackandal, he turned into a mosquito and flew away, forever chasing the whites from the island.\(^\text{46}\) Vesey’s followers expected a similar

\(^{44}\) Ibid., 48.

\(^{45}\) Ibid., 67.

\(^{46}\) Joseph Adjaye, “Mediated Lives: Memory and Construction of History in the Caribbean Diaspora,” *Journal of Caribbean Studies* 19, no.3 (2005): 214. “What is interesting,” Adjaye writes, “is the symbolic imagery that came to be associated with the mosquito, for whites soon came to discover that the mosquito was their most formidable enemy because it transmitted malaria” (214).
outcome upon Vesey's arrest. “The Negroes were under the impression that Denmark Vesey, the freed black, would be delivered,” wrote Mrs. Mary Beach, a middle-aged woman who closely attended his trial, “if in no other way the jail door opened by a supernatural power.” Little before his own execution, Gullah Jack would confess that what he feared most was that Vesey’s ghost would come to take revenge on him for failing his mission.47

By far the bloodiest in U.S. history, Nat Turner's rebellion in Southampton County, Virginia, in 1831, may paradoxically be included in

As Laurent Dubois adds, Mackandal gained mythical status when he struggled to set himself free and the post on which he was tied gave way. Amid the panic that ensued, the cry “Mackandal saved” that was heard among the public allowed his followers to believe that Mackandal had stayed true to his word before the execution that he would manage to escape by turning himself into a fly. Interestingly, Mackandal's sentence to death was pronounced because of his “mingling holy things in the composition and usage of allegedly magical packets.” (Avengers, 51).

47 David Robertson, Denmark Vesey, 102.

The shock that southerners experienced at the news of Vesey’s uprising together with the realization that their slaves had been inspired by the Haitian paradigm severely affected every corner of public life in Charleston and the entire nation. Recorded dialogues, such as that of John Horry, slave of Mr. Horry, who admitted that the insurrectionists' purpose was “[t]o kill you [their masters], rip open your belly, and throw your guts in your face,” incited terror in the white population by bringing to mind memories of the fate of white colonists in St. Domingue (Robertson 72). To the emerging question of whether Haiti should at last be recognized as an independent country by the United States, an established newspaper of Baltimore, Niles Register, wrote: “We think not. The time has not yet come for a surrender of our feelings about color, nor is it fitting, at any time, that the public safety should be endangered.”47 Charlestonian Edwin Clifford Holland was more adamant in his beliefs: “Let it never be forgotten that our Negroes are freely the Jacobins of the country;” the South Carolinian lawyer, poet, and essayist declared, “that they are the Anarchists and the Domestic Enemy: the common enemy of civilized society, and the barbarians who would if they could, become the destroyers of our race” (Eugene Genovese, From Rebellion to Revolution 96, emphasis his). Accordingly, the United States would not grant recognition to Haiti until 1863.
the list of insurrections that were inspired by the Haitian Revolution not because of Turner’s direct involvement with the Caribbean island, which remains elusive, but on the basis of white southerners’ suspicion of it. Historians mainly focus on a letter that reached the governor of Virginia a few days after Turner’s failed rebellion, during which time its prime instigator was still eluding arrest. Signed “Nero,” the letter warned of the creation of a revolutionary army in Haiti that was preparing to shed blood in the United States: “They will know how to use the knife, bludgeon, and the torch with effect – may the genius of Toussaint stimulate them to unremitting exertion…. We have no expectation to conquer the whites of the South States – our object is to seek revenge for indignities and abuses received…” Their leader, who had taken “lessons from the venerable survivors of the Haytian Revolution,” was now travelling throughout the South hoping to visit “almost every Negro hut and quarters there.” For Thomas Jefferson’s grandson, Thomas Jefferson Randolph, Assemblyman, who was at the time taking part in the debate on gradual

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48 In the early morning of August 22, 1832, Nat Turner together with six associates, later on joined by approximately sixty other slaves, began to raid local plantations, killing approximately fifty-eight people, most of whom infants and children. For a detailed view, see Kenneth S. Greenberg ed., Nat Turner: A Slave Rebellion in History and Memory (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), which contains a number of insightful contributions that shed light on the event and its aftermath.

49 Quoted in Matthew Clavin, Toussaint Louverture, 15-16.

50 Quoted in ibid.

emancipation in the Virginian legislature, there was no question as to the
lesson southerners had to learn: “The hour of the eradication of the evil is
advancing, it must come,” he declared. “Whether it is affected by the
energy of our minds or by the bloody scenes of Southampton and San
Domingo is a tale for future history.”

52 David Child, editor of the *Massachusetts Journal*, also found commonalities in the two regions:

“[T]he oppressed and enslaved of every country, Hayti and Virginia as well
as France and Poland, have a right to assert their 'natural and unalienable
rights' whenever and wherever they can,” he wrote, views to which
Thomas Roderick Dew, President of the College of William and Mary,
would bitterly respond: “Has it come at last to this… that the hellish plots
and massacres of Dessalines [Haitian rebel leader and first President of
Haiti], Gabriel, and Nat Turner, are to be compared to the noble deeds and
devoted patriotism of Lafayette, Kosciusko, and Schrynecki?”

53 Similarly,
in a pamphlet authored by Samuel Warner shortly after the rebellion had
claimed the lives of fifty-eight whites, the author appeared confident that
the atrocities resembled “scenes similar to those which but a few years
since, nearly depopulated the once flourishing islands of St. Domingo of its
white inhabitants,” and he accused Nat Turner of inculcating his army of
sixty to eighty slaves “the happy effects which had attended the united
efforts of their brethren in St. Domingo, and elsewhere, and encouraged

52 Quoted in Matthew Clavin, *Toussaint Louverture*, 14.

53 Quoted in Louis Masur, “Nat Turner and Sectional Crisis,” *Nat Turner: A Slave
Rebellion in History and Memory*, 153.
them with the assurance that a similar effort on their part, could not fail to produce a similar effect.”

A little before his execution, Nat Turner would receive the visit of a young white lawyer, Thomas Ruffin Gray, who had closely attended his trial, broadly reported to the press, and requested an interview that would shape historical and literary scholarship on Turner for decades to come. Gray’s subsequent publication of the interview, though controversial ever since, presented Nat Turner as a quasi-lunatic who was led by Holy visions to bloodshed the county: “He is a complete fanatic,” wrote Gray, “or plays his part most admirably.” More importantly, Gray’s *Confessions of*...

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54 Quoted in ibid., 15. If there was one major effect in the aftermath of the rebellion, this involved the rapid deterioration of slaves’ treatment in the region, as a number of innocent blacks suffered the wrath of white militia who took their vengeance on them in no less brutal a manner. Levi Waller, plantation master, asked for compensation for the loss of his slave, when local militia reportedly were “compelled to hamstring and disable him [Alfred, his slave met on the road,] and in this situation he was found … by dragoons from Greensville County, who shot him.” Another slave’s “ears were [reportedly] cut off, & after rubbing the wound with sand, they tied him on a horse” and left it roaming in the forest. When Richmond troops arrived, they asked a slave whether that was Southampton County and, when he replied, they shot him (Thomas Parramore, “Covenant in Jerusalem,” *Nat Turner: A Slave Rebellion in History and Memory*, 70). Such was the fury of the white authorities that honorable Jeremiah Cobb pronounced graphically Nat Turner’s sentence in court: “The judgment of the Court is, that you be taken hence to the jail from whence you came, thence to the place of execution, and on Friday next, between the hours 10 A.M. and 2 P.M. be hung by the neck until you are dead! dead! dead! and may the Lord have mercy upon your soul (Herbert Aptheker, “The Event,” *Nat Turner: A Slave Rebellion in History and Memory*, 57, emphasis added). According to Douglas Egerton, Turner arguably agreed to sell his body to the local doctors in exchange for ginger cakes as his last wish. As Egerton explains, though, “the fear most Africans had of physical dismemberment as impeding entrance into the spirit world” rather busts the myth. Whatever the truth may be, the fact remains that Turner’s body was dismembered and parts of it given to locals as souvenir (“Nat Turner in a Hemispheric Context,” *Nat Turner: A Slave Rebellion in History and Memory*, 135).
Nat Turner would serve as the background for a white southern novelist who would cause an uproar in literary and historical circles with his own account of the events approximately one hundred and thirty-four years later, in 1966. William Styron’s Confessions of Nat Turner presented the black insurrectionist as disdainful of his race, especially for the uneducated slaves who seem to him as “stupid as a barn fat of mules,” grateful for his benevolent master, to the extent that he does not want to be set free for fear that he might turn “a malingerer whenever possible,” and in love with a young white woman whom he fantasizes until “the twain—black and white—are one.”56 Such a provocative representation of a controversial leading black figure by a white southerner, especially at times when racial tensions in the United States were running high, only added fuel to fire and, indeed, response from the black intellectual community did not take long to come. In a book titled William Styron’s Nat Turner: Ten Black Writers Respond, the authors argued that Styron “reject[ed] history by rejecting the image of Nat Turner,” who instead was “a virile, commanding, courageous figure.” In fact, the Ten continued, Styron “wage[d] war on this image, substituting an impotent, cowardly, 


irresolute creature of his own imagination for the real black man who killed or ordered killed real white people for real historical reasons.”

The Ten’s fiery response to Styron’s novel opened a long debate that might still pose particular problematics for a hemispheric American Studies with which my own dissertation is allied. The question as to who has the right to delve into whose history and literature has often been raised as part of an intellectual identity politics that raises boundaries rather than helps scholars cross borders. Exclusive control over cultural representations does not protect a group from cultural appropriation but rather condemns it to cultural solipsism and intellectual decay.

Accordingly, Madison Smartt Bell’s endeavor to narrate the history of the Haitian Revolution in a trilogy certainly raised suspicious eyebrows; how could a white southern writer from Tennessee dare delve into the saga of the country whose name made so many of his ancestors shiver in fear? “[T]here was the whole problem of intellectual identity politics, which dictate that you’re not supposed to write about any groups of people of which you are not yourself a member,” Bell writes in an article and emphatically concludes: “I’d built my whole career as a novelist on breaking this stupid rule.” And it is precisely this rule that recent developments both in American Studies, as I have discussed in the

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introduction, and Southern studies have been trying to overcome by
breaching the boundaries and barriers that secluded them in parochial
identity politics.

Literary scholar Michael Kreyling, in his article “Toward a ‘New
Southern Studies,’” demonstrates how southern literature was occupied
with similar dichotomies as to “who was white and who was not, what was
literature and what was not, what was southern and what was not.” Kreyling
castigates earlier southern anthologies and critical works for their
attachment to the strict borders of canonical works that fostered regional
distinctiveness for decades. According to the graphic description by
Houston Baker Jr. and Dana D. Nelson, the southern literary imagination
until recently abounded with “Good (or desperately bad) Old Southern
White Men telling stories on the porch, protecting white women, and being
friends to the Negro.” This model of selective writing and forgetting in
endless pages of southern literature, David McWhirter adds, has played a
significant role in the configuration of Dixie in northern and southern, black
and white public memory as a unique cultural space and “as a privileged
locus… a bastion of traditional values (cultural, religious, familial,
communal, agrarian) – a last line of defence, or so it was argued, against
a soulless, rootless, corrupt urban industrial (hence ‘northern’)

59 Michael Kreyling, “Toward a ‘New Southern Studies,’” South Central Review

60 Houston Baker Jr. and Dana D. Nelson, “Preface: Violence, the Body, and ‘The
South,’” Violence, the Body, and “The South,” Spec. issue of American Literature
modernity.”61 Until recently, McWhirter further argues, southern literature was both read and taught as the cause and effect of the region’s chivalric dreams and historical nightmares, with its magnolia images not truly depicting the South, but arising from an essentialist description of the South, as if it existed prior and/or blind to the multitude of languages and cultures that flourished in the region.62

In this respect, it is of great interest to see how the recent debate about transnational narratives has affected the discipline that is most entrapped in its distinct sense of place and exceptionalism, southern studies. A number of questions Jon Smith and Deborah Cohn ask in the introduction of Look Away: The U.S. South in New World Studies, indicate the infinite new directions the discipline can take: “What happens... if we look away from the North in constructing narratives of southern identity? If we define ‘America’ hemispherically, for example, ...[or] if we do not define southern ‘defeat’ as southern white men’s surrender at Appomattox [?]”63 In one characteristic response, Immanuel Wallerstein traces the existence of a new southern region, a broader peripheral zone, a Caribbean world stretching from Brazil to Maryland, in an ironic shift of capitalism and its birth of Andersonian imagined communities and nation-


62 Ibid., 2.

In this collection of essays the reconfiguration of the South as a global, porous region, open to constructive infiltration by all sorts of cultures and ideas, is suggestive of the immense new intellectual inquiries and distances southern studies is invited to cover. Such deconstruction of the cultural, political, and economical boundaries of the formerly self-secluded region gives rise to a metonymic place that defies the celebration of the South as an exceptional region and moves beyond the binary oppositions of the past. Southern identity and cultural geography are now shifting from the glorification of a unilateral, white past to an all-inclusive,

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64 Ibid.

65 For instance, according to Jamie Winders, the U.S. South now emerges as the North of Latin America, as immigrants from the whole of the Hispanic world swarm not only to California but also to all southern states, shaping white and black established notions of cultural hierarchy and ideas. See Jamie Winders, “Rethinking Southern Communities, Reconfiguring Race: Latino Migration to the U.S. South,” The U.S. South in Global Contexts: A Collection of Positive Statements, Spec. issue of American Literature 78 (2006): 699-700.

Home to a constantly increasing number of transnational business corporations, the U.S. South, Tara McPherson argues, is now connected to reviving theories of labor exploitation that had exclusively been attributed to the lascivious North. See Tara McPherson, “On Wal-Mart and Southern Studies,” Spec. issue of American Literature 78 (2006): 695-98.

Dixie is now acknowledged as the locomotive of American industrial economy, the life force that nurtures U.S. imperialism, and the developed region that lies in sharp contrast with an indolent world that still struggles to reach modernity, John Matthews suggests. See John Matthews, “Globalizing the U.S. South: Modernity and Modernism,” Spec. issue of American Literature 78 (2006): 719-22.

As part of the broader hemispheric South, it becomes the land where never-ending stories of racial mistreatment and violence from Latin America, Mexico, and the Caribbean, now meet with the guilty and haunted stories of America’s slavery past, Susan Donaldson holds in “Visibility, Haitian Hauntings, and Southern Borders,” Spec. issue of American Literature 78 (2006): 714-16.
multiracial, and polyphonic discourse that crosses established borders, both physical and ideological ones.  

Such is the dialogue in which Carribeanists, headed by Edouard Glissant, have long been engaged. Glissant’s investment in an archipelagic concept of the Americas, characterized by the obscurity of linear genealogies and lack of centers and pure origins, led him to a theorization of a hemispheric continent with similar concepts and experiences. In this effort, the U.S. South emerges as the paradigmatic site of endless dislocations, loud silences, and silent presences that rise from mansions and plantations to haunt the present and the past. John Matthews writes: “The plantation South [which] derives its design from new-world models, owes a founding debt to West Indian slave-based agriculture, extracted labor and profit from African-Caribbean slave trade, and practiced forms of racial and sexual control common to other hemispheric colonial regimes.”  

It is within this common past of rootlessness and constant wanderings that Glissant finds in the pages of William Faulkner’s common stories and histories of “fratricidal conflict, 

66 Similarly, how can somebody separate southern studies from the mother-discipline of American Studies? Deborah Cohn suggests that the two disciplines have long suffered from mutual suspicion and exclusion, as “the (white) South was long cast (and long cast itself) as exceptional to the U.S. North’s master narratives of progress, modernity, and success.” And yet, following the rise of interest in the African diaspora, southern studies appears to be at the forefront of reshaping its curricula in favor of inclusive, diverse and global narratives that altogether can show the way for American Studies to overcome its inherent exceptionalism. See Deborah Cohn, “U.S. Southern Cultures and Latin American Studies: Windows onto Postcolonial Studies,” Spec. issue of American Literature 78 (2006): 706.

family entanglements, and an infringed moral code,” as Michael Dash argues.68 “And because the Faulknerian character is the only one in all of North American literature to be in no way separate from his vertiginous destiny,” Glissant writes, “he is the only one to totally signify the United States in their fundamental drama and in which the United States refuse to recognize themselves.”69 Indeed, this silence, the refusal to face the past and its perennial influence in the present, is what Glissant finds to celebrate in Faulkner’s masterpiece, Absalom, Absalom! (1936). It is the story of Thomas Sutpen, a white trash southerner who aspires to reach higher status after he is denied entrance to a local Cavalier’s mansion, “before that white door with the monkey nigger barring it and looking down at him.”70 Sutpen flees to Haiti, from where he returns with a number of Blacks – possibly slaves? – back to Mississippi in order to build his own family saga, only to collapse after he finds out one of his sons is of mixed racial origin. “Linearity gets lost. The longed-for history and its nonfulfillment are knotted up in an inextricable tangle of relationships, alliances, and progeny, whose principle is one of dizzying repetition,” Glissant argues, holding Sutpen’s story as paradigmatic of the detours and retours involved in New World history.71


69 Edouard Glissant, Poetic Intention, 161-62.

70 William Faulkner, Absalom, Absalom! (1936; New York: Vintage, 1990), 188.

71 Edouard Glissant, Caribbean Discourse, 80.
What is even more interesting, *Absalom!* has now become the focus of renewed attention, given the legendary “mistake” Faulkner seems to have made with respect to Sutpen’s trip to Haiti in 1827, at a time when slave trade was illegal. Apparently, John Matthews suggests, reading between the lines, what lies hidden in the pages of the novel is not only a hemispheric map of broken dreams and dislocations that has so far gone unnoticed, but also the notion of a Faulknerian “Southern innocence…. [that is,] not a failure to know but an interested lack of attention” on the part both of the novel’s protagonists and its readers. Matthews explains that “[w]hat Quentin is left with at the end of *Absalom* signals a persistence of historical knowledge that survives even the effort to shut one’s eyes to it.”\(^72\) It is only another point in which Glissant invests to develop his concept of *opacity*, the “impenetrability” of a common American slavery past that is lost in silenced memories and forgotten stories which is nevertheless constantly present but refusing to be apprehended by its unsuspected protagonists.\(^73\) The unavoidable yet constantly deferred obligation to know the other, to acknowledge their presence, and to recognize their history and existence is what Glissant therefore finds in the tragic Faulknerian heroes as foundational in the hemispheric American narrative. “But affirming at the same time the original secret and exploding a mechanism of its unveiling is to revive the collective consciousness,” he

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\(^72\) John Matthews, “Recalling the West Indies,” 257.

\(^73\) Edouard Glissant, *Poetic Intention*, 163, 162.
celebrates in Faulkner’s revelation of the southern psyche, “to maintain it in a state of anguish and questioning.”

And it is this effort to restore the Other into the collective memory of the U.S. South as part of a hemispheric Americas that I suggest Madison Smartt Bell participates in with his trilogy on the Haitian Revolution, namely *All Soul’s Rising* (1995), *Master of the Crossroads* (2000), and *The Stone That the Builder Refused* (2004). What is even more important is the fact that Bell immersed himself into his project at a time when the particular subject matter was of (very) little interest. It was only in the same year that *All Souls’* was published that anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouililot broke ground by highlighting the centuries-old silence of the Haitian Revolution as a historical event through his seminal *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*. Trouililot castigated the West for continuing to shun the Haitian achievement on the basis of “an implicit organization of the world and its inhabitants,” according to which the possibility of African slaves – devoid of human intelligence – rising up and succeeding in overthrowing colonial rule was impossible.75

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74 Ibid., 164. To be sure, Glissant does not abstain from criticizing Faulkner either. “Faulkner, behind the veil of irony or cold-blood, is indissociable from the drama he exposes also,” he writes. “I mean that none can ever be certain that this writer wasn’t a racist....” And Glissant continues: “Faulkner succumbs to the unconscious prejudicial movement against mulattoes or mixed-blood people: the “pure” Negro is always more noble for him, and at any rate more “sound” than the mulatto”(Ibid., 162). And even later on, “Faulkner is not far from believing (metaphysically?) that any solution (to a racial problem for example) would be a negation, a deep impoverishment of that collective being” (Ibid., 164).

75 Michel Rolph-Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon, 1995), 73. Interestingly, as critic Dorris Garraway shows, as recently as 2000, the French President, Jacques Chirac, went so far as to essentially attempt to re-write history by overshadowing the fact that Haiti was
Revolution thus entered history with the peculiar characteristic of being unthinkable as it happened,” Trouillot writes, just as he underlines the entrance of any event in the historical record with inevitable silences: “Something is always left out while something else is recorded. There is no perfect closure of any event,” he concludes. Less than a decade later, the shift of emphasis toward hemispheric narratives both in American and Southern studies, as well as the significant contribution of Bell’s trilogy would lead to an explosion of research on Haitian scholarship and prove Trouillot right in foregrounding the Haitian Revolution as a seminal event in American history and literature.

Within this context of influences, I wish to argue that in his portrayal of the Revolution Bell invests his protagonists in a Glissantian relation with their surroundings, meaning that they struggle to survive the bloodshed by constantly redefining themselves as individuals and changing sides or allies. In their vertiginous detours and retours, fixed origins, ideas, and classifications are shuttered for a relational, creolized identity to emerge, characterized by both violence and inter-dependence, until opacity intervenes to underline the inability to ever stabilize, define, and

under harsh French colonial rule against which Haitians rose. “Haiti was not, properly speaking, a French colony,” he declared, “…[and] we have in fact had amical relations with Haiti, notably insofar as we share the same language.” Garraway rightly takes Chirac to task not simply for “silencing” the Haitian Revolution and its causes but, equally important, for forgetting Bonaparte’s disastrous campaign to crush the revolution and reestablish slavery on the island. (“Introduction,” Tree of Liberty: Cultural Legacies of the Haitian Revolution in the Atlantic World, [Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2008], (7).

76 Ibid., 49.
apprehend the American world. In the end, his narrative emerges as a creolized history of the Americas where linearity is substituted for a diverse narrative of changing narrators and views, and where silences are deconstructed for the history of the Haitian Revolution to come to surface. “As a southerner raised on southern renascence literature, I was trained from an early age to recognize the bearing of history on the present,” Bell writes of his collective burden, the force of racial identity that shadows everyday life. “It now seems to me that the history of the Haitian Revolution bears on the present situation of the United States with a very considerable weight,” he concludes, in a statement that reverberates with diachronic connotations as to the role that events in Haiti have played in the U.S. mind all along.\textsuperscript{77}

Bell’s forceful start of \textit{All Souls’} abounds with meaning as to his active engagement with that burden of history and identity politics in the Americas throughout the trilogy. Antoine Hébert, a French doctor raised in the enlightened world arrives at Habitation Arnaud, in St. Domingue, in search of his sister, only to see the body of dying young black woman, who has hours earlier given birth, brutally nailed on a pole. “She killed her child the moment it was born. She stole a nail and drove it through its head. That nail” (\textit{All Souls’} 19),\textsuperscript{78} Michel Arnaud, the plantation master, defiantly explains to Hébert, in only another instance of resistance that

\textsuperscript{77} Madison Smartt Bell, “Engaging the Past,” 206.

\textsuperscript{78} Madison Smartt Bell, \textit{All Souls’ Rising} (New York: Vintage, 1995). All parenthetical references to the text are from this edition.
slave women had invented in their despair. Apparently, the baby was the outcome of shipboard rape during the Middle Passage, “[s]ome sailor’s bastard, a half-breed,” Arnaud fumes (19), indifferent to the drama of sexual abuse to which African women suffered on board the slave ships.\textsuperscript{79} For him, what matters is that his slave’s infanticide has cost him valuable property. “I paid twelve hundred pounds for that, and not eight months ago. Breeding stock, if you like. It is ruinous. If not abortion, it is suicide. They are animals” (20).\textsuperscript{80} Arnaud goes on, describing in a just few sentences the system of chattel slavery in the New World, “the idea of a slave as \textit{instrumentum vocale} – a chattel, a possession, a thing,” as Eugene Genovese has famously written.\textsuperscript{81}

It is precisely the concept of slavery, the infinite desire of one human wishing to subjugate the other on any pretext that Bell feels the need to explore. In a passage that fully encapsulates the trauma residing in the feminine psyche of the New World, Claudine, Arnaud’s wife, contemplates her behavior toward Mouche, a slave girl whom her husband had bought her as a lady’s maid and who now carries the baby of her husband, possibly a result of rape:

\textsuperscript{79} Treated as mere cargo, African women were systematically raped on board the slave ships. See Markus Rediker, \textit{The Slave Ship: A Human History}, (London: Penguin, 2008), 7, 152, 215.

\textsuperscript{80} During the Revolution, a mid-wife named Samedi acquired legendary fame for allegedly helping women to abort or kill their babies at birth. According to Dubois, “she wore a belt with seventy knots, each a reminder of one of her victims, for whom, she proclaimed, she had been a ‘liberator’” (Laurent Dubois, \textit{Avengers}, 47).

\textsuperscript{81} Eugene Genovese, \textit{Roll, Jordan, Roll}, 4.
Claudine… wished she could flay the bitch to the bone…. [But] their eyes met, and Claudine recalled in spite of her loathing how her parents had sold her to Arnaud for the money they believed he possessed, believing stupidly that all Creole planters were richer than Croesus, how whoever had sold Mouche from her home would have made a better bargain, receiving a few sticks of tobacco or an iron ax head in exchange for her life…. This crackling connection brought them to a communion larger than themselves. (All Souls’ 88-89) Claudine momentarily if instinctively thus understands that both she and Mouche are bound in the same fate, as mere instruments of profit in a merchandise system that essentially does not distinguish them from one another, no matter their race. In their passive role as women in the Americas, and even from within their statuses as master and slave, they both find themselves in a related relationship of imposed dependence on each other for the system to continue to thrive. But to maintain that relationship in the slave republics of the New World, no other way exists but violence. “[A]ll over the island masters and slaves were expressing their relation in similar ways, and it was nothing to lop an ear or gouge an eye, even to cut off a hand, thrust a burning stake up a rectum, roast a slave in an oven alive, or roll one down a hill in a barrel studded with nails,” Bell writes. “All these were as sacraments, body and blood” (89, emphasis added), as if masters and slaves have always been attendants
of that primeval, *opaque* liturgy that has been nurtured all along on human flesh in exchange for people to live together.

It is not long before the sheer horror of violence, emanating both from that inextricable connection between slave and master *and* the endemic fragility of that relationship, strikes the reader with full force. “Claudine thought that while her power over the girl was absolute, Mouche did not fully recognize this truth. Yet she would make her know it,” Bell writes (89). When she hears Mouche singing, “[t]he voice [that] came out of her essential African self” (91), the possibility that the slave might have, indeed, managed to find a way to break from that relationship, releases the absolute horror from Claudine’s psyche. As Claudine “let the razor decline through a slow curve and come to rest against the point just below the sternum where the taut rise of the belly began…. until the viscera slithered and slapped down tangling over Claudine’s feet” (91), she reenacts, body and blood, the sacrament of the New World, breaking the bondage of master and slave by tragically reestablishing it at the same time, in only another instance of that “*dizzying repetition*” of master-slave relationship Glissant talks about.\(^8^2\) As she looks down, she can now discern Mouche’s dying baby, in a shuttering moment that reveals her anguish, the unspoken truth of the humanity of slaves and of miscegenation that has been around her all along but of which nobody wants to speak: “It was the thing, Claudine was confident, that she had wanted to uncover, and she had a desire to open it further, to see and

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82 Edouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, 80.
know more, and more, but she did not gratify this wish” (92), Bell writes, as if recalling Glissant’s praise of Faulknerian heroes, the desire of whites to know of the unseen past in the Americas, to remove the curtain on the collective subconscious, but at the same time their inability to face the consequences of their relational identity to one another.

It is exactly the challenge to explore and embrace her creolized identity that Claudine eventually meets – in no less brutal terms. As the rebellion spreads and she manages to escape a burning mansion with a few survivors, she meets a band of rebels blocking their way. To gain their permission to pass, she daringly cuts her own finger when she discovers that her ring cannot come off (167). “No one of us could have believed that any whitewoman would do what she did then” (176), narrates Riau, the runaway slave who evolves into a central figure in the trilogy. Such an act of bravery and defiance is not simply indicative of Claudine’s determination to cross established gender and racial boundaries, but, equally important, it stands for the recognition of violence per se as a constitutive and deeply ingrained part of her own new, creolized identity and of the Americas as well. By inflicting and receiving violence with the same emotional strength that nurtured slavery, by succumbing as a slave to the demands of rebels who have now become masters, and by imposing on herself a similar punishment as to the one her former slaves suffered, Claudine triumphantly embraces the reversibility of her relational identity; in fact, she becomes a citizen of the New World.
To be sure, Bell’s promotion of violence as central to his narrative has met with critics’ skepticism, especially with respect to his realistic portrayal of countless scenes of interracial horror. Most notably, literary critic Paul Breslin praises Bell for his “ambitious, serious trilogy” but takes issue with his “almost voyeuristic treatment of violence and sexual degradation” and accuses the author of “inviting the reader to enjoy the stylistic inventions and graphic particularity lavished on these scenes, with an effect that sometimes verges on pornography.”83 For his part, Michel-Rolph Trouillot, despite his positive review, argues that All Souls’ “is bloody, violent to the extreme…. [It is] about bodies: bodies skinned, maimed, tortured, raped, and penetrated in ways that rupture the very souls they once hosted.”84 Both critics are admittedly right in their critiques, and the fact of the matter is that Bell’s trilogy abounds with scenes that appear disturbing if appalling, to say the least. But I would suggest that herein lies only another reason for Bell’s successful endeavor to delve into his challenging task. To narrate such a forceful history of the Americas, to break the silence that has so long covered it, and to face his

83 Paul Breslin, The First Epic of the New World: But How Shall It Be Written?," Tree of Liberty: Cultural Legacies of the Haitian Revolution in the Atlantic World, (Charlottesville: Virginia University Press, 2008), 228. Breslin takes, for instance, Bell’s following description of the dying slave woman that Herbert finds in the very second paragraph of All Souls’: “Pulling against the vertex of the nail, her pectoral musculature had lifted her breasts, which were taut, with large aureoles, nipples distended” (All Souls’ 12).

own collective prejudices and innocence of a U.S. white southern identity, Bell purposefully invests in realism so that the violent scenes speak for themselves. “... I decided to try for the most realistic and historically accurate rendition of which I might be capable,” Bell admits, and, indeed, what is crucial in his representation of the brutal reality of the New World is that Bell defies established categories of racial behavior to portray instances of horror as instigated by all sides yet on an individual basis. Accordingly, critic Martin Munro argues, “Bell places the accent less on fixed racial metonymies of “good” and “bad” than on individual acts, decisions, and choices of both “blacks” and “whites,” and their accumulative effects.”86 For instance, we learn that Arnaud is haunted by memories of torture to which he subjected his slaves:

Images boiled over him – his own hands nailing the hands of a rebellious Negro to a post, severing the leg of a runaway, lopping off nostrils, grinding a branding iron into charred flesh. He had compelled one slave to eat his own amputated ears, had ordered another to be ground to bloody pulp in the cane mill he had tended. (Masters 402)

Or we are told of the horrible revenge a mulatto, Choufler, takes on his white father, in a powerful moment that encapsulates the tragedy of racial divisions on the island. In his infinite anguish to substitute his subservient position as a mixed-race for the privileges his father has enjoyed all along,

85 Madison Smartt Bell, “Engaging the Past,” 206.

including white men’s right to fornicate with black women and produce offspring such as himself, essentially to reverse the master-slave relationship that has governed their lives all along, Chouller inflicts on his father the cruelest punishment he can conceive of. He will skin his body alive and will even deny him the right to scream, just as he has been condemned to silent subjugation by birth due to his skin:

The epidermis had been peeled away strategically to reveal the workings of the musculature on the hands and arms and thighs; even the cheeks were laid bare, and the lips had been cut away (so that the man must scream without a proper mouth to do it with). Two tendons had been severed, so that the large muscles of the thigh hung down below the trembling genitalia, and above these, an incision had been made into the body cavity. The operator pulled out the mass of intestines, straightened out the kinks in them and let them drop. He reached within and laid the curious hand on the liver, the spleen, the palpitating heart…. This was a sincere inquiry into the nature of man, not how a man is made and how his parts cooperate, but what a man is, in his essence, and who, in the final analysis, would be allowed to be one. (All Souls’ 237)

Just so do we read of the brutal attack of the rebel forces on one of the plantations they raided when the Revolution began and their capacity to become the monsters their white masters believed them to be, in a scene
of rape whose perpetrator bears a name – and which rather validates Breslin’s charges of pornography:

In another room a whiteman hung upside down across a bed, gutted like a hog with his entrails swung from the breastbone tangling across his face, and below his stiffening open hands a naked whitewoman screamed and struggled on her all-fours. The man behind her was Paul Lefu, who kept jerking her up by the hips to meet his thrusts into her hindquarters, wanting her to support herself four-legged like an animal, but her palms would slip from under her on the blood-slickered floor and her face crash down against it. (All Souls’ 171)

Equally terrifying is Riau’s narration of one of the most heinous, albeit alleged atrocities during the Revolution, how Jeannot (a real-life rebel reader, notorious for his cruelty) “was leading them [rebels] all and carrying a white baby stuck onto a spear. The baby was newborn, or notborn even, and it was not quite dead but could still move its arms and legs a little the way a frog does when you stick it” (176). The particular scene has been the subject of debate among historians across centuries to the extent that, Laurent Dubois suggests, it “became one of the most lasting images of Saint-Domingue’s slave uprising.”87 As historian Jeremy Popkin explains, there is one single source mentioning the event, an anonymous chronicle, according to which on August 23, 1791, the band of

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rebels attacking the Galliffet plantations “had for a banner the body of a white child impaled on the end of a pike.” Yet Popkin explains that its author was at the time in prison, and his account based on witnesses. Accordingly, Trouillot dismisses the story focusing on “its apparent usefulness in propaganda,” though he admits that he “can’t prove” whether such atrocity ever took place or not. Whatever the case may have been, it is interesting that Trouillot gives Bell credit for the fact that “[w]e can find evidence in the official record for almost every one of the monstrous acts committed in the book” and, indeed, in their totality historians agree that violence was a definitive aspect of the Revolution. “I believe that in ignoring the Haitian Revolution, we in the United States lose an important part of the meaning of our own history,” Bell concludes his rationale to embark on his project, as if underscoring the endemic violence that run the relationship between masters and slaves, whites and Native Americans or African Americans and vice versa in the Americas. Indeed, “the story is profoundly Caribbean,” John Lowe agrees, “but has many affinities to the literature of the U.S. South.”

In repeated confrontations with that violence, Claudine’s reconciliation with her past involves a number of steps in the voluminous


90 Ibid., 195.

91 Madison Smartt Bell, “Engaging the Past,” 206.

trilogy, quite often retreating to a hallucinatory state amidst silences, shrieks, and visions. But in the creolized world of the Americas, retours to the prior condition of feigned innocence cannot possibly yield fruitful results. During only another rebel attack to the convent of Les Ursulines which she had joined, Claudine has “the inspiration of setting her hair aflame,” in a desperate attempt to purge herself from the crimes of the past, at the same time that she speaks to her supposed unborn baby in her belly (All Souls’ 493). Forever exiled from her idyllic but fake past, she embarks on a Glissantian errantry, ceaseless journeys across the regions, finding bits and pieces of her scattered identity everywhere, until one day she returns with her husband to their plantation if briefly. “It must be said that my wife did a very great evil, whose blot still lies across this land…. She did so only following my example,” Arnaud confesses to Hebert, as “[t]he captain’s eyes slid shut, against his will. Imprinted on their lids he saw, as through the knothole, the human skull and heap of bones littered on the shed floor, and the pair of skeletal hands still lashed to a hook on the wall above” (Master 295).  

Mouche’s bones are there to haunt the present and the past of her masters, visible remains of the violence on which her relationship with them was built, but Bell does not let Arnaud and Claudine those remains. On the contrary, they both embrace the history of that past, acknowledging its presence, and perhaps even truly feeling sorrow for the stain that has

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93 Madison Smartt Bell, Master of the Crossroads (New York: Vintage, 2004). All parenthetical references to the text are from this edition.
forever been imprinted on their minds. “It was there my wife murdered her lady’s maid, a bossale fresh from Africa, who, as it happened, was carrying my child,” Arnaud further admits. “You will understand, in my heat I had sowed the whole atelier with half-breed bastards…. As you have seen, the very bones still hang in bondage, and my wife is bound to them, and so am I” (295). For Bell, the recognition of that violence – the visibility of the bones in the very spot on which the drama of the New World was enacted and the inevitability of its consequences in the lives of his protagonists – is of fundamental importance for the history of the Americas to be narrated. This history of silences, retrieved from the collective unconscious and broken free, is highly disturbing but needs to be told. As Bell argues in a response to his critics in 2007, “So it may be that the story of the Haitian Revolution is now necessary less to Haitians than to “us” – citizens of the surrounding societies who have spent roughly two hundred years steadfastly refusing to hear about it.”

And so his characters do hear the stories that their world tells them, prominent among whom Claudine, whose affiliation with her creolized world becomes complete with her initiation into the syncretic religion of the New World, voodoo. What is of great interest is the particular goddess

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95 According to Margarite Fernandez Olmos and Lizabeth Paravasini-Gebert, the term “voodoo” derives from the West African language of Ouida (or Whydah) meaning “spirit” or “sacred energy.” It is a syncretic religion that draws on a pantheon of African and Creole deities, Catholic saints, and spirits of ancestors who altogether actively intervene in the everyday life of the devotees by offering advice and demanding favors in exchange. Neither standard a liturgy nor a
that mounts her, Erzulie-gé-Rouge (*Masters* 459). According to critic Joan Dayan, Erzulie, broadly known as “the Black Venus,” “The Tragic Mistress,” or “the Goddess of Love,” is distinct from the wider voodoo pantheon on the basis of her birth in the New World, a creolized goddess born out of colonial domination and female slave resistance that signifies the transcendence of violence through the redeeming yet self-negating power of love. Just as love in the New World came to signify servitude, either in a master-slave or husband-wife relationship, as Dayan explains, so does, I suggest, Claudine grow out of her secluded self into a figure of unrequited love. Participating in a process of Glissantian *Becoming*, by which diversity and cross-cultural conduct allow the individual to establish a relation with the Other, Claudine commits herself to teaching children and being humble and caring to all, no matter their race (*Masters* 459). Through her service to the *loa*, in which, Dayan nicely argues, “a person or thing can be two or more things simultaneously [and a] word can be double, two-sided, and duplicitous,” a space of relation to one another

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97 Ibid., 56.

98 Edouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, 98.

irrespectively of one’s identity, Claudine gradually discovers the related world of the Americas.

Indeed, we read that the “serviteurs had begun to say that she [Claudine] had her skin turned inside out, and that she did not have the spirit of a white person at all” (Masters 459), Riau as narrator declares in admiration of her transcendence, yet by no means does her atonement during the voodoo ceremonies absolve her of her haunted past. Toward the end of the trilogy, and as Claudine is again mounted by Erzulie Jé Rouj, she addresses Hébert’s sister, Elise, in a bitter tone that captures the unbearable burden of history in the New World: “You dreamed the dream of the blanche, Claudine Arnaud – it was she who cut the child unborn from the mother’s belly, long ago and yesterday and always, and ever since the child has walked with her” (Stone 649). Claudine thus consciously acknowledges the voodoo goddess as co-inhabitant and co-participant in her world, offering her very body as a medium for the voice of the creolized voodoo deity to speak and castigate the centuries-long maltreatment of the Other in the Americas. In the perennial anguish residing in white women’s soul, Bell then reaches the depths of the creolized world, the silenced truth of the relationality between master and slaves, whites and blacks, that has nevertheless been founded on violence. Besides, Dayan suggests of voodooism, “to be seized by the

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100 Madison Smartt Bell, The Stone that the Builder Refused (New York: Vintage, 2006). All parenthetical references to the text are from this edition.

101 In her book Divine Horsemen, Maya Deren narrates her possession by Erzulie: “As sometimes in dreams, so here I can observe myself, can note with
god, is... to destroy the cunning imperial dichotomy of master and slave, or colonizer and colonized,” for the mounting of the devotee by the spirit and his or her complete transformation is not based on any sort of social distinctions or coercion but on the recognition of the strange Other as actively present in real life. In the words of Wilson Harris, such is precisely the capacity of voodoo, “which breaks the tribal monolith of the past and re-assembles an inter-tribal or cross-cultural community of families.”

Bell’s acknowledgment of the hidden if secluded Other in the creolized Americas is best exemplified by the figure of Riau, the African-born Maroon whom Bell elevates as his sole protagonist who speaks in the first person throughout the trilogy. Already in the beginning of the second chapter Riau introduces himself by clarifying that “the whitemen believe that everything is a story. In their world that may be so. I [He] will not live there.... Their story is not the same as ours” (All Souls’ 27), as if to underscore his positionality in the text as the figure who will repeatedly interfere to narrate another version of history. And his interruptions in the text, in the form of entire full chapters, will be strategically placed, defying

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pleasure how the full hem of my white skirt plays with the rhythms, can watch, as if in a mirror, how the smile begins with a softening of the lips, spreads imperceptibly into a radiance which, surely, is lovelier than any I have ever seen. It is when I turn, as if to a neighbor, to say “Look! See how lovely that is!” and see that the others are removed to a distance, withdrawn to a circle which is already watching, that I realize, like a shaft of terror struck through me, that it is no longer myself whom I watch. Yet it is myself, for as that terror strikes, we two are made one again....” (258-59).


the linear order and reason of Western narration but at the same time shedding light on the events and its protagonists, what Wilson Harris celebrates as the "discontinuity…[where] the essential objectivity or life of art resides."

104 “The whiteman must know a reason for each thing which he does, but with the people of Guinée, it is not so. I had a spirit walking with me, whether Kalfou or Ogun-Feraille, and had only to go where the spirit would lead me…” (Masters 169). So declares Riau, introducing a zone of opacity that more often than not will unsettle the western readers in their understanding of the events.  

It is not coincidental that we learn of the definitive event of the Haitian Revolution, the Bois Cayman meeting of rebel readers, through Riau’s voice. “Boukman [the legendary hungan who allegedly presided over the meeting] stood up…. Before he spoke we all could feel his esprit. It was not one loa riding him that night, but all les Morts et les Mystères” (All Souls’ 115), Riau narrates the religious ceremony that meant to mark the outburst of the Revolution. Little is known of the particulars, but according to Laurent Dubois, the event must have taken place on Sunday, August 21, 1791, during which conspirators vowed for secrecy “drinking the blood of a black pig sacrificed before them,” in accordance with West

104 Ibid., 26.

105 As critic Charles Forsdick nicely argues, though reading Toussaint’s figure only, “Bell thus exploits the opportunities provided by fiction – such as the opportunity it grants him to create Riau – to resist the demands of positivist historiography; he is consequently able to retain, in his portrayal of Toussaint himself, a certain degree of opacity” (“Madison Smartt Bell’s Toussaint at the Crossroads: The Haitian Revolutionary between History and Fiction,” Small Axe 23 (2007): 202).
Of contemporary accounts there can be found only one, by Antoine Dalmas, a surgeon at a nearby plantation, who supposedly acquired firsthand information about the event and presented it accordingly to the panic-stricken readers when his memoirs was published in 1814: “The religious ceremonies that the blacks practiced in slitting the pig’s throat, …the eagerness with which they drank its blood, the value they placed on possessing some of its hairs – a kind of talisman that, according to them, would make them invulnerable – serves to characterize the African,” Dalmas argued, only to conclude that “it was natural for such an ignorant and stupid class to take part in the superstitious rituals of an absurd and bloody religion before taking part in the most horrible assassinations.”

For Bell, however, the account is much different. In an emotional text where Riau recognizes the lingering, eternal presence of millions of dead slaves in the Americas in the form of loa, the voodoo ceremony is described in detail to present an alternative historicization of the events, a narrative where the living and the dead appear to have always coexisted defiant of logical explanations, causes and effects (All Souls’ 112-19). As a mosquito bites Toussaint and Riau recalls Macandal, the legendary first rebel of St. Domingue (119), opacity spreads over Riau’s deeper thoughts on the event, raising walls to the Western reader’s attempt to understand what really might have happened there. “Voodoo was the medium of

106 Laurent Dubois, Avengers, 100.

107 Ibid.
conspiracy. In spite of all prohibitions, the slaves travelled miles to sing
and dance and practice the rites and talk,” C. L. R. James confirms. Yet
the exact details of the ceremony can only be conceived of through
imagination, and the nature of the creole religion, the very improvisation
on which it rests, makes any possibility of an established historical account
impossible, leaving space for Bell’s imagination to fill the void.

“Somewhere along this way [of writing the novels] my notion of artistic
inspiration was considerably simplified, so that in the end my governing
intention became to serve Les Invisibles, Les Morts et les Mystères: to let
my voice be replaced by theirs,” Bell writes in an article. “I hope that I have
served them well.”

Riau’s first-person narration of the history of the Haitian Revolution
continues in the same spirit of alternating time and space sequels, but
what is no less interesting is that his version abounds with historically
accurate references that reconstruct the American world from a creolized

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108 C. L. R. James, The Black Jacobins, 86.

109 Wilson Harris speaks of voodoo in a manner that solidifies boundaries as to
the possibility of comprehending, in the Glissantian sense of capturing the
meaning of, the particular religion: “Haitian vodun or voodoo is a highly
condensed feature of inspiration and hallucination within which ‘space’ itself
becomes the sole expression and recollection of the dance – as if ‘space’ is the
character of the dance – since the celebrants themselves are soon turned into
‘objects’ – into an architecture of movement like ‘deathless’ flesh, wood, or stone.
And such deathless flesh, wood or stone (symbolic of the dance of creation)
subsists – in the very protean reality of space – on its own losses (symbolic
decapitation of wood, symbolic truncation of stone)) so that the very void of
sensation in which the dancer begins to move, like an authentic spectre or
structure of fiction, makes him or her insensible to all conventional props of habit
and responsive only to a grain of frailty or light support” (“History, Fable and
Myth,” 13).

110 Madison Smartt Bell, “Sa Nou Pa We Yo,” 216
perspective. For instance, we learn of the notorious suspicions governing the relations between slaves and Maroons that I discussed in the previous chapter on representations of Nanny:¹¹¹ “He [Riau] knew that there was no love between maroons and slaves, and that the maroons did not trust the slaves who ran away to them, thinking that they might be spies who would deliver them all to the whitemen again” (*All Souls’* 113). Or we read about the Maroon camps as creolized spaces of Native American influence that I chart in the same space.¹¹² Narrates Riau: “We had still the Indian-woven fish traps, the bows with their arrows almost as long as a man was tall, and some said even the gourd and bead asson which our hungan shook in time with the drums as the spirits came down, that the asson had first been given by an Indian mystère (*Masters* 164). Similarly, we learn about the horrors of the Middle Passage, in a passage that might as well now be considered classic:  

In Guinée I was alive, but they brought me out a dead thing. I was not three days but three months in my tomb. Each day they brought us on the deck and made us eat and made us dance, still nothing moved but the corps-cadavre. As a dead thing I

¹¹¹ See this dissertation, 156-57.

¹¹² Ibid., 149-51. According to historians Sylvia de Groot, Catherine Christen, and Franklin Knight, the rugged terrain of St. Domingue together with the position of most colonies in scattered locations allowed for thriving Maroon communities to be established on the island. According to estimates, already by 1546 more than 7,000 Maroons in a total slave population of 30,000 had escaped to the mountains. All attempts to track them down and dismantle their communities repeatedly meant with little success, if any (“Maroon Communities in the Circum-Caribbean,” *General History of the Caribbean: The Slave Societies of the Caribbean*, Vol. 3, ed. Franklin W. Knight [Unesco, 1997], 173).
was sold to Bréda. There Toussaint was my parrain, and there could be none better. Toussaint taught me how to be a slave, how to bear my death. It was the hungan Achille, when he came down from the mountain with his band, who touched my lips and eyes and made me live again. (All Souls’ 476)

What then emerges from throughout the trilogy is a creolized history of the Americas, in other words, a history structured exactly on the irreducible singularity of its related inhabitants113 — to use Glissant’s terms, the narration of history through literature that allows for the submerged, individual voices to speak and contest the established narrative. “In Bell’s novel [The Stone,] the standard categories of historical analysis tend to dissolve into the vagaries, complexities, and often reversals taken within personal trajectories,”114 argues Dubois, a reading that Bell himself celebrates as “the most fundamental difference between the historical novelist and the historian – this reversed priority of the personal and the categorical.”115

Nowhere does this prioritization of the individual as enlightening of history become clearer than Riau’s alternation between first and third person narratives, his shifting alliances and crossing of established boundaries. “At other times I had left Dieudonné, and I had left Toussaint’s army. I had left Habitation Bréda when I ran away to the maroons and

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113 Edouard Glissant, Poetics of Relation, 190.
115 Madison Smartt Bell, “Sa Nou Pa We Yo,” 214.
before that I left Guinée to be a slave in Saint Domingue. Now I was leaving Bahoruco,” (Masters 170), Riau narrates, as if highlighting the quintessential Glissantian hero who refuses to be settled, defined, and eventually comprehended. Riau’s flexibility to change from slave to Maroon, soldier to captain, Riau and mounted voodooist, essentially his self-freedom to alternate among different identities, is what grants him a *relational* identity whose definition is lost in the *opacity* of the creolized world, “the real foundation of Relation, in freedoms,” as Glissant writes.¹¹⁶

For in his capacity to change sides and cross rigid borders, Riau eventually refuses to be understood, to be captured in words and western narratives, none of which could possibly grasp the full complexity of his condition. “Agree not merely to the right to difference but, carrying this further, agree also to the right to opacity that is no enclosure within an impenetrable autarchy but subsistence within an irreducible singularity,”¹¹⁷ Glissant continues, underscoring the search of the Western mind for transparency and logical patterns, and at the same time the inapplicability of the creolized world to be conceived of in such terms. Accordingly, so writes historian Keith Cartwright as recently as 2013: “Something of the unthinkableably of the Haitian Revolution, its refusal to be contained within

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¹¹⁷ Ibid.
Western categories of analysis, remains with us, affecting what we read and how we read, whom we collectively see and whom we don’t."  

Paradigmatic of Bell’s creolized approach to historical novel writing is the figure of Dr. Hébert, who serves as the reader’s guide to the unknown world of the Haitian Other, “the stranger who arrives in the strange land knowing nothing and needing to learn it all,” in Bell’s words. From the beginning of the trilogy Hébert appears to be distant from his Enlightened Self, quick to acknowledge the humanity of slaves and weary of the colonists’ temperamental character. “He was a very strange whiteman. Sometimes Riau had even wondered if he were not a man of Guinée who by witchcraft was poured into the skin of a blanc” (Master 244), writes Riau of him, and indeed, it is not long before Hébert displays a character indifferent to racial norms of behavior and classifications by even marrying his colored mistress, Nannon, a prostitute, and acknowledging her son (Master 638). The politics at play that Bell pursues thus become apparent: in the chaotic New World of radical opposites and extremes, the two characters attempt mutual steps toward constructing a unique-in-its-diversity new identity through a relational approach to their parochial surroundings, where their cosmologies merge for a creolized Americas to come to surface. Indeed, “[t]heir ways of thinking and being are very different, but neither is superior to the other,”


119 Madison Smartt Bell, “Engaging the Past,” 203.
Bell writes, and he explains that “Riau proves capable of assimilating himself a long way toward the European, while the doctor shows a capacity to assimilate himself considerably toward what is emerging as the Haitian.” The outcome is a new, creolized identity that is born in the American archipelago but its particulars are lost in the countless personal stories that constitute the experience of the Americas, a place structured on personal difference and cultural diversity and insistent upon acceptance and respect. To attempt to define it, Glissant suggests, would mean to reduce it in a system of hierarchies “– But perhaps we need to bring an end to the very notion of a scale. Displace all reduction.”

Among the countless personal stories that abound in the trilogy are those of characters moving back and forth between the Caribbean and the United States, either seeking refuge from racial terror or a better fortune in the stable regions of the American North (Master 101, 221-22, 538 and The Stone 16, 86). It is the same journey Frederick Douglass would make eighty-nine years after the declaration of Haitian independence on January 1, 1804, when, as consul general to Haiti, he addressed the World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago, on January 2, 1893. Organizers were celebrating, albeit a year later, the four-hundredth anniversary of Columbus’s arrival to the American shores in a display of U.S. American ingenuity and progress. For Douglass, though, the historical focus was different. “From the beginning of our century until now,” he argued, “Haiti

120 Ibid.
121 Edouard Glissant, Poetics of Relation, 190.
and its inhabitants under one aspect or another, have, for various reasons, been very much in the thoughts of the American people. While slavery existed amongst us, her example was a sharp thorn in our side and a source of alarm and terror.” And he continued: “Her very name was pronounced with a shudder. She was a startling and frightful surprise and a threat to all slave-holders throughout the world, and the slave-holding world has had its questioning eye upon her career ever since.” More than a century later reality seemed to be no different, the Haitian Revolution remaining obscure, shunned in the academy as an anomaly among the grand Revolutions of the world. Together with the radical shift of American and Southern studies toward a polyphonic world at the turn of the century, however, Bell’s trilogy of the Haitian Revolution meant to break ground by presenting an imaginative historicization of the American past – a related, creolized world of racial symphonies and antitheses that nowadays may as well be considered as indispensable to the official narrative.123

122 Matthew Clavin, Toussaint Louverture, 181.

123 John Lowe concludes: “By pointing to the violence of history, the [three] novels reveal a parallel Caribbean story that complements the tragic racial history of the U.S. South and the nation. More generally, these narratives force the complacent reader to confront history with less detachment and with more awareness of the lives that have been lost in the quest for full humanity and freedom” (Calypso Magnolia, 143-44).
Epilogue

Creolized Histories:

History and Literature Together, and Where We Go Next

“The sea is History,” writes Derek Walcott in his famous homonymous poem, reciting foundational moments in the history of a porous, cross-cultural world from the ancient times to the New World in just a few lines.¹ This dissertation attempted to accomplish a similar itinerary in order to narrate the relationality of the American past by focusing both on established historical accounts of seminal events and their reinscription in literary texts that have come to revise the established narratives. With the safe harbor of American Studies as my point of sail, what I have tried to chart is a cartography of the past that both pays respect to the rigid demands of professional historiographic research and spreads across literary texts to tell stories previously unheard of but which significantly shape our understanding of the past.

Each and every author analyzed in the preceding pages has accomplished to bring to light foundational narratives which official history has chosen to ignore. Derek Walcott merges the waters of the Mediterranean with the American archipelago to negotiate the burdened influence of ancient Greece in the Americas. Maryse Condé gives voice to the silenced figure of Tituba in order to address the foundational moment of U.S. American history, Puritanism. Michelle Cliff retrieves the legendary heroine of the Jamaican mountains, Queen Nanny, to narrate the lost

history of maroonage, perhaps the definitive characteristic of Caribbean history. The same author relives the past of Mary Ellen Pleasant to question the starting point of the Civil War, John Brown’s raid on Harpers Ferry. Last but not least, Madison Smartt Bell imagines the Haitian Revolution, an event of which so little had been written at the time of his trilogy’s publication but which nowadays proves of such importance in our understanding of the American past. In the end, what all four writers present is a creolized history of the Americas, in other words a hemispheric past of cultural mobility and infiltration where imagination comes to fill in the gaps of the negligent historical account. From within their pages, a different American history story emerges, one that narrates the penetrability of seemingly sealed national boundaries, betrays false racial and gender dichotomies, and finally rejects ideas of a parochial cultural essentialism. Instead, the different historiography that emerges from the Caribbean archipelago acknowledges historical consciousness among all peoples, its content being contingent on the irreducible singularity of each culture.

To be sure, the interconnectedness of history and literature in the narration of the past does not limit itself in the Americas. Rather, it can serve as a starting point for myriad other stories across continents to be told, and events will never stop producing parallel but different stories that bring peoples closer together. For instance, and as these lines are written in April 2016, recent developments offer additional loci of commonality between the Caribbean and the Greek archipelago. As the financial crisis
that has brought Greece to its knees evolves, what business media
describe as a “Depression worse than 1929 America,” news of the recent
inability of Puerto Rico to cover its debts too has filled the international
media with immediate references to Greece. To a further extent, and to
those living in Greece, it is hard to ignore the harsh reality of a neo-
colonized region, what The Financial Times’ editor Wolfgang Munchau
graphically describes as “the eurozone’s first colony” that has dramatically
lowered people’s standard of living to third-world status. At the same time,
the humanitarian crisis that is currently developing in the Aegean
prompted by Syrian refugees fleeing the misery of civil war bears striking
similarities with the drama of immigrants long taking place in the
Caribbean. Interestingly, skeptical governments of the European North
have been persistently propagating the idea of Greece’s exit from the

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3 Writes The Economist: “Both [Greece and Puerto Rico] sit at the southern, sunny edge of a large currency union, are bereft of natural resources, and developed thanks to generous monetary and fiscal transfers from richer regions. Both borrowed profligately to fund over-generous public payrolls at artificially cheap interest rates – in Greece’s case because lenders assumed that the EU would back the debt; in Puerto Rico because its interest payments are tax-exempt for mainland American investors. Both economies lost competitiveness because of high production costs, an overvalued currency and inflexible labour markets. And both have responded to surging bond yields and a loss of market access with grinding austerity programmes, which have stabilized their nominal debts only at the cost of severe recessions.” See “Another Fine Debt Crisis” at http://www.economist.com/news/business-and-finance/21656446-startling-parallels-between-greece-and-american-outpost-caribbean-another-fine-debt, 30 June 2015

4 Visit “Greece must default if it wants democracy” by Wolfgang Munchau, at http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/16f04ffa-5963-11e1-9153-00144feabd0.html#ixzz1mv1mT42f 20 Feb 2012
Schengen passport-free travel zone treaty that would immediately halt the refugee wave from the European South to the North.\(^5\) Such geographical categorizations certainly do strike a chord with similar divisions in the Americas now reappearing in the European continent.\(^6\) In this and many respects, I argue, Edouard Glissant’s notion of a _prophetic vision of the past_ acquires a different, metonymic, and perhaps literal dimension, as if the vision of what may have happened in the past proves prophetic of what is to come tomorrow.

In the end, creolized histories, alias history and literature together, tell parallel but different stories of the same events, with history repeating itself albeit with different protagonists, in an eternal struggle for people to make sense of their surroundings. To include such stories in the official narratives, without losing sight of their irreducible singularity and historical specificity, is to honor people’s efforts to preserve them in memory. They are meaningful to those they immediately concern as well as to others writing about them thousands of miles away.

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\(^5\) Visit “Greece warned EU will reimpose border controls” by Alex Barker, Duncan Robinson, and Kerin Hope Financial Times 1 Dec 2015, https://next.ft.com/content/463dc7a0-982b-11e5-9228-87e603d47bdc

\(^6\) Writes Gavin Hewitt, BBC editor: “There are vast differences between the [European] North and the [European] South…. The South wants solidarity; the North does not want to accept further liability for the debts of the nations they mistrust. What holds these countries together is fear; fear of the zone disintegrating and the unknown.” Visit “Eurozone Crisis: North versus South” by Gavin Hewitt BBC Europe, 11 July 2012, http://www.bbc.com/news/world/europe-18793708
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