

Writing beyond Redress: Slavery and the Work of Literature

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To bring these acknowledgments to a close, I must underscore that this dissertation would not have been realized without the help I received at the Writing Center of the University of Minnesota. Thank you so much, Director Katie Levin, and all the consultants I worked with, especially Lee Fisher. You understood the unique challenges that writing a dissertation on the problematic of writing posed. I respect you and I am grateful for your help and healing words. Last, but with deepest gratitude, I thank all the students and teachers I have been fortunate to know and to work with over the years. You have taught me so much: you are the heart of my work.



## **Dedication**

I dedicate this dissertation to the memory of my grandparents:

Helen Zawistoski and Theodore Pentkowski; Lucy Anziano and William Gildersleeve.

## Abstract

*Writing beyond Redress: Slavery and the Work of Literature* is a comparative study of literary works by Afro-Caribbean writers which illuminate the entanglements of slavery, imperialism, and imprisonment. Spanning a period from the early nineteenth century to the early twenty-first century, the project traces in literary writing a dialectic of confinement and emancipation in the long fight against the system of slavery and its attendant ideologies. Each chapter focuses on a primary text that foregrounds either a specific site of confinement during slavery, or an instantiation of its afterlife: the prison (*The Memoir of General Toussaint Louverture*, by Louverture himself), the sugar plantation (*Autobiografía de un esclavo*, Juan Francisco Manzano), the isolated peasant village (*Gouverneurs de la rosée*, Jacques Roumain), and the immigration detention center (*Brother, I'm Dying*, Edwidge Danticat). Calling us to rethink the labor involved in the act of writing and the stakes—including physical risk—of speaking from within and against systems of oppression, these texts illuminate the inhibitions of speech and activity that slavery and the institutions that arose in its aftermath were designed to maintain. Confronting, too, the often dissimulating uses of language by the dominant society, these texts reimagine the potency of the written word to combat social wrongs and to forge other possible forms of social being. While writing alone cannot redress the damages of slavery, at the same time, writing must be claimed for the ongoing work of emancipation.

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## INTRODUCTION

### Slavery and Writing in Light of the Present

Slavery...established a measure of man and a ranking of life and worth that has yet to be undone. If slavery persists as an issue in the political life of black America, it is not because of an antiquarian obsession with bygone days or the burden of a too-long memory, but because black lives are still imperiled by a racial calculus and a political arithmetic that were entrenched centuries ago.

—Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Across the Atlantic Slave Route* (4)

The Plantation is one of the bellies of the world, not the only one, one among so many others, but it has the advantage of being able to be studied with the utmost precision. Thus, the boundary, its structural weakness, becomes our advantage. And in the end its seclusion has been conquered. The place was closed, but the word derived from it remains open.

—Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (75)

Nothing keeps history univocal except power.

—Susan Buck-Morss, *Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History* (150)

## The Inquiry and the Stakes

This dissertation, *Writing beyond Redress: Slavery and the Work of Literature*, emerges out of two primary concerns: on the one hand, for the history of slavery in the Americas, and on the other, for contemporary anti-black racism in the Americas. My orientation to these two concerns entails both scholarship and activism. The tension between the work of the pen and other labors of resistance underpins a question that animates my project: What is the relationship between battling the injustices of the world—especially the ongoing propagation of structural racism, racialized violence, and racist ideologies—and the work of writing and scholarly pursuit? One response I will offer begins with an observation. I often hear people of various political convictions characterize intellectual work—especially reading, studying, and writing—as complicit with the dominant order, or as simply out of touch. Appearing distant from matters of corporeal violence and material deprivation, scholarship is sometimes regarded as at best indifferent to, at worst an accomplice to, such realities. There are, to be sure, occasions in which those of us involved in intellectual work, especially at institutions of higher education, may recede from “the world.”<sup>1</sup> And yet, there is no absolute barrier. After all, we all come from, and maintain links with people outside the space of the university. Moreover, the lives of people within intellectual spaces are often deeply affected by or constituted by realities such as racism and material deprivation: if not oneself, one’s

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<sup>1</sup> Such retreats, however, are not limited to academia. Indeed, one cannot actually live under a condition of incessant and absolute “integration” into larger social issues, even if we all are fundamentally constituted in and by a society. The call for such integration ignores the centrality of mediation in creating livable societies. Additionally, a degree of critical distance is what allows one the ability to think and to work.

students, colleagues, or the workers at the campus cafeteria are likely to be.<sup>2</sup> Because institutions of higher learning participate in broader forms of social exclusion, the effects of that reality confront us all. In a university like the one in which this dissertation was composed, prohibitions grounded in race and class persist. As progressive student groups underscore, we see this dominant order in the inadequate approaches to recruiting and supporting students of color: there are especially low percentages of Native American and African American students at this university, in comparison to the demographics of the larger urban area in which the institution is situated. I highlight these issues while also recognizing the many attacks being waged today on the system of education, at all levels, throughout the United States. There are countless efforts to denigrate intellectual work, especially in the humanities, and to silence that work with charges of elitism. As a form of commitment to that work and simultaneously an interrogation of its exclusions, this dissertation provides a critical account of some of the complex and often vexed roles that writing has held during the historical period from the time of plantation slavery to the present.

*Writing beyond Redress* focuses principally on literary writing in the context of Haiti, and secondarily, on literary writing in the context of Cuba. This orientation is a response to another issue of concern: the ways that a U.S.-centric perspective continues

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<sup>2</sup> Consider the experience of Dr. Thea Hunter, an African American scholar and longtime adjunct professor based in New York City, who recently died. Her work as a scholar of the history of slavery and as a beloved teacher, as well as the racism and material struggles she underwent in the hierarchies of academia were chronicled by Adam Harris in his article, “The Death of an Adjunct,” in *The Atlantic* on April 8, 2019. See: [www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2019/04/adjunct-professors-higher-education-thea-hunter/586168/](http://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2019/04/adjunct-professors-higher-education-thea-hunter/586168/).

to guide many popular discourses of politics, history, and culture, as well as a range of academic disciplines. While it is primarily through the spheres of culture and of intellectual work that I have engaged with the Caribbean, rather than, for example, being able to spend time in Haiti or Cuba, it is this limit condition that also further contributes to my efforts to problematize the seeming divide between lived realities and intellectual production. Further, the project is structured by an extended education in the French and Spanish languages but can claim only a minimal exposure to and familiarity with Haitian Kreyòl; the project would likely present other emphases if I had been able to work with primarily Kreyòl-language texts.

This dissertation began to take shape only four years after the devastating earthquake in Haiti on January 12, 2010, in which millions of people died. Following the earthquake, many longstanding, racist tropes about Haiti's supposedly intrinsic state of "disaster" were reproduced across television screens, airwaves, and print publications. Simultaneously, there were non-Haitian people who responded to the destruction on the island with the mindset that they were, and had a right to be, either the country's supreme judges or its valiant saviors—disregarding, for one matter, the ways that Haitian people themselves were at the forefront of the relief efforts. Some published writing, including the collection of essays by Haitian, other Caribbean, and U.S.-based writers and scholars, *Haiti Rising: Haitian History, Culture, and the Earthquake of 2010*, offered a critical counterpoint to such practices and discourses. As scholar Martin Munro, who edited that volume, writes in the introduction thereto: "Haiti neither needs nor asks for pity. What it needs, what it has needed for more than two hundred years, is genuine and lasting

support, understanding, and respect; and it is in this spirit that the essays in this book have been assembled” (1). I have attempted to approach the contexts that I do study here—the literature and history of Haiti and Cuba —with a similar spirit.

The chapters that follow constitute a comparative study of literary works by three Haitian writers and one Cuban writer that illuminate the entanglements of slavery, imperialism, and imprisonment: *Memoire du General Toussaint Louverture* (1802), by Louverture himself; *Autobiografía de un esclavo* (1840), by Juan Francisco Manzano; *Gouverneurs de la rosée* (1944), by Jacques Roumain; and *Brother, I'm Dying* (2007), by Edwidge Danticat. Spanning a period from the early nineteenth century to the early twenty-first century, each of these texts foregrounds a specific site of confinement. Louverture, the famed Haitian leader, writes his text from the Fort de Joux prison in the Alps of France, following his arrest and removal from the revolutionary war against slavery. His work rails against the reasons for and the conditions of his imprisonment. Manzano's text provides a window into the violence and hierarchies of a Cuban sugar plantation during slavery, while he faces threats of punishment for undertaking intellectual pursuits. Roumain's text provides a fictional account of the challenges of an isolated, Haitian peasant village, impacted by the history of slavery, U.S. occupation, and an increasingly globalized capitalist economy. Danticat's text focuses on the space of Krome Detention Center, an infamous site where U.S. Customs and Border Protection detains Haitian and other asylum seekers. In this immigration jail, the author's own uncle becomes ill after officials there take away his medicine; he dies shortly thereafter. I see the sites that these texts illuminate as either instantiations of what we broadly call the



institution of slavery, or as concrete manifestations of the racialized exclusions that have persisted in its wake. Reading these texts together allows for a long-historical view of the role of literary writing in reckoning with the logic and the material realities of slavery and its aftermath and may allow us to see the resonances and distinctions between specific forms of confinement. By confinement, I understand the physical detainment, by force and/or coercion, including economic methods, of the human body and its desire for free movement and agency. This concept may involve, as well, the inhibition of intellectual and cultural capacities by means of physical violence and/or coercive speech and logic, especially racism.

Confronting such confinement, the texts I examine in this dissertation vary in literary form. Although all but perhaps Roumain's novel are instances of what one might call "life writing"—texts that exist in the domain of the explicitly autobiographical—they nonetheless span a range of styles and approaches. Part of my interest here, then, is in attending to how literary works reckon aesthetically and discursively with conditions of confinement. I am also interested in how these texts elucidate the labor involved in the act of writing and the stakes—including physical risk—of speaking from within and against systems of oppression. My claim is that these works bear witness to the inhibitions of speech and activity that slavery and the institutions that arose in its aftermath were designed to maintain. Indeed, because writing was often deployed as a tool to solidify the oppression of black communities across the Americas—through, for example, the deployment of legal documents like *Le Code Noir* in the French colonies, and various prohibitions on the education of enslaved people—the acts of writing

undertaken by these Afro-Caribbean writers hold a rather unique critical import. Often, they account for the violent and dissimulating ways in which the written word has been used to justify slavery, racist accounts of history, and other forms of racialized oppression. On the other hand, these texts also demonstrate the potency of the written word to confront social wrongs and to articulate visions of an anti-racist society. The latter fact does not by itself redeem writing, nor does it resolve the complicated question of hierarchy in relation to intellectual pursuits. In other words, we are still left with the problem of how those of us who are, in one way or another, “authors” access writing in ways that many of our contemporaries do not. Moreover, the mere existence of literary works about systems of oppression cannot dismantle those systems. However, silencing or ignoring such written works constitutes its own kind of violence.

As Michel-Rolph Trouillot’s work, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (1995), helps one to see, such silencing is a considerable part of the injury done to black writers in the Americas, and especially, considering U.S. imperialism in the Americas, to writers from places such as Haiti and Cuba. While there is, to be sure, a tendency to valorize writing as the sole arbiter of historical knowledge, and thus efforts to dismiss the non-graphic as “mere culture,” we must also take seriously the question of whose written work is read, reread, written about further, and in what ways; and whose is not. As Walter Benjamin might say, there are “tradition[s] of the oppressed” (257) that have been little attended to; and these traditions still have much to teach us all about history, culture, politics, and power. As Trouillot writes, “History is the fruit of power, but power itself is never so transparent that its analysis becomes superfluous. The

ultimate mark of power may be its invisibility; the ultimate challenge, the exposition of its roots” (xix). This dissertation undertakes a reading that begins to expose the types of power that continue to silence conditions like those that Louverture, Manzano, Roumain, and Danticat confront in and through their writing.

Ultimately, this dissertation takes the position that words alone cannot redress the damages of slavery or contemporary racist oppression. And yet, I take seriously reading and writing as activities in the ongoing work of emancipation, for, despite everything, they still allow us the capacity to strike at the forms of exclusion that have been promoted in their name.

### **Problematizing the Inquiry, Clarifying Terms and Methods**

Through what process has it become possible to claim the lives and efforts of history’s defeated as ours either to redeem or to redress? And if we take slavery’s dispossessions to live on into the twenty-first century, divesting history of movement and change, then what form can effective political agency take?

—Stephen Best, “On Failing to Make the Past Present” (454)

I have articulated this dissertation’s task as one of navigating a constellation of literary works that span the time period between the nineteenth century, when plantation slavery was the dominant form of labor and economy in the Americas, and the early twenty-first century, wherein the prison industrial complex and the immigration detention

center occupy a central role in the political and economic organization of many societies in this hemisphere.<sup>3</sup> Such a task, however, involves several problematics that my interpretive efforts in each chapter engage and hold open.

The first problematic that I will address relates to Stephen Best's first question above: How it is that those of us writing and thinking in the present can "claim the lives of history's defeated as ours either to redeem or redress"? (454). In discussing the varying responses to the Haitian earthquake and taking a position against the approaches of "judge" or "savior," I have tried to answer that question. This gesture does not absolve me of assuming such roles, or any other problematic roles or ideas that may emerge in this work. What I can say, however, is that I consciously approach my role as that of a careful reader and interlocutor. To grapple more fully with the problem of "claim[ing] the lives of history's defeated as ours to redeem or redress," however, we must pursue a line of questioning to which Best's provocation points: What are your investments in the history of slavery and racial oppression, and what conceptual positions inform your work?

First, like Ta-Nehisi Coates, I understand slavery and racial oppression as "the inheritance" of all of us who live in the Americas, for the societies of this hemisphere

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<sup>3</sup> My understanding of the institution of slavery relies heavily on insights from materialist thinkers like C.L.R James, especially in *The Black Jacobins*, and Eric Williams in *Capitalism and Slavery*. In other words, I think it is imperative to understand slavery in relation to the growth of the capitalist economy, while also recognizing that an analysis of capitalism does not fully account for all the atrocities of slavery. I also want to note that the overall materialist positions that I have attempted to thematize in relation to understanding slavery can help us see how contemporary institutions like the prison industrial complex are also capital-driven institutions.

came into existence through the intersecting systems of colonialism and slavery.<sup>4</sup> The economic inequalities, discriminatory policies, and the forms of racialized thought that persist within the United States, and beyond, continue to produce injury and continue to limit possibilities of life, in particular for many communities of color. Here, I want to emphasize the dispossession of black communities through, and in the wake of, the system of slavery.<sup>5</sup> Examining proposals for and developing a plan for reparations are crucial tasks of the present. Moreover, I argue that racism and the idea of race as such, are fundamentally injurious ways of organizing a society; Aimé Césaire’s work helps us to see them as pathologies.<sup>6</sup> Thus, along with instituting reparations, we also need an ongoing, far-reaching reckoning with the ways of thinking and being that have long supported this racialized order.

To turn, then, to the related problem of what Paul Gilroy calls “raciology,” a second dimension of my position derives from a concern for the ways in which the concept of race has been reified.<sup>7</sup> Far from advocating a notion of “colorblindness” I

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<sup>4</sup> On June 19, 2019, in his testimony before members of the United States Congress during the hearing on the “Commission to Study and Develop Reparation Proposals for African-Americans Act,” H.R. 40, Coates stated: “It is impossible to imagine America without the inheritance of slavery.” See the following transcript of part of Coates’ speech, as it appeared on *Democracy Now*’s coverage of the hearing: [www.democracynow.org/2019/6/20/ta\\_nehisi\\_coates\\_testimony\\_congress\\_reparations](http://www.democracynow.org/2019/6/20/ta_nehisi_coates_testimony_congress_reparations).

<sup>5</sup> While distinct notions of race and racial categories exist throughout the Americas, many of the societies in this part of the world share a legacy of slavery and of anti-black racism—however exactly they define blackness. This is the key reason why slavery and anti-black racism are anchoring concerns of this comparative project; why my analysis traverses Haiti, Cuba, and the United States.

<sup>6</sup> Racism, like colonization—which often relies on racist ideas—is founded on brutalizing principles and is exercised through a range of violent as well as more subtle acts. In *Discourse on Colonialism* Césaire argues that, while exacting grave violences on the colonized, “colonization works to *decivilize* the colonizer, to *brutalize* him in the true sense of the word, to degrade him, to awaken him to buried instincts, to covetousness, violence, race hatred and moral relativism” (35, emphasis in orig.). Following Césaire, we can see how racism and colonization produce gravely ill societies.

<sup>7</sup> In my intellectual experience, theories of creoleness (especially those of Jean Bernabé, Raphaël Confiant, and Patrick Chamoiseau) and mestizaje (especially as Gloria Anzaldúa conceives it), as they emerge from

nonetheless concur with Gilroy's overall stance "against race" in the long term, given the dangerous ways that "race" has been used both to justify every form of atrocity and to propagate social atomization. And yet, at the current moment I also see, like Gilroy, that "[f]or many racialized populations, 'race' and the hard-won, oppositional identities it supports are not to be lightly or prematurely given up" (*Against Race* 12). After all, many communities of color remain targeted by state violence and systemic oppression in the United States and in the Americas more broadly. In the realm of education, for example, the scholarship of a discipline like African American Studies is still not considered a fundamental, required part of the curriculum at many institutions. Therefore, I do not wish to denounce categorically what we call "identity politics," even though ultimately, I think we need to overcome "raciology." Instead, I assert that ethnic studies programs currently need to be safeguarded and are central to the work of anti-racism in the long term. In fact, as at many institutions of higher education, it was through a history of struggle that the African American Studies department at this university was founded; many of its faculty continue to contest racist oppression on campus and beyond.<sup>8</sup>

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some specific communities in the Americas, seem to provide a counterpoint to such reification. It is important, however, to not treat these as catch-all categories that can apply to every case, or terms that can simply be used to dismiss questions of race. They instead are concepts that come out of social hierarchies and racial antagonism—and should be approached in recognition of those issues. As Aaron Kamugisha comments about discourses of "creolization" across the Caribbean (specifically as they relate to the work of Bernabé, Chamoiseau, and Confiant, but also beyond), such ways of thinking can also "obscure" "[a] deeper interrogation of racist culture" (81). Moreover, Kamugisha underscores how these notions of creolization in the Caribbean tend to have a "relationship to elite domination" (85), with writers like Bernabé et al understanding themselves as a "vanguard" (85) which however occupies a higher class position. Undoubtedly, then, there remains much to think through regarding the import of these discourses than what I currently present in this dissertation.

<sup>8</sup> For a glimpse into current anti-racist struggles at University of Minnesota, in which faculty members in African American Studies continue to play a transformative role, see Laura M. Holson, "When the Names

Third, I value and indeed remain anchored in the projects of universal history and comparative thought. Such projects have been at the core of my own intellectual training—and these are largely the philosophical orientations that I bring to questions about slavery and race. As Gilroy argues in *The Black Atlantic*, a text with universalist concerns, there is an error in suggesting, for example, that one can or should only care about the history that relates specifically to one’s own racial or cultural group, however that may be defined. As he writes: “The history of blacks in the West and the social movements that have affirmed and rewritten that history can provide a lesson which is not restricted to blacks. They raise issues of a more general significance that have been posed within black politics at a relatively early point” (223). With this insight, one can also regard the tradition of Afro-Caribbean literary writing, such as the work of the authors that this dissertation foregrounds, as “raising issues of a more general significance,” even as one attends to their particularities.

I now turn to the question of “redress,” which is central to Best’s inquiry above. In all frankness, “redress” remains the matter with which I continue to grapple most, even as I complete this dissertation. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines redress as “[r]eparation or compensation for a wrong or consequent loss.” We might ask, however: What does reparation or compensation mean in the case of wrongs and losses that are at once, measurable, but in many regards, also exceed measure—wrongs and losses that impact all aspects of the lives of individuals and communities? Following the analyses of

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on Campus Buildings Evoke a Racist Past.” *New York Times*, May 23, 2019: [www.nytimes.com/2019/05/23/us/task-force-university-racism.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/23/us/task-force-university-racism.html).

Césaire and Fanon, I regard slavery and colonialism as developments that cannot be excused or minimized; in other words, the damage has been done, and it is excessive and widespread. As Césaire emphasizes in *Discourse on Colonialism*, however, no return to the days before these developments is possible (44-45). Moreover, many forms intended to compensate for the damages of slavery and colonialism remain inadequate. In his focus on the legacy of slavery in the United States, Coates underscores this matter: “America was built on the preferential treatment of white people—395 years of it. Vaguely endorsing a cuddly, feel-good diversity does very little to redress this” (53). Yet, this history of scanty redress is precisely why instituting reparations should be regarded as a serious and relevant proposition. Members of both the African American community, like Coates, and of black Caribbean communities, such as former Haitian president, Jean-Bertrand Aristide, have made clear arguments for reparations, insisting that they are far different from and indeed much “more than a handout, a payoff, hush money, or a reluctant bribe” (Coates 59).<sup>9</sup> Reparations are a form of redress, but also go beyond “compensating for a wrong,” because they aim to redistribute wealth and produce greater social well-being: resources that were systematically denied enslaved peoples—through

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<sup>9</sup> Coates’ study provides, among other essential information and insights, an account of the history of the call for reparations in the United States’ context. A future version of my project would engage more fully with texts and speeches on reparations, especially those from the Caribbean context. In its focus on the role of literary writing in the work of emancipation, my project attends to forms of redress and social transformation that are also necessary within, and come out of, work on language and literature. What I have attempted to do here is articulate a crucial relationship between writing and slavery that, in my view, might also benefit from more attention. This work does not replace or take priority over the forms of redress that Coates, Aristide, and others advocate in their work; again, my project would benefit from a much more thorough study of those efforts.



“legalized” practices of unpaid, forced labor, racialized oppression, and extreme forms of violence.

Further, we might think of the work of redress and beyond as something like an ongoing effort to transform the ways of thinking and being that allowed the system of slavery to develop, and that continue to feed the realities of racialized and economic injustice that prevail in our time. In this sense, I am interested in an approach taken up by Theodor Adorno in his essay, “Education After Auschwitz.” As he writes: “One must come to know the mechanisms that render people capable of such deeds, must reveal these mechanisms to them, and strive, by awakening a general awareness of those mechanisms, to prevent people from becoming so again” (2). For Adorno, whose focus is the Holocaust, the work of “coming to know the mechanisms that render people capable of such deeds” requires a careful study of the thought and ways of life of those who committed genocide, rather than those of their victims. In this sense, Adorno correctly assigns the responsibility for these acts to the perpetrators. Such a project is essential, as well, for attending to the history of slavery and colonialism. Césaire’s *Discourse* is, I submit, a form of such writing “beyond redress.”

My efforts in this dissertation, while fundamentally motivated by Césaire and Adorno, focus more centrally on the silencing of dispossessed communities. This project seeks above all to center voices that have been muted or dismissed. At the same time, in many of the works I foreground, there are also ways of accounting for the dominant conditions in which they emerged, and against which they are composed; indeed, this is part of what I draw out in my readings. However, I want to underscore that such

accounting should not be placed only on the shoulders of those who most acutely experience dispossession. Rather, it is an ongoing task for all of us who want to produce more just societies, based in principles of anti-racism and anti-oppression.

I shift now to focus more squarely on Best's second question above, regarding the relationship between the past and the present. Best asks: "if we take slavery's dispossessions to live on into the twenty-first century, divesting history of movement and change, then what form can effective political agency take?" (454) Best, correctly in my view, articulates the need for holding in suspense the idea that there is an absolute, unmediated link between the past and the present, or that this is necessarily the most effective way to undertake an analysis concerned with contemporary injustices. In attending to the issue of slavery, one should underscore a crucial matter: slavery is not only a past reality. Millions of people in the world today are enslaved. In Haiti, the *restavèk* "child labor system" continues (Danticat, *Create Dangerously* 45). Thus, the idea of the absolute pastness of slavery is also a formulation that we should take care not to reproduce.

Best is not contesting, however, the existence of contemporary slavery, but rather is responding to a wave of scholarly and cultural projects that attempt to elucidate a relationship between the specific formation of earlier chattel slavery and the present racist order. He does not, in this essay, critique by name any specific projects, but it does seem that he wants scholars to be self-reflexive about their methodology, and take care not to repeat this approach, simply because it appears to be the most popular, or perhaps the default mode of analysis in the present. While I take Best's caveat to heart, I also see

value in Saidiya Hartman’s insistence that slavery introduced “a racial calculus and a political arithmetic” that continues to underpin deeply racialized inequalities today (*Lose Your Mother* 4). Thus, this dissertation is inspired by projects like those of Coates, of Michelle Alexander in her book, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (2010), and of Ava DuVernay in her documentary *13<sup>th</sup>* (2016). I read these projects, however, as interrogating not only the continuities, but also the discontinuities between the institution of slavery and the contemporary prison/industrial complex, housing markets, and more. Indeed, a suppler understanding of the movement of history, in Best’s sense, might in fact help us better articulate the stakes of the lineage of slavery, as Hartman presents it.

To further consider the issue of the movement of history and its repetitions or reverberations, we might look to Édouard Glissant’s theoretical work in *Poetics of Relation*. In that text, Glissant—a thinker also concerned for redressing the damages of slavery—offers a possibility of conceptualizing past and present moments, and other disparate realities, through a notion of “Relation” as something that does not, however, simply ossify links among distinct entities. As Glissant writes:

Relation relinks (relays), relates...Relation cannot be “proved” because its totality is not approachable. But it can be imagined, conceivable in transport of thought. The accumulation of examples aims at perfecting a never complete description of the processes of relation, not circumscribing them or giving legitimacy to some impossible global truth. (173-174)

Glissant's caution about circumscription and his simultaneous insistence on the concept of "relay" in fact heavily influence the organization of this dissertation. While each of the four chapters is anchored in a text which relates to a specific time period and a specific site of confinement, Glissant's understanding allows one to consider how these texts might resound outward in various directions and might even speak to each other. Thus, while this dissertation sketches a chronology, it does not attempt to cement a singular trajectory. In other words, I do not regard the movement from Toussaint Louverture's memoir in the first chapter to Edwidge Danticat's memoir in the fourth chapter as a merely linear process. Indeed, curious repetitions of metaphors and concerns travel across the four texts on which I focus, suggesting a more complex temporality, even as the reality of confinement links them. Sometimes, a phrase appears, then seems to disappear for a while, only to emerge again in another form. One example is the phrase, "Salut et respect," with which Louverture typically closed out his written correspondences. In Jacques Roumain's novel, *Gouverneurs de la rosée*, the men of the Haitian village of Fonds Rouge use a similar greeting when they head into the fields to work, calling out "Honneur et respect" to the sun. I invite the reader of this dissertation to look for other such occurrences. Further, I would suggest that a more conceptual relay occurs in this arrangement of texts. We see a transfer of notions of emancipation taking place across them—an articulation of freedom, attempting to push through whatever small cracks

might exist in the circumscribed boundaries of the prison, the plantation, the post-slavery peasant village, and the immigration detention center.<sup>10</sup>

Thus, in highlighting confinement as a category for approaching texts by Afro-Caribbean writers, I do not intend to arrest the history or contemporary life of the Caribbean, or the lives of the writers on whose work I focus, within such limitations. As Katherine McKittrick, speaking about the potentially problematic repeated emphasis on the dispossessions of black communities and individuals, cautions, “We might...think about how we can and will re-evaluate the commonsense workings of violence and death *and* re-think analyses of injustice that re-isolate the dispossessed” (906). Here, McKittrick calls attention to the conceptual frameworks that are often deployed in attending to matters of black life and black death. She underscores the danger of “re-isolating” the dispossessed. Thus, despite my focus on confinement in this dissertation, I attempt to hear and think together several texts side by side, and thus not leave them in mere isolation. I also try to grapple with the isolations that have been produced through the racialized and economic dispossessions that emerged during the era of plantation

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<sup>10</sup> We might conceive of the type of echoing and transfer that I suggest takes place among these texts as a form of what Vicente L. Rafael calls “telecommunication.” In his work, *The Promise of the Foreign*, which focuses specifically on the colonial Philippines, Rafael elucidates the ways that, for example, the Castillian language, as an unexpected lingua franca served as a medium of “telecommunication” in the efforts by Filipino activists and writers to forge independence from Spain. If we regard the dialect of emancipation that appears in these texts (or perhaps literary writing itself), as a kind of lingua franca—what Rafael defines as “a language that allows for communication across social and geographical distances” (79)—we might be able to conceive of how the texts of confinement that I highlight here put these writers “in touch with unseen and/or unknown others,” including one another (Rafael 79). In this way, their texts “becom[e] a medium of telecommunication,” for “[t]o speak in the lingua franca is to have access to this mediumship and thus to stand in relation to those absent from one’s midst” (Rafael 79). Enabling exchanges across spaces held apart from one another, or between people who are confined and isolated from others, telecommunication names an effort to use even a colonial language against its presumptive uses, and to reshape the kinds of relations that such a language might otherwise assume.

slavery, rather than assume their “normalcy.” I aim to show as well how the texts I study theorize the problem of dispossession, but also present a range of other concerns beyond the immediate circumstances of their emergence. I am particularly interested in how these texts give articulation to what Raymond Williams calls a “structure of feeling.”

Williams’ concept allows one to approach works of art—in this case, specifically works of literature—as capable of reckoning with a range of political anxieties, aesthetic formations, and the various other sensibilities that are, as he notes, dominant, residual, or emergent at a given moment in history. Williams explains the import of this concept:

Methodologically, then, a ‘structure of feeling’ is a cultural hypothesis, actually derived from attempts to understand [a range of social] elements and their connections in a generation or period...The hypothesis has special relevance to art and literature, where the true social content is in a number of cases of this present and affective kind, which cannot without loss be reduced to belief systems, institutions, or explicit general relationships, though it may include all these as lived and experienced, with or without tension, as it also evidently includes elements of social and material (physical or natural) experience which may lie beyond, or be uncovered or imperfectly covered by, the elsewhere recognizable systematic elements... (132-133)

While oriented more to a notion of social organization than to Glissant’s concept of “Relation,” Williams’ idea of a “structure of feeling” also allows space for the

articulation of ideas, feelings, and experiences which are not settled, which are in formation. Thus, for example, a text like Manzano's autobiography provides a window into an era of increasing restriction on the activities of enslaved people, while it takes account of the centrality of the sugar economy; it contains a number of elements which have not yet settled into a whole. Although dominant practices undoubtedly hold sway over a figure like Manzano—particularly as someone who occupies a subordinate social position—his text also gives visibility to other formations that do not necessarily correspond to the dominant vision. I believe this is especially true of Manzano's relationship to the aesthetic. That this element—which Manzano links to a form of independence, however limited—surfaces repeatedly throughout his text does not negate or redeem the reality of his enslavement. However, it does open up a more complex vision of the past. At the heart of both Williams' and Glissant's projects is an effort to understand culture in terms of dynamism, allowing room for the movement of ideas and feelings that cannot simply, or once and for all, be grasped.

I turn now to the idea of “the work of literature,” which I have announced in the title of this dissertation as a key part of my inquiry. While literature is a sphere of culture, its relationship to slavery and to racialized oppression requires further analysis. Following the line of questioning advanced by Best, we might ask: What does literature have to do with slavery, or with ongoing racial violence, or with racism as a grounding ideology of the present? One answer might be that literature has long served as history's other, preserving stories that often are not represented in historiographic accounts. As Williams helps us to see, literature acts as a site wherein the structure of feeling of a time

finds articulation and, simultaneously, is worked through. To my mind, this is one of the key capacities of literary writing.

And yet, for enslaved peoples, the acts of writing and reading that make possible literature as a graphic form have frequently, and often through systematic and violent means, been prohibited. Because of the exclusions of literacy, as Gilroy, Glissant, and others have recounted, orality became the primary mode of expression among enslaved communities; thus, the musical traditions of the Americas remain a site of memory, survival, protest, and fun (Brennan 6). In foregrounding literary writing, it is not my desire to disavow or to compete with these rich oral and musical traditions, but rather, to add another dimension to our understanding of the “counter-culture” that was produced both within and against the system of slavery, capitalism, and the formations that have developed in their wake. I see the writings of Louverture, Manzano, Roumain, and Danticat, among countless other Caribbean writers, as contributing to the work of this counter-culture of modernity.

Moreover, I see ways in which the literary works of the Afro-Caribbean writers I foreground in this dissertation also bear elements of what scholar Timothy Brennan has highlighted as New World African music’s “approach to technique, based on a set of counter-values. Among these are repetition, sincerity, personality, and voice” (11). While the texts that I study in this dissertation are affected not only by the reality of confinement—which Afro-Caribbean music also confronts—but also by the delimited nature of the literary text as such, as well as by the isolation of the work of literary authorship as opposed to the more collective work of playing music with a group of



people, I argue that these texts nonetheless also frequently make manifest the counter-values of “repetition, sincerity, personality, and voice.” While the figures I highlight in this dissertation are examples of individuals who, by one means or another, acquired literacy while many of their compatriots, often manual laborers of lower social standing, did not, I do not see their work as necessarily complicit with the dominant order, much less at odds with the traditions of orality that have largely been more popular in Caribbean life. Instead, I argue that their work exists as a narrow pivot point, one might say, between orality and literacy, underscoring the cultural, historical, and political value of each. Interweaving the energies of orality and literacy, these works present a challenge to the ideology that would reduce everything in this world to the status of a commodity.

I want to end this section of the introduction, which has sought both to problematize the inquiry I will pursue and to elucidate some of the positions, terms, and methods through which I undertake this work, by turning to the words of Aristide, the former Haitian president, whose speeches were initially meant to be a focus of one chapter of this dissertation. In his work, *Eyes of the Heart*, a text directed to an audience beyond Haiti, Aristide calls attention to the ways in which a vast portion of the Haitian population has been deprived of literacy over many generations, even though many civic leaders in Haiti, particularly Aristide himself, long emphasized the importance of literacy to democracy. As Aristide writes:

If for 200 years the Haitian people have not been taught to read and write, it is no accident of history. If there are no schools in the countryside for the sons and

daughters of those who work the land, it is no accident. If even in 1991 and again in 1994 when as president I spoke to international donors over and over about the need for adult literacy they looked at me as if I was crazy, it is no accident. If today 85% of the Haitian people cannot read and write, it is no accident. (53)

Contesting here a crude historical determinism, Aristide disrupts the narrative that would cast Haiti as forever destined to impoverishment and illiteracy. As Aristide underscores, conditions of widespread impoverishment and illiteracy have been produced in history. In this case, they seem to be linked to an ongoing effort to castigate the Haitian people for daring to dismantle the system of slavery.<sup>11</sup> Aristide's statements here suggest, nonetheless, that through the work of human beings, these conditions can be changed. Such was certainly proven true in the Cuban literacy campaign during the era of the Cuban Revolution.

Another perspective that we might build from Aristide's words here is that Haitian writers, and I will add, Cuban writers, have contributed to knowledge about the world, about the history of slavery, about race, about democracy, and about the aesthetic, to name just a few areas of inquiry. The fact that we in the United States still largely suffer from a certain cultural illiteracy, and do not know the work of many Haitian or

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<sup>11</sup> As many scholars have remarked, the indemnity that Haiti was called to pay France for the damages of the Haitian Revolution—the war which sought to dismantle the system of slavery, and in so doing destroyed the concomitant wealth that this system provided to colonialist planters—is thoroughly unjust. Although the Haitian state in fact paid large sums of this amount, especially under the reign of President Boyer (1818-1843), in international politics many people still view Haiti as a debtor state, which has irresponsibly utilized humanitarian funds—funds that have been donated to the country, in a supposedly magnanimous fashion, by external parties.

Cuban writers and the history that they confront—despite our proximity to and frequent interventions in Haiti and Cuba—is also not an accident of history. And yet, this illiteracy is a matter which also requires a reckoning.

## **Overview of Chapters**

To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it “the way it really was” (Ranke). It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger. Historical materialism wishes to retain that image of the past which unexpectedly appears to man singled out by history at a moment of danger. The danger affects both the content of the tradition and its receivers. The same threat hangs over both: that of becoming a tool of the ruling classes. In every era the attempt must be made anew to wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it.

—Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History” (255)

Each of the primary literary texts that this dissertation highlights presents something akin to the “flash” that Benjamin describes above. While there are many other literary works that I could have focused on in this project, I encountered something striking in the texts by Louverture, Manzano, Roumain, and Danticat, respectively. While none of these texts provides what one might call a definitive discussion of a particular time period, they each seem to provide, in a concentrated form, a range of issues about

the historical moment in which they were composed and sometimes about adjacent historical periods; a reading based in Williams' concept of "structure of feeling" helps to elucidate these issues. Also, because of the sensibilities and social issues of the present, these texts spoke to me as a reader in especially compelling ways. I have suggested that while the chapters demonstrate a chronology, it is not a comprehensive or closed chronology. In my analysis there are, the reader will note, many missing significant historical moments. I do not, for example, offer a sustained discussion of the dictatorship of the Duvaliers, which was of course a formative historical development in contemporary Haitian history. The dictatorship does come up briefly, however, in my analysis of Roumain's and Danticat's work. The overall absence of this historical period in this account about literary writing may have something to do with the fact that writers were among the groups that the Duvalier regimes most targeted, although there are crucial works of that era to consider.<sup>12</sup> It seems to me as well that perhaps the Duvalier era is a lived reality that many are still working through, and others attempting to forget, in the present. Moreover, while there are clear aspects of the Duvalier dictatorships that one could speak of in terms of confinement—not least, the brutalities of the Fort Dimanche prison—the decades-long damages exacted by that regime also seem to exist in a register beyond the framework of this dissertation. My suggestion is not that slavery or confinement, either, can be fully accounted for in the texts of Louverture, Manzano, Roumain, and Danticat. And yet, the type of "flash" that their texts seem to produce,

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<sup>12</sup> Here, I am thinking especially of the works of Jacques Stephen Alexis, Marie Vieux Chauvet, Frankétienne, and René Depestre, to name a few key authors of this time period.

offers an entry into attending to the histories from which they emerge in a way that my limited reading about the era of the dictatorship has not yet allowed.

Turning now to the organization of the chapters, the dissertation is divided into two sections. The first two chapters, on Louverture and Manzano, deal with literary works written in the nineteenth century, during the time of slavery. The last two chapters, focusing on Roumain and Danticat, deal with works written well after abolition. Roumain's text emerges at the cusp of the mid-twentieth century; Danticat's is a work of the early twenty-first century. As suggested earlier, I am interested in pursuing the continuities and discontinuities between these periods. In other words, I believe we can see that even with official abolition, many of the structuring elements and the mentality that constituted the era of slavery continued to perdure in the centuries following, or otherwise reemerged in different forms. New sensibilities and formulations also come to the surface in each text. I invite the reader to consider the various ways that these texts may resonate with or contradict each other and the curious relays they produce across a range of temporalities.

**Chapter One, "Literacy as Conscription and as Emancipation: Reading *Memoire du Toussaint Louverture* with C.L.R. James' *The Black Jacobins*,"** focuses on *Memoire du General Toussaint Louverture* (1802), a text that the revolutionary leader Toussaint Louverture wrote, sometimes with the aid of a secretary named Jeannin, while he was imprisoned in the Jura mountains in France—the site where he eventually died. A longstanding, and indeed, dominant narrative about this text was that it was essentially inconsequential, and if anything, served as an apologia to Napoleon Bonaparte, who was

ultimately responsible for calling for the arrest of Louverture, who had long been leading the war against slavery in Saint Domingue, now known as the Haitian Revolution (1791-1804). Even in C.L.R. James' progressive, materialist account of the revolution, *The Black Jacobins*, Louverture's memoir receives only cursory, and far from laudatory, attention. And yet, in *The Black Jacobins*, James otherwise gives extensive attention to Louverture's prowess as a speech maker, a writer of correspondences, and more—despite Louverture's having learned to write only in the early days of the revolution. In the chapter, I read the *Memoire du General Toussaint Louverture*—recently republished by Philippe R. Girard—through the problematics of literacy that I suggest emerge from James' historical account of the Haitian Revolution. Part of what is at stake here is that literacy, especially the ability to write and produce speeches, is a skill that Louverture sometimes used in dictatorial fashion while occupying a leadership role. As a formerly enslaved man and later a general aligned with a French government that had called for abolition, Louverture was variously affected by colonialist uses of literacy deployed by the French regime—or, in the words of David Scott, Louverture was conscripted by such modern formations. Nonetheless, after he is removed from the action of the revolution and imprisoned, Louverture takes up the medium of writing to articulate principles of anti-racism and a right to equality before the law. While some of Louverture's fellow generals—who facilitated his arrest by the French—led the island to full abolition and independence, which Louverture had not been able to do, Louverture's *Memoire* is a key document of the Haitian Revolutionary period that registers some of the major intellectual battles that were emergent in that struggle. My argument is that while bearing

witness to the complications that Louverture's seeming attachments to literacy and to French thought produced in his leadership role, the *Memoire* is a document that ultimately crystallizes and preserves key principles of the anti-slavery struggle in Saint Domingue. In sum, I assert that while we must account for the colonial formations that in part shaped Louverture, and notwithstanding the subordinate position he occupied in relation to the French regime, he was less a conscript than a co-scripter in an age of revolution. Writing the *Memoire* from prison, Louverture seizes writing for the work of emancipation. In building these claims, I draw on the scholarship of Michel-Rolph Trouillot, Deborah Jenson, and John Walsh.

**Chapter Two, "Countering Alienation: On Resistance, Critique, and Literary Freedom in Juan Francisco Manzano's *Autobiografía de un esclavo*,"** shifts to the site of Cuba, following the historical trajectory of slavery in the Caribbean. As scholars like historian Ada Ferrer have demonstrated, when the Haitian Revolution brought down the system of slavery in Saint Domingue, essentially toppling the world's richest colony at that time, the activity of the slavery economy, and particularly the labor of sugar production, increased in notable ways in Cuba. In what, by all accounts, became a very opulent society, crackdowns on enslaved people and free blacks increased. The death of the antislavery figure, José Antonio Aponte, in 1812 is one of the most famous of these cases, and his execution was meant to send a clear message to black people on the island that any effort to disrupt the system of slavery, especially in the form of mass rebellion as had happened in Haiti, would be met with grave violence. In this context the Spanish colonial government took extensive efforts to censor written antislavery material

and to prohibit black people from writing. Meanwhile, white creole intellectuals, who were often slaveowners yet also advocated gradual abolition, and who were vehemently against Spanish colonial rule on the island, undertook many efforts to claim literary writing for the abolitionist cause. It is in this social space that Juan Francisco Manzano, a house slave in Matanzas, and later in Havana, came to write *Autobiografía de un esclavo* (1840). In the chapter, I discuss how Manzano was, in the homes in which he was enslaved, considered to be an exceptional figure for his ability to memorize and recite poetry. Indeed, as a young boy, he was valorized for this ability, while at the same time, he was made to stay away from other black children. His status as a mixed-race or mulatto individual was one of the reasons that contributed to the narrative around his difference.

Thus, the chapter deals with the ways that racial hierarchy in Cuba was propagated, as well as the ways that a range of forms of labor and activity—such as, on the one hand, manual labor in sugar production, and on the other, cultural activities—were often held apart from each other, and attached to differing values in the economy of refinement. I use Marx’s concept of alienation to approach the ways that these various social categories were produced and maintained. While Manzano held what some describe as a more enviable position in the slavery hierarchy than sugar laborers, he was often separated from his family members, and as he grew older, his abilities in the literary arts, especially his efforts to compose his own poetry, provoked the rage of his slaveowners. As punishment for his activities, he was frequently sent to labor in sugar. Indeed, Manzano’s case also brings to the surface the way that labor in sugar was



regarded broadly across the colony of Cuba as the most reviled form of labor, despite being the very source of the island's wealth. I argue that Manzano's autobiography, a text that he wrote at the behest of the white creole intellectual, Domingo del Monte, who set its composition as the cost of Manzano's freedom, is fundamentally a text that registers—while it also contests—alienation. At the same time, Manzano's autobiography gives articulation to other sensibilities, including a desire for aesthetic pleasure that would do more than simply neutralize the violence of the sugar plantation.<sup>13</sup> In my analysis of Manzano's work and his struggle to claim autonomy through poetry and other means, I engage with Marx as well as with the scholarship of Saidiya Hartman, Roland Barthes, and Édouard Glissant.

Moving from the late nineteenth century, after slavery is officially abolished across the Americas, I enter the period of post-slavery Caribbean society. In **Chapter Three, “‘Eh bien, nous sommes ce pays’: On Reconciliation, Incommensurability, and the Literary Stakes of Jacques Roumain's *Gouverneurs de la rosée*,”** I foreground the well-known “peasant novel,” *Gouverneurs de la rosée* (1944) by Jacques Roumain. I

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<sup>13</sup> The dangerous potential of the aesthetic to mask the degradation and indeed destruction of human lives is a major concern for Adorno in his essay, “Meditations on Metaphysics: After Auschwitz.” In that work, he also rails against forms of thought that would be “in the nature of the musical accompaniment with which the SS liked to drown out the screams of its victims” (88). What I try to discern in my discussion on slavery and Manzano's particular situation as a house slave who was responsible for entertaining his masters, are the implications of the aesthetic within the conditions of slavery. Slaveowners also used the aesthetic to “drown out” physical punishment and other forms of suffering and to smooth over the racialized hierarchy which they perpetrated; however, an enslaved person like Manzano, I suggest, while living within and in many ways exploited by such an aesthetic economy, also seems to take hold of the aesthetic otherwise, or perhaps taps into another of its dimensions: what Adorno elsewhere theorizes as the “autonomy of art.” There is no ultimate autonomy of art within conditions of enslavement; however, the suggestion here is that the elements of the “counter-culture” produced in and by enslaved people during the time of slavery present a recalcitrant element in the face of dominant, bourgeois uses of the aesthetic. Far from redeeming or justifying slavery, the knowledge of these opposing operations of the aesthetic should make us further vigilant—about both the existence of brutality and the uses of the aesthetic in our current time.

argue that this realist novel about an isolated peasant village gives visibility to struggles over land and resources that faced Haitian peasants in the wake of the U.S. Occupation of Haiti (1915-1934) and in the context of the increasingly globalized economy, which forced many Haitians to leave their country and find work in other parts of the Caribbean. Through his protagonist, Manuel, Roumain highlights a unique feature of his version of the “peasant novel”: the dilemma of the migrant worker who returns to his home village. Encountering his village, Fonds Rouge, overcome by drought and fractured by a feud among his family and their neighbors, Manuel brings in his experience of working in the sugar fields of Cuba, where he had labored for many years, to revitalize the community. Indeed, he catalyzes a few forms of collective labor to find water and build a system of irrigation. One of Manuel’s key strategies in uniting his community is to remind his fellow villagers of the *coumbite*: a labor formation that had existed in the community before the U.S. Occupation. I read this insistence on the *coumbite* as Roumain’s effort to articulate an anticolonial vision, one which underscores the strength of the peasantry and the value of collective labor and activity; it is, in sum, an effort to concretize a notion of a national culture, which as Fanon demonstrates, is a key moment in processes of decolonization. What this insistence on the *coumbite*, as a notably masculinist form of labor does, however, is to exclude or assimilate many of the female figures and feminized forms of labor that appear in the text to the idea of the nation that the text is attempting to distill. Further, I discuss the ways that land is figured in Roumain’s text, and how in the anticolonial effort of land reclamation, his novel continues to wrestle with colonialist notions of the land, while also articulating an ecological imagination that seeks to redress

the damages that the Haitian land and people had incurred over the course of history. Finally, I discuss the interplay of orality and writing that the novel registers on the level of form. In this chapter I draw on the work of a range of scholars but ground my interpretation in dialogue most directly with Celia Britton, Kathy Richman, and J. Michael Dash, and their readings of *Gouverneurs*.

In my final chapter, **Chapter Four, “Tending to the Voice: On the Poetics of Redress in Edwidge Danticat’s, *Brother, I’m Dying*,”** I turn to a more recent historical period, that of the post-9/11 United States, wherein national security measures in the wake of that terror attack led to increasingly brutalized forms of border control. While U.S. policies toward Haitian asylum seekers had for decades previously been both contradictory and overtly racist, Edwidge Danticat’s 2007 memoir, *Brother, I’m Dying*, recounts her uncle’s ordeal in the custody of the ever more intolerant institution that is U.S. Customs and Border Protection. Engaging with Harsha Walia’s notion of “border imperialism,” I bring to the surface the ways that Danticat shows various actors in and apparatuses of the immigration system working together to transform her uncle, Joseph, first into an “alien” and a number, and then to precipitate his death. Danticat’s memoir is a text that seeks justice for her uncle’s death and works to disrupt the official narrative of Customs and Border Protection, which in real-historical legal proceedings claimed that its agents had done no wrong and bore no responsibility for his death. I argue that a major way that Danticat attends to what one might call not only a silencing of her uncle, but an elimination of his personhood and his life, is through her attention to the voice of her uncle, who lived much of his adult life with a voicebox, as well as her emphasis on other

acts of the voice throughout the text. While I argue that at times this attention in fact reduces Joseph to an abstract voice, I underscore the tirelessness of Danticat's effort to reject the conditions in which her uncle was detained and in which he died, although she ultimately cannot rescue him from those conditions. This chapter also engages with the thought of Barthes and Edward Said.

The dissertation ends with a conclusion, "The Relay of Emancipation," where I underscore the need for the continuation of work against slavery and racism. Here, I identify abolition not as a singular event, but as an ongoing project. I end by resuming the dissertation's findings on the role of literary writing in that work.

## CHAPTER ONE

### Literacy as Conscription and as Emancipation: Reading *Memoire du General*

#### *Toussaint Louverture* with C.L.R. James' *The Black Jacobins*

“notre verité s’est trouvée mise sous verrous”; “our truth found itself behind bars”

— Jean Bernabé, Patrick Chamoiseau, Raphaël Confiant, trans. M.B.

Taleb-Khyar, *Éloge de la créolité/In Praise of Creoleness* (14; 76) <sup>14</sup>

“But some dreams manage to escape. I am after the dreams that have escaped from jail.”

— Mahasweta Devi, “The Republic of Dreams” (2) <sup>15</sup>

### Introduction

In the wake of unprecedented scholarly attention over the last several decades, and due to a broader public discourse on Haitian history prompted by the 2010 earthquake, the Haitian Revolution (1791-1804), the war undertaken by the enslaved

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<sup>14</sup> This phrase appears early in the “Prologue” of the text by Bernabé, Chamoiseau, and Confiant, amidst a discussion about the ways that Caribbean peoples have long had to “[see] the world through the filter of western values” (76), including in the imposition of languages like French and English. In this section, the authors also make the claim that Caribbean literature does not yet exist, that it is not yet fully free from a condition of “being for the other.” This predicament resonates with what Toussaint Louverture faces as a writer. And yet, we might ask: cannot his *memoire* be understood as an instance of ‘Caribbean literature,’ in another sense? As a document that emerges out of the battle to end slavery and to forge self-rule, it testifies to the becoming of the reality that we now know as the Caribbean. Indeed, Louverture’s *memoire* registers in literary form an effort to reject the status of “being for the other,” and is a document that seeks an emancipation of language.

<sup>15</sup> Mahasweta Devi presented this speech at the Frankfurt Book Fair in 2006. It focuses on, among other things, literacy and multilingualism in India, and the ways that acts of reading and writing may be harnessed to disrupt the order of “the Establishment” (2).

people of Saint Domingue to destroy the system of slavery on their island and build an independent republic founded on radical abolitionism no longer seems as thoroughly “silenced” as it once was; at least, it is not always silenced in all of the same ways. To be sure, many educational efforts as well as openings for artistic endeavors remain in the task of making common historical knowledge the events of the Haitian Revolution and what many scholars underscore as its universal import.<sup>16</sup> Haitian-born anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot’s work, *Silencing the Past* (1995), played a crucial role in initiating the era of groundbreaking scholarly studies about the revolution. In addition to its impact in excavating that history, Trouillot’s work remains a valuable theoretical resource for addressing how historical developments more broadly are written and spoken about, and the ends to which they are galvanized in a given present. Trouillot elucidates, for example, how the choice of archival sources on which an historiographical account relies and the narrative frameworks it uses tend to reproduce certain silences that soon become accepted as historical fact. Less interested in the process of silencing as it occurs via the conscious bias of a given historian—although this of course plays a role in how an event is discussed—Trouillot exposes the varying and often less visible forces, including the dominant concepts of a given time period, that shape our accounts of the past, and the ways we explain the meaning of past events for the present. Trouillot’s analysis of silencing pertains in rather striking ways to the fate of a text composed by the once leading general of the Haitian Revolution, Toussaint Louverture. While Louverture

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<sup>16</sup> On the Haitian Revolution’s place in the dynamic process of “universal history,” see Susan Buck-Morss, *Haiti, Hegel and Universal History* (2009). On the articulation of liberty in the Haitian Revolution as “universal emancipation,” see Nick Nesbitt, *Universal Emancipation: The Haitian Revolution and The Radical Enlightenment* (2008).

himself remains a figure of seemingly endless and varied interest—he is, in Philip Kaisary’s words, “a remarkably protean cultural icon” (12)—little attention has been paid to the memoir he wrote during his imprisonment in France, shortly before his death. Such neglect need not persist, especially considering the 2014 publication of a critical edition of Louverture’s text, presented by Philippe R. Girard, as *Memoire du General Toussaint Louverture*.<sup>17</sup>

In this chapter I bring the *memoire* into focus by first attending to the ways that narratives about its supposedly inconsequential nature or Louverture’s lack of literacy are reproduced. C.L.R. James’ monumental historiographical study of the Haitian Revolution, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint Louverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (1938), is a compelling site for launching a discussion about what is, I argue, a silencing of Louverture’s prison memoir. James otherwise extols Louverture and spends much time underscoring what one might call Louverture’s authorial prowess; and yet, he also relegates his *memoire* to the status of a footnote. At the same time, James’ theorization of Louverture’s intellectual capacities and those of his fellow revolutionary fighters disrupts

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<sup>17</sup> Indeed, the version of Louverture’s text that this chapter focuses on is Girard’s 2014 bilingual edition. We might expect the title of the work to read “Mémoire” or “Mémoires” as it does in other versions, which translate the text into a more modernized, official French from the language of its composition: a language which Girard has variously described as an early form of Haitian Kreyòl, and as a creolized French. Girard’s approach to Louverture’s text most influences my own; that his edition allows for the closest engagement with Louverture’s act of writing makes it the most salient for the purposes of this chapter. One key element that I borrow from Girard—an approach taken also by John Walsh—is his reference to Toussaint Louverture as “Louverture” instead of the commonly used appellation “Toussaint.” Girard explains that Louverture “made a distinction between people who addressed him as ‘Toussaint Louverture’ and those who called him ‘Toussaint’ as if he were still a slave with no last name of his own” (22). Undoubtedly someone like C.L.R. James uses the name “Toussaint” in his work in a manner of affection and esteem; it remains a common way of naming the general in many contexts. However, my subject position in relation to Louverture differs from that of James, though like James, I also hold him in esteem. In the context of this chapter more specifically, my decision to refer to Toussaint Louverture by his last name intends to acknowledge the reality of his life beyond slavery and the struggle for emancipation that he undertook with and for his people, and to accord him proper respect as an author.

a narrative that appears in Trouillot's work, namely that, "the Revolution was not preceded or even accompanied by an explicit intellectual discourse" (Trouillot 88). To be sure, Trouillot does not deny the material and philosophical impacts of the revolution. He explains, rather, that the unprecedented nature of the Haitian Revolution meant that its meaning was being forged in real time, and thus its philosophical content could only be grasped after the fact.<sup>18</sup> Trouillot highlights the acts of the revolution as the most consequential, while admitting that "[i]t did produce a few texts whose philosophical import is explicit" (89). He writes:

The Haitian Revolution expressed itself mainly through its deeds, and it is through political practice that it challenged Western philosophy and colonialism. It did produce a few texts whose philosophical import is explicit, from Louverture's declaration of Camp Turel to the Haitian Act of Independence and the Constitution of 1805. But its intellectual and ideological newness appeared most clearly with each and every political threshold crossed from the mass insurrection (1791), to the crumbling of the colonial apparatus (1793), from general liberty (1794) to the conquest of the state machinery (1797-1798), to Louverture's taming of that machinery (1801), to the proclamation of Haitian independence with Dessalines (1804). (Trouillot 89)

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<sup>18</sup> Scholars such as Nick Nesbitt have recently undertaken efforts to further evaluate the intellectual content and philosophical impacts of the Haitian Revolution. See Nesbitt, *Caribbean Critique: Antillean Critical Theory from Toussaint to Glissant*. Liverpool UP, 2013.



In my efforts to bring Louverture's *memoire* into a discussion about the larger philosophical import of the Haitian Revolution, it is certainly not my aim to discredit the centrality of the hard-won acts of this revolution as thematized by Trouillot. Moreover, I am not uninterested in the documents that Trouillot singles out here as having explicit intellectual content—documents which James and others address at some length—but they are not my focus here. My primary interest in Louverture's *memoire* emerges from a concern about how certain conceptions of what counts as having philosophical merit or literary worth continue to affect how we approach works like the *memoire*, which may not immediately conform to what we expect of intellectual writing. In other words, I want to ask: Why has Louverture's *memoire* been widely devalued, or at the very least, passed over? Further, what would it mean to consider this *memoire* an intellectual contribution of the Haitian Revolution, and what precisely is its contribution?

Writing from a prison cell at the Fort de Joux in the fall of 1802, General Louverture preserves and helps to further the ethos of the Haitian Revolution. Having been removed from the battle and his leadership role, Louverture turns to what the late Indian activist-writer, Mahasweta Devi—in a speech that makes a claim for literacy's role in dismantling hegemonic rule—calls the “sword of the pen” (4). In a “21-page, 16,000-word document” (Girard 13), the exiled and incarcerated leader of Saint Domingue insists that the French military and government be held accountable for their actions in the colony during the months that led up to his arrest. Louverture denounces their intemperance and the racism that infuses their treatment of him and other officers of color. Louverture condemns above all the behavior of General Charles Leclerc (Napoleon

Bonaparte's brother-in-law) who, on the orders of Bonaparte, led "a massive expedition to unseat [the] wayward governor and perhaps restore slavery" (Girard 7). With the threat of slavery's return under a post-revolutionary French regime, what Louverture's *memoire* makes manifest, I argue, is the immense difficulty of defeating slavery, overcoming colonial rule, and forging something new, especially with tools that had been used to maintain those oppressive systems, including military discipline, the law, and literacy. Following Louverture's removal from his leadership role, it is nonetheless through writing that he manages to salvage some key principles of the struggle against slavery: antiracism and equality before the law.<sup>19</sup> I argue that, paradoxically, it is in confinement that Louverture retools the forms of literacy that had made him, in David Scott's formulation, a "conscript of modernity," offering in his *memoire* instead a concrete articulation of emancipation. Further, I assert that this expression of emancipation has more in common with his earliest declarations about liberty and with the popular movement against slavery in Saint Domingue than with the actions he took in the late stages of the war through his own increasingly hegemonic rule over the island.

Louverture's relationship to writing—particularly his composition of speeches and declarations—is a fiercely debated topic. In this debate, one can observe characterizations of Louverture that range from racist disavowal on the one hand, to hagiography on the other. In his seminal study, *The Black Jacobins*, James contests both

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<sup>19</sup> Regarding Louverture's removal from power, it appears that some of the other Haitian generals, particularly Jean-Jacques Dessalines, may have collaborated with the French in order to turn over Louverture to their authority. These generals had no fidelity to the French, but many saw Louverture as an obstacle in the way to the island's sovereignty, or perhaps simply to their own desires to lead the island. See James 333.

views by validating Louverture's authorship, while also tracing ways in which Louverture at times seems to have deployed literacy in more colonial forms, on occasion violently silencing his own people. As I have noted, one striking absence in James' account of Louverture's intellectual efforts is the *memoire* that Louverture wrote in prison. James provides only a brief, passing mention of the *memoire* in his bibliographical notes, casting it as "an apologia, written for Bonaparte" (388). In fact, in the main body of his text James ends his narrative of Louverture's participation in the revolution with his arrest. In the arrest scene, however, one finds the famous speech-act attributed to Louverture before his boarding the ship to France: "In overthrowing me, you have cut down in San Domingo only the trunk of the tree of liberty. It will spring up again by the roots for they are numerous and deep" (334). While this poignant and oft-repeated statement may well have been Louverture's "last legacy to his people" (334), James' inattention to the *memoire* reproduces a historical silencing that seems rather surprising, given his otherwise extensive focus on Louverture's literary abilities.

From another perspective, however, this omission is not shocking. Until recently, the *memoire*—and particularly the version of the *memoire* written entirely in Louverture's own handwriting—simply was not considered a document of interest, or perhaps it was willfully ignored: for years the French national archives imprisoned it. Excerpts of one version of the text written in the hand of a secretary named Jeannin, with whom Louverture consulted during part of his time in prison, were printed in the French journal *La Presse* only in 1843 (Jenson 18). In 1853 the text was published in an extended form by the Haitian historian Joseph Saint-Rémy (Girard, "Un-silencing" 669),

who nonetheless transformed the document into a more formalized and modernized French, from his reading of the *memoire* manuscripts. For decades, Saint-Rémy's was essentially the only edition of the text that any scholar discussed, and indeed the version to which James curtly refers in his bibliography. More recent scholarship has sought to remedy some of the inadequacies of these approaches to the text. Daniel Desmordeaux's *Mémoires du général Toussaint Louverture* (2011), while based on Saint-Rémy's edition, elaborates on Saint-Rémy's own position and provides historical notes and appendices that further contextualize Louverture's composition of the document. Deborah Jenson's work in *Beyond the Slave Narrative* (2011) presents a vast field of Haitian revolutionary archives, introducing works that also fell victim to disavowals similar to those that greeted Louverture's text. Jenson, who includes in her book photographic evidence of Louverture's *memoire* in the archives, also movingly discusses the fate of the version of the *memoire* that Louverture wrote in his own script, without the aid of a secretary. After Napoleon had taken away all his writing tools, Louverture seems to have tucked this version of his *memoire* under his headscarf; apparently, it was found there after he died. Jenson writes of this document, "Toussaint was determined to remain armed with an inscribed rhetoric of protest even to his death, like a literary second skin" (13). Most recently, Girard's edition of the *memoire* written by Louverture (2014) presents the most radical departure from earlier studies, and arguably brings the reader closest to Louverture's voice and embodied experience. Girard reproduces the full text of the *memoire* in Louverture's phonetic French, provides an English language translation beside it, and offers notes on differences between this and other manuscripts of the text.

In a rich introduction preceding the text, Girard also details the conditions of Louverture's confinement and provides many other salient historical and literary notes. By reading Girard's edition of Louverture's text alongside James' account in *The Black Jacobins* of practices of literacy within the Haitian Revolution, I believe we can further disrupt efforts to wall off the *memoire*, and ultimately, Louverture's own voice. I aim in this chapter to develop an analysis of the *memoire* in relation to and as a part of the antislavery struggle in which Louverture participated.

The reading that I pursue in this chapter suggests that *Memoire du General Toussaint Louverture* is a manifestation of the contradictions that Louverture lived, in endeavoring to fight the system of slavery while also, in Scott's account, becoming "conscripted" in and by the forces of capitalist modernity, of which writing, military discipline, and lest we forget, imprisonment, are key dimensions.<sup>20</sup> In Scott's words, Louverture "inhabited a cognitive universe he could neither simply claim as his own nor completely disavow" (156). My own reading of the *memoire* is influenced by Scott, partly because the text does bring to the surface some of the ways that Louverture seized

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<sup>20</sup> In *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Michel Foucault locates the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth century as the point in which forms of very bodily, public punishment shifted to seemingly less spectacular forms of discipline, including the prison (8). That Louverture and many other black and 'mulatto' generals of the antislavery army of Saint Domingue were imprisoned by the French, rather than made to face for example, public execution, may be evidence of this shift. Of course, this is not to say that their imprisonment was somehow more just; it is only to suggest a relation to the overall pattern that Foucault describes. Indeed, in the French colonial context, Girard notes that increasingly sophisticated uses and abuses of the law were directly linked to a growing reliance on the institution of the prison. Girard identifies Bonaparte's regime as being insistent on arresting many of the leaders of antislavery struggle in the Caribbean (besides Louverture, the orator Jean-Baptiste Belley, sometimes spelled "Bellay," was also imprisoned, to name just one other figure). These men were often condemned to isolated conditions, where they could be more easily treated outside the law. He writes: "Under Bonaparte, both metropolitan France and the colonies saw the multiplication of measures aimed at placing criminal and political prisoner beyond the reach of normal laws in a kind of 19<sup>th</sup> century Guantánamo" (Girard 10).

the apparatuses of French colonial rule in order to fight against these. However, I also want to depart from Scott to the extent that I see Louverture as painstakingly attempting to create something new within the limit conditions he experienced. In other words, we need not take the notion of “conscription” as the ultimate characterization of Louverture’s engagement with writing.

What I seek to foreground above all in my analysis of Louverture’s text are his efforts to continue the battle he had been fighting in Saint Domingue—a battle which, along with other acts, involved various kinds of language practices. I argue that as a rhetorical act that follows his removal from the action of the revolution, Louverture’s writing of the *memoire* is more than a way “to vicariously fight” (Girard 22). In it we see an insistence on the law as an equalizing force, which operates on non-racist principles; a demand for reciprocity in the use of language; and a protest against racist treatment and incarceration. Reading this document of defiance within the historical constraints in which it emerged and with a sober orientation toward the figure of Louverture allows us to even further appreciate the sensibility that James identifies as Louverture’s strident commitment to liberty. Thus, this chapter endeavors to read *The Black Jacobins* and *Memoire du General Toussaint Louverture* side by side, in an effort to wrestle with writing as at once conscription and emancipation.

### **Literacy in *The Black Jacobins***

“the black Antillean, whoever he is, always has to justify his stance in relation to language”

—Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (2) <sup>21</sup>

James spends no small amount of time in *The Black Jacobins* discussing the literacy and indeed literary prowess of Louverture, the main figure who animates his study of the Haitian Revolution. James highlights Louverture’s skill as a speech-maker, an author of declarations, and a tireless correspondent in military affairs. This preoccupation with literacy becomes especially prominent in chapters ten through thirteen, which deal with some of the most consequential battles of the Revolution and with Louverture’s leadership role: “Toussaint Seizes the Power,” “The Black Consul,” “The Bourgeoisie Prepares to Restore Slavery,” and “The War of Independence.” That James foregrounds literacy in this section of the text suggests that it was not simply a concern parallel to the antislavery battle in Saint Domingue, but a significant component thereof.<sup>22</sup> In fact, Girard suggests that Louverture’s own coming to (French) literacy was concomitant with the revolution:

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<sup>21</sup> While Fanon principally addresses here the issues that arise in the black Antillean’s choice of and use of a specific language in speaking, this short excerpt may also allow us to reckon with disavowals that a racialized subject in particular may face in making choices with regard to the genre, form, content, or even tone in which that subject attempts to write or convey an idea. In other words, Fanon’s words point to the ways that the dominant expectations of language, grammar, and aesthetic form can contribute to the propagation of racial hierarchies. The “black Antillean” and otherwise marked subjects confront the extra burden of having to translate themselves to others, as if they were operating in a lesser language or a lesser aesthetic form.

<sup>22</sup> Another significant moment that deals with literacy’s role in the antislavery struggle comes in an earlier chapter of James’ *Black Jacobins*, “And the Paris Masses Complete.” Although this moment underscores oratory rather than writing per se, it demonstrates another way that the antislavery fighters of Saint Domingue fought for abolition through linguistic means; how they deployed the tools of rhetoric to further

there is no definitive evidence that Louverture could read and write, or even sign his name, before the Haitian Revolution...According to his son Isaac, it was only after this revolution began in 1791 that Louverture learned how to read from a French officer; indeed, the first signature that is undoubtedly his dates from late 1791, when he was almost 50. (“Introduction” 4)

That Louverture begins writing relatively late in life, and during a revolution, makes his accomplishments as a writer within that struggle even more impressive. And yet, James clarifies that Louverture was far from the only Haitian revolutionary general who waged the struggle against slavery in part through writing and speech-making. He asserts that “[t]he same forces which moulded his genius had helped to create his black and Mulatto generals and officials” (256). While like Louverture, most of the other Haitian generals and soldiers had not received a formal education in writing, these men too, in Jenson’s words, “had a crash encounter with literacy” (17) during the revolution itself, and spent a great deal of time preparing speeches, writing letters, and composing constitutions, very often in French, while also communicating in a burgeoning form of Haitian Kreyòl.

In considering the language practices of the fighters who James calls ‘the Black Jacobins,’ I draw on Paulo Freire’s understanding of literacy as “reading the word and the

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their cause. James writes: “In January 1794, three deputies sent by San Domingo to the [National] Convention arrived, Bellay, a Negro slave who had purchased his freedom, Mills, a Mulatto, and Dufay, a white man...Bellay, the Negro, delivered a long and fiery oration, pledging the blacks to the cause of the revolution and asking the Convention to declare slavery abolished. It was fitting that a Negro and an ex-slave should make the speech which introduced one of the most important legislative acts ever passed by any political assembly. No one spoke after Bellay” (139-140).



world” (*Literacy* 35) and as an attempt to vocalize “true words” (*Pedagogy* 87) to name the world. For Freire, language is often deployed by oppressors to mystify reality, but it also has a transformative potential: through it, the oppressed can name their lived reality and ultimately remake the world. In other words, language is not the inherent property of the elite.<sup>23</sup> While we must recognize the hierarchical and colonial nature of the written word in particular—whose legacy in Latin America the Uruguayan intellectual, Ángel Rama, has brilliantly documented<sup>24</sup>—I propose that we also view the practices of the written word in which the Haitian generals participated as part of a larger sphere of meaning-making in which the Haitian Revolution was waged. In other words, there need not necessarily be such a stark distinction between practices of writing and other forms of literacy, even though they undoubtedly carry different class attachments. We may regard, for example, the Oath at Bois Caïman, which was reportedly part of the initiating act of the Haitian Revolution, the speeches of Louverture and Dessalines, voodoo practices and

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<sup>23</sup> As I say this, I also recognize the limitations of my account of the Haitian Revolution with the focus primarily on the leaders of the struggle and their language practices. The work of Carolyn Fick in *The Making of Haiti: The San Domingo Revolution from Below* (1990) and of Colin Dayan in *Haiti, History, and the Gods* (1995) in distinct ways helps to dislodge the study of the Haitian Revolution from only a focus on leadership; Dayan’s text also advocates a thinking of Haiti beyond the revolution. In their discussions of the revolution, both Fick and Dayan insist that the repeated emphasis on leadership tends to efface the vast majority of individuals who lived during the time of the antislavery struggle and who participated in it in ways that are often not recognized by dominant historiography—even in the case of more progressive historians like James, whose use of the term “the masses” throughout *The Black Jacobins* has provoked extensive critique. Challenging such hegemonic approaches, Fick and Dayan also unsettle the perceived centrality of European forms in the construction of Haiti and instead seek to foreground practices grounded in the African, neo-African, and Kreyòl traditions of the country. While this chapter, like many of the studies that Fick and Dayan problematize, returns to a focus on Haitian leadership and attends primarily to French-language practices, I attempt to think with the critiques forwarded by Fick and Dayan, and ultimately seek to move closer to the democratic and non-patriarchal modes that their work enacts.

<sup>24</sup> See Rama, Ángel. *The Lettered City*, trans. John Charles Chasteen (Duke UP, 1996).

other popular forms, and the 1801 and 1805 constitutions as part of the same, albeit highly differentiated, sphere of activity.<sup>25</sup>

In this sense, too, I depart somewhat from Scott's reading of *The Black Jacobins* as principally an account of conscription, and rather see in James' work a suggestion that the antislavery fighters of Saint Domingue are co-scripters, albeit in unequal conditions, in and of an age of revolution. I argue that while reckoning with the violence at the core of colonial forms of subjugation, we can also acknowledge merits of the practices of literacy by these Haitian antislavery fighters in the larger struggle for emancipation. In what follows, I will trace James' account of the complexities of Louverture's literacy and his characterization of how the Haitian generals overall negotiated the politics of language and literacy. I will end my account by detailing James' almost complete silence on the memoir that Louverture wrote while in prison.

### *Literacy and Louverture: Merits and Limitations*

James' portrait of Toussaint Louverture's literacy ranges from an image of Louverture as a "solider and administrator" (198) who utilized literacy to manage the

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<sup>25</sup> This understanding of the broader field of meaning-making in the Haitian Revolution emerges out of my reading of Susan Buck-Morss' *Haiti, Hegel, and Universal History* (2005) and Philip Kaisary's *The Haitian Revolution in the Literary Imagination* (2014). Buck-Morss' work deals primarily with the Haitian revolutionary period itself, and Kaisary's work attends to literary and artistic representations of the Haitian Revolution in the twentieth and into the twenty-first century. What these two texts share, in my view, is a way of seeing the revolution within a richer sphere of cultural, philosophical, and political activity. Buck-Morss' attention to the practices of voodoo and free-masonry allow us to imagine the field of meaning-making within the revolution as multifaceted, hybrid, and dynamic. Kaisary's work also contains a capacious view of the sphere of meaning-making, albeit in a later period. Further, he helps to make clear the political stakes of different forms of representation of the Haitian Revolution, and his retention of James' radicalism—despite the problems he also recognizes with James' heavy emphasis on leadership—opens up a space for thinking about the leading figures in James' work against the grain. It is in this spirit that I endeavor to approach *The Black Jacobins*.

colony; an adept diplomat who, through correspondence, could speak across opposing lines of the struggle within his own ranks as well as with various outside parties, including the French, British, and Americans; and an author of some of the finest declarations on the matter of freedom during the age of revolution. By the end of the war, James sees these same skills essentially turning Louverture into a dictatorial figure, who silenced opposition and, in his 1801 constitution, sought to take control over all printed material in the colony (Walsh 98). In analyzing Louverture's production of these various literary forms, James portrays him as someone who chose his words carefully, and thus was quite discerning. James explains that Louverture labored extensively over the documents that he "dictated" to his secretaries; and that despite a lack of formal schooling and his supposed recourse to a "broken dialect" Louverture, with his secretaries' "devotion," was able to produce documents that expressed an astounding force of will (197).<sup>26</sup> Such will allows Louverture to present a formidable opposition to the French, yet at times, closes him off from his people.

James locates one of the most effective moments of Louverture's career as a speech maker during the period when it became clear that France was intent on rescinding the commitment it had expressed to abolition—a commitment that had been won principally through the struggle of the antislavery fighters themselves. In response, Louverture wrote a declaration that demonstrates an unwavering antislavery position.

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<sup>26</sup> Noting Louverture's collaboration with secretaries, both Jenson and Walsh describe it as a common practice of leaders at this time, from Washington to Bonaparte. Walsh states: "To question Louverture's authorship would be to place a modern view of writing and authorship onto a historical period when dictation and redaction were the norm" (91). To bring home this point, Walsh underscores the redaction involved in Napoleon Bonaparte's *Le Mémorial de Sainte-Hélène* (91).

This declaration provides evidence of Louverture's willingness to speak forcefully to the French regime, and not only to use a language of mediation among groups which undoubtedly were antagonistic to one another, also a characteristic aspect of his leadership. Of this document, James asserts: "his declaration is a masterpiece of prose excelled by no other writer of the revolution" (197-8). James holds Louverture's authorship above that of many other leading figures of the time, particularly the European and American leaders. James excerpts part of the declaration in his book, which I reproduce below:

Do they think that men who have been able to enjoy the blessing of liberty will calmly see it snatched away?...No, the same hand which has broken our chains will not enslave us anew. France will not revoke her principles, she will not withdraw us from her greatest benefits...if, to re-establish slavery in San Domingo, this was done, then I declare to you it would be to attempt the impossible: we have known how to face dangers to obtain our liberty, we shall know how to brave death to maintain it. (197)

Articulating a sense of betrayal and seeking to hold the French accountable both to their purported principles and to the earlier legislation that they had presented, Louverture makes clear that emancipation is a question of life and death, in the most material sense possible. Louverture utilizes the strong form "will not" to essentially dictate to France the behavior that it should follow. He makes clear that the consequences of not taking that

path would be grave. James goes on to call the tone of this speech, among others that Louverture gave, “single-minded” and “elevated,” but he also emphasizes that these speeches likely frustrated the logic of the French bourgeoisie. If the French read these documents as only a representation of ideas, a metaphoric rendering of the situation in Saint Domingue—a mode that seems to have been common, if we consider how loosely the term “slavery” was employed in many documents written by Europeans at the time<sup>27</sup>—rather than an instance of stating or forging a truth, they were probably surprised by the actions of Louverture’s army afterwards. As James writes: “The French bourgeoisie could not understand it. Rivers of blood were to flow before they understood that elevated as was his tone Toussaint had written neither bombast nor rhetoric, but the simple and sober truth” (198). James thus marks a distinction between the use of words in efforts of bombast and rhetoric, and the use of words in a mode of simplicity or sobriety. James sees Louverture at this time as speaking in clear ways and having an equally unequivocal sense of the ideas he intended to convey.

James’ explanation of Louverture’s commitment to the principle of liberty, in this and other such moments of the text, bears another reflection on the importance of words as a material element in this struggle. James suggests that *liberty* meant something

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<sup>27</sup> In his work, *Universal Emancipation*, Nesbitt details the discourse of the time, emphasizing how European powers often used the term “slavery” rather metaphorically. Here, too, he shows how the revolutionary fighters of Saint Domingue seemed to apprehend this term, and the term “liberty,” far less abstractly: “The human right to be free from enslavement inspired the eighteenth-century Age of Revolution, which spoke widely of the injustices of ‘slavery’ and ‘servitude,’ while, paradoxically, chattel slavery was maintained and defended as an actual social institution throughout the Atlantic world. On January 1, 1804, however, the former slaves of the French colony of Saint-Domingue took the decisive step of universally abolishing slavery unconditionally and immediately upon achieving independence as the new nation of Haiti. Acting decades in advance of the North Atlantic powers, they turned the abstract assertion of a human right to freedom for all citizens into a historical fact and created a slavery-free society.” (1)

categorically different to Louverture and his army than it meant to the French. Not simply a naïve consumption of the word *liberty*, James insists that for Louverture, “What revolutionary France signified was perpetually on his lips, in public statements, in his correspondence, in the spontaneous intimacy of private conversation. It was the highest stage of social existence that he could imagine” (290). Sunil Agnani comments on this type of passage in James’ work, saying that, “for James, there is something excessive in the colonial reception of a radical Enlightenment idea, something in addition to and beyond its meaning in Europe” (180). Here we come to the idea that while Louverture may have appeared to use the term *liberty* in the more universal or abstract sense in which it circulated throughout the Atlantic world, he was, despite the compromised position he occupied as a leader—as in, not always fully in step with the popular will—keenly aware of liberty as a concrete aspiration for Saint Domingue.

Another key element of Louverture’s engagement with language has to do with the correspondence he maintained with other leaders of his army, as well as with the French. Indeed, the importance of writing for Louverture emerges in large part in his career as a military officer. Making note of his extensive correspondence, James writes, “Perhaps it is in his correspondence that we can most easily grasp the range and sensitivity of Toussaint’s untaught genius” (253). For James, the “sensitivity” of Louverture’s literary skill is, differently from his ability to assert his will, also something that allowed Louverture to maintain the struggle against slavery on the island, and to attempt to build a more unified constituency. Indeed, Louverture became known for his exchanges across many racial lines, in the service of the well-being of the colony. For

better or for worse, Louverture's engagement in these many different spheres turned him into an almost singularly essential figure. As James writes: "Sought after by blacks, Mulattoes and whites, the suave and discreet Toussaint was gradually becoming the one man in San Domingo on whom everything hinged" (185). Louverture's suave navigation of antagonistic political and racial camps eventually made it difficult for many of his black troops to trust his commitment to them. Thus, this diplomatic aptitude, which James sees as something that in fact makes Louverture superior to the other Haitian and French generals, also later plays a role in his downfall.

While offering a largely affirmative account of Louverture's literary capacities, and foregrounding both the sobriety and the nuance with which he expressed himself early in the revolutionary struggle, James also suggests that over the changing nature of the war—when the relations between Saint Domingue and France, Spain, or Britain, were becoming less clear, and when constituencies within Louverture's troops more frequently expressed critiques of his policies—Louverture's tendency to declare and to dictate ultimately transformed him into a despotic and hermetic figure. James cites Louverture's efforts to manage difficult situations by himself, without communicating with his people, as reasons for his eventually becoming someone who other generals were relieved to see removed from the action of the war. While Louverture's keen literary skills allowed him to make tough negotiations with the Europeans, often they also alienated him from his compatriots, even if those compatriots ultimately shared many of the same convictions as he.

*The Multiple Literacies of 'The Black Consul'*

Turning now from Louverture, I want to highlight James' description of what he often deems the "illiteracy"—in my view, the varying literacies—of the group of generals who fought under Louverture, and who James designates the 'Black Consul.' Many of these generals emerge in James' narrative as much more competent speakers of French than Louverture, even though some of them were reportedly unable, or barely able, to read or write. They also by and large appear as better communicators than Louverture. It is their range of military and diplomatic skills, as well as their various forms of intelligence, that come to play an enormous role in securing the victory of the Haitian army over the European powers.

James offers a detailed sketch of many of these figures. Consider, for example, his portrayal of one of the future leaders of post-slavery Haiti, Henri Christophe:

Christophe, ex-waiter, could neither read nor write, but he also astonished the French by his knowledge of the world and the ease and authority with which he ruled...unlike Toussaint he learned to speak French with remarkable fluency. He loved luxury, was friendly with the whites, and governed well. (257)

A passage like this, which distinguishes Christophe from Louverture, is part of a larger discourse about the supposed "illiterate" generals of the revolution, who like Christophe,



came into such leadership roles through purportedly “mass support,” and in this sense, seem to have served as more convincing representatives of the will of the people.<sup>28</sup>

Such popularity is more accurate in the case of Jean-Jacques Dessalines, who did not have the same kind of patience for the whites as either Christophe or Louverture. Additionally, Dessalines reportedly had a much keener ability than Louverture to speak to (or perhaps with) “the masses,” rather than only make declarations to “the masses.” James writes:

After the war with Rigaud, Dessalines told his soldiers: “The war you have just won is a little war, but you have two more, bigger ones. One is against the Spaniards, who do not want to give up their land and who have insulted your brave Commander-in-Chief; the other is against France, who will try to make you slaves again as soon as she is finished with her enemies. We’ll win those wars.” That was and still is the way to speak to the masses, and it is by no accident that Dessalines and not Toussaint finally led the island to independence. Toussaint, shut up within himself, immersed in diplomacy, went his torturous way, overconfident that he had only to speak and the masses would follow. (240)

In James’ account, what Dessalines succeeds at articulating with clarity are the stakes of the battle. He lays out in unambiguous terms who the enemies are, and exactly why the

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<sup>28</sup> This passage seems to reveal the ways in which someone like Christophe might also be considered a “conscript” of French colonial rule, as it appears that he maintained rather amicable relationships with some of the French, and perhaps had spent more time among them, given his greater fluency with the language.

army is fighting these enemies, and for what cause: “[they will] try to make you slaves again” (240). Another thing that emerges from this passage portraying Dessalines’ speech is a recognition of the need for a concentrated, economical way of speaking, with no trace of the “vacillation” that James ascribes to Louverture, as the war grows more entrenched. With straightforward phrases like “[w]e’ll win this war,” Dessalines demonstrates his commitment to the Haitian revolutionary fighters; he indicates clearly that he is on their side and will fight with them. In essence, James presents Dessalines as a more effective leader, distinguishing between Dessalines’ mode of communicating with the population, on the one hand, and Louverture’s mode of declaring to the population, on the other.

One of the most crucial figures to emerge in James’ book is Louverture’s nephew Moïse, often remembered as the “soul” of the revolution. It is Moïse who presents a strident critique of Louverture’s agricultural policies. He calls into question the forced labor policies that Louverture appears to have been advocating, in the interest of maintaining the agricultural system. Moïse also disobeys Louverture’s orders to restore land to some of the whites in his district, and it is after this that Louverture has Moïse summarily killed, without a trial. Although Louverture lamented this decision considerably, the killing of Moïse marks a turning point in Louverture’s leadership role in the antislavery war.

Tellingly, both in James’ work and in other texts about the Revolution, a line is drawn between Moïse, who is cast as an “illiterate,” although he is a figure who expresses an insightful critique of Louverture’s policies, and the very “literate” Louverture, who silences that critique. Indeed, comparing these men in the introduction

to Louverture's prison memoir, Girard writes: "Some illiterate officers like Louverture's nephew Moïse could be deceived by secretaries who misrepresented their ideas, but Louverture was educated enough to retain control of his prose even when he did not personally pen a letter" (5). We are confronted, then, with a characterization of Moïse as someone unable to read and write, and therefore someone whose words could be misconstrued or willfully misrepresented. Next to the "controlled" speech of Louverture—a figure who apparently held mastery over his own mind and words—Moïse appears malleable, holding changeable ideas, and inconsistent. In instances like this, we see a more elite vision of literacy being espoused, even in otherwise progressive scholarship.

James' account too focuses on what might be deemed the undisciplined aspects of Moïse, although James also notes how Moïse was very well liked by Louverture and perhaps even more importantly, by the people at large:

Moïse was a different type, a "bonny lad," a dashing soldier, fond of women, the most popular soldier in the army, beloved by the blacks of the North for his ardent championship of them against the whites. He stood high in Toussaint's favour until he refused to carry out Toussaint's severe labor legislation in the North. Cultivation in his district suffered, and Toussaint sent observers to watch his administration and listen to the criticisms Moïse indiscreetly made of Toussaint's policy toward the whites. At first it was thought he would be the successor, and the whites decided that if Moïse ever ruled they would leave. (257)

We come to see here how Louverture—perhaps too consumed by the possibility of creating a new society through largely diplomatic negotiations with the whites, or convinced that such was the most pragmatic strategy—is essentially threatened by the actions of a man who, although supposedly comparatively “illiterate” and “undisciplined,” sees the injustice not only of showing favor to, but essentially offering the benefits of property to, those who had been oppressors. What Moïse seems to see and to express in a way that Louverture does not, or at least not as clearly, is that the economic and labor inequalities in revolutionary Saint Domingue were still bound to the old racial hierarchy, and that the hatred of whites for blacks had not gone away. In sum, Moïse realized that there was no avenue for building a society without dismantling the fundamental structures in which racist oppression was so tightly bound. It is not by coincidence, then, that when Moïse specifically acts against Louverture’s orders, he is cast as “indiscreet” in his critiques, qualities which make him the very opposite of the “suave and discreet Toussaint.”

While Louverture would be incredibly remorseful, indeed by all accounts, devastated, by his decision to execute Moïse, James describes this act as a crime. It certainly inspires the anger, sadness, and dismay of the other generals; Louverture apparently attempts to settle their consternation with yet another proclamation (James 278). For James, this constitutes the moment in which the revolutionary leadership turned to Dessalines, and in which Dessalines found it necessary to facilitate Louverture’s capture by the French.

*Louverture's Arrest and Beyond*

As Louverture kept many of his actions hidden from his people, or simply did not communicate openly with them, especially during later stages of the war, France withheld many unpleasant truths from him. Indeed, despite Louverture's best efforts and the power of his words, the French and other European forces continued to engage in a battle of words with him, often lying to him outright. It is General Leclerc—the general who Louverture later condemns in his memoir—who would ultimately attempt to capture him through both destructive actions and various ruses of the pen. James reports on one moment in this effort: "Leclerc proclaimed that he had two letters proving Toussaint's treason, and published one. It was a forgery, for when the Home Government asked him for proofs in order to bring Toussaint to trial, he confessed that he had none" (335). After Leclerc retracted his statement about Louverture, he convinced Louverture to come talk with him, only to have his aides arrest him. James states that Louverture's arrest "came like a cold shock to the whole population. Whatever Toussaint had done, he stood for liberty" (334). In this moment, we see that James regards Louverture as someone who was also implicated in a discourse of symbolism; someone whose actions—including speeches and silences—signified in ways that perhaps superseded his own efforts of controlled expression. Moreover, the symbolic weight attached to Louverture has been an obstacle to further considering other actors in the revolution, especially the ordinary people of Saint Domingue who did not occupy leadership positions. At the same time, the

countless narratives surrounding Louverture also sometimes make it difficult to hear his own voice.

Paradoxically, the fact that Louverture was cast out of the action of the war, and into prison in the Jura Mountains, allows him to gather and record at least some aspects of the last months of his participation in the revolution. It is in prison that he writes his *memoire*. The only explicit mention that James makes of Louverture's *memoire* is in his annotated bibliography at the end of the work. Under a section titled "Biographies of Toussaint L'Ouverture," James provides an entry on the Haitian historian Saint-Rémy's writings on Louverture, highlighting the biography he wrote, and notes how Saint-Rémy's attitude toward the general differs between his publication of the biography and his later edition of Louverture's *memoire*. I reproduce this entry in its entirety:

Saint-Remy: *La Vie de Toussaint L'Ouverture*. Paris. 1850.

Saint-Remy, a Mulatto, hated L'Ouverture like poison, and his biography is a scornful attack. Three years later, however, he seems to have mellowed. He published Toussaint's "Mémoires," an apologia, written for Bonaparte, in the Fort-de-Joux, dealing chiefly with his activities just before and during Leclerc's expedition. Saint-Remy's introduction is almost friendly. (James 388)

As mentioned earlier, James here characterizes the text that Louverture writes in prison as an apologia to Bonaparte. Perhaps James does not give great credence to Saint-Rémy's rendering of the text, as he notes that this "Mulatto" Haitian historian and lawyer

previously had written a “scornful attack” of Louverture, and thus is perhaps wary of Saint-Rémy’s initial vehemence, then extreme shift in perspective. Moreover, given James’ preoccupation with narrating the remaining battles that eventually resulted in Saint Domingue’s independence, the prison text does not appear to be a very compelling document to him. Despite his own attention to Louverture’s determination to use literary and other means to defeat slavery in Saint Domingue, James seems to see Louverture’s “Mémoires” as unworthy of in-depth discussion, at least in relation to the narrative he foregrounds.

And yet, there is a passage in James’ account of Louverture’s arrest which bears a striking resemblance to the exact language that Louverture uses in the *memoire* to describe his ordeal. That James registers the sensibility of this wording suggests either a reading of the *memoire* or a summary of its contents in another work. James writes:

They bound him like a common criminal, arrested his aide-de-camp, arrested his wife, son and niece, treating them with every indignity; they broke into his house, stole his money, his jewels, and his family papers, destroyed his plantations. They rushed the family on board a frigate which was waiting in the harbour of Le Cap and embarked them for France. (334)

The violent acts that accompanied Louverture’s arrest—especially the arrest of his family members, but also the destruction of their home, and the seizure of Louverture’s correspondence—caused great suffering to the eloquent, once leading general of Saint

Domingue. Louverture's insistence on the unjust nature of these acts and his conviction that he had a right to a trial are themes that come through astoundingly clearly in his *memoire*.

**Salvaging the Revolution from Jail: Defiance and Antiracism in *Memoire du General Toussaint Louverture***

“The prison writer returns herself to language, and thus necessarily into an identity separate from that which power seeks at once to impose, to know, and to destroy.”

—Doran Larson, “Toward a Prison Poetics” (147)

Louverture attempts to salvage his role in the Haitian Revolution with the document that he reportedly began writing between 24 August 1802—the day of his arrival at the Alpine prison of Fort de Joux—and 11 September 1802, when Napoleon Bonaparte's aide-de-camp Caffarelli came to question him about his dealings with the British and the whereabouts of his supposed fortune (Girard 14). After having been separated from his family members who were incarcerated in other parts of France, and himself placed in a frigid, isolated cell, Louverture endeavors to demand justice from the French regime. While addressing the text directly to Bonaparte, Louverture uses a discourse that often seems more resonant with the demands of a popular antislavery struggle. Although the text sometimes evokes more abstract and “universal” notions of



liberty—like those found in Louverture’s declarations—unlike many of those documents it also contains a very embodied and personal protest against physical confinement.

Louverture even mentions his life in slavery, though only once, close to the end of the document, saying: “j’ai été Esclave joze la vancer” (148); “I was a slave, I dare to announce it” (149). He otherwise focuses on all his accomplishments in Saint Domingue and condemns the French for his mistreatment. As Jenson aptly notes, “Although at the end of his life the kidnapping and imprisonment by the French uncannily paralleled the experience of enslavement, he protested against it as someone for whom such treatment was unthinkable” (25) Despite its relatively intimate focus on Louverture’s own experiences, the *memoire*, Girard argues, is more a “petition” or “report” than it is an autobiography (19). Indeed, he notes, Louverture “describe[s] the document as ‘my report’ when sending it to Bonaparte” (19).

In my reading, I argue that part of the text’s potency is the way it navigates these multiple modalities. Indeed, another important position that the *memoire* occupies is as an historical record of the linguistic developments of its time. Girard arrives at the conclusion that while the text is a “Rosetta Stone” of early Haitian Kreyòl, the language in which Louverture writes is a “creolized French” (30).<sup>29</sup> Other scholars have remarked that the language of Louverture’s text is essentially a phonetic rendering of French; thus, it is a text that continues to bear the marks of orality. The seeming “impropriety” of Louverture’s French, at a time when France’s state institutions sought to make the language increasingly standardized, no doubt served to justify the kinds of disavowals

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<sup>29</sup> See Girard’s exquisite notes on the language of the text and the language Louverture spoke, pp. 23-30.

that it—and Louverture himself—received both during his lifetime and beyond.<sup>30</sup> For example, Bonaparte’s aide-de-camp Caffarelli describes in his report to Bonaparte the difficulty he had in understanding Louverture’s spoken language when he went to interrogate him.<sup>31</sup> Despite and against these racist dismissals, Louverture must have articulated his arguments clearly enough, given Bonaparte’s insistence on taking away all his writing implements. It is thanks to the work of scholars like Girard that Louverture’s voice can again, in some form, be heard. The force of Louverture’s claims comes through

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<sup>30</sup> In *The History of the French Language*, Peter Rickard discusses how this standardization was actually an initiative of the revolutionary regime. That the Abbé Grégoire, a figure who was sympathetic to abolition, oversaw this process perhaps shows the contradictions within the notion of equality itself; the process of standardizing French became known as ‘anéantir les patois’—destroying, eliminating, indeed perhaps even ‘exterminating’ dialects. As Rickard writes of these developments: “In August 1790, the revolutionary government feeling that ‘l’unité de l’idiome est une partie intégrante de la Révolution,’ entrusted the Abbé Henri Grégoire with the task of investigating the linguistic state of the nation. Accordingly he sent a letter to parish priests all over the country, asking them to state whether dialects were spoken in their parish, and whether French was understood at all or in part. The replies enabled him to compile a report entitled *Sur la nécessité et les moyens de anéantir les patois et d’universaliser l’usage de la langue Française*, which he presented to the National Convention in 1794. From this report it appeared that, out of an estimated population of twenty-five million, at least six million, above all in country districts in the south, knew no French at all, while another six million only had a smattering of the language and were unable to carry on a sustained conversation in it. Only some three million, by virtue either of the region where they happened to live, or of their education, were able to speak it purely; while the number who could write it was, of course, even smaller. On the other hand, it also emerged from Grégoire’s report that the dialects were themselves being influenced more and more by French, and this is certainly borne out by such scanty dialect literature as has survived from the period. Grégoire’s conclusion was that ‘pour extirper tous les préjugés, développer toutes les vérités, tous les talents, toutes les vertus, fondre tous les citoyens dans la masse politique, il faut identité de langage’—a return, in fact, to the premiss which had been his starting-point. To bring this about, the revolutionary government proposed to provide a primary school in each commune, with a teacher to be paid by the state” (Rickard 121).

<sup>31</sup> Consider this passage from Caffarelli’s report, which Desormeaux includes in the appendix of his edition of Louverture’s *Mémoires*: “Sa manière de narrer exige beaucoup d’attention, à cause de la difficulté qu’il a de s’exprimer. Lorsqu’il parle avec vivacité, son visage se décompose, et il grimace d’une manière tout à fait extraordinaire: ses yeux, ses paupières sont d’une mobilité dont on ne se fait pas d’idée. Lorsqu’il parle avec feu d’une chose qui l’indigne, il est horrible” (Desormeaux 211). (“His way of narrating requires a lot of attention [on the part of the listener], because of the difficulty he has in expressing himself. When he speaks with vivacity, his face decomposes, and he grimaces in an outright extraordinary way: his eyes, his eyelids are of a mobility that you can hardly imagine. When he speaks with fire about a thing he’s indignant about, he’s horrible”). Here, Caffarelli uses incredibly dehumanizing language to describe Louverture; he characterizes him as monstrous, as barely able to speak, and even likens his face to decomposing matter. These are unequivocally racist tropes.

powerfully in the text, amidst the extreme circumstances he endured while writing. In what follows, I highlight some of the repeated themes or problematics that Louverture's text addresses. I hear Louverture's voice in this document as a voice against incarceration and racism.

### *Naming and Rejecting Confinement*

Throughout the *memoire*, Louverture evokes the concrete conditions in which he is writing. While he does not go into depth in describing his cell, he frequently underscores that he is in the depths of one, somewhere very far away from anyone who might have the power to change his situation. Toward the end of a long passage, Louverture laments how the French have isolated him in the prison: "je sui an voier dant le fons du cachot" (13); "I am thrown at the bottom of a cell" (14). The idea of being at a bottom of a cell resonates with other forms of confinement, evoking in particular the belly of a slave ship. The text in this sense points to the reality of slavery, although again Louverture only directly mentions his own slave past once. Moreover, in this phrase describing the situation of his writing, Louverture insists that he has been thrown (or perhaps "sent to"; "envoyer") in that place. This vocabulary points to Louverture's understanding of his not only having been imprisoned, but indeed exiled, and separated from his loved ones. Caffarelli and others remark that Louverture often mentioned his

family throughout his time in prison; being in captivity, so far away from his island and his loved ones—and not knowing their fate—causes Louverture a great deal of pain.<sup>32</sup>

Indeed, in the longer passage in which the statement “je sui an voier dant le fons du cachot” appears, we see Louverture recount and condemn the injustice that was done to his family and his estate. Louverture describes those injustices as inflicting on him extreme physical pain—as being equivalent to having a limb removed, then being forced to walk. In this passage we hear moments that closely resemble the account of Louverture’s arrest provided by James. I quote the relevant passage from Louverture’s *memoire* at length below:

arrete arbitrairement sans  
mentendre ni me dire pourquoi; en parrè toute mes avoir, pillie toute la  
famille an general, saisire mes papier et les gard der, man barqué anvoier nud  
comme ver deter, répendus des calomni les plus a tros sur mon conte,, da précela  
je sui an voier dant le fons du cachot; nesce pas coupé la jambre dun  
quie quin et lui dire marché, nesce pas coupè sa langue et lui dire parlé  
nes ce pas en teré un homme vivant, tous cela a été bien combiné a ma perte  
pour ment ne antire, et me detruire parce que je sui noire et ingnorant,

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<sup>32</sup> Girard discusses in some detail the conditions of Louverture’s isolation. He began his incarceration in the company of one of his servants, a man named Mars Plaisir, and apparently the two men provided each other some solace in that space (Girard 11). However, just a few weeks after their arrival at the prison, “Plaisir was sent away...and Louverture had to face the rest of his captivity without a familiar face” (11). Moreover, as “the most prominent prisoner” at Joux, Louverture was “kept in his own cell and isolated from other inmates. He was guarded by a squad of nineteen riflemen and officers who had standing orders to shoot unannounced visitors on sight” (10).

et je n'avoit pas conte au nombre des soldat de la republique ni avoire de merite,  
et point des justice pour moi; et ci j'avois pas dant ce monde j'avois dant  
l'autre...(138,140)<sup>33</sup>

Arrested arbitrarily

without

hearing me or telling me why; took all my assets; plundered all my  
family in general; seized my papers and kept them; embarked and sent me naked  
as worm; spread the worst calamities on my account. Based on this

I am thrown at the bottom of a cell. Isn't it like cutting the leg of

someone and telling him: "walk?" Isn't it like cutting his tongue and telling

him: "talk?"

Isn't it like burying a man alive? All of this was well thought out to lose me,

to annihilate me, and to destroy me because I am black and ignorant,

and I must not count as one of the soldiers of the Republic or have any merit,

and no justice for me; and if I have none in this world I will have some in the next

(139, 141)

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<sup>33</sup> Please note that in all the citations of the original language of the memoire, I have tried to reproduce them exactly as they appear in Girard's transcription. Thus, for example, the reader will note the double commas in one of the lines in the passage above, the underlined statements at certain points, which appear in Louverture's document, and many interesting spellings, including in an upcoming passage, the word "geurre" which corresponds with "guerre" or war, to name a few such details.

The imagery in this passage—which itself reads almost like a prose poem—is some of the richest imagery in Louverture’s *memoire*. Louverture rails against being relegated to the status of a “ver deter” (“earthworm”), thus capturing a sense of the diminution he has suffered. He also underscores the physical immobility imposed on him, when he says: “nesce pas coupé la jambre dun quie quin et lui dire marché,”; “Isn’t it like cutting the leg of someone and telling him: ‘walk?’” (Girard 140; 141). Louverture suggests that his intellectual abilities have also been severed: again, with a very physical image, he says, “nesce pas coupè sa langue nesce pas coupè sa langue et lui dire parlé”; “Isn’t it like cutting his tongue and telling him: ‘talk?’” (Girard 140; 141). Moreover, he underscores that all this treatment is due to the French seeing him as “noire et ignorant” (“black and ignorant”). And yet, the limitations to speech that Louverture highlights are in fact ways of rendering him “ignorant,” or without words; we see this especially in the French regime’s seizure of his correspondence.

Moreover, the kind of intellectual constraint and physical suffering that Louverture describes here serves as a powerful testament against being confined to a literally enclosed space. Such confinement must have been especially difficult for someone who had lived for decades as a free man—for someone who spent that time in almost constant movement. Louverture’s mobility was a characteristic aspect of his leadership: he was a person always on top of the latest developments, always corresponding with others. As James writes, “With the exception always of Bonaparte, no single figure in the whole period of the French Revolution travelled so fast and so far” (256). It is against this knowledge of Louverture’s extensive travel and activity that we

may be able to better appreciate his experience of arrest, forcible exile, and eventual imprisonment in France. It is no wonder that Louverture says, and indeed underlines in the original document the statement: “nes ce pas en teré un homme vivant.” In prison, Louverture says, he feels like a man buried alive.

According to other archival sources, during his imprisonment, Louverture experienced a range of different fortunes; any bit of solace he received, as well as access to writing, were quite contingent. The director of the prison for the first part of Louverture’s captivity was a man named Baille, who was apparently much more humane than those, like Bonaparte, giving orders from Paris. Because of the presence of this milder official, with whom he apparently conducted an ongoing conversation, Louverture was able to procure writing tools for some time. Girard notes that Baille also gave Louverture more rations than other prisoners. At one point, however, the leadership changed and there was an increase in surveillance, in which “Louverture’s knife and razor were taken away,” and eventually as we know, his writing tools (Girard 10). During Caffarelli’s interrogation, the authorities at the jail took away Louverture’s uniform and gave him prisoner’s clothes. This gives Louverture’s statement that he was left “nud comme ver deter,” “naked as a worm,” additional valences. Girard states that “[a]s a self-made man, Louverture was very sensitive to any social or racial slight, so this insult must have deeply hurt his pride” (13). In prison, many efforts were taken to unmake the man that Louverture had become. Insults to him on the basis of rank and race, Louverture rightly points out, were all acts intended to destroy him. Louverture’s repeated emphasis

on the injustice of his situation, his persistent protest against his confinement, shows his embodied sense of himself as a free man.

*Defending His Record: On Honorable Service*

In an early passage of the *memoire*, Louverture presents a thoroughly positive vision of the effects of his governance of Saint Domingue. He asserts that the island was doing well—better, even, than it had been before. He identifies his leadership as the primary reason for this success. The passage is meant not only to underscore Louverture’s capabilities, but perhaps also to justify his having written the 1801 Constitution. Although one of the main reasons that Bonaparte sent Leclerc to Saint Domingue was because of the threat he perceived in the constitution,<sup>34</sup> in the *memoire* Louverture presents himself as unequivocally committed to the interests of France. Louverture thus undercuts Bonaparte’s rationale for sending Leclerc and his troops to Saint Domingue, demonstrating that his actions as a leader and his writing of the constitution align with each other and together constitute a form of correct rule. Indeed, he suggests that it is the French who are wanting in proper conduct. If this passage presents an inflated view of Louverture, it also serves as a counterpoint against which the brutality of the French regime—its destruction of this seemingly peaceable order—stands out strongly:

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<sup>34</sup> Walsh reads the 1801 Constitution as a response, in part, to the growing racism of Bonaparte’s regime (98). In it, Saint Domingue would gain more autonomy, albeit under the rule of Louverture. In it, Louverture also declares himself governor for life, thus above the law which he otherwise relies on.



la colonis de S<sup>t</sup> domingue

Dont j'étois commandant jouissoit de la plus grande tranquilité la cultu  
et les commerces y fleurissoit, l'isle étoit parvenus a un degre des  
plendeur où on ne l avoit pas en cor vus, et tout cele joze le dire  
étoit mon ouvrage, cependant on y étoit sur le pied de geurre,

The colony of Saint-Domingue

of which I was the commander was enjoying the greatest tranquility. Agriculture  
and commerce were flourishing, and the island had attained a degree of  
splendor that no one had ever seen previously, and all of this I dare to say  
was the result of my labors. And yet we were on a war footing.

(52-55)

What Louverture does not speak of here, of course, are the measures he took to ensure  
that agricultural work was being continued. As we saw earlier, because of Louverture's  
efforts to make amends with white planters, fellow fighters like his nephew, Moïse,  
thought that he—just as he in turn suspected of Leclerc—also had plans to restore  
slavery. As Carolyn Fick writes:

in light of [Louverture's] policies favoring the return of white émigré colonists,  
[he] left the impression among the black workers that he was planning a return to  
the old regime. No doubt Moïse was among those who believed that Toussaint

was in some way moving toward a restoration of slavery in Saint Domingue, and if such rumors were circulating, Toussaint, as a revolutionary leader made the fatal error of not taking vigorous and concrete measures to dispel them. (209)

In this passage from Fick's account of the revolution, we see again Louverture as someone who was very selective about who he talked to, and exactly what information he shared; the passage suggests that he communicated principally with the white émigré colonists, not with the black workers. While he would have benefited from more consistent and reciprocal dialogue with his people, Louverture's discretion becomes useful in his writing of the prison memoir. Indeed, Louverture's sense of which issues to highlight, which ones to finesse, and which topics to omit, shows his deft skill as a writer. In his *memoire*, he never directly mentions the constitution. Instead, he provides an extensive discussion of the importance of the law.

#### *Using the Language of Justice and the Law*

Louverture's *memoire* is deeply preoccupied by his understanding of the law; including how it should serve him—a general of honorable conduct—in appealing the injustice of his situation. Most significantly, perhaps, for Louverture the realm of law is one that he assumes should surpass the ongoing racial prejudice of his day. As Walsh states, “Louverture remained confident in the rule of law until the very end; tragically, Bonaparte failed to honor any pact with him. In lieu of what could have been one of the greatest trials in the history of the French Caribbean, Bonaparte ordered silence” (99). In

the *memoire*, Louverture essentially enacts the trial that, in this same text, he requests from Bonaparte, but which the French leader never grants.

Using both a discourse of natural law and a legal discourse to make his claims, Louverture evokes the importance of justice through the law and underscores its universality. The latter allows Louverture to wield the law as a mirror before the French. As Walsh explains further, “Like a skilled prosecutor, Louverture cross-examines the French and demands them to reflect on their own crimes” (97-98). Indeed, Louverture’s knowledge of the law and his skill with various literary maneuvers—tools that, at other times, he seems to have deployed in ways to maintain a rather dictatorial leadership—here allow him to effectively make his case. Consider the following passage:

...cet du fond de cett prison que je recoure a la justice et a la magnanimitè du premiere consul...je demande dont detre Traduit De vant un tribunal ou conseil de geurre ou lon féra paraite ausis le general leclerc et que lon nouguge apré nous a voire enten dus lun et lautre, lequitè, la raison, les lois, tout massure, quon ne peut me refusere cette justice. (Girard 154)

It is from the depths of this prison that I invoke the justice and the magnanimity of the first consul...I thus also ask to be brought before a tribunal or a court martial, where General Leclerc will also be made to appear, and that we be judged after both being heard. Equity, reason, laws: all convinces me that this justice cannot be denied to me. (Girard 155)

As we see in the above passage, which well captures the overall sensibility of the document, Louverture again refers to the concrete circumstances of his writing and underscores the fact that unlike General Leclerc, who would however later die from illness in Saint Domingue, he finds himself at the “fond de cett prison” (“the depths of this prison”). Deploring his confinement, he adds later that this punishment reveals the racism of the French regime: “si jai et  un blan a pr  savoir servis comme jai servis toute cette mal heure mau rait pas arrive”; “if I were a white man, after serving like I served, all these misfortunes would not have happened to me” (Girard 142-143). As in the other passage where Louverture identifies the racialized dimension of his treatment, here too we see his keen understanding that he has been incarcerated and is being denied justice because he is a black man. Contrasting this treatment with his knowledge of his “service,” Louverture invokes the military as an institution that, like the law, should operate under a logic of universality. Indeed, having not only served in the military, but also become well-versed in its protocol, Louverture contests the extrajudicial nature of his incarceration, saying that he and Leclerc must be heard before being judged, “que lon nouguge apr  nous a voire enten dus lun et lautre” (Girard 155). We see here another expression of a fundamental conviction that he and Leclerc are equals and should be treated accordingly before the law.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>35</sup>In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Frantz Fanon remarks upon the limits of the approach of proving that “the black man is equal to the white man” (14) in the quest for racial justice and emancipation. Instead, he advocates the following: “What we are striving for is to liberate the black man from the arsenal of complexes that germinated in a colonial situation” (14). Fully within such a colonial situation, Louverture is not, as we will see, immune from the influence of an “arsenal of complexes”; however, the kind of

In other parts of the text, Louverture stages additional comparisons between himself and Leclerc, saying that he only ever acted out of the interest of *la patrie*, whereas such proper conduct is wanting in Leclerc. While it is General Leclerc, then, who receives most of Louverture's condemnation in the text, Walsh suggests that Louverture primarily deploys Leclerc as a foil for Bonaparte, who Louverture probably knows is ultimately responsible for his imprisonment (97). Bonaparte is also the person who has the power to release him from prison; thus, Louverture must navigate a tight space in the *memoire* between deference and critique. As we see above, Louverture takes care to address Bonaparte with the honorific "le premier consul" ("the first consul") and, perhaps in an appeal to his ego, characterizes him as a magnanimous and just leader (155). Most scholars now tend to read this approach as part of a rhetorical strategy, not an uncritical expression of praise. After all, Louverture uses a discourse which shows that he too is an empowered figure, using terms like "je recoure" ("I invoke") and "je demande" ("I demand").

At the end of the text, Louverture repeats to Bonaparte his demand for a trial, again stating that he and Leclerc should both be brought before a tribunal. Here, he refers to Bonaparte not only as "le premier consul," but also as: "pere de tous les militaire, juge integre defenseur des innosance" and as "medecin"; "father of all military men, honest judge, defender of the innocent" and as "doctor" (Girard 168-169). In this set of epithets,

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equality that he and his fellow-fighters advocate seems to have much more to do with concrete or located—and also, universal—principles, than with a mimicry or replication of European values. The 1804 Constitution upon which Haiti's independence is based voices a clear tone of self-determination. For more on this point, see: Nesbitt, *Universal Emancipation* and Buck-Morss, *Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History*, among others.

Louverture uses a tone that some may identify as servile; I see this move, however, as a rhetorical strategy that once more seeks to underscore a sense of justice and equality before the law. Perhaps Louverture's insistence on this particular form of justice reveals his partial status as a conscript or as a colonized intellectual. And yet, as in the earlier appeals he made in declarations that spoke of liberty, one comes away with the sense that Louverture is earnest in his statements here too: he believes that justice, like liberty, has a concrete manifestation—in the form of the law. That Bonaparte is unmoved by Louverture's words says nothing about Louverture's literary skill; it only further reveals the injustice of the French colonial regime.

### *Reciprocity in Language*

Finally, the matter of reciprocity in language emerges as one of Louverture's fundamental concerns in the *memoire*, and indeed something that I should like to suggest relates to the overall discourse he develops against racist treatment. In the passage we considered above, Louverture insists that both he and Leclerc "be heard" (55). However, as mentioned earlier, Louverture was not accorded the possibility of being heard in a trial; moreover, Bonaparte did not even send a written reply to his *memoire*. Louverture had given the document to Bonaparte's aide-de-camp Caffarelli, who came to see Louverture in prison in October 1802. Caffarelli had come to extract a confession from Louverture, saying that he had betrayed France. Louverture repeatedly refuted this idea and refused to say anything of the like. He also denied that he had any fortune—a primary reason Bonaparte had ordered this interrogation—and insisted that no such thing

was to be found anywhere on the island of Saint Domingue. Bonaparte considers both Louverture's refusals and his demands a form of insubordination. Thus, as Jenson recounts, "When Napoleon Bonaparte received Toussaint's memoir, he was angry enough to order that all writing implements and paper be removed from Toussaint's cell" (107). Bonaparte's rejection of the *memoire*, coupled with his attempts to silence any further efforts by Louverture to express himself, show Bonaparte as someone incapable of engaging in a reciprocal correspondence. While Louverture's refusal to comply with Caffarelli underscores his self-defense against racist and unjust treatment, Bonaparte's actions here emphasize the dictatorial nature of his rule. Unfortunately, this silencing reminds one of Louverture's own earlier actions, in refusing to hear the critiques of Moïse. Instead of responding with an acknowledgment of Moïse's statements and discussing his views with him further, Louverture responded with violence. The tragedy of colonial modernity—and especially the plague of the form of leadership that at times Louverture, in his far more subordinate position, and certainly Bonaparte as an imperial despot embodied—becomes very clear in these instances.

At other points of the *memoire*, we see glimmerings of other possible forms of interaction through language—which one hopes find concretion in actions. Amidst a situation that itself shows the ever-present reality of colonial violence, Louverture articulates a desire for respectful treatment in correspondence. In one passage, Louverture expresses his distaste for Leclerc's not properly announcing to the Haitian leaders the arrival of the French cadre to the island. He contrasts this with how his own general, Christophe, communicated with him about what was unfolding, including alerting him of

Leclerc's lack of correspondence: "il [Christophe]...masuroit que le General commandant en Chef cette Es cadre ne lui avoit pas fait l'honneur de lui Ecrire"; "he [Christophe]... assured me that the general in chief commanding this squadron had not done him the honor of writing to him" (Girard 55-56). In this brief excerpt—wherein the verb "Ecrire" ("to write") is capitalized—one gains a sense of Louverture's commitment to honorable conduct and a desire for reciprocity in communication, even amidst the animosity of war. Louverture's demand that the French government use the medium of language with integrity is more than a question of etiquette. For Louverture, words are deeply bound to acts. Indeed, Louverture's insistence on proper treatment through language is an integral part of the antiracism that his *memoire* advocates. It is another kind of tragedy that Louverture's authorship and his tireless correspondence did not receive full respect in his lifetime.

Despite the treatment that Louverture suffered at the hands of the French regime, he always signed his letters, "Salut et respec": "Salutations and respect" (Girard 168-169). This remains true for the *memoire*. However, unlike the copy he gave to Caffarelli for transmittal to Bonaparte, in the copy of the document that he kept in his headscarf, he did not sign his name. In this act, perhaps Louverture manages not only to salvage some of his words, but also to safeguard the most emancipated version of himself.

## **Conclusion**



“As long as we have prisons, we will have shocked shells writing prison. As long as Black men represent disproportionate majorities in prison, we will have writing imprisoned by race.”

—Davu Seru, “A Manifesto on African American Prison Literature” (6)

In my reading of *Memoire du General Toussaint Louverture* alongside *The Black Jacobins*, I have endeavored to show that the forms of literacy and discipline that helped to shape Louverture and the ‘Black Jacobins’ of Saint Domingue as they fought the war against slavery frequently helped to reproduce a hierarchical order. Through declarations and proclamations, Louverture and many of his other generals spoke over, and even violently suppressed, the voices and will of their people. In not listening to them, in not making the effort to hear them, they often built institutions which only further served to alienate the people and to consolidate the power of the island of Haiti in the hands of the elite.

Paradoxically, however, the composition by Louverture and his compatriots of letters, declarations, and especially constitutions also helped to win and solidify the abolition of slavery and the independence of the island. The impact of the Haitian Revolution is, thus, something that can be seen in both acts and words. After being deprived of everything else, and sent to prison in France, Louverture used the written word to produce a record of his own conduct and some of the key principles of the revolution; in particular, antiracism and equality before the law. That his keen intellect and powerful writing were confined first to a prison, then to a colonial archive, and later

to the silencing processes of historiography reminds us how powerful hegemony, and the uses of racialized thought in that order, are. Louverture's *memoire* challenges the conception that only texts written in the supposed "standard" form of a language, with impeccable grammar, should be regarded as intellectually relevant. And the record of his "untaught genius" (James 253) also underscores the injustice of excluding literacy and education from vast populations of human beings, and instead allowing intellectual capacity to be propagated as somehow bound to a natural intelligence of the ruling class.

The master's tools, as Audre Lorde emphasizes, cannot dismantle the master's house. And yet, the institution of slavery fundamentally relied on the idea that literacy is something that is solely the master's property. That antislavery fighters in Saint Domingue were able to dispel this lie and in many ways reclaim the tool of literacy in the service of emancipation is no humble accomplishment. That Louverture wrote his most extended text in prison; that many of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s and Nelson Mandela's most famous words were penned in other prisons; that young black men like Kalief Browder continue to be locked in solitary confinement and their testimonies ignored or silenced, reminds us of the ongoing nature of that work. The challenge is not only to liberate language, but to dismantle the institutions that propagate imprisonment.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Countering Alienation: On Resistance, Critique, and Literary Freedom

#### in Juan Francisco Manzano's *Autobiografía de un esclavo*

“En todos los trámites de mi vida, la poesía, ya próspera, ya adversa me suministraba versos análogos a mi situación”; “Throughout all the stages of my life, poetry—sometimes happy, sometimes sorrowful—afforded me verses in harmony with my situation.”

—Juan Francisco Manzano, *Autobiografía de un esclavo*, Trans. and ed., Schulman and Garfield (102; 103)

Like modern art in its entirety, literary writing carries at the same time the alienation of History and the dream of History; as a Necessity, it testifies to the division of languages which is inseparable from the division of classes; as Freedom, it is the consciousness of this division and the very effort which seeks to surmount it...it is none the less an imagination eagerly desiring a felicity of words, it hastens towards a dreamed-of language...

—Roland Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero*, Trans. Lavers and Smith (88)

### Introduction

In an era of ever-increasing wealth from sugar production, Cuba in the first half of the nineteenth century endeavored to fashion itself against the recently liberated black

republic of Haiti.<sup>36</sup> In that Cuba, the labor and the cultures of enslaved and free people of African descent were to be sublimated beneath a veneer of neo-European, presumed sophistication. Creating a chokehold on all activities that challenged the system of slavery which led to the island's sugar wealth, the then Spanish colony sought to operate like a well-oiled machine, replete with the repressions that such brutal efficiency requires.<sup>37</sup> In that prohibitive environment, Juan Francisco Manzano (1797-1853/4), a man sometimes called "el esclavo poeta de Cuba," wrote poetry, a play, and an account of his life as a house slave on two plantations in the Matanzas province, and later in Havana.<sup>38</sup> The latter work, now often referred to as *Autobiografía de un esclavo*, remains the most well-known of these texts.<sup>39</sup> The *Autobiografía* exposes many of the workings

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<sup>36</sup> In her study of this time period, *Freedom's Mirror: Cuba and Haiti in the Age of Revolution* (2014), Ada Ferrer explains how Cuba's stance toward Haiti grew out of a fear of the mass slave rebellion that had occurred there: "At a basic level, liberation in Saint-Domingue [Haiti] helped entrench its denial in Cuba...The Haitian Revolution...hastened and hardened Cuba's sugar revolution and the brutal practices of enslavement that came with it" (12). Paradoxically, despite the desire of the Cuban planter class to quell the type of antislavery sentiment that had erupted in Haiti, Cuba also relied heavily on migrants from Haiti, because of the need for laborers in sugar production.

<sup>37</sup> As Sibylle Fischer notes, such brutality is especially evident in the arrest, trial, and execution of José Antonio Aponte in 1812. Following the circulation of a rumor that Spain had abolished slavery in Cuba, Aponte was accused of planning an antislavery rebellion, and along with eight other people, underwent an extended trial for several weeks. During the trial, a famous book of images belonging to Aponte received great scrutiny. Fischer describes this item as "an oversized book wrapped in black oilskin that contained an eclectic array of more than sixty pictures with religious, political, and historical themes" (42). She also reports that Aponte was found to have in his possession portraits of the Haitian revolutionary leaders, Toussaint Louverture, Henri Christophe, and Jean-Jacques Dessalines. Apparently, such artifacts were enough to confirm his guilt. Authorities in Cuba made it clear that the Haitian Revolution and Aponte himself were counter-examples to avoid at all costs: after Aponte's execution, his severed head was displayed on a public street as a warning to all who would dare build an insurgency against slavery on the island. See Fischer, "The Deadly Hermeneutics of the Trial of José Antonio Aponte," pp. 41- 56.

<sup>38</sup> The dates on which I rely in this paragraph come primarily from the chronology provided in the modernized, Spanish edition of the *Autobiografía* prepared by Ivan A. Schulman and translated by Evelyn Picon Garfield (31-32). Indeed, this is the version of the text that I cite from throughout the chapter. Many of these dates are confirmed by other scholars, although there are some discrepancies to be found in the date of Manzano's death. Some sources list it as 1854, instead of 1853.

<sup>39</sup> Although my analysis focuses on the modernized, bilingual version of Manzano's work as noted above, William Luis' full-length Spanish edition of the text, published with Manzano's other writings and titled

of the sugar plantation, which the slave-owning class sought to obscure. To more fully appreciate what the work accomplishes, one must also consider that the writing of this text was not, itself, a freely chosen activity. The white, creole intellectual Domingo Del Monte—the host of a well-known literary salon or *tertulia*, and an advocate of gradual abolition, despite also being a slave-owner himself—had requested that Manzano write the text. Though Del Monte did not fully convey to Manzano that eventually his work would be distributed in transnational abolitionist circles, he presented the completion of the project as the price of Manzano’s manumission.<sup>40</sup> Ambivalent about this literary task, and more interested in composing poetry, Manzano nonetheless began writing the autobiography when he was still legally enslaved. He also seems to have found a way to compromise his conflicting impulses: in 1836, he recited an autobiographical poem that he had written, “Mis treinta años,” at Del Monte’s *tertulia*, leading the members of the group to raise enough money for his freedom (Luis, “Nicolás Azcárate” 332). Manzano then fulfilled Del Monte’s initial request, submitting to him in 1839 the completed manuscript that would become the *Autobiografía*. Del Monte’s salon group modified the

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*Autobiografía del esclavo poeta y otros escritos* (2007), is probably the closest version to Manzano’s original manuscript. Luis has done extensive archival work on Manzano’s oeuvre, including on the materials related to the autobiography. While a more in-depth study of Manzano’s work should focus principally on Luis’ edition and on other Spanish-language scholarship, for the purposes of this chapter—and given this dissertation’s composition in English—I have relied on the Schulman/Garfield bilingual edition, while consulting the Luis edition as needed.

<sup>40</sup> For Joselyn M. Almeida, “Del Monte thus practices a kind of usury to extract the literary value of Manzano’s life” (140), an exchange which is obviously heavily conditioned by the slavery economy. Almeida also writes of the ways that Del Monte sought to keep Manzano’s sense of the audience for his work limited, thus perhaps keeping Manzano particularly concerned about, and focused on, the potential opinions of his protector and the other members of his salon.

text, selecting a portion of it for publication, and altering its spelling and grammar.<sup>41</sup> That version of Manzano's work was sent to England in the hands of the Irish abolitionist, Richard R. Madden, where it would be published in 1840 (Molloy 37-38). The manuscript thus endured further transformation, due to translation into English and the impacts of Madden's own prefatory material.<sup>42</sup> Furthermore, as many accounts of the work emphasize, it would not be published in its full form in Spanish, in Cuba, until 1937 (Molloy 38). Given the constraints imposed by the colonial, slavery society itself, and the further demands of the abolitionist literary circle, Sylvia Molloy's assessment that Manzano's work was "an inordinately manipulated text—a slave narrative that, besides having dispossession for its subject, was in its very composition and publication, dispossessed" (38) remains apt, and a helpful point of departure for this chapter.

In a vein similar to Molloy, I foreground the dispossession that informs this text. In fact, I read Manzano's *Autobiografía* first as a document of alienation. Marx's theory of alienated labor within the wage-labor system may not fully account for all the

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<sup>41</sup> Manzano mentions having written a second half of the autobiography, a text which seems never to have been published. There is some speculation that it perhaps only circulated among the Del Monte group, and then was lost. For more on the manipulations and the fate of the document, see Schulman/Garfield, Almeida, Molloy, and Luis. All of these scholars, and many others who write about Manzano, focus heavily on the journey that Manzano's text endured; I am thus also reproducing that approach here.

<sup>42</sup> Almeida writes further of the effects of Madden's manipulation of Manzano's text, and its eventual circulation to the members of the world Antislavery Convention in 1840: "Madden crowds out Manzano, and turns the translator, usually the marginal, anonymous figure, into the author" (141). For more on the ways that Madden and Del Monte transformed Manzano's work on a textual level, see Karen Ruth Kornweibel's book, *Writing for Inclusion: Literature, Race, and National Identity in Nineteenth-Century Cuba and the United States*, especially the chapter, "Countering Negation in Juan Francisco Manzano and Frederick Douglass' Early Texts and Patronage Relationships," pp. 23-43. In this chapter Kornweibel examines the rather common practice of patronage and prefatory writing in the context of writers who were or had been enslaved, particularly Manzano and Douglass: a practice undertaken by white abolitionists whose own mediation of these texts often overshadowed or heavily marked the reception of the primary author's words.

deprivations and forms of violence under slavery, but it helps us name some of its fundamental conditions. Marx identifies several interlinked elements of alienation that operate in a system of estranged labor, slavery being an extreme form of such a system. He writes, “In estranging from man 1) nature, and 2) himself, his own active functions, his life-activity, estranged labour estranges the *species* from man. It turns for him the *life of the species* into the means of individual life” (74). As we will see, there are many ways in which these forms of alienation find expression in Manzano’s text. In an overarching sense, we will note that, like other enslaved people, Manzano was often deprived of his own labor power and creative energy for the benefit of others, in a growing capitalist system. Regarding the task that Manzano undertakes in the *Autobiografía*, we can recognize that although he is meant to recount the story of his life, both his life and the efforts to narrate it are marked by his having been the property of another. As he emphasizes to his would-be protector Del Monte when beginning to write and while still an enslaved man, “A slave is a dead soul” (Schulman 5). Such statements evince alienation, especially here, Manzano’s alienation from himself.

In many ways, it is the estrangement from “species being” that seems most prevalent in the *Autobiografía*, especially in its expression as “the *estrangement of man from man*” (Marx 77); and yet, such estrangement often feeds into the alienation of Manzano from himself. As a house slave, Manzano generally faced different conditions from those of the enslaved people who were forced to work specifically in sugar harvesting or production, which was the lot of most slaves on the island. And yet, from a young age he served as a source of entertainment for his slave-owners and their guests,

first learning and then reciting to them poems, operas, and sermons. He also acted as a personal servant to the mistress of his first household, the Marchioness Justiz, and later to the even crueller Marchioness Prado Ameno, the mistress of another sugar estate. Along with accompanying these mistresses in many of their daily activities, Manzano was responsible for cleaning, dusting, sewing, and other such tasks in their homes. As he grew older, his facility with the literary arts—which had earlier evoked the praise of his slave-owners—became a reason for his condemnation. As we will see, he reports that he was punished for falling short of any of his duties, and especially for engaging in activities related to composing poetry or writing. He was repeatedly punished by being sent away to the sugar mill to undertake additional labor, or by being locked up in a cellar-like space there for days. Although overall Manzano works less in sugar production than many other enslaved people, he still labors on the plantation and later in the abolitionist *tertulia*; that much of his labor is of a more cultural or intellectual type than manual does not diminish the reality of exploitation, though it does raise other problematics.

Indeed, to further underscore the aspect of “the *estrangement of man from man*” (Marx 77) in this context, Manzano often emerges in his autobiography as an exceptional slave, even regarding himself as a “mulato entre negros” (Manzano/Schulman 132): a “mulatto among blacks.” The disparate values attached to manual labor and to cultural labor, and also to racial categories—with whiteness at the top of the social hierarchy and blackness at the bottom—emerge strongly in the *Autobiografía* and demand critical attention. So, too, does the production of Manzano’s exceptionalism, which in many ways is tied to the racialized order. While Manzano was, undoubtedly, a person of many



talents, his difference was often solidified in racial terms. Not only was he regarded much of the time as a “mulatto among blacks,” but many of the adults on the plantation “cuidaba[n] de que no me rozase con los otros negritos” (Manzano/Schulman 55): they “[took] care that I would not mix with other black children” (Garfield 56). We see, thus, how Manzano—whose blackness and mixed-race status are both at issue in this passage—is socialized to stay apart from other children who are seen as entirely black. As a mixed-race person or mulatto, whatever amount of prized white parentage that he had, would be compromised simply by associating with black children; that kind of “mixing” was not allowed. And yet, he also was not white. He thus inhabits a very particular space, which leads to an articulation of a certain form of distinction. Rather than taking for granted the narrative of distinction attached to Manzano, however, I instead want to address it as something that was produced to serve the differential economy of the plantation, and thus an expression of alienation therein. In sum, my reading of the *Autobiografía* seeks to account for ways that Manzano and other slaves were made to be estranged from their own “life-engendering” energies and activities (Marx) and often from one another.

While emphasizing the injustices that affect the content and the form of Manzano’s text, I suggest that we not consign it entirely to the structures of confinement in which it was produced; nor can we simply dismiss Manzano as a timid and supplicant figure, as many readers have characterized him.<sup>43</sup> Instead, I claim that Manzano’s

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<sup>43</sup> In his “Introduction” to the *Autobiografía*, Schulman draws on the impressions of Manzano by Del Monte’s group, and the vision of the enslaved person that they wanted to promote, concluding that

autobiography—a text that bears witness to its own fight to exist—also engenders what Roland Barthes terms “the dream of History” (88). A significant portion of this dream, for Manzano, is to inhabit a world where he can engage in thinking, writing, and creating, in freedom. What is at stake in Manzano’s text, I claim, is an effort, from the limit conditions that he inhabited, to reject slavery and to assert another possible life. Manzano is not, like Esteban Montejo, with whom he is often compared, a radical antislavery figure, but I argue that his autobiography takes a stand against slavery in several ways.<sup>44</sup>

First, not simply the “most perfect account of Cuban slavery” (qtd. by Schulman, “Introduction” 30) that Madden, Del Monte, and other abolitionists desired it to be, the *Autobiografía* challenges a range of narratives about slavery that were ascendant at its time—both those of the slavery apologists and the slave-owning class, and those of many of the white, upper-class abolitionists.<sup>45</sup> In its crafting of a counter-vision, the

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Manzano was “a fundamentally obedient and faithful servant” and someone who “besides being submissive, was fearful” (27). Rather than pathologizing Manzano, I suggest that we read expressions of hesitancy or fearfulness in his work as among the many possible (and understandable) responses to the conditions of slavery. Moreover, Manzano’s own work contests the idea of his being a categorically submissive figure. Whenever his mother was threatened by an overseer—including at times when he was still an adolescent, and she would try to protect her son or beg for mercy—Juan would do whatever he could to defend her. Consider just such a scene: “Dar un grito y convertirme de manso cordero en un león todo fue una cosa. Me le zafé con un fuerte tirón del brazo por donde me llevaba y me le tiré encima con dientes y manos” (Schulman/Manzano 70). “All at once I screamed and was transformed from a gentle lamb into a lion. I wrenched myself loose from his grip with a strong yank of my arm and I attacked him with teeth and fists” (Garfield 71). Such a moment—there are other examples in the text—helps to complicate the dominant narrative reproduced about Manzano.

<sup>44</sup> An extended version of this chapter would do well to take up a discussion of Montejo’s life, as it appears in *Biografía de un cimarrón* (1966), which he narrates in conversation with Miguel Barnet. Montejo’s position as a runaway slave, and later an independence fighter, adds other crucial dimensions an understanding of slavery in Cuba.

<sup>45</sup> While the actions of Del Monte and Madden offer a revealing glimpse of the perspective of upper-class abolitionists, consider a statement from the perspective of a slavery apologist, a man named Antonio de las Barras y Prado, a Spanish merchant who was living on the island: “The sense of horror that Europeans have of slavery is lost [here in Cuba] because the treatment given to slaves, except in rare cases, is not as severe as it is presented in novels. Many proletarians of free countries like England would wish to have the treatment of the slaves of Cuba...” (as qtd. by Schulman, “Introduction” 8). Here, there is a clear denial of

*Autobiografía* realizes the work of critique.<sup>46</sup> Second, in the face of the cultural gatekeeping that characterized nineteenth-century Cuba, Manzano's text strikes notes of resistance in the ways it claims a right to the aesthetic, and more broadly to the material pleasures that existed just out of reach of enslaved people and often free people of color. Rather than making an overarching claim about agency in an abstract sense—which scholar Saidiya Hartman cautions against in her work, *Scenes of Subjection*<sup>47</sup>—it nonetheless seems reasonable to read Manzano's text in terms of its articulation of what Hartman calls "resistance to subjugation" (50). While such acts typically "proceeded by stealth: one acted furtively, secretly, and imperceptibly, and the enslaved seized any and every opportunity to slip off the yoke" (Hartman 50), what is notable about Manzano's

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the level of brutality that slaves in Cuba experience; Barras y Prado even suggests that their treatment would be enviable to some working-class Europeans. We also see in this statement a contestation of the vision of slavery produced in literary works, specifically novels. No doubt a statement like this would be targeted at works—by white creoles—such as *Cecilia Valdés* (1839) by Cirilio Villaverde and *Sab* (1841) by Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda, individuals who were known to the Del Monte group. Such a dismissive vision toward literary writing about slavery, even with all the complexities it involved, helps us further understand the situation in which Manzano found himself in writing the autobiography. While a different genre than those of Villaverde and Gómez, Manzano's autobiography nonetheless emerged at a time in which accounts of slavery were regarded with suspicion in terms of their potential for exaggeration. For Manzano, he can claim the position of someone who lived through what he narrates, thereby lending greater credence to his story. On the other hand, being a mulatto, thus a person of color on the island, and an enslaved man, his voice already would have been regarded with incredulity.

<sup>46</sup> In this sense, I am aligning Manzano's work with aspects of what Toussaint Louverture does in his *memoire*: revealing the contradictions of the logic of the system of colonial slavery. Aimé Césaire's work in *Discourse on Colonialism* is a later, and even more explicit iteration of such a project. Césaire writes from a far vaster point of view than say, Louverture or Manzano, not only because he has access to a large archive of colonialist texts, but also because he has, in the era of decolonization, a perspective of the long history of colonialism. I see the work of these three writers, nonetheless, undertaking a similar kind of project, albeit in different scales and through different literary means.

<sup>47</sup> Attending, in this text, to the experiences of enslaved people in the United States, Hartman asks: "How is it possible to think 'agency' when the slave's very condition of being or social existence is defined as a state of determinate negation? In other words, what are the constituents of agency when one's social condition is defined by negation and personhood refigured in the fetishized and fungible terms of object of property?" (52). While my own approach to reading a text like Manzano's attempts not to subsume the personhood of an enslaved person to the condition of enslavement, I also want to make note of a tendency in the opposite direction, which Hartman is addressing here.

text is that he makes visible such moments of resistance, while also guarding aspects of “stealth,” including through what he chooses not to discuss, as well as, we will soon see, through various other stylistic choices. Manzano’s work, then, participates in what Édouard Glissant, in assessing a vast range of Caribbean literature calls “creative *marronage*” (71): a way to get around the “rule of silence” of the plantation, thus producing a literature which “bursts forth in snatches and fragments” (69). Arguably, this kind of *marronage* also finds articulation in the many other kinds of creative activities for which Manzano expresses a desire. Third, then, it is Manzano’s claim to the freedom to write and create, and the ‘runaway’ nature of his aesthetic, that stands as a counterpoint to the alienation of slavery. The following sections address, through readings of passages of the *Autobiografía*, these three dimensions, while also accounting for how alienation appears in the work.

### **Unmasking the Plantation: The *Autobiografía* as Critique<sup>48</sup>**

Manzano’s *Autobiografía* gives visibility to the incongruities of the plantation, and thus helps to demythologize many of the common narratives that were used to

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<sup>48</sup> In using the term “unmask” to describe the critical work of Manzano’s autobiography, I mean to address the fact that the society in which Manzano lived seemed very concerned about maintaining appearances. If Manzano’s account does not always rely on a brutalizing image of the plantation, it does bring the reader inside that space, into its inner workings, as it were. The maintenance of a strict line between an outside and an inside seems a key issue here. A figure like Manzano may be included in the picture or image of the plantation household only when he is behaving as his slave-owners expect; if he does not, he is sent away. The segregation between the household and the sugar field, between the slave-owners and slaves, all helped to produce a sense of the rightness and well-functioning nature of the slavery system. Keeping up appearances was essential in this site. Perhaps a better way of registering the critical work of Manzano’s text is to say that he shows exactly how masking—or producing appearances—occurs on the site.

contain or cover up its brutality, to justify slavery, or to variously demonize or exoticize blackness. Though nominally a narration of the life of an individual enslaved person, Manzano's text is more than a document attesting to his internal transformation. To be sure, it is dense with statements about Manzano's emotional responses to what he experiences. However, if his literary protectors wanted the autobiography only or primarily to be a text documenting Manzano's interiority—a stage for displaying the sentimental education they hoped to promote—he seems to have refused that mode. Instead, the autobiography reads as an eyewitness account of a locality in which the author is embedded, and which to a considerable degree determines his life. In what emerges as a diagram of the workings of the plantation, Manzano moves between a focus on himself and his situation, while illustrating several key dimensions and structuring devices of the site in which he and others are enslaved. His “I” works to situate the reader in the plantation, operating as a kind of guide into that space. Taking on a rather different role than he had in his earlier life, that of reciting the verses of others and producing sweet sounds for the entertainment of the household, Manzano subtly offers a critical account of a space that the slave-owning class sought to promote as a space of civility and refinement.<sup>49</sup>

### *Naming Violence, Arbitrariness, and Contradiction*

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<sup>49</sup> For more on the relationship of the creation of the notion of refinement, against and in conversation with the plantation, see Simon Gikandi's study, *Slavery and the Culture of Taste*.

One of [the] contradictions [of the Plantation] contrasts the tidy composition of such a universe—in which social hierarchy corresponds in maniacal, minute detail to a mercilessly maintained racial hierarchy—with the ambiguous complexities otherwise proceeding from it.

—Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation* (65)

While social and racial hierarchies in Cuba were used to ensure a smoothly-functioning society, the sugar plantation as Manzano presents it was often a site of considerable disorder, wherein individuals like his owners, the Marquesa Justiz, and especially later the Marquesa Prado Ameno, dictated much of what occurred on the plantation, and acted on their own whims. Thus, as Manzano says, despite internalizing many of the rules and expectations of the households in which he served, he could never be sure exactly how his owners would react—even at times when he did what he thought was expected. Often, their reactions would involve an element of physical violence.

Manzano describes one such moment of arbitrary punishment, where it is unclear what he has done to receive such treatment. Then still a young person, he says that for any childish act, he could be beaten and locked in a cellar. He writes:

Por la más leve maldad de muchacho me encerraban por veinticuatro horas en una carbonera, sin nada con que taparme...Aquí, después de sufrir recios azotes, era encerrado con orden y pena de gran castigo al que me diese siquiera una gota de

agua. Tanto se temía en esta casa tal orden, que nadie, absolutamente nadie, se atrevía... (Manzano/Schulman 56)

For the least childish mischief, I was locked up for twenty-four hours in a coal cellar without floorboards and nothing to cover myself... Here, after suffering brutal lashes, I was locked up with orders that anyone who might give me even a drop of water would be punished. Such an order was so feared in that house that no one, absolutely no one dared... (Garfield 57)

In this scene, Manzano underscores the vulnerability he experiences, being made to lie on the ground—“in a cellar without floor boards”—and with “nothing to cover [himself].”<sup>50</sup> He thus presents himself as deprived of physical solace, and therefore acutely exposed to other external forces. He talks about, for example, the blows he receives in that raw space, adding the modifier “recio” (brutal) to emphasize the extent of the cruelty he suffered. Moreover, in this scene, he also demonstrates how slaves like himself were isolated from others. Anyone who showed mercy to a person in a situation like his would be punished too. This scene illustrates that there were strict codes that members of the plantation were called to abide by, under threat of punishment; it also underscores the extent of alienation of “man from man” that the plantation produced.

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<sup>50</sup> This image recalls the moment in Louverture’s *memoire*, where he describes himself as “naked as an earthworm.”

Experiencing years of this kind of treatment, Manzano later encapsulates his life in the plantation house in the following terms: “cuán frágil es la suerte del que está sujeto a continuas vicisitudes. Yo nunca tenía hora segura...” (Manzano/Schulman 90); “But how fragile is the fate of he who is subject to continuous mishaps. My life was never predictable...” (Garfield 91). In this short passage Manzano—moving from the subject-position of “él” (“he/one”) to “yo” (“I”)—states that he experiences constantly changeable circumstances, with the threat of various mishaps lurking around the next corner. The shift from one pronoun to another seems to underscore the precarity of this position, producing a sense that therein, one can never calmly be oneself, one can never settle in place, and one always must be ready to adjust to “vicisitudes” (90) as they arise. The text at large seems to capture this disjointed rhythm: while the narrative proceeds somewhat chronologically, there are moments where it skips back and forth in time and omits several years. Manzano’s fortune indeed changes considerably over time, from his being treated as a lapdog in one household; to attending art classes with his next owner; to being beaten by her overseers; to being locked up; to being dressed by his owner in fancy, page’s clothes; to being made to wear a sack typically used to hold sugar. This last type of “fortune” that Manzano undergoes is of course a punishment—like many others in this list. In being made to wear a sack used to hold sugar, Manzano embodies a link between the status of sugar and the status of the enslaved person, both commodities.

The sense of arbitrariness in Manzano’s life—despite the very strict position he inhabited, being owned by others—also coexists with a sense of almost frustrating predictability. If we compare Manzano’s account of his misfortunes with the passage



below, which appears just a few pages earlier, we encounter something of a contradiction:

Si tratara de hacer un exacto resumen de la historia de mi vida, sería una repetición de sucesos semejantes entre sí. Desde mi edad de trece o catorce años, mi vida ha sido una consecución de penitencia, encierro, azotes y affliciones. Así determino describir los sucesos más notables que me han acarreado una opinión tan terrible como nociva. Sé que nunca, por más que me esfuerce con la verdad de los labios, ocuparé el lugar de un hombre perfecto o de bien. Pero a lo menos ante el juicio sensato del hombre imparcial, se verá hasta qué punto llega la preocupación del mayor número de los hombres contra el infeliz que ha incurrido alguna flaqueza. (Manzano/Schulman 88)

If I were to try to give a precise summary of the story of my life, it would be a repetition of events, all similar. From the age of thirteen or fourteen I have experienced penance, confinement, lashes, and misfortunes. So I have decided to describe the most noteworthy events that have occasioned such terrible and harmful opinions of me. I realize that, no matter how much I try to speak the truth, I will never take my place as a perfect or even honorable man. But at least, in the eyes of the prudent judgment of impartial men, one will see to what extremes the prejudice of the majority touches the unfortunate being who has become the victim of some weakness. (Garfield 89)

In this passage, Manzano calls his life “una repetición de sucesos semejantes entre sí” (88); “a repetition of events, all similar” (89). Here, Manzano underscores that there is little that distinguishes the years of his life from the age of thirteen or fourteen onward, and that these years were essentially an endless sequence of “penitencia, encierro, azotes y affliciones” (88); “penance, confinement, lashes, and misfortunes” (89). The contrast of this passage with the one we just considered seems to allow Manzano to give greater weight to the violence enacted against him; even if punishment was a recurring event, he never knew exactly when it would happen or precisely what form it would take. If we examine this key passage independently, we also find a striking internal contradiction: despite calling the events of his life “repetitive,” he then goes on to enumerate forms of violent treatment, building a list of four different, albeit related words to describe them.

A few other points in this set of passages deserve attention. In the longer passage, Manzano identifies himself as a “victim” of cruel treatment. Neither in this characterization, nor in the phrase where he describes himself as “subject to continuous mishaps,” nor even in the earlier scene where he recounts being locked up, does he name directly any of the individuals who engage in acts of cruelty against him. Instead he deploys a more nebulous notion of fate, underscoring that he experiences a very unfortunate position, one seemingly beyond his powers to change. While it is clear at other points in the text precisely to whom he is referring, his choice in these passages to shift the attention to the question of subjugation itself rather than to identify an individual responsible for that subjugation, is a curious move: one that we may understand as a

gesture of stealth. It is a gesture that requires the reader to do the work of discerning where to locate responsibility for such injustices.

Manzano also reflects in the above passage on writing the autobiography, discussing his own literary efforts with suspicion. He explains: “Sé que nunca, por más que me esfuerce con la verdad de los labios, ocuparé el lugar de un hombre perfecto o de bien” (Manzano/Schulman 88); “I realize that, no matter how much I try to speak the truth, I will never take my place as a perfect or even honorable man” (Garfield 89). Here, another contradiction appears between a steady attempt to carefully tell the truth, and the fact that it is already determined that this effort will not count (“nunca...ocuparé”): it will not cause any change in opinions of him. The tenor of this sentence, then, resonates more with the sensibility of repetition that he underscores earlier in the passage. At the same time, he also comes to suggest that he is at the mercy of fate: he hopes for the assessment of his words by some unknown, “impartial men,” who would be discerning judges.

Manzano’s moves between the seemingly contradictory modes of what is fated, and what might be left to chance, may account in part for why many of his early readers considered him a hesitant figure. It is notable that we see these kinds of shifts in a passage where Manzano also reflects on what he seems to regard—or simply present as—the limits of his literary abilities. He underscores the inability of his words to attain the status of truth, as well as seems to worry that they might be too repetitive: an aesthetic element that he understands would not be the most desirable to some of his readers. Michael Stoneham conversely reads such aspects of Manzano’s work as emblematic of his skill and the strategies that he deploys as a writer:

...in the *Autobiografía*, Manzano is a witty satirist employing many of the same conventions Voltaire makes use of in his masterpiece *Candide*. Perhaps, even more than the social criticism seething from the text within the series of non-sequiturs, hyperboles, and absurd situations, Manzano achieves clarity in his condemnation of slavery by portraying his own life as a glaring contradiction to the indulgent life of the plantation owner whose whimsicalness made the young slave everything from a contented lapdog to a Christ-figure. His critique is both pointed and incisive, and the reader leaves the text with a clear understanding of the corruption and moral degradation inherent in the system of slavery on Cuba. He is also able to cleverly condemn the hypocrisy of his wealthy Creole sponsor, Domingo Del Monte, who was both a slave owner and plantation aristocrat reluctant to upset the social structure that guaranteed his livelihood. (98)

In this description, Stoneham identifies a range of literary moves that Manzano undertakes to give voice to the complexity of his life in slavery. He sees the most potent of Manzano's efforts in how he portrays "his own life as a glaring contradiction to the indulgent life of the plantation owner" (98) in whose house he served for many years. Indeed, throughout the autobiography we see such "a glaring contradiction" in how Manzano accompanies his slave-owner in essentially all the cultural activities she attends—from card games, to drawing classes—wherein he is not supposed to participate, and instead is often punished if he falls short of any of the duties he is called to undertake

at such times. Nonetheless, Manzano often finds ways to participate in these activities in his own manner, learning the skills that he sees being practiced, and reproducing those activities after the fact. Although the plantation system aimed to establish a clear divide between the slave-owning class and enslaved people, between people of varying racial categories, and between what each of these groups had material access to, the figure of the house slave or personal servant occupied a liminal role, hovering between such spaces. Because of his owners' reliance on his company and aid in a full range of activities, Manzano gains a vantage point that allows him to see the contradictions of the system. Moreover, his work as a cultural laborer in the households he served inadvertently also places him in the position where he has access to situations where he could learn how to write; this, despite the dominant order which forbade such activities.

*Roles and Relations: Emotion's Place in the Economy of Subjugation*

“[P]aternalism minimizes the extremity of domination with assertions about the mutually recognized humanity of the master and the slave...”

—Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection* (52)

In addition to foregrounding the contradictions and the quality of arbitrariness that seemed to govern the plantation, another key dimension of Manzano's work is the sketch it provides of the complex roles and relationships that structure that space. From his position of relative privilege as a house slave—which also places him in greater

psychological proximity to members of the slave-owning class—Manzano provides an account of the extent to which slave-owners are reliant on enslaved people for their everyday activities, and even for their emotional needs. As we saw above, Manzano’s conditions change considerably over the course of years, and indeed as he grows older, he continues to lose much of the favor that he has as a boy—if that “favor” clearly often coexists with violent treatment. Indeed, the position of being a favored slave comes with its own problems, and one should register the fact that Manzano often speaks about himself at this time as being a dog, or pet, or “golden beak” to his *ama*, or owner.

The first several pages of the *Autobiografía* attend to Manzano’s early years, during which he lived as a house slave on the sugar plantation of La Marquesa de Justiz de Santa Ana. In the house of this Creole aristocrat, who was also a practitioner and cultivator of the arts,<sup>51</sup> Manzano assumes the role of entertainer for the household by reciting operas and poems from memory. He also serves as something of an adopted child—or beloved pet—for this elderly, childless woman. In his account of this role, Manzano presents himself as a kind of necessary accompaniment and accessory to La Marquesa. Only a young boy at the time, his waking hours are dedicated to the activities

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<sup>51</sup> By all accounts La Marquesa de Justiz had a special interest in poetry, and even wrote some poems of her own. Edward J. Mullen notes that she in fact “composed a poem to the Spanish emperor Charles III on the occasion of the fall of Havana to the British” (66). While evidence of her engagement with poetry, this statement also suggests that she was someone with a degree of fidelity to the Spanish colonial regime. While it is unclear to what extent this commitment may have affected her household, we do know that the young Manzano was exposed to recitations of works by Spanish writers of earlier generations. Thus, the aesthetic regime in which he grew up had a strong Spanish and continental European dimension. Later Manzano would encounter other versions of this aesthetic in the *tertulias* of Del Monte, though he would also engage with other ideas about Cuban-ness, and ways in which Cuban literature might grow beyond the European tradition.

of the lady of the sugar plantation, and his own physical movement is essentially determined by her activity. As he writes:

Como ya he dicho, no había nacido en la casa ninguno, y mi ama, la Marquesa de Justiz, ya señora de edad, me tomó como un género de entretenimiento. Dicen que más estaba yo en sus brazos que en los de mi madre, que, con todos sus títulos de una criada de mano y medio criandera, había casado con el primer criado de la casa y dado a su señora un criollo que ella llamaba el niño de su vejez. Aún viven testigos de esta verdad. Crecí al lado de mi señora sin separarme de ella más que por dormir, pues ni al campo viajaba sin llevarme en la volante.

(Manzano/Schulman 46)

As I have already stated, no child had been born in the house, and my mistress, the Marchioness de Justiz, by then an elderly lady, adopted me as a form of entertainment. They say she held me in her arms more than my own mother, who, with all her titles from handmaid to half-time nurse, had married the head houseservant and provided her mistress with a Creole, which she called the child of her old age. There are still some living witnesses to this fact. I grew up alongside my mistress, without ever leaving her side except to sleep, for she never even traveled to the countryside without taking me along in the coach. (Garfield

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In this passage we become aware of how La Marquesa focused peculiar attention on Manzano, and how she sought to eclipse the affection given to him by his own mother: “they say she held me in her arms more than my own mother” (47). This excerpt illustrates how the system of slavery endeavored to damage or even sever the ties among members of a family of enslaved people. Manzano’s mother, María del Pilar, whom he presents as a woman of many trades and responsibilities, including “handmaid to half-time nurse,” (47) is presented as holding a relatively respected position on the plantation. Yet she too is someone whose time is almost entirely taken up by the demands of Doña Justiz and the needs of the household. Manzano characterizes his mother’s giving birth to him as a kind of gift for La Marquesa. Her labor produced a child—notably “un criollo”—for the benefit of the mistress of the house (47).<sup>52</sup>

In underscoring the category of *criollo*, Manzano highlights the hierarchy that developed on the island to designate those who were born there (criollos), and those who were born elsewhere (negros/Africans) and (españoles/Spaniards). Manzano holds a relatively higher position in the plantation hierarchy because he is of mixed race and because he was born on the island. In his discussion of his parentage, Manzano also notes that the Marquesa provided “una educación conforme a su clase y condición” (46), “an education conforming to their class and condition” to the women that she had as her closest servants, including Manzano’s mother. Here, then, the relation between access to

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<sup>52</sup> In thinking about the role of Manzano’s mother, María del Pilar, and Manzano’s narration of her lot within the slavery economy, we might recall Angela Davis’ words in *Women, Race, and Class*: “The enormous space that work occupies in Black women’s lives today follows a pattern established during the very earliest days of slavery. As slaves, compulsory labor overshadowed every other aspect of women’s existence” (5).



education and one's position in the social hierarchy starts coming more prominently into view.

Despite the Marquesa's apparent preference for Manzano and his family—or, perhaps more accurately, because of her own desire to maintain control over her 'pet slave'—he notes how the Marquesa would become angry at his parents whenever they might scold him. The Marquesa even 'teaches' his father, Toribio de Castro, a lesson for reprimanding the young Manzano, in part by refusing to see Toribio for several days:

“Esto después de enseñarle a aquel los derechos de padre que conmigo le correspondían como tal, y los que le correspondían a ella como ama, ocupando el lugar de madre” (Manzano/Schulman 48); “She did so [saw him] only after making clear to him which parental rights were his as a father and which hers as a slaveholder who assumed the role of mother.” (Garfield 49)

We see here an appropriation of the child by the Marquesa, and a moment where biological inheritance is unsettled as the primary element of a family bond. Instead, ownership becomes the ground of parental rights, as well as of the right to dole out affection or punishment.

So thoroughly does the Marquesa succeed in claiming Manzano's affections, he tells us that he even began to call her “mama.” Manzano recognizes that the Marquesa allowed him to partake in mischievous activities, which many others on the plantation were not allowed to do, thus underscoring the sense of favor he held in her eyes. He

writes:

“Me la pasaba travesando, mejor mirado de lo que merecía por los favores que me dispensaba mi señora, a quien yo tambien llamaba ‘mama mía’”

(Manzano/Schulman 48); “I spent my time getting into all kinds of mischief, but was seen in a better light than I deserved because of all the favors bestowed on me by my mistress, whom I also called ‘my mama.’” (Garfield 49)

For the Marquesa, Manzano’s apparent proclivity for mischief, along with his linguistic abilities, seem part and parcel of the entertaining nature that she values; indeed, the former quality does not diminish her affection for him, and as he says, he enjoys many favors under her watch. Moreover, despite or alongside the relationship of master-slave, some apparent affection develops between them; besides calling the Marquesa his “mama,” he also notes that he would cry and make a fuss if the Marquesa went anywhere without him.

Rather than erasing the violence of the plantation, my view is that scenes like this one in fact allow us to see another way in which it was perpetrated. This aspect of the plantation—its reliance on and often manipulation of sentiments like affection—also plays a role in alienating Manzano from himself, from his family members, and from others of his race or status. Indeed, he was often explicitly segregated from other black children. He was also variously included in and excluded from certain activities in which

the white children of the Marquesa's extended family would participate.<sup>53</sup> As he writes: "En la casa había misa, pero no se me permitía oír la allí, por el jugueteo y distracción con los otros muchachos" (Manzano/Schulman 48); "Mass was heard in the house, but I was not permitted to attend because I would play with and distract the other children" (Garfield 49). Here Manzano suggests that his mere listening to the mass in the house would make him a distraction to these children; in this way, he is also presented as 'other' to them. Manzano thus represents himself seemingly through the eyes of his slave-owner: as an unruly child, someone who perhaps requires further discipline and isolation from others. This is another moment that underscores the idea of man's, or in this case, a child's alienation from others.

Later as an adolescent, as a slave on the plantation of the Doña Prado Ameno, Manzano continues to hold a cultural role, but more frequently is required to perform more taxing manual labor. He begins his life there undertaking roles similar to those that he occupied at the house of the Doña Justiz, who had died in 1809, and who upon her death, had refused to free Juan—a testimony to the way she, manipulating "affection," sought to maintain a hold over him. As he becomes older, some of the qualities that allowed him favor in the Justiz household bring him condemnation. As he writes of the early days living with Prado Ameno:

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<sup>53</sup> Jerome Branche provides a more detailed account of the process of Manzano's socialization within this racial economy. He writes: "The uncommon process of socialization and the formation of a socio-racial consciousness in Manzano the slave, is further detailed in the fact that his godparents are White aristocrats, and that he attends school and plays with the marchioness' grandchildren. He also notes that he is forbidden from playing with little Black children by his father, and by doña Joaquina, a member of the extended White family to which he belonged." (44)

En 1810, si mal no recuerdo, yo era el falderillo de mi señora. Se puede decir así, porque era mi obligación seguirla siempre, a menos que fuese a sus cuartos, porque entonces me quedaba a las puertas impidiendo la entrada a todos, o llamando a quien llamase, o haciendo silencio si consideraba que dormía.  
(Manzano/Schulman 88)

In 1810, if I am not mistaken, I was my mistress's lapdog. One can say this because it was my duty to always follow her, except into her rooms, and then I was to remain at the door, keeping everyone out or calling whomever she requested, or demanding silence if I thought she was sleeping. (Garfield 89)

Again, in this context, Manzano is tightly bound to the needs and whims of his mistress. In addition to fulfilling the task of accompaniment, we see that Manzano must take on the role of regulating traffic and noise that might disturb the mistress. In this passage, he distinctly characterizes himself as a lapdog, a “falderillo”: a word that suggests being part of the material of his mistress' skirt (*falda*). The sense of being the property of someone else thus becomes heightened under the rule of this new slave-owner.

Manzano even is required to neglect many of his biological needs in order to keep up with the labors he has in the household: an expression of alienation from nature. At times his mistress' voice—and her demands for his labor—come at the very moment he is trying to attend to some of his own biological needs. In one notable passage, he writes:

...siempre hambriento, me comiese cuanto hallaba, razón por la que me miraba como el más glotón. Tan era así, que, no como no tenía hora segura para comer, comía a dos carillos y me tragaba la comida casi entera, de lo que me resultaban frecuentes indigestiones. Estas me obligan a ir a hacer ciertas necesidades con frecuencia. Todo esto me hacia acreedor de otros castigos. Mis delitos comunes eran: no oír la primera vez que me llamasen y dejar de oír una palabra cuando se me daba un recado. (Manzano/Schulman 58)

Always hungry, it is not surprising that I ate everything I found, and for that reason I was considered an awful glutton. So it was that, since I did not have a customary hour to eat, I would stuff myself and gobble the food down almost without chewing, so I frequently had indigestion. That made me have to take care of certain necessities often. All of this brought on other punishments. My usual offenses were not hearing the first time I was called and missing one word when I was given a message. (Garfield 59)

In this scene, the time and the demands of the owner are made to surpass Manzano's bodily needs. Here, his time itself becomes something that the slave-owner seeks to monopolize, at the cost of ordering—in every sense of the term—his body, the body of the enslaved person.

Indeed, the Marquesa de Prado Ameno regards Manzano, his time, and every material item that he and his family have as her possession. When Manzano's own

mother, María, dies, he goes to great lengths to retrieve a box she had owned, which contained some gold bracelets. Recognizing these items as part of his inheritance, and himself as the oldest descendant and the person responsible for delegating the items or money to his remaining family members, he writes:

Cuál sería mi asombro cuando, incómoda, me respondió mi señora, “¿Estás muy apurado por la herencia? ¿No sabes que soy heredera forzosa de mis esclavos? En cuanto vuelvas a hablar de la herencia te pongo donde no veas el sol ni la luna. Marcha a limpiar las caobas.” (Manzano/Schulman 118)

How surprised I was when my mistress, greatly agitated, answered me, “Are you in a big hurry for your inheritance? Don’t you know that I am the automatic heir of my slaves? If you do as much as speak of the inheritance again, I will put you where you will see neither sunlight nor moonlight. Go clean the mahogany furniture.” (Garfield 119)

In this scene, the Marquesa violently asserts her control over the items that Manzano’s mother had in her possession, claiming that in fact it is impossible for enslaved people to own or inherit anything. Moreover, disavowing a central relationship of affection in Manzano’s life—that which he had with his mother—she commands him to never speak about this situation, under the threat of punishment. She then orders him to go clean, which was one of the primary tasks he was called to undertake in the household.

In his response to the Marquesa's orders, Manzano proves that despite his role as a "falderillo," he does not believe he owes any fidelity to this *ama*, especially above his own mother. Manzano blatantly ignores and even rejects the Marquesa's assessment about who should have possession of his mother's belongings, and moreover, who should be able to memorialize and mourn for her. In fact, behind the Marquesa's back—but after directly asking her for money to be able to say masses for his mother, which she refuses—he decides to sell the gold bracelets to buy candles at the church and to pay for masses to be held in her memory. He writes about the Marquesa's coming to learn of his actions:

No tardó mucho tiempo mi señora en saber por el mismo padre que había mandado decir tantas misas. Me preguntó de dónde tenía este dinero. Mas como lo que yo menos apreciaba por entonces era vivir, le dije sin rodeos que había vendido una manilla. Quiso saber a quién, mas como di palabra al platero de no decirlo, me sostuve diciendo que a uno que no conocía. "Pues ahora sabrás para qué naciste," me dijo. "Tú no puedes disponer de nada sin mi consentimiento." Fui preso al Molino. Ya era ésta la tercera vez. (Manzano/Schulman 120)

It was not long before my mistress found out from the priest himself that I had paid for so many masses. She asked me where I got the money. But since at that time what I least valued was life, I spoke plainly about how I had sold a bracelet. She wanted to know to whom, but because I gave my word of silence to the silversmith, I kept on saying to someone whom I did not know. "Well, now you

will find out why you were born,” she told me. “You cannot dispose of anything without my consent.” I was imprisoned at El Molino. That was already the third time. (Garfield 121)

In this passage we see that the priest, to whom Manzano paid for masses for his mother, confesses Manzano’s actions to the Marquesa. Manzano, on the other hand, appears as someone who speaks with greater sensitivity and discretion. He stays true to his word of remaining silent about the aid the silversmith had given him. At the same time, the Marquesa underscores her role as someone who should have control over everything to do with Manzano and other slaves. The Marquesa attempts to dominate their emotional and material resources.

Finally, Manzano talks about the cruelties that he suffers in this situation by making the decisions that he did, notably without any specific regard for his own life, but rather driven by the desire to memorialize his mother. He reports how, when he was sent to El Molino (the sugar mill), he was placed under the watch of an overseer. He describes this person as a “Spaniard from Galicia” who “had a very hot temper and a harsh demeanor,” despite being a very young man. Reflecting on the lashes that this overseer gives him, Manzano notes that “I was not the only one in such difficulties” (Garfield 123). Although this is not the most explicit or strident proclamation of solidarity with other slaves, arguably we can read in this moment a convergence of shared conditions. In such moments, Manzano recognizes himself in a common plight with the other enslaved



people in the household, thus interrupting the estrangement that is otherwise propagated by the hierarchy of the plantation.

Undoubtedly, the roles and relationships among people in the household were largely dictated by the slave-holders. In this context, Manzano found himself both favored at times and frequently condemned. And yet, the bonds among enslaved people themselves—such as those between Manzano and his mother—remained proof, too, of a counter-order to that of the plantation.

### *Racialization*

The moments we have thus far considered of Manzano's autobiography underscore the sense of fear and mistreatment that he faced as a sometimes 'pet slave,' and the ways that his relationships with other enslaved people were often mediated by the slave owners. We must, however, further investigate the complex positionality that he had occupied on the sugar plantations where he spent roughly the first twenty years of his life. In his position as a house slave, in which he was considered a "mulatto among blacks," he was quite estranged from the daily difficulties of most of the field slaves.

As Malcolm X famously argued in 1963, the distinction between a house slave and a field slave and its modern iterations has been a decisive one, with the house slave "identif[y]ing himself with his master more than his master identified with himself" ("A Message to the Grassroots"). In Malcolm X's formulation, the house slave appears to be a traitor: someone who rejects his fellow slaves who work in the field; someone who not only lives more comfortably than they do, but also relishes that fact; and someone who

ultimately disavows blackness.

Along with his position in the household, Manzano indeed identified as a mixed-race person born in Cuba (a mulatto and criollo) rather than a black person born in Africa (africano or negro), or as a Cuban-born black person (negro criollo). He thus seems to inhabit the category of the estranged “house negro” that Malcolm X condemns. An exchange that preceded Manzano’s escape from the sugar plantation to Havana seems both to confirm and to complicate this fact. As Manzano recounts:

...me llamó un criado libre de la casa y estando a solas con él me dijo, “Hombre, ¿qué, tú no tienes vergüenza de estar pasando tantos trabajos? Cualquier negro bozal está mejor tratado que tú. Un mulatico fino, con tantas habilidades como tú al momento hallará quien lo compre.” (Manzano/Schulman 130)

...a free servant of the house called me aside and said, “Look, young man, aren’t you ashamed of being so mistreated? Any African is treated better than you. A mulatto youth, like you, with as many skills as you have, will find someone to buy him in a second.” (Garfield 131)

We see here the figure of a free servant remind Manzano that he is a “mulatico fino” (“a [fine] mulatto youth” and not “cualquier negro bozal” (“[a]ny African”), a sentiment which indeed partly inspires the escape that Manzano makes shortly thereafter. In being differentiated from a black laborer, and instead recognized as a mulatto with many skills,

Manzano comes to see himself as someone worthy of not being mistreated. In this sense, we see Manzano internalize and reproduce the racism by which the plantation runs. This kind of logic emerges in other points in the autobiography as well, where Manzano underscores that many of the overseers who were ordered to beat him up, and seemingly relished doing so, were black men. As he writes: “No pocas veces sufrí, por la mano de un negro, vigorosos azotes” (Manzano/Schulman 58); “more than a few times I suffered vigorous floggings at the hands of a black man” (Garfield 59). Although we see at least one white man, the Spaniard from Galicia, beat Manzano, he seems to mention this man only once, yet gives some detail of his identity; the black overseers, while appearing regularly in the text, are largely presented as a type of figure, without specific identity. Undoubtedly, Manzano’s way of navigating race in these moments is problematic, if also giving visibility to the positionality that someone who was considered “mulatto,” like himself, might occupy.<sup>54</sup>

To return to the passage above, we should also underscore that this scene takes place after Manzano has had his nose punched and is again threatened with being sent to El Molino, the sugar mill. Moreover, although the free servant (whose skin color is not here identified) says that Manzano should hold himself in enough esteem to run away from such brutal treatment, he still regards Manzano as someone who will be bought—

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<sup>54</sup>Interestingly, Fernando Ortiz talks about the way that sugar at different stages was described, calling one of its stages “mulatto.” Thus, the categories that were used to talk about race on the island are also sometimes used to talk about sugar. In this characterization, “mulatto” appears as something in between, which however is “born brown” and “whitens itself.” As he writes: “Sugar changes its coloring; it is born brown and whitens itself; at first it is a syrupy mulatto and in this state pleases the common taste; then it is bleached and refined until it can pass for white, travel all over the world, reach all mouths, and bring a better price, climbing to the top of the social ladder” (9).

albeit for his “habilidades” or skills, not for a capacity to do hard, manual labor. Thus, regardless of certain undeniable markers of privilege, Manzano is still considered “property,” and bound to the system of slavery. This scene, while confirming the racism and alienation that Malcolm X diagnoses in the distinctions asserted between house slaves and field slaves, also gives insight into the additional gradations of hierarchy that existed in nineteenth-century Cuba, and the values that were associated with the various racial categories and forms of labor.

Without a doubt, laboring on sugar plantations was considered the lowest form of labor on the island—despite being the very source of its wealth. As Alexander von Humboldt, in his famous tract on ‘the island of Cuba’ underscores, the sugar plantation was the worst threat to any black person working in one of the other levels of the hierarchy: “The *calesero* [coachman] is threatened with *cafetal* [coffee planting], the slave working in the *cafetal* fears transfer to sugar planting...” (256). The possibility of falling down the ladder to a supposedly lesser form of labor seems to represent a considerable fear among the slave populations on the island, and even to some degree among free blacks. We see several examples of this use of the hierarchy, and particularly the threat of the sugar plantation, in Manzano’s autobiography. When he is taken to the sugar mill or forced to work in other sugar-related tasks on the plantation, it is specifically to be punished.

One of the most significant moments in the *Autobiografía* shows Manzano carrying sugar to the filter house. In this scene, we see how the enslaved people who either more regularly worked as sugar laborers, or who had received similar punishments

to Manzano, faced many kinds of dangers. Manzano's narrative presents in affecting terms the different, arbitrary fates suffered by himself and another slave—notably “un negro, criollo”—named Andrés. After Manzano tells the reader about his own predicament, how he has been handcuffed, but also further inhibited with rocks in the handcuffs, because he is too thin for them, he turns to the situation of Andrés. He writes:

En este día me tocó, como uno de tantos todos, ir a cargar azúcar para la casa de purga. Como no podía andar se me quitó una roca, y todas se me hubieran quitado si no temieran que me fugara... Estaba yo metiendo hormas en uno de los tinglados, hacia la izquierda. Acababa de soltar la horma y de haber dado unos pasos cuando parecía que se desplomaba el firmamento detrás de mí. Era un gran pedazo del techo con unas cuantas viguetas que se derrumbó detrás de mí cogiendo al negro Andrés, criollo. Yo, con el susto, caí por una abertura debajo de la casa de purga. Mi guardiero gritaba, toda la negrada voceaba. Acudieron a sacar a Andrés, y yo me salí como pude por la parte baja de la puerta. Sacaron al antes dicho con mil trababjos, y tenía todo el craneo roto, el pellejo dele cerebro arollado, los ojos reventados. Lo condujeron al Molino y murió a pocas horas.

(Manzano/Schulman 98, 100)

During those days it fell to me, as to many others, to carry sugar to the filtering house. Since I was unable to walk, they took off one of the rocks they would have cut all of them loose if they did not fear that I would run away... I was putting the

sugarloaf cones in one of the sheds toward the left. I had just released one of the cones and taken a few steps when it seemed as if the sky was falling down behind me, hitting the black Creole, Andrés. From the shock, I fell through an opening down under the filter house. My watchman was shouting; all the slaves were yelling. They rushed to help Andrés out, and I got myself out the best I could through the bottom section of the door. They extricated him with a great deal of effort; his whole skull was crushed, the skin on his head was scraped off, his eyes popping. They took him to El Molino, where he died a few hours later. (Garfield 99,101)

Here, Manzano witnesses the side of the plantation dedicated to manual labor, and the more extreme conditions that govern that part of the system. This view still does not show the work of those who cut cane, but it does underscore the danger that threatened many of those working in sugar production overall; and it emphasizes the reality of physical constraint that could also befall figures like Manzano. And yet, one cannot compare Manzano's fortune with that of Andrés, who is killed in these devastating circumstances. Andrés makes a very short appearance in this scene, only to die after suffering from severe head trauma. The chaste description here, while disallowing the reader from considering Andrés in his fullness, almost registers as an effort to speak of him respectfully. In other words, Manzano does not extend the discussion of Andrés' suffering, which is perhaps a way to refuse a voyeuristic look at what befalls him.

This episode marks Manzano strongly; indeed, it provokes his desire for freedom. After this point, he becomes very distraught, and reports “Comía poco y casi siempre llorando” (Manzano/Schulman 100); “I ate very little and was almost always in tears” (Garfield 101)—which prompted others to order him to clean the mahogany furniture throughout the whole plantation house, to prevent him from crying further. Manzano’s empathy for Andrés, while perhaps far from being an act of solidarity, does give visibility to the sense of the pain caused by the racial hierarchy on the island, and by the overall threat of danger to which those working in manual labor were regularly exposed. While Manzano neglects to give Andrés a full space of his own within the narrative—an ability to tell his own life—his short appearance and almost immediate death are among the most stinging moments in the text.

#### *Awareness of the Voice and the Violence of Language*

Something that Manzano’s early readers, such as Del Monte, valued about his autobiography was the apparently melancholy nature of his words. Reading the text within the dominant sensibility of romanticism of the time, they valued the “sad voice” of the enslaved man, finding in it an element that would provoke sympathy for the cause of abolition. Although Manzano does admit to suffering from depression, we can read this admission as not merely a performance of melancholy, but rather as an understandable response to the changeable and often brutal conditions he experienced. If we recall Manzano’s characterization of his inability to narrate his life, it is clear that he was cognizant of the kinds of dismissals that affected enslaved people who tried to tell their

own stories. Thus, perhaps what we see in Manzano's text—rather than existential sadness—are moments of self-awareness about the regrettable fate to which his own words would often be subjected.

Indeed, although Manzano was often lauded for his ability to reproduce and imitate verses, very few people wanted to hear his own words. Alongside the physical forms of punishment and humiliation that he and many other slaves suffered, Manzano's account shows the truly absurd status that language held on the plantation. The slave-owners and others who wield power on the plantation manipulate language and disavow its capacity for communication. We see the interplay between physical punishment and linguistic violence in an incident that Manzano narrates, where a capon apparently goes missing under his watch:

Pasadas unas dos semanas o algo más, fui llamando para que diese cuenta de un capón que faltaba. Al momento que dije que habían venido tres y dos pollos y que eso había sido lo que yo había entregado. Quedó esto así. Mas a la mañana siguiente vi venir al mayoral del ingenio...Sacó una cuerda de cáñamo delgada, me ató como a un facineroso, se montó a caballo y, echándome por delante, me mandó correr. (Schulman/Manzano 94)

Some two weeks or more had passed when I was called to give an account of a missing capon. Right away I said that there had been three plus two chickens and that had been what I had delivered. This was all there was to it. But the next



morning I saw the overseer from the sugar mill approaching...[Eventually] he took out a rope made of flimsy hemp, tied me up like a criminal, mounted his horse, and, pushing me ahead, ordered me to run. (Garfield 95)

Part of what this passage brings into view is how everything on the plantation was carefully counted and measured, and the fact that slaves frequently lived under the weight of suspicion. In Manzano's case, he was automatically assumed guilty for the missing bird; he was cast as a thief. Even when he tried to articulate his knowledge of what had happened in a situation like this, his explanation was either not elaborate enough, or was simply assumed to be a lie. No story or amount of time could make up for the purported loss of any piece of property.

In fact, the denigrated value of the slave against the value of other commodities on the sugar plantation, such as the capon, is made clear in the continuation of the passage below, where Manzano is thrown to the ground "like a sack," beaten up, and continually yelled at by the overseer and his mistress who shout, "Tell the truth!" In this passage, the violent use of language alongside the use of the whip gives evidence to the ways that language was used as a force to maintain the plantation as well:

Dieron conmigo en tierra sin la menor caridad, como quien tira un fardo que nada siente, uno a cada mano y pie y otro sentado sobre mi espalda. Se me preguntaba por el pollo o capón. Yo no sabía qué decir, pues nada sabía. Sufrí venticinco azotes. Decía mil cosas diferentes, pues se me mandaba a decir la verdad y yo no

sabía cuál. Me parecía que al decir que me lo había Hurtado cumplía y cesaría el azote, pero había que decir qué había hecho con el dinero y era otro aprieto. Dije que había comprado un sombrero. “¿Dónde está el sombrero?” Era falso. Dije que compré zapatos; no hubo tal. Dije, y dije y dije tantas cosas por ver con qué me libraba de tanto tormento...Nueve noches padecí este tormento; nueve mil cosas diferentes decía al decirme “di la verdad” y azotarme. Ya no tenía qué decir. Algo que lo pareciese para que no me castigasen. Pero no porque yo tal cosa supiera. (Manzano/Schluman 96)

They mercilessly threw me on the ground, as one throws a sack that has no feelings, one holding down each hand and foot and another seated on my back. They asked me about the chicken or capon. I did not know what to say because I knew nothing about it. I suffered twenty-five lashes. I said a thousand different things because they were demanding I tell the truth and I did not know which truth they wanted. I thought that saying I had taken it would suffice and the whipping would stop, but then I would have to say what became of the money, so I found myself in another dilemma. I said I had bought a hat. “Where is the hat?” It was a lie. I said I had bought shoes; there were none. I said so many things, over and over again, trying to see how to free myself from so much torture...I suffered these torments for nine nights; I said nine thousand different things as they shouted at me, “Tell the truth!” and whipped me. I no longer had anything

left to say, anything that it seemed might end their punishing me. But not because I knew such things..." (Garfield 97)

This kind of experience of having to "tell the truth"—or rather, under coercive conditions, saying a thousand things that are never registered or perhaps never heard as legitimate words—finds its ultimate expression in the text of Manzano's autobiography. Manzano seems preoccupied with making the truth manifest in the language of his document, while simultaneously seeming to believe that such truth will seem like a lie, will seem fabricated, or will seem to have self-motivating strands. Manzano's concern with an unadulterated truth is particularly fascinating, given the fact that it is his own life—something, surely, he knows more about than anyone—that he is narrating. That he sought to continue writing and composing his own poetry, in the midst of this otherwise violent field of expression, shows that he saw that words could do something else, that there were other capacities of language than either facilitating or exacerbating the suffering of others.

### **Beyond Refinement: Claiming Freedom in the Aesthetic**

#### ***The Autobiografía as Resistance***

I turn now to an account of Manzano's efforts to claim the aesthetic amidst a system of brutality. Against this system, so intent on covering itself up, white abolitionist writers also found the aesthetic a vehicle for overcoming the violence of slavery. At the

same time, their preoccupation with the aesthetic seems to have been guided by a desire to create a society wherein racial difference would dissipate into a properly creolized, albeit whitened culture. Fischer discusses this approach within the literary circle of Del Monte. She writes:

While Del Monte may have been ambivalent about slaves, he certainly was not ambivalent about the need for a truly Cuban literary culture...Linking literature to slavery must have held out a particular promise to Del Monte. On the one hand, it seems clear that the idea of literature was closely connected to that of progress. Literary writing and more refined aesthetic practices no doubt symbolized the overcoming of barbarism: having a specifically Cuban literature meant that civilization had taken root. Antislavery narratives, with their appeal to compassion and empathy, may have appeared particularly useful in this context. If slavery and colonial rule relied, for the most part, on domination by brute force, the antislavery texts must have held out the promise of producing readers with a more refined and subtle sensibility, subjects more susceptible to feelings of humanity and reason. (Fischer 113)

In the above passage, what emerges as the most useful or potent aspect of literature as a field of interest for the intellectual Creole class is the quality of refinement: a sense of subtlety, graciousness, lack of barbarism and its distance from force. As we have seen, such attributes were also often avowed by the white planter class, while in fact many

among that class were agents of extreme force and brutality. For Del Monte and others, one of literature's main goals was not only to blot out violence, but also to purify the unrefined, which members of their class still frequently associated with black people on the island. They could accept the black person as a fictional figure, or literary voice which could then be cultivated in various ways.<sup>55</sup> Regarding a black person as a fundamentally equal, independent person, and indeed a writer, who could present his or her ideas about the future of the island was a far different matter.

Due to the worldview that governed the centers of literary activity in Cuba at the time, William Luis has argued that Manzano, in making any effort to write his life story and in focusing on writing as an activity, automatically takes part in a bourgeois, white-dominated world. “[T]he process of writing,” Luis argues, is an acceptance of and communion with Western culture and history” (*Literary Bondage* 84). While I agree that the white aesthetic was the dominant one in Manzano's life—he seems, for example, to have been quite distanced from the neo-African musical practices growing at the time (Brennan)—I do not see Manzano's acceptance of writing and his work in European forms (such as *décimas*) merely as an effort to embody or valorize whiteness. Instead, I want to highlight the ways that his *Autobiografía* lays claim to a possibility of the aesthetic, beyond the codes of refinement that were propagated by the white society of the time, and even by members of the abolition movement. Manzano's own untiring desire to learn how to write, despite his owners' efforts to prohibit him from that realm of

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<sup>55</sup> For more on the figuration of black subjects in nineteenth-century Cuban literature, see Rafael Ocasio, *Afro-Cuban Costumbrismo: From Plantations to the Slums*. UP of Florida, 2012.

activity, and his emphasis on the pleasure of the aesthetic in everyday life—in touching coins and fabrics, in smelling flowers and plants—show that he saw in the aesthetic something quite life-giving. Manzano, I argue, pursues the aesthetic against the order of deprivation that the slave-owning class exacted upon enslaved people.<sup>56</sup>

*Seizing the Pen: The Desire to Write*

No sooner has a word been said, somewhere, about the pleasure of the text, than two policemen are ready to jump on you: the political policemen and the psychoanalytical policemen: futility and/or guilt, pleasure is either idle or vain, a class notion or an illusion.

—Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text* (57)

During his childhood and adolescent years, Manzano accompanied his slave-owners to many cultural events, including plays and operas, and attended to them at their drawing classes. It is in these spaces that he builds an affinity for aesthetic activities, but it is only after he escapes to Havana, and lives for a few years under conditions that are

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<sup>56</sup> While Hartman emphasizes that pleasure was a “limited response to need and a desperately insufficient form of redress,” (52) I am suggesting that not all forms of pleasure in or around the plantation were equivalent or were put to the same purposes. To be sure, things like the weekend dances that slave-owners either organized or allowed enslaved people to take part in—activities which Hartman focuses on her analysis, and which has a certain resonance with the ways that Manzano was “allowed” to be present at certain cultural activities, but not fully participate in them—are manipulative and contribute to further alienation. Manzano’s own claim to the aesthetic, and indeed to various forms of cultural activity, is, in my view, of another order. He is claiming the right to participate in such activities as a fundamental part of being free.

unclear, that he comes to work as a servant for his second owner, Prado Ameno's son, where he focuses on learning how to write. Manzano seems to have a calmer relationship with this owner, Don Nicolás, and serving in that household, some of his conditions improve—especially in terms of the clothes he wears and the money he has to spend. Manzano thus experiences in Havana occasional moments of solace, and he has some material possessions that add to a sense of being a relatively autonomous person. Still, he is enslaved, and indeed, is not supposed to leave the house alone. This, however, brings him in frequent contact with his master's habits and reading and writing materials.

Remarking that he studied his master's habits, Manzano comes to hold in regard the way that this man would sit down and study. Manzano becomes interested in repeating the actions he saw performed. As he tells us:

Apenas aclaraba y lo veía puesto en pie, le preparaba antes de todo la mesa, sillón y libros para que se entregase al estudio. Me fui identificando de tal modo con sus costumbres que empecé yo a también a darme estudios...Tomaba sus libros de retórica y me ponía mi lección de memoria. La aprendía como el papagayo y ya creía que sabía algo. Sin embargo, conocía el poco fruto que le sacaba a aquello, pues nunca tenía ocasión de darle uso. Entonces determiné darme algo más útil, que fe el aprender a escribir. (Manzano/Schulman 102)

At daybreak when I saw him arise, I would prepare his desk, chair, and books before anything else, so he could devote himself to his studies. I began identifying

with his habits so thoroughly that I, too, began my own study regimen...I used his rhetoric books and learned my lesson by heart. I learned it like a parrot and even believed that I knew something. However, I recognized how few were the fruits of my labor, since I never had the opportunity to use the information. It was then that I decided to dedicate myself to something more useful, learning to write.

(Garfield 103)

Although clearly Manzano here says he “identifies” with his master’s habits, it seems that he is mostly interested in these activities in themselves, more so than in adopting the personhood of his master as such. After all, Manzano becomes frustrated with the limited activities he is undertaking in mimicking his master, and he no longer wants to be a “papagayo” (parrot). Instead of reading about the use of language, he wants to make use of the information in rhetoric books and be able to write himself.<sup>57</sup>

In all the passages where Manzano talks about writing, he attends to the act of writing in almost sensuous terms, speaking of the pleasure of tracing letters, and of using writing tools. In this sense, there seems to be much more at stake in Manzano’s acts of writing than merely becoming like his master. Although we see that he discusses and experiences writing first as a labor of imitation—he copies the letters of his master, from papers he has thrown away—this is of course the only way that he is able to learn writing, as it is a practice from which enslaved people on the island are prohibited.

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<sup>57</sup> For more on this passage, and the way that Manzano uses the “master’s rhetoric” against the grain, see Abraham Romney’s essay, “Rhetoric from the Margins: Juan Francisco Manzano’s *Autobiografía de un esclavo*.” *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*, vol. 45, no. 3, 2015, pp. 237-249.



Manzano's interest and pleasure in the act of writing become clear in many different passages throughout the work. He regards his first attempts at writing as an experiment, and then changes his process or repeats the same set of activities, all of which he sees as a form of practice of the craft he writes. He dedicates an increased amount of time to this effort:

Contentísimo con mi logrado intento me pasaba desde las cinco hasta las diez ejercitando la mano en letras menudas. Aún de día, cuando tenía tiempo, lo hacía también. Me ponía al pie de algún cuadro cuyos rótulos fueran de letras mayúsculas. Con muchos rasgos logré imitar las letras más hermosas. Llegué a tenerlas entonces que más parecían grabadas que de pluma. (Manzano/Schulman 104)

Very happy with my successful experiment, I spent from five to ten o'clock practicing my hand at making small letters. Even during the day, when I had time, I also practiced. I would station myself at the foot of some painting whose title was in capital letters. With many strokes I was able to imitate the most beautiful letters. I succeeded then in making them look more like engravings than handwriting. (Garfield 105)

For Manzano, there is great satisfaction in creating "las letras más hermosas" ("the most beautiful letters") and he reports that he even steals away time during the day whenever

possible to write. In this passage, it is notable that he traces not only the letters of his master, but those letters that he sees in the titles of paintings. This passage resonates with other moments in the text, where he talks about running his fingers over the images and letters on coins. For Manzano, who calls his own handiwork “engravings,” writing seems to exist in a much more material register than simply the space of the two-dimensional page.

At one point, Manzano’s master discovers him writing, and encourages him against it, saying that it is not something “correspondiente a [su] clase” (105); not something that corresponded to his class. The master instead asks him to work in sewing—another craft which he had long ago mastered. Manzano decides he will not give up the task of writing but instead will always have some sewing with him, in order to keep up appearances, and allow his master to think he is working on more “appropriate” tasks. Of this set of events, he writes:

El señor marqués me encontró una vez por lo que me dijo acerca de ella llegué a creer que ya sabía escribir. Entonces supo mi señor por los que me veían desde las cinco en me tren de escritura, que yo pasaba todo el tiempo embrollado con mis papeles. No pocas veces me sorprendió en la punta de una mesa que había en un rincón. Me impuso dejase aquel entretenimiento como nada correspondiente a mi clase y que buscase que coser. En este punto no me descuidaba porque siempre tenía alguna pieza entre manos. Para ganar se me prohibió la escritura, pero en vano. Todos se acostaban y entonces encendía mi cabito de vela y me desquitaba

a mi gusto copiando las más bonitas letrillas de Arriaza a quien imitaba siempre. Me figuraba que con parecerme a él ya era poeta o sabía hacer versos. Me pillaron una vez algunos papelitos de décimas y el señor don Coronado fue el primero que pronosticó que yo sería poeta, aunque se opusiera todo el mundo. Supo cómo aprendí a escribir y con qué fin, y aseguraba que con otro tanto han empezado los más. (104)

The marquis discovered me one time, and from what he said even I believed that I already knew how to write. Then my master found out, from those who used to see me in the act of writing from five on, that I was spending all my time engrossed in my papers. More than a few times he caught me at the head of a table that was in a corner. He ordered me to abandon that pastime, which did not correspond to my class, and to look for something to sew. As for sewing, I would take care to always have some at hand. So as not to interfere with my productivity, I was prohibited from writing; but it was in vain. For when everyone went to bed, I would light my candle stump and indulge myself, copying the prettiest verses from Arriaza, whose writing I always imitated. I figured that if my writing looked like his, I was already a poet or knew how to compose verses. Once they got hold of some scraps of papers full of décimas, and Don Coronado was the first to predict that I would be a poet, even though everyone was against it. He found out how I learned to write and why, and confirmed that most had begun the same way. (Garfield 105)

As we see here, the craft of sewing and other such activities are assessed as productive, and are juxtaposed with writing, which seems to get Manzano in trouble. As Molloy notes: “Whereas Manzano sees writing as useful, his master (who sends him back to his sewing, a task, Manzano claims, he was not neglecting) considers it a pastime and time within the slave system cannot be passed, it must be measured in work” (51). For Manzano, engaging in the act of writing was both an activity of pleasure, and an activity that he saw as useful to his life—something that perhaps he knew could help him build a life from which he was excluded, as an enslaved man. His slave-owners discouraged him from writing; the energy and affinity he felt for writing were extracted later in the abolitionist salons. Neither of these groups, however, allowed Manzano the space to write freely, as he desired. And yet—to evoke Glissant<sup>58</sup>—if writing was frequently closed off to Manzano, many of his written works, from the autobiography to his play *Zafira* to his poems, may remain open.

### **Writing and Beyond: Claiming a Sensuous World**

“Libre, cual mariposa...” (“Free, that butterfly...”)

—Juan Francisco Manzano, “La cocuyera” (“The firefly hunter”), Friol

(17)

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<sup>58</sup> See the chapter, “Closed Space, Open Word” in *Poetics of Relation*.

Let the blare of Negro jazz bands and the bellowing voice of Bessie Smith singing the blues penetrate...closed ears...We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, it doesn't matter. We know we are beautiful. And ugly too. The tom-tom cries and the tom-tom laughs. If colored people are pleased, we are glad. If they are not, their displeasure doesn't matter either. We build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how, and we stand on top of the mountain, free within ourselves.

—Langston Hughes, “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” (95)

By way of conclusion, I want to call attention to the fact that beyond his heavy focus on writing, in the *Autobiografía* Manzano also discusses his engagement in other forms of language and expression—chatting, storytelling, drawing. Through these cultural forms, Manzano appears to assert and fashion a life. In the spaces beyond the written text, he seems to participate more fully in the life of the greater community of enslaved people around him. At the same time, and notwithstanding the complicated status that writing held in Cuba in the nineteenth century, Manzano in fact used writing to preserve aspects of life beyond the written word. I will highlight here three scenes, for the rich materiality that they associate with other expressive acts.

Manzano recalls that, as a young boy, he was very talkative, and beyond simply performing verses and reciting operas for the masters of the house, he would also practice his own verses among the other people serving in the household, often making them

laugh. He was punished several times for doing this, and the *ama* Doña Justiz also forbade him from talking with others in the house. He writes:

Supo mi señora que yo charlaba mucho, ya que los criados viejos de mi casa me rodeaban cuando yo estaba de humor, para gustar de oír mis décimas que, como propio producto de la inocencia, no eran ni divinas ni amorosas, y dio orden expresa en las casa de que nadie me hablase. Nadie sabía explicar el género de mis versos, ni yo me atreví más a decir uno, ya que por dos veces me costó mi buena monda. Como carecía de escritura, para estudiar las cosas que yo componía hablaba solo, haciendo gestos y affeciones según la naturaleza de la composición. Por eso decían que era tal el flujo de hablar que tenía, que por hablar, hablaba con la mesa, con el cuadro, con la pared. (Manzano/Schulman 64)

My mistress found out that I chatted a lot, since when I was in high spirits the old domestic servants gathered around me to enjoy hearing my décimas—which, being the very product of my innocence were neither spiritual nor amorous—and she gave strict orders for no one in the house to speak to me. No one could explain what kind of verses they were, nor did I dare recite them anymore, because they had already cost me two beatings. Since I lacked writing skills, in order to study what I was composing I used to talk aloud to myself, affecting gestures and emotions according to the nature of the composition. It was said,

therefore, that my facility for expression was such that just to talk, I would talk with the table, with the painting, with the wall. (65)

Here we see in his description of his “high spirits” the joy that Manzano derives from this expressive activity, and the pleasure that it brings to the other servants of the house, who are said “to enjoy hearing [his] *décimas*.” Even at this time before he could write, he attempted to craft verses in the air, and speak them to whomever was around him. When he was no longer allowed to talk with other people, he says, he would affect talking with the objects around him. Indeed, the everyday objects around Manzano often provided some sense of company or solace, and this is especially true of elements of nature, which he would write about extensively in his poetry.

In one of the most affecting scenes in the autobiography, he talks about how one afternoon, he was helping his owner to “pick flowers or transplant little bushes as a kind of entertainment” (Garfield 89). At the same time, his mind is going off in its own direction, and he is mulling over some of the verses of poetry that he had memorized. Distracted, he says, he picks a small leaf from a geranium tree, whose fragrance he enjoyed and “iba hacienda añicos [una] hoja, de lo que resultaba mayor fragancia” (Manzano/Schulman 88); “I tore the leaf to shreds, which produced an even stronger aroma” (Garfield 89). Although Manzano says at least twice in this passage that he had picked up the leaf and started tearing it without really being aware of what he was doing—he was lost in his thoughts of poetry—his owner responds with inordinate cruelty. She does not simply verbally scold him or ask him not to do something like that

again in the future, but in fact sends him to the stocks, perhaps seeing Manzano's act as an attempt to destroy her property. Such cruelty is the response for this small act of attending to the texture and smell of a leaf, as Manzano's imagination was moving away from the scene of slavery.

Finally, the activities of drawing and painting hold a key role, especially when Manzano is younger. He attends art classes with his owner, and despite being there as a slave, he considers himself to be one among the class. As he would later do with writing, he copies activities and images that he sees in that class and takes up these creative activities outside the class as well. He talks about one time accessing some paintbrushes, and creating an image that initially caused much pleasure for all the people around him:

Me acuerdo una vez haber pintado una bruja echándole una ayuda a un diablo; aquél tenía el semblante afligido y la bruja risueño. Esta lámina causó a muchos grande risa, pero yo tuve por más de dos meses bastante que llorar, ya que me padre, con la austeridad de su caracter, me prohibió tomar los pinceles mientras él viviese. Me quitó la cajita de colores y la tiró al río, rompiendo la lámina que le había causado tanta risa. (Manzano/Schulman 66,68)

I remember one time having painted a witch giving aid to a demon; the latter had a sorrowful look, and the witch was cheerful. This picture prompted much laughter, but I had plenty to cry about for more than two months because my father, with his austere nature, prohibited me from taking up my paintbrushes as



long as he lived. He took away the box of colors and threw it into the river, tearing up the same picture that had made him laugh so much. (Garfield 67,69)

Although in this passage, Manzano identifies his father as the main individual who punishes him for taking part in this activity, it is no doubt because he was well aware of the greater punishment the young Juan could face at the hands of the slave masters. After, all, as von Humboldt notes, by law at that time, black people risked facing severe physical punishment and bodily mutilation if they engaged in drawing:

Someday people will have trouble fathoming that until 1826, none of the Greater Antilles had laws prohibiting minor children from being separated from their parents, or that blacks were forbidden to make drawings under the threat of a glowing iron, the real purpose of which was to facilitate identification of the human cattle. (258)

This historical note helps us to understand the constraints placed on the expressive practices and the communal relationships of black people in Cuba. The continual efforts of many enslaved men and women of African descent to draw, paint, make music, or write—as well as to fight in many different ways for their family members—constituted acts of resistance and were, in themselves, claims of freedom. Manzano, too, is a part of that legacy.

## CHAPTER THREE

### **“Eh bien, nous sommes ce pays”: On Reconciliation, Incommensurability, and the Literary Stakes of Jacques Roumain’s *Gouverneurs de la rosée***

A circular chronology in which the future is a repetition of the past, a closed space that confers a shared identity on all the people within it in opposition to those outside, a narrative dynamic that moves from discord to reconciliation to harmony, an all-encompassing system of imagery, and a community based on sameness and communion: in all these dimensions, *Gouverneurs de la rosée* is dominated by closure, homogeneity, and consistency. It works, in other words, to eliminate difference and contradiction.”

—Celia Britton, “‘Common Being’ and Organic Community in Jacques Roumain’s *Gouverneurs de la rosée*” (170)

Jacques Roumain’s novel *Gouverneurs de la rosée*, published posthumously in 1944...foregrounded the crisis of a village—and a people—on the brink of starvation because of drought, underdevelopment, and a repressive political regime. Combining standard French, Haitian Creole, and Creolized French, Roumain’s cosmopolitan work about a creole world, itself a complex act of multiple translations, inspired like-minded artists to diffuse it more broadly by translating it into different languages and media in such wildly different contexts as the post-World War II US, post-Revolutionary Cuba, and 1980s Haiti...What

made Jacques Roumain's *Gouverneurs de la rosée* so compelling that it "spawned," as it were, such diverse translations and adaptations?

—Kathy Richman, "Militant Cosmopolitan in a Creole City: The Paradoxes of Jacques Roumain" (303)

## Introduction

Written nearly seventy-five years ago, within a small opening in time—almost exactly between the end of the U.S. Occupation of Haiti (1915-1934) and the start of the Duvalier dictatorships, which would last for three decades (1957-1986)—Jacques Roumain's "peasant novel," *Gouverneurs de la rosée*, continues to inspire strong, even polarized assessments. While many readers are now content to allow this once heralded exemplar of Haitian literature to pass out of the limelight in favor of works by contemporary writers of Haiti and the Haitian diaspora, there remain very pointed sentiments about what Roumain's text, still a reference for countless writers, does or does not accomplish.<sup>59</sup> I begin with the statements of scholars Celia Britton and Kathy Richman above, for they are emblematic of the major positions that constitute the debate surrounding *Gouverneurs*. For Britton, who reads Roumain's novel through Jean-Luc Nancy's notion of "common being" or organic community, Roumain's attempt to narrate

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<sup>59</sup> J. Michael Dash talks about the peculiar perseverance of Roumain's novel, even during the time of the Duvalier dictatorship: "Even when in 1961 François Duvalier's Tontons Macoutes had murdered Jacques Stephen Alexis, Roumain's literary and ideological heir, Roumain's novel was 'mandatory in the secondary schools...For most Haitian readers, *Gouverneurs de la rosée* was—and still is—the incarnation of national literature' ("Fictions" 33). The quotation within this citation is Dash's translation of a passage from the following essay, as cited by Dash: Ulrich Fleischmann, "Jacques Roumain dans la littérature d'Haïti," in Léon-François Hoffmann, ed., *Oeuvres complètes de Jacques Roumain* (Nanterre: Archivos, 2003), 1230.

how the people of the fictional village of Fonds-Rouge address their lack of water and the fractures among the community results in a sense of closure, narratively and philosophically: in the end, she suggests, everything appears to be solved. Moreover, the community, while in fact having relied on knowledge from the outside to resolve its problems, appears to be continuing a self-contained life, and is happy to do so.<sup>60</sup> Richman on the other hand calls attention to what she sees as the rather astounding complexity and mobility of Roumain's novel; in her reading, it seems anything but inhibiting. After all, between 1947 and 1980, *Gouverneurs* was translated into languages ranging from German, to Polish, to Czech, Serbo-Croatian, Vietnamese and beyond (Chaulet Achour 9) and was adapted to various media—including, as Richman remarks, to a Spanish-language film, *Cumbite*, by Tomás Gutiérrez Alea in 1964 and to a Kreyòl-language comic strip, *Mèt Larouzé*, by Fanfan in 1980 (303). Although the text may appeal to “like-minded artists” who are also concerned with peasant life and how imperialism and globalization affect, indeed produce, impoverished communities, Richman highlights the hybridity not only of the adaptations of the text, but also within Roumain's narration itself. Richman sees, for example, a compelling paradox between what she considers the creolized peasant village portrayed in the text, Fonds-Rouge—one in which Christianity and voodoo, for example, intersect—and the influence of Roumain's cosmopolitanism,

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<sup>60</sup> In Britton's account, it is only the Marxist perspective of Roumain's protagonist, Manuel, that constitutes something of an outside perspective, although in her assessment, this element in some way folds into the communalist Christian perspective that also seems operative in the novel. Apart from Manuel's discussion, in Marxist terms, of the worker solidarity he experienced in Cuba, Britton sees the novel as an essentially closed world. As she further remarks: “The narrative never moves outside the village; the town remains a hostile but shadowy presence that is never really confronted. The characters are bound to the particular landscape of their home village through their close relationship with the land that provides them with a living” (168).

which some associate, too, with *Gouverneurs*' protagonist Manuel, despite his more modest travel. From my reading of Roumain's text, I submit that elements of both Britton's and Richman's assessments obtain. In other words, I argue that *Gouverneurs* contains impulses of closure and homogeneity, while in other ways manifesting openness and incommensurability. The co-existence and interplay of these dimensions together suggest an attempt to reckon with contradictions in Haitian society, and arguably beyond, in the early 1940s.<sup>61</sup>

My claim about the concomitance of these tendencies draws closer, then, to the assessment of scholar J. Michael Dash, a long-time reader and commentator on Roumain's work. Reflecting on the cultural and political debates that were ascendant during Roumain's era, Dash asserts that "Roumain is at least as interested in the idea of a migrant peasant culture as he is in the survivals of an archaic past...*Gouverneurs*...is as much a 'peasant novel' defined by...cultural atavism...as it is about migration, cultural transformation, and the emergence of new diasporic revolutionary identities" ("Fictions" 27). For the purposes of this chapter, I depart from Dash's focus here, however, to the degree that I am less interested in pursuing how the text articulates identity and difference as they speak to overarching notions of "Haitianness," "peasant-ness," or "migrant-

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<sup>61</sup> The text clearly centers the context of Haiti and the Haitian peasantry. At the same time, it presents many broad thematics that would resonate in other places. We see this in the novel's dramatization of the problems of a small village, in its tensions with or isolation from a larger world, and in its presentation of the figure of the young person who leaves his village and returns, to name a few of the text's more universal dimensions. Such themes appear strongly in literary works from many parts of the globe in the early and mid twentieth century—think of Lu Xun's short story "Hometown" (1921) and Juan Rulfo's novel *Pedro Páramo* (1955), to give just two examples. Such works register the sensibility of the life of 'small places' amidst a globalizing world; perhaps that is partly why such texts also remain compelling to contemporary readers, determined as we are by the continuation of processes of globalization.

hood,” which Dash himself problematizes, than in foregrounding two specific sites of tension that *Gouverneurs* dramatizes: the relationships among people in the village of Fonds-Rouge,<sup>62</sup> and the relationships between these villagers and the land on which they live. Categories like “Haitian” and “peasant” are very much operative in these major conflicts that the novel stages, but they are concrete expressions of broader philosophical issues.

In its approach to the vexed relationships among the people of the village, the novel seeks consensus; it offers the ideas of the character of Manuel as the most right-minded of all the villagers, and sometimes hastily assimilates other characters’ discomfort with his approach. While consensus-building is not categorically suspicious, it is troubling that the novel seeks consensus through, in particular, employing rather binaristic and fixed gender roles. Such aspects may contribute to what Britton identifies as the novel’s sense of narrative closure. At the same time, the text offers gestures that cannot be subsumed into any easy characterization, such as its lyric evocation of plant life and water, thus maintaining a sense of what Richman identifies as incommensurability, or narrative openness. Due to the presence of such disparate elements, there are ways that *Gouverneurs de la rosée*, despite its overall progressive orientation, reads as a politically mixed text. And yet, it is a novel, not a handbook. We need not distill from it an infallible method for resolving the profound conflicts of a

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<sup>62</sup> While in some ways the name of the village, Fonds-Rouge, resists translation, we might consider the connotations that this name evokes. Roughly figured, it suggests the village as a ‘red source,’ or ‘red grounds.’ Roumain himself was of course a leading member of the Haitian Communist Party, and for his activity therein was jailed.

community; however, we can locate and grapple with the insights and proposals that it does present about the work of addressing such conflicts.

Part of the tension between homogeneity and incommensurability that emerges from *Gouverneurs* derives, I believe, from a concern for preservation. As mentioned above, Roumain wrote this work at a time when all of Haitian life had been damaged by the U.S. Occupation, and when the future of the country seemed unsure.<sup>63</sup> It is a text that he also wrote while exiled in Mexico and just before his own untimely death at the age of thirty-seven. Reading Roumain's text retrospectively, one can see that his work expresses a desire for the revitalization of the Haitian peasantry; it asserts their value and roles in the country; and it provides a space in which the country's people might fortify themselves for whatever lies ahead.

We encounter a sense of urgency in the need for such revitalization from the very first sentences of the novel. From the fictionalized village of Fonds-Rouge, which has been overtaken by a drought, we hear a death knell: "Nous mourrons tous, nous mourrons tous... nous mourrons tous: les bêtes, les plantes, les chrétiens vivants" (Roumain 11); "We're all going to die, [we're all going to die]... We're all going to die. Animals, plants, every living soul" (Hughes/Cook 23). With these first words of the novel, *Délira* Delivrance, a *commère* of Fonds-Rouge, vocalizes a pending common doom for animals,

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<sup>63</sup> Edwidge Danticat's essay, "The Long Legacy of Occupation in Haiti," written on the one hundredth anniversary of the start of the U.S. Occupation, provides a window into this devastation. Danticat begins by recounting the events of a brutal massacre that took place fourteen years into the occupation: "I am writing this in Les Cayes, Haiti, where one of the worst massacres of civilians took place on December 6, 1929, during the nineteen-year American occupation of Haiti, an occupation that began a hundred years ago today. The Cayes massacre took place during a demonstration, which was part of a nationwide strike and an ongoing local rebellion. U.S. Marine battalions fired on fifteen hundred people, wounding twenty-three and killing twelve" (1-2).

plants, and people.<sup>64</sup> Despite this shared ominous future, the text also reveals deep divisions between the people of Fonds-Rouge and the land on which they live, and among the villagers themselves. Not only have the village's sources of water dried up, but unlike in the earlier days when members of the community worked in a collective labor formation called the *coubite*, people are now isolated from one another. Indeed, "Il ne restait qu'un goût amer. On était déjà mort dans cette cendre tiède qui recouvrait ce qui autrefois avait été la vie" (Roumain 22); "Nothing remained now but a bitter taste. They were already dead beneath the dust, in these warm ashes that covered what formerly had been life" (Hughes/Cook 32). The narrative insists that while the earlier days were difficult, the villagers nonetheless were able to survive in large part because of their cooperation with each other. In the present of the novel, however, as Délira warns, death is imminent; or as the third-person narrator suggests, death has already overtaken Fonds-Rouge. The intrigue of the novel, then, becomes how life might be restored to and perpetuated in this village.

The solution that will be applied to the issues facing Fonds-Rouge comes with the entrance into the novel of Délira's long lost son, Manuel, who has been away for fifteen years, working as a laborer in the sugar cane fields of Cuba, a common trajectory for

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<sup>64</sup> In Hughes' and Cook's English translation of *Gouverneurs*, they typically render the communal term "commère" as "sister" and the masculine version thereof, "compère," as "brother." In a more literal sense, these terms might be translated as "co-mother" or "co-father," which would underscore another kind of familial relationship among the members of the community, as those that are co-parenting and are together responsible for its well-being and growth. Another term that might resonate with the words *commère* and *compère*, given Roumain's political position, would be *comrade*.



many Haitians: that of becoming a migrant worker in another part of the Caribbean.<sup>65</sup>

Upon his return, Manuel is shocked by the extent of the village's lack of water, and insists that finding a source of water, and having the villagers come together to build an irrigation system will be what resuscitates the community. Eventually, Manuel does find water, which seems at the end of the novel to allow the community to perdure. However, Manuel himself is killed by a fellow villager, Gervilen, whose anger over the past and whose present jealousy toward Manuel lead him to murder. On his death bed, Manuel underscores that his blood has been shed for the purpose of "la réconciliation, la réconciliation pour que la vie recommence" (Roumain 160); "reconciliation—reconciliation—so that life can start all over again" (Hughes/Cook 158). Indeed, as his dying wish, Manuel asks his mother never to reveal to the other villagers who killed him, so as to bury the bitterness between their family and Gervilen's family once and for all.

Manuel's call for reconciliation—which some might equate with conceptual closure—on the one hand appears noble, as it marks an attempt to end the hatred that has torn the community apart. On the other hand, this gesture seems to advocate a practice of dissimulation, which in the long term might serve as a harmful precedent for the

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<sup>65</sup> While the novel emphasizes Manuel's having worked in Cuba, it actually does not provide a particular reason or set of reasons why he left; we know that the village has disintegrated in the time that Manuel has been away, but the village's past is largely portrayed as more desirable. Why does Manuel leave? The recent work of Aaron Kamugisha, *Beyond Coloniality*, adds a level of complexity in approaching the diasporic movement (and return) of a figure like Manuel, and for that matter, of Roumain himself. While underscoring the issues of immigration and what he calls "ethnic chauvinism" at play within the Caribbean, Kamugisha asserts, "The idea, however, that Caribbean people's movements can be reduced to questions of labor, an arithmetic of jobs available, sought, protected, or denied, is simply false. We don't only move in the Caribbean for work; we do so to have a life—because there are different experiences we crave, people we love in another location, a world of experience we desire. The splitting of Caribbean bodies by the dry calculus of immigration figures, of how many bodies can [a] country support, predictably ignores this" (207). Roumain's leaving unspoken Manuel's reasons for going to Cuba may be one novelistic way to disrupt such a "dry calculus."

community. Further, we should consider that this process of reconciliation is driven primarily by a single member of the village, who others regard as something of an outsider, given his time away in Cuba. Thus, the text also stages a fear of “outside influence,” which, in Haiti’s case—considering the history of colonialism, and later, the damaging effects of many international aid organizations—seems a well-founded fear. On the other hand, the emphasis on Manuel’s outsider status also confronts the production of otherness that then was taking place in Haiti’s political scene: many of those espousing Marxist ideas, like Manuel, and of course Roumain himself, were jailed, or worse. During the consequent Duvalier period, political dissidents, writers, those who had traveled or lived abroad, and more, were rendered as others and outsiders, and targeted for those reasons; such individuals were often assassinated by the Duvalier regime.<sup>66</sup> Thus, the call for reconciliation by the figure of Manuel, given his perceived outsider status, gives it a valence that we would do well to keep in mind, even if we want to problematize the concept of reconciliation as such. In the reading of *Gouverneurs* that follows, I will attend to other forms of violence on the level of narrative that this call for reconciliation sometimes enacts or obscures, while not simply discounting other salutary gestures that the novel undertakes.

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<sup>66</sup> In her essay, “Create Dangerously,” in the volume of essays that bears that same title, Danticat highlights, for example, the cases of Marcel Numa and Louis Drouin, two promising young Haitian writers, who, she notes, had first gone into exile with their parents when Papa Doc Duvalier came to power in 1957 (6). When they returned to Haiti in 1964 as members of Jeune Haiti, a group dedicated to the work of toppling the dictatorship, they were captured and sentenced to execution. Danticat emphasizes that it was not only because of their politics, but also, and especially so, because of their having lived abroad that Duvalier targeted them. “In propaganda preceding their execution, he labeled them not Haitian, but foreign rebels, good-for-nothing *blans*” (7).

## On Conflict and Reconciliation: Setting the Grounds of Analysis

The two distinct, though interrelated, tasks of reconciliation that *Gouverneurs* foregrounds are related to its two major conflicts: first, among the people of the village of Fonds-Rouge, second between the people of the village and the land or natural world in which they make their lives. In the case of mending the relationships among people, I argue that the novel's staging of the *coumbite*—in Britton's explanation, "the traditional, originally African, practice of working collectively on each other's land" (164)—as a means for restoring the life of the village is vexed above all by Roumain's portrayal of gender roles, or the ways that the characters in the novel articulate and navigate gender. On the one hand, the novel's emphasis on labor contrasts the sense of resignation that has largely overtaken the village, and therefore, it appears to hold a creative and restorative function. Moreover, the specific formation of the *coumbite* reads as an oppositional and even anticolonial form of labor that one could contrast with the *corvée*, the forced labor system that was deployed at many points during Haiti's history, most nefariously during the U.S. Occupation. On the other hand, however, the novel's advocacy of labor and in particular the *coumbite* as the primary, perhaps even singular mode of repairing the damages that the village has undergone obscures the sacrifices that many of the female characters are required to make at the behest of male characters in the text, acts which may or may not be counted as labor. While we see how the protagonist Manuel sacrifices himself for the ongoing life of the village, he emerges much more strongly as a figure who acts rather than as one who is called on to undertake both emotional and physical

roles that are supposedly meant to support the well-being of the village at large.

Meanwhile, female characters like Manuel's mother, Délira, and his lover, Annaïse, are those who are asked directly to take up such roles in order to create a renewed peace in the village. Thus, in my effort to reckon with how the novel attempts reconciliation through labor, one of my key concerns is to foreground the very elisions that take place therein with regard to gender.

On the level of narrative, *Gouverneurs* also imagines reconciliation between the people of Fonds-Rouge and the land—or, more broadly, the natural world—that they inhabit and of which they are a part. In the context of a community of people whose ancestors were enslaved, and who had themselves undergone a foreign occupation, the land along with the people have long been forced into exploitative relationships. The novel imagines other possible, more life-giving formations. However, its vision of reconciliation with the land is also marked by the problematics of gender. Clearly, not all modes of gendering land are the same or share the same philosophical principles. In many traditions, viewing the land as feminized is part and parcel of forms of respecting and working sustainably on the land. *Gouverneurs'* approach to land as a gendered entity, I argue, brings in something of that vision, but it also seems to wrestle with traces of the imperialist vision of the land as a woman or feminized body that the male colonizer is meant to conquer, or over which he should have dominion—a worldview that arguably bore on the actual land and people of Haiti.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Prior to the creation of the plantation system on the island of Hispaniola, which would eventually become Haiti and the Dominican Republic, the Taíno people called that island their home. This group of people was

The novel also partakes in some notions of mastery, a term that inspires much contemporary concern, not least because of the troubling contexts in which it has been deployed historically.<sup>68</sup> An idea of mastery seems more explicit in the English translation of the novel by Langston Hughes and Mercer Cook, which of course they render *Masters of the Dew*; a translation about which Dash says, “it would be difficult to find a genuine equivalent in English and *Masters of the Dew* is as close as one could get” (“Introduction” 13). As Dash, and even more extensively, Christiane Chaulet Achour explain, the original French version of the title, using the word “gouverneurs,” has a range of meanings. This word, in Roumain’s usage, is not exactly standard French; below its surface reside several idiomatic Kreyòl expressions. Reflecting on the scholarship of Léon-François Hoffmann, Chaulet Achour states that Hoffmann finds that in Kreyòl, the term that one most likely would use to indicate what the novel seeks to capture is “mèt lawouze,” which means “littéralement ‘maître de l’arrosage,’ désignant celui qui est responsable de tout ce qui est l’irrigation” (41) (“literally ‘master of watering,’ designating the person who is responsible for all that is [or concerns] irrigation”). This explanation is in fact only one of many that Chaulet Achour highlights, and ultimately, she never settles on a single definition. In sum, the phrase that serves as the novel’s title,

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largely decimated by the expeditions of Columbus and those who came after him. Danticat has written a children’s book about the last queen of the Taíno people on the island, Anaconda. For more on how colonialist regimes rendered land as feminized, and the impacts of these acts, see Anne McClintock’s *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Context*.

<sup>68</sup> The designations of “master” and “slave” and the idea of “master race” versus a subservient or servile race are the problematic uses of “master” that immediately come to mind. In the context of a place where people had previously been made slaves to a master, Roumain’s use of an idea of mastery (though the term he uses is “gouverneur,” rather than, say, “dominateur” or “patron”) communicates a sense that the people should have, and have every right to claim, autonomy and agency.

both in the original version and in the English translation, is a rather supple one. At large, if “gouverneurs de la rosée” or “masters of the dew” are phrases that point to an idea of mastery, that mastery is much less about domination, than it is about human beings having mastery over their own lives. In particular, the title suggests that human beings can take their lives in their own hands, and produce new lives, especially through their work on the land. Such ideas resonate with the thought of Antonio Gramsci, who was also concerned for the degradation of his people and worried how “Italians...at present live exclusively on their little personal interests, humans born only to consume the fruit of the earth” (68). Roumain’s novel expresses, too, a desire for his people to have a life beyond mere survival. While there are, I will show, some moments in the novel where domination seems to rear its head, characterizations that indicate a sense of mastery or hierarchy rarely seem to become ossified, and in fact, are often coupled with sentiments of respect. For example, some of the characters use honorific titles like “Maître” (which in addition to meaning “master” is also the word for “teacher”) to address beings in the natural world. Manuel expresses particular reverence for plants, trees, and water.<sup>69</sup> There are also moments in the text that envision a dissolution of the painful divide that had developed between humans and the natural world, perhaps even a reversal of the colonialist paradigm in which the land is seen solely as something to conquer.

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<sup>69</sup> One scene that contradicts this stance of reverence, however, appears early in the novel, when Manuel pretends to throw a rock at a dog, so he will be scared away and not bother Manuel. While I do not think this instance should provoke a categorical condemnation of Manuel, I nonetheless believe that one has to account for the presence of gestures like this one; to think further about the relationship between the feigning of violence and fully realized acts of violence.

In my focus on the conflict between the people of Fonds-Rouge and the land on which they live and work, I will draw on Monique Allewaert's discussion of enslaved communities' relationship to ecology and Katherine McKittrick's notion of "a black sense of place." Doing so will help me to articulate the relatively more dynamic ecological and social vision of land that *Gouverneurs* proposes against imperialist practices toward the land, as well as to identify some ways that the text still seems to grapple with those practices and their attendant worldview. Further, I submit that the often reverent and sometimes euphoric register of this novel toward the natural world presages an ecological ethics that has now surpassed what Roumain could envision in the 1940s. My suggestion is that the work of environmentalists, like that of the late Berta Cáceres, point to a way of being in and with the natural world that go beyond the proposals of Roumain's novel, and perhaps help us better see its limitations.

Finally, I also want to underscore the question of literary form in relation to the broader context in which *Gouverneurs* unfolded. Reading literary form through Manuel's call to "reconciliation" enables one to see some of the contradictions at work within the text, and to recognize the co-existence of several incommensurable elements. Before addressing the two main issues that I have discussed above—reconciliation among people, and reconciliation between human beings and the land—I will attend to this problematic. In anchoring my discussion of *Gouverneurs* in a consideration of the form of the text and its self-reflexivity about issues of narration, it is my hope that the stakes of how it wrestles with the types of reconciliation that I thematize above may become more apparent.

## **On Literary Form and Literacy: Writing, Storytelling, and the *récit paysan***

We began this chapter thinking through the tensions of Roumain's work, suggesting how it contains a drive toward homogeneity, and simultaneously attempts to surface aspects of hybridity. The text, centered in the divided, fictional village of Fonds-Rouge, also embodies some divides on the level of literary form. It should be noted that this text is often understood as a realist novel, and within that broader category, specifically as a "peasant novel," which is the term I have thus far used to describe the text. In the context of *Gouverneurs* and more broadly the Haitian context, the term "peasant novel" is in part a translation of the French term, *récit paysan*. The practice of the *récit paysan* has a long history in Haiti, and as Chelsea Stieber's research underscores, it is in fact a form with a specific regional history. Disrupting the capital-centric practices of many Haitian governments, the U.S. occupation forces, and the capital-focused narratives of dominant historiography, Stieber turns attention to the *récit paysan* as a rather resistant form that developed in the northern provinces of Haiti. As she remarks:

...the peasant novel...is the product of the north: a literary manifestation of the region's fight against the decline and isolation of the northern province, and an increasing sense of obsolescence, as state, military, and economic control continued to tighten around the capital city. (47)



In this description, we see how the peasant novel aimed to participate in an effort to safeguard aspects of the life of the northern provinces against the growing influence of the capital city, Port-au-Prince. The sensibility at work within the northern peasant novel, however, was not simply an inward-looking one. In Stieber's account, the *récit paysan* also appears to have an aim of integrating the experiences of the northern provinces into the overall fabric of the country.

Roumain, who came from the capital of Port-au-Prince and spent considerable time abroad, adds several dimensions to the otherwise provincial orientation of the genre. Roumain's relatively multilingual approach and his attention to migrant labor gesture toward a larger Caribbean reality. As many scholars have noted, Roumain's introduction of the protagonist Manuel, designated as an *étranger* (foreigner) during the reader's first encounter with him, presents a unique adaptation of the *récit paysan* as it appeared in northern literary journals. His adoption of the form, however, need not erase but indeed could help point to its regional history, however refracted that history may be through the capital and through other points on the globe to which that capital is connected.<sup>70</sup> What remains unfortunate is that most readers beyond Haiti, if they know the *récit paysan*, only know it through Roumain's novel; scholars like Stieber are attempting to challenge the dominance of such canonical readings.

I should like now to unpack the term *récit paysan* itself. As we have noted, the English translation of this term is usually "peasant novel." And yet, in French—a

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<sup>70</sup> Here I am thinking specifically about Roumain's exchanges with Hughes (and by extension, Harlem and more broadly New York City, and the United States), as well as those with the Cuban poet, Nicolás Guillén. The dialogue among the three constitutes a black, pan-American effort to wrestle with the impacts of racism and social hierarchy and to engage these conflicts in literary works.

language that still bears the traces of coloniality and hierarchy in Haiti—the word often employed to signify novel is *roman*. If we look into the French word, *récit*, we see that the term may mean more broadly, “Relation orale ou écrite (de faits vrais ou imaginaire)” (*Le Petit Robert* 1118). I bring up the ambivalence of the definition of *récit* to suggest that calling *Gouverneurs* a novel may not fully account for its paradoxes.<sup>71</sup> What I think the ambivalence in the term *récit* might suggest is that Roumain’s work hovers in a space between the written and the oral. Repetitions like those we saw in *Délira*’s opening lines—the anaphoric use of “nous mourrons tous”—help both to produce a rhythmic quality and to emphasize in the mind of the reader-cum-listener the conditions that are being related. In fact, such gestures appear throughout the text. It is as if the text could be related as an oral tale, or, given its length, perhaps as a series of tales. There are also many places in Roumain’s French-language text where it appears that the narrator is speaking directly to the reader/listener, including moments where the narrator offers what

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<sup>71</sup> One point that may help us understand the novel in more complex terms is the fact that Roumain actually published a short story of the same title, “Gouverneurs de la rosée,” in 1938. Dash explains that while the story contains some of the same concerns as the novel, and also focuses on peasantry, principally it “is about blocked revolt” (“Fictions” 35-36). Here, the struggle of the cacos—a group of anticolonial, peasant fighters—against the U.S. Occupation takes center stage, with Roumain attempting to cast the cacos amidst a broader field of proletarian struggle. This contrasts with what Dash sees as the operative mode of the peasant novel as a literary form, including to at least some degree Roumain’s interpretation of the form. As Dash writes in his 1978 “Introduction” to the Hughes and Cook English translation of *Gouverneurs*, “The most striking feature of the Haitian peasant novel is that it is very different from the contemporary novel of the Third World that tends to be inspired by anti-colonial protest, and the angst of the ‘assimilé’ torn between the culture of the metropolis and that of his native land. From its first manifestation the peasant novel devoted itself to recording the experiences and survival of Haiti’s peasantry in a post-colonial and national context” (10). Reading these accounts from different moments of Dash’s engagement with Roumain’s novel, it is my sense that both the impulse to preserve the peasantry and the commitment to anti-colonial struggle co-exist within *Gouverneurs*. It may be that the novel is more grounded than the story in a concern for survival as such, but much of its language has an anti-colonial resonance, particularly if we think within the Fanonian terms of a burgeoning national culture. See Fanon in “The Trials and Tribulations of National Consciousness” and “On National Culture,” chapters three and four of *The Wretched of the Earth*.

appears as a proverb-like statement. The voice of the text also shifts frequently from the voices or minds of the characters to those of the third-person narrator.

Such aspects of orality might point us to the call of Jean Bernabé, Patrick Chamoiseau, and Raphaël Confiant, the authors of *Éloge de la créolité* (*In Praise of Creoleness*), who desire to see in the literary writing of the Caribbean a presence of the earlier practices in the region that were based in orality. In particular we might underscore the influence of African and African diasporic practices of storytelling, and especially the figure of the *griot* throughout the Caribbean islands. Not simply wanting to reproduce that past, however, the authors of the *Éloge* declare: “we shall create a literature, which will obey all the demands of modern writing while taking roots in the traditional configurations of our orality” (Bernabé et al 98). Roumain’s text, in my view—with its shifting narration and multivocality—provides one possible example of how orality can persist within a novelistic form. Moreover, while written principally in French and focused in the Haitian context, its dimensions of orality contribute to its being a creole text: a text that has roots, and can travel.

I want to suggest that *Gouverneurs* also operates in a manner akin to the mode of storytelling theorized by Roumain’s contemporary, Walter Benjamin. Reflecting specifically on the written works of Nikolai Leskov, Benjamin writes, “among those who have written down the tales, it is the great ones whose written version differs least from the speech of the many nameless storytellers” (84). Undoubtedly there is a sense of deep literariness in Roumain’s text, but the presence of storytellers persists. While Roumain’s protagonist Manuel serves in many regards as the primary storyteller—with a very

didactic sensibility—we also see figures like Manuel’s father Bienaimé and Manuel’s lover, Annaïse, tell about things that had occurred in the village while Manuel was away. Other men of the village talk also about their own experiences working in the Dominican Republic, and Manuel’s mother, Délira, talks about what she undergoes at the market in town, on days when she has to go there to sell goods. Although none of these figures are “nameless,” there are ways in which they seem to voice experiences that people within a broader social milieu might share. In other words, the figure of the bourgeois individual that thinkers like Benjamin critique does not quite exist in this text. The novel does allow for individuality in some respects, however, and especially in the case of Manuel, underscores a sense of his value in and for the community.<sup>72</sup>

In Roumain’s novel we can also identify the presence of the two paradigmatic types of storytellers that Benjamin discusses in his essay, “The Storyteller”: the one who travels (such as the seaman or the merchant) and the one who stays close to home, or is located in one place (such as what he calls the tiller of soil). As Benjamin reflects:

“When someone goes on a trip, he has something to tell about,” goes the German saying, and people imagine the storyteller as someone who has come from afar. But they enjoy no less listening to the man who has stayed at home, making an honest living, and knows the local tales and traditions. (84)

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<sup>72</sup> The text’s insistence upon the figure of the male hero, a figure singlehandedly capable of redeeming his society, is however something that I see as a somewhat outdated as well as a somewhat problematic dimension of the work. I will attempt to address why this is so in an upcoming section of the chapter.

As we have seen, Manuel, who in contemporary terms would be considered a migrant worker, is the most obvious example in *Gouverneurs* of a character who has “gone on a trip.” He often talks about what he learned in Cuba, and the differences between Haiti and Cuba. Many of the other characters in the text, including Manuel’s good friend from the village, Laurélien, ask him eagerly about his experiences abroad. While many are initially suspect of the ways that Manuel seems to have changed while he was away, and are unsure of his ‘foreign’ ideas—such as the *huelga* or strike, something he saw take place among the sugar-cane workers of Cuba—many of them come to appreciate this other perspective, and the village does seem to become revitalized as a result of its introduction. At the same time, Manuel’s stories from abroad sit alongside those of his father, Bienaimé, and some of the other men of the village, who recall the days of the *coumbite* in Fonds-Rouge. In other words, the text seems to advocate both types of storytellers—the one who goes abroad, and the one who stays in his village—as sources of knowledge and counsel.

To be sure, in circumscribing almost all of the action of the novel in Fonds-Rouge, while presenting experiences from abroad through the vehicle of memory, Roumain conveys a sense that the village is a somewhat isolated, and perhaps even an inhibiting space. However, I maintain that Roumain’s interjection, amidst the French or creolized French of the text, of Kreyòl words and phrases—often in the form of the songs that Bienaimé remembers the men singing during the *coumbite*—as well as of the Cuban Spanish phrases that Manuel enunciates, gives the impression that this space is never only self-identical. Further, the appeals of Manuel’s mother, Délira, to both Catholic saints and

traditional African deities underscore the aspect of multivocality. Indeed, there are several references to the old gods of Guinea, such as Legba; we see this especially in chapter four of the novel, which is almost entirely dedicated to the portrayal of a voodoo ceremony (Roumain 58-66). Thus, while the text may assert something like a sense of closure in its location, it points in many ways to spaces and times beyond its immediate locale.

If the place of storytelling in Roumain's text is a rather salutary gesture, we nonetheless must reckon with the fact that the stories it tells do come in the form of a novel. The novel, of course, emerges principally from the bourgeois tradition. It is a form that also relies on a writer, and later, a reader. How can we reckon with the fact that this kind of literacy is emphasized in the context of a work that centers on peasant life, given that peasants are frequently dispossessed in terms of access to literacy?

Differently than my suggestion above about the multilingual register of the text speaking to the hybridity of the peasant village as such, Richman reminds us that many of Roumain's language choices point to Roumain's cosmopolitanism, and his imagined audience beyond Haiti:

Roumain intersperses brief passages in Creole and Creolized French with standard French. He also provides translations of Creole and explanations of Haitian peasant culture in footnotes and within the narrative. These decisions clearly signal that his intended readers were fellow cosmopolitans rather than Haitian peasants, the majority of whom were at the time (and still are) illiterate, and who

in any case spoke Creole rather than French. *Gouverneurs de la rosée's* work, then, was to expose its cosmopolitan readers to the struggles of the rural poor in Haiti. (Richman 307)

A complication, then, at the heart of *Gouverneurs* is who the texts speaks for, to, and with. If it is intended primarily for cosmopolitan readers—how is it, or can it be, considered part of a struggle for peasant life in Haiti?<sup>73</sup> Does it erase or mute the voices of actual peasants in its effort to channel their experiences? Or is it, at least in part, because Roumain creates a text that demonstrates awareness of his own class position and experiences that his *récit paysan* in fact resists simplification or diminution of the experiences of the peasantry of his time?<sup>74</sup>

Part of the answer may come in the definition of *récit*, which suggests a tale's ability to convey events real or fictional. *Gouverneurs* refuses a clear divide between these two modes, because many of the situations it describes—such as the concern for food and water—could be very real problems for the peasants living at the time. At the same time, there are other aspects of the text that the reader may have to simply accept as

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<sup>73</sup> Interestingly, the writing of Jean-Bertrand Aristide seems to follow a similar trajectory. While he worked extensively in and with the poorest communities of Haiti, many of his published works, such as *Eyes of the Heart*, situate him as something of a *porte-parole* who might “translate” the experience of the Haitian poor to a globalized, and by and large, wealthier audience.

<sup>74</sup> Danticat, in another of her essays, “I Am Not a Journalist,” in the volume *Create Dangerously* recounts how the late journalist Jean Dominique, who was murdered in April 2000, had “broadcast on his radio station the Creole soundtrack of a film based on the classic Haitian novel *Gouverneurs de la rosée*...written by the Haitian novelist Jacques Roumain...In Manuel...and his peasant family and friends, Jean saw prototypes of poor Haitians, who were either condemned to a desperate life or driven to migrate, only to return to Haiti to face the impossibility of reintegration or even death. Jean was extremely proud of having aired the Creole teleplay of the novel on his radio station because whenever he visited the countryside, the peasants would tell him how they had recognized themselves and their lives in the words of Roumain's book” (45).

fictionalized, such as what we will later see as the dramatic moment in which Manuel finds water. While such an answer may be unsatisfying, what I seek to evoke is the aspect of mediation that a literary text undertakes and calls us to remember. In sum, Roumain's text, even with its clear political commitments, is not exactly a pamphlet on class struggle in Haiti. Nor is it a straightforward ethnographic treatise—despite its efforts to record aspects of Haitian life and convey these in a translated form to a cosmopolitan audience. It is also not a United Nations-style report on the status of the peasantry, although its concerns undoubtedly engage with the real situation of Haitian peasants. What is clear is that this text points us to contradictions that we cannot reconcile once and for all.

To my reading, perhaps the most consequential contradiction remains that the status of Roumain's *récit paysan* as a written work stands at odds with the problem of illiteracy faced by communities like the one the text is meant to represent. Through the dimensions of orality it takes up, the novel attempts to mediate that gap, and indeed, these aspects of orality may speak to why, later, the text could be readily adapted into a film and then a comic book or graphic novel. However, the text never completely resolves this gap, to both positive and troubling ends. In the tension between formal literacy and practices of orality, the text refuses reconciliation.

In the single moment of the novel that directly deals with the act of writing as such<sup>75</sup> Manuel reflects on his own illiteracy and—via the medium of Roumain's written

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<sup>75</sup> The only other explicit reference in the text to writing, as far as I have been able to determine, is in a moment where the term writing is used in a rather figurative sense. In an early moment following Manuel's return, he is talking and drinking with some of the other villagers. We read: "La bouteille de clairin circule à la ronde. Manuel bois, mais il observe les habitants, déchiffrant dans les rides de leurs visages l'écriture implacable de la misère. Ils se tiennent autour de lui; ils sont pieds nus et dans les déchirures de leurs



words—expresses that he long had a desire to learn how to write. The difficulty of life as a migrant worker, however, and later the responsibilities he faced in his village, required that Manuel defer that dream. As we read:

Il avait toujours regretté, Manuel, de ne pas savoir les écritures. Mais lorsque l'existence, grâce à l'arrosage, sera devenue meilleure, on demandera au Magistrat Communal du bourg d'installer une école à Fonds-Rouge. Il proposerait aux habitants de bâtir de bonne volonté une case pour l'abriter...et si l'habitant allait à l'école, certain qu'on ne pourrait plus si facilement le tromper, l'abuser et le traiter en bourrique. (Roumain 149-150)

He had always regretted, Manuel had, not knowing how to write. But when, thanks to irrigation, existence became easier, they'd ask the Communal Magistrate in town to set up a school in Fonds Rouge. Manuel would propose that the peasants, of their own volition, build a hut to house it...And if a peasant went to school, surely it wouldn't be so easy any more to cheat him, abuse him, and treat him like a beast of burden. (Hughes/Cook 147-148)

This moment in the text advocates the value of literacy and what it might be able to do for the peasantry of a village like Fonds-Rouge. At the same time, however, it does not

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hardes rapiécées, on voit la peau sèche et terreuse" (Roumain 40)./ "The bottle of white rum went the rounds. Manuel watched the peasants as he drank, seeing in the wrinkles of their faces the deep marks of poverty ['the implacable/unforgiving writing of misery']. There they were around him barefoot, and, through the holes of their patched garments, he saw their [dry and] earthy skin" (Hughes/Cook 48).

denigrate the peasant population; rather, it presents a critique of how those who presumably have access to literacy and greater resources exploit their position. The mode of analysis that Roumain engages in, then, does not present the peasantry through an essentialist vision. Rather, his novel seeks to unpack the reasons for the dispossession of the peasantry. His efforts in that regard, however, sometimes fall short. After all, in this passage, Manuel sees appealing to the Communal Magistrate in the town as the only possible option for securing funding for a school, though he views the residents of Fonds-Rouge as those who would donate their time and labor to constructing it. While this moment does make visible one way in which peasants might be re-enfranchised, it does not advocate, for instance, a peasant takeover of the town's resources, or another such radical solution. In this sense, Roumain's text seems less concerned with a massive transformation of Haitian society, and rather envisions a more gradual process of change, whereby wealth and resources could be developed in more peripheral areas. For some, this vision might fall short; for others, it simply reveals Roumain's understanding of how change might occur within a society. In its effort to think through the question of transformation in Haiti, Roumain's novel designates literacy as a project of the future, rather than a project of the present, for the peasant community. Tragically, this is a project that was again foreclosed by the rule of the Duvaliers, who in their execution of writers like Jacques Stephen Alexis, made clear that literacy was a threat to the very closed notion of Haitianness that they espoused. Perhaps the novel predicted, then, that radical action in Haiti would not have the longstanding effects that much of its population had hoped.

## A Note on the Centrality of “Land”

It is difficult to connect these different realms, to show the involvements of culture with expanding empires, to make observations about art that preserve its unique endowments and at the same time, map its affiliations, but, I submit, we must attempt this, and set the art in the global, earthly context. Territory and possessions are at stake, geography and power. Everything about human history is rooted in the earth, which has meant that we must think about habitation, but it has also meant that people have planned to have more territory and therefore must do something about its indigenous residents.

—Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (7)

Before turning to the two major narrative problematics that I have suggested are key to how the text wrestles with the issues of reconciliation and incommensurability—the way it stages the relationships among the villagers of Fonds-Rouge, on the one hand, and between the land and the people of that village, on the other—I wish to underscore from the outset that the text presents these dynamics as rather fundamentally interrelated. In fact, while it appears that the villagers themselves are the common denominator in these two relationships, the land too is a driving factor in both. As we will soon see, the land heavily mediates the relationships among the villagers; it is the idea of working upon and cultivating the land collectively that appears a key solution to the problems among the villagers themselves.

Moreover, differing concepts of “land” are at work within the text. Most explicitly, land is discussed both as “terre”—as in dirt, earth, soil, the actual physical material upon which the village stands—and as “pays”—or country, nation. Undoubtedly, an equivalence between soil and country might engender many problems, and Roumain himself was aware of the dangers of that equivalence.<sup>76</sup> Another point worth noting is that the word translated as “peasant” in the English version of the text is, in Roumain’s French text, “habitant”—which suggests someone who both lives on the land and is an inhabitant of the country(side). In calling attention to these terms, I want to keep them in some tension throughout this discussion.

Finally, but of key importance, is the way in which land is gestured toward metonymically in the title of the novel. Attending to differences between the French and English versions of the text, Dash reminds us, and helps us further unpack, what is at stake in the title:

The original title *Gouverneurs de la rosée* ...suggests three levels on which the novel was conceived. This title is firstly drawn from the peasant experience and a Haitian creole expression meaning the peasant who sees about watering the fields.

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<sup>76</sup> During the time period in which Roumain was writing, I note a tendency by some of the Haitian intellectuals who were invested in preserving ‘indigenous’ Haitian culture—against the domination of the United States, for example—to make such connections between soil and country, which would later take on a much more insidious form in the *noirisme* and anti-foreign ideology of the Duvaliers. Although Roumain was often associated with *indigénisme*, he was also in many regards an internationalist. There are moments in *Gouverneurs*, however, that some might extract to assert a more isolationist, nationalistic view, such as a moment where Manuel says he is made of the very earth of the village, that his skin is the same color as that earth. See Dash’s discussion of the period in which Roumain wrote the novel in “Fictions” and “Introduction.”

But more than being rooted in the peasant world, it suggests the Marxist conception of man as master of his own fate, imposing his will on the world. Thirdly, the use of “dew” rather than “water” provides a lyrical and poetic resonance to the experience described, suggesting behind the ideological message a universal kind of allegory. (“Introduction” 13)

In the reading that follows, I will also attempt to keep in tension these various incommensurabilites as highlighted by Dash: the presence of a Kreyòl expression within a French-language phrase; the Marxist emphasis on one’s ability to work upon the world, but I would add, also the novel’s recognition of one’s life as bound to others and to the world, and especially to the resources of the land which allow for life; and the concern with “l’eau” (water) in the narrative versus the emphasis on “rosée” (dew) in the title, as well as the expression “gouverneurs de la rosée” (masters of the dew) which appears as a full, independent phrase in several passages of the work. Orienting ourselves in the complexity of such elements of the work may enable us to better bring to the surface the issues that arise in the ways *Gouverneurs*, on the level of narration, calls for reconciliation among the people of Fonds-Rouge and between the people and the land.

**Reconciling a Community through Labor: Anticolonialism and the Potential of the *Coumbite***

“Brother,” “sister,” “comrade” are words outlawed by the colonialist bourgeoisie because in their thinking my brother is my wallet and my comrade, my scheming.

—Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (11)

We don't know yet what a force we are, what a single force—all the peasants, all the Negroes of plain and hill, all united. Some day, when we get wise to that, we'll rise up one end of the country to the other. Then we'll call a General Assembly of the Masters of the Dew, a great big *coumbite* of farmers, and we'll clear out poverty and plant a new life.

—Langston Hughes and Mercer Cook, *Masters of the Dew* (74-75);

English translation of Jacques Roumain's *Gouverneurs de la rosée*

When Manuel returns to the home of his parents, Délira and Bienaimé, in rural Haiti, after working for fifteen years as a migrant laborer in Cuba, he discovers that a deep fracture has developed between the people of their village. He enters the text as an *étranger*, a foreigner, encountering the unsettling reality that conditions in Fonds-Rouge have vastly disintegrated since the time of his departure. He senses that something is quite wrong when he, seemingly by chance, encounters a young woman of the village, Annaïse, who will later become his lover. Although Manuel insists that despite being away for a long time, “Je suis des gens d'ici: de Fonds Rouge”; “I'm from around here—from Fonds Rouge” (Roumain 28; Hughes/Cook 36). Annaïse is cautious and as the text suggests, “elle n'était pas rassurée par la présence de cet étranger”; “She wasn't happy

over the presence of this stranger” (Roumain 28; Hughes/Cook 36). Beyond Manuel’s simply being an unfamiliar figure, the novel soon explains why he might have appeared so disquieting to Annaïse.

After finally reuniting with his mother, Délira, and his father, Bienaimé, Manuel learns from his father how their family and the family of Annaïse—once people who worked and communed together—became enemies. The tale that Bienaimé recounts begins with the death of a rather well-off and also respected member of the community, a man named Johannes Longeannis who is said to have been a fighter with the peasant rebels who battled the U.S. Occupation, the *cacos*. The novel does not explain exactly how Longeannis acquired a considerable amount of land to farm, but when he died, the remaining villagers had to divide up his land (*des terres*), which caused many problems. As Bienaimé recalls:

“Eh bien, mon fi, lorsque feu Johannes Lonjeannis est mort—on l’appelait Général Lonjeannis parce qu’il avait fait la guerre avec les *cacos*—il a fallu arriver au partage des terres...C’était un véritable *don*, si tu as mémoire, ce général Lonjeannis, un nègre de grandes manières, un patriarche : on n’en voit plus de ce format. Par lui, on était pour ainsi dire tous parents.” (Roumain 55)

“Well, son, when the late Johannes Longeannis died—we called him General Longeannis because he had fought with the *Cacos*—we had to divide up the land. He was really a rich peasant, if you remember, that General Longeannis, a well-

mannered Negro, patriarch. They don't come like that any more. Through him, we were all related, more or less." (Hughes/Cook 62)

Here, Bienaimé notes that many of the villagers were essentially related through this one man. However, two members of this larger family, Dorsica (the father of Gervilen, thus the uncle of Annaïse, and a distant cousin of Manuel's family) and Sauveur (brother of Bienaimé) end up getting into a fight. Dorsica, while drunk, comes to occupy the land that then supposedly belonged to Sauveur, or that had at that point been allocated to him. In this way, a colonialist logic of occupation and private property seems to hang over the community. In response to Dorsica's actions, Sauveur starts fighting with him, and in fact stabs him, leading to his death. Sauveur is sent to jail, and later dies there. Bienaimé laments these events, particularly the death of his brother, and is presented as a compassionate figure overall. He continues:

On a fini par séparer la terre, avec l'aide du juge de paix. Mais on a partagé aussi la haine. Avant on faisait qu'une seule famille. C'est fini maintenant. Chacun garde sa rancune et fourbit sa colère. Il y a nous et il ya les autres. Et entre les deux: le sang. (Roumain 56-57)

We finally got the land divided up, with the help of the justice of the peace. But we also divided up all that hate between us. Before, we were just one big family.



That's finished now. Each one nurses his own grudge and whets his own anger.  
There's our side—and the others. Between the two, blood! (Hughes/Cook 63)

While Bienaimé's statements contain a level of self-reflexivity about how those on both sides of the feud are holding onto hate, the novel does pass over much of the internal experience of Dorsica, his son Gervilen, and their family. It portrays them as generally more violent and not as neighborly in the text. In thus calling the reader to empathize more with Bienaimé and with Manuel's family, the text perpetuates some of the divides that it otherwise seems to want to reconcile; or, perhaps it simply ignores them, acting as if nothing more is to be reckoned with in this situation.

The "one big family" that Bienaimé had previously understood the village to be, now was torn apart through the division of land, as well as the killing of Dorsica by Sauveur. Thus, Manuel's attempt to restore a practice of communal labor on the land that had previously been fought over—and of which each villager retained rather infertile scraps—produces a good deal of consternation. Undoubtedly, some of the villagers suspect Manuel's intentions. Despite the fact that they all desperately need water, and Manuel has no interest in operating as a landlord, it takes a long time for many of the villagers to trust him. Many of the relationships among villagers remain tenuous through much of the novel, and as we learn, Gervilen categorically rejects Manuel's leadership. Having seen his father killed at the hands of Manuel's uncle (something Manuel was unaware of until his return to the village), he despises Manuel's insistence on the

members of the village being “brothers,” and can only think of avenging his father’s death with his own hands.

Although specific personal reasons, then, might drive a figure like Gervilen to reject Manuel’s proposals, another reason that the call for a collectivity, specifically in terms of a labor formation, might be troubling overall for the villagers is the pained memory of the *corvée* system that had been utilized by the U.S. Occupation forces: a system that most acutely affected the peasantry. Since for many in Fonds-Rouge, Manuel seemed to arrive on the scene as a foreigner (despite his growing up in the village), his proposals for the people to labor together in finding water and setting up an irrigation system may well have carried a connotation of colonialist forms of labor. Laurent Dubois writes about the operations of the *corvée*:

In August 1916, invoking the *corvée* regulations, U.S. marines began using rural residents as road-building crews. On paper, the *corvée* was presented as a relatively humane institution. The men were to be paid, fed, and only meant to work in the vicinity of their homes...The *corvée* as it was actually practiced involved tremendous abuse, which echoed the historical horrors of colonial slavery...The “recruitment” of laborers was deeply traumatic for local residents. Sometimes it was done through brute force. (239-241)

In the wake of such history, Roumain finds it necessary to establish a sense of trustworthiness in his protagonist, Manuel, through a number of strategies. For one

matter, even as Manuel reminds the villagers of his own experiences as a laborer, he also must articulate a sense of solidarity with them as specifically Haitian peasants.

In one passage, Manuel critiques the way that Haitians are often regarded abroad, calling out in particular the treatment he saw and experienced among Cuban rural police. Recalling the terms that those police used to denigrate the Haitian workers, he underscores the barbarity of these officials:

“J’ai laissé des mille et des milles d’Haïtiens du côté d’Antilla. Ils vivent et ils meurent comme des chiens. *Matar a un Haitiano o a un perro*: tuer un Haïtien ou un chien, c’est la même chose, disent les hommes de la police rurale: des vraies bêtes féroces.” (Roumain 43)<sup>77</sup>

“I left thousands and thousands of Haitians over there in Antilla. They live [and die] like dogs. *Matar a un Haitiano o a un perro*: to kill a Haitian or a dog is one and the same thing, say the rural police. They’re just like wild dogs.”

(Hughes/Cook 50)

It appears that in being away in Cuba, Manuel began to see himself anew as Haitian. The dehumanizing treatment that he saw other countrymen undergo seems to have given him a new attachment to his birthplace. While one might question why Manuel did not stay

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<sup>77</sup> The syntax of this passage, especially in the French version, creates some ambiguity about which figures the phrase “des vraies bêtes féroces” (“[some real] wild dogs”) is meant to modify. Given the other aspects of Manuel’s experience in Cuba, however, to me this phrasing most strongly suggests that Manuel intends to characterize the rural police in this way.

longer in Cuba to work alongside and perhaps organize with these thousands of other Haitian laborers, what seems clear is that he felt obliged to return to his village, and with his return brought a renewed sense of the right to dignity of his people.

At the same time, it is through working side by side in Cuba with other working people—despite their nationality—that Manuel also sees the common position that they hold, as well as the value of their labor. Thus, something else that he is able to share with his fellow villagers is the experience of overcoming fractures based in identity, and of building solidarity among people on the shared basis of being workers. Drawing on his experience of the workers' strike or *huelga* on an American-run sugar plantation in Cuba, Manuel “translates into good Creole” what he believes could be the fruits of a new attempt at common labor among the people of Fonds-Rouge. The *coubite*—almost the opposite of the *huelga* in terms of an action, but motivated by many of the same principles—seems to have disintegrated in the village, largely because of the feud over land. Manuel, with a conviction about what unity among working people could produce, attempts to articulate the *coubite* in renewed, vibrant terms:

Manuel avait entrepris les habitants, l'un après l'autre. Pendant des années, la haine avait été pour eux une habitude. Elle avait donné un objet et une cible à leur colère impuissante contre les éléments. Mais Manuel avait traduit en bon créole le langage exigeant de la plaine assoiffée, la plainte des plantes, les promesses et tous les mirages de l'eau. Il les avait promenés d'avance à travers leurs récoltes : leurs yeux brillaient, rien qu'à l'entendre... (Roumain 132)

Manuel began to talk with the peasants, one after the other. For years, hate had become with them a habit. It had given an object and a target to their impotent anger against the elements. But Manuel had translated into good Creole the exacting language of the thirsty plain, the plaint of growing things, the promises and the mirages of water. He had led them in advance through their harvest. Their eyes gleamed just from listening to him. (Hughes/Cook 131)

In shifting the focus of his fellow villagers from the dusty conditions of the present, conditions which further exacerbate the enmity that the people of the village feel for each other, Manuel provides an image of a livable life—indeed, an image of actual plants growing. This vision of what is possible, drawing on a memory that the villagers had of the *coumbite*, convinces them that the idea of reconciliation among the community is not so far-fetched; indeed, it is a way of being of which some of them retain a memory.

Above all, it is Manuel's father, Bienaimé, who cultivates this memory. In one particular passage, he even directly ponders the amicable relationship he used to have with the parents of Annaïse, villagers named Beaubrun and Rosanna. Not only was cooperative work a key way in which relationships in this village unfolded, but a sense of warmth and mutual accountability also seems to have suffused their interactions. As we read in Bienaimé's recollection in *medias res*:

Casamajor Beaubrun, sa femme Rosanna et leurs deux garçons les saluaient. Ils disaient: frères, merci oui; question de politesse parce qu'un service, ça se prête de bon vouloir: aujourd'hui, je travaille ton champ, toi, demain le mien. L'entraide, c'est l'amitié des malheureux, n'est-ce pas? (Roumain 14)

Casamajor Beaubrun with his wife, Rosanna, and their two sons would greet them. They would start with, "Thank you very much, brothers," since a favor is willingly done: today I work your field, tomorrow you work mine. Co-operation is the friendship of the poor. (Hughes/Cook 26)

The form of community that this memory of the *coumbite* evokes becomes for Manuel a powerful source to draw on as he speaks with his fellow villagers. It presents something of a blueprint for renewing the community. Although Roumain reminds his readers that the Haitian countryside had been thoroughly disrupted by the U.S. Occupation, and by the frequent draining of its workforce to other sites in the Caribbean, he presents his character Bienaimé's recollection of the *coumbite* as not merely a relic of the past, but indeed as something that could be revitalized in the present.

Through the figure of Manuel, we encounter a vision that interweaves this earlier form of cooperation (*coumbite*), a seemingly new conception of solidarity across a broad group of working people (*huelga*), and a concept of national culture (*pays*) that seems to also have a positive unifying potential. Indeed, in a response to a question by one of his

friends in the village, who is also frustrated by the seeming stagnation it has experienced, Manuel makes the following statement:

“Ce que nous sommes? Si c’est une question, je vais te répondre : eh bien, nous sommes ce pays et il n’est rien sans nous, rien du tout. Qui est-ce qui plante, qui est-ce qui arrose, qui est-ce qui récolte ? Le café, le coton, le riz, la canne, le cacao, le maïs, les bananes, les vivres et tous les fruits, si ce n’est pas nous, qui les fera pousser ? Et avec ça nous sommes pauvres, c’est vrai, nous sommes malheureux, c’est vrai, nous sommes misérables, c’est vrai. Mais sais-tu pourquoi, frère ? A cause de notre ignorance: nous ne savons pas encore que nous sommes une force, une seule force: tous les habitants, tous les nègres des plaines et des mornes réunis. Un jour, quand nous aurons compris cette vérité, nous nous lèverons d’un point à l’autre du pays et nous ferons l’assemblée générale des gouverneurs de la rosée, le grand coumbite des travailleurs de la terre pour défricher la misère et planter la vie nouvelle.” (Roumain 70)

“What are we? Since that’s your question, I’m going to answer you. We’re this country, and it wouldn’t be a thing without us, nothing at all. Who does the planting? Who does the watering? Who does the harvesting? Coffee, cotton, rice, sugar cane, cacao, corn, bananas, vegetables, and all the fruits, who’s going to grow them if we don’t? Yet with all that, we’re poor, that’s true. We’re out of luck, that’s true. We’re miserable, that’s true. But do you know why, brother?”

Because of our ignorance. We don't know yet what a force we are, what a single force—all the peasants, all the Negroes of plain and hill, all united. Some day, when we get wise to that, we'll rise up one end of the country to the other. Then we'll call a General Assembly of the Masters of the Dew, a great big *coumbite* of farmers, and we'll clear out poverty and plant a new life." (Hughes/Cook 74-75)

In this passage, which has the sensibility of a political speech, Manuel is able to underscore the value of the peasants (*habitants*), by highlighting the many things that they make possible. The passage emphasizes that “this country” (*ce pays*) is not something that exists in the abstract, but in fact requires the labor and energy of the workers, and especially of the working peasants, in order to be anything, in order to produce anything at all. Not only are the peasants those who live on the land, work the land, and produce the country's food, the passage emphasizes that they are the country (“*nous sommes ce pays*”). Thus, *ce pays* is not some faraway, rarefied ideal, nor something that exists only in the city. In extending his fellow villagers' imagination beyond Fonds-Rouge to a vision of a great *coumbite* that would unite all the peasants across the country, Manuel is able to make the idea of a renewed *coumbite* within the village, for the purposes of building an irrigation system, seem all the more possible. By the end of the novel, many of the villagers of Fonds-Rouge come together to do that work, after Manuel has first accomplished the task of finding another source of water.



And after Manuel's death, many of the villagers continue to think about Manuel's words, recognizing in them a germinative potential.<sup>78</sup>

While the novel thus provides a resolution to the fractures among the community members of Fonds-Rouge, some developments lie beyond such reconciliation; it is uncertain, for example, what will happen after this one season of growth and renewal in the village. One compelling outcome that the novel presents is that the *coubite*, as a communal form of labor seemingly outside the logic of the colonial order, has the potential to restore some relationships. It may even have the ability to help contribute to a broader collectivity across the country. The text moves, thus, from envisioning a sense of common purpose within the community of Fonds-Rouge, to conceiving of a national formation, a "we." An important question to continue asking, however, is: Who counts and who does not count in the "we" of this assertion? Whose labor and whose sacrifices are left invisible through the practice of the *coubite*, and later, in the construction of the country at large?

### **Some Pitfalls and Violences of a Masculinist Vision of Labor**

While *Gouverneurs* often does account for, and at times even expresses compassion for, the difficult life that the women of Fonds-Rouge experience because of

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<sup>78</sup> The idea that the novel presents of words and acts operating as a seed for future action is something that resonates with a famous moment in Haitian history, the moment during the Revolution in which Toussaint Louverture is arrested. As C.L.R. James recounts in *The Black Jacobins*: "In overthrowing me, you have cut down in San Domingo only the trunk of the tree of liberty. It will spring up again by the roots for they are numerous and deep" (334).

their social class—especially in its portrayal of the figure of Délira, whose experiences echo those of a broader population of impoverished black women (Hughes/Cook 102) — the novel often does not specifically problematize the gendered treatment that many of these characters undergo. While the novel sees the labor of women as contributing in important ways to the common life of the village—and indeed regards the female characters as fellow *habitants*, or *commères* alongside the male peasant-workers or *compères*—masculinist forms of labor, and labor as an essentially masculine concept, hold dominance. Therefore, while not completely discounting the potentialities of a formation like the *coumbite*, my claim is that the notion of labor that Roumain’s text underscores is based principally in a patriarchal model that cannot satisfactorily account for feminized labor. Thus it portrays female peasants, more than male peasants, primarily as vehicles for, rather than agents in, producing the greater good of the community. Moreover, the text does not recognize what may be incommensurable to the category of labor as such. This type of elision is important, because it ultimately leads us to see how the very bodies of women are imagined as sites in or through which the well-being of the village may be secured.

While reflections on the conditions facing Fonds-Rouge recur throughout the novel, I want to draw our attention to a passage that is noteworthy for the multiple thematics it encapsulates: the lack of water and food in the village; the looming sense of death; the absence of people at work; the silence that these conditions produce; the memory of the *coumbite*, and an experience of vitality that accompanied it; and above all

the gendered dynamics that subtend the entire novel, including a rather jarring emphasis on virility and traditional masculine and feminine roles. Consider the following:

La vie était tarie à Fonds-Rouge. On n'avait qu'à écouter ce silence pour entendre la mort, se laisser aller à cette torpeur et on sentait enseveli. Le heurt régulier et répété des pilons dans les mortiers s'était tu: il n'y avait plus un grain de petit-mil, et ce qu'il était plus loin le temps des *coumbites*, du chant viril et joyeux des hommes, du balancement éticelant des houes au soleil, le temps bienheureux où nous dansions le menuet sous les tonnelles et les voix insouciantes des jeunes negresses jaillissaient comme une fontaine de la nuit... (Roumain 111)

Life had dried up at Fonds Rouge. One had only to listen to this silence to hear death. One yielded to the torpor and felt himself already buried. The regular and repeated blows of the mallets in the mortars had become stilled since there wasn't a grain of millet to husk. How far things were from the good old days of the *coumbite*, from the virile joyous chant of the menfolk, from the sparkling, swinging hoes in the sun, from those happy years when we used to dance the minuet under the arbors with the carefree voices of dark young girls bursting forth like a fountain in the night! (Hughes/Cook 112)

Here, we read that like the springs surrounding the village, life itself seems to have dried up in Fonds-Rouge. While an important source of the earlier productivity of the village

was the “virile joyous menfolk” who were “swinging hoes in the sun,” another element missing in the present of the village is the “carefree voices of dark young girls bursting forth like a fountain in the night.” The idea that the feminized figures provided a sense of vitality through their singing is not by itself problematic, but that they are regarded as mostly soothing figures, who accompany the work of the men—and thus are not exactly workers themselves—seems more troubling. Moreover, that the women are figures who “burst forth” following the men’s engagement in a type of labor that involves a penetrating movement of a tool into the ground, objectifies the women in rather sexualized terms. I do not intend to take a prudish lens to the sexualized discourse that sometimes appears in *Gouverneurs*, but I think it is crucial to call attention to the language that is used to portray sexuality, and the relation between sex and power, in this novel.

Undoubtedly, a relationship does develop between Manuel and Annaïse over the course of the text, despite, or following Annaïse’s initial sense of uneasiness around the “stranger,” Manuel. At times, Manuel seems a bit too insistent on having Annaïse’s company; at other times, he seems more respectful of her autonomy and focuses on his relationships with the other *compères* of the village. The reader of the novel is made to understand that Annaïse, essentially on her own terms, comes to trust Manuel and desires to be in his company. She also finds hope not only in his proposal of the *coubite*, but in his own tireless efforts to search for water. Annaïse eventually joins Manuel in helping to reconstruct the *coubite*, by talking with the women of the village (Roumain 87-89). Manuel says that the women are essentially more irritable, but also more sensible than the

men, and that if they start complaining about the lack of water to their men, and keep emphasizing the possibility of the *coumbite*, the men will eventually agree to participate in it. Annaïse is not portrayed as simply compliant with the will of a man who understands himself as the leader of this project, but eventually she does say to Manuel, “J’ai compris et je t’obéirai, mon nègre” (Roumain 88); “I understand, and I’ll obey you, Negro of mine” (Hughes/Cook 92). While not outright sexist, passages like this emphasize a rather fixed and binaristic understanding of gender and expose the overall sensibility of the time period in which the novel was composed.

There is one very disturbing scene in *Gouverneurs* which some might describe as the consummation of Manuel’s and Annaïse’s relationship. While there are a few indications that both of the characters share a feeling of desire, the scene also deploys some incredibly violent language that underscores male sexuality as a naturally overpowering force. In fact, the scene normalizes violence as an aspect of sexual relations. In particular, we read: “Il entra en elle, une présence déchirante, et elle eut un gémissement blessé” (Roumain 117); “He entered, a lacerating presence, and she gave an injured groan” (Hughes/Cook 118). By staging the man as “une présence déchirante” (“a lacerating presence”), this passage troublingly echoes the figure of the machete that the men are elsewhere said to use in their work on the land. Moreover, because the female character is described as “blessé” (“injured”), we cannot but read this act as a violence. The passage further describes Annaïse as “anéantie”—a word that can signify “annihilated” or “decimated,” though the Hughes/Cook translation renders the term “prostrate”—while in this man’s embrace. Other moments suggest greater gentleness

between these two characters, but the rendering of Annaïse as a figure upon whom a sexual violence is enacted compromises the salutary aspects of the text, especially for a contemporary reader.

The novel ends with the sense that almost everything has been resolved through the sacrifices of Manuel, and that in dying and refusing to share the details of the violent act that leads to his death—the blows that he suffers at the hands of Annaïse’s cousin, Gervilen—he enables a new sense of life and community to begin. Rather unsurprisingly, the novel ends with the suggestion that this new life will come in the form of the child of the pregnant Annaïse and the now deceased Manuel:

—Oh Manuel, Manuel, Manuel, pourquoi es-tu mort? gémit Délira.

—Non, dit Annaïse et elle souriait à travers ses larmes, non, il n’est pas mort.

Elle prit la main de la vieille et la pressa doucement contre son ventre où remuait la vie nouvelle. (Roumain 192)

“Oh Manuel! Manuel! Manuel! Why are you dead ?” Délira groaned.

“No,” said Annaïse. She smiled through her tears. “No, he isn’t dead.”

She took the old woman’s hand and pressed it gently against her belly where the new life was stirring. (Hughes/Cook 188)

While the reader of the text certainly cannot begrudge Annaïse or Délira the comfort that they experience in regarding “la vie nouvelle” (“the new life”) that derives from the

union of Manuel and Annaïse, this same reader can also regard as a tragedy the fact that it is only through the text's primary male figure that the life of a female character like Annaïse is rendered meaningful. What is intolerable is that such meaning seems to become possible only through an act that contains moments of violence.

### **Reconciliation with the Land: Toward Right Relations**

“La terre est dans la douleur, la terre est dans la misère.”

—Jacques Roumain, *Gouverneurs de la rosée* (12)

Beyond the human characters, the central role of land in *Gouverneurs* requires further analysis. We have seen that the land operates as a primary mediator in the relationships among the people of Fonds-Rouge, whose work is based in the land, and who most acutely depend upon the land for their lives. I want to suggest, however, that the novel also slowly points us toward something like respecting the autonomy of the land, or perhaps more humbly, it offers a stance against domination. *Gouverneurs* is critical of the ways that human activity upon the land causes damage, and it underscores repairing human relationships with the land.

As we see in the epigraph above, the earth beneath Fonds-Rouge is hurting, it is in misery; the reader of *Gouverneurs*, then, is meant to understand the earth as having sentience: as suffering from an injury that one should take seriously. At large, the novel suggests the need for reconfiguring human relations with the land, and for reimagining

the way that we regard the natural world more broadly. A significant reason for the pain of the earth in this Haitian village seems to be the long history of colonialist practices that have deprived it of vitality, as well as the more recent practices of privatization that have torn apart this once commonly-worked land. The most obvious response in the novel to this call to attend to the earth differently is for people to work upon it more mindfully, and to not neglect the work of planting seeds or irrigating the soil. As Manuel laments, the community has “betrayed” the land (Hughes/Cook 45), and cannot, for example, simply cut down vast areas of trees because they are needed for fuel, or to make room for certain other kinds of crops to grow.<sup>79</sup> Taking up a more mindful practice of cultivating the land, the novel suggests, will in fact lead to a situation in which the land is actually more fruitful, and will provide more fully for the needs of the human community. The novel, then, expresses some trust in the idea that the land will provide for human beings. Similarly, Manuel’s conviction that somewhere water may still be found provokes him to search for a spring. Upon finding a spring, Manuel falls to the ground in utter thankfulness and reverence.

I will pursue here, then, the reimagining of relations between humans and the natural world, of which Manuel’s encounter with the spring provides a celebratory response. Further, following Dash’s suggestions regarding the lyrical nature of the

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<sup>79</sup> Roumain’s critique of such acts, through the figure of Manuel, has a prescience, given the disastrous conditions that Haiti currently faces with regard to deforestation. In highlighting the practice of cutting down trees for fuel, I do not aim to denigrate the people who have taken those actions in order to survive, and in fact regard these communities as the most disenfranchised by the extractivist practices of colonialism and capitalism. As many environmentalists today underscore, it is often the most impoverished communities that face the most severe impacts to health and livelihood because of the destruction of land, water, and natural habitats.



novel's title, which we touched on earlier, I also will consider the way that the text overall presents land and nature as incommensurable to human efforts to tame or subdue them. I believe the poetic dimensions of the text, its lyrical descriptions of the land, even in human encounters with natural forms, constitutes one of its most progressive dimensions. I regard such moments in the text as a part of what one might call an ecological imagination.

In addressing both the question of reimagining relations between humans and the natural world, and the idea of an ecological imagination, I ground my reflections in a concept that Katherine McKittrick forwards in her essay, "On Plantations, Prisons, and a Black Sense of Place" (2011). Theorizing the idea of a "black sense of place," McKittrick writes:

A black sense of place is not a steady, focused and homogenous way of seeing and being in place, but rather a set of changing and differential perspectives that are illustrative of, and therefore remark upon, legacies of normalized racial violence that calcify, but do not guarantee, the denigration of black geographies and their inhabitants. (950)

McKittrick's notion here reminds us of the history with which a text like Roumain's is wrestling. Thinking with the idea of a "black sense of place" allows us to delink land from an idea of pure rootedness and stability, while allowing us to consider a possibility of other ways of being in and with the land than those that slavery, colonialism, and

occupation allowed.<sup>80</sup> Such a perspective thus allows us to see how Roumain's work bears witness to the difficulty of moving out of the solidifying tendencies of racialized (and gendered) violence. Roumain's work is far from free of problematic gestures and logics on this account. At the same time, I think reorienting a reading of *Gouverneurs* through the idea of a "black sense of place" pushes us to account for the violences that exist in the text, while not limiting an understanding of the world of the Haitian peasants of Fonds-Rouge to a notion of degradation. As we will see, some of the images that Roumain presents, particularly in illustrating the relationship between land and people, are degrading; we would do well to reject them. However, a creative, germinative perspective moves through other depictions of this relationship: one that challenges the otherwise reifying concepts that Roumain's text confronts. I begin, then, by looking at how the novel reckons with colonialist notions of land.

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<sup>80</sup> Raymond Williams has broadly addressed the problem of fixing specific meanings to land, and in particular to sites like the country and the city, and the ideological purposes to which such connections are deployed. Williams' ideas about the "astonishingly varied" feelings and ideas that emerge through real experience, have certainly guided my ways of thinking about land in Roumain's novel. I focus on McKittrick's notion of a "black sense of place" here because of the specific relationship of black communities to geographies of oppression, but also geographies that are reconstituted to build communities without erasing understandings of the past. To me this notion resonates in some more specific ways with the context of Fonds-Rouge, as presented by Roumain. It may be helpful, however, to bring in some of Williams' own words in *The Country and the City* to consider the resonance of his ideas with those of McKittrick: "On the actual settlements, which in the real history have been astonishingly varied, powerful feelings have gathered and have been generalised. On the country has gathered the idea of a natural way of life: of peace, innocence, and simple virtue. On the city has gathered the idea of an achieved centre: of learning, communication, light. Powerful hostile associations have also developed: on the city as a place of noise, worldliness and ambition; on the country as a place of backwardness, ignorance, limitation. A contrast between country and city, as fundamental ways of life, reaches back into classical times. Yet the real history, throughout, has been astonishingly varied" (1).

## Colonialist Notions of Land: Unsettling the Racialized and Gendered Vision

In several regards, *Gouverneurs* might be considered an anticolonial attempt to reclaim Haitian land for the Haitian peasantry. Within this effort, however, certain colonialist notions remain. After all, can there be a reclamation that does not rest on a logic of ownership and domination? What is clear is that the novel presents some colonialist tropes, which at the same time it seems to be fighting against. If not often outright challenging them, at the very least, the text seems to stage a struggle with them. One such moment comes in the first chapter of the novel, where we find a description of the immediate area surrounding Délira's and Bienaimé's home. This description projects a notably racialized and gendered image: "Derrière la maison, la colline arrondie est semblable à une tête de négresse aux cheveux en grains de poivre" (Roumain 13); "Behind the house a round hill, whose skimpy bush hugged the earth, resembled the head of a Negro girl with hair like grains of pepper" (Hughes/Cook 24). While such a description might reflect Roumain's larger attempt to link the Haitian people to land that had previously been occupied by foreign forces, the objectification that it relies on—an objectification of a black girl—undermines such an effort. Moreover, the emphasis on a single body part, the head, may be read as a form of dismemberment, pointing to colonialist and gendered forms of violence. We could conjecture that Roumain is attempting to thematize that violence in order to overcome it; however, that fact does not erase its troubling qualities.

In foregrounding such aspects of Roumain's novel, my intent is to reevaluate and reevaluate the text. We need not hold Roumain as the gold standard against which every Haitian writer should measure him or herself in order to take his text seriously and at the same time to thoroughly critique it. If the overall objective of his text is to present an anticolonial vision and to foreground peasant experience from a largely proletarian perspective, we have to reckon with how the text goes about doing that. Thus, I have chosen not to categorically dismiss the text, but rather to approach it with as careful and critical an eye as possible, from a commitment to anti-racism and anti-oppression. In the conclusion of this chapter, I will speak more directly to ways that I think we might live with or move past Roumain.

For now, I want to provide one other moment in which the text invokes a problematically gendered, if less overtly racialized vision of the land. The text is replete with gendered references to the land, an issue that is consequential particularly in relation to the fact that the men are regarded as those who work upon the land, and indeed who perform 'virile' labor thereupon. Not unlike the scene that recounts the physical relationship between Manuel and Annaïse, this scene also deploys violent language against a feminized figure. While criticizing the way that his community has treated the land during the time he has been away, Manuel says:

“Mais la terre est comme une bonne femme, à force de la maltraiter, elle se révolte: j'ai vu que vous avez déboisé les mornes. La terre est toute nue et sans protection” (Roumain 37). / “But the earth's just like a good woman: if you

mistreat her, she revolts. I see that you have cleared the hills of trees. The soil is naked, without protection” (Hughes/Cook 45).

This passage too, then, participates in the idea that the land, like a woman, is something that one might decide to mistreat. Undoubtedly, Manuel is suggesting that one not take that approach. His justification, however, is largely that it is in a man’s own best interest not to mistreat the land or the woman; otherwise, his own situation becomes less viable. While we can see how the text is trying to work through and move past explicit gender abuse, it is frustrating that such moments rely so heavily on gendered and objectifying imagery—including, here, attention to the “nudity” of the soil.

To conclude this brief meditation on how the text both produces and wrestles with racialized and gendered visions of the land, I should note that this novel is written in a language that heavily relies on gendered nouns—including those relating to the natural world: la terre, l’eau, la rosée (land, water, dew). Thus, it cannot easily escape a tendency to circumscribe the world through gender; and sometimes, it is precisely this emphasis on gender that has notably salutary results. Independent, perhaps, of the structuring dimension of French or creolized French, the text also occasionally valorizes the feminine through references, for example, to the Virgin Mary and to a goddess of the spring. Despite its largely masculinist leanings, then, *Gouverneurs* also has moments of recognizing the feminine as something that holds power, especially in terms of its relation to the sacred and to the natural world.

## Toward an Ecological Imagination

In an early section of *Gouverneurs*, shortly after Manuel has returned home, he proposes to undertake a kind of homecoming by essentially singing to the plants surrounding his village. He says he is eager to greet them, and he feels the need to ask to be in their presence and to walk among them.

Il avait envie de chanter un salut aux arbres: Plantes, ô mes plantes, je vous dis: honneur, vous me répondrez: respect, pour que je puisse entrer. Vous êtes ma maison, vous êtes mon pays. Plantes, je dis: lianes de mes bois, je suis planté dans cette terre, je suis lié à cette terre. Plantes, ô mes plantes, je vous dis: honneur; répondez-moi: respect, pour que je puisse passer. (Roumain 49)

He wanted to sing a greeting to the trees. “Growing things, my growing things! To you I say, ‘Honor!’ You must answer ‘Respect’ so that I may enter. You’re my house, you’re my country. Growing things, I say, vine of the woods, I am planted in this soil. I am rooted in this earth. To all that grows, I say, ‘Honor.’ Answer ‘Respect’ so that I may enter. (Hughes/Cook 55-56)

If this passage reads as something of a choreographed dance between Manuel and the “growing things” of his country, it also articulates a rather ecstatic relation to this particular natural setting. Manuel wants to be in and of the plant life of his country. Here,

a logic of domination is replaced with a desire to respect the will of the plants, whose permission he must ask in order to move any further through the land.

This scene has an echo in the earlier days of his community as well, when the men worked in the *coumbite*. In both cases, male figures are shown to be singing, and through the movement of their bodies, they seem to connect with the rhythm of the earth. The passage shows, too, that men would call out expressions of honor to the sun:

“Honneur et respect, maître soleil, soleil levant...Ces hommes noirs te saluent  
d’un balancement de houes qui arrache du ciel de vives échardes de lumière”

(Roumain 16); “Master Sun! Honor and respect, Master Sun! We black men greet  
you with a swirl of hoes snatching bright sparks of fire from the sky”

(Hughes/Cook 27).

In using this language of honor and respect, these men—if themselves masters of the dew—recognize themselves as dependent upon and linked not only to the earth, but to all of nature. They recognize that the sun provides them with the energy and light needed to do their work. Its worth is incalculable, and their whole bodies sing its praises.

In *Ariel’s Ecology*, Monique Allewaert discusses the types of complex affiliations that enslaved communities developed with the land on which they lived and were forced to labor. While the land and plants could well be a source of danger for these communities, often enslaved people saw in the plant life around them and in other “nonhuman bodies” like the sun or moon potential accomplices in disrupting the

oppressive order in which they lived. Drawing on the portrayal of such a dynamic in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, Allewaert writes:

Caliban's attention to the power and disruption that might emerge from bogs, fens, flats, and other natural phenomena figured nonhuman bodies, organic or not, as vectors for subaltern resistance, thus challenging the colonial assumption that any body was not definitively human was an exchangeable product. (8)

Such a perspective of "nonhuman bodies" as being resistant to the colonialist and capitalist order—despite often being folded into it, or being made to power it—carries the idea that the human beings who were working the land, in bondage, could also reject their commodification in that order. In other words, the 'wild' freedom of the plants helped to produce an imaginary of freedom. Rather than regarding the land as something to overpower and dominate, this imagination produced something of a sense of common purpose with the natural world. In the songs and greetings that the men of Fonds-Rouge offer to the land, plants, and sun, they recall this history, while expressing another way of being with the land than that proposed by the colonial order.

### **'Water is Life'**

Roumain's protagonist Manuel at times sounds like a contemporary water protector. The indigenous slogan, "Water is Life," has resonance with *Gouverneurs*,



given the acute recognition on the part of the villagers of Fonds-Rouge that they cannot live without water. Manuel in particular knows that nothing is possible in the village if its people cannot find a sustainable water source. While a neighboring village called Mahotièrè does have a spring where the women of Fonds-Rouge go to wash clothes, there is no way that Fonds-Rouge can last as a place if water is not also regularly available there.

Thus, Manuel undertakes to find water, certain that there will be a spring. Demonstrating a knowledge of the earth and of the plants that grow in his region—Manuel knows that the *malanga* plant is one that accompanies water—Manuel's discovery of water depicts an intimate relation to and experience of the land and its resources. The scene of that discovery is long; since it is in many ways the climax of the novel, however, I shall quote it in full:

Manuel se trouvait au bas d'une sorte d'étroite coulée embarrassée de lianes qui tombaient des arbres par paquets déroulés... Il monta vers le figuier-maudit, il sentait ce souffle bienfaisant lui sécher la sueur, il marchait dans un grand silence...

Manuel s'arrêta; il en croyait à peine ses yeux et une sorte de faiblesse le prit aux genoux. C'est qu'il apercevait des malangas, il touchait même une de leurs larges feuilles lisses et grasses, et les malangas, c'est une plante qui vient de compagnie avec l'eau.

Sa machette s'enfonça dans le sol, il fouillait avec rage et le trou n'était pas encore profond et élargi que dans la terre blanche comme craie, l'eau commença à monter...chaque fois il y avait un bouillonnement qui s'étalait en une petite flaque et devenait un oeil tout clair dès qu'elle reposait.

Manuel s'étendit sur le sol. Il l'étreignait à plein corps: "Elle est là, la douce, la bonne, la coulante, la chantante, la fraîche, la bénédiction, la vie."

Il baisait la terre des lèvres et riait." (Roumain 107)

Manuel was at the bottom of a kind of narrow gully encumbered by creeping vines which fell weeping from the trees...He went up toward the giant fig tree. He felt the blessed breeze dry his sweat. He was walking through a great silence...

Manuel stopped. He scarcely believed his eyes. A sort of weakness struck his knees. It was because he saw *malangas*. He even touched one of their broad, smooth, icy leaves. And *malangas* are always plants that accompany water!...

His machete plunged into the earth. He dug furiously, and the hole was not yet deep or large before water began to creep up through the chalk-white soil...Each time there was a bubbling which turned into a small puddle that looked like a bright eye as soon as it had settled.

Manuel lay down on the ground. With his whole body he embraced the earth. “There she is! The good, sweet, flowing, singing, cooling, blessed life! He kissed the earth with his lips and laughed.” (Hughes/Cook 108-109) <sup>81</sup>

Not unlike some of the other scenes involving depictions of the earth, this moment also contains a gendered vision of the land and water. Here, however, the feminine is exalted: “Elle est là, la douce, la bonne, la coulante, la chantante, la fraîche, la bénédiction, la vie” (Roumain 107); “There she is! The good, sweet, flowing, singing, cooling, blessed life!” (Hughes/Cook 109). Moreover, although we also see the figure of the machete in this scene, we read that it has to “plunge into” the earth, rather than tear it apart, in order for water to be released. Manuel has by now also asked consent of the earth, requesting that it guide him. Thus, the sensibility here is largely one of joy and euphoria; a mode of domination is, for the moment, eclipsed. Manuel spends time touching the leaves of the malanga trees and soon falls onto the ground, indeed “embraces it with his whole body” and kisses it. He is overcome by this experience, and he nearly melds with the earth. Whereas the novel otherwise centers the human beings who work upon the land, that anthropocentrism seems to come undone in this long passage, where Manuel knows with

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<sup>81</sup> This part of the text strongly resounds with a moment in Ghassan Kanafani’s 1962 novella, *Men in the Sun*, which dramatizes the lives of several Palestinian men who seek work in Kuwait—and who die, on their way there, in the desert, inside an empty truck that is actually meant to carry water. The relevant section from Kanafani’s novel, a scene which takes place before the trip into the desert, reads as follows: “Abu Qais rested on the damp ground, and the earth began to throb under him with tired heartbeats, which trembled through the grains of sand and penetrated the cells of his body...Every time he breathed the scent of the earth, as he lay on it, he imagined that he was sniffing his wife’s hair when she had just walked out of the bathroom, after washing with cold water. The very same smell, the smell of a woman who had washed with cold water and covered his face with her hair while it was still damp. The same throbbing, like carrying a small bird tenderly in your hands” (21).

his whole body the fact that he and his community are inordinately dependent upon water. Indeed, the figure of water here surpasses the concept of reconciliation with the land that the text otherwise seems to pursue. The water itself exceeds and contests such closure.

Manuel's encounter with a new source of water does, however, also bring to mind later political developments in Haiti, which many in the country saw as the beginning of a new life. The party of Jean-Bertrand Aristide, *Fanmi Lavalas* (*lavalas* meaning 'the flood'), sought to bring together and to vastly improve the lives of the urban poor of Haiti and the peasants of the countryside. It is not coincidental, then, that one of the chapters in a book that Aristide wrote from exile, *Eyes of the Heart* (2000), bears the title, "The Water of Life." In this chapter, Aristide remarks:

In Haiti's countryside the people are crying out for the water of life, too. The 70% of Haiti's population that lives in the countryside needs water to grow the food that can feed the country. If Haiti is to be economically independent we must be able to feed ourselves. To do that, we must heal the land. (46)

The lyrical ecological imagination in Roumain's novel thus retains a relationship to a material desire and need that persists among the Haitian peasantry. Such an ecological vision also underscores the continuing fractures that remain between human beings and the broader natural world, and the ways that the current global economic system particularly harms the poor, and the land and water on which poor communities rely. And

yet, as Aristide says, “in the end, on this small planet, we are all swimming in the same water” (50). From small nation states like Haiti and fictional villages like Fonds-Rouge can come insights that have universal significance.

## Conclusion

“Oh, sûr, qu’un jour tout homme s’en va en terre, mais la vie elle-même, c’est un fil qui ne se casse pas, qui ne se perd pas tu sais pourquoi? Parce que, chaque nègre pendant son existence y fait un noeud: c’est le travail qu’il a accompli et c’est ça qui rend la vie vivante dans les siècles des siècles: l’utilité de l’homme sur cette terre.”

—Jacques Roumain, *Gouverneurs de la rosée* (113)

“Naturally the day comes when each man must enter the earth. But life itself is a thread that doesn’t break, that can’t be lost. Do you know why? Because every man ties a knot in it during his lifetime with the work that he does—that’s what keeps life going through the centuries—man’s work on earth.”

—Langston Hughes and Mercer Cook, *Masters of the Dew*; translation of *Gouverneurs* (114)

I want to bring this chapter on Jacques Roumain’s *Gouverneurs de la rosée* to a close by attempting to link the richly poetic moment in which Roumain’s protagonist

Manuel discovers water, and the present moment in which the writing of this chapter has unfolded. I have suggested that there are ways in which we would do well to surpass some of the notions on which Roumain's novel relies: in particular, a binaristic and often naturalized notion of gender and gendered roles. I have discussed as well the ways that his text wrestles with a colonialist and ultimately capitalist notion of the land as something to dominate. While in many ways the novel rejects these ideas, it also reveals the difficulties of moving out of the forms of speech and the frameworks through which they operate.

There are, then, some ways that we have outgrown Roumain. And yet, the relevance of, and indeed the uniqueness of, his *récit paysan* lies partly in how it knits together different temporalities and places, and how it provides a space for thinking through what elements of our own worldviews we would do well to let pass away, those that we might preserve, and those that we should seek to create. It is a text that is not afraid of death, but that also makes a claim for life—for the lives of poor Haitian peasants, for the lives of the lands and waters.

*Gouverneurs* resonates with the growing environmental movement that we see taking shape around the globe. And yet, surpassing Roumain's, and perhaps even Aristide's, vision—which was tragically disrupted, though it too remains a powerful resource for current political struggles in Haiti—many of the most progressive environmentalist groups fundamentally center female leaders and express even greater urgency about healing the land. Facing the massive destruction of her communal, ancestral lands at the hands of an international company that sought to build a dam, the

late environmental activist, Berta Cáceres, a Lenca, indigenous woman from Honduras, offers words that imagine a world dedicated to preserving the life that sources of water not only represent, but are. As María José Méndez recalls, Cáceres in her acceptance speech for the 2015 Goldman Environmental Prize emphasized: “The Gualcarque River has called upon us, as have other gravely threatened rivers. We must answer their call” (21). Méndez ends her own reflection on Cáceres by asking her readers to listen to rivers. Moved by the words of these women, I concur that we are at a time when, in order to have a world in which human beings can actually survive, and hopefully even have a life beyond mere survival, we must prioritize the sounds of the rivers and the ocean.

Beyond the space of the literary text, there are poisoned oceans and dying streams. There are mountains without trees. There are peasants—in Haiti and beyond—still struggling to produce food on their own land. There are migrant workers who have to leave their land in order to find work elsewhere, only to be treated as other, as foreign, as outside of a community of concern. Perhaps a written text at its best can become a link between the world from which it emerges, and the world that it imagines. The two are not the same, and that is precisely why their conversation matters.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Tending to the Voice: On the Poetics of Redress

#### in Edwidge Danticat's *Brother, I'm Dying*

Voices mute for ever, or since yesterday, or just stilled;

If you listen hard you can still catch the echo.

Hoarse voices of those who can no longer speak,

Voices that think they're saying something,

Voices that speak and can't be understood:

Choruses and cymbals for smuggling sense

Into a senseless message.

Pure hubbub to pretend

That silence is not silence.

—Primo Levi, "Voices," *Against Forgetting*, ed. Carolyn Forché

(377)

"Frè, map mouri." Brother, I'm dying.

"What's wrong?" my father asked.

"Gòj," he replied. Throat.



—Joseph Dantica and Miracin Danticat in Edwidge Danticat’s  
*Brother, I’m Dying* (41)<sup>82</sup>

## Introduction

Edwidge Danticat’s 2007 memoir, *Brother, I’m Dying*, addresses the transnational configuration of her extended family’s life, and in so doing, reveals the often obscured yet undeniably brutal border space between the United States and Haiti.<sup>83</sup> While interweaving memories that span long stretches of time and geography, the text is anchored in a concentrated period of a few months in which, Danticat writes, her life and the lives of her father and her uncle “intersected in startling ways” (25). Three key developments mark the intersection of their lives during that period: Danticat’s first pregnancy; the diagnosis of her father, Miracin, with pulmonary disease and his eventual

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<sup>82</sup> Note the reasons for the difference in the spelling of the last name of the author and her father (Danticat) and that of her uncle (Dantica): “Though an error on my father’s birth certificate had made him a Danticat, giving us a singular variation of the family name [Dantica], we still pronounced our surnames the same. In French and Creole our *t* was silent, though I often joked with my uncle that in English we were ‘cats’ and he was not” (Danticat 209-210).

<sup>83</sup> Although the United States and Haiti are not contiguous, the Caribbean Sea between them remains a dangerous place for asylum seekers, and it bears a history of many losses. Besides the sea, which is monitored by entities like the U.S. Coast Guard, I understand places like Krome Detention Center, the prison at Guantánamo Bay in Cuba, and Fort Allen in Puerto Rico—all places where Haitian asylum seekers have been held—as part of this border space (See Jana K. Lipman, “‘The Fish Trusts the Water, and It Is in the Water That It Is Cooked’: The Caribbean Origins of the Krome Detention Center,” for more on the history of these sites). The existence of such institutions to maintain a border between the U.S. and Haiti reveals its militarized nature; the practices of criminalizing and discriminating against Haitians, which occurs in such sites, will become more evident later in the chapter. A final point on the notion of a border space: I use this term to describe the space between Haiti and the U.S. rather than the term “borderland” by Gloria Anzaldúa, because of the specificity that “borderland” holds for understanding the actual land and cultural space between the U.S. and Mexico. However, I do draw on Anzaldúa in thinking about the question of borders at large; indeed, she acknowledges that various types of borders share many dynamics. One of the most resonant descriptions for approaching the U.S.-Haiti border space is the following: “Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish *us* from *them*. A border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge” (Anzaldúa 25). Sites like Krome Detention Center have long operated as something like “narrow strip[s] along a steep edge”: they are places that operate outside the norms of national or international law, and they are made to remain out of the range of public scrutiny.

death from that disease; and arguably most shockingly, her uncle Joseph's detainment by, and death in the custody of, U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) in Miami, where the infamous Krome Detention Center is located. Given the text's realization following the deaths of her "two papas" (Dufault 105) it reads, on one level, as an elegy or a memoir of loss.<sup>84</sup> In the final passage of the first chapter of *Brother*, however, Danticat describes her task as a writer in the face of these losses primarily as one of witnessing and recollecting. She expresses a responsibility to recount in writing her father's and her uncle's experiences, "only because" they have died—a fact that she does not name directly in the passage—and therefore, "they can't" (26). Writing in the wake of these deaths, Danticat acknowledges the limitations to what she can access in her text. She regards her memoir as capable only of conveying her family's experiences in a form of "cohesiveness," not wholeness (26). Danticat does not assume that she can unequivocally speak for her father or her uncle, though she frequently registers their voices in the text by reproducing (or perhaps reconstructing) dialogues between the two brothers—including, as we see above, a key exchange between the two, which bears the phrase that ultimately becomes the book's title. She also includes fragments of conversations with other family members. In this sense, the memoir never seems to rest entirely on one voice; nor does it ever settle on any single mode of articulation, despite being a meticulously wrought, tightly woven work. I argue that by moving between different

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<sup>84</sup> Danticat's Uncle Joseph and Tante Denise were the primary caregivers for her and her brother Bob for several years of their childhood, while their parents were attempting to build a life for the family in the United States. They eventually moved to the United States to join their parents when Danticat was twelve. The children's flight to the United States to be reunited with their parents is recounted in the chapter of the memoir called "One Papa Happy, One Papa Sad," pp. 97-111.

figures of the voice and by showing a range of ways in which voices act—storytelling, falling silent, communicating, witnessing, showing pain, and existing in modes beyond the merely expressive—Danticat reckons with the finality of loss of her loved ones, and thus her inability to restore the fullness of their lives or to reverse the silencing that their deaths represent. I argue further that this same approach also embodies a relentless effort to hold accountable the systems, the people, the historical developments, and the ways of thinking that ultimately set the stage for, or directly lead to, the deaths of her uncle and her father. In this chapter, I will examine how Danticat’s memoir both seeks and refuses redress for these losses by tending to the voice and its various modalities.

In an interview titled “Death by Asylum,” Danticat reflects on the work involved in writing her memoir, saying that while the process was transformative for her in several regards, “I wouldn’t say that the book vindicates the deaths completely. It’s certainly the only vindication we’ve had, so I’m glad I wrote it” (Berger 36). While recognizing the lack of closure that her memoir represents, Danticat also contrasts the redress it pursues with immigration officials’ response to her uncle’s death in detention. As Danticat recounts:

There was an investigation done by the Inspector General [of the Department of Homeland Security] on my uncle’s death, and the outcome was they said no one did anything wrong. I am saying in the book that something was done wrongly, unjustly, and inhumanely, and saying it in a larger forum than we would have had in any courtroom. (Berger 36)

Danticat characterizes the assessment by the Department of Homeland Security of the actions of their agents in Customs and Border Protection (CBP) as a complete disavowal. Her aim in the book is to reveal the falsity of the Department's assertion by revealing the callous treatment her uncle received at the hands of CBP officials, including medical staff. Using the CBP's own records of her uncle's detention to prove her claims against them, part of what Danticat seeks, as she says in the interview, is for "this book and others like it" to be used "in the training of U.S. customs officers and immigration workers" (36). She continues, "If they can only remember that they are dealing with human beings at the worst moments of their lives and not mere numbers or so-called 'aliens,' then they would do a better job" (36). Danticat here characterizes her memoir as intervening in the operations of immigration bureaucracy by emphasizing the personhood of those held in asylum, and as providing a more humanistic training for those tasked with the work of 'processing' asylum seekers. However, I would suggest that more is at stake here than simply mitigating the damages of this system—both in what Danticat does in the text, and especially in what the rampant injustices of the immigration system themselves demand.

The import of Danticat's memoir, in my view, resides instead in how it labors to articulate the deliberate silencing of, neglect of, and violence toward her uncle, whose story has commonalities with those of many other asylum seekers, particularly with other Haitian asylum seekers. While not providing a full sociological account of the various situations in which he is detained—in the fighting between United Nations troops and

gangs in Haiti that forces him to flee his home, then at the CBP offices at the Miami airport, next at Krome Detention Center, and finally at the prison ward of Jackson Memorial Hospital—the memoir nonetheless, as Nicole Waller argues, maps places that often exist under the radar, where people are essentially made to disappear (359). While giving visibility to these “unspoken spaces”<sup>85</sup> and the practices and discourses by which they operate, Danticat also shows how various acts of the voice cut through and disrupt those structures. Both tendencies contribute to the work of redress in the memoir.

Most significantly, Danticat chronicles the figure of her uncle’s voice. She presents it as at once profoundly embodied and elusive. She also registers the ways in which he expresses himself in the space of inhibiting or oppressive conditions. Though not denying the brutality of what he suffers, especially in detention, Danticat wants to underscore the fact that her uncle was not categorically voiceless. Veronica Austen sums up what she sees as Danticat’s reply to the immigration bureaucracy’s attempts not only to render him silent, but indeed to erase his life and his death, saying:

To the U.S. immigration system, Joseph Dantica’s life was not one that counted, his death not one to grieve. Edwidge Danticat seeks to correct this view, using the genre of memoir to construct her uncle, an asylum seeker, as a viable subject with a worthwhile life and voice. (30-31)

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<sup>85</sup> This phrase comes from Martín Espada’s essay, “I’ve Known Rivers: Speaking of the Unspoken Spaces in Poetry.”

While I would argue that Danticat's memoir seeks to construct her uncle as an irreducible person—rather than the more abstract “viable subject” that Austen suggests—with a “worthwhile life and voice,” I agree with Austen that the matter of figuring Joseph Dantica's voice is a central way in which the memoir seeks redress. Paradoxically, however, I also see Danticat's intense focus on her uncle's voice as symptomatic of the very reduction of personhood that she identifies in the operations of the immigration bureaucracy; in this sense, the memoir's redress remains partial.<sup>86</sup> At the same time, the memoir also contains many acts of bearing witness to and of contesting objectification. These moments of witnessing also occur, I emphasize again, alongside other figurations and acts of the voice, underscoring that the voice is more than one thing. Through its work of representing the voice in these various dimensions, the memoir also points to realities beyond the voice, and registers a desire for a fullness of life, personhood, and relationships, recognizing these, however, as somehow always beyond narration.

In an effort to retain such dynamism in my own writing, in what follows I trace several key figures and acts of the voice to which Danticat's memoir tends. The order of these meditations roughly follows the trajectory that the memoir takes. These figures and acts may be read as autonomous, though many also bear a relation to one another. While I make claims about each of these figures or acts and attempt in the conclusion to join some strands that travel through each of them, I also do not wish to ossify them or the

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<sup>86</sup> Because of the nature of grief, I am not sure, however, that there can be anything like fully realized redress for the loss of a loved one. Of course, that does not negate the need to pursue material redress for losses suffered, or the crucial aspect of transforming societies in such a way that death in detention, and detention itself, are no longer normalized. Perhaps Danticat's work attains what one might call psychological redress in the only way possible—partially. And yet, I do want to shed a critical lens on this reduction of her uncle primarily to a voice, even if to simply problematize it.

ways in which they might resonate with each other. Such reification is, I maintain, something to resist at all costs.

### **Punctum: A Hole in the Text**

“it is this element which rises out from the scene...for *punctum* is also: sting, speck, cut, little hole—and also a cast of the dice.”

—Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (26-27)

If a text may, as a photograph, materialize a *punctum*, an “element which rises out from the scene,” the first half of *Brother*, where Danticat narrates her childhood living with her Aunt Denise and Uncle Joseph, contains just such an element. This *punctum* comes in the form of a tracheotomy hole in her uncle’s neck. Expressing her own sense of childhood “intrigue” about this “perfect circle...salmon pink” (63), Danticat links the hole to a condition of muteness and characterizes it as a site of curiosity, and sometimes derision, for her family’s neighbors:

While my uncle was not the only mute person in Bel Air—there was a boy who was born voiceless and an old woman who’d suffered a stroke—he was the only one with a tracheotomy hole in this neck. People were so curious about this hole that they kept their eyes on it throughout entire one-way conversations with him. I too was intrigued by this narrow abyss that seemed to lead deep into his body. A

perfect circle, it was salmon pink like our house and convulsed outward when he sneezed...In their curiosity, some of our neighbors were cruel. I remember once walking out of our house with my uncle and hearing a young boy call out “kou kav” or cave neck...Back then, all I could think to do was imagine a wall around him, a roaming fortress that would follow him everywhere and shield him from derision. (63-64)

In this passage, Danticat provides an acutely material description of the tracheotomy hole, calling it a “narrow abyss that seemed to lead deep into his body” (63). Thus she links the surface of the hole not only to the exterior of the family’s home—“it was salmon pink like our house” (63)—but also to a passageway into the home’s interior, by tacit analogy to the “narrow abyss” leading to an unreachable interior space of Joseph’s body. Such a connection suggests an intimacy between the condition of Joseph’s throat and the family’s life together. At the same time, Danticat links the hole to exterior spaces, saying the hole could “convuls[e] outward” when he sneezed, thus also casting it within a space of vulnerability to a larger social reality. The period in which Joseph’s tracheotomy hole was exposed retains a strong hold on Danticat, who recalls that during that time she wanted to “imagine a wall around him, a roaming fortress that would follow him everywhere and shield him from derision” (64). Circling around the tracheotomy hole, then, are charged questions about vulnerability and safety.



The hole itself is an emblem of a surgery that Joseph had undergone for throat cancer; in this way, it might be read as a wound.<sup>87</sup> If we read the hole as signifying metonymically, it also becomes a way of figuring his voice. As a preacher, Joseph's livelihood depends on his ability to use his voice; thus, this hole represents a threat to his vocation. Danticat notes that Joseph nonetheless took part in conversations with community members during this time—albeit “one-way conversations” (63). Even if he could not contribute words to these conversations, I see these instances as demonstrating that by listening and being present, Joseph still fulfilled a pastoring role. Certainly, the memoir shows Joseph regaining his preaching duties more fully after he receives a voicebox, but passages like the one above also present him as participating in social exchanges before he could speak again with vocalized words.

Joseph's time living with an exposed hole in his neck, however, makes him susceptible to people's cruelty. Beyond the social world of the family's community of Bel Air—a community he always desired to reside in, until his life was threatened—the hole also exists as a site of international struggle. Joseph first receives a biopsy and a diagnosis of throat cancer from an American doctor, stationed in Haiti; he loses his voice for some time following the biopsy, and then essentially completely after the laryngectomy operation he receives in the United States. While he undergoes another medical procedure where he receives a voicebox, the changing conditions of Joseph's

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<sup>87</sup> Though a different kind of wound, the bleeding “herida abierta” (25) that Gloria Anzaldúa characterizes as the U.S.-Mexico border seems nonetheless a compelling intertext here. That it is a wound produced by the grating of the “Third world” against “the first” (Anzaldúa 25) has resonance with the fact that Joseph's tracheotomy hole derives from the surgery he, as a Haitian man, undergoes at the hands of U.S. doctors. I speak to this issue more fully in the paragraphs that follow.

throat are, at large, bound to various interventions by medical actors from or in the United States: the country that had occupied his home country of Haiti during his childhood. Joseph's body, then, becomes a site in which geopolitical forces intervene. Here, such forces essentially carve a hole in a man's neck and for a time, cause him to lose his speaking voice. The operations on Joseph's throat may well have saved his life—thus there is also an aspect of benevolence to consider here. Nonetheless, they are invasive, if not nearly invasive as an actual occupation.

Edward Said reflects on the relationship between an invasion by external powers and the wounds to the interior of a place and the people who live there. Speaking of the occupations of Palestine, he writes: “But once another power—Arab, European, or Israeli—invades your interior, dismisses your past, and stakes its claims on your future, perhaps it does not make any difference who or what the power is” (70). Actually, Said goes on to say that who the power is does matter to a certain degree, even if the result is still damaging: “It is a matter of what, say, the Israeli does not allow us that the Arab, highly ambivalent about us, does” (70). In either case, Said suggests that such occupations disrupt the interior space of those being occupied, leaving a fundamental imprint not only on the interior of a country, but also on the personal, interior lives of those who dwell within.

In the case of Joseph Dantica, the operations on his throat—not the same as an occupation—had a profound impact on his body, but again, they saved his life. However, the first visit he made to the United States in the early 1980s for his laryngectomy became cause to deny him asylum when he had to flee Haiti for his life in 2004, when an

actual United Nations force intervened in his neighborhood. In a late chapter of *Brother, I'm Dying*, "Alien 27041999," Danticat reports how the hospital in New York City where Joseph had received his throat surgery had requested an inquiry on his immigration status without his knowledge. The result of this inquiry in 1983 was the opening of a file in which Joseph was given the designation, "alien," number 27041999. This file, over which Joseph had essentially no control, was held against him over twenty years later, when he requested temporary asylum. Danticat writes:

Later, Department of Homeland Security files would show that a September 22, 1983, request had been made by Kings County Hospital, where my uncle had had his surgery and subsequent follow-up visits, to the United States Department of Justice, about my uncle's immigration status. As a result of this, on February 14, 1984, an immigration "alien" file, number 27041999, a file he was never aware of, was opened for my uncle. The file was subsequently closed. (220)

Here, we see more clearly the ways that the interventions of outside forces come to dictate the fate of a man who, two decades later, found himself in dire circumstances. The opening and closing of the immigration file brought with it an assumption that Joseph had sought permanent residency when he traveled to the United States in the 1980s. As we will see, this assumption directly contradicts Joseph's reported desire to remain in Haiti, and specifically in Bel Air, throughout his life. This part of his story is something that the immigration system cannot hear, does not see, and in fact does not permit: the very act of

classifying him as an alien is an effort to foreclose the complexity of his story. That his life was later disrupted by a United Nations intervention, causing him to leave his home country, further underscores the way in which these most intimate wishes to remain in Haiti were also invaded by external forces.

At Joseph's funeral in Brooklyn, which is characterized as a moment of unwanted exile for her uncle, Danticat seeks to inhabit her uncle's interior monologue, going over in her mind what she thinks he may have been thinking and feeling before he died. Among these thoughts is the continuing imprint on Haiti of the U.S. occupation that had occurred when he was a child. As she writes:

When was he last conscious? I wondered. What were his final thoughts? When did he realize he was dying? Was he afraid? Did he think it ironic that he would soon be the dead prisoner of the same government that had been occupying his country when he was born? In essence he was entering and exiting the world under the same flag. Never really sovereign, as his father had dreamed, never really free. What would he think of being buried here? Would he, forever, proverbially, turn in his grave? (250)

Danticat imagines her uncle as aware of the painful ironies of his condition, the way his life was affected by the influence of the United States, from his earliest days to his death. She may be ventriloquizing or projecting thoughts onto her uncle here, however. Doing so may be a way to reject the muteness that characterizes his death. And yet, the use of

question marks throughout this passage, the repetition of questions that her uncle could not directly answer, also convey a sense of attempting not to foreclose what he might say. The question marks, as they prick the page, perhaps also stand in for the silence that is constitutive of death.

In the same section of the memoir, we see Danticat's father, Miracin, speak in his own words about the situation in which his brother died, and the fact that he will be buried in the United States. This moment shows how both men's lives were deeply affected by U.S. influence over Haiti and gives credence to the imagined inner monologue that Danticat produces for her uncle. Miracin laments:

“He shouldn't be here,” my father said, tearful; and breathlessly agitated, shortly before drifting off to sleep that night. “If our country were ever given a chance and allowed to be a country like any other, none of us would live or die here.”

(251)

Speaking on the night following Joseph's funeral, Mira is deeply pained not only by his brother's death, but also by the circumstances that lead to it. That he will be buried in the United States (“here”), a country that had never welcomed him, and far away from the community to which he had dedicated his entire life, makes his death particularly distressing for Mira. Moreover, Joseph had always insisted on staying in Haiti (“our country”) and never desired to immigrate to the United States, which Mira and several other of their family members had done. Although Joseph for years faced danger in his

community, he had never wanted to be anywhere besides Bel Air. Danticat recalls that “[o]ver the years, this had been a touchy subject between my father and uncle: my father wanting my uncle to move to another part, any other part of Haiti and my uncle refusing to even consider it” (25).<sup>88</sup>

We see in this passage, however, that Miracin, a long-term resident of the United States, also still suffers from the effects of displacement. Spending decades far away from his family’s neighborhood of Bel Air—a name which suggests a climate more suitable to breathing well—Mira experiences trouble breathing; in the passage, he appears as “breathlessly agitated.” His body, too, as it suffers from pulmonary disease, also bears the damages of historical and political developments. Indeed, he insists on the injustice of the geopolitical situation that caused him to leave his country and settle in the United States many years ago: the dictatorships of François (“Papa Doc”) and Jean-Claude (“Baby Doc”) Duvalier, who ruled from 1957-71 and 1971-86, respectively. As he says: “If our country were ever given a chance and allowed to be a country like any other, none of us would live or die here” (251). This statement also underscores many of the unjust economic, military, and supposedly humanitarian interventions by outside powers that have often so negatively affected Haiti, including the United States’ tacit support for, in particular, Jean-Claude Duvalier, who the U.S. government considered an

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<sup>88</sup> A principal reason for Joseph Dantica’s burial in New York, in addition to the proximity to some of his family members there, has to do with the fact that the gangs in Haiti that had threatened his life also vowed to do him violence and dishonor in his death. Thus, unfortunately, it was safer for him to be buried in New York, though neither the United States nor Haiti proved fundamentally secure for him in life.

ally in anti-Communism.<sup>89</sup> As Roseanna L. Dufault has noted, in such gestures, Danticat “simultaneously criticiz[es] corruption and gang activity in Haiti on the one hand, as well as U.S. policies and interventions on the other” (1). Through providing occasional references to these historical and political aspects, Danticat allows her readers to understand the developments facing her family as contextual, rather than as random events or simply an intrinsic state of affairs in Haiti. Haiti is not an open wound. But the space between the United States and Haiti continues to sting.

### **Extensions of the Voice: Communicating across Gaps**

Every day we hear this phrase: Ours is the age of communication. A platitude which, like every other, involves an ambiguity...every communication, including the sort that is direct and without intermediaries, is equivocal.

—Octavio Paz, *The Double Flame: Love and Eroticism* (251)

Another way *Brother* figures the voice is through the notions of extension or prosthesis: modes that are essentially integral to communication. At several different points in the memoir, Danticat suggests that voices often require the mediation of entities beyond themselves in order to sound. Voices may also rely on certain tools to traverse

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<sup>89</sup> The writings of former Haitian president Jean-Bertrand Aristide, particularly his book *Eyes of the Heart: Seeking a Path for the Poor in the Age of Globalization*, are among many sources that address these developments.

gaps of geography and language.<sup>90</sup> If the memoir registers the incommunicability of death and injustice, it also makes a case for the value of communication. Against forms of language that rely on dissimulation, such as those deployed by the office of Customs and Border Protection, Danticat presents moments in which communication enables life.<sup>91</sup>

One place where communication occurs via prosthesis is when Joseph is recovering in a hospital bed from his biopsy. Joseph realizes that someone next to him in the hospital has a radio. Over the airwaves, he hears, among various notices of missing people and lost objects, the voice of an unnamed announcer, who surprisingly speaks of Joseph's situation. This scene precipitates a reflection on the significance of the voice:

“Reverend Joseph Nossius, please come home. Your family is worried about you”...My uncle was staring at the ceiling and wondering whether the doctors with their “biopsy” had done him more harm than good when he heard the announcer’s voice. It reminded him how important voices were. If you had one, you could use it to reach out to your loved ones, no matter how far away.

Technological advances could help—the telephone, the radio, microphones,

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<sup>90</sup> In *The Promise of the Foreign* Vicente Rafael also examines the capacity of technology and different uses of language to traverse distances. Theorizing what he calls “telecommunication” in his study of the growth of anti-colonial nationalism in the Philippines, Rafael discusses, for example, the ways that via the telegraph, “the Philippines was put in contact with the world in new ways” (17). Rafael offers a critical account of the introduction of such technologies; he does not praise them, but also does not dismiss them on account of being “foreign.” He says that partly through being “foreign,” they enabled a certain access to communication among disparate parties, in ways that had not been possible previously.

<sup>91</sup> As Nicole Waller argues, Danticat constructs the detention center as “a place from which and with which one can no longer communicate” (360). Thus, the other moments in the text that emphasize communication present a counterpoint to the operations of the detention center.



megaphones, amplifiers. But if you had no voice at all, he thought, you were simply left out of the constant hum of the world, the echo of conversations, the shouts and whispers of everyday life. (39)

The idea articulated here, that if you had a voice, “you could use it to reach out to your loved ones, no matter how far away,” underscores the way that a voice—in this case, a voice carried through a radio—can telescope spaces.<sup>92</sup> In instances such as a medical emergency, when communication becomes imperative, the voice’s ability to extend beyond its immediate location is particularly vital. Further, the passage highlights the necessary mediation of “technological advances” in order to communicate and not be “left out of the constant hum of the world, the echo of conversations, the shouts and whispers of everyday life” (39). The fear, not only of not having a voice, but of not being able to participate in the social activities so grounded in speaking, seems to Joseph—at least as Danticat recalls his thinking—a particularly worrisome possibility. Expressing deep concern for the condition of “not having a voice at all,” Joseph finds some solace in prosthetic technologies, which are enumerated as: “the telephone, the radio, microphones, megaphones, amplifiers” (39). Indeed, he eventually makes use of such technology, in the form of a voicebox.

Beyond the use of technology, however, the memoir also thematizes other ways in which the notion of extension or prosthesis serves communication. In another passage

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<sup>92</sup> Radio has long played a significant role in Haiti, especially in the work of attempting to build democracy. See Duke University’s excellent Radio Haiti Archive: <https://repository.duke.edu/dc/radiohaiti>.

about the time in which he lived with the tracheotomy hole and before he received his voicebox, Danticat describes Joseph discovering ways in which he could speak. He cultivates various modes of expression to communicate—sometimes using other of his own faculties, sometimes with the aid of other people. As she recalls:

Eventually it wasn't as difficult for my uncle to communicate as I expected. For those who knew how to read, he'd write notes explaining complicated or elaborate thoughts. The rest of the time, he used facial expressions and hand gestures. Pointing to his eyes, for example, meant look. Tugging at his ears meant listen. Pulling his hands apart meant open. Pushing them together meant close. Slapping his palm against his forehead meant he'd forgotten or overlooked something. (63)

Here we see that the body begins to work in new ways, and that a person can in fact utilize other parts of the body to speak—demonstrating that the voice may not be located solely in the throat. In this passage we see how the capacity for expression is exchanged among different parts of Joseph's body, from his hands to his eyes and ears. Depending on the circumstance—such as whether or not one's interlocutor can read—a different faculty serves to mediate the expression of ideas. Redefined in relation to the physical body in a fuller sense, then, and as something that can travel to different parts of the body and adjust to changing circumstances, the voice becomes a far suppler notion than we

might expect. By delinking the voice from a hierarchical understanding in which its sole locus is presumed to be the throat, this passage emphasizes the voice's mobility.

People too are prostheses for Joseph's voice. Shortly after her uncle first received his throat surgery but had not yet received his voicebox, we also learn that Danticat and other younger family members would accompany him, as at that point he did not like going out alone. While he was, at this time, making use of the many faculties discussed above, some instances provoked him to request the assistance of the younger generation. Danticat writes:

One altered facet of my uncle's post-operation life was that he didn't like to go too many places by himself. Whenever he had to make a deposit at the bank or had school business at the Education Ministry, he would wait for either me or his grandson, Maxo's son, Nick, to come back from school and take one of us with him. That way if he wasn't able to make himself understood, either with his gestures or with his sometimes indecipherable handwriting, then one of us would interpret him. (64)

This passage reveals that it is most often in instances where Joseph must interact with an official institution—here, the bank and the Education Ministry are mentioned—that Edwidge or another family member would join him. The passage thus suggests that they had a relationship with and perhaps a certain insight into Joseph's way of thinking. We read that if gestures or “sometimes indecipherable handwriting” (64) did not enable

Joseph's interlocutors to understand him, either Edwidge or his grandson would act as "interpreters." And yet, Danticat notes how sometimes they too would misunderstand Joseph, though they would always look forward to his affirmation when they were correct. What surfaces here is the ever-present incommensurability between one's self and another in the act of communicating. Rather than the figure of Joseph as someone unable to articulate himself, or his relatives as lacking in some way by periodically being unable to understand him, what this passage brings into view is the very nature of language, replete with gaps and holes. Further, the passage shows how language is very much a relational proposition.

As we see in the above passage, in her actual lived relationship with her uncle, Danticat participates in something of a joint effort of speaking. While this may not remedy, for the memoir overall, the problem of Danticat essentially having to speak in the place of her uncle and her father, it does ask us to conceive of speaking in a more nuanced way. In the act of speaking, there may be times in which one has to pass the role of speaker onto another person, or another member of a group. To vocalize what one needs to say, at times one may require the assistance or further elaboration on the part of others. In some sense, the very nature of a conversation—one of the most common forms of speech—necessitates that one share the field of expression.

Danticat does share the space of her text with the voices of others, while at times attempting to bridge the gaps between the individuals portrayed in her text and her readers through acts of translation. In fact, her English-language memoir itself may constitute such an effort, as much of her family—especially the older generation—spoke

primarily Kreyòl or French. Danticat’s working in a mode of translation becomes especially clear in the key scene where her uncle expresses to her father that he fears he is dying. While staying at his son Maxo’s apartment on his first night in New York City, Danticat recounts, Joseph woke up “in the middle of the night with a sharp, throbbing pain in his neck” (41). Because Maxo was not then home, Joseph, barely able to speak, called his brother, Mira, who at that point had been living in the States for several years. Notably, this scene also foregrounds the device of the telephone:

“Hello,” my father said, his voice creaking anxiously. No good news could ever come at this hour of the night, he told himself.

My uncle pressed his lips as close as he could to the mouthpiece to whisper these three words: “Frè, map mouri.” Brother, I’m dying.

“What’s wrong?” my father asked.

“Gòj,” he replied. Throat. (41)

In this passage, we see an example of what we might call a bridging approach to language—specifically, here, between Kreyòl and English. Danticat leads up to a Kreyòl statement with an English sentence, “My uncle pressed his lips...to the mouthpiece to whisper these three words,” but then delivers that statement on its own terms, “Frè, map mouri.” While she then offers what we are asked to understand as a translation, “Brother, I’m dying,” she doesn’t condition this translation with a statement like, “which means,” or, “which translated into English means.” Instead, she gives the Kreyòl phrase as spoken

by her uncle the opportunity to stand on its own. This is probably even more true of the moment when Joseph replies to his brother, “Gòj.” We might read English and Kreyòl as kinds of building blocks—whole entities in themselves—being set side by side to bridge the two countries Danticat’s work traverses.

Following the exchange above, Mira calls an ambulance and rushes to Maxo’s house to be with his brother, only to miss him and later catch up with him at the hospital. Joseph thus travels alone with the medics in the ambulance where they perform, on the way to Kings County Hospital, “a tracheotomy, drilling a hole in my uncle’s neck to insert a tube there so he could breathe” (42). The next day, following his surgery, Joseph “was never able to use his own voice again. He was fifty-five years old.” (42) Although Joseph soon receives a voicebox, which serves a prosthetic function in helping him to speak, the text also reckons with this fundamental loss. Here, we see Joseph and his voice as independent entities, beyond even the care and reach of his family members. And yet, decades later, after Joseph dies, Miracin has a dream where he accompanies Joseph in the ambulance. The desire to connect, to transcend the divides that life places between the two brothers persists, facilitated here through yet another telecommunicative mode: the dream.

### **The Grain, or the Autonomy of the Voice**

“[T]he narrative circles around the figure of Uncle Joseph, but never fully manages to grasp him again.”

—Nicole Waller, “Terra Incognita: Mapping the Detention Center in Edwidge Danticat’s *Brother, I’m Dying* and the US Supreme Court Ruling *Boumediene v. Bush*” (360)

Though reflecting on the limits to linguistic precision in critical works about music, Roland Barthes’ meditation in “The Grain of the Voice” serves as a helpful optic for considering the threat of loss, and particularly the loss of voice, that is ever-present in *Brother*. Opposing typical notions of the voice which hold it as an expression of the soul, Barthes understands the voice rather as “not personal...not original,” but nonetheless “individual”: something that “has us hear...a separate body” (182). He writes,

The voice is not personal: it expresses nothing of the cantor, his soul; it is not original (all Russian cantors have roughly the same voice), and at the same time it is individual: it has us hear a body which has no civil identity, no ‘personality,’ but which is nevertheless a separate body. Above all, the voice bears along *directly* the symbolic, over the intelligible, the expressive... The ‘grain’ is that: the materiality of the body speaking its mother tongue; perhaps the letter, almost certainly *signifiante*. (Barthes 182)

In this passage, Barthes theorizes an element of music that eludes the grasp of critics, who he complains simply deploy adjectival phrases to describe the quality of tone or the style of a musical performance. For Barthes, that elusive element of music in fact

transcends the descriptive: it is something almost ontological yet escapes the saturation of meaning. He calls it ‘the grain.’

In the service of articulating how he intends ‘the grain,’ Barthes reflects on a specific occasion of music: the singing of Russian cantors, whose voices he says largely cannot be distinguished one from the other. Among these, Barthes nonetheless identifies an element which asserts a particularity, and it is here that he observes the voice. For Barthes, the separate body that we hear is the grain of the voice, or what he calls “the materiality of the body speaking its mother tongue” (182). Seemingly distinct from any national or regional language, Barthes refers here to “mother tongue” as something even more fundamental to the voice: its capacity to sound. The voice emerges from the body. To hear the sounding of a voice means hearing its concreteness from and as a body; it is this that inhabits music as a grain.

Barthes later goes on to address sites besides music where we encounter this grain, thus gently linking these sites. As he writes: “The ‘grain’ is the body in the voice as it sings, the hand as it writes, the limb as it performs” (188). We see here an emphasis on materiality, the way the physical body exists in those spaces of activity that we otherwise might relegate to the merely ineffable. While the voice escapes and in some way transcends the body, it emanates from, and is of the body. If not personal, it is nonetheless integral to a specific person.

For Joseph Dantica, the voice presents itself as a problem at times—something that, while central to his work as a pastor, he often must struggle for, something that he faces having to lose, and something that he does not wish to be without. While the



memoir attends to some of the ways in which these various phases of struggle for a voice cause pain and difficulty for Joseph, it never presents him as a lesser being, or as less complete at any point. In this way, while suggesting his voice as fundamental, the memoir rejects the notion that human value should be located exclusively in the ability to speak with an unwavering or unmediated voice. One key way in which it registers his voice, however, is through the faculty of memory—something that too retains a quality of elusiveness.

One passage that takes the reader to an early moment in Danticat's life, in which Joseph was a central caretaker for her and her brother, is the following: "As a child living in his house from the time I was four until I was twelve years old, I remember my uncle's voice being crisp and distinct: deep and resolute, breathy and jingly when he was angry, steely and muted when he was sad" (34). On the level of content this passage speaks to a reality that no longer exists as such: the voice that Joseph had before the surgeries on his throat. On the formal level, this statement registers subtleties of emotion and tone. It offers a description that makes use of adjectives: a description strangely akin to what Barthes laments finding in the writings of music critics. And yet, noting that she experienced her uncle's voice in her early years as generally "crisp and distinct" and "deep and resolute," while also recalling how it would transform from "breathy and jingly at times when he was angry" to "steely and muted when he was sad," Danticat accounts for the transformation of his voice over time, and in relation to specific affective realities. Danticat's description, while identifying some particularities of Joseph's voice, allows space for it to remain mobile and to leave an autonomous mark on the world.

At the same time, such an account demonstrates, too—differently from Barthes’ discussion of the Russian cantors—a level of intimacy that complicates the notion of the personal that Barthes wants to unsettle. Danticat’s vision of her uncle’s voice comes from someone who deeply knows and cares for him. In such descriptions, Danticat draws closer to another text of Barthes that we considered earlier, *Camera Lucida*, wherein Barthes reflects on what he calls “the impossible science of the unique being” (71). Interestingly, Barthes makes this statement in the context of discussing a photograph of his mother, whose personhood seems to disrupt his own efforts of theorization. Although he rejects the idea that he can behold or even vocalize something like her “essence” (though he suggests that the “Winter Garden” photograph of her may be capable of such) there is something of the personal that we catch in Barthes’ reflection on his mother. It is perhaps for this reason that Barthes refuses to reproduce that photograph of her in his text. And yet, for Barthes, as for Danticat, very specific familial relations exude—notably, in their loss—a kind of force that demands an account in writing.

### **Storytelling: Voice as Relationality**

“I started becoming interested in writing by really listening to stories.”

—Edwidge Danticat in “I Am a Witness,” an interview with Jake Brownell

In an interview with journalist Jake Brownell in 2008, Danticat remarks that, growing up in Haiti, storytelling was a common practice in her family home and in her community. She would listen to the many storytellers around her—including her Uncle Joseph, her Aunt Denise, and her Granmè Melina, as well as children of her own age—and attempt to take in all they were saying. Believing herself too shy to stand in front of others and present an oral tale as her other family members did, Danticat eventually discovered writing as another way she could tell stories (Brownell). In the memoir, Danticat reproduces some tales that she was told as a child, as in the chapter “The Angel of Death and the Father of God,” which includes a story told by Granmè Melina (138-144). As we have seen, Danticat also presents an account of many conversations by her family members and other recollections that they passed on to her. In this way, her text registers a practice of listening to the words of others and underscores the importance of orality and auralty to its economies of representation.

For Walter Benjamin, “The storyteller takes what he tells from experience—his own or that reported by others. And he in turn makes it the experience of those who are listening to his tale” (87). In bringing together the experiences of so many others and in sharing publicly an account of the intersection of her life with her uncle’s and father’s, Danticat participates in such a practice. Moreover, the practices of storytelling that she experienced as a child leave specific imprints on both the content and the form of her memoir.

Danticat remarks that her uncle’s primary way of storytelling was in the work he did as a preacher. In a passage where she talks about qualities of her uncle’s voice, she

also recounts how Joseph came to be a preacher. Shifting the role of storyteller to her father, Danticat presents Miracin's observations about Joseph's passionate speeches on the politician Fignoié, and then eventually how he saw Joseph turn away from politics, to become a pastor. As she writes:

When he began preaching sermons, my father recalled, sermons which required that he project a wide range of emotions in one hour or less, my uncle had the same effect on the hundred or so people who attended his church as he'd had on those who crowded into the living room to listen to him talk about Fignoié. (34)

This passage points to the affective range that Joseph could reach with his voice. While not focusing directly on the tone of his voice, as we saw earlier in the chapter, this passage nonetheless underscores Joseph's capacity to vocalize in a way that could "project a wide range of emotions in one hour or less" (34) and affect a considerable number of people. In the context of both politics and religion, Joseph's speaking abilities made an impression. Miracin further recalls his brother's impact through his sermons as a pastor:

"His preaching style was very straightforward," remembered my father. "He talked a lot about love. God's love, the love we should have for one another. He knew all the verses for love. Sometimes I'd close my eyes and think, would I

want to hear him if he wasn't my brother and I'd have to say yes. Yes, he would have made a very good politician, but my brother was a better preacher." (35)

Danticat's father here offers an assessment of his brother's preaching, noting how he would close his eyes, and imagine himself as a non-intimate listener. Reflecting on Joseph's preaching, Miracin concludes that, even if they had not had a personal connection, he still would have wanted to listen to Joseph preach.

In addition to recounting aspects of Joseph's impact as a preacher, Danticat's memoir also registers his mode of storytelling in more formal ways. The memoir is divided into two sections, and each one bears a quotation from the Bible that serves as an epigraph for the section. Both quotations come from the Old Testament and emphasize brotherhood and friendship. The epigraph of the first part of the text, titled "He is My Brother," contains a passage from Genesis, which reads, "This is how you can show your love to me: Everywhere we go, say of me, "He is my brother." The epigraph of the second part of the memoir, titled "For Adversity," reads, "A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for adversity"; this is a passage from Proverbs. While the memoir is not a religious text in any obvious or overt sense, Danticat's decision to foreground these Bible verses in structuring it speaks to her relationship with her uncle. In addition to evoking recollections of conversations between her uncle and father and other family members at different points of the text, this quotation of Bible verses is another way to register her uncle's voice and to validate his work as someone who preached often about "the love we should have for one another" (35).

## Acts of Witness: Documenting through Writing

“I think of myself as a witness: a person who can report on what I’m seeing and who can report on what others are saying... and the way I witness is through this work of writing.”

—Edwidge Danticat, interview with Jake Brownell, “I Am a Witness”

Joseph Dantica’s voice and life in *Brother* is imprinted in moments where the book foregrounds his own acts of writing down what he sees—either at times when he is not able to use his speaking voice, or in situations when violence is occurring in his community. While Edwidge Danticat frequently underscores her role as a writer as fundamentally one of witnessing—and indeed of using writing to witness, to “report on what [she’s] seeing” and “on what others are saying” (Brownell)—it is significant that she includes several scenes in which her uncle too engages in such a practice.

The first scene in which Joseph is shown as utilizing writing to respond to a situation is again in the hospital room, after his biopsy. Danticat writes,

That evening, after the biopsy, my uncle lay in a hospital bed, unable to speak. Would his voice ever come back? He wrote that question on little pieces of paper the nurses gave him. They told him once more that this time it would, but probably not after he had the actual operation. (38)

Here, while unable to use his speaking voice, Joseph persists in asking questions about the status of his voice. We see in the form of “little pieces of paper” an illustration of the resiliency of his expressive capacities, and the need also to reflect on and receive information about his situation. While facilitated both by the scraps of paper, and the nurses’ initial gesture of providing them, Joseph perseveres in articulating himself.

Joseph also uses the medium of paper and a writing tool at a number of different points, over a span of decades, to record the violence occurring in his neighborhood. He takes account of what happens, who dies, and by what means. He often also notes the times of day in which he encounters the corpse of someone who has died. Discussing her uncle’s acts of witness during the Duvalier years, and later in the unrest of the 1990s, Danticat writes,

My uncle managed to stay out of harm’s way by avoiding the demonstrations and all other overtly political activity, including speaking out against the military from the pulpit of his church. Still, every morning he got up to count the many bloody corpses that dotted the street corners and alleys of Bel Air. During the years when he couldn’t speak, he had developed a habit of jotting things down, so he kept track of the cadavers in the small notepads he always carried in his jacket pocket. In his notebooks, he wrote the names of the victims, when he knew them, the condition of their bodies and the times they were picked up, either by family members or by the sanitation service, to be transported to the morgue or dumped in mass graves. (139)

If Edwidge Danticat's efforts to bear witness people's lives and to the injustices they undergo are recalcitrant, so too are her uncle Joseph's. Even at times when he seems otherwise powerless to intervene, he still does whatever he can to provide a written record of what he has seen. When his neighborhood is rocked by violence on October 24, 2004, in the wake of a clash between United Nations forces and local gangs, and his church is caught in the crossfire, Joseph produces a written account.<sup>93</sup> Though his own life was in danger, he "jotted down a few of the words he was hearing [as people were screaming]...Again, recording things had become an obsession. One day, I knew, he hoped to gather all his notes together, sit down and write a book" (176). Although Joseph never gets the chance to write that book, he does record what happens to his church and community and is prepared to deliver this story to Customs and Border Protection officials when he arrives in Miami. This act of written testimony is one of many things that the immigration bureaucracy ignores, and which Danticat attempts to recover in her text.

### **Naming Alienation and Thingification**

"Truly, there are sins for which no one has the power to make amends and which can never be fully expiated."

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<sup>93</sup> See Danticat's chapter, "Beating the Darkness" (pp. 170-180), for more details on the violence that occurred that day and how Joseph responded to it.



—Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism* (42)

Danticat's central act of witness in *Brother* is her account of the degradation that her uncle endures in the custody of immigration officials in Miami. Although she is a second-hand witness to his suffering, she does have brief contact with her uncle over the phone, attempts to gain access to her uncle at several points, and, after he dies, undertakes an extensive process of investigation, combing through all the records that exist of her uncle's detention. Danticat stretches the events of her uncle's detention over several chapters, as if gently trying to convey the terrible news, while also meticulously presenting the details of what he undergoes. Danticat has discussed in several interviews how she does not want her uncle's life to be reduced to his ordeal in detention, though this is the part of her memoir that seems to receive most attention in critical essays. In this and the following few sections, I too will attempt to thematize some aspects of this part of her memoir, but I will also continue to bring to the surface acts of the voice that Danticat presents as counterpoints to brutalizing operations of immigration bureaucracy.

Danticat chronicles the way that her Uncle Joseph and his son Maxo—who travels with him and survives detention, but later dies in the 2010 earthquake—experience various forms of dehumanization at the hands of bureaucratic institutions, from the moment that they leave Port-au-Prince. These men, Danticat shows, are subjected to many of the “structuring elements” that constitute what activist Harsha Walia has termed “border imperialism.” In *Undoing Border Imperialism*, Walia argues that the imperialist maintenance of national borders relies on “displacements and secured borders” (40-52),

“criminalization and the carceral network” (53-61), “racialized hierarchies” (61-66) and “labor precarity” (66-74). In the case of Joseph and Maxo Dantica, we see criminalization and racialization most strongly at play. They are almost immediately detained after they arrive in the United States, despite having valid passports and visas—though these too, as we know, are also apparatuses that serve border imperialism.

On the short plane ride between Port-au-Prince and Miami, Joseph and Maxo undergo an experience of striking immobility, despite the actual miles that they cross. As if counting the distances, Danticat relies heavily on the various numbers that mark aspects of this experience: “My uncle was now alien 2704199. He and Maxo had left Port-au-Prince’s Toussaint Louverture Airport on American Airlines flight 822. The flight was scheduled to leave at 12:32 p.m., but was a bit delayed and left later than that (214).<sup>94</sup> In this passage, we see the designation “alien” and the eight-digit number that essentially replaces her uncle’s name. Although the official use of this designation follows the flight, its positioning in front of the other sentences demonstrates how it came to supersede many other realities. The sensibility conveyed here is that, even before arriving in the United States, Joseph was already marked as “other,” and perhaps a criminal. Additionally, the passage notes that Joseph and Maxo travel on an American Airlines flight: another way in which the power of the United States over their lives is expressed. Danticat also makes specific note of the number of the flight, 822, a detail that

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<sup>94</sup> In this passage we again encounter the figure of Toussaint Louverture. His own life ended in arrest and exile; he died as a prisoner of colonial France. Here, we see the name of Louverture marking the site of departure for Joseph and Maxo, the city of Port-au-Prince. Joseph would never return there.

seems to carry an aspect of “fatefulness,” as plane crashes are always designated this way.

Furthermore, the emphasis on numbers underscores the forms of thingification to which these men are subjected. As Dufault writes about this dimension of Danticat’s memoir:

Ultimately she devotes one of the final chapters of her memoir, “Alien 2704199”—which, in addition to emphasizing the impersonal treatment of individual detainees, also unfortunately evokes the numbers tattooed on prisoners in Nazi concentration camps—to a dispassionate description of her uncle’s ordeal at the hands of U.S. agents who could, at the very least, have allowed him contact with his family. (103)

Danticat’s use of numbers in this account signals the gravity of what her family members’ experience—indeed evoking “the numbers tattooed on prisoners in Nazi concentration camps” (103). The resonances between the concentration camp and the detention center also exist in the fact that, after Joseph is interrogated and transferred to Krome Detention Center, he has most of his possessions removed. As Danticat recounts:

When he arrived at Krome, my uncle was lined up with a dozen or so other detainees and his briefcase inventoried and taken away from him. A Krome property inventory form lists one softcover religious book, his Bible, one

thousand U.S. dollars—he was allowed to keep the nine dollars to buy phone cards—one airline ticket, one tube of Fixodent for his dentures, and two nine-volt batteries for his two boxes...there’s no mention of the herbal medicine or the pills he was taking for his blood pressure and inflamed prostate. (226)

In addition to describing all the possessions that were taken from him, Danticat notes here how the records make no mention of the medicine and pills Joseph had brought with him. However, these too are taken away from him, which ends up making him extremely ill. The thingification that Joseph experiences ranges from his being turned into a number, being detained, having his possessions removed, and having his bodily needs neglected.

Linked to these radical forms of dehumanization, Danticat argues, a range of narratives and discourses are operative in how her loved ones are treated. The thingification of Joseph and Maxo, in other words, is part of a much broader, ongoing pattern of casting Haitians as irrevocably “alien.” As Kaiama L. Glover explains:

Haiti has long been the beating heart of an intricate corpus of narratives, ideological setups, forms of visual culture, and affective practices that are enduringly racialized. Confirmed as the site of disastrous not-quite humanity, Haiti is ur-example of the Afro-abject. The head-shaking, finger-wagging commentaries on offer in mainstream North Atlantic media consistently conjure

Haiti in a disparaging language and Afro-alterity, making Haiti a veritable cipher for global articulations of human versus other(ed) being. (236)

Danticat's uncle, even at eighty-one years of age, is cast as a "type"—Haitian, Haitian asylum seeker—categories that are alienated in themselves. In fact, the denigration of Danticat's uncle should be understood within the decades-long approach and set of policies wherein Haitian asylum seekers were treated as essentially indistinguishable members of a vast and unsavory collective. Danticat refers to one such policy: "I suspect that my uncle was treated according to a biased immigration policy dating back from the early 1980s when Haitians began arriving in Florida in large numbers by boat" (223).

This biased policy resulted in the mostly white or lighter-skinned Cuban refugees arriving in Florida both before and after the Mariel boatlift of 1980, fleeing from a Communist country, being given asylum, whereas most Haitians, as primarily black-skinned asylum seekers, were assumed to be fleeing their country 'merely' for economic reasons, and thus were not given asylum. We see such othering, too, in how immigration officials would later talk about Joseph's case. As Danticat reports: "Russ Knocke, a spokesman for U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, would derogatorily refer to my uncle's traditional medicine as a 'voodoo-like potion'" (227). In sum, many of the same racist tropes that had long been deployed in approaching Haitians and black people more generally are deeply embedded in the immigration system that Joseph and Maxo Dantica encounter in Miami.

## Contesting Interrogation: On Words and Documents that Police the Border

Write down!

I am an Arab

And my identity card number is fifty thousand

I have eight children

And the ninth will come after a summer

Will you be angry?

—Mahmoud Darwish, “Identity Card”

In the second half of *Brother*, Danticat provides a commentary on one of the main structuring elements of the detention center: the interrogation. A scripted and particularly violent form of the confession, this form, its sensibility, and relationship to official documents, are registered by Mahmoud Darwish in his famous poem “Identity Card,” as excerpted in the epigraph above. The brilliance of Darwish’s poem lies particularly in its sardonic riposte to such forms; Danticat takes a different, but I argue, another effective critical approach. As in border spaces like that of Israel-Palestine, in the U.S.-Haiti border space forms like the identity card and the interrogation are marshaled in particularly violent ways.

Danticat’s memoir allows one to examine the form of interrogation used by the immigration bureaucracy and to witness the choices that people make in response to this bureaucratic mode. In recounting her uncle’s ordeal, Danticat reproduces almost line by

line the transcript of the interrogation, which she procured from CBP records. She also interrupts the interrogation with her own commentary. Reading her, one arrives at the sense that her uncle Joseph had a desire to tell the truth, to tell what seems like it would conform to or speak to law, and to maintain a sense of dignity. His responses also seem to bear the traces of his knowledge of the changeability and arbitrary nature of U.S. policies toward Haitians.

When Joseph and Maxo Dantica arrive at the Miami airport, after barely making it out of Port-au-Prince safely, CBP officers swiftly take them out of line, separate them from each other, and take them into different spaces for interrogation. One of the first questions that a CBP officer with the last name Reyes<sup>95</sup> asks Joseph is the following: ““What is your purpose in entering the United States today?”” (217). Without any intervening statements, Danticat shows her uncle responding: ““Because a group that is causing trouble in Haiti wants to kill me”” (217). Danticat then goes on to say that “[a]ccording to the transcript, Officer Reyes did not ask for further explanation or details” (217). Here we see that the form of discourse deployed by the CBP is designed not to

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<sup>95</sup> Danticat never describes Officer Reyes, neither with exceedingly negative descriptions, nor with the kind of detailed attention she describes her uncle. Nowhere does the first name of this officer seem to appear. The one identifying element that we see is his last name, “Reyes,” which indexes someone of a Spanish-speaking background. Given not only the context of Miami, but the notably extensive integration of Cuban-Americans in the city, it may point to him being Cuban. In such gestures (something similar happens later with the appearance of an Officer Castro, whose Cuban-ness seems, through the last name, even more explicit) Danticat seems both to want to register the concrete differences between the treatment of Haitians and Cubans, especially in Miami, while perhaps not foreclosing the possibility of immigrant solidarity across national lines. Undoubtedly the fact that these potentially Cuban officers of CBP, were once themselves, or come from a family of immigrants from Cuba, but now are integrated into a major apparatus of U.S. border imperialism, while Haitians continued to be detained at Krome or are deported reveals much about who the official bureaucracy perceives as assimilable to U.S. society, and who it considers distinctly “other.”

consider complexity or the totality of a person's experience, but indeed, to close off the possibility of elaboration.

Danticat then reports that Reyes asks about the documentation that Joseph brought with him: “‘What documents did you present today to the first Customs and Border Protection officer that you encountered?’ asked Officer Reyes” (217). Danticat follows with her uncle's response: “‘My Haitian passport and immigration forms,’ my uncle answered” (217). While these forms are in fact all valid and up to date, another immigration official will later report that Joseph did not have proper documentation. Here, even documents do not serve the legal purposes they are supposedly meant to serve.

In reflecting on Joseph's use of his documents, Danticat notes that prior to the interrogation, he had filled out a form in Customs which indicated that he desired to apply for “temporary asylum.” Danticat suggests that this was one calculation he makes which ends up having serious consequences, and a choice which she says she does not fully understand:

I don't know why my uncle had not simply used the valid visa he had to enter the United States, just as he had at least thirty times before, and later apply for asylum. I'm sure now that he had no intention of staying in either New York or Miami for the rest of his life. This is why, according to Maxo, he had specified “temporary.” (215)



If Joseph answers that his intent is only a “temporary” asylum, it may be in part because he is trying to make a judgment about what will be the most reasonable request, given the frequent changes in U.S. immigration policy—something of which Joseph was no doubt aware. To get a sense of the inconsistency of the system, it is worth noting that twelve years prior to Joseph’s detention, “[i]n May 1992, Bush changed his policy on Haitian boat people twice in four days” (Bostdorff 207). By 2004, the already volatile policies toward Haitians were complicated by post-9/11 security measures. Thus, any and every choice Joseph makes in the space of the interrogation, and later in the credible fear interview in detention, is framed by these realities.

In assessing the choices that Joseph makes in these bureaucratic spaces, Danticat must reconstruct his possible intentions, because he dies shortly thereafter. In the part of the memoir recounting the interrogation, Danticat again attempts to enter Joseph’s interior monologue. Knowing his personality and the kinds of choices he might make under other circumstances, she comes to the conclusion that with regard to his request for temporary asylum “I can only assume that when he was asked how long he would be staying in the United States, he knew that he would be staying past the thirty days his visa allowed him and he wanted to tell the truth” (215).<sup>96</sup> The ethics that Joseph manifests in other parts of his life tragically are held against him in the bureaucratic, dissimulating world of the CBP offices.

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<sup>96</sup> This moment in the memoir bears some resonance with the moment in Juan Francisco Manzano’s autobiography where he is forced to “Tell the truth,” when a capon goes missing—even though he has already attempted to explain what happened—and is not believed. Here, Joseph attempts to tell the truth and is essentially punished—he is denied entry into the United States—for doing so.

As mentioned earlier, in this part of the narration Danticat also relies heavily on the official transcript of what took place. Doing so allows the reader to have an explicit sense of the sensibility of interrogation practices. Danticat highlights the sparse language used in the questions hurled at her uncle by the immigration officer. She also re-presents the limited responses of her uncle, which take a shape that seems almost predetermined by the site in which he is held. Again, in the custody of Customs and Border Protection, no space for elaboration is allowed. In recounting the interrogation, however, Danticat asks questions and makes comments on the proceedings. Consider the following exchange regarding her uncle's health:

“Are you currently taking any prescription medication for any health condition?” asked Officer Reyes.

The transcriber/translator has my uncle saying, “Yes, for back pain and chest.” And in parentheses, writes, “ibuprofen.”

The transcript has neither my uncle nor the interviewer mentioning two rum bottles filled with herbal medicine, one for himself and one for my father, as well as the smaller bottles of prescription pills he was taking for his blood pressure and inflamed prostate.

“How would you describe your current health status?” Officer Reyes continued. According to the transcript, my uncle answered, “Not bad.” He had probably said, “Pa pi mal” just as my father continued to, even as he lay dying.

(218)

Here, Danticat registers the fact that there is an intermediary—a translator/transcriber who takes down the exchange and suggests that the translation may be somewhat lacking. Since she does not have access to her uncle’s exact words in Kreyòl, she again must estimate what he might have said. Knowing her uncle and her father’s preference for discretion, she notes that Joseph probably described his health as “Pa pi mal” (which is written down by the translator as “Not bad,” but is probably closer to “Not so bad”). We might read Joseph’s response here as a way in which he seeks to hold onto his dignity and a sense of privacy, even in this most invasive space.

Further, the long passage above portrays the transcript as perhaps ventriloquizing Joseph and Officer Reyes; it “has them say” different things. The transcript appears, then, as almost agential—more so than the individuals in the room, particularly Joseph. While inanimate, the transcript appears to have more power than the people in the room. Though it is a first-hand witness to what occurs, it also very much dictates the exchange.

In working with and against the transcript of his interrogation, Danticat endeavors to reclaim what might be regarded as merely data in a bureaucratic mode, and to read otherwise for the work of restoring a sense of complexity to her uncle. Danticat also gives voice to powerful examples of those things that are not or cannot be accounted for in a bureaucratic form, aspects of a person that exist in excess of any type of calculation. By restoring this textured sense of personality, she seeks to undermine the alienation produced in and by the immigration bureaucracy.

However, despite all these efforts in her literary work—and in the many attempts she, as a resident of Miami, made to reach her uncle while he was being detained by CBP—Danticat could not save her uncle from further objectification. After completing the interrogation, the immigration officials determine that Joseph’s and Maxo’s requests for asylum are essentially illegitimate, and they are sent to Krome Detention Center—often considered a “ground zero” for Haitian asylum seekers. It is the space where many such individuals are typically held, and frequently mistreated, before being deported back to their country.

In the face of this reality, Danticat finds herself only able to ask further questions, which seem to interrogate this whole state of affairs:

Was my uncle going to jail because he was Haitian? This is a question he probably asked himself. This is a question I still ask myself. Was he going to jail because he was black? If he were white, Cuban, anything other than Haitian, would he have been going to Krome? (223)

Here again, Danticat points to the impacts of the specific immigration policies toward Caribbean migrants that have been in place since the 1980s, which gave Cuban asylum seekers preferential treatment and therefore the ability to pass quickly through U.S. immigration bureaucracy, but simultaneously made it nearly impossible for Haitian asylum seekers to pass through at all. Danticat underscores here the racialized nature of these policies.

Danticat also demonstrates how her uncle and cousin are treated as criminals. Regardless of Joseph's status as a man of eighty-one years, who used a voicebox to speak, Danticat reports that following their interrogation

[a]t around 7:30 a.m., they left the detention area to board a white van to Krome. Maxo was handcuffed but asked if my uncle could not be handcuffed because of his age. The officer agreed not to handcuff my uncle but told Maxo to tell my uncle that if he tried to escape he would be shot. (221)

The threat of death in the immigration system becomes acute in this passage. While neither of the men are actually shot on their way to Krome, the fact that they, and in particular here Joseph, are 'legitimately' regarded as potential targets of a deadly weapon is unconscionable. In this moment we see an expression of what Adorno says about the imprint that Nazi concentration camps and the "administrative murder of millions" (86) has left upon the lives and deaths, and indeed on the institutions, of those who came after them. As Adorno states further, "The last, the poorest possession left to the individual [his/her own death] is expropriated" (86). While Joseph and Maxo survive the threat of being shot by a CBP officer, the deep neglect and denial of Joseph's health condition in Krome soon lead to his death.

### **The Body's Account**

I wonder...if the urge to linguistic expression is not itself a form of appropriation by a “debased form of power” (i.e. logo-centrism). Putting pain into language is logically a move away from pain and the body as its medium; it may in effect be a betrayal that ultimately abandons and forgets pain altogether.

—Jane Blocker, *What the Body Cost* (32)

After undergoing the interrogation which forecloses any possibility of detailing many aspects of his life, Joseph Dantica must undergo in Krome another kind of interrogation, called the “credible fear interview.” It is during this so-called interview that Joseph—whose health condition was already ignored as a consideration in his request for asylum—is violently dismissed and even negated, ultimately leading to his death. While no family members are allowed to enter Krome, Edwidge and her husband manage to send an immigration lawyer named Pratt to accompany her uncle during the credible fear interview. It is during this interview that Joseph’s body comes to show its distress.

Again drawing on transcripts in this section of her memoir, as well as on a few still images from a camera recording, Danticat writes that Joseph will be interviewed by Officer Castro, “a woman who appeared to be in her mid-forties” (232). I quote the scene that follows at some length. It is perhaps the most disturbing scene in the book, and one that also underscores the limits of a worldview that values purely linguistic capacities over all other realities:

My uncle and Pratt were seated at a desk close to the back wall, facing Officer Castro. A certified translator was needed for the proceedings, and since there wasn't one on the premises, a telephone translation service was called and the interpreter put on speakerphone.

The interpreter had trouble understanding my uncle's voice box, so Officer Castro asked my uncle to move his mouth closer to the phone. As my uncle leaned forward, his hand slipped away from his neck and he dropped his voice box.

The records indicate that my uncle appeared to be having a seizure. His body stiffened. His legs jerked forward. His chair slipped back, pounding the back of his head into the wall. He began to vomit. (232)

Vomit shot out of his mouth, his nose, as well as the tracheotomy hole in his neck. The vomit was spread all over his face, from his forehead to his chin, down the front of his dark blue Krome-issued overalls. There was also vomit on his thighs, where a large wet stain showed he had also urinated on himself.

"Somebody call for help!" Pratt jumped from his chair and pulled his papers away from the spreading vomit. (232)

...

Fifteen minutes had passed since my uncle first started vomiting. A registered nurse and medic finally arrived. By then my uncle looked "almost comatose," Pratt recalled. "He seemed somewhat unconscious and couldn't move."

Pratt told the medic and nurse that right before he became sick, my uncle had told him his medication had been taken away. Pratt then turned to Officer Castro and asked if my uncle could be granted humanitarian parole given his age and condition.

“I think he’s faking,” the medic said, cutting Pratt off.

To prove his point, the medic grabbed my uncle’s head and moved it up and down. It was rigid rather than limp, he said. Besides, my uncle would open his eyes now and then and seemed to be looking at him.

“You can’t fake vomit,” Pratt shot back. “This man is very sick and his medication shouldn’t have been taken away from him.”

The medications were indeed taken away, replied the medic, in accordance with the facility’s regulations, and others were substituted for them. (233-234)

In this scene, Danticat shows the lawyer, Pratt, as the only concerned person witnessing the degradation of Joseph’s health. The situation is a deeply brutalizing one, where even the brief aid of a translator is essentially alienated, through the use of a phone. While the female officer, Castro (again, likely a Cuban-American officer), seems to interact with Joseph somewhat more humanely than her male counterpart Reyes did during the initial interrogation, she also does not seem to embody the type of concern that the lawyer Pratt expresses. The medic who eventually arrives on the scene as Joseph continues to vomit is shown as, by far, the most callous and violent figure here. As someone charged with attending to the health of the detainees in Krome, he seems to have internalized the type



of neglect that is endemic to such detention centers. Underscoring how Joseph was only treated according to the policies of the center, which supposedly required that medicines be taken away and substituted, he insists that despite Joseph's vomiting, he is "faking" his illness.

Indeed, what is especially disturbing about this scene is its revelation of the detention center's complete denial of the body, and in fact its violation of the body. The medic—who noticeably Danticat does not name as she does most other workers in the immigration system—not only completely dismisses the physical reality and evidence of Joseph's acute illness, but also actually denies its existence. Danticat's extensive repetition of the word "vomit" seems to counteract that denial. Danticat also reveals the cruelty of the medic a bit later in the scene, where he seeks to prove that Joseph is apparently putting on a performance, in that he "grab[s] [his] head" and "move[s] it up and down." As this occurs, the other figure who has come supposedly to help—a nurse—seems to remain silent. Here, the actions as well as the inactions of U.S. medical workers profoundly damage the health and ultimately lead to the death of Joseph Dantica, an eighty-one-year-old pastor from Haiti.

Joseph is eventually taken to the medical unit of Krome, but soon his health deteriorates. At last he is taken to Jackson Memorial Hospital, but even with his health in such a dire condition, Danticat shows that he is still treated as a criminal:

...in the Krome medical unit, my uncle's condition worsened, and according to Krome records, he was transported to Miami's Jackson Memorial Hospital with

shackles on his feet...At 5 p.m., he was transferred to the hospital's prison area, Ward D...where no lawyers or family members are allowed to visit. (236, 238)

In this scene, the way that the system of detention is meant to cut off people from the rest of the world becomes abundantly clear. By disallowing lawyers and family members from entering “Ward D,” the immigration system, the system of incarceration, and even the medical system, conspire to enact a final silencing of a human being.

### **A Few Words That Escape from Detention**

Shortly after Joseph had arrived at Krome, he was able to make one phone call to his family. After having searched for Joseph at the airport and made tireless phone calls to figure out his whereabouts, only to receive limited and often callous responses, Danticat represents the phone call that she receives from her uncle as something of a miracle. Affectionately describing her uncle's voice as “that motorized voice”—the voice that he had come to use and live with all those years after receiving a voicebox—Danticat welcomes hearing it, even though that voice confirms her uncle's detention in Krome. Recounting what would become the last conversation the two would have while Joseph was alive, Danticat writes:

That night at around six o'clock, my uncle called me from Krome.

“Bon dye,” I shouted, so overjoyed to hear that motorized voice. “My God. It’s so good to hear you.”

“Oh, I can’t tell you how good it is to hear you”...

“Does he know?” he asked. “Does Mira know I’m in here? I didn’t want him to know. He’s so sick. I don’t want him to have this on his mind.”

“Don’t worry,” I said. “He knows you’re getting out tomorrow.” (228-229)

In this exchange, one glimpses the sensibility of the relationship between Joseph and Edwidge, including the relief and joy, and likely even surprise that each experiences in hearing the other’s voice: “Bon dye...My God. It’s so good to hear you,”/ “Oh, I can’t tell you how good it is to hear you.” Danticat’s mixed sense of relief, joy, and surprise seem to be expressed especially in the single Haitian Kreyòl phrase retained here, “Bon dye” (literally, “Good god”). This common phrase, despite its seeming simplicity, functions as a kind of address that points to an entity outside their direct conversation. It seems to articulate a need for a witness—indeed, a divine witness, which is most appropriate given her uncle’s vocation as a pastor—to what is occurring. It could also be read as an appeal for someone to intervene in those circumstances. Whatever the case, “Bon dye” is an expression that, while articulating relief, also seems to register the sense of limitation that Danticat felt in relation to her uncle’s detention.

What also becomes evident in this phone conversation is that the relationship between Edwidge and Joseph depends, at least in part, on a connection to each other’s voice. Neither one says, however, “I’m so glad to hear your voice”; rather, they both

emphasize their happiness in “hearing you.” We understand here, then, that the faculty of hearing is something that allows one to perceive a “you.” “Hearing you” is a key way in which Edwidge and Joseph experienced their bond over the many years that Edwidge lived in the United States, while Joseph remained in Haiti. For them, telephone conversations—however rare they were at times—simultaneously marked closeness and distance. This contradiction seems to remain in this telephone exchange, though again, after not knowing what had been happening to her uncle for quite some time after he had to flee his home in Haiti, this brief telephonic connection comes as a relief. Danticat’s familial and affective proximity to her uncle, then, along with the disparity in their positions during the time of his detention, inflect her effort at witnessing his detention.

There also exists in this exchange a shared understanding about a matter that is important to both of them: assuring that Mira—Joseph’s brother, Edwidge’s father—who at that time was undergoing treatment for lung disease, does not experience pain or worry. The significance of the relationship between these two brothers, to which the memoir as a whole is a testament, is underscored quite strongly here. We also see how the relationship of Danticat and her uncle is emphasized through a brief gesture of caretaking; here, she attempts to console her uncle about both about his brother’s condition and his own state by saying “Don’t worry,” “He knows you’re getting out tomorrow.” This may be a small way of reciprocating the care that her uncle had provided her, especially when she was younger. Perhaps this limited act of consolation seeks to disrupt the isolating and degrading circumstances in which Joseph finds himself. Notably, writer Lyonel Trouillot sees such gestures throughout Danticat’s texts, saying:

“The quest for positive, modest personal action is for me one of the distinguishing features of Danticat’s work” (182). In this sense, attending to the life of another takes on an active form in her writing; such actions, however “modest,” unfold in confrontation with whatever limit conditions exist.

Thus, Joseph’s voice, though mediated through a phone belonging to the same bureaucratic institution imprisoning him, escapes into the world, and asserts his relation with others. Simultaneously, however, the incongruence between the condition of Danticat and of her uncle becomes apparent. Although both are limited from acting upon the situation, Joseph is physically detained in a place that constitutes part of a nation’s borderland: a space of extreme brutality. In an odd way, perhaps this isolation paradoxically reveals that not only Joseph’s voice, but in fact his entire person, are also singular, independent entities. In other words, in Joseph’s “motorized voice,” we catch a glimpse of the irreducibility of his personhood. Joseph is, however, much more than his voice. Sadly, it is only his voice that for a few moments escapes from Krome. In recounting this final phone call from her uncle, Danticat’s memoir seeks to make sure that the silencing Krome imposes does not have the last word.

### **Writing and Caretaking: The Work of the Literary**

To write of those who have been stripped of freedom and life itself does not yet free or redeem their premature disappearance but at least it denies that their disappearance was absolute. The gift they left behind in others as they passed

from this world can then express itself freely as the trace of life that animates our own encounter with the past.

—Nick Nesbitt, *Voicing Memory* (212)

In her recent book, *The Art of Dying* (2017), Danticat reflects on the tension between the work of caretaking and the work of writing, exploring how these two vocations attend to the problem of death. “As writers,” Danticat suggests, “we might seek the least elegant death possible for our characters, while we would want our loved ones to die ‘soft as cream,’ as Toni Morrison writes in *Beloved*” (18). As we have seen, the distinction between the positions of “character” and “loved one” falls away in *Brother, I’m Dying*. Danticat does not have a choice, however, to make her loved ones die a death “as soft as cream.” Nonetheless, it does seem that she endeavors to write of their deaths with care.

The caretaking that Danticat’s memoir enacts comes through in several ways. In her efforts to clearly document, to the best of her ability, what she could find out about the details of Joseph’s detention, Danticat seeks to ensure that the brutality of his treatment does not remain unknown, does not remain forever disavowed. In this work of justice, Danticat writes a window into the operations of U.S. immigration bureaucracy. Danticat endeavors to ensure that injustices at Krome will not be further obscured. To this end, her narration refuses to shy away from the most brutal treatment that her uncle receives. She undertakes a critical effort to name clearly what he suffered—even if she

can neither access nor fully vocalize the way he felt as he was suffering. As such, Danticat's memoir demonstrates the import of literary writing as a way to bear witness.

As I have tried to show throughout this chapter, Danticat also tends to various figures, acts, and modalities of the voice. I read this approach, too, as an act of caretaking. In registering the many forms a voice can take, Danticat creates more than a counter-discourse to the single-toned discourse of immigration bureaucracy. Indeed, I would argue, she seeks to free the voice from the constraints of discourse as such, and to recover something of the poetic powers, the materiality, and even the radicality of both the voice and language itself.

Danticat takes care to safeguard the voice of her Uncle Joseph, even as other forces seek to limit it. Sometimes, Danticat does reduce her uncle to the representation of his voice, perhaps principally in an effort to refuse the silencing she sees him suffer. However, her memoir also attends to many other details of his life and personhood. Most affecting are perhaps those moments where she recounts, or, as at the end of the book, imagines her uncle together with her father. I end with a few such moments.

The last exchange between the brothers while they are alive happens just after Miracin has undergone his first hospitalization for lung disease. It is at this time that Joseph has made a trip to see his brother in New York—a trip where he is not detained by immigration officials. Indeed, despite never wanting to live away from Haiti, Joseph did make many trips over the years to visit his family members in the United States. In the memoir, Danticat recounts the interactions she observes between the two brothers during

the last visit they would have together. She too had traveled from her home in Miami to be with them:

The week after my father left the hospital, my uncle would rise early to pray with him. Sleeping in the room next to my father's, I would sometimes be awakened by their combined voices, my father's low, wined, my uncle's loud, mechanical, yet both equally urgent in their supplications. (160)

The emphasis here on the combining of the two men's voices—one "low, wined" and the other "loud, mechanical"—is particularly meaningful. It shows the two as intertwined, united in a shared set of supplications. Despite the many years that they would spend apart, and the isolation they would experience in dying—especially in Joseph's case—recollections like these underscore the deep ways in which these men, and their voices, were linked with each other. Restoring that sense of their relationship is thus, on Danticat's part, an act of caretaking.

Danticat's gestures of caretaking echo Joseph's work as pastor. In the passage above, he pastors to his brother, visiting him and praying with him while he is ill. In an earlier moment of the memoir, Danticat suggests that Joseph's caretaking was also linked to his desire to remain in Haiti. Recounting a conversation they had, he told her: "It's not easy to start over in a new place," he said. "Exile is not for everyone. Someone has to stay behind, to receive the letters and greet family members when they come back" (140).



In this way, Joseph was ready to greet his brother back in their homeland, from which they both ultimately were exiled.

Danticat attempts to redress their exile through the final act of her memoir, which is to imagine the two brothers together again, walking in the mountains of Haiti. She writes:

...in my imagining, whenever they lose track of one another, one or the other calls out in a voice that echoes throughout the hills, “Kote w ye frè m?” Brother, where are you? And the other one quickly answers, “Mwen la. Right here, brother. I’m right here.” (269)

Danticat cannot through her memoir restore life to her father and her uncle. And yet, through her work as a writer, she can imagine them reunited, she can imagine a life for them beyond the strict borders that separated them in their lives. She ends her memoir by asking her readers to hear the voices of these two men, joined in conversation with one another.

### **Conclusion: Mobilizing the Voice for the Task of Justice**

“We would tell. Would sing. Would howl.”

–Aimé Césaire, *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land* (17)

I have sought in this chapter to show how Edwidge Danticat's memoir endeavors to redress the neglect, violence, and dehumanization that her uncle Joseph suffered in detention, while also registering the impossibility of redress for the crime of her uncle's death at the hands of officers and medical staff of the U.S. immigration bureaucracy. In the face of this atrocity, she provides a multifaceted account of Joseph's personhood that underscores the specificity of his voice, and the value of what he aimed to do in life, including what he had to say. Danticat's memoir bears witness to the irreducibility of a single human person, and thus endeavors to contest the thingification and silencing of a most beloved person in her life.

Danticat's memoir has also helped give visibility to a much more widespread set of abuses by the U.S. immigration system. As Jana K. Lipman reminds us:

Joseph Danticat is only the most well-known of the thousands of Haitians who have confronted the lack of medical care, the threat of sexual violence, the unsanitary conditions, and the abusive practices that have plagued Krome for three decades. Undocumented migrants from dozens of countries are now jailed at Krome... (116)

To confront the continuing abuses of the immigration system—of which Krome is only one part—requires all the faculties we have. The voice is only one of them. More people—with their voices, bodies, and minds—coming together to call out the injustices of immigration detention centers is an essential act at this time of militarized borders. To

undermine border imperialism itself requires acts of imagination and solidarity that we have yet to write.

## CONCLUSION

### The Relay of Emancipation

for it is not true that the work of man is done  
that we have no business being on earth  
that we parasite the world  
that it is enough for us to heel to the world whereas the work  
of man has only begun  
and man still must overcome all the interdictions wedged in  
the recesses of his fervor  
and no race has a monopoly on beauty, on intelligence, on  
strength

—Aimé Césaire, *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land* (44)

Abolition is not a culminating event, but rather a belated and an ongoing effort to dismantle slavery and all the damaging ways of doing, being, and thinking that have developed in its wake. Toussaint Louverture knew this, even as the French arrested him and removed him from the action of the Haitian Revolution. Through the metaphor of the ‘tree of liberty’—whose roots, he claimed, were many, were deep, and would rise up—he vocalized the impetus of growth embedded in the cause of emancipation, something that cannot be confined to any single historical figure or era. The work of emancipation, a core striving of human history, continues. In the 1980s, the Haitian people toppled a

dictatorship; as I write this, they are again demanding the end to a corrupt government and the right to build their country anew.<sup>97</sup>

The history of slavery and its afterlives remind us that freedom is, and remains, a concrete striving. Emancipation, lived freedom, means rejecting at every turn the propagation of systems of confinement and an always active commitment against the brutalization of human beings. It means a dissolution of policies that render people as property or that give greater protections to capital than to sentient beings. It means supporting reparations: restoring wealth to the communities of people who were enslaved and whose ancestors widely have been made to live with less than. Emancipation means creating societies that take upon themselves the work of becoming anti-racist: this is a long revolution that will transform the ways we organize our communities, the policies we make, the education we propose, the ways that we see and treat each other, the ways that we participate in culture. Therefore, as I have attempted to demonstrate throughout this dissertation, literature too is a site in which consequential struggles for emancipation take place.

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<sup>97</sup> Responding to the work of the young activists who are at the forefront of this struggle, a group of Haitian writers recently expressed their solidarity with fellow citizens and have claimed a role in these efforts. In an open letter published on *Le Nouvelliste* website on June 17, 2019, writers such as Frankétienne, Yanick Lahens, and Kettly Mars offered these words: “Nous écrivains Haïtiens voulons continuer d’être utiles à la nation en maintenant vive la parole qui alerte, questionne, critique et suscite la conscience critique.” (“We Haitian writers want to continue to be useful to the nation in keeping alive the word that alerts, questions, critiques, and sparks critical conscience.”) Against the ossification of a society, these writers seek the capacity of “la parole” (“the word”) to provoke new growth. It is my hope that whether written, spoken, sung, painted, or whispered—by writers, peasants, or the urban poor—the words of all the Haitian people demanding a more just and livable society will resound in Haiti and across the world.

On the one hand, literature can operate in exclusionary ways: to serve only the edification, refinement, consolation, and self-justification of the ruling class. As Herbert Marcuse underscores, the sphere of culture—in which literature occupies no small part—often has been an accomplice in the degradation of human beings, despite its appeals to liberating the soul: “The freedom of the soul was used to excuse the poverty, martyrdom, and bondage of the body. It served the ideological surrender of existence to the economy of capitalism” (109). The use of literature for facilitating such an oppressive order is something we must oppose. Moreover, we should seize the subversive capacities of literature to disrupt the alienation of human beings. Literature can counter alienation through giving voice to, preserving, and carrying forward a ‘spirit of emancipation’ across space and time. Especially when it retains a link to forms of orality and to embodied experience, literary writing can prove a potent means against reification. As Gloria Anzaldúa writes, “[w]ords are blades of grass, pushing past the obstacles, sprouting on the page” (93). In breaking through the page, literary writing can telecommunicate (Rafael) recalcitrant voices, and strike against forces of submission.

In tracing, across a period of two centuries, one strand within the powerful traditions of literary writing that move through Haiti and Cuba, I have attempted in this dissertation to show such capacities at work. The authors we have encountered—Louverture, Manzano, Roumain, and Danticat—are writers whose words push against the page and seek a way out of the system of confinement that has long brutalized human beings in the Americas. They reject the mode of dissimulation that helps to perpetuate a racist order. Against the impending enclosure of human lives within systems of

oppression, their works infuse language with a poetics of opening. What their works can teach us, I submit, is how writing can engage, and even supersede, the task of redress: it can form cracks in the walls that confine human beings and enable a relay of the striving we call emancipation.

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