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Andrea Katherine Hilkovitz

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**Telling Otherwise: Rewriting History, Gender, and Genre in
Africa and the African Diaspora**

Committee:

Alexandra Wettlaufer, Supervisor

Jossianna Arroyo-Martinez

Neville Hoad

Bernth Lindfors

Jennifer Wilks

**Telling Otherwise: Rewriting History, Gender, and Genre in
Africa and the African Diaspora**

by

Andrea Katherine Hilkovitz, B.A.; M.A.

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Dedication

In loving memory of Harley.

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**Telling Otherwise: Rewriting History, Gender, and Genre in
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Supervisor: Alexandra Wettlaufer

“Telling Otherwise: Rewriting History, Gender, and Genre in Africa and the African Diaspora” examines counter-discursive postcolonial rewritings. In my first chapter, “Re-Writing the Canon,” I examine two works that rewrite canonical texts from the European tradition, Jean Rhys’s retelling of the life of *Jane Eyre*’s Bertha in *Wide Sargasso Sea* and Maryse Condé’s relocation of *Wuthering Heights* to the Caribbean in *La migration des coeurs*. In this chapter, I contend that re-writing functions not only as a response, as a “writing back” to the canon, but as a creative appropriation of and critical engagement with the canonical text and its worldview. My second chapter, “Re-Storying the Past,” examines fictional works that rewrite events from the historical past. The works that I study in this chapter are Assia Djebar’s recuperation of Algerian women’s resistance to French

colonization in *L'amour, la fantasia* and Edwidge Danticat's efforts to reconstruct the 1937 massacre of Haitians under Trujillo in *The Farming of Bones*. In my third chapter, "Re-Voicing Slavery," I take for my subject neo-slave narratives that build on and revise the slave narrative genre of the late eighteenth- through early twentieth- centuries. The two works that I examine in this chapter are Sherley Anne Williams's *Dessa Rose* and the poem sequence *Zong!* by M. NourbeSe Philip, based on the 1781 murder of Africans aboard the slave ship *Zong*. My fourth chapter, "Re-Membering Gender," examines texts that foreground the processes of re-writing and re-telling, both thematically and structurally, so as to draw attention to the ways in which discourses and identities are constructed. In their attempts to counter masculinist discourses, these works seek to re-inscribe gender into these discourses, a process of re-membering that engenders a radical deconstruction of fixed notions of identity. The works that I read in this chapter include Daniel Maximin's *L'Isolé soleil*, which privileges the feminine and the multiple in opposition to patriarchal notions of single origins and authoritative narrative voices and Maryse Condé's *Traversée de la Mangrove*, which rewrites Patrick Chamoiseau's novel *Solibo Magnifique* so as to critique the exclusive nature of Caribbean identity in his notion of créolité.

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Introduction: Telling Otherwise

This study emerged as a result of my ongoing interest in rewriting as both process and product. I have long been fascinated by rewriting, translation, appropriation, and other modes of intertextuality. Beginning with undergraduate research on Samuel Beckett's self-translations, continuing with a Master's Report on African women's *Bildungsromane*, and culminating in this dissertation project on rewriting in Africa and the African diaspora, my research interests to date share the connective thread of examining rewriting as the creative engagement of texts and traditions. This project seeks to extend and expand upon that interest by examining the poetics and politics of rewriting in Africa and the African diaspora.

In postcolonial discourse, rewriting is often associated with the theoretical approach toward the study of postcolonial literatures suggested by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin in their seminal work *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (1989). Using Salman Rushdie's phrasing,¹ Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin assert that postcolonial rewritings can be understood according to a model by which the "'Empire writes back' to the imperial 'centre.'"² In their formulation, writers rewrite canonical

¹ See Salman Rushdie, "The Empire Writes Back with a Vengeance," London Times July 3 1982: 461.

² Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, The Empire Writes Back, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2002) 32.

works “with a view to restructuring European ‘realities’ in post-colonial terms, not simply by reversing the hierarchical order, but by interrogating the philosophical assumptions on which that order was based” (32). In this sense, postcolonial rewritings of canonical texts can be understood as a form of counter-discourse, as it is defined by Richard Terdiman. According to Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, “a discourse such as post-colonialism, which runs ‘counter’ to the established canon..., can very readily appropriate from Terdiman the idea that the sign obtains its meaning in conflict and contradiction” (167). For the writers of *The Empire Writes Back*, Terdiman’s conception of counter-discourse has important applications for postcolonial theory. It “suggests that ‘no discourse is ever a monologue...it always presupposes a horizon of competing, contrary utterances against which it asserts its own energies’” (167). As a result, discourses are understood to “come into being in a structure of counter-discursive practices,” so that “the inscription of conflict is no longer conceived as a contamination of the linguistic but as its properly defining function” (167).

The brief gloss of Terdiman’s notion of counter-discourse provided by Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin in *The Empire Writes Back* is a bit too enthusiastic, however, in that it fails to acknowledge Terdiman’s sense of the limitations of counter-discourse. In *Discourse/Counter-Discourse: The Theory and Practice of Symbolic Resistance in Nineteenth-Century France*, Terdiman says that, by definition, “counter-discourses are always interlocked with the domination they

contest.”³ Therefore, “their footing is never equal” (18). As a result, Terdiman states that he has “a certain modesty about the claims which might be made for the counter-discursive” (17) and explains that his “celebration of their power...remains measured” (19).

Since the publication of *The Empire Writes Back* more than twenty years ago, the notion of rewriting the literary canon from the perspective of the colonized has become one of the fundamental assumptions of postcolonial literary scholarship. Quoting Tiffin, Laura E. Ciolkowski notes that there exists “a postcolonial literary tradition that is specifically interested in rewriting the fictions of...empire”:

[I]t has become the project of post-colonial writing to investigate European textual capture of places and peoples and to intervene in that originary and continuing containment. Post-colonial refusals of the interpellated subject position take place, appropriately, through that original avenue of interpellation – textuality – and a mapping and dismantling of particular, canonically enshrined imperial texts constitute a major part of post-colonial writing.⁴

According to Tiffin, “post-colonial writers...engage in counter-discourse” to the extent that “these subversive manoeuvres...are what is characteristic of post-

³ Richard Terdiman, Discourse-Counter-Discourse: The Theory and Practice of Symbolic Resistance in Nineteenth-Century France (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1985) 16.

⁴ Quoted in Laura E. Ciolkowski, "Navigating the *Wide Sargasso Sea*: Colonial History, English Fiction, and British Empire," Twentieth Century Literature 43.3 (1997): 351.

colonial texts, as the subversive is characteristic of post-colonial discourse in general.”⁵

Echoing Terdiman as well as Wilson Harris, Tiffin further contends that “[p]ost-colonial literatures/cultures are thus constituted in counter-discursive rather than homologous practices” and that “they offer ‘fields’ of counter-discursive strategies to the dominant discourse”:

The operation of post-colonial counter-discourse...is dynamic, not static: it does not seek to subvert the dominant with a view to taking its place, but...to evolve textual strategies which continually ‘consume’ their ‘own biases’...at the same time as they expose and erode those of the dominant discourse. (96)

The model of counter-discourse suggested by Tiffin here seems to be more complex than the model put forth in *The Empire Writes Back*, wherein the imperial center and its periphery exist in a dialogic, yet inherently unequal, relationship. Similarly, in *Decolonising Fictions*, Tiffin and Diana Brydon assert that “postcolonial writers write ‘decolonising fictions,’” or “texts that write back against imperial fictions,” yet simultaneously express a desire to replace the “old imperial fictions of the center and its margins” with a more progressive model of “cross-cultural interactions.”⁶ Yet, despite efforts by theorists such as Tiffin and

⁵ Helen Tiffin, "Post-colonial Literatures and Counter-discourse," *The Post-colonial Studies Reader*, eds. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin (London: Routledge, 1995) 95-96.

⁶ Diana Brydon and Helen Tiffin, *Decolonising Fictions* (Sydney: Dangaroo, 1993) 11-12.

Brydon to re-work the theoretical approach to postcolonial rewriting, the “empire writes back” model has endured, arguably far beyond its usefulness as a theoretical paradigm.

Indeed, studies of postcolonial rewriting have fallen short when it comes to accounting for the relationship between the text that rewrites and the text that is rewritten. In comparing revisionist texts to canonical texts, these studies frequently privilege the canonical text as originary. In such studies, the relationship between the two texts is seen as linear and reductive, so that the text that appropriates is invariably secondary, and the process of adaptation inevitably entails loss. Likewise, studies that read several rewritings of a single canonical text often unintentionally reinforce the canonicity of the text from the Western tradition. Even those studies that aim to highlight the ways in which the revisionist text “writes back” to the canonical text and its imperial worldview often succumb to this reductive logic. Though they seek to trace lines of influence between the texts that go both ways, rather than one-way, these studies nonetheless inadvertently posit the canonical text as creative and the text that “writes back” as derivative. In other words, the text that “writes back” is bound to the canonical text in an uneven relationship of power that endlessly draws attention to the extent to which it writes “back” over the extent to which it “writes.” “Rewriting” on the other hand challenges notions of authority and

priority, suggesting that derivations need not be derivative, nor works that appear second, secondary.

Prior scholarly work on the topic of postcolonial rewriting has also failed to adequately theorize the relationship of the postcolonial writer to the text that he or she rewrites. Some studies have viewed re-writing as no more than slavish imitation, according the postcolonial writer little to no agency or creativity. Other studies have attempted to ascribe agency to postcolonial writers by emphasizing the ways in which they “write back” to imperial texts. In both of these models, the postcolonial writer is seen as belonging to a culture on the margins of the imperial center, whereas the text that he or she rewrites is viewed as a Western cultural production. Neither model reflects the situation of many writers who, as a result of the colonial education system, have very complex relationships with works from the European canon. For these writers, canonical works from the European tradition are both part of their own literary and intellectual heritage and, as mentioned beforehand, sites of colonial domination. Indeed, many of these writers, in choosing to rewrite canonical texts from the Western tradition, have expressed the simultaneous desire to pay homage to their literary predecessors and to counter the assumptions on which their texts are based.

These critical studies have also not satisfactorily accounted for the variety of reasons that postcolonial writers choose to rewrite. There are many and varied motives behind rewriting including, but not limited to, a desire to “write back” to

an imperial text. Critical models that emphasize the agency of postcolonial writers have tended to privilege the political over the aesthetic in considerations of the use of rewriting in postcolonial literatures. Though such models accord postcolonial writers political agency, in ignoring the aesthetic motivations of these writers, these models actually serve to undermine their artistic agency.

Critical responses to postcolonial intertextuality have ranged from accusations of plagiarism to celebrations of intertextuality as an active, productive form of resistance and transformation. As recently as 1999, Roger Little accused Maryse Condé of “lifting the very armature of some of her novels from other writers in English” and “reworking in French...[the] English language originals.”⁷ For Romita Choudhury, on the other hand, intertextuality is “understood not only as a dimension shared by all texts but also as a deliberate, self-conscious reply of one text to another” that “has significant implications for the discourse of postcolonialism.”⁸ Intertextuality in the postcolonial context is, in short, a contested mode.

My dissertation seeks to address some of these shortcomings, arguing for a more complex and nuanced understanding of the varied approaches to and uses of rewriting and intertextuality by postcolonial writers in Africa and the African diaspora. My study broadens the definition and scope of rewriting by extending

⁷ Roger Little, "Condé, Brontë, Duras, Beyala: Intertextuality or Plagiarism?," French Studies Bulletin 72 (1999): 14-15.

⁸ Romita Choudhury, "'Is there a ghost, a zombie there?' Postcolonial Intertextuality and Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*," Textual Practice 10.2 (1996): 315.

the notion of rewriting beyond the study of rewritings of canonical texts from the European tradition. In addition to what Tiffin terms “canonical counter-discourse,” in which both the canonical text and its imperial worldview are reworked, this project aims to examine the rewriting of other types of texts and dominant discourses (“Post-colonial Literatures and Counter-discourse” 97). Rewritings of fictional works from the English canon will therefore be read alongside texts that rewrite historical documents, for example, while the dominant discourses that are countered will range from colonial or imperial discourses to historiographic, generic, and gendered discourses—even postcolonial discourse.

My study is not meant to be a comprehensive examination of the phenomenon of rewriting, however. Rather, I will analyze examples of rewriting from Africa and the African diaspora to show how widespread, and yet divergent, rewriting is. My study thus also attempts to reframe the conversation about rewriting by positioning rewriting as, to borrow Brent Hayes Edwards’s term, a “practice of diaspora” rather than a postcolonial response from margin to center.⁹ My project reads examples of rewriting in the diaspora in order to question the persistence of the “empire writes back” model in theorizing what postcolonial literature does. It explores the problematic dimension of this model with a view to suggesting alternate readings of postcolonial diasporic literatures.

⁹ See Brent Hayes Edwards, The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2003).

Because my dissertation seeks to complicate and expand the very idea of rewriting, part of the goal of this study is necessarily to adapt a vocabulary to describe rewriting as both process and product. The vocabulary of rewriting is extensive, but not always satisfactory, and often problematic. There is a great need to rethink the terminology used to describe rewriting in general, and postcolonial rewriting in particular. Many of the terms currently in use register the passive, unimaginative role often ascribed to rewriting: stealing, forgery, being indebted to, repetition, copying, imitation, and plagiarism. As mentioned earlier, such terms belie the extent to which many of the texts that these writers have rewritten are themselves borrowings. These terms also do not account for rewritings of familiar stories, such as myths, or retellings of tales from oral cultures, in which the notion of a text belonging to or being owned by a single literary predecessor is absent. Indeed, post-Romantic notions of authorial genius and modern-day copyright laws have left little room for an understanding of textual appropriation that reinforces the collaborative, cooperative nature of intertextuality. As Julie Sanders argues in *Adaptation and Appropriation*, “we need to view literary adaptation and appropriation from this more positive vantage point, seeing it as creating new cultural and aesthetic possibilities that stand alongside the texts which have inspired them, enriching rather than ‘robbing’ them.”¹⁰

¹⁰ Julie Sanders, *Adaptation and Appropriation* (New York: Routledge, 2006) 41.

My critique of the “empire writes back” model primarily concerns two aspects relating to terminology: the notion of rewriting as a response to empire, which reinforces a hierarchical binary between center and periphery, and the idea that rewriting is a unidirectional response “back” to a hegemonic discourse. While I agree that rewriting can function as a counter-discursive textual practice, I share Brydon and Tiffin’s belief that theories that emphasize “creative adaptations, re-reading, re-writing, re-visioning, and ‘contra-dicting’” are more useful and applicable to postcolonial rewriting than that suggested by the phrase “writing back” (29). My dissertation thus aims to reposition the study of diasporic rewriting within the broad interpretive field of intertextuality, adaptation, and appropriation studies. My argument will show that reading postcolonial rewritings through the lens of intertextuality serves as a far less reductive approach than models focusing on writing back.

In *A Theory of Adaptation*, Linda Hutcheon defines adaptations as “deliberate, announced, and extended revisitations of prior works.”¹¹ In her view, “adaptation is a form of repetition without replication” (xvi). She also argues that “multiple versions exist laterally, not vertically” (xiii). Though adaptation is often conceived of as involving a shift in genre or medium, Hutcheon argues that adaptation also occurs when the context or frame of reference shifts, such as when a story is told from another perspective (7-8). In this regard, rewriting can be seen

¹¹ Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation* (New York: Routledge, 2006) xiv.

as a form of adaptation. However, theories of adaptation, like theories of postcolonial rewriting, have also “suffered from domination by ‘normative and source-oriented approaches’” (Hutcheon 16). Hutcheon aims to disrupt such readings of adapted texts by showing the ways in which adaptation is “a process of making the adapted material one’s own” (20). Where Hutcheon is perhaps most useful for my own study is in her theorization of the intentions or reasons guiding the decision to adapt: “[T]here are manifestly many different possible intentions behind the act of adaptation: the urge to consume and erase the memory of the adapted text or to call it into question is as likely as the desire to pay tribute....Adaptations can even be seen as mixed in intent: ‘contested homage’” (7). Hutcheon’s notion that adaptation can carry a “mixture of affection and sense of transgression or even guilt” is particularly valuable when it comes to theorizing postcolonial rewriting (169). As Chapter One will demonstrate, the rewriting of canonical texts often is accompanied by such disparate feelings, feelings that have not been adequately accounted for by readings that insist on the idea of writing back “with a vengeance.”

Sanders similarly positions “the ‘rewriting’ impulse” within the larger field of intertextuality (2). Like Hutcheon, Sanders identifies “a complicated blend of admiration and satire at play” in “acts of literary appropriation such as [the] postcolonial rewritings of canonical texts” (5). Using Paul Ricoeur’s notion that appropriation is “the ‘playful’ transposition of the text,” Sanders argues that

“the political aspect of ‘re-visionary’ writing should never occlude the simultaneously pleasurable aspects of reading into such texts their intertextual and allusive relationship with other texts, tracing and activating the networks of association” (7). Sanders thus addresses more explicitly than Hutcheon the contested space of postcolonial rewriting. Her suggestion that adaptation is best conceived of “in terms of intertextual webs or signifying fields, rather than simplistic one-way lines of influence” is of particular usefulness in theorizing diasporic rewriting. As Chapters Two and Four will show, this approach has much in common with Édouard Glissant’s poetics of relation.

In distinguishing appropriation from adaptation, Sanders posits that appropriation signals a more decisive break from notions of source and involves a move toward “a wholly new cultural product and domain” (26). This idea acknowledges influence while allowing the resulting product to be viewed as its own work. Sanders also usefully references the appropriation of history so as to account for “lost or oppressed voices” (140), an idea that has relevance for Chapters Two and Three in particular. Finally, Sanders argues that theory itself is an important source text for many appropriations: “Postcolonialism, feminism and gender studies, queer theory and postmodernism have all wrought important influences on these texts, often equal to and sometimes in excess of the canonical texts or events to which they explicitly refer” (157). This idea is particularly

helpful for understanding what the texts in Chapter Four are doing, as they engage discourses of postcolonialism, gender, and sexuality.

As my project demonstrates, many postcolonial writers do not view their primary purpose in rewriting to be that of responding to the empire and its world view. With the end of colonialism and subsequent reconfigurations of formerly colonized peoples around the globe, the dynamic of imperial center and periphery has shifted. As I explain in Chapter One, for example, the empire sometimes writes back to unexpected addressees, such as when a writer uses French to rewrite a text from the English canon. Similarly, in Chapter Four, I show that the hegemonic discourse that is countered is not always a colonial or imperial discourse, but a gendered discourse. So, as the center shifts, new peripheral discourses are created to counter this altered hegemony.

Postcolonial rewritings also do more than write “back”; though they are often counterdiscursive, they are not only counterdiscursive, nor are they necessarily counterdiscursive. The rewritings that I explore in this study are complex discursive zones, where elements of writing “back” coexist with elements of writing “for,” “from,” “with,” and “alongside.” For example, in Chapters Two and Three, I explore rewritings that express an ambivalence toward the very project of writing.

The title of my dissertation, “Telling Otherwise,” comes from Paul Ricoeur’s essay “Memory and Forgetting.” In his discussion of the “ethics of

memory” Ricoeur points to the relationship between narrative and memory, arguing that narratives are the sites where memory is both used and abused: “Narratives, therefore, are at the same time the occasion for manipulation through reading and directing narratives, but also the place where a certain healing of memory may begin.”¹² In this formulation, narratives contain within them the possibility of alternate memories, both personal and collective, as well as the suggestion of alternate histories. Ricoeur writes, “This exercise of memory is here an exercise in *telling otherwise*,” which he defines as “to tell in another way” (9). Ricoeur connects the work of memory in telling otherwise to the “ethical-political...act of memory” (6). Thus the “duty to remember” is connected to the “duty...to tell” (9-10). Ricoeur’s conception of telling otherwise is particularly useful in a study of postcolonial rewriting because one of the principal reasons behind the duty to remember, in his formulation, is “to keep alive the memory of suffering over against the general tendency of history to celebrate the victors” (10). Ricoeur suggests the need for a “parallel history of...victimisation, which would counter the history of success and victory”: “To memorise the victims of history—the sufferers, the humiliated, the forgotten—should be a task for all of us...” (11).

¹² Paul Ricoeur, "Memory and Forgetting," Questioning Ethics: Contemporary Debates in Philosophy, eds. Richard Kearney and Mark Dooley (New York: Routledge, 1999) 8-9.

“Telling Otherwise” provides new insights into the poetics and politics of revision. Reading postcolonial rewritings from the perspective of intertextuality also leads to a better understanding of the ways that the authors themselves are complicating and problematizing postcolonial theory and suggesting new approaches of their own that emphasize hybridity and allow for expressions of play and feelings of ambivalence. My intention is to open up the field of diasporic rewriting to a multiplicity of interpretations. No one model of rewriting fits all of the works discussed in the chapters that follow. Indeed, even the paired texts that I read in each chapter are both linked and divergent. Each of the chapters that follow represent different sources—texts and discourses—that are rewritten, grouped according to the discourses that they rewrite: the imperial discourse of canonical texts, the discourse of history and of historiography, the discourse of the slave narrative genre, and masculinist discourses about Caribbean identity.

In my first chapter, titled “Re-Writing the Canon,” I examine two works that rewrite canonical texts from the European tradition, Jean Rhys’s imaginative retelling of the life of *Jane Eyre*’s Bertha in *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) and Maryse Condé’s relocation of *Wuthering Heights* to the Caribbean in *La migration des coeurs* (1995), which was translated as *Windward Heights* (1998). In re-writing texts from the Western canon, postcolonial writers reevaluate the ideologies and assumptions promoted therein, exposing the blind spots of colonial discourse and giving voice to previously marginal characters. So, for example, in

Wide Sargasso Sea, Rhys re-imagines Charlotte Brontë's "madwoman in the attic," restoring her rightful name and giving her a history, even a voice. Rhys transforms this unsympathetic figure into a fully fleshed-out character and, in doing so, complicates our understanding of, and identification with, *Jane Eyre*. In this chapter, I contend that re-writing functions not only as a response, as a "writing back" to the canon, but as a creative appropriation of and critical engagement with the canonical text and its worldview. I argue that rewriting does far more than challenge the canon to redress the wrongs and omissions of the past. These texts both negotiate their position within and express their independence from a literary tradition, troubling notions of origin and addressing issues of racial and gender identity in a contemporary context. In this chapter, I use the term "Caribbeanization" to refer to the process, akin to translation, that is involved in the transculturation of texts from the English canon to the Caribbean context.

My second chapter, "Re-Storying the Past," examines fictional works that rewrite events from the historical past. Playing on the French word *histoire*, meaning both "history" and "story," I explore the connection between history and fiction and the ways in which official history is one perspective among many possible points of view. The texts that I examine in this chapter demonstrate that official versions of history, particularly those that exist in the colonial archives, often do not account for the experiences of the victims of history, including women, indigenous peoples, slaves, and immigrants. Using a concept borrowed

from clinical psychology, in which a person who has suffered a traumatic event is encouraged to retell the story of the event from an alternate perspective, *restorying* refers to the efforts of postcolonial writers to create alternate, fictional archives that bear witness to those stories left out of the traditional repositories of history. My use of the term “restorying” for the title of this chapter aims to suggest the power of narrative in the formation of individual and collective memory, as well as to underline the extent to which historiography is itself a “restorying” of historical events from a particular perspective. The works that I study in this chapter are *L’amour, la fantasia* (1995), Assia Djébar’s recuperation of Algerian women’s resistance to French colonization, translated as *Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade* (1989), and Edwidge Danticat’s efforts to reconstruct the 1937 massacre of Haitians under Trujillo in *The Farming of Bones* (1998). In reading texts that rewrite the history of Africa and the Americas from the perspectives of the marginalized, I examine not only the possibilities that fiction offers in re-creating accounts of past events but also the limitations of these fictional narratives as a means of recuperating the past.

In my third chapter, titled “Re-Voicing Slavery,” I take for my subject neo-slave narratives that build on and revise the slave narrative genre of the late eighteenth- through early twentieth- centuries. While many critical studies of neo-slave narratives have focused solely on American perspectives, my study aims to read an American example of the genre alongside a diasporic neo-slave narrative

by a Canadian writer of West Indian descent. The two works that I examine in this chapter are Sherley Anne Williams's *Dessa Rose* (1986), which employs alternating viewpoints to tell the story of the title character, and the poem sequence *Zong!* by M. NourbeSe Philip (2008), based on the murder of Africans aboard the slave ship *Zong* in 1781. In addition to cataloguing the atrocities of slavery, these works engage in a proliferation of voices, preferring the choral and communal to the univocal. For both writers, however, writing is seen as a potential danger, and the possibilities of re-writing are ambiguous at best. In the preface to her novel, for example, Williams writes, "Afro-Americans, having survived by word of mouth – and made of that process a high art – remain at the mercy of literature and writing; often these have betrayed us." In this chapter, I build on the theme of ambivalence that I began to explore in Chapter Two.

In my fourth chapter, "Re-Membering Gender," I examine several texts that foreground the processes of re-writing and re-telling, both thematically and structurally, so as to draw attention to the ways in which discourses and identities are constructed. In their attempts to counter masculinist discourses, these works seek to re-inscribe gender and sexuality into these discourses, a process of re-membering that engenders a radical deconstruction of fixed notions of identity. The works that I read in this chapter include Daniel Maximin's *L'Isolé soleil* (1981), translated as *Lone Sun* (1989), which privileges the feminine and the multiple in opposition to patriarchal notions of single origins and authoritative

narrative voices and Maryse Condé's *Traversée de la Mangrove* (1989), translated as *Crossing the Mangrove* (1995), which rewrites Patrick Chamoiseau's novel *Solibo Magnifique* (1988), translated as *Solibo the Magnificent* (1997) so as to critique the exclusive nature of Caribbean identity in his notion of créolité.

Chapter One: Re-Writing the Canon

In *Translating Literature: Practice and Theory in a Comparative Literature Context*, André Lefevere argues that translation is a form of rewriting, in that a translation aims to represent the text to which it refers.¹³ A translation is “a culture’s window on the world” (11), according to Lefevere, in that “translations...project an image of the work that is translated and, through it, of the world that work belongs to” (125). Translation can thus be seen as a process of acculturation, with translation taking place in the contact zone of two literary traditions, in the space where the writer and the translator come together. When one culture is considered superior to another, as with colonialism, the exchange between the culture of the colony and that of the metropole is unequal. According to Lefevere, “translations usurp...the authority of their source texts” and confer that authority on the language of their target culture, such as when Shakespeare is translated into a so-called minor language (122-23). Conversely, Lefevere describes a process called “reverse translation,” whereby postcolonial writers choose to write in the language of the colonizer in order to appropriate the authority of the colonizer’s culture (118-19). In rewriting canonical texts from the cultural and literary tradition of the West, postcolonial writers have similarly been

¹³ André Lefevere, *Translating Literature: Practice and Theory in a Comparative Literature Context* (New York: MLA, 1992) 138.

thought to appropriate the authority of these texts and the languages and cultures to which they belong. In the conception of postcolonial rewriting as “writing back” from the empire to the imperial centre, the process of rewriting functions as a response by the postcolonial writer to a received tradition.

This chapter examines the rewritings of two texts from the canon of English literature, Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* and Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights*. Both novels have been rewritten by Caribbean women writers, the first by Jean Rhys as *Wide Sargasso Sea* and the second by Maryse Condé as *La migration des coeurs*. In rewriting the Brontës, Rhys and Condé not only appropriate the plots, characters, and narrative structures of their source texts, but they also reevaluate the canonical texts and the values and assumptions promoted therein. Their retellings thus engage rather than simply respond to the canon.

In addition, Rhys and Condé displace their stories to Caribbean locales and adapt the Brontë narratives to Caribbean contexts. In this sense, the revisionary practices of Rhys and Condé can be understood as acts of *übersetzung*. Playing on the double meaning of the German verb *übersetzen*, which means both “to translate” and “to transport over,” *übersetzung* describes the concurrent translation and transportation of a text from one culture to another culture. As the term indicates, transporting a text from a source context into a target context is a process akin to translation. In that the canonical text is transported from the source to a target culture in the process, that text may be

considered to be translated, even in those cases, such as Jean Rhys's rewriting of *Jane Eyre*, when the source and target languages are the same. Lefevere and Susan Bassnett use the term "rewriting" to refer to those moments when a translated text is transported into a new culture, as the new context invariably means that the translation is used by different authorities and for different purposes.¹⁴ As Linda Hutcheon notes of adaptations across cultures, "[a]lmost always, there is an accompanying shift in the political valence from the adapted text to the 'transcultured' adaptation."¹⁵ Thinking about rewriting as translation provides some insight into what the retellings of Rhys and Condé are attempting to do in way that is not satisfactorily accounted for by the "writing back" model of rewriting. Likewise, reading rewritings as acts of *übersetzung* aids in an understanding of rewriting both as process and product, particularly when considering texts such as those by Rhys and Condé that trouble, to various degrees, the prevalent notion of postcolonial rewritings as "writing back" to their canonical source texts.

Of the two revisionary texts, *Wide Sargasso Sea* more closely resembles the postcolonial paradigm of rewriting as counter-discursive response. Rhys's text was written as an explicit response to *Jane Eyre*, and its intention, as the author's statements in letters and interviews make clear, was primarily corrective. In *Wide*

¹⁴ See Susan Bassnett and André Lefevere, eds., Translation, History and Culture.

¹⁵ Hutcheon, A Theory of Adaptation 145.

Sargasso Sea, Rhys re-imagines the story of Bertha Mason, the Creole madwoman in the attic of Brontë's tale, as Antoinette Cosway, giving the previously marginalized character a voice, a history, and even a name of her own. In creating an alternate history of the colonized subject, Rhys's novel challenges the master narrative, refusing Brontë's metaphorical alignment of Jane's subordination based on gender and class, her "governessing slavery," with Antoinette's racialized oppression.¹⁶ As John J. Su notes of the novel, *Wide Sargasso Sea* prioritizes "[Bertha's] suffering over Jane's personal growth and insertion into bourgeois English society."¹⁷ The text thus refuses a feminist reading of *Jane Eyre* by showing the ways in which Jane's individual development comes at the price of Bertha's oppression.

To the extent that Rhys aimed to reevaluate Brontë's novel and its worldview, she succeeded admirably, given that her novel has changed the way *Jane Eyre* is both read and taught. As Elizabeth Baer observes, "Rhys has commandeered *Jane Eyre* as her sequel and in doing so, forever 'revises' our reading of that text by the creation of hers."¹⁸ In this sense, *Wide Sargasso Sea* is a classic example of rewriting according to Lefevere's use of the term, given the extent to which it is paradoxically both dependent on *Jane Eyre* as a source text

¹⁶ Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre* (New York: Signet Classic, 1847) 272.

¹⁷ John J. Su, "'Once I Would Have Gone Back...But Not Any Longer': Nostalgia and Narrative Ethics in *Wide Sargasso Sea*," *Critique* 44.2 (Winter 2003): 157.

¹⁸ Elizabeth Baer, "The Sisterhood of Jane Eyre and Antoinette Cosway," *The Voyage In: Fictions of Development*, eds. Elizabeth Abel, Marianne Hirsch, and Elizabeth Langland (Hanover: UP of New England, 1983) 132.

and yet at the same time has itself reshaped, and arguably guaranteed, the life of its source text.

Yet, Rhys's text also breaks from the model of postcolonial rewriting in a number of ways. In addition to her explicit goal of correcting the perceived shortfalls of Brontë's novel, especially in regards to the character of Bertha/Antoinette, Rhys's efforts to create a back story for her characters in *Wide Sargasso Sea* can also be read as an attempt to return the characters to the Caribbean. As suggested by the title of Rhys's text, she envisioned the process of transporting her characters home across the ocean as a difficult passage. Rhys also aimed to bring into focus more than her literary forerunner issues of English imperialism and the relationship between England and its colonies in the West Indies. Rhys's rewriting of *Jane Eyre* can therefore fruitfully be read as a process of *übersetzung*, in that it aims not only to respond to Brontë, or even to be corrective of her text and its worldview, but also to Caribbeanize the text in a complex process of critical engagement with her source.

Condé's text has proved more troublesome for critics for several reasons. According to Carine Mardorossian, *La migration des coeurs*, unlike *Wide Sargasso Sea*, "does not seek to elucidate, extend, or even correct" the source text it translates into a new cultural locus.¹⁹ Neither does it reevaluate the worldview

¹⁹ Carine Mardorossian, "Cannibalizing the Victorians: Racial and Cultural Hybridity in the Brontës and Their Caribbean Rewritings," Diss., U of Illinois, Urbana, 1998, 22.

of Brontë's novel with the purpose of drawing out, via a contrapuntal reading, that which remains at the level of suggestion in *Wuthering Heights*. In *La migration des coeurs*, Condé relocates the love story of Heathcliff and Cathy to Guadeloupe, where their difference in social class is played out among the complex and racialized caste system of the Caribbean. Condé transforms the brooding gypsy of Brontë's tale into the equally racially ambiguous figure of Razyé, who is described as Ashanti-black with purplish features and Indian-like hair. Cathy is his mulatto love interest who marries a white man in order to better her social position. Like Rhys, Condé gives voice in her retelling to disenfranchised characters, exploding the narrative structure of the original story by inserting these marginalized characters' first-person narratives. Unlike Rhys, though, Condé does not undermine the source text but, rather, adapts Brontë's narrative to a Caribbean context, appropriating the other text in order to work through it as she creates a new text.

Thinking about rewriting as a process of translation and transculturation is especially useful in dealing with Condé's text because her stated aim is to Caribbeanize Brontë's work. Condé's concept of "récri[re] à la caribéenne" 'rewriting in the Caribbean mode,' as she describes it in an interview with Christine Gaspar, is "une manière de s'appropriier des textes connus dans le canon international et de leur donner une signification caribéenne," 'a way of appropriating well-known texts from the international canon so as to give them a

Caribbean meaning.²⁰ In the same interview, Condé contends that rewriting in this sense is a form of cannibalism:

‘C’est plus un acte de cannibalisme qu’une référence à une oeuvre.’ (Gaspar 185)

‘It’s more an act of cannibalism than a reference to a particular work.’ (translation mine)

Reading the revisionary practices of Rhys and Condé as cannibalism, according to Mardorossian, acknowledges “the process of active and productive transformation to which cultural productions are continuously subjected” (4). Beginning with the work of Aimé and Suzanne Césaire, cannibalism has been reappropriated by Caribbean writers as a symbol of cultural resistance to Western discursive practices. In his seminal work *Cahier d’un retour au pays natal*, Aimé Césaire lays claim to a cannibalistic heritage as an antidote to reason:

Parce que nous vous haïssons vous et votre raison, nous nous réclamons de la démence précoce de la folie flambante du cannibalisme tenace.²¹

Because we hate you and your reason, we claim kinship with dementia praecox with the flaming madness of persistent cannibalism.²²

Likewise, in a piece titled *Misère d’une poésie*, which appeared in *Tropiques*, the journal she co-founded with her husband and René Ménénil, Suzanne Césaire

²⁰ Christine Gaspar, "The Female Literary Quest: The Intertextual Community of Women Writers in Maryse Condé's *La Migration des coeurs* and Marguerite Duras's *Emily L.*," Diss., Brown U, 2000, 185. (Translation mine.)

²¹ Aimé Césaire, *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1983) 27.

²² Aimé Césaire, *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*, trans. Clayton Eshleman and Annette Smith (Middletown: Wesleyan UP, 2001) 17-18.

theorized that Caribbean poetry must be cannibalistic in order to avoid the exoticism of its predecessors:

La poésie martiniquaise sera cannibale ou ne sera pas.

Martinican poetry will be cannibalistic or it will not be.²³

Suzanne Césaire's redeployment of cannibalism as a model of interacting with Western culture, in contrast to imitation and the blind appropriation of French aesthetic norms, prefigures Roberto Fernández Retamar's use of cannibalism in calling for the decolonization of Caribbean literature in his essay "Caliban."

Cannibalism as a term has thus been recuperated from "the act of savagery and destruction it signifies in the Western imaginary" to refer to a "productive process of hybridity," the doubly transformative process of consuming a text and making out of it something new and at once its own creative product (Mardorossian 3). In their introduction to Aimé Césaire's *Collected Poetry*, Clayton Eshleman and Annette Smith note that cannibalism symbolizes both the "devouring" of the colonized by the colonizer and "the latent desire of the oppressed to do away with the oppressor":

...cannibalism carries to its fullest degree the idea of participation;
it symbolically eradicates the distinction between the I and the
Other, between human and nonhuman, between what is

²³ Quoted in Marie-Agnès Sourieau, "Suzanne Césaire et *Tropiques*: De la poésie cannibale à une poétique créole," *The French Review* 68.1 (1994): 69. (Translation mine.)

(anthropologically) edible and what is not and, finally, between the subject and the object. It goes insolently against the grain of Western insistence on discrete entities and categories.²⁴

According to Mardorossian, cannibalism can therefore be used “to signify a process of creative intertextuality” (5).

I have chosen to use the term Caribbeanizing, suggested by Condé’s formulation of rewriting *à la caribéenne*, for the specific version of transcontextualizing engaged in by both Rhys and Condé. In the readings that follow, I will focus on the Caribbeanization of *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights* as models for the complex dynamics at play in rewriting. Rather than seeing retelling as the unidirectional response of a writer against a received tradition, I contend that these postcolonial rewritings exist in dialogic relation to the texts they rewrite. In engaging the canonical texts critically, these writers not only call into question the cultural assumptions at their core, but they also force a critical rereading of the canon, engaging readers in a dialogue that ultimately serves to enrich both works. Though *Wide Sargasso Sea* and *La migration des coeurs* can both be read as counter-discursive responses to their source texts, the revisionary practices of Rhys and Condé can perhaps best be understood in the context of postcolonial intertextuality.

²⁴ Clayton Eshleman and Annette Smith, "Introduction," *Aimé Césaire: The Collected Poetry* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1983) 13.

Re-righting *Jane Eyre*: Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*

In a letter to Selma Vaz Dias, Rhys wrote of her reasons for undertaking the rewriting of *Jane Eyre*: “The creole in Charlotte Brontë’s novel is a lay-figure, repulsive which does not matter, and not once alive which does. She is necessary to the plot, but always she shrieks, howls, laughs horribly, attacks all and sundry off stage. For me (and for you I hope) she must be right on stage. She must be at least plausible with a past....”²⁵ Rhys continued, “I am fighting mad to write her story” (qtd. in Jain 115). Rhys’s motivations for writing *Wide Sargasso Sea* therefore stem primarily from her own dissatisfaction with Brontë’s portrayal of the creole lunatic through the figure of Bertha Mason and her desire to right the wrongs done to this character. Interviewed by Elizabeth Vreeland, Rhys explained, “I thought I’d try to write her a life.”²⁶ In addition to her desire to create a back story for Bertha, Rhys also notably complained in a letter that *Jane Eyre* represented “only one side—the English side.”²⁷ According to Gaspar, then, Rhys aimed to engage some of the issues raised, and then subsumed, by Brontë’s text: “She hoped to introduce a distinct political and moral perspective into her rewriting by emphasizing more strongly than Brontë the issues of English

²⁵ Quoted in Veena Jain, “Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea*: A Re-Writing of History,” Women’s Writing: Text and Context, ed. Jasbir Jain (Jaipur: Rawat, 1996) 114.

²⁶ Quoted in Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Three Women’s Texts and a Critique of Imperialism,” “Race,” Writing, and Difference, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1985) 268.

²⁷ Jean Rhys, The Letters of Jean Rhys, eds. Francis Wyndham and Diana Melly (New York: Viking, 1984) 297.

imperialism, colonial Jamaica, and the Abolitionist period of slavery, as well as the dominant social codes governing marriage, class, and gender differences in the Victorian era” (13). In this sense, Rhys’s efforts to rewrite *Jane Eyre* as *Wide Sargasso Sea* can be seen as an attempt to re-right a number of injustices.

In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Rhys re-imagines the story of *Jane Eyre*’s Bertha Mason so as to give her a name, a voice, and a past. Rhys recasts Bertha as Antoinette Cosway and explains that the surname Mason was her stepfather’s. She is called Antoinette Mason for the first time upon enrolling in school at the convent in Spanish Town, when one of the nuns says, “I know. You are Antoinette Cosway, that is to say Antoinette Mason.”²⁸ Since she is never referred to as Antoinette Mason in the time between her mother’s marriage to Mr. Mason and her enrollment in school, the suggestion in the text is that the name Mason was used to hide the shame of the name Cosway, with its public reminders of her father’s infidelities and disgraceful death following emancipation and her mother’s mental breakdown in the aftermath of the destruction of Coulibri. This shame, however, is not shared by Antoinette herself, who imagines cross-stitching her name as “Antoinette Mason, née Cosway” (53; pt. 1).

More important than the last name Rhys restores to her character is the replacement of the first name Bertha with Antoinette. In *Jane Eyre* the first wife of Mr. Rochester is said by Richard Mason, her brother, to be named Bertha

²⁸ Jean Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea* (New York: Norton, 1982) 52.

Antoinetta Mason (292; ch. 26). In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Rhys asserts that the character was originally named Antoinette and that the substitution of the name Bertha was an attempt by her husband to rename her. In Rhys's novel, Rochester first uses the name Bertha in order to separate his wife Antoinette from her mother, Annette, upon hearing from Daniel that her mother was mad; as Antoinette explains to Christophine, "When he passes my door he says, 'Good-night Bertha.' He never calls me Antoinette now. He has found out it was my mother's name" (113; pt. 2). From the beginning, Antoinette objects to being called Bertha by her husband: "My name is not Bertha; why do you call me Bertha?" (135; pt. 2). However, whereas she initially claims that "It doesn't matter," she comes to realize that Rochester's attempts to rename her are a means of reshaping her identity (135; pt. 2). Antoinette likens his efforts to rename her to the black magic that he claims Christophine practices: "Bertha is not my name. You are trying to make me into someone else, calling me by another name. I know, that's obeah too" (147; pt. 2). Christophine also confronts Rochester on this point, asking him why he insists on using alternate names for his wife: "She tell me in the middle of all this you start calling her names. Marionette. Some word so" (154; pt. 2). After Rochester silently responds with "Marionette, Antoinette, Marionetta, Antoinetta," Christophine connects his use of the name Marionette to Antoinette's present condition and suggests that his efforts to rename her are partly responsible for his wife's mental state: "That word mean

doll, eh? Because she don't speak. You want to force her to cry and to speak” (154; pt. 2). Her subsequent “madness,” which is also questioned in Rhys’s text, is thus shown to be circumstantial, brought about in being renamed, and not genetic.

At the end of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the issue of names and renaming surfaces again; in reflecting on the name of her caregiver, Grace Poole, Antoinette states, “Her name oughtn’t to be Grace. Names matter, like when he wouldn’t call me Antoinette, and I saw Antoinette out of the window with her scents, her pretty clothes and her looking glass” (180; pt. 3). Antoinette, now figured as Bertha, associates the loss of her name with the loss of her identity, saying, “Now they have taken everything away. What am I doing in this place and who am I?” (180; pt. 3). In the final scene of Rhys’s novel, in which Antoinette dreams of setting fire to Thornfield Hall and then jumping to her death, she imagines that “the man who hated me was calling too, Bertha! Bertha!” (189; pt. 3).

In addition to giving *Jane Eyre*’s Bertha a prename, both literally and temporally, Rhys gives the character a voice and a history. Whereas *Jane Eyre* is narrated in the first person by Jane herself, *Wide Sargasso Sea* is told from the perspectives of three different narrators: Antoinette, Rochester, and Grace Poole. Gaspar argues that the narrative framework of Rhys’s text is an example of what Hutcheon refers to as “ironic inversion,” in that Jane is displaced from her capacity as principal narrator by some of the characters that did not have narrating

roles in *Jane Eyre* (15). The narrative structure of *Wide Sargasso Sea* allows Rhys to “recover the hidden and buried stories” of these previously marginal characters (Gaspar 16). In the same vein, Rhys’s narrators tell their stories retrospectively in what Gaspar, using Dorrit Cohn’s term, refers to as self-narrated monologues; this style gives the reader insight into the characters’ thoughts as well as their actions (16). Though Rhys is most concerned with allowing Antoinette to speak for herself, as is evidenced by the fact that this character has the largest narrative capacity of the three, she also gives textual space to Rochester and Grace Poole. These accounts are important, contends Gaspar, insofar as they point to the constraints of nineteenth-century society (16). For example, Rochester’s narrative allows the reader insight into his social status as second-born son, whereas Grace Poole’s account provides some perspective on the circumscribed role of women (Gaspar 17).

In attempting to provide Antoinette with a background and a history, Rhys relocates her character to the Caribbean and positions her story within the context of Caribbean society and culture. Part one is narrated by Antoinette and describes her youth in Jamaica. In looking back on her life before her marriage to Rochester, Antoinette tells her family’s story against the backdrop of emancipation. Antoinette recounts how, with the end of slavery, Creole planters lost their status and were no longer considered white: “They say when trouble comes close ranks, and so the white people did. But we were not in their ranks”

(17; pt. 1). In describing her lonely childhood, Antoinette explains that white Creoles were hated by black Jamaicans, who called them “white cockroaches” (23; pt. 1). Her only friend, Tia, aligns whiteness with social class, saying, “Plenty white people in Jamaica. Real white people, they got gold money. They didn’t look at us, nobody see them come near us. Old time white people nothing but white nigger now, and black nigger better than white nigger” (24; pt. 1).

Antoinette remarks that her family’s financial status improved when her mother married Mr. Mason, to the detriment of their relationship with their black servants and neighbors: “In some ways it was better before he came though he’d rescued us from poverty and misery....The black people did not hate us quite so much when we were poor” (34; pt. 1). Mr. Mason misunderstands the complex relationship between the family and the black people who lived near their estate, and he repeatedly misjudges their situation. When Antoinette’s mother wants to leave Coulibri due to the hatred she perceives, Mr. Mason minimizes the threat by saying that the situation had improved since their marriage: “Annette, be reasonable. You were the widow of a slave-owner, the daughter of a slave-owner, and you had been living here alone, with two children, for nearly five years when we met. Things were at their worst then. But you were never molested, never harmed” (32; pt. 1). He is incapable of perceiving the danger that Antoinette’s mother can sense is coming, and they engage in a series of fights about the nature and motivations of the black people: “You don’t like, or even recognize, the

good in them,' she said, 'and you won't believe in the other side.' 'They're too damn lazy to be dangerous,' said Mr. Mason.... 'They are more alive than you are, lazy or not, and they can be dangerous and cruel for reasons you wouldn't understand'" (32-33; pt. 1). Mr. Mason even goes so far as to tell Aunt Cora that she is the one guilty of misjudgment, saying, "Live here most of your life and know nothing about the people. It's astonishing. They are children – they wouldn't hurt a fly," to which Aunt Cora replies, "Unhappily children do hurt flies" (35; pt. 1). Annette's fears are realized soon after, when a group of blacks sets fire to Coulibri, burning it to the ground. Antoinette recounts how her brother Pierre died and how, as a result of the fire, her mother grew increasingly ill and eventually died.

In part two, Rochester's character is likewise given a voice and a history. Unlike Antoinette, however, he is unnamed in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, and it does not become clear until later in the text that he is the Mr. Rochester of *Jane Eyre*. Similar to Rhys's treatment of Antoinette, Rochester narrates part two and provides, through his account, a back story that explains his reasons for marrying Antoinette and his subsequent feelings of alienation from both his wife and the West Indies. Rhys's narrative demonstrates the extent to which Rochester is, in his own right, constrained and tormented by this relationship. He outlines the fragility of his economic position as second son in an imaginary letter he crafts to his father: "The thirty thousand pounds have been paid to me without question or

condition....I have a modest competence now....No begging letters, no mean requests. None of the furtive shabby manoeuvres of a younger son. I have sold my soul, or you have sold it..." (70; pt. 2). Rochester also gives voice to the feeling that he is playing a role on several occasions. In recounting his wedding ceremony, for example, he says, "I played the part I was expected to play" (76; pt. 2). Rochester claims to feel deceived by the transaction that resulted in his union with Antoinette; recalling that she initially refused him, he says that he would "curse the fever or the caution that had made [him] so blind, so feeble, so hesitating" (90; pt.2). As Rochester and Antoinette prepare to leave for England, he again gives voice to a feeling of betrayal: "They bought me, *me* with your paltry money. You helped them to do it. You deceived me, betrayed me, and you'll do worse if you get the chance..." (170; pt. 2). The idea that Antoinette will do worse references an earlier scene in which she bites him and curses him "comprehensively" and, of course, prefigures the scene in *Jane Eyre* when he loses an eye and a hand in trying to escape from the fire that Bertha sets. The third part of *Wide Sargasso Sea* begins with Grace Poole's voice and concludes with Antoinette's voice. Rhys thus gives voice to, and recovers the stories of, three characters that are marginalized in Brontë's text.

It is significant that, as part of her project to restore Antoinette's name, voice, and history, Rhys transposes her character to the Caribbean. By giving the reader a sense of the racial dynamics at play in Antoinette's alienation, and by

letting the reader in on Rochester's thought process as he reads his Jamaican experience through the lens of Victorian sensibilities, Rhys points to the role that English imperialism played in the creation of *Jane Eyre's* madwoman in the attic. Moreover, Gaspar argues that Rhys's relocation of Antoinette to the Caribbean was a final attempt to right a perceived wrong: "For Rhys, it was as if Antoinette's character had been brought to England against her will by both Rochester and Brontë" (21). "[R]eturning Antoinette to her homeland and providing her with a context," according to Gaspar, "shed light on her incomplete portrait and seemed the only viable strategy to liberate her once and for all from the confines of the earlier novel" (21). Yet, Rhys's title, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, also illustrates the potential difficulty of transcontextualizing stories in that it references the oceanic weeds that may inhibit passage.

Seen in this regard, rewriting seems insufficient for describing both Rhys's product and process. Even the notion of rewriting as re-righting seems lacking when one considers that Rhys expressed guilt about reworking Brontë's text. In her letters, for example, Rhys explains that she felt like a "fraud" and a "demon" (158). Rhys's text therefore begs the question: How are we to understand the relationship of *Wide Sargasso Sea* to *Jane Eyre*? Given that Jane is never mentioned in Rhys's text, Baer argues that *Wide Sargasso Sea* is a "post-dated prequel" to *Jane Eyre* in that it "exists both before (in a literary sense) and after (in reality)" Brontë's novel (132). Baer's sense that Rhys returns to the past

to see anew evokes Adrienne Rich's notion of "re-vision," which Rich describes as "the act of looking back, or seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction" (qtd. in Gaspar 14).

This approach is also similar to Hutcheon's idea of "ironic transcontextualizing," in which "a text is designed to critically revise or give an altered significance to a previous work" (Gaspar 14). In Hutcheon's formulation, the earlier work is parodied by the work that seeks to revise it. Gaspar's analysis of Rhys's novel makes use of Hutcheon's understanding of parody "as an act of emancipation" to argue that *Wide Sargasso Sea* aims "to recast Antoinette's former portrayal as insane and bestial by filling in a possible background lacking in the earlier novel" (16). According to Gaspar, *Wide Sargasso Sea* is both "materially indebted to *Jane Eyre* even while it seeks to deform, demystify, and demythologize certain aspects of that literary classic" (20). Drawing upon Hutcheon's argument that the term *parody* encompasses notions of "counter" and "against" alongside "intimacy" and "accord," Gaspar argues that *Wide Sargasso Sea* can therefore be read as a parody of *Jane Eyre* (20). It is important to note that Hutcheon's formulation of parody as "repetition with a difference" allows for an understanding of parody beyond mockery (32). Indeed, as Gaspar asserts in her reading of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, parody "may be governed by a tone that is either playful, respectful, or mocking," and, like irony, can be "positive and reinforcing, or negative and destructive" (8).

In the same vein, Graham Huggan identifies mimicry as a strategy used by Jean Rhys and contends that *Wide Sargasso Sea* is a “mimic text.”²⁹ Though Huggan points out that “mimicry...does not connote subservience, but rather resistance” (644), and, like Walcott, suggests that “mimicry...is best conceived of as an act of imagination” (648), he nonetheless reinforces the idea that the Caribbean text primarily exists to “answer back” to the dominant, colonial discourse (657). Drawing on Homi Bhabha’s notion, developed in “Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse,” of mimicry as “a difference that is itself a process of disavowal,” Huggan argues that Rhys’s rewriting “engages in a dialectical relationship with its European predecessor which is essentially counterdiscursive in nature” (657).

In reading *Wide Sargasso Sea* as both re-righting and transcontextualizing *Jane Eyre*, I would argue that Rhys encourages us to expand Hutcheon’s notion of parody even further, for Rhys’s text does not fit neatly within the category of playful, respectful, or mocking but rather contains elements of all three. Neither can its ironic transcontextualizing be read as purely positive or negative in intent. Though *Wide Sargasso Sea* certainly works as a corrective to *Jane Eyre*, its tone is not mocking, nor was its intent destructive. Already with Rhys, therefore, we see a complex dynamic between the source text and its retelling that troubles

²⁹ Graham Huggan, “A Tale of Two Parrots: Walcott, Rhys, and the Uses of Colonial Mimicry,” *Contemporary Literature* 35.4 (1994): 657.

critical understandings of rewriting as “writing back.” This dynamic is further complicated by the work of Maryse Condé, who unlike Rhys, expressed a deep respect and admiration for the Brontë text that she reworked.

Caribbeanizing Brontë: Maryse Condé’s *La migration des coeurs*

In an interview, Condé claims that she was inspired to rewrite her own Brontë tale by Rhys’s re-imagining of *Jane Eyre*. She sees herself as following in the footsteps of her compatriot, who, as she puts it, dared to rewrite a canonical text:

‘La raison pour laquelle j’ai écrit *La migration des coeurs* c’est que quand j’ai vu il y a plusieurs années que Jean Rhys (une antillaise) avait osé écrire, réécrire, un livre qui appartenait au canon universel, j’ai compris qu’il fallait le “cannibalisme” qu’on recommandait à tous les écrivains antillais d’accomplir.’ (Gaspar 181-2)

‘The reason that I wrote *La migration des coeurs* is because, when I saw that a number of years ago Jean Rhys (an Antillean woman) had dared to write—rewrite—a book that belonged to the universal canon, I understood that it took the “cannibalism” that was recommended to all Antillean writers in order to accomplish it.’ (translation mine)

Condé’s use of the word “universal” to describe the literary canon is significant, especially in light of her contention that the process of rewriting is an act of cannibalism; Condé sees her project, in rewriting *Wuthering Heights*, as a form of solidarity with other women writers, in the sense that their intertextual connections form a dialogue among women writers:

‘Il y a une sorte de monde de femmes, de paroles des femmes, de textes d’une société entre les livres des femmes.’ (Gaspar 182)

‘There is a kind of world of women, of women’s words, of texts within a society of women’s books.’ (translation mine)

This notion of solidarity distinguishes Condé’s rewriting from that of Rhys and immediately complicates any reading that would seek to impose a model of “writing back” onto Condé’s work.

Condé sees her textual appropriation of Brontë’s masterpiece as both cannibalism and parody. In an interview with Gaspar, Condé explains that cannibalism, in her understanding, signifies “l’appropriation des grands textes du canon et la réécriture sur les Antilles” ‘the appropriation of the major texts from the canon and their rewriting in the Antilles’ (182). Again, Condé’s usage of the French preposition “sur” here is interesting; while it can mean “in” or “on,” it can also signify “towards” or even “about.” In thinking about Condé’s re-writing of *Wuthering Heights* as a process of Caribbeanizing Brontë’s text, the idea of cannibalism as re-orienting the canonical text in the direction of the Caribbean or using the canonical text to write about the Caribbean proves to be very useful, as the analysis that follows will make clear. Condé claims that rewriting is an appropriative more than referential gesture, suggesting that the reader should understand her use of intertextuality as parody:

‘Donc, il ne faut pas vraiment chercher de ressemblances ou de rapports avec [ceux] qui apparaissent dans le texte. C’est plutôt

une sorte de moquerie, de parodie....Parodie et cannibalisme.’
(Gaspar 185)

‘Therefore, one should not really search for resemblances or connections to [those works] that appear in the text. It’s rather a kind of mockery, of parody....Parody and cannibalism.’
(translation mine)

Parody functions in Condé’s work as an appropriation designed to give new meaning to the text on which it is based.

According to Mardorossian, what Condé’s project shares with that of Rhys is the extent to which their rewritings “have radically and irrevocably restructured contemporary readings of Victorian fiction” (4). Mardorossian thus places these two authors “in the context of [the] legacy of Caliban/cannibal” in their productive resistance (3). Like Rhys’s re-writing of *Jane Eyre*, Condé’s text highlights race and draws attention to the limitations placed on women by society. Condé, like Rhys, also gives voice to previously marginalized characters in her re-telling. As she explains in her interview with Gaspar, Condé used first-person narratives to introduce those who, for reasons of race, class, or gender, are usually silent:

‘...tous les récits à la première personne viennent des personnes (des bonnes, des marchands de poisson, de la gardienne indienne), c’est-à-dire des gens qui en principe n’ont pas de discours, à qui on n’a jamais donné la parole....Donc, il y a cette importance donnée à la parole des gens qui normalement n’ont pas la parole.’ (183)

‘...all the accounts in the first person come from people—maids, fishmongers, the Indian caretaker—that is to say, people who in principle do not have discourse, to whom one has never given

speech....Therefore, there is this importance given to the words of people who normally are not speakers.’ (translation mine)

The difference between their revisionary practices is that whereas Rhys envisions her project as primarily corrective, Condé is interested in adapting a novel from the English tradition to the context of the contemporary Caribbean. In her interview with Gaspar, Condé says that one of her motivations for re-writing *Wuthering Heights* was that she noticed that Brontë’s text, despite its spatial and temporal remove, is still applicable:

‘...ce livre-là, écrit par une anglaise dans un presbytère au dix-neuvième siècle avait, à mon avis, une parole qui pouvait se comprendre de manière différente, qui pourrait s’appliquer à des sociétés contemporaines nouvelles.’ (182)

‘...that book—written by an Englishwoman in a presbytery in the nineteenth century—had, in my opinion, a meaning that could be understood differently, that could be applied anew to contemporary societies.’ (translation mine)

Mardorossian contends that Condé reworks rather than reevaluates Brontë’s text: “In the palimpsestic rewriting, the original text shines through to comment on the twentieth-century Caribbean social and cultural relations whose structures ultimately derive from the context which produced *Wuthering Heights*” (201). Gaspar likewise argues that “Brontë’s story lends itself quite easily to another one in which these elements [race and class] are reformulated in the context of colonialism” (92). In “looking at the past to comment on the present,” Condé traces “the continuance of colonial mentalities” (Mardorossian 7).

In her interview with Gaspar, Condé also notes that the choice between passion and duty posed by Brontë could easily be transposed to the Caribbean and given a Caribbean signification:

‘...je crois que ce que Emily Brontë a dit—à savoir, une sorte de choix entre ce qui est la passion (Heathcliff) et ce qui est peut-être le devoir ou les qualités morales (Linton)—pouvait se transposer dans un modèle antillais.’ (182)

‘...I believe that what Emily Brontë said—that is, a kind of choice between he who is passionate (Heathcliff) and he who is perhaps dutiful and moral (Linton)—could be transposed on an Antillean model.’ (translation mine)

By emphasizing the ways that race and class function in the Caribbean, Condé refigures the choice between passion and duty in *Wuthering Heights* as the choice between African values and European values in *La migration des coeurs*:

‘La passion s’accompagnant de la race pour un homme comme Razyé qui est noir et qui est, par conséquent, dévalorisé en ce qui représente simplement les valeurs matérielles d’ascension sociale....Le choix est entre les valeurs qui sont données d’Afrique...et les valeurs de l’assimilation à l’Europe.’ (Gaspar 182)

‘Passion accompanies race for a man like Razyé who is black and who is consequently devalued in that which represents simply the material values of climbing the social ladder....The choice is between the values that come from Africa...and the values of assimilation to Europe.’ (translation mine)

Condé’s project can therefore perhaps best be understood as the combination of transculturation, parody, and cannibalism that I term Caribbeanization.

While she aims explicitly to parody *Wuthering Heights*, Condé seems not to have been vexed by Brontë's tale. Unlike Rhys, who set out to rewrite *Jane Eyre* as a result of her dissatisfaction with the portrayal of the Creole West Indian woman Bertha, Condé takes a respectful approach to her source text. In fact, Condé dedicates her rewriting to Brontë in an epigraph that appears at the beginning of the text:

À Emily Brontë qui, je l'espère, agréera cette lecture de son chef-d'oeuvre. Honneur et respect!³⁰

To Emily Brontë
Who I hope will approve of this interpretation of her masterpiece.
Honour and respect!³¹

This epigraph has been a source of critical contention, as some readers have been unable to reconcile the notion of parody with the reverential tone of Condé's dedication. Elizabeth Boxley Bowles Duchanaud, for example, discusses "the sarcasm that underlies Condé's 'honor and respect' as she prepares to deconstruct Brontë's oeuvre."³² Rather, Condé's reworking of the text is motivated by a complex set of desires to appropriate the text for a Caribbean signification, and her own reading or interpretation in no way precludes her ability to respect and honor the text she cannibalizes and parodies. Instead, Gaspar contends that Condé

³⁰ Maryse Condé, *La migration des coeurs* (Paris: Laffont, 1995) 7.

³¹ Maryse Condé, *Windward Heights*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Soho, 1998) v.

³² Elizabeth Boxley Bowles Duchanaud, "Reading the French Caribbean through Edouard Glissant," Diss, NYU, 2006, 92.

sees her reworking as “making contact with a writer and her work,” so that her intertextuality exists in solidarity with other writers (178).

Condé’s reference to Brontë establishes an immediate filial relationship between *La migration des coeurs* and *Wuthering Heights*, a relationship that is largely echoed at the level of structure, plot, and characterization. However, Maria Cristina Fumagalli argues that Condé’s narrative “becomes more and more independent” of Brontë’s text and “more focused on Caribbean reality” following Cathy’s death.³³ Indeed, Condé not only sets her version a century later than Brontë’s text, but she also extends Brontë’s narrative genealogy into subsequent generations. In this sense, Condé’s text functions almost as a sequel to *Wuthering Heights* (Gaspar 67). Similarly, Mardorossian calls *La migration des coeurs* “the Caribbean rejoinder” to Brontë’s text.³⁴ According to Gaspar, whereas Rhys’s “re-vision” resulted in a prequel to *Jane Eyre*, Condé’s text also offers “a new ‘vision’ of how the characters’ lives might be played out under a specific set of circumstances, in this case, by beginning to overcome the familial, racial, and socially-based hatred that grips the previous generations” (66). Brontë’s original, in this formulation, serves as a “springboard” for an exploration of issues of identity in the context of the contemporary Caribbean (Gaspar 67).

³³ Maria Cristina Fumagalli, "Maryse Condé Creolizes the Canon in *La migration des coeurs*," *Emerging Perspectives on Maryse Condé: A Writer of Her Own*, eds. Sarah Barbour and Gerise Herndon (Trenton: Africa World, 2006) 258.

³⁴ Carine M. Mardorossian, "Rewriting the Postcolonial: Maryse Condé's *La migration des coeurs*," *Emerging Perspectives on Maryse Condé: A Writer of Her Own*, eds. Sarah Barbour and Gerise Herndon (Trenton: Africa World, 2006) 275.

In transposing *Wuthering Heights* to a contemporary Caribbean context, Condé's novel presents "both an account of and a meditation on the process of creolization" (Fumagalli 253). According to Fumagalli, "the class/race conflict present in *Wuthering Heights* is radicalized" in *La migration des coeurs* (258). Razyé is adopted by a mulatto couple, Hubert Gagneur and Irminette Boisgris, whose two children, Cathy and Justin, are described as different in color:

Le garçon était plutôt triste et taciturne. Avec une peau claire, assez claire pour qu'il se gagne à la force du poignet une place dans la société des Blancs. Quant à la fille, elle était de la couleur du sirop qu'on vient de sortir du feu et qu'on refroidit au plein air, les cheveux noirs comme des fils de nuit et les yeux verts. (25)

The boy was somewhat sad and taciturn, with a fair skin, fair enough for him to earn a place for himself in white folks' company through sheer hard work. As for Cathy, she was the colour of hot syrup left to cool in the open air, with black hair like threads of night and green eyes. (18-19)

Fumagalli argues that these descriptions serve to inform the reader of the degrees of color used by the French colonial powers to distinguish among those of mixed race origins (259). Razyé is a black Creole, and therefore of the lowest class. His rival for Cathy's affections, Aymeric de Linsseuil, is a member of the aristocratic white planter class known as *béké*, to which Cathy, as a mulatto, would aspire. Mardorossian argues that the rivalry between Heathcliff/Razyé and Edgar Linton/Aymeric de Linsseuil, which was "predominantly represented in terms of a class conflict" in *Wuthering Heights* "is overlaid in Condé's novel with a racial

dimension that forcefully illustrates the intertwined racial and class hierarchies of Caribbean societies” (“Rewriting” 275).

As Condé suggests in her interview with Gaspar, the rivalry between the two men takes on another dimension to the extent that the choice between Razyé and Aymeric is seen as a choice between African and European values. Cathy must assimilate in order to gain entrance into the de Linsseuil family, a process that involves a “complete deculturation” from Creole culture (Fumagalli 262). In *La migration des coeurs*, Cathy’s death is brought about in part because of her loss of identity, to which she tries too late to lay claim. Cathy dies in childbirth, and her daughter, who was fathered by Razyé, is raised by Aymeric de Linsseuil after the death of his wife. Cathy II is described as darker than her mother:

À la différence de ses frères, un hâle déjà foncé l’obscurcissait, comme si elle était remontée dans le temps à la recherche d’une généalogie oubliée. Cela lui préparait un bel avenir! On ferait la moue, on comparerait, on dirait: ‘Comme elle est brune!’ Triste société, où les qualités sont définies selon la couleur de la peau! (92)

Unlike her brothers, her skin had already darkened, as if she had gone back in time in search of a lost family-tree. This forbode a fine future for her! They would make faces and comparisons and declare: ‘How dark she is!’ How pitiful a society where qualities are defined according to skin colour! (87-88)

Despite being a source of embarrassment for the extended de Linsseuil family, Cathy II ironically is raised as a béké and absorbs the ideals appropriate to her social standing. Like her mother, though, Cathy II experiences a sense of

alienation, continuing to sign her diary Cathy de Linsseuil after marrying Razyé II, who is the son of Razyé and Irmine de Linsseuil, the sister in law of Cathy I. Her alienation is furthered when she realizes that she and Razyé II share a father in Razyé, whom she holds responsible for the death of her “father” Aymeric.

Though the fate of the second generation in *La migration des coeurs* is bleaker than that of *Wuthering Heights*, there are signs of hopeful change afoot with the third generation. The daughter of Cathy II and Razyé II is named Anthuria, which Fumagalli reads as “a sign that in spite of being the offspring of an incestuous relationship, she is bound to make a new start” (271). Anthuria takes her name from the indigenous anthurium plant, leading Fumagalli to note that “if *nomen et omen*, Anthuria seems to have been bestowed by her mother with a name capable of counteracting, and in more than one way, the child’s (alleged) ‘curse’” (271). In addition, Razyé II refuses the course of assimilation for his daughter, choosing to move to L’Engoulvent and create a new life with his daughter rather than subject her to indoctrination by his béké mother. By throwing Cathy II’s diary into the sea, Razyé II literally buries the past and suggests that “the future needs to be invented” (Fumagalli 272).

Mardorossian argues that writers of the Caribbean diaspora such as Condé “explore and complicate the intertextual relationship between the English canon and its rewritings in a way that has implications for both postcolonial and Victorian studies” (qtd. in Duchanaud 86-87). According to Duchanaud, Condé’s

multi-lingual approach further complicates the intertextual relationship between the English canon and its rewritings, for, in rewriting the English novel in French, Condé challenges the monolingual model of “writing back.” Paraphrasing Françoise Lionnet, Duchanaud remarks that Condé’s work demonstrates that “the empire does not always write back to the expected *destinataire*,” or addressee (89). Interestingly, according to Duchanaud, the Anglophone texts (*Wuthering Heights* and *Windward Heights*) are put into contact via the translation of a third French text, *La migration des coeurs*, suggesting “a cross-cultural, cross-linguistic relationality” (89). Yet the translated title *Windward Heights* strangely returns to notions of rootedness that both the French text and its translation challenge. Between the “English titles representative of fixed spaces,” therefore, is a literal and symbolic “migration” (Duchanaud 90). According to Duchanaud, the spatial and linguistic border crossing that marks *La migration des coeurs* is reflective of both a process (of writing) and a product (the resulting novel) that is disorderly (90).

In her essay, “Order, Disorder, Freedom, and the West Indian Writer,” Condé discusses the concept of disorder as a creative force. According to Duchanaud, Condé inserts elements of disorder into her work through her use of epigraphs and intertextual allusions. Condé introduces disorder as early as the dedication page, where she pays tribute to her literary forerunner, for, while *Wuthering Heights* is certainly an important source text for Condé’s work, other

works have also influenced its conception. Condé makes this clear with an epigraph from Simone de Beauvoir's *La Cérémonie des adieux* that follows her dedication to Brontë:

Sa mort nous sépare.
Ma mort ne nous réunira pas. (7)

Death has separated us
My death will not reunite us (v)

Condé's use of this epigraph directly after her dedication serves to challenge the reader who seeks to trace *La migration des coeurs* to a single point of influence in *Wuthering Heights*. With this epigraph and subsequent textual allusions to such diverse works as Aimé Césaire's *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*, Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North*, and Charles Dickens's *David Copperfield* (to name but a few), Condé confronts the notion that the origin of her novel can be traced to a single source text, suggesting instead that the genealogy of her work is multiple. In "Narrating the Americas: Transcolonial Métissage and Maryse Condé's *La Migration des coeurs*," Lionnet refers to this refusal of origins as Condé's "cross-cultural poetics" (qtd. in Duchanaud 93). At the level of narrative structure and naming, too, Condé furthers creative disorder. Though *La migration des coeurs* largely mirrors the storyline of *Wuthering Heights*, Condé subverts the spatial rootedness of Brontë's text by privileging the figure of the wanderer and his travels. By focusing on Razyé's travels, rather than on the fixed space of *Wuthering Heights*, Condé introduces disorderly forms of relationality

(Duchanaud 95). Notions of rootedness are further contested by Razyé's declaration that he doesn't belong anywhere:

'Je dis "chez moi" pour parler comme tout le monde. Mais je n'ai pas de pays. C'est en Guadeloupe qu'on m'a trouvé nu comme un ver et brillant plus fort qu'un cochon qu'on égorge, en plein milieu des razyés. Mon nom vient de là.' (17)

'I say "home" to speak like the rest of you. But I have no home. I was found in Guadeloupe as naked as the day I was born, on the barren heaths and cliffs—the razyés—hence my name.' (9)

As is evidenced by Razyé's name, names play an important role in Condé's novel, contributing to the motif of wandering. Named for the landscape on which he was discovered, Razyé complicates traditional notions of origin based on familial or national lineage (Duchanaud 97).

Mardorossian argues that Condé's text can be read as a direct response to the paradigm of "postcolonial revisionism" put forward in *The Empire Writes Back*: "*La migration des coeurs* is not so much a rewriting of Emily Brontë's novel as it is a rewriting of the assumptions and tropes that motivate analyses of postcolonial rewritings" ("Rewriting" 276). As Sarah E. Barbour and Gerise Herndon clarify, "Condé's refusal to provide the reader easy opportunities for admiration and identification or to provide satisfying narrative conclusions forces us to question many premises on which postcolonial literary analyses have been

based.”³⁵ Instead of attempting to read rewritings as, to use Mardorossian’s phrasing, “paradigmatic instances of the postcolonial project” (“Rewriting” 276), reading Condé’s retelling within the framework of Caribbean intertextuality allows for an understanding of her project, like that of Rhys, as more than an act of “writing back.” Indeed, the notion of Caribbeanization calls attention to the ways in which Condé writes not only “back” but also “from” and “for.” This Caribbeanizing tendency, suggested by Jean Rhys’s retelling of *Jane Eyre* as *Wide Sargasso Sea*, is thus fully realized in Maryse Condé’s reworking of *Wuthering Heights* as *La migration des coeurs*.

³⁵ Sarah E. Barbour and Gerise Herndon, "Maryse Condé: A Writer of Her Own," Emerging Perspectives on Maryse Condé: A Writer of Her Own, eds. Sarah Barbour and Gerise Herndon (Trenton: Africa World, 2006) 25.

Chapter Two: Re-Storying the Past

In *Le discours antillais*, Édouard Glissant contends that one of the most pernicious effects of colonization is the idea of a single, linear, and hierarchical History.³⁶ Glissant argues in an essay from the collection titled “Histoire, histoires” that this notion of “‘l’Histoire.’ (Avec un grand H)” (227) “‘History [with a capital *H*]’”³⁷ was an enabling fantasy conceived by the West at a time when it sought to determine the course of world history. Glissant recounts that history was understood by Hegel to be the realm of Europeans; Amerindians were relegated to the prehistorical, and Africans were deemed ahistorical. According to Glissant, the historical consciousness of the French Caribbean people has its origins in the trauma of the slave trade and was formed amid constant rupture. The resulting condition, which he terms “non-histoire” ‘nonhistory,’ is characterized by “l’impossibilité pour la conscience collective d’en faire le tour” ‘the inability of the collective consciousness to absorb it all’ and, thus, “le raturage de la mémoire collective” ‘the erasure of the collective memory’ (224; 62).

³⁶ Édouard Glissant, *Le discours antillais* (Paris: Seuil, 1981).

³⁷ Édouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays*, trans. J. Michael Dash (Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, 1989) 64.

As part of their struggles against colonial domination, colonized peoples routinely sought to recover and assert their own histories, often returning to their oral traditions as a source of collective memory. Playing on the French term *histoire*, meaning both history and story, Glissant posits stories, especially folktales, as “l’anti-écriture” ‘antiwriting’ (262; 84) and the multiple, the collective, the non-linear as “l’anti-Histoire” ‘anti-History’ (263; 85). In turning to literature as a means of collective resistance, Glissant cautions that literature, in Hegel’s day, was, like history, used to justify exclusion and domination, such that literature and history comprised a “double prétention” ‘double hegemony’ (243; 76).

La littérature se fait méta-existence, toute-puissance du signe sacralisé, par quoi les peuples de l’écriture estimeront légitime de dominer et de régir les peuples à civilisation orale. (243)

Literature attains a metaexistence, the all-powerfulness of the sacred sign, which will allow people with writing to think it justified to dominate and rule peoples with an oral civilization. (76)

Glissant distinguishes between myth and tale, arguing that myth “préfigure l’histoire” ‘prefigures history’ (261-62; 83) and “consacre la parole” ‘consecrates the word’ (262; 84), whereas the folktale attacks “le sacré du signe écrit” ‘the sacred status of the written word’ (262; 84). Glissant resolves that “une exploration créatrice” ‘a creative approach’ (223; 61) is needed as an antidote to “la mise en schémas historique” ‘the historical approach’ (223; 61).

La littérature n'est pas diffractée seulement, elle est désormais partagée. Les histories sont là, et la voix des peuples. Il faut méditer un nouveau rapport entre histoire et littérature. (245)

Literature is not only fragmented, it is henceforth shared. In it lie histories and the voice of peoples. We must reflect on a new relationship between history and literature. (77)

According to Glissant, the role of the writer is thus to “fouiller” “dig deep” (227-28; 64) into collective memory so as to reconstitute the “chronologie tourmentée” ‘tormented chronology’ (228; 65) of the Caribbean.

Michel-Rolph Trouillot likewise makes use of the ambivalence of the word “history” in order to rethink the relationship between history and story. In *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*, Trouillot claims that history can be understood to mean both “what happened”—the facts—and “that which is said to have happened”—the narrative.³⁸ According to Trouillot, in the space where these two definitions of historicity overlap “we discover the differential exercise of power that makes some narratives possible and silences others” (25). In arguing that the distinction between these two meanings “is not always clear,” Trouillot draws attention to the process of historical production and the function of power therein (3). Trouillot contends that silences appear at four moments in the historical process: “the moment of fact creation (the making of *sources*); the moment of fact assembly (the making of *archives*); the moment of

³⁸ Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon, 1995) 2.

fact retrieval (the making of *narrative*); and the moment of retrospective significance (the making of *history* in the final instance)” (26). As Trouillot’s own study demonstrates, deconstructing the silences of historical narratives allows for the production of alternative narratives.

The question of history has remained one of the central preoccupations of the literatures that have emerged from former colonies since independence. Postcolonial writers have challenged the very notion of history by destabilizing it at a fundamental level, calling into question its claims to objective truth and highlighting its constructedness. In deconstructing the multiple silences of historical narratives that exist in colonial archives, and in reconstructing alternate, fictional archives that bear witness to those stories left out of the traditional repositories of history, postcolonial writers engage in the dual process of writing/righting history.

In this chapter, I examine two fictional works that rewrite events from the historical past: Assia Djébar’s *L’amour, la fantasia* (1995), a recuperation of Algerian women’s resistance to French colonization, and Edwidge Danticat’s *The Farming of Bones* (1998), about the 1937 massacre of Haitians under Trujillo. In rethinking history as story, these texts demonstrate that official, written history is but one version, one perspective among many possible points of view regarding the same set of events. I use the concept of *restorying*, borrowed from clinical psychology, to refer to the efforts of these writers to create alternative narratives

through fiction. In this process, also known as narrative therapy, a person who has suffered a traumatic event is encouraged to retell the story of the event from an alternate perspective. Restorying recognizes the power of narrative and its role in the construction of identity, as well as the ability of human beings to rewrite the stories that shape their individual and collective identities. In reading texts which rewrite the history of Africa and the Caribbean from alternate perspectives, it is my aim to examine not only the possibilities that fiction offers in re-creating accounts of past events but also the potential limitations of these fictional narratives as a means of recuperating the past.

Writing/Righting History: Assia Djébar's *L'amour, la fantasia*

According to Albert Memmi's *Portrait du colonisé*, if one of the greatest injustices of the colonized is having been deemed ahistorical—"d'être placé *hors de l'histoire*" 'having been placed outside of history'—then women who have been colonized are subject to a double colonization.³⁹ Excluded from both history and writing, the female colonial subject is, argues Memmi, in danger of losing her memory (131). In *L'amour, la fantasia*, Assia Djébar draws attention to the ways in which history is constructed, exposing the mechanisms at work in the colonial archive so as to recuperate the voices and agency of Algerian women. Djébar's text works to reinstate women within the realm of history and to revalue oral

³⁹ Albert Memmi, *Portrait du colonisé* (Paris: Payot, 1973) 121. (Translation mine.)

narratives as sites of collective memory. In doing so, *L'amour, la fantasia* brings together three histories: the French conquest of Algeria, the Algerian war for independence, and Djébar's personal history. The autobiographical account frames and interprets the historical accounts and serves to link personal identity to collective identities formed around gender and nation.

The first part of *L'amour, la fantasia* juxtaposes the author's own coming of age with Algeria's struggle for independence, thus aligning the personal narrative with the national narrative. The first section also creates juxtaposition between the two parts of the title linked previously by a comma, *l'amour* and *la fantasia*. Each of the titled chapters in this section is about love, whereas the numbered chapters deal with war. The titled and numbered chapters are interpolated, and these interpolated chapters are linked to each other through the repetition of words from the end of one to the beginning of another. For example, the French word *combat* in the phrase "un étrange combat de femmes"⁴⁰ 'an unprecedented women's battle'⁴¹ links the end of "Trois jeunes filles cloîtrées..." 'Three Cloistered Girls' with the beginning of II, where the phrase "Le combat de Staouéli..." 'The battle of Staouéli' (24; 14) appears. As is evidenced in the example above, these links are maintained in the English translation. Furthermore, the first section is entitled "La prise de la ville ou L'Amour s'écrit" 'The Capture

⁴⁰ Assia Djébar, *L'amour, la fantasia* (Paris: Michel, 1985) 23.

⁴¹ Assia Djébar, *Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade*, trans. Dorothy S. Blair (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1993) 13.

of the City or Love-Letters.’ Love and war are therefore conflated from the beginning of the text and set up a theme that Djébar traces throughout the course of the novel.

This organizational structure also emphasizes another meaning of the term *fantasia*—that of a musical movement that proceeds along themes and variations. From the beginning of Djébar’s text, therefore, the author sets up a narrative structure that is cyclical and polyphonic. The novel’s polyphony is further suggested by its two epigraphs by nineteenth-century colonizers. The first, from Eugène Fromentin’s *Une Année dans le Sahel* (*A Year in the Sahel*), sets a terrifying scene punctuated by voices crying out:

Il y eut un cri déchirant—je l’entends encore au moment où je t’écris—, puis des clameurs, puis un tumulte.... (7)

A heart-rending cry arose—I can hear it still as I write to you—then the air was rent with screams, then pandemonium broke loose.... (xxiii)

The second epigraph, which appears on the following page, is from Barchou de Penhoën’s *Expédition d’Afrique* (*Expedition to Africa*) and similarly foregrounds the voices of the native Algerians:

L’expérience était venue à nos sentinelles: elles commençaient à savoir distinguer du pas et du cri de l’Arabe, ceux des bêtes fauves errant autour du camp dans les ténèbres. (9)

Our sentinels were gaining in experience: they were learning to distinguish the footsteps and voices of the Arabs from the sounds made by the wild beasts that prowled the camp in the dark. (1)

Djebar uses these quotations in part to set up and then thwart expectations, for the first part of her novel begins not with a scene from the conquest of Algeria but rather with the chapter “Fillette arabe allant pour la première fois à l’école” ‘A Little Arab Girl’s First Day at School.’ Connecting the nineteenth-century colonial accounts to the story about a young girl going to school are the paired issues of language and representation. Citing Michel de Certeau, Nada Halloway argues that “this idea of the writer, the painters, and the engravers as the first colonizers is significant to the development of both *Fantasia* and the historical Algerian invasion, given the role that the language of representation played in the actual process of colonial expansion.”⁴²

Education, too, played an important role in the colonial project. As a result of her education, the young narrator is separated from her mother tongue, an alienation that is related both to language and to gender. As Djebar explains, however, the French language afforded her and her sisters freedoms that Arabic did not. For them, French is a language of the imagination; through writing love letters, the three cloistered girls escape from their physical confines and explore the world of love:

...j’imaginai un tournoiement de mots écrits en secret, sur le point d’enserrer de rets invisibles nos corps d’adolescents. (22)

⁴² Nada Halloway, "Charting the Nation/Charting History: The Power of Language in Assia Djebar's *Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade*," Twelve Best Books by African Women: Critical Readings, eds. Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi and Tuzyline Jita Allan (Athens: Ohio UP, 2009) 39.

...I imagined written words whirling furtively around, about to twine invisible snares around our adolescent bodies. (13)

Though French is, for the young narrator, equated with self-expression and liberation, Djébar refers to the French language in the final movements of the novel as “la langue adverse” ‘the enemy’s language’ (241; 215). This seemingly contradictory stance toward writing in French is explained by Djébar’s comment that “le français m’est langue marâtre” ‘French is my “stepmother tongue”’ (240; 214). This phrasing recalls Abdelkebir Khatibi’s construction in *Maghreb pluriel* of oral dialect as maternal and written language as paternal.⁴³ According to Soheila Ghaussy, in Djébar’s formulation, “French loses its role of the strictly paternal, superimposed language of colonization.”⁴⁴ In an interview with Clarisse Zimra, Djébar notes that she resolved her conflict with French through writing the novel:

En écrivant *L’amour, la fantasia*, j’ai définitivement réglé mes comptes avec la langue française.

In writing *Fantasia*, I settled my accounts, once and for all, with the French language.⁴⁵

Djébar resolves her ambivalence toward French due to the discovery of letters written by French woman Pauline Rolland. For Djébar, Rolland is the ancestor of the Algerian women whose stories she retells in the third part of the

⁴³ Abdelkebir Khatibi, "Bilinguisme et littérature," *Maghreb pluriel* (Paris: Denoël, 1983) 188.

⁴⁴ Soheila Ghaussy, "A Stepmother Tongue: 'Feminine Writing' in Assia Djébar's *Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade*," *World Literature Today* 68.3 (Summer 1994): 461.

⁴⁵ Clarisse Zimra, "Disorienting the Subject in Djébar's *L'Amour, la fantasia*," *Yale French Studies* 87 (1995): 151.

novel. As Mary Jean Green argues, “By expanding the French documentary sources to include the words of this sister in oppression, Djébar has found a gap in the hegemonic perspective which opens the possibility of real communication.”⁴⁶ Djébar creates other gaps in the hegemonic perspective of the French colonizers by disrupting their discourse. For example, she breaks the colonizers’ texts into fragments and regularly inserts her own commentary alongside their texts, such as when she analyzes J.T. Merle’s account of the visit between an Algerian father and his wounded son. In this example, she draws attention to Merle’s theatricality by portraying the meeting as scenes from tableaux (44; 32). In doing so, argues Green, Djébar exposes “the constructed nature of these historical accounts” and thus “blurs the lines between history and fiction” (962-63). Furthermore, Green contends that, by weaving the fragmented texts of the colonizers with the author’s own voice, “the text itself...creates the possibility of dialogue absent from the historical record” (962).

Likewise, Djébar finds a resisting gaze in the accounts of the French *enfumade*: “As the French soldiers surround a group of captured women...one of them unyieldingly returns the look of the observer, refusing the objectification contained in his gaze” (Green 962). When she cannot find evidence of a resisting gaze in the historical documents, Djébar writes the reciprocal gaze herself. For

⁴⁶ Mary Jean Green, "Dismantling the Colonizing Text: Anne Hébert's *Kamouraska* and Assia Djébar's *L'Amour, la fantasia*," *The French Review* 66.6 (1993): 965.

example, Djébar imagines that Amable Matterer, the lookout for the invading French fleet, is confronted by “des milliers de spectateurs” ‘thousands of watchful eyes’ (15; 7) as he “regarde la ville qui regarde” ‘gazes at the city which returns his gaze’ (15; 7). The power of representation is foregrounded with the statement that follows this imagined encounter:

A mon tour, j’écis dans sa langue, mais plus de cent cinquante ans après. (16)

I, in my turn, write, using his language, but more than one hundred and fifty years later. (7)

According to Hallway, Djébar thus “colonizes that part of discourse that will render the weak and the powerless to the margins of history” (39).

In her analysis of the formal strategies used by Djébar in her rewriting of history, Veronika Thiel points to Djébar’s metadiscursive commentary as one of the most significant ways that the author engages the archive.⁴⁷ In one example, Djébar comments explicitly on the archive itself:

Les historiens perdent celui-ci de vue, juste avant que l’Emir soit contraint de se rendre. Aïssa el Berkani partit avec sa ‘deira’ au Maroc. Au-delà d’Oudja, sa trace disparaît dans les archives—comme si ‘archices’ signifiait empreinte de la réalité! (201)

The historians lost sight of him, just before the Amir was forced to surrender. Aïssa el-Berkani left with his ‘deira’ for Morocco. Beyond Oudja, there is no more trace of him in the archives—as if ‘archives’ guaranteed the imprint of reality! (177)

⁴⁷ Veronika Thiel, “La Querelle des discours: Techniques formelles de la réécriture de l’histoire dans *L’Amour, la fantasia*,” *L’Esprit Créateur* 48.4 (2008): 38-39.

According to Thiel, Djébar's hypertextuality seeks to create not only a new vision of historical events but also a new version of the historical texts themselves:

L'écriture hypertextuelle est donc une véritable réécriture au sens premier du terme qui vise non seulement à inventer une nouvelle vision des événements représentés, mais également à produire une nouvelle version des textes eux-mêmes. (38)

Hypertextual writing is therefore a real rewriting according to the original meaning of the term that aims not only to invent a new vision of the represented events but also to produce a new version of the texts themselves. (translation mine)

In critiquing historiography's pretention to objectivity, Djébar renders it opaque and underlines the constructed and subjective nature of its discourse (Thiel 37). According to H. Adlai Murdoch, Djébar's approach involves "problematizing writing itself": "Her task will be to take on the 'official' record of the French colonial conquest of Algeria, itself a rewriting of historical fact, and to rewrite this rewriting from the perspective of the colonized subject."⁴⁸ In doing so, Djébar connects the act of conquest with the act of writing, so as to draw attention to the ways that Algeria as a nation is inscribed as a female subject (Murdoch 77-78). By highlighting the performative aspects of the invasion of the French, Djébar points to the role of representation in the colonial project (Halloway 38).

⁴⁸ H. Adlai Murdoch, "Rewriting Writing: Identity, Exile and Renewal in Assia Djébar's *L'amour, la fantasia*," *Yale French Studies* 83.2 (1993): 75.

Writing, language, and violence are thus linked. For example, Djébar describes autobiographical writing as opening a wound:

Tenter l'autobiographie par les seuls mots français, c'est, sous le lent scalpel de l'autopsie à vif....Les blessures s'ouvrent, les veines pleurent, coule le sang de soi et des autres, qui n'a jamais séché. (178)

To attempt an autobiography using French words alone is to lend oneself to the vivisector's scalpel....Wounds are reopened, veins weep, one's own blood flows and that of others, which has never dried. (156)

Writing and violence are further connected when Djébar imagines herself coming across the hand of an Algerian woman discarded by Fromentin:

Eugène Fromentin me tend une main inattendue....Il évoque alors un détail sinistre: au sortir de l'oasis que le massacre, six mois après, empuantit, Fromentin ramasse, dans la poussière, une main coupée d'Algérienne anonyme. Il la jette ensuite sur son chemin. Plus tard, je me saisis de cette main vivante, main de la mutilation et du souvenir et je tente de lui faire porter le 'qalam.' (255)

Eugène Fromentin offers me an unexpected hand....He describes one sinister detail: as he is leaving the oasis which six months after the massacre is still filled with its stench, Fromentin picks up out of the dust the severed hand of an anonymous Algerian woman. He throws it down again in his path. Later, I seize on this living hand, hand of mutilation and of memory, and I attempt to bring it to the *qalam*. (226)

As Katherine Gracki states, "In *Fantasia* Djébar imagines herself picking up this hand and bringing it to the *qalam* so that it may testify to its own mutilation as well as to the historical violence its mutilation represents. The wounded female

body comes to represent an Algeria raped and left bleeding in the dust by the conquering soldiers.”⁴⁹

In an interview with Mildred Mortimer, Djébar comments that “...l’histoire est utilisé dans ce roman comme quête de l’identité” ‘history is used in this novel as a quest for identity.’⁵⁰ She goes on to explain that the identity she seeks is national as well as feminine: “Identité non seulement des femmes mais de tout le pays” ‘Identity not only of women but also of the entire nation’ (201). Through history, then, Djébar explores issues of language choice and the tensions between written and oral accounts, both of which have been understood according to distinct gender dynamics. It is in her juxtaposition of written (male) and oral (female) accounts that Djébar is able to recuperate a collective history of women and of Algeria. According to Laurence Huughe, “the writing of individual history is thus based in the writing of collective history,” so that “the autobiography becomes what Djébar calls ‘an autobiography in the plural.’”⁵¹

Re-membling *el trujillato*: Edwidge Danticat’s *The Farming of Bones*

In *The Farming of Bones*, Edwidge Danticat uses fiction to challenge the history of *el trujillato* and the 1937 massacre of Haitians under Dominican

⁴⁹ Katherine Gracki, "Writing Violence and the Violence of Writing in Assia Djébar's Algerian Quartet," *World Literature Today* 70.4 (1996): 836.

⁵⁰ Mildred Mortimer, "Entretien Avec Assia Djébar, Écrivain Algérien," *Research in African Literatures* 19.2 (1988): 201. (Translation mine.)

⁵¹ Laurence Huughe, "'Ecrire comme un voile': The Problematics of the Gaze in the Work of Assia Djébar," *World Literature Today* 70.4 (1996): 874.

dictator Rafael Trujillo's regime. Danticat tells the story of the massacre, in which thousands of Haitians who lived and worked in the Dominican Republic were slaughtered, from the perspective of protagonist and narrator Amabelle Désir. Born in Haiti and raised in the Dominican Republic after her parents drowned and orphaned her at the age of eight, Amabelle works for a family of wealthy Dominicans as a domestic servant. Amabelle recounts the days leading up to the massacre, her flight to Haiti, and her return visit to the Dominican Republic. Her account of the massacre, which is told in chronological order, is interspersed with nonlinear dream sequences about her parents, memories of her childhood, and recollected conversations with her lover, Sebastien. These narratives, which are printed in bold type, connect the present to the past and the real to the imaginary so as to demonstrate the uncertainty of the memories and events from which history is made.

History is challenged not only through the novel's narrative structure, but also through its refusal of a single narrative account of the events that surround the massacre. Though the story is told by one narrator, the novel is populated with other voices: rumors abound, men talk in their sleep, and survivors tell their stories to anyone who will listen. Likewise, questions proliferate, and answers are hard to come by. Some events, like the deaths of Sebastien and Mimi, are assumed but not verified. Others, like the use of parsley as a test of Haitian nationality, are never fully explained. After hearing one story in response to the

question about why parsley was used to distinguish Spanish-speaking Dominicans from Kreyol-speaking Haitians, Amabelle thinks to herself, “Perhaps there was no story that could truly satisfy. I myself didn’t know if that story was true or even possible, but as the señora had said, there are many stories. And mine too is only one.”⁵² Similarly, Danticat explains in an interview with Renee Shea that, in researching her novel, she came across different versions of the massacre, depending on her location on the border: “I traveled along border towns both in the Dominican Republic and in Haiti, and there are a lot of differences in how people remember it.”⁵³

According to Michele Wucker, author of *Why the Cocks Fight: Dominicans, Haitians, and the Struggle for Hispaniola*, the massacre lives strongly in the memory of both nations, such that “even now, it is nearly impossible for Dominicans and Haitians to think of each other without some trace of the tragedy of their mutual history.”⁵⁴ Yet, as Danticat explained in an interview with Eleanor Wachtel, when she returned to Massacre River during her research for the novel, expecting “to sense the history” that had taken place there, she encountered only “the ordinariness of life.”⁵⁵ In an interview with Mallay

⁵² Edwidge Danticat, *The Farming of Bones* (New York: Soho, 1998) 305.

⁵³ Renee H. Shea, “The Hunger to Tell: Edwidge Danticat and *The Farming of Bones*,” *Macomère* 2 (1999): 16.

⁵⁴ Michelle Wucker, *Why the Cocks Fight: Dominicans, Haitians, and the Struggle for Hispaniola* (New York: Hill, 1999) 44.

⁵⁵ Eleanor Wachtel, “A Conversation with Edwidge Danticat,” *Brick* 65-66 (2000): 107.

Charters, Danticat recounts, “It was really strange to stand there—it was low tide, and people were bathing, and washing their clothes in the water.”⁵⁶ When Amabelle returns to the river after the massacre, she likewise notes its ordinariness:

At first glance, the Massacre appeared like any of the three or four large rivers in the north of Haiti. On a busy market day, it was simply a lively throughway beneath a concrete bridge, where women sat on boulders at the water’s edge to pound their clothes clean, and mules and oxen stopped to diminish their thirst. (284)

Danticat says that it was “what I didn’t find there that most moved me” (Wachtel 107): “I was really sad because there was nothing that reaffirmed what had happened. No memorial plaques. No apologies. Life was just going on. That’s when I realized how fragile memory is. It can just vanish in the air if we let it” (Shea 21). In the absence of official markers to commemorate the massacre, Danticat claims that “we ourselves are the museums” (Shea 21):

There are no markers. I felt like I was standing on top of a huge mass grave, and just couldn’t see the bodies. That’s the first time I remember thinking, ‘Nature has no memory’—a line that later

⁵⁶ Mally Charters, "Edwidge Danticat: A Bitter Legacy Revisited," Publishers Weekly 1998: 43.

made its way into the book—‘and that’s why we have to have memory.’ (Charters 43)

According to Wucker, Trujillo commemorated himself and his regime so frequently that he appeared in the *Guinness Book of World Records* for building the most statues in his own honor (69). As Kelli Lyon Johnson argues in her article “Both Sides of the Massacre: Collective Memory and Narrative on Hispaniola,” “these commemorations were the space Trujillo claimed for himself in which to construct the national identity of the Dominican Republic, his own attempt to shape the country’s collective memory and identity.”⁵⁷ While commemoration was misappropriated during the Trujillo’s reign, it is absent altogether in Haiti, where the massacre has not been commemorated but silenced. In an interview with Jerry Philogene, Danticat expresses her reasons for writing the novel as an attempt to remember the massacre in the face of the silence that surrounds it: “Nineteen ninety-seven had come and gone and no word said...no wreaths laid; I wrote the book as a memory and a tribute to what happened.”⁵⁸ She also laments the fact that “whereas young Dominicans know about this massacre of Haitian laborers, young Haitians do not” (qtd. in Francis 169). As she explains to Charters, “...I wasn’t thinking so much I wanted to popularize it with a larger

⁵⁷ Kelli Lyon Johnson, "Both Sides of the Massacre: Collective Memory and Narrative on Hispaniola," *Mosaic* 36.2 (2003): 76.

⁵⁸ Quoted in Donette A. Francis, "Unsilencing the Past: Edwidge Danticat's *The Farming of Bones*," *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism* 5 (1999): 168.

audience as with younger people, like my brothers, who didn't know about it at all. It's a part of our history, as Haitians....Writing about it is an act of remembrance" (43).

Using Homi Bhabha's notion of "in-between spaces" that enable new strategies of individual and communal identity and create "innovative sites of collaboration and contestation," Johnson claims that "in-between space is entextualized in the novel: between history and memory, the vernacular and the official, fiction and fact" (76). In the hybrid, shared narrative space she creates, Danticat locates a new collective memory that includes those who have been historically marginalized. According to Johnson, collective memory is usually gendered female, in contrast to the traditionally male realm of official history: "the distinction between history and memory thus creates divisions of gender, race, and nationality, ultimately devaluing collective memory as inferior to the 'objective' events and materials of history" (77). In relocating collective memory to the narrative space, Danticat's novel itself becomes the location of collective memory. In the absence of monuments, or other physical sites or spaces of memory, it is in the narrative space of the novel that a Haitian collective memory of the massacre resides. By creating a site for the memories of those marginalized by traditional state discourses of history, Danticat "undermines traditional state uses of collective memory" (Johnson 79). Johnson argues that this collective memory in turn expresses a new national identity (76).

Lynn Chun Ink agrees, arguing in her article “Remaking Identity, Unmaking Nation: Historical Recovery and the Reconstruction of Community in *In the Time of the Butterflies* and *The Farming of Bones*” that Danticat’s novel offers an alternative definition of community to that of patriarchal nationalism:

Women’s contemporary texts that attempt to rewrite imperial history not only reconstruct collective identity but also redefine the very boundaries of this collectivity, renegotiating the masculinized national identity that is inherited from imperialism. By disrupting accepted notions of community, such texts offer alternative communal definitions at the same time they strive to present an alternative to imperial history. These recoveries re-imagine the national community perpetuated by imperialism, thus often rejecting a male-defined nationalism and the collective identity it produces.⁵⁹

Danticat critiques Dominican nationalism under Trujillo by showing “the constructedness of national identity” and “the arbitrariness of national borders” (Ink 802).

Amabelle exemplifies the ambiguous identity of the migrant. Amabelle initially identifies more strongly with the Dominican family that raised her than

⁵⁹ Lynn Chun Ink, "Remaking Identity, Unmaking Nation: Historical Recovery and the Reconstruction of Community in *In the Time of the Butterflies* and *The Farming of Bones*," Callaloo 27.3 (2004): 788-89.

with her Haitian heritage. When Sebastien angrily confronts her about her loyalties, saying, ““Who are these people to you? Do you think they’re your family?”” Amabelle responds, ““The señora and her family are the closest to kin I have”” (110). As Ink explains, “her feeling of kinship arises...from the feelings and experiences of the loss of a mother and a motherland that she shares with Valencia as well as with Papi” (802). Unlike the other members of the Haitian migrant community in Alegría, Amabelle even upholds and reinforces the class distinction that separates her from Valencia, with whom she shared a room as a child. When Mimi refers to Señorita Beatriz by her first name, Amabelle expresses shock at the ““lack of respect”” Mimi shows towards the lady of her household (63). Thinking of her own relationship with Señora Valencia, Amabelle recalls: “I had called her Señorita as she grew from a child into a young woman. When she married the year before, I called her Señora. She on the other hand had always called me Amabelle” (63). Though Amabelle seems aware, at times, that her status as a house servant prevents her from truly being a member of the Duarte family, she is more often surprised at those moments when differences of class, race, or nationality interfere to trump the allegiance she feels. For example, after she assists Valencia in the delivery of her twins, Amabelle is hurt when Valencia asks Juana to stay the night: “Why Juana? Why not me?” (41). According to Ink, “As the privileged position of Juana, the Dominican servant, over Amabelle indicates...national ties take primacy over class status” (801).

Likewise, Amabelle demonstrates only a fleeting awareness of the vulnerability of her status as a migrant. Other migrants of Haitian descent seem acutely aware of their status as outsiders: “To them we are always foreigners, even if our granmèmès’ granmèmès were born in this country” (69). They also express concern over their undocumented status and subsequent lack of legal rights: “Papers are everything. You have no papers in your hands, they do with you what they want” (70). Amabelle too “had no papers to show that I belonged either here or in Haiti where I was born” (70), yet she feels that she is not as vulnerable as those who labored in the cane fields:

They were always hearing about rifles being purposely or accidentally fired by angry field guards at braceros or about machetes being slung at cane workers’ necks in a fight over pesos at the cane press. Things like this happened all the time to the cane workers; they were the most unprotected of our kind. (70-71)

As tensions rise between Dominicans and Haitians, and rumors reach Alegria about Haitians being killed, Amabelle naively believes that the Dominican need for Haitian labor will protect her, despite Doctor Javier’s warning: “It couldn’t be real. Rumors, I thought....This could not touch people like me, nor people like Yves, Sebastien, and Kongo who worked in the cane fields....The Dominicans needed the sugar from the cane for their cafecitos and dulce de leche” (140). Only after the massacre does Amabelle come to identify herself as Haitian,

suggesting that “it is not some essential quality that binds her to other Haitians, or even a sense of obligation by birth as Sebastien demands of Amabelle, but rather the shared experience of persecution and loss arising from the massacre” (Ink 804).

National borders are shown in the novel to be as fluid as national identity. According to Ink, “the two countries have a shared history resulting in a cultural and racial blending that defies national distinctions” (803). The difference in color between Valencia’s twins makes clear the arbitrariness of race as a marker of Dominican nationality. The boy is “coconut-cream colored, his cheeks and forehead the blush pink of water lilies” (9) and resembles his mother, with her “cherimoya milk color” (11). The girl, on the other hand, is described as “a deep bronze, between the colors of tan Brazil nut shells and black salsify” (11). Interestingly, Valencia remarks that her daughter looks like Amabelle, suggesting the fluidity of racial identity, “My daughter is a chameleon. She’s taken your color from the mere sight of your face” (11). Moments later, however, she asks if Rosalinda’s color will remain unchanged: “Amabelle do you think my daughter will always be the color she is now?” (12). Valencia expresses her concern to Amabelle that her daughter will be “mistaken for one of your people” (12). This exchange anticipates the moment in Danticat’s account of the massacre in which dark-skinned Dominicans are in fact mistakenly thought to be Haitian: “He was black like the nun who came to re-dress his wounds. He’d been mistaken for one

of us and had received a machete blow across the back of the neck for it. There were many like him in the room, I was told” (217).

According to April Shemak, author of the article “Re-membering Hispaniola: Edwidge Danticat’s *The Farming of Bones*,” Valencia’s concerns about the racialized appearance of her daughter “reflect the emphasis that the regime puts on the nation’s ‘singular’ racial origins (white/Spanish) so that ‘other’ races are not compatible with Dominican nationality.”⁶⁰ When Doctor Javier remarks that Rosalinda “has a little charcoal behind the ears” (17), Papi rewrites his daughter as “the symbolic mother of the Dominican nation whose origins and namesake lie in Spain” (Shemak 90):

It must be from her father’s family....My daughter was born in the capital of this country. Her mother was of pure Spanish blood. She can trace her family to the Conquistadores, the line of El Almirante, Cristobal Colón. And I, myself, was born near a seaport in Valencia, Spain. (18)

Rosalinda does in fact resemble Valencia’s husband, Pico, “with his honey-almond skin and charcoal eyes” (35). However, Valencia chooses to read her children’s racialized appearance through another myth of Dominican genealogy, referring to her children as “my Spanish prince and my Indian princess” (29).

⁶⁰ April Shemak, "Re-Membering Hispaniola: Edwidge Danticat's *The Farming of Bones*," Modern Fiction Studies 48.1 (Spring 2002): 90.

According to Shemak, Valencia's elision of Rosalinda's paternal origins echoes that of Trujillo, who used makeup to cover his African features (91). As Shemak argues, "while Papi's remarks represent the racial views of the Dominican elite, Valencia's twins signify the 'true' diverse racial origins of the Dominican people," such that "the 'dark' daughter, Rosalinda, becomes a metonym for the African segments of the Dominican Republic, while the 'white' son, Rafi, is a metonym for its Spanish ancestry" (90-91).

The unreliability of race as a sign of Dominican nationality led to the use of language as a marker of national difference under Trujillo's dictatorship. As Valencia remarks to Amabelle and Sylvie, "On this island, you walk too far and people speak a different language. Their own words reveal who belongs on what side" (304). Danticat foregrounds the use of language as a marker of Dominican nationality in her novel by retelling how the pronunciation of the Spanish word for parsley, *perejil*, was used to distinguish between Haitians and Dominicans during *el trujillato*: "Many had heard rumors of groups of Haitians being killed in the night because they could not manage to trill their 'r' and utter a throaty 'j' to ask for parsley, to say perejil" (114). The arbitrariness of Trujillo's use of parsley as a test becomes more apparent when Amabelle is confronted by a mob at Dajabòn. As parsley is waved in her face and the young men demand "que diga perejil," Amabelle realizes that she could pronounce the word without a Kreyòl accent:

At that moment, I did believe that had I wanted to, I could have said the word properly, calmly, slowly, the way I often asked “Perejil?” of the old Dominican women...at the roadside gardens and markets, even though the trill of the *r* and the precision of the *j* was sometimes too burdensome a joining for my tongue. It was the kind of thing that if you were startled in the night, you might forget, but with all my senses calm, I could have said it. But I didn’t get my chance. (193)

According to Ink, Danticat posits “shared suffering” and “common struggle” as the basis for community identity as an alternative to a “patriarchal national collectivity” formed around class, gender, or race (804). Ink points to several moments in the novel in which characters form alliances through shared experience, including Amabelle’s relationship with Valencia, Papi’s connection with Kongo, and the discussion that occurs between Valencia and Kongo when she invites the workers to join her for a *cafecito*. Though community through shared loss is not sustainable in these cases, Ink contends that Danticat highlights “the need for multiple and fluid alliances” (805).

More often, however, as Ink readily admits, national identity is shown to threaten these alliances. Drawing on V. Spike Peterson’s argument that patriarchal nationalism creates divisions along race, class, and especially gender lines, “dividing women from men and *from each other* (insofar as their

identification with women as a group is disrupted in favor of identification with the male-defined group)” (qtd. in Ink 801), she analyzes two moments in Danticat’s text when gender is shown to be central to nationalism: Man Rapadou’s murder of her husband, Yves’s father, and Valencia’s support of her husband, Pico. Man Rapadou tells Amabelle that she poisoned her husband to prevent him from spying on his fellow Haitians and betraying them to the Americans, thus elevating national duty over wifely loyalty: “...greater than my love for this man was love for my country. I could not let him trade us all, sell us to the Yankis” (277). Ink argues that “the murder signals the ultimate subversion of patriarchal order, accentuated by its enactment within the privacy of the home, during one of the most domestic of situations” (800). Valencia also privileges national allegiance by siding with her husband and defending his role in the massacre, saying, “Pico merely followed the orders he was given” (300). As Amabelle wondered whether she should stay or flee in the days leading up to the massacre, she asked herself how far Valencia would go to protect her: “Would she be brave enough to stand between me and her husband if she had to?” (141). When Amabelle returns to Alegría after the massacre, she gets the answer to her question. Though Valencia tells Amabelle that she sheltered Haitians during the massacre, and would have hidden her as well, she ultimately chooses her husband and her country: “If I denounce this country, I denounce myself. I would have had to leave the country if I’d forsaken my husband” (299). It is at this moment

that the connection, however unequal and tenuous, that has existed between these two women is irreparably broken:

All the time I had known her, we had always been dangling between being strangers and being friends. Now we were neither strangers nor friends. We were like two people passing each other on the street, exchanging a lengthy meaningless greeting. And at last I wanted it to end. (300)

In trying to recuperate collective memory of the massacre, Danticat positions her novel within the genre of testimonial fiction. Danticat even describes the process of writing the novel as a collaborative experience, saying that it was a “less solitary writing experience because it felt like I was collaborating with those who had existed once” (qtd. in Johnson 80). Johnson uses John Beverley’s discussion of the *testimonio* in “The Margin at the Center: On Testimonio” to understand Danticat’s role as a witness. According to Beverley, “*testimonio* is a fundamentally democratic and egalitarian form of narrative in the sense that it implies that any life so narrated can have a kind of representational value” (qtd. in Johnson 86). “Each individual *testimonio*,” Beverley argues, “evokes an absent polyphony of other voices, other possible lives and experiences” (qtd. in Johnson 86). Johnson claims, therefore, that Danticat witnesses both by listening to the stories of survivors during her research for the novel and by speaking for them:

“she is also a witness who assumes a voice for those people, telling their story in the novel” (86).

However, Danticat has repeatedly expressed some concern about her role as author in relation to those whose stories she is telling, a relationship that is necessarily unequal: “I was purposefully questioning myself and what I was doing—writing this story in English, stealing it if you will, from the true survivors who were not able or allowed to tell their stories” (Shea 17-18). Similarly, in a note to her mother in the acknowledgements, Danticat writes, “Yes, I do always remember that these stories—and all others—are yours to tell and not mine” (312).

Danticat’s concern about her role as a writer in relation to those whose testimonies she is gathering and re-telling has as much to do with the notion of assuming a voice for the silenced as it does with the fallibility of language. *The Farming of Bones* repeatedly explores the problems inherent in language: its role in perpetuating power dynamics, its insufficiency for accounting for the trauma of the massacre, and its potential for subversion and manipulation. The danger of language is highlighted beginning with the novel’s epigraph, a selection from Judges 12:4-6 that echoes the use of parsley to distinguish between Dominicans and Haitians on the basis of language, in which the Gileadites used the word “Shibboleth” to root out Ephraimites trying to cross the river Jordan. Danticat’s

use of this ancient story of slaughter also serves as a reminder that the abuses of language have a long history.

Danticat further foregrounds the insufficiency of language through her depiction of the stories told by the survivors of the massacre. When rumors reach the survivors that officials are listening to stories and writing them down, they are initially hopeful about the potential power of these stories to bring Trujillo to justice: “The group charged the station looking for someone to write their names in a book, and take their story to President Vincent. They wanted a civilian face to concede that what they had witnessed and lived through did truly happen” (236). However, the survivors soon come to the realization that their testimonials will not be used to bring about justice, but rather to compensate them for their losses, granted that they can provide proof. A woman leaving the police station tells Amabelle that the justice of the peace ““writes your name in the book and he says he will take your story to President Sténio Vincent so you can get your money....Then he lets you talk and lets you cry and he asks you if you have papers to show that all these people died”” (234). As Shemak argues, the representation in Danticat’s text of the testimonials of the survivors as “only part of a bureaucratic process” and “only valuable when they can be supported by official documentation” stands “in stark contrast to the revolutionary potential of testimonio lauded by critics such as...John Beverley” (101-102). “Instead of

serving as a site of consciousness-raising and social change,” writes Shemak, “testimonials were taken only as long as they could produce capital” (102).

Danticat points to the potential for language to be subverted and manipulated in her depiction of Yves’s reaction to rumors that priests are recording testimonials of the massacre for members of the media. When Amabelle asks him if he intends to visit the priests, he responds, “I know what will happen....You tell the story, and then it’s retold as they wish, written in words you do not understand, in a language that is theirs, not yours” (246). This notion that stories can be reworked by others echoes Danticat’s own concern about writing down the oral stories of survivors in English. According to Ink, “Danticat’s choice of English serves as one source of ambivalence for her in the retelling of the Haitian massacre because it is not the *Kreyól* language of those persecuted” (800). The ability of language to manipulate is further explored through Danticat’s depiction of Father Roumain. As a result of his torture in prison, during which, as his sister explains, “[t]hey forced him to say these things that he says now whenever his mind wanders” (260), Father Roumain can no longer control his self-expression, through thoughts or words, giving voice instead to the discriminatory views propounded by Trujillo: “Our motherland is Spain; theirs is darkest Africa, you understand?...How can a country be ours if we are in smaller numbers than the outsiders?” (260).

Where oral testimonies fail, the bodies of the victims offer their own testimony and challenge the manipulation of language. Danticat describes the ways in which the bodies of the cane workers bear the marks of their labor, such as the following description of Sebastien's body: "the cane stalks have ripped apart most of the skin on his shiny black face, leaving him with criss-crossed trails of furrowed scars. His arms are...hardened by four years of sugarcane harvests...the palms have lost their lifelines to the machetes that cut the cane" (1). Danticat also constructs a history from the physical scars and deformities of the survivors and from the dismembered bodies and bones of the victims. Amabelle's body is described as "a map of scars and bruises, a marred testament" (227). Amabelle's "map of scars" explicitly links to the description of Kongo's back as a "map of scars" (62). Shemak contends, therefore, that "Amabelle's body is a historiographic archive that retains the history of the events of the massacre" and that connects the survivors of the massacre to the cane workers whose bodies, like theirs, are forever scarred (103). The "bones" in the title of Danticat's novel can likewise be read as referring to both cane stalks and bodies, such that the agricultural labor of Haitian migrants in Dominican cane fields is explicitly connected to the massacre. Moreover, Ink suggests that Danticat exploits this connection "to shed light on the contemporary plight of migrant cane workers" (800). As Shemak argues, remembering for Danticat is therefore "a confrontation with history that is corporeal—a 're-membering'" (85).

Yet, despite the “corporeal ‘texts’” and “physical ‘inscriptions’” outlined by Shemak (98), Danticat also points to the fragility of corporeal memory by showing the ways in which the dead bodies of the victims were unable to serve as evidence. Without identification, without paper documentation, even these mutilated bodies were not enough. Ultimately, then, Danticat is ambivalent about the transformative or recuperative potential of testimonial narrative.

Danticat’s ambivalence is one among many points of comparison between her rewriting of history and that of Assia Djébar. In addition, both texts destabilize the accepted historical narrative by inserting voices not included in the archives and posit alternatives to imperial history. Both texts explore the ways in which the historical archive is founded on bodies. And both texts envision alternate definitions of the national community that include the perspectives of women. However, whereas Assia Djébar’s ambivalence centers around language alone, and is largely resolved, Danticat’s ambivalence encompasses not only language but also the very idea of retelling others’ stories and even the potential of these narratives. As a documentary filmmaker, Djébar does not share her ambivalence in this regard.

Chapter Three: Re-Voicing Slavery

In the last chapter, I discussed the ways in which postcolonial writers have rewritten historical accounts to call attention to the production of history, the power dynamics that authorize some accounts and silence others, and the voices, stories, and perspectives that are missing from the archives. Similarly, African American writers have rewritten slave narratives in an effort to reclaim the past and to call into question the ways that the genre has traditionally depicted slaves.

According to Ashraf H. A. Rushdy, contemporary narratives about slavery, known formally as neo-slave narratives, emerged in the middle of the 1960s in conjunction with the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements. The social movements of the period promoted a revisionist approach to histories of American slavery, and many of the young people who participated in these movements—and through them experienced first-hand the power of people to create change—were graduate students who would consequently change the face of the American academy.⁶¹ Secondly, the Civil Rights Movement created what Rushdy calls a “cross-fertilization between the streets and the ivory tower,” in other words a new understanding of the relationship between those who were making history and those who were writing it (88-89). Subsequent historical

⁶¹ Ashraf H. A. Rushdy, "The Neo-Slave Narrative," *The Cambridge Companion to the African American Novel*, ed. Maryemma Graham (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004) 88.

approaches to slavery were newly interested in exploring issues such as the agency and resistance of slaves. Intellectuals of the Black Power Movement in particular held revisionist historians accountable for the ways in which they represented slavery, as is evidenced by historian Eugene Genovese's essay "The Influence of the Black Power Movement on Historical Scholarship" regarding the impact of Black Power intellectuals on historians. Finally, the social movements of the mid-60s were instrumental in the creation of Black Studies programs and curricula (Rushdy 89). Perhaps most importantly, these movements empowered African American writers and artists to explore slavery with a critical eye. As Sherley Anne Williams explained in "The Lion's History: The Ghetto Writes B[l]ack," Black Power "provided the pride and perspective necessary to pierce the myths and lies that have grown up around the antebellum period," as well as "the authority to tell it as we felt it."⁶²

The neo-slave narrative was first elaborated by Bernard W. Bell in his 1987 study *The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition*. Debra McDowell and Elizabeth Beaulieu subsequently elaborated and modified the term so as to draw attention to the genre's appeal to black women novelists. According to Rushdy, neo-slave narratives often use innovative formal devices as they attempt to rewrite the story of antebellum slavery in order to underscore the difficulty of

⁶² Sherley Anne Williams, "The Lion's History: The Ghetto Writes B[l]ack," *Soundings* 76.2-3 (1993): 248.

recuperating voices from the slave past: “form...is a site where the politics of representing slaves, slave voices, and slavery is manifestly at stake” (97). Of the three most common forms employed by novelists of this genre, argues Rushdy “those novels...that assume the voice of the slave and revise the conventions of the slave narrative” make the most explicit use “of form itself as a way of raising particular questions about authenticity, control, and appropriation” (97). Neo-slave narratives of this kind use experimental forms to “recuperate voice and body, challenge appropriation and commodification, and experiment with the tension between a literacy that captures and an orality that liberates” (Rushdy 102).

For African American writers, the process of recovering the historical past is often intensely painful and difficult. Many have an ambivalent relationship toward history and memory. Leon Forrest’s notion of “memory-history” as a force that “destroys as it heals” suggests the simultaneous danger and healing potential of memory (qtd. in Rushdy 103). Likewise, Toni Morrison has used the term “rememory” to refer to the haunting quality of traumatic events and the ability of memory to both heal and wound. In Morrison’s own neo-slave narrative *Beloved*, Sethe tries desperately to forget the past but is literally haunted by her dead daughter and is compelled to tell and retell her story in order to finally be free of its psychic burden. Echoing the seeming paradox of Sethe’s murder of *Beloved*, in which Sethe claims “if I hadn’t killed her she would have died,” Morrison makes

clear that the story of *Beloved* is told so that it can be forgotten: “This is not a story to pass on.”⁶³ Since “remembering seemed unwise,” *Beloved* must be “disremembered” (Morrison 274).

In this chapter, I examine two neo-slave narratives that build on and revise the slave narrative genre of the late eighteenth- through early twentieth- centuries: Sherley Anne Williams’s *Dessa Rose* (1986) and M. NourbeSe Philip’s *Zong!* (2008). Like the works studied in chapter two, these neo-slave narratives rewrite true events from the historical past. Both authors also consciously rewrite the novels of their contemporaries, so that their works function as responses to history as well as to other literary engagements with the slave past. Williams and Philip also share a concern with language and narrative. Their works engage in a proliferation of voices, preferring the choral and communal to the univocal and infusing the written form with orality. For both writers, however, much like for Edwidge Danticat in the last chapter, writing is seen as a potential danger, and the possibilities of re-writing are ambiguous at best.

Signifyin’ Slavery: Sherley Anne Williams’s *Dessa Rose*

As indicated in the Author’s Note that precedes her novel, Sherley Anne Williams’s *Dessa Rose* is based on two historical events. In the first incident, which she learned about by reading Angela Davis’s 1971 essay “Reflections on

⁶³ Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Plume, 1988) 200, 75.

the Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves," a pregnant slave helped to overthrow a coffin in Kentucky. She was subsequently sentenced to be hanged, but, according to Davis, was "first permitted for reasons of economy, to give birth to her child."⁶⁴ In the second incident, which Williams discovered through one of Davis's sources, a white woman in North Carolina sheltered runaway slaves. These two events occurred only a year apart, in 1829 and 1830 respectively, and prompted Williams to wonder what might have happened had the women known each other: "How sad, I thought then, that these two women never met."⁶⁵ In Williams's fictional retelling of these events, writes Donna Haisty Winchell, "they do."⁶⁶ Williams imagines the pregnant black woman as Dessa Rose, the title character of her novel, and the white woman who shelters Dessa and her fellow runaways as Ruth Elizabeth Sutton.

Yet, there is another source text for her novel, which Williams also mentions in the Author's Note: William Styron's *The Confessions of Nat Turner*. Published in 1967, Styron's narrative was the subject of fierce debate among African American intellectuals, many of whom objected to his representation of slavery and of slaves (Rushdy 89). According to Albert E. Stone, some members of the black intelligentsia took Styron to task in *William Styron's Nat Turner: Ten*

⁶⁴ Quoted in Mary Kemp Davis, "Everybody Knows Her Name: The Recovery of the Past in Sherley Anne Williams's *Dessa Rose*," *Callaloo* 40 (Summer 1989): 545.

⁶⁵ Sherley Anne Williams, *Dessa Rose* (New York: Morrow, 1986) 5.

⁶⁶ Donna Haisty Winchell, "Cries of Outrage: Three Novelists' Use of History," *Mississippi Quarterly: The Journal of Southern Cultures* 49.4 (1996): 732.

Black Critics Respond, a collection of critical responses edited by Black Power intellectual John H. Clarke and published in 1968.⁶⁷ Williams writes, “I admit also to being outraged by a certain, critically acclaimed novel of the early seventies [sic] that travestied the as-told-to memoir of slave revolt leader Nat Turner” (5). As Rushdy notes, “Williams stated that she immediately began writing *Dessa Rose* in 1968 as a response to Styron, and the first section of the novel is a direct parody of the jailhouse interview that Styron had borrowed from the original *Confessions of Nat Turner* (1831) by Thomas Gray” (98). Williams was not the only writer to have been influenced thus by Styron; Rushdy points out that Ernest Gaines, Charles Johnson, and Ishmael Reed all wrote works critiquing Styron (97-98).

In Stone’s account of an exchange that took place at the 1968 meeting of the Southern Historical Association between Styron and the participants in a panel on “The Uses of History as Fiction,” the critique directed at Styron was about “the propriety and legitimacy of [his] decision to assume Nat Turner’s own voice and point of view” (11). Even his co-panelist Ralph Ellison, hardly the most militant participant in the panel, chided Styron’s abuse of history: “you don’t have the freedom to snatch any and everybody, and completely recreate them” (qtd. in

⁶⁷ Albert E. Stone, *The Return of Nat Turner: History, Literature, and Cultural Politics in Sixties America* (Athens: U of Georgia P, 1992) 3.

Stone 9). Ellison's remark points to the greater offense that Styron's work was perceived to have committed:

His first-person narrative and 'meditation on history' challenges, indeed often affronts, many convictions held by black intellectuals—convictions about the nature of chattel slavery as well as slave resistance to it; about Nat Turner as man, myth, and martyr; about the kind of stories that can or ought to be told about such past black figures and experiences. (Stone 22)

While Styron claimed to have "adhered to the known facts of the revolt wherever possible," he admitted that *The Confessions of Nat Turner* was "less an historical novel than a meditation on history" (qtd. in Stone 56). In light of the controversy surrounding Styron's text, Williams is careful to point out that her own work is fictional—what Winchell calls "an imaginative what-might-have-been" (732). Williams writes, "This novel, then, is fiction; all the characters, even the country they travel through, while based on fact, are inventions" (5).

In regards to perceptions about Styron's work being a misrepresentation of the slave experience, it is significant that Williams acknowledges the influence of Angela Davis on her work. In "Reflections on the Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves," Angela Davis challenges the popular perception of the role of black women in slavery. "Lingering beneath the notion of the black matriarchate," writes Angela Davis, "is an unspoken indictment of our female

forbears as having actively assented to slavery” (qtd. in M. Davis 545). By contrast, according to Mary Kemp Davis, Angela Davis’s work explores the ways in which female slaves demonstrated a “covert and active resistance to slavery;” thus, her work “rehabilitates the image of the female slave” (545).

As Mary Kemp Davis notes, two women actually played roles in the uprising on the coffle: a pregnant rebel leader named Dinah and another woman who aided in the escape of a wounded white man and thus precipitated the recapture of her fellow slaves (546). Davis claims that, while the female slave traitor has been vilified, the female slave rebel has traditionally been ignored (546). Since neither Angela Davis nor her source mentions Dinah by name, Davis argues that it is not likely that Williams would have known her name either (546). In her efforts to recuperate this female slave rebel figure, therefore, Williams (re-) names her, gives her a story, and has her avoid execution by escaping once more: “Dessa’s penning of her own autobiography at the end of the novel...is a synecdoche for Williams’s recovery of the lost history of Dinah and her unsung rebel sisters” (M. Davis 547). As Williams mentions in her Author’s Note, Angela Davis helped her to understand her place in and relationship with history: “I loved history as a child, until some clear-eyed young Negro pointed out, quite rightly, that there was no place in the American past I could go and be free....The Davis article marked a turning point in my effort to apprehend that other history” (6). Like her eponymous protagonist, who gains control over the past by writing her

story “for posterity,” Williams lays claim in her Author’s Note to “a summer in the 19th century” through the writing of *Dessa Rose*.⁶⁸

Robert Butler contends that “slavery persists in modern times not only in economic and social terms but also in the ‘stories’ imposed upon black people...that present visions of the slave past that fix blacks in stereotypical roles” (21). To achieve “liberation from this enslaving discourse,” the black writer must deconstruct fictions such as Styron’s *The Confessions of Nat Turner* and reconstruct “new visions of the slave past” (Butler 21). According to Butler, Williams’s counterdiscursive response to Styron’s text uses a rhetorical strategy known as “signifyin(g)” (115). “Signifyin(g),” writes Henry Louis Gates, Jr., “is a uniquely black rhetorical concept...by which a second figure repeats, or tropes, or reverses the first” (qtd. in Butler 115). This discursive mode “both repeats and artfully revises previous discourse” and is thus “a powerful source of intertextuality, a means by which a given text can enrich its meanings by repeating a pattern from an earlier text and then troping upon that pattern” (Butler 115). In *The Signifying Monkey*, Gates claims that signifyin(g) as formal revision takes one of two forms: “loving acts of bonding,” in which works enrich

⁶⁸ Robert Butler, *Contemporary African American Fiction: The Open Journey* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 1998) 129.

themselves by association with other works, and “ritual slayings,” in which texts displace other texts by subverting them and ironically inverting their meanings.⁶⁹

Using these twin concepts of revisionism, Butler argues that Williams engages in the “ritual slaying” of Styron’s text while simultaneously participating in “loving acts of bonding” with other texts (116). Butler reads Williams’s novel as a deconstruction of the “static” slave past described in Styron’s novel, which Butler claims “imagines black history as a cycle of defeat and despair” (21). As a striking counterpoint to the nihilism and passivity of Styron’s text, Williams’s novel “reconstruct[s] a hopeful and dynamic vision” of the slave past (Butler 115, 117). By reversing the structure of Styron’s “deterministic” narrative, Williams envisions Dessa Rose’s progression from slavery to freedom (Butler 117). Butler contends that Dessa’s increasing freedom of movement in space—from a cellar to Sutton’s Glen and eventually to the West—is accompanied by a developing consciousness in which she is able to claim and assert her identity (117-18). In becoming “what Styron’s Nat Turner failed to become, an autonomous self engaged in acts that not only result in her own growth but also transform the social world and history,” Williams’s heroine harkens back to those of nineteenth-century slave narratives (Butler 118).

⁶⁹ Henry Louis Gates, Jr., The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism (New York: Oxford UP, 1988) xxviii.

Williams's text "signifies upon" several slave narratives, including *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, *The Narrative of Williams Wells Brown*, and *Running a Thousand Miles to Freedom, or the Escape of William and Ellen Craft from Slavery* (Butler 118). As an example of the ways in which *Dessa Rose* "consciously echoes classic slave narratives," Butler cites Williams's reference to a line from Frederick Douglass's *Narrative* in the paratextual space underneath the title of the first chapter as an act of double signification (118). Here, Williams uses only the beginning of the quote, "You have seen how a man was made a slave..." to ready the reader for the image of Dessa pregnant and chained up in a dirty root cellar (Butler 118). The end of Douglass's quote, "you shall see how a slave is made a man," is unstated but, according to Butler, "strongly implied," and highlights Dessa's potential for rebellion (118). Debra Walker King also reads this epigraph as an example of signifyin(g), though her interpretation focuses on the ironic "inversion of the male slave narrative's journey motif."⁷⁰ Rather than suggesting Dessa's movement toward freedom, "The Darky" shows a woman's experience of slavery—as King puts it, to play on Douglass's words, "how a woman was made [a slave]" (135).

Williams's use of *The Narrative of Williams Wells Brown* is another example of her revisionist strategy. In *Dessa Rose*, Ned recounts how he avoided

⁷⁰ Debra Walker King, *Deep Talk: Reading African-American Literary Names* (Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, 1998) 135.

a whipping after being sent with a letter from one of his masters to the sheriff. Ned asks a white man to read the letter to him and, upon discovering its contents, pays another slave to deliver the letter to the sheriff in his stead. This story, according to Butler, is similar to one told by Brown, in which Brown likewise “subverts the intentions of his owner” and thus “cleverly alters the journey he has been sent on, changing it from a set of movements directed by whites to motion that he controls with his own consciousness and will” (118). However, whereas Brown revels in his trickery, Ned feels guilty and blames slavery for pitting black men against each other (Butler 118). Williams writes, “This wasn’t a nice trick but it was what slavery taught a lot of people: to take everybody so you didn’t get took yourself. We laughed so we wouldn’t cry...” (208). Williams also subverts the individualism of Brown’s *Narrative* and emphasizes the community-building efforts of slaves by showing the ways in which the runaway slaves at Sutton’s Glen come to realize that their freedom can best be attained by working together (Butler 119). This vision of community is expanded even further in *Dessa Rose* when the title character realizes that her destiny is tied to that of a white woman: “our only protection was ourselves and each others” (Williams 202).

In her use of yet another source text, *Running a Thousand Miles to Freedom, or the Escape of William and Ellen Craft from Slavery*, Williams demonstrates the other form of signifyin(g)—what Gates calls “loving acts of bonding”—by playing upon the similarities between the texts to draw out deeper

meanings in her own work. According to Butler, these commonalities are most apparent in the slaves' "elaborate masquerade" to gain their freedom (119). Butler describes how Ellen Craft dressed in male attire and passed herself off as a planter, accompanied by her husband in the role of loyal black slave, so as to travel to Philadelphia under the guise of seeking treatment for a medical condition (119). Similarly, the escaped slaves at Sutton's Glen come up with a plan to pose as slaves for sale, only to repeatedly escape and reunite. In doing so, they hope to earn enough money to pay their way West to freedom. In Williams's version of this ruse, Dessa acts the role of "Mammy" to Ruth's "Mistress" while their companions pretend to be slaves (194-95). Meanwhile, Cully, one of the runaway slaves who stays behind at Sutton's Glen to tend the fields, is given a haircut and is introduced in town as Ruth's "brother from Charlestown" so that "there would seem to be a white person on the place while she was gone" (Williams 194-95). Playing the roles of "invalid gentleman" and "respectable white lady," Ellen Craft and Ruth Sutton successfully use "the sentimental stereotypes of a racist white audience" to their advantage and, thus, manage to escape detection (Butler 119).

The story of William and Ellen Craft's escape from slavery is used by Williams to explore gender issues in *Dessa Rose* as well (Butler 119). Butler notes that the Crafts emphasize the danger of exploitation of black women by "licentious monsters" (119). A similar fear is expressed in *Dessa Rose* when the runaway slaves consider selling themselves into slavery as part of a scam to earn

money. Despite the higher price that the women are likely to command, Harker and Nathan are reluctant to sell them due to the likelihood of sexual violation: “Womens was subject to ravishment and they didn’t want to put none of us back under that threat. This the way it was during slavery” (Williams 193). Both the Crafts’ narrative and Williams’s text emphasize the disadvantageous position of black women in a society that discriminates according to race and gender. Of the status of his wife, William Craft explains, “The laws under which we lived did not recognize her as a woman” (qtd. in Butler 120). Likewise, Williams draws attention to the ways that Dessa and Ruth are both enslaved in some sense. Butler notes that Ruth realizes that she and Dessa, as women, are treated “as things rather than people” (120). Dessa, too, realizes that Ruth’s position as a white woman does not protect her from sexual violence after a white plantation owner tries to rape her and Ruth calls upon Dessa to help her thwart his attack: “The white woman was subject to the same ravishment as me....I hadn’t knowed white mens could use a white woman like that, just take her by force same as they could with us” (Williams 201). This realization prompts Dessa to soften her opinion of Ruth and to feel a connection between them: “My thoughts on her had changed some since that night at Mr. Oscar’s. You can’t do something like this with someone and not develop some closeness, some trust” (Williams 206).

A final source text, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, is also signified upon by Williams as she explores interracial relationships. Butler compares Huck’s

“crisis of conscience”—his efforts to reconcile what he has been taught about Jim with his feelings for Jim—to Dessa’s conflicting views about Ruth (120). For Dessa, Ruth represents oppression: “white woman was everything I feared and hated” (Williams 169). Dessa is initially unable to make this vision of Ruth coincide with Ruth’s behavior, and she finds the dissonance unsettling: “She did know the difference between black and white; I give her that....But where white peoples look at black and see something ugly, something hateful, she saw color. I knowed this, but I couldn’t understand it and it scared me” (Williams 170). When one of her fellow runaway slaves, Nathan, begins an affair with Ruth, Dessa is deeply hurt by his actions: “White folks had taken everything in the world from me except my baby and my life and they had tried to take them. And to see him, who had helped to save me...laying up, wallowing in what had hurt me so—I didn’t feel that nothing I could say would tell him what that pain was like” (Williams 173). By seeing Ruth as “what had hurt me so,” Dessa confuses what Ruth symbolizes with Ruth’s actions, to the extent that Nathan must remind her, ““You know, Dess, Ruth ain’t the one sold you; her husband ain’t killed Kaine”” (Williams 173).

Nathan’s relationship with Ruth continually threatens the bond that forms between these two women. Butler argues that Williams, like Twain, is not overly sentimental about interracial relationships: “she stresses that even as they grow in understanding and love for each other on one level of their consciousness, on

another level they remain apart, fearful of each other and what their contact implies” (121). When Ruth tells Dessa that she is considering joining them out West, Dessa is afraid of what her presence might mean: “Couldn’t she see what harm her being with Nathan would cause us?” (Williams 218). Ruth has come to understand the nature of slavery and says that she, too, would like to be free of it: “I don’t want to live round slavery no more; I don’t think I could without speaking up” (Williams 218). Ironically, it is precisely Ruth’s breakthrough that causes Dessa to be most fearful: “But it was funny, cause that was the thing I had come to fear most from her by the end of that journey, that she would speak out against the way we seen some of the peoples was treated and draw tention to us” (Williams 218). Dessa verbalizes her fears as follows: “I think it scandalous, white woman chasing all round the country after some red-eyed negro” (Williams 218). According to Butler, Williams echoes Twain most when Dessa, like Huck, uses “the language of official genteel culture” (121). Dessa’s use of the word “scandalous” reduces the relationship between Ruth and Nathan to a stereotype; her use of scripture, “Speak, neither act out of turn,” likewise ruins the intimacy she shares with Ruth and reinforces the notion of distance between them, with each woman occupying her rightful “place” (Butler 121-22).

The idea that each woman should stay in her rightful place is challenged by Ruth, who says, “Well, I ain’t talking no “place”...no “mistress”” (Williams 218). In turn, Dessa’s anger comes to a head, and she threatens to break with

place before slamming the door: “Didn’t seem to me she knew what she was talking, and I knew if I heard much more I was going do more than speak out of turn” (Williams 218). However, when Dessa hears Ruth yell, “‘I’m talking friends,’” she longs once again for the connection she shared with Ruth: “I stood there in the hall, breathing fast, wanting things back like they was when we come in from lunch, her Miz Lady and me the one she partnered with in the scheme, wishing she’d come to the door and say what she’d said again” (Williams 218-19). Butler argues that, in this moment, “Dessa’s socially conditioned consciousness...gives way to the human feelings welling up from her subconsciousness, which seek human contact with [Ruth]” (122).

However, Dessa does not fully embrace the possibility of friendship just yet; as she walks outside, she contemplates the encounter that just occurred and seems both intrigued and perturbed by the idea that she and Ruth could be friends: “This was the damnedest white woman...sleeping with negroes, hiding runaways, wanting to be my friend...Who wanted to be her friend anyway?...It was like her to take for granted I’d want to be her friend...” (Williams 219). It is not until the scene in the jail when Ruth works to free Dessa and they are accused of being in cahoots that their friendship is solidified. When Nemi says, “‘You-all in this together...womanhood....All alike. Sluts,’” Dessa’s feelings toward Ruth finally change for good: “I wanted to hug Ruth. I didn’t hold nothing against her, not ‘mistress,’ not Nathan, not skin” (Williams 232-33). Like Huck, whose deeper

morality prompts him to forge a relationship with Jim in spite of the penalties for doing so, Dessa “ultimately accepts the dangers of her sisterhood” with Ruth (Butler 122). In the Epilogue, the reader learns that Ruth doesn’t continue West with the runaway slaves after all and that Dessa, in retrospect, misses her and minimizes the potential danger that her presence might have caused: “I guess we all have regretted her leaving, one time or another. She couldn’t’ve caused us no more trouble than what the white folks gived us without her....Miss her in and out of trouble—” (Williams 236). Her final pronouncement about Ruth is noticeable for the sea change in her feelings that it represents: “...I have met some good white men....But none the equal of Ruth...” (Williams 236). The fact that Ruth does not accompany the former slaves on their journey West is a final way that *Dessa Rose* signifies upon *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. According to Butler, the difference between Dessa’s fate and that of Twain’s Jim is “revealing,” as Williams’s “black characters...move to what in American literature has been traditionally defined as an area of renewal and expanded possibility” (123). Conversely, Ruth goes to a vaguely defined East, in a move that parallels Jim’s disappearance: “We come West and Ruth went East, not back to Charlestown; she went on to...Philly-me-York” (Williams 236).

Other critics have also noted the ways in which *Dessa Rose* functions as a counternarrative to Styron’s text. Stone, for example, draws attention to the fact that Williams’s novel “is both historically grounded and imaginatively structured

as a retort to Styron's *The Confessions of Nat Turner*" (375). According to Stone, *Dessa Rose* begins with "an ironic imitation of Styron's and Gray's roles as white scribe-interpreters of black experience" (376). In the first part of her novel, Williams interrupts Dessa's first-person account with the "condescending voice of Adam Nememiah, a white man writing a study of slaves, to be entitled, *The Roots of Rebellion in the Slave Population and Some Means of Eradicating Them*" (Stone 376). This narrative technique recalls both Styron and Gray, in that Nat Turner's confessions were given to a white man, who interpreted them through his racist perspective (Winchell 735). In an interview with Cheryl Y. Greene, Williams explains her use of Nehemiah as a historical necessity:

I had the initial problem of how do you get this woman's story told....I didn't feel I knew enough about her or the circumstances of slave life to tell the story firsthand. Because of my education, I knew about this uppity little white man, so it was a way to control what I had—I could have her talking to him. How could the story of an illiterate black person come to us unless written down by a white person? (qtd. in Winchell 734-35)

Winchell aptly points out that, despite the historical necessity of using a white narrator to tell Dessa's story, Williams "surely did not miss the irony" of using Nehemiah, "a white man with little knowledge of either slavery or slave revolts," to interpret Dessa's account of the uprising (735).

In what Stone refers to as a “parodic retelling,” Nehemiah fails both to understand and to appropriate Dessa’s narrative (377). Listening to Dessa’s account, Nehemiah frequently forgets his role as transcriber and is “held spellbound” by the seeming disconnect between Dessa’s “halting speech and hesitant manner” and the fact that she was accused of leading a slave revolt (Williams 18). Williams writes that Nehemiah “hadn’t caught every word” and kept “forgetting to write” (18). Yet he experiences no trouble writing Dessa’s story despite his poor note-taking: “he deciphered the darky’s account from his hastily scratched notes and he reconstructed it in his journal as though he remembered it word for word” (Williams 18). After meeting with Dessa on several occasions over the course of a week, during which he listens to Dessa recount stories about her life on the plantation, including the killing of her husband, Kaine, by their master, Nehemiah writes down “the facts of the darky’s history as I have thus far uncovered them”:

The master smashed the young buck’s banjo.

The young buck attacked the master.

The master killed the young buck.

The darky attacked the master—and was sold to the Wilson slave coffle. (Williams 39)

That Nehemiah has such a sketchy understanding of the events at this point can be attributed not only to his woeful efforts to listen to Dessa and transcribe what she recounts.

Dessa's narrative is also lost on Nehemiah due to what Mary Kemp Davis calls his "blindness and ruthless selectivity" (550). As Davis notes, "even when Dessa recalls snatches of her life with Kaine, her recollections are of dubious value to Nehemiah" (550). As Dessa recounts another story involving Kaine, Nehemiah dismisses her account as "more of that business with the young buck" and, in frustration, stops writing (Williams 37). Similarly, Adam McKible claims that Nehemiah's "facts" represent "the Master narrative of antebellum slavery."⁷¹ McKible argues that the Master narrative "effaces as much contradiction as it can, destroying certain records, highlighting others, and creating heroes and villains generally convenient to it" (224). Nehemiah's efforts to control Dessa's narrative by ignoring some parts of her story and selectively choosing "the facts of the darky's history" belies the notion that he has simply "uncovered them." Rather, according to McKible, "Nehemiah's compilation of data proves itself a methodology for distortion and—for Dessa—a disabling construction of the truth" (225). McKible contends that Adam Nehemiah's name is significant in this regard: "his first name implies his role as archetypal namer and controller of

⁷¹ Adam McKible, "'These Are the Facts of the Darky's History': Thinking History and Reading Names in Four African American Texts," *African American Review* 28.2 (1994): 223.

language, and Nehemiah, the name of the Old Testament prophet who rebuilt the wall around Jerusalem and awakened the religious fervor of the Jews, implies the guardianship of traditional culture and values” (224). In showing how “Nehemiah takes upon himself the writing of Dessa’s history and attempts to control her meaning within the language of slavery,” Williams offers a critique of history and of historiography (McKible 224). In the face of Nehemiah’s relentless questioning about her role in the rebellion, Dessa quickly realizes that a response was not required: “So, having no answers, she gave none....Maybe this white man would tell her something she didn’t know. But it was soon apparent to her that the white man did not expect her to answer” (Williams 56). An answer is unnecessary not because his questions were meant to be rhetorical but because he will answer them for her despite what she says herself. This is but one example of what Stone refers to as Nehemiah’s “willful, partly ignorant misrepresentation” (379).

Nehemiah’s efforts to appropriate Dessa’s narrative are ultimately unsuccessful, however. When he first meets Dessa, he is elated at his good fortune that she is pregnant and has therefore not yet been hanged, and he anticipates that her story will have great use value for him: “This case was likely to yield more toward his book on slave uprisings than he had hoped” (Williams 21). Yet, Dessa is resistant from the beginning. Nehemiah complains that “she answers in a random manner, a loquacious, roundabout fashion—if, indeed, she can be brought to answer them at all” (Williams 23). At another moment, Nehemiah realizes that

she has successfully distracted him from his line of questioning: “The darky had led him back to the same point as the previous session and he had taken notes on nothing save the names she called in her first burst of speech” (Williams 39). Dessa’s resistance is perhaps most acute in a moment when she signifies upon Nehemiah: “Talking with the white man was a game; it marked time and she dared a little with him, playing on words, lightly capping, as though he were no more than some darky bent on bandying words with a likely-looking gal” (Williams 60).

When Dessa once again escapes, Nehemiah acts “like one possessed” and vows that “the slut will not escape me” (Williams 71). Having traced her to Arcopolis and dragged her before the sheriff, Nehemiah attempts to prove her identity by using the very journal in which he had originally attempted to contain and control her: “I know it’s her....I got her down here in my book” (Williams 231). When the book is knocked to the floor, the pages scatter, and the sheriff, upon looking at them, says to Nehemiah, “Nemi, ain’t nothing but some scribbling on here.... Can’t no one read this” (Williams 232). Ruth conjoins, “And these is blank, sheriff” (Williams 232). Stone argues that this scene represents “Williams’s final derisive judgment on white *and* male versions of slavery and slave resistance”: “It is surely no accident that two white readers signal the utter inadequacy of white writing about the institution and experience of slavery” (380).

Rushdy argues that neo-slave narratives often have an ambivalent relationship with textuality because of the written word's ability to captivate. Slave narratives frequently portrayed literacy as a necessary step towards attaining freedom; neo-slave narratives, on the contrary, tend to show more "distrust" than "faith" in literacy (Rushdy 99). In her Author's Note, for example, Williams writes, "Afro-Americans, having survived by word of mouth—and made of that process a high art—remain at the mercy of literature and writing; often these have betrayed us" (5). Her novel points to the dangers of textuality by highlighting Nehemiah's attempts to both write and read Dessa. During Nehemiah's initial interviews with Dessa, she is at once curious and suspicious about what he is writing down and how he intends to use it, to the extent that he has to assure her that "what I put in this book cannot hurt you" (Williams 45). She was right to be wary, because Nehemiah's writing does in fact put her in danger in the scene before the sheriff when he begins to read from his journal: "The book made me fear him all over again" (Williams 231). According to Rushdy, "writing...is a metaphor for who gets to control definitions of identity and who gets ascribed the authority to report on the...past" (100). It is important, therefore, that when Dessa tells her own story years later, she does so in writing: "This why I have wrote it down, why I has the child say it back. I never will forget Nemi trying to read me, knowing I had put myself in his hands. Well, this the childrens have heard from our own lips" (Williams 236).

Rushdy contends that many authors of neo-slave narratives “who are skeptical of writing or believe it positively detrimental...subvert writing with oral performances”: “the slaves in all these novels respond by positing their memory as a crucial documentary force in history, their voice as a power equal to the written texts they contest” (101). In *Dessa Rose*, Williams not only provides “the recorded memories and the voice of the slave Dessa” as a counterpoint to the writing of Adam Nehemiah, but she also subsumes Nehemiah’s writing in Dessa’s voice (Rushdy 98). For, in the Epilogue, the reader discovers that all of the texts that constitute *Dessa Rose*—including Nehemiah’s writing, Ruth’s stories, and her own recollections—are Dessa’s words as told to and written down by a member of the next generation (Rushdy 98). This is yet another way that Williams can be seen as responding to and signifyin(g) upon Styron’s text. Whereas Styron’s Nat Turner, according to Rushdy, “is both disdainful of any voice other than his own and quite self-consciously absolutist in his individualism,” *Dessa Rose*, like other neo-slave narratives, is “ambiguously first-person, suspicious of the coherent subject of narration, and inviting of others’ voices” (99).

Names and naming are also contested spaces in *Dessa Rose*. Dessa herself is called “Odessa” on numerous occasions by both Nehemiah and Ruth, in addition to being referred to as “darky” and “wench.” Ruth, too, is referred to as both “Miz Ruint” and “Miz Lady” by Dessa. These renaming efforts recall the renaming of Ruth’s childhood maid, Dorcas, as “Mammy,” as well as Dorcas’s

subsequent renaming of Ruth as “Rufel.” As McKible explains, “what Rufel remembers as an act of love may have been a gesture of revenge, a recurrent moment of resistance that she and her family could not read” (233). Dessa and Ruth’s misunderstanding over Ruth’s use of the term “Mammy” to refer to her maid, which Dessa hears as “mammy” and interprets as referring to her own mother, is another example both of names as fields of contestation and of Williams’s signification, or “repetition with a signal difference” (M. Davis 553). In regards to names, it is important that Dessa and Ruth assert their rightful names at the close of the novel because it signifies their acceptance of each other. Ruth says to Dessa, ““My name Ruth...Ruth. I ain’t your mistress,”” to which Dessa responds, ““Well, if it come to that...my name Dessa, Dessa Rose. Ain’t no *O* to it”” (Williams 232).

With *Dessa Rose*, Williams therefore rewrites a number of source texts, including Styron and two historical incidents of slave rebellion, so as to draw attention to the ways in which the conventions of traditional slave narratives have denied slaves agency. By highlighting the ways in which slavery is constructed in these texts, Williams points to the misrepresentation of slaves and of slavery. Finally, by focusing her re-writing around a female slave who actively resists, Williams denies the typical view of female slaves as passive.

Un-telling the Slave Trade: M. NourbeSe Philip's *Zong!*

Although a great deal of critical attention has been paid to neo-slave narratives written by African Americans, rewritings of the slave trade by writers from the African diaspora are not regularly included in discussions of this genre. In looking at a neo-slave narrative written by a Caribbean Canadian author, I aim to examine the ways in which this text likewise reworks and subverts both historical and fictional narratives about the triangular trade. Though Marlene NourbeSe Philip's *Zong!* complicates the notion of narrative in that it is a song poem that develops in a non-linear fashion, my use of the term "neo-slave narrative" in reference to Philip's work reflects the extent to which Philip presents a contemporary narrative of slavery that assumes voice while deviating from formal generic conventions.

Like *Dessa Rose*, *Zong!* rewrites a number of source texts. The historical source is the 1781 incident involving the slave ship *Zong*, in which 150 slaves were thrown overboard, preempting their deaths from illness or thirst. The captain of the slave ship, Collingwood, worried about the cost of the losses, chose to kill the slaves so that he could recoup their insured value. As Ian Baucom explains in his study of the *Zong* atrocity, *Specters of the Atlantic*, the losses were therefore multiple:

Like Spivak's history of the native informant, the case of the *Zong*...names a vanishing event. Indeed, it names a double act of vanishing: the brutal slaughter of the slaves aboard Collingwood's ship, and their *antecedent* dematerialization as subjects of insurance. Subject to the loss-value protocols of insurance, the slaves were...regarded by the law to have vanished...prior to the moment of their murder.⁷²

The losses are further multiplied by the fact that the account of the massacre on the *Zong* has largely been lost in the annals of history. As Philip writes, "the complete story does not exist. It never did."⁷³ Instead, her access to the historical facts surrounding the *Zong* massacre is mediated through the text of the resulting court case, *Gregson v. Gilbert*. The legal decision held that the owners of the ship (Gregson) were not responsible for the loss of the slaves, and the insurers (Gilbert) were ordered to reimburse them (Philip 189).

Interestingly, like Williams, Philip engages with two fictional source texts in her rewriting of the *Zong* massacre, so that she rewrites not only the actual events and their historical and legal retellings but also the fictional retellings of other authors. In her Acknowledgments for *Zong!*, Philip recognizes the influence on her work of *Black Ivory* (1990) by James Walvin; this text provided Philip's

⁷² Ian Baucom, *Specters of the Atlantic: Finance Capital, Slavery, and the Philosophy of History* (Durham: Duke UP, 2005) 149.

⁷³ M. NourbeSe Philip, *Zong!* (Middletown: Wesleyan UP, 2008) 196.

first encounter with the incident and spurred her interest in researching the historical facts that underpinned Walvin's retelling (xi). In her "Notanda" at the end of *Zong!*, Philip also references a novel based on the massacre that she began to read during her research only to stop. In her journal, she writes, "A novel requires too much telling...and this story must be told by not telling—there is a mystery here" (190). The novel to which she refers is likely Fred D'Aguiar's *Feeding the Ghosts*.⁷⁴ However, its usefulness as a source text is refused when Philip decides to limit her research to the legal document: "If what I am to do is find their stories in the report – am I not subverting that aim by reading about the event?" (190). In yet another moment of rewriting, Philip notes that the slave ship's original name was Zorg, which in Dutch ironically means "care," and that Zong appeared during repainting (208).

Philip's decision to create poems from the *Gregson v. Gilbert* case was motivated by the notion that "law and poetry both share an inexorable concern with language" (191). As Emily Allen Williams and LaJuan Simpson explain, the poet received a law degree from the University of Western Ontario in 1973 and subsequently practiced law in Toronto before becoming a writer full time.⁷⁵ As Philip comments in an interview with Patricia Saunders, she credits her law

⁷⁴ See Fred D'Aguiar, *Feeding the Ghosts* (Hopewell: Ecco, 1997).

⁷⁵ Emily Allen Williams and LaJuan Simpson, "Interrogating the Silence: Marlene NourbeSe Philip's *She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks*," *Beyond the Canebrakes: Caribbean Women Writers in Canada*, ed. Emily Allen Williams (Trenton: Africa World, 2008) 80.

training with her ability “to write, or ‘not write’ (and ‘not tell’) this story.”⁷⁶ Legal training, explains Philip, “teaches you to squeeze all of the emotion out of the events that comprise the case in question to get to the fact situation” (Saunders 66). In a process she describes as a reversal of that legal training, Philip’s rewriting aimed to “take these hard facts, this desiccated fact situation of *Gregson v. Gilbert*—and [to] reintroduce those emotions and feelings that were removed” (Saunders 66). In their study of *She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks*, Williams and Simpson argue that Philip’s training as an attorney and skills as an interrogator lend themselves to “a questioning technique” that is “reflected in her interrogative writing style” (80-81). In this formulation, Philip “interrogates the silence” of historical archives in an effort to “re-envision—make visual—the past” (Williams and Simpson 79, 81).

Philip is troubled by the court case, which Walvin describes as “the most grotesquely bizarre of all slave cases heard in an English court” (16). She notes that the argument in the case’s appeal that “there is no ‘loss’ when the insured brings about the insured event by his own act” causes her to question the letter of English maritime law, which “exempted insurance claims for the natural death of slaves...but held, and ominously so, that insurers were liable when slaves were killed or thrown overboard” (190). Philip writes, “How can there not be a ‘loss’

⁷⁶ Patricia Saunders, "Defending the Dead, Confronting the Archive: A Conversation with M. NourbeSe Philip," *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism* 26 (2008): 66.

when 150 people are deliberately drowned?" (190). Nigel H. Thomas explains that, in an interview with Philip, she said that "having once understood how the word as traditionally used undergirds and sanctifies oppression, she could no longer write traditional poetry."⁷⁷ Similarly, in an interview with Saunders, Philip explains that she needed "to find a form to bear this story": "What I feel strongly is that we can't tell these stories in the traditional way, or the Western way of narrative—in terms of a beginning, a middle, and an end" (72).

One of the techniques that Philip uses in her poetry is silence. In her study of Philip's poetics of silence, Cristanne Miller claims that Philip recuperates the power of silence and thus reworks the idea of silence as oppression. In contrast to the emphasis placed by many black feminists on voice, Philip insists that silence is equally capable of expression. According to Miller, "[f]undamental to this insistence is the more basic contention that neither language and silence nor power and opposition are dichotomously distinct; both language and silence may be tools of the Master or tools of rebellion against patriarchal determinations of meaning."⁷⁸ Marked by what Miller describes as "expressive syntactic omission and blank space on the pages," Philip's poetics of silence builds on work she began in *Looking for Livingstone: An Odyssey of Silence* (140). In this text, Philip

⁷⁷ Nigel H. Thomas, "Caliban's Voice: Marlene Nourbese Philip's Poetic Response to Western Hegemonic Discourse," *Studies in the Literary Imagination* 26.2 (1993): 74.

⁷⁸ Cristanne Miller, "M. Nourbese Philip and the Poetics/Politics of Silence," *Semantics of Silences in Linguistics and Literature*, eds. Gudrun M. Grabner and Ulrike Jessner (Heidelberg: UP C. Winter, 1996) 139.

reworks the gospel of John, replacing “Word” with “nothing,” thus issuing a challenge to what Miller calls “the Judeo-Christian myth of the Word’s authority” (143):

In the beginning was –
nothing
 could
 would
be
 without Silence.⁷⁹

In Philip’s allegory of anticolonial resistance, *The Traveller* encounters Livingstone, who is, argues Miller, “[o]nly capable of seeing silence as the absence of his own language and culture” (144). Instead of silence as absence, Miller contends that Philip posits silence as “the un-(or differently) said” (143). Silence, in Philip’s use of the term, thus refers to “an alternative use of words,” and language is figured as “no more communicative in itself than silence is” (Miller 145-46). Tellingly, in a reversal of the association between voice and identity, *The Traveller*’s loss of language is tied to finding her identity (Miller 147).

In this regard, *Looking for Livingstone* returns to a theme Philip began to develop in an earlier collection of poems, *She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks*. In the opening essay, titled “The Absence of Language or How I Almost Became a Spy,” Philip claims that “it is impossible for any language that

⁷⁹ M. Nourbese Philip, *Looking for Livingstone: An Odyssey of Silence* (Stratford: Mercury, 1991) 30.

inherently denies the essential humanity of any group of people to be truly capable of giving voice to the i-mages of experiences of that group without tremendous and fundamental changes within the language itself.”⁸⁰ According to Philip, this situation creates the contradictory state of “voiced silence” (*She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks* 15). As Miller explains, “the ‘paradox’ of simultaneous speech and silence” means that “language may operate as silence to the extent that it is not heard as language by the dominant culture” (149). Philip’s conception of silence as “a form of communication that those who rely on the hegemonic word...cannot hear” means that silence may “in some cases be a more powerful means of expression than language” (Miller 149, 151). According to Miller, silence is therefore “not the mark of victimization,” but rather a form of resistance (157). As Philip herself states in “Dis Place the Space Between,” “if you sure those you talking to not listening, or not going to understand your words, or not interested in what you saying, and wanting to silence you, then holding on to your silence is more than a state of non-submission. It is resisting.” (qtd. in Miller 157).

As in her other works, in *Zong!* silences appear in the white space that Philip creates through innovative strategies of page layout. In *Zong!* Philip takes this technique to its extreme, spacing out the letters and words on the page so that

⁸⁰ M. Nourbese Philip, *She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks* (Charlottetown: Ragweed, 1989) 16.

the reader must navigate these gaps in order to read the text. For example, in the poem *Zong #1*, the first six lines of the poem appear approximately as follows on page 3:

 w w w w a wa
 w a w a t
er wa s
 our wa
te r gg g g go
 o oo goo d

According to Philip, the visual gaps on the page force readers “to ‘make sense’ of an event that eludes understanding,” so that in working to piece together the fragmented words and phrases, “we all become implicated in, if not contaminated by, this activity” (198).

Another technique Philip uses in *Zong!* is to “mutilate” or “murder” the text:

I murder the text, literally cutting it into pieces, castrating verbs, suffocating adjectives, murdering nouns, throwing articles, prepositions, conjunctions overboard, jettisoning adverbs: I separate subject from verb, verb from object—create semantic mayhem, until my hands bloodied, from so much killing and cutting, reach into the stinking, eviscerated innards, and like some

The language she discovers, when she breaks words apart, is for Philip, “my very own language”: “For the first time in my writing life, I felt, this is my own language—the grunts, moans, utterances, pauses, sounds, and silences” (Saunders 71).

Returning to the notion of telling as a process of “not telling,” Philip explains that she sought not to write the slaves’ stories but to open up “a space to let them come to light” (Saunders 73). The poem sequence thus creates a rhetorical space that Philip calls “a secret order / among syllables.”⁸¹ As a rhetorical exercise, Philip limited herself to the words used in the legal case, so that the text became a “word store” (191) that she used as her medium, “almost as a painter uses paint or a sculptor stone—the material with which I work being preselected and limited” (198). As Ian Baucom explains, “Philip metaphorizes the possibilities of resuscitation by reviving the legal transcripts documenting the massacre” since “all her poems draw exclusively on the language of those texts” (332). Her decision to confine herself to the words used in the decision was motivated by a sense that “the story...is locked in this text” (Philip, *Zong!* 191). Not telling in this sense is accomplished by exploding the words of the text to discover what they reveal.

⁸¹ Quoted in Stephen Morton, "Postcolonial Poetics and the Trauma of Slavery in Marlene Nourbese Philip's *She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks*," Beyond the Canebrakes: Caribbean Women Writers in Canada, ed. Emily Allen Williams (Trenton: Africa World, 2008) 223.

with Saunders, Philip claims that “the work of remembering and mourning, of locating the bones and grieving...can be an act of subversion and resistance” (77).

Like Williams, Philip expresses a distrust of language due to the way it has traditionally been used to subjugate Africans: “I deeply distrust this tool I work with—language. It is a distrust rooted in certain historical events that are all of a piece with the events that took place on the *Zong*....I distrust its order, which hides disorder” (197). Like Condé, she envisions poetry as the antidote to order: “I want poetry to disassemble the order, to create disorder and mayhem” (Philip, *Zong!* 199). However, in creating a space for the slaves from the *Zong* to tell their own stories, Philip interestingly avoids the pitfalls involved in the project of giving voice that many neo-slave narratives encounter. In this regard, Philip’s text offers a new model for rewriting narratives about slaves and slavery, what she calls “un-telling” slavery, “the story that simultaneously cannot be told, must be told, and will never be told” (206-207).

Chapter Four: Re-Membering Gender

In this chapter, I examine two texts that foreground the processes of re-writing and re-telling, both thematically and structurally, so as to draw attention to the ways in which discourses and identities are constructed: Daniel Maximin's *L'Isolé soleil* (1981) and Maryse Condé's *Traversée de la Mangrove* (1989). In their attempts to counter masculinist discourses, these works seek to re-inscribe gender into these discourses, a process of re-membering that engenders a radical deconstruction of fixed notions of identity. Maximin's novel, which was translated into English as *Lone Sun* in 1989, privileges the feminine and the multiple in opposition to patriarchal notions of single origins and authoritative narrative voices. Condé's novel, translated in 1995 as *Crossing the Mangrove*, rewrites Patrick Chamoiseau's 1988 novel *Solibo Magnifique* so as to critique the exclusive nature of Caribbean identity in his notion of *créolité*.

In order to understand the counter-discursive poetics at play in the works of Maximin and Condé, it is necessary first to situate their discourses within contemporary French Caribbean models of identity. The theoretical writings of Édouard Glissant, in particular, will be useful to my discussion of both Maximin and Condé. By questioning all forms of universality and generalization, Glissant constructs a critical framework that stands outside of notions of fixed identities, single origins, and cohesive narrative structures. For Glissant, such atavistic

conceptions are inapplicable to fundamentally composite societies like those of the Antilles. According to Glissant, Caribbean identities are products of the multiple disruptions and dislocations caused by the slave trade and the ensuing effects of colonial subjugation. Rather than attempting to define identity through reference to a lost or irrecoverable site of origin, Glissant advocates embracing the multiple, heterogeneous, and fragmented experiences that shape lived realities and modes of expression in the Antilles.

In *Le discours antillais*, Glissant distinguishes between the displacement caused by exile and that of the slave trade. According to Glissant, the difference between those who retain their identity to some degree in exile and those who are transformed by their forced dislocation is that the latter realize that they must engage with their surroundings and risk assuming new and unfamiliar identities:

Il y a différence entre le déplacement (par exil ou dispersion) d'un peuple qui se continue ailleurs et le transbord (la traite) d'une population qui ailleurs se change en autre chose, en une nouvelle donnée de monde. C'est en ce changement qu'il faut essayer de surprendre un des secrets les mieux gardés de la Relation. (40)

There is a difference between the transplanting (by exile or dispersion) of a people who continue to survive elsewhere and the transfer (by the slave trade) of a population to another place where they change into something different, into a new set of possibilities. It is in this metamorphosis that we must try to detect one of the best kept secrets of creolization. (14)

The “secret” of these communities is that this forced encounter with other peoples, this cultural mixing, creates a new and multiple identity of relation, that

which Glissant calls *créolisation*. Equally opposed to the political and cultural domination of the Other and to reductive multiculturalism, *créolisation* is the brew (*brassage*) that results from a combination of equal terms and not the unequal grafting characteristic of hybridization (*métissage*). For Glissant, creolization is the way of the future, not only for the Caribbean, but for the increasingly global societies of the modern world.

In *Poétique de la Relation*, Glissant locates historically the active resistance that the West has exhibited towards the process of creolization. The problem of Western culture, according to Glissant, is found in its never-ending desire to return to an irrecoverable place or time, a need to search for meaning through establishing or representing lost roots (*racines*). Glissant builds upon the notion of the rhizome developed by Gilles Deleuze et Félix Guattari in *Mille plateaux* as an opposition to the root:

[L]e rhizome...est une racine démultipliée, étendue en réseaux dans la terre ou dans l'air, sans qu'aucune souche y intervienne en prédateur irrémédiable. La notion de rhizome maintiendrait donc le fait de l'enracinement, mais récuse l'idée d'une racine totalitaire.⁸²

[T]he rhizome [is] an enmeshed root system, a network spreading either in the ground or in the air, with no predatory rootstock taking over permanently. The notion of the rhizome maintains, therefore, the idea of rootedness but challenges that of a totalitarian root.⁸³

⁸² Édouard Glissant, *Poétique de la Relation* (Paris: Gallimard, 1990) 23.

⁸³ Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1997) 11.

Applied to the concept of identity, a rooted identity is inherited from ancestors and located within a geographic space, whereas a rhizomatic identity doesn't have a place of origin or a family history. A rhizomatic identity constructs itself in the present, while a rooted identity is born of the past. Glissant posits a rhizomatic Caribbean identity as the radical opposition to a rooted Western identity.

Over time, the concept of exile shifts from representing specific geographic dislocation, or separation from an origin or home, to becoming conceptually the basis upon which Western identity, consciousness, and language are founded:

C'est donc là, en Occident, que le mouvement [l'exil] se fige....Ce figement, cet énoncé, cette expansion requièrent alors que l'idée de racine prenne peu à peu ce sens intolérant.... (26)

The West, therefore, is where this movement becomes fixed.... This fixing, this declaration, this expansion, all require that the idea of the root gradually take on the intolerant sense.... (14)

Glissant believes that exile, in this sense, becomes a source of dominating power because the "pulsion totalitaire de la racine unique" 'the totalitarian drive of a single, unique root' does not attempt to establish a "rapport fondateur à l'Autre" 'a fundamental relationship with the Other' (27; 14). So defined, exilic thought attempts to overcome difference and impose similitude on other cultures.

Glissant offers an alternative to this intolerant mode of exile through the notion of errantry (*errance*). According to Glissant, exile and errantry are different ways of thinking about the world and lived experiences. Exilic thinking

is fixed, both circular and arrow-like, because it exhibits the singular desire for a return to lost origins; the exile seeks to violently inscribe this nostalgia for home into all the cultures and languages that he encounters, continually accumulating and appropriating all experiences to a single, stable identity. Errantry, on the other hand, does not wish to become transparent to thought, to (re)present or to stand for something in a fixed relation; rather, it is both that which conveys meaning and that which is meant:

[L]a pensée de l'errance est aussi bien pensée du relatif, qui est le relayé mais aussi le relaté. La pensée de l'errance est une poétique, et qui sous-entend qu'à un moment elle se dit. Le dit de l'errance est celui de la Relation. (31)

[T]he thought of errantry is also the thought of what is relative, the thing relayed as well as the thing related. The thought of errantry is a poetics, which always infers that at some moment it is told. The tale of errantry is the tale of Relation. (18)

Whereas exilic thought is fixed and obsessed with return (*retour*), errantry is open and enacts detour (*détour*):

[L]a poétique de la Relation est à jamais conjecturale et ne suppose aucune fixité d'idéologie....Poétique latente, ouverte, multilingue d'intention, en prise avec tout le possible. (44)

[T]he poetics of Relation remains forever conjectural and presupposes no ideological stability....A poetics that is latent, open, multilingual in intention, directly in contact with everything possible. (32)

According to Glissant, then, whereas exilic thinking attempts to place the Other in dialectical opposition to itself, errantry embraces difference and celebrates the multiplicity of roots that are present in an encounter with the Other.

Errantry is present in both the confrontation of different languages and the fracturing inherent within dominant languages, for, according to Glissant, the theoretical ideal of language as an “intangible unicity” is always already belied by the function of multiple languages within lived experience:

Ces différences de situation n’empêchent pas de constater qu’à des degrés divers de complexité, il y a plusieurs langues anglaises, espagnoles ou françaises....Quel que soit l’intense de cette complexité, ce qui est désormais caduc, c’est le principe même (sinon la réalité) de l’unicité intangible de la langue. (132)

Despite these differences in situation, one cannot help but notice that, in varying degrees of complexity, there exist several English, Spanish, or French languages....Whatever the degree of complexity, the one thing henceforth outmoded is the principle (if not the reality) of a language’s intangible unicity. (118)

Errantry does not attempt to predetermine the relationship between or among languages, encounters, or speakers according to hierarchical models; rather than fixing the Other, errantry destabilizes identities and emphasizes the mashed, complex, and multiple nature of relation.

Engendering Antillanité: Daniel Maximin’s *L’Isolé soleil*

In Daniel Maximin’s *L’Isolé soleil*, this possibility of errantry as a literary wandering is played out along the multiple modes of a Glissantian poetics of

relation. *L'Isolé soleil* can be read as enacting, both thematically and structurally, Glissant's poetics of relation in the sense that it puts into action Glissantian notions of errantry and relation. In refusing to be inscribed within totalizing and unifying narratives of identity, Maximin's novel is reflective of Glissant's destabilizing and disruptive counterpoetics. *L'Isolé soleil* explores the multiple roots, poetic relations, and linguistic instability of errant identities by focusing on the opaque, unpredictable (*imprévisible*), and fragile movement of errantry rather than upon the illuminating quest of the exile to recover the security of lost authenticity and origins.

A novel about writing a novel, Daniel Maximin's *L'Isolé soleil* is more complex than the prototypical *Kunstlerroman*. A labyrinthine composition of fragmented and multivoiced texts, organized in a nonlinear fashion around a cyclical genealogy and without a unifying narrative point of view, Maximin's novel aims to rewrite the history of Guadeloupe by inserting into the textbook version of the island's history alternate versions of the past from the perspective of the oppressed. In this project of rewriting Caribbean history so as to re-inscribe and re-center the historical narrative around previously marginalized figures and events, Maximin was no doubt influenced by the work of Trinidadian historian C.L.R. James, whose landmark study of the effects of the French Revolution on and in the archipelago redefined Caribbean historiography. Yet, as Clarisse Zimra states in her introduction to the English translation of *L'Isolé soleil*, the missing

history is not to be found in any individual's recollections but in the collective memory of the fictionalized descendants of the Matouba uprising: "What is missing from the white history books is to be recovered neither in the straight facts nor in each subject's interpretation of what facts they can piece together, but in their contradictory exchanges, their overlapping narratives."⁸⁴ In the sense that Maximin's novel stresses the futility of searching for lost origins, the elusiveness of returning to one's roots in order to reconstruct an idealized, "authentic" identity, *L'Isolé soleil* enacts both at its thematic and structural levels the notion that Caribbean identity is necessarily an identity of relation.

The novel's complex narrative techniques mirror the fragmented Antillean identity, a stylistic device that H. Adlai Murdoch terms "textual creolization."⁸⁵ By inserting into the texture of the novel numerous intertexts and multiple narrative points of view, Maximin explodes notions of origin and of a fixed authorial identity. Furthermore, by choosing for his fictional counterpart a woman who in the process of writing creates an alternate history of maternal relations, Maximin counters patriarchal genealogical determinism, by which an author is usually associated with his work, with a feminist poetics of identity.

L'Isolé soleil is a novel about writing a novel, but it is also a novel about re-writing a lost history from the collective memory of a people, a project that

⁸⁴ Clarisse Zimra, "Introduction," *Lone Sun* (Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, 1989) xiv-xv.

⁸⁵ H. Adlai Murdoch, *Creole Identity in the French Caribbean Novel* (Gainesville: UP of Florida, 2001) 101.

necessitates a multi-layered narrative structure if one wishes, like Maximin, to explode the official, white man's History of the Antilles and to create a space within that rupture for multiple alternate histories. To this end, while the novel employs tropes familiar to the genre of the *Kunsterroman*, such as the *mise en abîme*, it also incorporates a number of other texts into its narrative fabric to create a sense of fragmentation and fracture. In addition, then, to the novel within a novel structure of Maximin's text, *L'Isolé soleil* also contains within it numerous other kinds of texts, including letters, journals, writing notebooks, folktales, proverbs, historical accounts of events in the black diaspora, and poems and political tracts by such figures as Aimé and Suzanne Césaire and Léon Damas. Each of these intertexts has a unique function in the novel. By rewriting a history of Guadeloupe that is pieced together from fragments of various kinds of texts organized in a non-linear fashion, Maximin creates a space, or opening, within that rupture for accounts that would not usually be considered part of the historical framework, but which must be when the archive is destroyed, lost, forgotten, or non-existent. By considering two types of intertextuality, proverbs and journals, it is my aim to show how the inclusion of these various intertexts helps to create a rupture in the traditional monologic, linear, homogeneous historical narrative.

Maximin's use of proverbs, for example, invokes an alternate version of the past as it has been passed down through the collective memory of the

oppressed. Highly allusive in content and tightly-knit in structure, proverbs are an effective means of communicating secrets, of disseminating dissident information, and of remembering abuses and passing along through the generations the lessons learned from the past. As Christiane Chaulet-Achour argues, Maximin's use of proverbs aims to "ponctuer, illustrer, ou contredire la narration historique officielle" 'punctuate, illustrate, or contradict the official historical narrative.'⁸⁶ Juxtaposed with official accounts from Guadeloupe's history, proverbs call into question the singular, totalizing narrative of history and remind the reader that history is constructed, just one version among many of the same events. According to Murdoch, "these analeptic and proleptic cultural references disturb the linearity of colonial diegesis" and demonstrate "the significance of the margin as a potential site of disruption and difference."⁸⁷

In *L'Isolé soleil*, proverbs also function as Glissantian detour, for although proverbs are seemingly eternal sayings that bear encapsulated truths from the past, in Maximin's novel proverbs refuse return and resist universalizing collapse. Rather than acting as nodes of origin that allow access to a seemingly authentic version of the past, the proverbs that are repeatedly invoked in *L'Isolé soleil* cannot simply be contained within a kernel of truth. By never satisfactorily explaining the meaning of the proverbs when they are first introduced and by

⁸⁶ Christiane Chaulet-Achour, *La trilogie caribéenne de Daniel Maximin* (Paris: Karthala, 2000) 64. (Translation mine.)

⁸⁷ H. Adlai Murdoch, "(Dis)Placing Marginality: Cultural Identity and Creole Resistance in Glissant and Maximin," *Research in African Literatures* 25.2 (1994): 92.

invoking them in places within the novel where their meaning seems to differ from their original usage, Maximin suggests that proverbs are elusive and dynamic, resistant to return. According to Chaulet-Achour, Maximin's proverbs force the reader to question what he has previously been told:

Il oblige le lecteur, par leur caractère mystérieux, à réfléchir à ce que l'on vient de lui donner comme information. (64)

He makes the reader, through their mysterious nature, reflect on that which he has just been given as information. (translation mine)

Instead of functioning as clear lines that are traceable to a recoverable past, proverbs in Maximin's work are rendered as fragments, traces of a world that no longer exists and that cannot be recuperated, that open not onto return but onto detour.

Much like proverbs, the journals kept by the descendants of Marie-Gabriel seemingly allow her access to an unknown past yet, at the same time, actively resist her efforts to recover singular roots, suggesting instead multiple alternate routes. Like her authorial persona, Marie-Gabriel is involved in a complex process of re-writing history from these fragments, both oral and written, a process that involves the author of the novel, the author of the novel within the novel, their characters, and the reader in the creation of this history. The result is not a unified history, but many histories, which work to explode the overarching, univocal History of Guadeloupe. Ultimately, then, the history of Guadeloupe is not to be found in any single narrative or text from the past but in the collusion of

these multiple and conflicting narratives, in their concatenation, in their relation to and with each other.

Another narrative technique used by the author(s) of *L'Isolé soleil* is polyglossia, or the insertion into the text of many narrative voices and points of view. In the course of Maximin's novel, the narrative voice shifts constantly between the first, second, and third person narrative registers. Maximin uses this technique, as does his fictional persona Marie-Gabriel, in order to refuse a unifying, authoritative, patriarchal narrative voice. In refusing to write the narrative from the perspective of a generalizing, universalizing subject position, Maximin and his fictional persona deliberately deconstruct the dialectical relationship of subject and object, speaker and spoken to. By constructing their respective narratives from multiple subject positions, the authors blur the distinctions between subjectivity and objectivity, dismantling the power structures that let any one particular "I" appropriate for himself the role of storyteller. Through this fusion, this blurring of personal pronouns in the novel, Maximin calls into question the move to appropriate a singular subject position typical of history writing. Moreover, by writing from the perspective of many subject positions, none of which attempts to appropriate for itself the overarching, universalizing voice of the historical I, Maximin enacts a distinctly Glissantian poetics of identity by invoking a *brassage* of equally indistinguishable narrative voices that have been stripped of their authoritative power.

These other narrative voices often enter the text through the novel's intertexts, such as when the narrative switches to the informal second person in a letter or when a diarist writes autobiographically in the first person. The shifts in narrative register that accompany a change in genre are relatively familiar to the reader, to whom they seem much like the change in narrative voice that would accompany the introduction of dialogue. In such cases, it is fairly easy for the reader to recognize the change that has occurred in both narrative voice and genre and to register who is speaking and to whom. So, for example, in a letter from Adrien to Marie-Gabriel, there is no confusion as to the "you" being addressed and the "I" writing the letter.

At other times in the text, the narrative voice changes unaccompanied by a shift in genre, making it more difficult for the reader to discern who the narrator has become and who that narrator is addressing. In these instances, the reader must resort to contextual clues to figure out to whom the narrative register corresponds, often a difficult task in a novel in which textual clues such as names and defining characteristics (musician, ring, etc.) are not unique to any one character. Nonetheless, sometimes the context yields useful clues, such as in the case of the chapter of Adrien's writing notebook headed M-G, wherein it is relatively easy to discern that the "you" being addressed is Marie-Gabriel and the "I" narrating is Adrien due to the reference to the seventeenth birthday in which

“tu es tombée ivre de champagne”⁸⁸ ‘you fell, drunk with champagne,’⁸⁹ something the reader knows happened only to Marie-Gabriel. Even when Siméa addresses three different people in the course of her journal in the familiar second person, it is only minimally difficult for the reader to figure out that the “you” being addressed by Siméa is at once her friend Gerty, her lover Ariel, and her aborted child because of context clues.

On other occasions, when the shift in narrative voice is not accompanied by genre or obvious contextual clues, it becomes much more difficult for the reader to discern narrator and addressee. For example, in the chapter titled “L’Air de la mere,” there are no clues until the fifteenth section of the chapter to indicate that the “I” addressing Siméa and narrating the stories in the third person is her daughter and the author of the novel within the novel, Marie-Gabriel. Equally disorienting for the reader are the moments in the text when the narrator and the addressee seem to be one and the same, such as in the case of the opening of “Désirades,” when the addresser and addressee are apparently both Marie-Gabriel, thus Marie-Gabriel writing to herself:

...TU n’écriras jamais JE....Mais tu signeras toujours de ton seul prénom: Marie-Gabriel. (19)

YOU will...never write I....But you will always sign with your first name alone: Marie-Gabriel. (11)

⁸⁸ Daniel Maximin, *L’Isolé soleil* (Paris: Seuil, 1981) 94.

⁸⁹ Daniel Maximin, *Lone Sun*, trans. Clarisse Zimra (Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, 1989) 90.

Another possible interpretation is that the narrator is not the fictional author but Maximin himself writing to his character, his fictional alter-ego. The blurring of voices and subject positions in the novel is most accomplished at such moments as these, when the reader can no longer ascertain who is speaking to whom, or who is writing these various subject positions into being. Ultimately, though, the consequences of these shifts in narrative register reach far beyond figuring out who is speaking to whom. Regardless of the interpretation, what is important about these confusions in narrative voice is that they force the reader to engage in a process of identity formation that mirrors the fragmented Creole identity. Maximin thus uses polyglossia to disorient the reader so as to promote understanding, to convey the multiple registers and fractured identities of the Antilles, and to disrupt the notion of a single, authoritative narrative voice.

Much like the insertion of other texts and voices works to disrupt notions of authority and origin in *L'Isolé soleil*, so does the inclusion in the novel of a feminine, and feminist, perspective disrupt fixed notions of identity based on gender. By choosing a woman as his fictional alter-ego, Maximin refuses the paternalism that usually connects an author and his work. Moreover, by writing a nonsequential and fragmented narrative that privileges the multiple origins found in word associations and metaphors, a style that is characteristic of *l'écriture féminine*, *L'Isolé soleil* explodes the patriarchal notion of single origin and replaces it with a creolized notion of multiple origins. According to Glissant's

poetics of identity, transparency is masculine and opacity is feminine; the insertion, therefore, by Maximin of a feminine perspective into the novel reflects back on his own masculine authority, highlighting the constructedness of his masculine identity and calling into question his own position as a predetermined and omniscient narrator.

As John D. Erickson contends, “Marie-Gabriel’s/Maximin’s rewriting of history involves not only a break from colonialist history...but from patriarchal history and the dominant male narrative as well.”⁹⁰ Siméa’s journal critiques the exclusionary nature of male heroism and calls attention to the absence of women in works by Caribbean male writers of her generation:

Vous nous faites inspiratrices au départ de vos actes et consolatrices à l’arrivée, mais nous sommes absentes des chemins de votre mâle héroïsme. Poètes, vous trichez: vous prenez bien soin de nous désarmer avant de nous ouvrir grands vos bras. (137)

You turn us into inspiration for your acts in their beginnings and consolation at the end, but we are not on the routes of your male heroism. Poets, you cheat! You take care to disarm us before opening your arms to us. (135)

Likewise, Adrien cautions Marie-Gabriel about the hero-worship implicit in her project to recuperate Louis Delgrès:

Parfois, je me demande s’il ne faut pas nous débarrasser d’urgence de tous ces pères qui ne nous ont laissé que leur mort comme souvenir éclatant. (86)

⁹⁰ John D. Erickson, "Maximin's *L'Isolé soleil* and Caliban's Curse," *Callaloo* 15.1 (1992): 127.

Sometimes I ask myself if we shouldn't urgently get rid of all those fathers who have left us nothing but their death as a stunning memory. (82)

In her response to Adrien, Marie-Gabriel writes that "l'histoire n'est qu'un mensonge des hommes" 'history is nothing but men's lies' and, later, that "l'histoire est un piège tendu par nos pères" 'history is a trap set by our fathers' (108; 105). Marie-Gabriel complains that Caribbean writers have historically undervalued the contributions made by women and have emphasized only their roles as mothers:

Si on écoute nos poètes, nos révolutionnaires, nos romanciers et leurs historiens, la seule fonction des femmes noires serait d'enfanter nos héros. (108)

If we listen to our poets and revolutionaries, our novelists and their historians, the only function of black women is to give birth to our heroes. (105)

Adrien maintains that a second birth is necessary if one wishes to free oneself from this paternal legacy, and Marie-Gabriel later affirms the wisdom of his advice:

Si vous saviez comme vous avez raison d'affirmer que pour devenir adulte, il faut accomplir deux naissances, la première bien réelle hors du ventre maternel, et l'autre plus secrète et imprévisible hors du ventre paternel. (108)

If you knew how right you are when you say that to become adult you have to be born twice; the first time it's the very real birth from the maternal womb, and the second is a more secret and unpredictable birth out of the paternal womb. (105)

Marie-Gabriel ultimately rejects her initial project of writing to recover the lost fathers of Antillean history in favor of a project of writing to escape paternalism.

She tells herself:

Tu n'éciras pas pour faire honte ou plaisir à ton père....Tu écriras au contraire pour te libérer du paternalisme, de la loi du retour des pères et des enfants prodigues, et de tout ce qui cherche à revenir au meme. (19)

You won't write to shame or to please your father....On the contrary, you will write to free yourself from paternalism, from the law of the return of the prodigal fathers and children, and from everything that tries to go back to itself. (11)

Refusing to adhere to the “law of the return” characteristic of exilic, paternalistic thinking, Marie-Gabriel embraces instead detour, fragmentation, and relation by imagining for herself an alternate history of multiple, maternal origins rather than a history forged along the singular line of her lost father.

This shift from paternal to maternal origins is symbolized in Maximin's novel by Marie-Gabriel's decision to turn to her mother's story. As Zimra points out, Marie-Gabriel leaves “l'aire de la mer” and its associations with her father and Delgrès for “l'air de la mère,” which evokes her mother instead (lv). In choosing to translate “L'air de la mère” as “Mother's Song,” Zimra explicitly connects Marie-Gabriel to an alternate tradition that recalls the role of Matouba women in singing the word, or “chantent parole” (lv). According to Zimra, Maximin's “degenderization of the literary tradition” is accomplished through the influence of *l'écriture féminine* on Maximin's work (lvii). In Zimra's interview

with Maximin, the author discusses the influence of women's writing on his work and notes the "common ground" shared by "the colonized, the black, the female, the savage" based on "the fact of their exclusion" (xxiii). Maximin notes that he was particularly influenced by the work of Hélène Cixous, Clarice Lispector, Anaïs Nin, and Suzanne Césaire, and imagines his novel as "the dialogue I've wanted to have with her, with all of these 'women of four races and dozens of bloodlines,'" a line he borrows from Suzanne Césaire's essay "Le grand camouflage" (xxiv-xxv). Zimra contends, therefore, that "the claims and aims of women's writing...allow Maximin to write his own countertext on heroism" (liv).

Music is particularly interesting in regards to feminine identity in Maximin's novel. Martin Munro argues that music functions in the novel to "resist static, essentialised identities, and to invent and prophesy newer, freer models of subjectivity."⁹¹ Munro contends that rhythm in Caribbean literature has traditionally been tied to masculinity, and he claims that Maximin "effectively liberates rhythm (and music more generally) from this masculinist bind, and evokes female characters who use music and rhythm to shake loose the identity bonds in which the essentialised rhetoric of Negritude had entrapped them" (46). Munro suggests that Marie-Gabriel's mother in particular "evokes rhythm and music as forms of salvation, and effectively appropriates these traditionally male

⁹¹ Martin Munro, "Rhythm and Blues: Music and Caribbean Subjectivity in Daniel Maximin's *L'Isolé soleil*," Forum for Modern Language Studies 46.1 (2010): 45.

cultural forms as markers of Caribbean female subjectivity” (47). For Siméa, black rhythm is a powerful antidote to white trickery: “nos danses et nos chants jouent à déjouer leur marche” ‘our dances and songs play at unmasking their game’ (127-8; 125). At a Cuban dance club in Paris, Siméa criticizes the objectification of women and the othering of female desire:

Je ne peux plus supporter d’entendre les poètes et les chanteurs dépecer les femmes aimées. Nos cheveux plantes nourries par vos larmes, et nos désirs filtrés par vos regards. (134)

I can’t bear to listen anymore to these poets and singers cutting their beloved woman into little pieces. Our hair, plants fed by your tears, our desires filtered through your eyes. (132)

Siméa sees in improvisational jazz the potential to disrupt and destabilize the male poet’s strategies of dismemberment, and, upon her return to Guadeloupe, she learns to play the drums and the bass so as to reappropriate “ces instruments prétendus d’hommes” ‘those so-called men’s instruments’ (173; 171). Through music and rhythm, Siméa’s identity undergoes a gendered process of reconfiguration.

According to Chris Bongie, Maximin’s “anti-essentialist (and antipatriarchal) creolizing impulses” draw attention to the “fictiveness of the identities, past and future, he is (re)constructing.”⁹² In his interview with Zimra, Maximin states that “the present always invents a past for itself out of its own

⁹² Chris Bongie, *Islands and Exiles: The Creole Identities of Post/Colonial Literature* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1998) 358, 70.

desire” (xxvii). Maximin argues that “the truth of what we are is neither within ‘true’ history...nor absolute fiction,” but rather in “the play between what is real and what has been imagined” (xxvii-xxviii). In resisting the traditional view of the ancestral past as a repository of identity, Maximin’s work can be considered an “anti-*Roots*” (qtd. in Bongie 358).

At both the thematic and structural levels of *L’Isolé soleil*, then, Maximin explodes notions of single, authoritative identities and origins and privileges instead a Creole identity based on multiple perspectives and points of view. In doing so, Maximin’s novel thus enacts, both structurally and thematically, a Glissantian poetics of identity that valorizes such notions as errantry, relation, and creolization and that critiques the universalizing, univocal, and transparent nature of exilic thinking. Through the use of narrative techniques such as intertextuality, polyglossia, and feminist creolization in *L’Isolé soleil*, Maximin explodes notions of single, authoritative identities and origins and privileges instead a creole identity based on multiple perspectives and points of view.

Critiquing Créolité: Maryse Condé’s *Traversée de la Mangrove*

Like Maximin, Maryse Condé counts herself among those who have been influenced by the legacy of Glissant. In an article entitled “The Stealers of Fire: The French-Speaking Writers of the Caribbean and Their Strategies of Liberation,” Condé acknowledges Glissant’s “triple rejection of racial purity,

authenticity, and unique origins.”⁹³ She also aligns herself with Glissant in critiquing créolité, arguing that the theory of Jean Bernabé, Patrick Chamoiseau, and Raphaël Confiant, while derived from Glissantian ideas, transforms Antillanité into essentialism. Quoting a speech given by Glissant, in which he says “je n’arrive pas à la Créolité” ‘I do not arrive at Créolité,’ she suggests that, like Glissant, she does not recognize the trajectory from Antillanité to Créolité:

...la trace Négritude, Antillanité, Créolité....C’est un processus dans lequel je ne me reconnais pas.

...the path from Negritude, Antillanité to Créolité....This is a method to which I cannot reconcile myself. (qtd. in Condé, “The Stealers of Fire” 158)

In *Caribbean Discourse*, Glissant posits creolization as “a cross-cultural process” instead of “the glorification of the composite nature of a people” (140). In contrast, in *Éloge de la Créolité*, Bernabé, Chamoiseau, and Confiant, articulate Creoleness as “*le monde diffracté mais recomposé*,’ un maelström de signifiés dans un seul signifiant: une Totalité” “*the world diffracted but recomposed*,” a maelstrom of signifieds in a single signifier: a Totality.⁹⁴ As Heather Smyth notes, “[d]espite their claims to the openness of creoleness, the *créolistes* lose the self-consciously nonreductionist ethic that Glissant brought to

⁹³ Maryse Condé, “The Stealers of Fire: The French-Speaking Writers of the Caribbean and Their Strategies of Liberation,” *Journal of Black Studies* 35.2 (2004): 158.

⁹⁴ Jean Bernabé, Patrick Chamoiseau, and Raphaël Confiant, *Éloge de la Créolité/In Praise of Creoleness*, trans. M.B. Taleb-Khyar (Paris: Gallimard, 1993) 27; 88.

Antillanité.”⁹⁵ Similarly, J. Michael Dash criticizes *créolité* for its “tendency to turn Glissant’s ideas into ideological dogma,” as follows:

It lacks the ironic self-scrutiny, the insistence on process (“creolisation” and not *créolité*) that is characteristic of Glissant’s thought. Indeed, despite its avowed debt to Glissant, *Éloge de la Créolité* risks undoing the epistemological break with essentialist thinking that he has always striven to conceptualise.⁹⁶

For these critics, like for Condé, *créolité* reproduces essentialist notions within an ostensibly anticolonial and antiracial counter-discourse.

Condé’s critique of *créolité* is multifaceted. In an interview with Emily Apter, she states that she finds the minimization of African influences on Caribbean culture in *créolité* troubling:

With its accent on the fusion of multiple cultural elements, Africa becomes just another constitutive culture. But this does not do it justice in terms of the role Africa has played in Antillean history. It effaces the history of slavery...[and] makes the cultural laboratory more important than the memory of a sugar-based economy.⁹⁷

⁹⁵ Heather Smyth, “‘Roots Beyond Roots’: Heteroglossia and Feminist Creolization in *Myal* and *Crossing the Mangrove*,” *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism* 12 (2002): 14.

⁹⁶ J. Michael Dash, *Edouard Glissant* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995) 23.

⁹⁷ Emily Apter, “Crossover Texts/Creole Tongues: A Conversation with Maryse Condé,” *Public Culture* 13.1 (2001): 94.

It should be noted, however, that Condé does not advocate a return to Africa in search of Caribbean identity. Writing about her generation's confrontation with Africa, Condé remarks that "their search ends in disillusionment, bitterness, and failure," as they come to realize that "Mother Africa, alas, is nothing but a wicked stepmother" ("The Stealers of Fire" 162). In one of her few departures from Glissant, Condé argues that myths are "binding, confining, and paralyzing" and claims that "this bitter deconstruction of myths" is necessary to achieve freedom ("The Stealers of Fire" 162-3).

Condé cautions against the restrictive and prescriptive nature of créolité, especially as regards language:

The Martiniquan school of créolité is singular because it presumes to impose law and order. Créolité is alone in reducing the overall expression of creoleness to the use of the Creole language....This implies a notion of 'authenticity,' which inevitably engenders exclusion.⁹⁸

Quoting Richard Burton, Smyth notes that, by situating "the key to West Indianness not in 'race' nor even in 'culture' but in *language*," créolité poses a problem for many Antillean people who, like Condé, have lived abroad and know

⁹⁸ Maryse Condé, "Créolité without the Creole Language?," trans. Kathleen Balutansky, Caribbean Creolization: Reflections on the Cultural Dynamics of Language, Literature, and Identity, eds. Kathleen Balutansky and Marie-Agnès Sourieau (Gainesville: UP of Florida, 1998) 106.

little Creole (13).⁹⁹ In an interview with Angela Davis, Condé expressed her reservations about writing in Creole as follows: “I fear that Creole might become a prison in which the Caribbean writers run the risk of being jailed.”¹⁰⁰ Condé’s fear is paralleled in *Traversée de la Mangrove* when, in a caricature of créolité’s prescriptions in regards to language, Lucien the writer worries that the authenticity of his novel will be questioned unless he writes in Creole:

‘Lucien Evariste, ce roman-là est-il bien guadaloupéen?’
‘Il est écrit en français. Quel français? As-tu pensé en l’écrivant à la langue de ta mère, le créole?’
‘As-tu comme le talentueux Martiniquais, Patrick Chamoiseau, déconstruit le français-français?’¹⁰¹

‘Is this novel really Guadeloupean, Lucien Evariste?’
‘It’s written in French. What kind of French? Did you ever think of writing in Creole, your mother tongue?’
‘Have you deconstructed the French-French language like the gifted Martinican writer Patrick Chamoiseau?’¹⁰²

Condé also decries the “terrorizing...catalogue of acceptable literary themes” promulgated by the créolistes: “Were the stakes less high, we might smile at the attempt to dictate to the imagination of writers the quasifolkloric subjects worthy of inspiration” (“*Créolité* without the Creole Language?” 106).

⁹⁹ See the interview “Le difficile rapport à l’Afrique,” wherein Condé says the following: “Ma connaissance du créole est très limitée. Beaucoup d’Antillais sont dans mon cas, ceux qui ont beaucoup vécu à l’extérieur.” ‘My knowledge of Creole is very limited. A lot of Antilleans who have long lived abroad are in my position.’

¹⁰⁰ Angela Y. Davis, “An Interview with Maryse Condé,” *I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem* (Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, 1992) 207.

¹⁰¹ Maryse Condé, *Traversée de la Mangrove* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1989) 228.

¹⁰² Maryse Condé, *Crossing the Mangrove*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Doubleday, 1995) 189.

Citing Myriam Rosser, Smyth contends that créolité “elides diversity” in emphasizing a shared creole identity: “Créolité turns out to be a category that sublimates differences—of ethnicity as well as of gender and of class—in order to promote an organic vision of a whole, harmonious community” (14-15). Condé is particularly critical of the masculinist vision promoted by the créolistes. In *Éloge*, for example, the male writer must “inseminate Creole in the new writing” (98) if he wishes to avoid being cut off—the text uses the term “castration” here—from Creole language (105). According to Condé, sexuality in the literary model outlined by the proponents of créolité is “exclusively male sexuality,” and “women remain confined to stereotypical or negative roles.”¹⁰³ Similarly, Smyth points to A. James Arnold’s argument that the créolistes rely on “heterosexual exoticism and masculinist images” so as to demonstrate that sexuality and gender are noticeably absent in the terminology of theories of creolization (2).

In “Stealers of Fire,” Condé discusses the role of women writers in the construction of an alternate, liberatory discourse. She says that “women writers from the Caribbean are located on the margins of male discourse,” yet she suggests that their location as outsiders creates the potential for counter-discourse, arguing that “the words of women possess the power of anarchy and subversion” (159). Condé contends that women writers use a complex set of techniques to

¹⁰³ Maryse Condé, “Order, Disorder, Freedom, and the West Indian Writer,” *Yale French Studies* 83 (1993): 129.

counter male discourse: “they preempt it, accentuate it, or contradict it” (159). Condé asserts that women writers “introduce into the field of literature the notion of disorder” (159). This statement recalls an argument from her essay, “Order, Disorder, Freedom, and the West Indian Writer,” in which she claimed that “whenever women speak out, they displease, shock, or disturb” (131). Here, Condé associates “disorder” with female creativity, and she uses this concept as a counterpoint to the notion of “order,” which she ties to the literary models promulgated by several generations of male writers. Similarly, in “Chercher nos vérités” Condé envisions a feminist poetics that allows for multiple ways of imagining identity in the Caribbean: “Are there not many versions of antillanité? New senses of créolité?” (qtd. in Smyth 13).

Condé’s critique of créolité is not limited to her critical work, however. Building on her understanding of creative disorder, she uses her fiction as well to offer a challenge to the créolistes. Her novel *Traversée de la Mangrove*, in particular, demonstrates the extent to which she is willing to engage the créolistes, as is evidenced by the fact that she asked Chamoiseau to be the first public reader of her novel. His response to her was first read over the radio and subsequently translated and published as “Reflections on Maryse Condé’s *Traversée de la mangrove*.” According to Chamoiseau, Condé’s request included the comment that “we must show that although we may have different conceptions of the novel,

we can still engage in dialogue,” and she asked him to “offer a critical reading of my book” “from the perspective of your theory of Créolité.”¹⁰⁴

As I will discuss later in my reading of *Traversée de la Mangrove*, Chamoiseau’s reaction to Condé’s text is not only condescending at times but is also indicative of a willful misreading of her work. For now, I will focus my comments only on the patronizing tone he uses in discussing what he perceives to be the merits and faults of her work. Perhaps not surprisingly, given the créolistes’ obsession with language, Chamoiseau’s most negative comments concern Condé’s choices regarding language. Following a backhanded compliment about her use of popular sayings, which he says “ring true to my ear and echo loudly in my heart” despite not being in Creole, Chamoiseau writes that “[o]ther words of your vocabulary...fail to invoke in me anything besides the flavor of other places and other cultures. For instance, saying *île*, a word we never say or think” (394). His use of “we” is significant here, for it sets up a dynamic of cultural and linguistic authenticity that is arguably essentialist and limiting in its attempts to be prescriptive. After delivering the pronouncement that “the writer’s lexicon must feed itself primarily from...our verbal subconscious, in order for the literary fabric to touch us intimately and to release evocative bursts,” Chamoiseau delivers a withering indictment of her use of footnotes to provide a gloss for

¹⁰⁴ Patrick Chamoiseau, "Reflections on Maryse Condé's *Traversée de la mangrove*," Callaloo 14.2 (1991): 389-90.

readers unfamiliar with the cultural milieu: "...all the footnotes that explain what we already know make us think, dear Maryse, that you are not addressing us, but some other people" (394). At the end of his comments, he is perhaps at his most dismissive, in that he simultaneously raises possible criticisms only to suggest that it is not worthwhile to elaborate on them:

What can I say of the rest? I could, of course, discuss the lack of psychological breadth of certain characters, probably due to a somewhat too-uniformly discursive strategy; I could discuss the vocabulary, often ill-suited to the cultural level of this or that person; I could discuss the choice of images that fail to stir my heart...But what for? (394)

The tone of Chamoiseau's critique recalls that of *Lettres creoles*, Chamoiseau and Confiant's study of Guadeloupean, Martinican, and Haitian literature, which, according to Richard and Sally Price, "dispenses in three paragraphs with Condé's substantial corpus," and in what they consider "a stunning appropriation of her work," congratulates her for what they read as "a sign that she was finally, in their words, 'growing up' and seeing Antillean realities as they do."¹⁰⁵

In addition to starting a public dialogue with the créolistes through her invitation to Chamoiseau, Condé critiques créolité within the pages of her novel.

¹⁰⁵ Richard Price and Sally Price, "Shadowboxing in the Mangrove," *Cultural Anthropology* 12.1 (1997): 19.

Indeed, *Traversée de la Mangrove* can be read as a direct response to *Solibo Magnifique*, a novel written by Chamoiseau and published one year prior to Condé's novel. The similarities between the two texts are undeniable. In both *Solibo Magnifique* and *Traversée de la Mangrove*, the main character dies a mysterious death in the first pages of the novel. The storyteller Solibo dies in the midst of his narration, "d'une égorgette de la parole"¹⁰⁶ 'throat snickt by the word,'¹⁰⁷ while failed writer Francis Sancher is found face down in the mud of a mangrove swamp. The lack of denouement in these novels privileges a Rashomon-like emphasis on point of view, and the characters in both texts vie for interpretive authority. It is significant that the dead are artist figures; both novels are *Künstlerromans* and function as commentaries on writing (and reading) as interpretive acts. The structure of both novels is also based on the Caribbean practice of the wake, with people gathering to offer their testimonies in honor of the deceased. As Chamoiseau notes in his response to Condé's text, the wake is a special space historically, as a wake was the pretext for the gathering of slaves on the plantation (391). In order to understand how Condé's novel explicitly responds to Chamoiseau's text and the ideas promoted therein, I will first briefly examine the elements of *Solibo Magnifique* that will be germane to my discussion before turning my attention fully to *Traversée de la Mangrove*.

¹⁰⁶ Patrick Chamoiseau, *Solibo Magnifique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988) 25.

¹⁰⁷ Patrick Chamoiseau, *Solibo Magnificent*, trans. Rose-Myriam Réjouis and Val Vinokurov (New York: Pantheon, 1997) 8.

In Chamoiseau's novel, Solibo's death symbolically represents the death of orality and is subject to investigation by the police due to the highly unusual cause of death by auto-strangulation. In his postmortem, which takes place in the performative space of carnival, Oiseau de Cham, a witness/suspect cum narrator and the alter ego of Chamoiseau, aims to recuperate the oral tradition in writing. Solibo's death therefore represents narrative failure and, at the same time, suggests new narrative possibilities, as both the author and his double envision their roles as bridging the gap between the oral and written traditions. Oiseau de Cham, or Ti-Cham, as he is also called, is an ethnographer studying Creole storytelling. He envisions his role as recording the oral tradition for the collective memory and presents himself as a "marqueur de paroles" "word scratcher" (30; 11-12). In insisting that he is merely collecting and transmitting oral culture, rather than writing it, Ti-Cham largely belies the extent to which his occupation is predicated upon the death of orality and of Solibo. When he does see himself as a parasite and understands that Solibo is allowing him to write through him, it seems like an act of betrayal; however, Oiseau de Cham justifies his actions by reasoning that, lacking the option of a vibrant and enduring oral tradition, the benefits of preserving orality outweigh the pitfalls of complicity.

Chamoiseau's novel is divided into two parts: "Before the Word" contains the police incident report and Oiseau de Cham's account of the interrogations of the thirteen other listeners turned witnesses, and "After the Word" records the

actual words Solibo was speaking at the time of his death. The structure of the novel sets up a comparison between French and Creole. French is the language of the official account and the language in which the witnesses are subjected to interrogation, and their responses are in varying modes of Creole. As part of a larger commentary on language, Ti-Cham says that Solibo was diglossic and occupied “un espace interlectal” ‘an interlectal space’ (45; 22), which Chamoiseau’s novel in turn seeks to recreate. As opposed to the incident report, which is incapable of expressing complex realities such as death by auto-strangulation, Oiseau de Cham aims to fill the gap between the voiceless Creole witnesses and the representatives of French officialdom. Chamoiseau’s novel thus reinforces the idea that the true repository of collective memory is to be found in Creole. In many ways, however, the story remains a tale of misinterpretations; Solibo’s dying words are misinterpreted as part of his performance, and the witness suspects’ stories do not clarify but rather widen the gap between the two linguistic worlds. As Marie-Agnès Sourieau points out, there remains even in the final text an “irreconcilable discrepancy” between the police report and the actual events and their meanings.¹⁰⁸ The witnesses’ depositions are a series of miscommunications that frustrate both sides, as each witness offers different

¹⁰⁸ Marie-Agnès Sourieau, “Patrick Chamoiseau, *Solibo Magnifique*: From the Escheat of Speech to the Emergence of Language,” *Callaloo* 15.1 (1992): 131.

perspectives on Solibo's death and evidence that runs counter to the official report.

As both an omniscient narrator and a member of the group, Oiseau de Cham serves as a listener, witness, and transcriber, bridging the gap between the oral and the written by infusing the written form with oral authenticity. Solibo warns the ethnographer about the dangers of writing at all though, telling him that writing, in fixing the word, is akin to death:

‘Cesse d’écrire kritia kritia, et comprends: se raidir, briser le rythme, c’est appeler sa mort... Ti-Zibié, ton stylo te fera mourir couillon....’ (76)

‘Stop scribbling scritch-scratch, and listen: to stiffen, to break the rhythm is to call on death...Ti-Zibié, your pen will make you die, you poor bastard....’ (44)

Ti-Cham positions himself as an heir to the oral tradition of the *conteur*, or storyteller. As Renée Larrier explains, because of the storyteller's role on the slave plantation, as a subversive figure that used words to undermine and critique by telling stories with hidden messages about resistance, he is seen as the representative voice of the people and the preserver of collective memory.¹⁰⁹ The *conteur* is “the heroic figure par excellence” for the créolistes, who see themselves as heirs to the tradition of the storyteller and describe their own work as that of contemporary *conteurs* (Price 9). As mentioned earlier, the storyteller's

¹⁰⁹ Renée Larrier, "'Crier/Ecrire/Cahier': Anagrammatic Configurations of Voice in Francophone Caribbean Narratives," The French Review 69.2 (Dec. 1995): 276.

death is necessary to Chamoiseau's project; yet, even as Solibo dies from the waning interest in oral culture, his death opens a path for new creative ventures. In a scene reminiscent of Baudelaire's poem "Une Charogne," in which a rotting carcass is imbued with life, we are told that Solibo's body is crawling with manioc ants, "lui insufflant une vie formicante" 'breathing a formic life into it' (151; 102). For this reason, Vera Kutzinski argues that out of the "decaying, autopsied, and finally interred corpse" of Solibo rises "a strange bird," Oiseau de Cham.¹¹⁰

In Condé's novel, Sancher's death provides the occasion for the community to come together to ritually evoke memories of the deceased. Whereas Chamoiseau emphasizes the wake as the culturally and historically significant "space of the story teller" (391), Condé envisions the wake as a non-hierarchical space that provides a provisional sense of inclusivity. The narrator of her novel explains that the wake is open to all members of the community:

[O]n ne verrouille pas la porte d'une veillée. Elle reste grande ouverte pour que chacun s'y engouffre. (26)

[Y]ou don't lock the door to a wake. It remains wide open for all and sundry to surge in. (12)

The performative space of the wake provides both the structural framework for the narrative and prompts self-realization among the members of the community.

¹¹⁰ Vera M. Kutzinski, "Review of *Solibo Magnificent* by Patrick Chamoiseau," *African American Review* 33.4 (1999): 723.

The novel is divided into three parts: a brief prologue titled “Dusk,” the main section of the novel, called “Night,” followed by an epilogue, “First Light.” As Suzanne Crosta makes clear, these titles emphasize the passage of time, with an association between daybreak and transformation.¹¹¹ Indeed, the movement from night to dawn suggests new possibilities awakened by Sancher’s death and the wake, as the attendees explore the effects of the dead man on their own lives. As a result, Crosta argues that “Sancher acts as a catalyst; his death shakes up the whole community and forces everyone to rethink his or her priorities and redefine his or her existence” (154). Several characters even experience what might be described as rebirths, leading Dawn Fulton to comment that death functions in the novel as a “potentially transcendent mode of communication.”¹¹² Mira, for example, says, “Ma vraie vie commence avec sa mort” ‘My real life begins with his death’ (231; 193). Similarly, upon looking at Sancher’s coffin, Emile Etienne “se sentit plein d’un courage immense, d’une énergie nouvelle qui coulait mystérieuse dans son sang” ‘felt filled with an immense courage and renewed energy that flowed mysteriously through his veins’ (237; 198).

The majority of the novel comprises twenty chapters told by those who knew Sancher. The chapters recount the nineteen mourners’ interactions with the dead man, as Mira tells her story over the course of two chapters. Condé depicts

¹¹¹ Suzanne Crosta, "Narrative and Discursive Strategies in Maryse Condé's *Traversée de la mangrove*," *Callaloo* 15.1 (1992): 148.

¹¹² Dawn Fulton, "Reading Death: Allegory in Maryse Condé's *Crossing the Mangrove*," *Callaloo* 24.1 (2001): 307.

Rivière au Sel as a diverse community of exiles and émigrés, and the narrators' differences in class, race, ethnicity, and nationality are revealed through their conflicting understandings of Sancher's arrival and subsequent death. Also, the chapters alternate between the first and third person, as well as between male and female perspectives. For the most part, the female narrators tell their stories in the first person, while the male narrators use third-person narration. The exception to this rule includes two male narrators—Joby and Xantippe—who are socially marginalized and, as Crosta argues, “sensitive to the plight and emotions of women” (150). In allowing her female characters to speak for themselves, Condé privileges their point of view, thus drawing attention to the ways in which gender also contributes to the community's different understandings. In addition to emphasizing the ways in which gender constitutes difference, Condé foregrounds the marginalized perspectives of gay characters as well. According to Smyth, Condé's inclusion of sexuality as a mode of difference “functions as a resistant form of heterogeneity” (21). Indeed, her inclusion of gender and sexuality as terms of difference explicitly challenges the overt masculinity and heterosexuality of the créolistes.

Condé points to the fact that the narrative voices that make up her text are located and, furthermore, that the characters' various subject positions determine their interpretations. As a result, the many voices presented in her novel do not come together in a unified, or unifying, collective voice. Rather, the multiple

voices are often discordant and confrontational. As Smyth points out, in Condé's novel "intersections, understandings, and agreements are rare" (19). Though these divergent readings take place within the communal space of the wake, "the shared *experience*" does not result in "a shared *interpretive* system," according to Fulton (304). At the same time, the polyphonic nature of the novel undermines the existence of an authoritative narrative voice. In the absence of this interpretive authority, the partial explanations and contradictory interpretations must serve to elucidate Sancher's identity. But, as Crosta notes, the mystery surrounding Sancher cannot be resolved due to the contradictory and ambiguous information provided by the wake's attendees: "It is impossible to reconstruct the identity of the deceased because the referential data is sometimes misleading, sometimes suppressed, sometimes exaggerated, sometimes altered altogether. The reader does not quite know what is what" (153).

In Condé's novel, questions abound. Sancher is a mysterious figure of unknown racial and national origins. The reader is told that he may be Colombian, or perhaps Cuban, and that he is descended from white Creoles, yet is "[u]n mulâtre foncé" 'a brown-skinned mulatto' (150; 121). In addition, he has two names, Francis Sancher and Francisco Sanchez, and an unknown past. As Larrier's analysis of his last name makes clear, he has perhaps been away, "sans chez" meaning without a home (88). Moreover, as Christophe Lamiot phrases it,

“Sancher is all questions.”¹¹³ He not only asks questions constantly, but also answers questions with more questions, divulging very little about himself to the people of Rivière au Sel. As a result, each person in the community has only partial information and knows relatively little about the man he or she eulogizes. However, the process of meaning-making is not as simple as putting these pieces together as a group to make sense of his life and death. Many questions are never resolved and generate more questions, leading to what Lamiot defines as an ethics of questioning, wherein knowledge is reconceived as questioning: “Various narrators successively come to speech, neither of them providing a final word, or even a decisive word, about anything. At the end of each chapter...the quest is not taken any further, and each new [speaker] starts again from square one” (140, 142). Priska Degras thus concludes that Condé’s novel is “an exploration of the painful opacity of individual and collective stories.”¹¹⁴

According to Smyth, therefore, “the recognition that understanding can only be partial and contingent means that any vision of creolization and community will be part of...a cycle of interrogation and renegotiation” (23). Condé’s novel thus “enacts the process of questioning, of openness to different explanations, and absence of a central unifying presence that are necessary for

¹¹³ Christophe Lamiot, “A Question of Questions Through a Mangrove Wood,” Callaloo 15.1 (Winter 1992): 142.

¹¹⁴ Quoted in Pascale De Souza, “Crossing the Mangrove of Order and Prejudice,” The Romanic Review 94.3-4 (2003): 73.

understanding her vision of heterogeneous community” (Smyth 20). Smyth calls this process “feminist creolization”:

Creolization does not mean, for Condé, a heterogeneous yet harmonious mix, but a community of differences that must be negotiated and tested, in the midst of, in some cases, intransigent conflicts and power differences. It is a feminist vision in which shared commitments can emerge that do not require sameness or absence of contradiction. (22)

Unlike *créolité*, which levels differences, Condé’s “feminist politics of difference” is conceived as “open, multiple, contingent, and dialogic” (Smyth 3, 24). As Marie-Denise Shelton contends, the multiple and divergent points of view presented by Condé contest “the idea of a hegemonic culture,” such that Condé sees the Caribbean “as the meeting site of oppositional voices which are not mutually exclusive.”¹¹⁵

In addition to foregrounding narrative point of view, refusing interpretive authority, and enacting feminist creolization, Condé’s novel also functions as a larger commentary on writing and reading as interpretive acts. The *mise en abîme* structure of the novel places an emphasis on writing, as we are told that Sancher attempts to write a book also titled *Traversée de la Mangrove*. However, in an

¹¹⁵ Marie-Denise Shelton, “Condé: The Politics of Gender and Identity,” World Literature Today 67.4 (1993): 721.

exchange with Vilma, Sancher describes the book as a failure before he has even begun and acknowledges the impossibility of his project:

‘Ne me demande pas à quoi ça sert. D’ailleurs, je ne finirai jamais ce livre puisque, avant d’en avoir tracé la première ligne...j’en ai trouvé le titre: “Traversée de la Mangrove.”’

...

‘On ne traverse pas la mangrove. On s’empale sur les racines des palétuviers. On s’enterre et on étouffe dans la boue saumâtre.’
‘C’est ça, c’est justement ça.’ (192)

‘Don’t ask me what’s the point of it. Besides, I’ll never finish this book because before I’ve even written the first line...I’ve already found the title: “Crossing the Mangrove.”’

...

‘You don’t cross a mangrove. You’d spike yourself on the roots of the mangrove trees. You’d be sucked down and suffocated by the brackish mud.’
‘Yes, that’s it, that’s precisely it.’ (158)

This conversation also prefigures Sancher’s death “[I]a face enfouie dans la boue grasse” ‘[f]ace down in the sticky mud’ (14; 2). At the wake, Lucien recalls that Sancher once likened writing to death:

‘Moi presque zombie, j’essaie de fixer la vie que je vais perdre avec des mots. Pour moi écrire, c’est le contraire de vivre.’ (221)

‘I’m more or less a zombie trying to capture with words the life that I’m about to lose. For me, writing is the opposite of living.’ (183)

Condé’s novel also draws attention to the act of reading. The reader is called upon to play an active role in the signifying process, as he or she tries to make sense of the multiple and conflicting narratives told by Sancher, recounted at the wake, and recorded within the pages of the novel. Interpretation is thus

performed at each level of the text. Like the reader, each character at the wake attempts to read Sancher, but Sancher—like the text that is produced about him—largely resists being read. Fulton aptly describes Sancher as “an illegible text,” pointing to the fact that his body simultaneously invites and yet resists interpretation: “Even Sancher’s dead body remains blank, sealed shut: there is no blood, there are no wounds to tell the story of how he died; this too is left to interpretation” (303).

Whereas the créolistes have positioned themselves as the inheritors of a masculinist lineage descended from the *conteur*, Condé counters the heroics traditionally attributed to the storyteller figure with her portrayal of Sancher. Smyth reads *Traversée de la Mangrove* as explicitly counterdiscursive to *Solibo Magnifique* in this regard, arguing that “Condé refuses to heroize the male figure of *créolité*, the *conteur* who appears in novels such as Chamoiseau’s *Solibo Magnifique*” (22-23). Ramon A. Fonkoué agrees that Sancher is, rather, the prototypical anti-hero and asserts that, through him, Condé “s’attaque à une certaine image dominante du mâle dans la culture antillaise” ‘mounts an attack against a particularly dominant image of the male in Antillean culture.’¹¹⁶ Furthermore, Fonkoué argues that Condé critiques the rhetoric of the male hero:

¹¹⁶ Ramon A. Fonkoué, “Voix de femmes et figures du mâl(e) en littérature francophone: Nicole Brossard et Maryse Condé,” *Nouvelles Études Francophones* 25.1 (2010): 82. (Translation mine.)

Condé fait un pied-de-nez à la rhétorique du héros masculin triomphant (marron et conteur) face aux femmes ignorées ou ridiculisées. (82)

Condé thumbs her nose at the rhetoric of the triumphant masculine hero (maroon and storyteller) opposite ignored or ridiculed women. (translation mine)

This argument recalls Condé's remarks in "Order, Disorder, Freedom, and the West Indian Writer," in which she complains that "we have been fed upon triumphant portrayals of messianic heroes coming back home to revolutionize their societies..." (133). Condé's critique of the male hero also recalls her contention that women have been silenced by créolité's masculinist discourse:

The central role of women in the liberation struggles both before and after the abolition of slavery has been largely obscured. Frequently living on the plantation as cook, nursemaid, or washerwoman, it was often she who was responsible for the mass poisonings of masters and their families, for the setting of terrifying fires, for frequent marronage. (qtd. in Price 20)

Condé's use of the mangrove can be seen as part of her critique of créolité. Like her use of the mahogany tree to imply Sancher's likeness to Manuel in Jacques Roumain's *Gouverneurs de la rosée*, which Larrier reads as Condé's "subversion of the classic assimilation of trees with heroic males,"¹¹⁷ Condé's

¹¹⁷ Renée Larrier, "A Roving 'I': 'Errance' and Identity in Maryse Condé's *Traversée de la mangrove*," *L'Esprit Créateur* 38.3 (1998): 90.

reappropriation of the mangrove tree attempts to wrest its image from the créolistes. As Richard and Sally Price explain, “the metaphor of the mangrove swamp has a long history in Antillean literature, from Césaire’s ambiguous, sometime negative invocations...to its more recent adoption by the créolistes” (23). In the *Éloge*, for example, the mangrove figures prominently as a metaphor for créolité:

La Créolité est notre soupe primitive et notre prolongement, notre chaos originel et notre mangrove de virtualités. (28)

Creoleness is our primitive soup and our continuation, our primeval chaos and our mangrove swamp of virtualities. (90)

In *Traversée de la Mangrove*, Condé undermines the créolistes’ association of mangroves with heterogeneous roots and cultural authenticity. Instead, she presents a reimagined vision of the mangrove that is invested with new meanings. Leah Hewitt comments that “in the mangrove’s thick growth it is difficult to tell roots from trunks and branches, origins from effects, beginnings from ends.”¹¹⁸ Francis’s reflection that life’s troubles can be compared to trees imbues the mangrove with darker, more mysterious associations:

‘Les problèmes de la vie, c’est comme les arbres. On voit le tronc, on voit les branches et les feuilles. Mais on ne voit pas les racines, cachées dans le fin fond de la terre.’ (170)

¹¹⁸ Leah Hewitt, “Inventing Antillean Narrative: Maryse Condé and Literary Tradition,” *Studies in Twentieth Century Literature* 17.1 (1993): 85.

‘Life’s problems are like trees. We see the trunk, we see the branches and the leaves. But we can’t see the roots, hidden deep down under the ground.’ (139)

The difficulty of discerning one’s roots is depicted in Sancher’s futile search for his genealogy. Smyth notes that, therefore, “Condé’s use of the mangrove swamp image confounds a celebratory creoleness that seeks to trace well-defined roots to an earlier, more authentic, cultural identity” (19). Ruthmarie H. Mitsch has commented on the rhizomatic nature of the mangrove, arguing that the mangrove is “fluid, borderless, open to influence and change,” yet at the same time can “contain, entangle, strangle, bind.”¹¹⁹ While Mitsch acknowledges Vilma’s warning about the dangers of crossing the mangrove, unlike other critics she does not limit her interpretation of Condé’s use of the mangrove to its negative connotations. Rather, she argues through her reading of both Sancher and Condé’s novel as rhizomatic that the mangrove “stands for a lateral ethic, a reaching out, a crossing over, resistance and adaptation together” (68).

Drawing upon Glissant’s emphasis on the importance of landscape in Caribbean literature, Pascale De Souza examines Condé’s use of tracks, the paths that lead up the slopes of the *mornes*, to subvert the association of the hillside with the heroic figure of the male maroon. De Souza argues that, whereas the forested hills are associated with male resistance, the plains “came to signify the

¹¹⁹ Ruthmarie H. Mitsch, "Maryse Condé's Mangroves," Research in African Literatures 28.4 (Winter 1997): 55.

submissiveness of slaves” and were therefore “symbolically subjugated and feminized” (369). De Souza contends that, by portraying tracks as dead ends, Condé ties the *mornes* to a “futile return to a mythical past”; in contrast, the plains are posited as leading to the future (370). The fact that Mira, in particular, opts to take the road that leads down to the plains suggests the best hope for change in the novel. Interestingly, Chamoiseau suggests rewriting the title to emphasize the tracks: “That’s why, in reading this title, *Traversée de la mangrove*, I hear and would certainly have written: *Tracée dans la mangrove*, in order to evoke...the path of the runaway slave” (390). Aside from the paternalism inherent in rewriting her title, Chamoiseau misunderstands Condé’s text and, I would argue, willfully misreads her project to challenge the heroic male figure of the maroon and his association with the *mornes*:

Chamoiseau’s comment sheds light both on his reading of tracks as traditionally associated with marooning and his failure to see the novel as proposing a different perspective on *mornes* and tracks, as striving to challenge the very linkages Chamoiseau insists on here.

(De Souza 371)

As De Souza comments, “Given that the past has too often been mythified to the detriment of women and women writers, Condé refuses to vindicate it” (374). However, Chamoiseau surprisingly gets it right when it comes to what Smyth terms Condé’s “narrative ethics of collectivity” (4). Using such descriptors as

“strange,” “wayward,” and “unpredictable” (392), Chamoiseau perhaps inadvertently reminds us of Condé’s understanding of the role of women writers to transgress the imposed order of male writers with the disorder of female creativity.

Conclusion

My aim for this project was not to construct a singular model for postcolonial rewriting. Rather, it was my intention simply to demonstrate some of the complex ways that postcolonial writers from Africa and the African diaspora deploy rewriting as a discursive practice. Instead of presenting a new theoretical framework for postcolonial rewriting and intertextuality, the goal of this study was primarily to point out the inadequacy of the “writing back” model of rewriting put forward in *The Empire Writes Back* through close readings of selected texts that challenge that model. My hope is that these readings will help to show how outdated and limiting this paradigm is, and will therefore contribute to a discussion of other ways of theorizing postcolonial rewriting and intertextuality.

This study was organized into four broad categories of dominant discourse. These discourses include that of European canonical texts and their accompanying worldviews, as well as historical, generic, and gendered discourses. Each chapter corresponds to one of these dominant discourses, and in each, I have tried first to lay out the discursive terrain created by the dominant discourse and next to explain how the texts that I have chosen for this study work to counter these dominant discourses. Chapter One, “Re-Writing the Canon,” examines two works that rewrite texts from the canon of English literature, Jean

Rhys's reworking of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* in *Wide Sargasso Sea* and Maryse Condé's remapping of Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* in *La migration des coeurs*. In Chapter Two, "Re-Storying the Past," I have paired two fictional texts that rewrite history and challenge dominant notions about historiography: Assia Djebar's *L'amour, la fantasia* and Edwidge Danticat's *The Farming of Bones*. Chapter Three, "Re-Voicing Slavery," analyzes two neo-slave narratives that rewrite other narratives about slavery and, in so doing, rework their generic conventions: Sherley Anne Williams's *Dessa Rose* and Marlene NourbeSe Philip's *Zong!* Finally, in Chapter Four, "Re-Membering Gender," I look at two texts that respond to masculinist discourses in the Caribbean, Daniel Maximin's *L'Isolé soleil* and Maryse Condé's *Traversée de la Mangrove*.

However, there is certainly overlap between these discourses. For example, since all but one of the texts included in this study are written by women, issues surrounding gender and gendered discourses appear throughout many of the chapters and are not confined to the last chapter alone. Likewise, there are other ways that these texts could productively have been grouped or organized. Chapter One, for instance, could have been structured around its response to postcolonial discourse and could have perhaps been moved to the end of the project to trace different lines of development.

That said, one of my hopes in organizing the chapters as I have was to suggest a chronology of sorts by examining the differences between what might

be thought of as first generation counterdiscursive responses and those of subsequent generations. In other words, as the center shifts, so too are notions about what is peripheral reconfigured, so that, by Chapter Four, the dominant discourse regarding gender is being both created and contested within the locus of the Caribbean, in exchanges between Caribbean writers and theorists.

It is clear that existing models for understanding postcolonial uses of rewriting and intertextuality, according to which postcolonial writers and their revisionary practices are inevitably seen as responding, from a position of inferiority, to a dominant discourse in a unidirectional and monolingualistic fashion, do not adequately account for the complex discursive stances and identity formations at work in both the process and product of postcolonial rewriting. While it is not the goal of this study to suggest alternate models or theories, “Telling Otherwise” gestures towards these alternatives through readings of texts that participate, to various degrees, in a much broader and more open understanding of rewriting as intertextuality.

By way of conclusion, though my study examines the ways in which postcolonial rewriting functions as counter-discourse, it is not my intention to suggest that postcolonial intertextuality is counterdiscursive by definition. To do so would create limitations on writers in the African diaspora and would therefore work against my larger goal for this project—that of opening up the realm of artistic expression to multiple uses and purposes for postcolonial rewriting. Only

when postcolonial writers are free to adapt texts from any tradition for any purpose and are seen as participating in a world of texts to which they have rightful access will this larger goal be accomplished.

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Vita

Andrea Katherine Hilkovitz received a Bachelor of Arts in English and French Studies from Rice University in 1999. She served as a Teach for America corps member in Oakland, California, where she taught French at Castlemont Senior High School, before beginning graduate studies at the University of Texas at Austin. From 2001 to 2004, she worked as a Teaching Assistant in the Department of Classics and Religious Studies and the Department of English. She received her Master of Arts in Comparative Literature in 2004. From 2004 to 2006, she worked as an Assistant Instructor in the Department of French and Italian, where she won a teaching award for best Assistant Instructor of French in 2006. From 2006 to 2008, she worked as a Teaching Assistant II in the Department of English, and in 2008 she was the recipient of the William S. Livingston Outstanding Graduate Student Academic Employee Award for best Teaching Assistant at the University of Texas at Austin. She also received a Doctoral Fellowship from the Austin Branch of the American Association of University Women (AAUW). Since 2009, she has taught in the English Department at Mount Mary College in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, first as an Adjunct Instructor and then as a full-time Instructor. She has been hired as an Assistant Professor of English at Mount Mary College.

Permanent address: 2770 N. 85th Street, Milwaukee, WI, 53222

This dissertation was typed by the author.