

## ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: THE TRAUMA OF THE CARIBBEAN TEXT:  
ETHICS AND PROBLEMS OF VICTIMIZERS  
AND VICTIMS, AUTHORS AND READERS

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Since the early 1990s, trauma theory has acquired paradigmatic status as a methodology for studying literary representations of victims of various forms of violence, oppression, and social upheavals. However, with a genealogical foundation in Freud and an empirical basis in the Holocaust, trauma studies have been Eurocentric in orientation. My project seeks to “decolonize” trauma by bringing contemporary psychological and cultural trauma theory to bear on postwar Caribbean literature. Conversely, I use the insights provided by my investigation to reassess certain of the central tenets of trauma theory.

I argue that in canonical Caribbean trauma texts, including Jean Rhys’ *Wide Sargasso Sea*, and Mary Chauvet’s *Amour, Colère et Folie* [*Love, Anger, Madness*], characters may be understood best as positioned at the intersection of psychological and cultural trauma theories. Victims of traumatic violence may be members of groups that have perpetrated violence on others; and perpetrators of violence may identify with groups that have been historically victimized. Viewing characters along a psychological trauma axis as individuals, and a cultural trauma axis as members of collectivities with which they identify, opens a range of new interpretive

possibilities, and illuminates the manner in which critics respond to trauma texts and to each other.

Trauma literature places extraordinary demands on writers and readers who, through empathetic identification with victims, are exposed to potentially destabilizing representations of victimization that transmit something of the experience of the original trauma. I propose a reading practice for Caribbean trauma literature that urges critical readers to maintain an ethical awareness of their own responses to scenes of traumatic violence so as to read the characters of both victims and perpetrators in their full complexity.

This work includes an extended case study of the literature that emerged from the January 2010 earthquake in Haiti, supplemented by interviews of prominent Haitian authors that I conducted in Port-au-Prince in 2012-2013. Haitian earthquake texts and testimony tend to undermine significant Freudian-derived assumptions of modern trauma theory, including the doctrine of “unspeakability.” I sought in my readings of Haitian earthquake literature to identify a template of common thematic elements and distinct discursive modes that characterize these writings.

**THE TRAUMA OF THE CARIBBEAN TEXT: ETHICS AND PROBLEMS  
OF VICTIMIZERS AND VICTIMS, AUTHORS AND READERS**

**by**

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Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the  
University of Maryland, College Park, in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
2016

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## **Dedication**

**To the writers of Haiti, for whose welcome I will forever be grateful. In spite of the profound challenges that their community faces, theirs is a wondrous world in which literature flourishes.**

**and**

**With love and gratitude for  
RJSM, VM, JM, PM, RM, BE, MR, and MM**

## Acknowledgements

To the extent that I am now a scholar, a matter about which I am far from certain, I have Zita Nunes to thank. Where to start? Perhaps that she never lost faith in me, at least not outwardly, even in those moments when I most questioned myself. Zita was my notional reader throughout. I have to some degree internalized her voice, and so I asked myself at every turn whether she would like what I had just written, and usually (though not always), when I imagined she wouldn't, I cut it. Zita demanded clarity, but I knew that she would never ask me to change my argument to please her or anyone else. And I didn't, so that I can say (and indeed for her sake I probably *should* say), that my arguments are mine alone, and for this I'm grateful.

Valerie Orlando has been my role model in more ways than she would suspect. She instilled in me her own passion for Francophone literature, particularly that written by women, which she situates within a body of writing and theory, including the work of Frantz Fanon, to which she introduced me to my immense profit. In my own modest teaching I try to remember Valerie's sympathy for and kindness to her students, of which I was a beneficiary. I have been inspired, too, by Valerie's many contributions to our field, including those upon which I have drawn in this dissertation.

I owe my career as a doctoral student at the University of Maryland to Sangeeta Ray, whose theory class in Susquehanna Hall I took at the suggestion of Kandice Chuh before I applied to the program. Sangeeta decided that I was a writer, and that if I were to study for a Master's degree, my plan until I met her, I ought to

aim for a doctorate. I followed Sangeeta into Postcolonial studies, and, after much pleading, she consented to direct an independent study in which we read Michelle Cliff and I wrote on Jamaica Kincaid. I see Sangeeta's influence in many passages in this dissertation; and I hope she does as well.

At the outset of my doctoral studies, I was a student in Sheila Jelen's seminar on representation and Holocaust literature, and it was under her influence that I embarked on the inquiry that underpins this dissertation. My first article, "Reading the Victimizer," which I draw on in this work, came out of her seminar. Later, during my much-prized independent study with Sheila, I began to see that what often appears to be problems of representation are actually problems of reception. I went to Yale to listen to taped Holocaust testimony and began to understand Primo Levi's plaint, first uttered in 1947, "Why is the pain of every day translated so constantly into our dreams, in the ever-repeated scene of the unlistened-to story?" (60). I have tried to listen.

I'm leaving out professors, too many to name, whose classes and talks influenced my thinking. I will though long remember all those who had kind words of encouragement for me—and they were many. I would wish, nonetheless, to acknowledge especially Jonathan Auerbach, who in his workshops brought his engaged mind and keen pen to bear on drafts of my work—to my lasting benefit. And I have great affection for Ralph Bauer, who was my first teaching mentor. I remember how excited I was that first semester to be his TA, and with what gravity I prepared for that role.

I wish to acknowledge the University of Maryland's Center for Latin American Studies, the College of Arts and Humanities, and the Department of English for travel grants that supported generously my work in Haiti. I am deeply grateful to the College of Arts and Humanities for the Snouffer fellowship that supported me for a full year of uninterrupted work on this dissertation.



# The Trauma of the Caribbean Text: Ethics and Problems of Victims and Victimizer, Authors and Readers

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## Introduction

Since the early 1990s, trauma theory has acquired paradigmatic status in the study of literary representations of victims of various forms of violence (Kaplan 1–23). Trauma theory would thus seem to be particularly well suited to the study of the literature of the Caribbean, a region that has suffered grievously from, as H. Adlai Murdoch has described it, “the disruptions and transformations to which the slave trade gave rise,” which constitute a veritable “legacy of trauma” ( 86, 88). Nonetheless, trauma theory has found limited purchase in Caribbean studies; and it has been deployed in a manner that has been more descriptive than probative. Critics may describe fictional characters as having been traumatized by events depicted in a narrative. Some critics, as I will discuss presently, may claim themselves to have been secondarily traumatized by their readings of trauma narratives. But trauma theory has been little used to illuminate the way in which trauma affects the production or reception of important Caribbean literature, or, to put it another way, why authors of canonical texts make the choices they do and why readers interpret texts the way they do.

I argue in this dissertation that in certain canonical Caribbean trauma novels, characters may be understood best as positioned at the intersection of psychological and cultural trauma theories. Victims of traumatic violence may be members of groups that have perpetrated violence on others; and perpetrators of violence may identify with groups that have been historically victimized. Viewing characters along these two axes—a psychological trauma axis as individuals, and a cultural

trauma axis as members of collectivities with which they identify—opens a range of new interpretive possibilities that illuminate the manner in which characters respond to events within a trauma narrative and critics respond to trauma texts and to each other.

As psychological and cultural trauma theory are central to my inquiry, I propose to begin by clarifying how I will use these terms, particularly since “trauma” is frequently deployed indiscriminately to characterize the general condition of our age. In this work, psychological trauma refers to psychic wounds that disrupt an individual’s experience of the present. Stimuli, such as the report of a backfiring car that would ordinarily annoy a passerby, might, for a gunshot victim, trigger flashbacks to the traumatic moment of his shooting, causing for him a moment of terror. Psychological trauma theory is especially concerned therefore with the impact of trauma on particular individuals’ lives.

Cultural trauma theory, on the other hand, is focused on the impact of historical wounds on the members of collectivities. Individuals in these communities may harbor collective memories of such historical abuses as slavery, war, and genocide, which affect their experiences of the present, even if they were not personally exposed to them. In this dissertation, I will show how psychological trauma theory and cultural trauma theory are interrelated. These fields have developed separately, in part because the first has its roots in Freudian psychoanalytic theory, while the second has its in cultural studies. These two branches of trauma studies will, I believe, be mutually enriched as their textual nexuses in trauma literature are rendered more apparent.

In the early 1990s, Cathy Caruth described psychological trauma as an “unclaimed experience” (57) that by its nature exceeds the capacity of the victim to interpret it symbolically and hence to mediate it through language. Drawing on a genealogy that may be traced to Freud’s conception of *Nachträglichkeit*, or deferred action (Leys 20), Caruth described a mechanism by which a victim represses her memories of a traumatizing shock. Rather than being directly available to her consciousness, these memories of the trauma exist in fragmentary form in an inaccessible cavern in the victim’s mind, from which they manifest themselves periodically in the traumatic sequelae of repetition compulsions, nightmares, and flashbacks. (For a lucid account of this mechanism, as it is described by Caruth and others, see LaCapra 89–90.)

Two features of psychological trauma theory pose particular interpretive challenges to literary critics. At the heart of the theory is a paradox: because a traumatic shock sustained by an individual overwhelms her capacity to process it cognitively and therefore to know it directly, or in Caruth’s terminology to “claim” it, the precise and full nature of the event that caused the psychological wound is unknown to the victim and is therefore intransmissible. Thus, she is unable to testify to it, at least not fully, since if she were able to testify to the precise nature of her wounding, she could not have been traumatized; or if she were in fact traumatized, she would necessarily be testifying to something other than the trauma itself. Herein lies a problem of representation sometimes called “unspeakability” that was explored by Saul Friedländer and others in the early 1990s and has remained a subject of debate (Mandel *inter alia*). Unspeakability holds that certain

aspects of trauma are intransmissible and posits that lacunae therefore exist in testimony of “limit” events, especially the Holocaust.

Some critics have been concerned with psychological trauma theory’s Eurocentricity, both in its genealogy and in its focus in the 1990s on the Holocaust. These circumstances may have diminished its appeal to Caribbean scholars. In a 2008 special issue of *Studies in the Novel*, Michael Rothberg warns that “as long as trauma studies foregoes comparative study and remains tied to a narrow Eurocentric framework, it distorts the histories it addresses (such as the Holocaust) and threatens to reproduce the very Eurocentrism that lies behind those histories” (227). If indeed, as he argues, scholarship that “forgoes comparative study” inhibits the application of trauma theory to Caribbean literature, then this work may, I hope, further Rothberg’s aim of, as he puts it in his title, “decolonizing trauma studies.”

Finally, the Freudian model of trauma that is at the origin of Caruth’s theorizing is based on an individual’s experience of trauma. It assumes that at its origin, an individual has registered an actual wound at an identifiable time and place. While Freud deemphasized the significance of the cause of a trauma in certain of his writings, notably in *Moses and Monotheism*, he nonetheless assumed that a victim had been traumatized by an actual event, even if the nature of the shock was a matter of relative indifference (Metz 1473). In all events, to the extent that trauma theory is focused on an individual’s personal experience of an actual traumatizing event, it would be of little use in understanding collectivities’ contemporary memories of their traumatic histories, including slavery, which no individual still alive experienced

Partly in response to this disjunction, starting in the early 2000s, Ron Eyerman, Jeffrey Alexander, and other scholars began studying trauma at the level of the collectivity by describing mechanisms of identity formation in which collectivities form around the memories of traumatic histories, notably slavery, colonization and, as the case of Haiti exemplifies, natural disasters. Cultural trauma theory, which received an early articulation in Alexander's "Toward a Theory of Cultural Trauma" in a volume of essays co-edited with Ron Eyerman and others, *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity* (2004), has its own problems, notably the fuzziness and even essentializing quality of the collectivity, but it has proved to be fruitful in theorizing the mechanism by which historical traumas bear so pervasively on communities that have sustained gross abuses in the past.

In summary, psychological trauma theory offers crucial insights into the psyches of individuals, both fictional and non-fictional, who are victims of specific acts of violence. Cultural trauma theory offers an indispensable complement to psychological trauma theory by accounting for individuals whose psyches are affected by their self-identification with collectivities that have been the object of traumatizing historical injuries. I would wish here to add a methodological note: I avoid inferring cultural trauma on the basis of an individual's race or class, and invoke it only when an author or a character associates herself explicitly with historical injustices perpetrated upon a group with which she identifies. Thus, I argue in my first chapter that Edward Kamau Brathwaite's critique of Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), is best interpreted in light of his own professed identification with black communities that were subject to profound historical

abuses by white Creoles. In *Contradictory Omens* and elsewhere, Brathwaite himself claims this identity in an ongoing process of self-interrogation, which I urge critics to recognize. Along the same methodological lines, I look askance at Brathwaite's own impugning of the motivations of critics whose views he opposes on the basis of their textually undeclared ethnicities. In other words, I suggest that trauma theory should enable more complex readings of Caribbean texts by calling attention to the implication of characters' self-representations; but it should not sanction the essentializing of critics or other stakeholders in a literary text on the basis of their assumed traumatization (or perpetration of trauma) as members of a particular race, class, or historical position.

An example of cultural trauma *avant-la-lettre* may be found in Caryl Phillips' *The Cargo Rap*, the second novella in his 1989 *Higher Ground*. The novella takes an epistolary form. In one letter, Rudi, who is a semi-psychotic small-time criminal, writes from jail to his sister, Laverne,

I have made a pledge that one day we must visit our cousins in the West Indies. Their history is our history for they too are African people captured and sold into American bondage. They were shipwrecked on American islands, we on the American mainland. While the white men who 'owned' us became American, their white men remained Europeans: French English, Spanish or Dutch. The African West Indian is a captive within a captive and colonial society. We are captives in a supposedly free society. But we are historically of the same blood. What is inimical to them is inimical to us also. (123)

Phillips' character is a victim of cultural trauma since he identifies with a community that has been subjected to gross abuses, even though he is geographically and culturally remote from it. He experiences the present as a captive, not only literally because he is jailed, but also psychologically since he



identifies with a community that was historically enslaved. He finds common ground with individuals from quite different cultures in an imagined shared heritage of transportation and bondage. Although he's a producer of mayhem, which is why he's in jail, he sees himself above all as a victim of racism and injustice. His general posture is one of aggrievement. He exemplifies those who occupy positions at the intersection of cultural and psychological trauma. Even vile characters who are manifestly perpetrators of psychological trauma, like the Gorilla in Marie Chauvet's novella *Colère* [*Anger*], in her triptych, *Amour, Colère et Folie* (1968) [*Love, Anger, Madness*], the subject of my second chapter, may themselves be acting in ways that are inflected by their identification with victimized communities.

In this work, I call attention to the manner in which stakeholders in literary texts identify themselves with, and also *against*, fictional victims and perpetrators in trauma texts. In this respect, I associate myself entirely with readers of Caribbean texts who are concerned with victims of slavery, racism, exploitation, and natural disasters, and I am sympathetic to Brathwaite's disdain for the dramas of white Creoles who are losing their privilege, along with critics who are ruing nostalgically the demise of the empire. Likewise, I am interested in improving my understanding of the experience of victims of psychological trauma, and not that of their victimizers, particularly if it would appear to contextualize, and thereby, to some extent, to excuse their crimes or to explain the reasons for their depravity. Yet, in this work I continue an investigation that I began at the outset of my research, on representations of perpetrators, for I have come to believe that only by opening ourselves to the study of their characters may we understand fully the experience of

the victim in the traumatic moment, which may be identified as that moment in which she encounters the victimizer, and as a result of the wounds she sustains in this encounter, apprehends herself as a victim (1027). In short, without investigating the perpetrator, we are unlikely to arrive at a full reading of the victim.

At the same time, I argue that the transformation of a fictional character into a victim does not *ipso facto* negate her agency, which may include her capacity to choose to collude with her victimizer. Nor does her status as a trauma victim otherwise extinguish her humanity; and critics should avoid assuming that she is in any sense dead psychologically following her traumatization, however profound. I urge readers not to flatten characters into figures of victims, but rather to remain alert to the decisions that each character makes even when, as I discuss at length in my reading of the character of Rose in *Colère*, her choices are highly discomfiting to the reader. I recognize, however, that such representations place extraordinary demands on the readers of trauma texts. When we view the perpetrator through the eyes of a fictional victim in order to understand better her experience of traumatization, we encounter, through the medium of the text, an individual who does not wish to enter into a relationship with the character, but rather to damage her and, in some cases, to kill her. To the extent we empathize with the character of the victim, we expose ourselves to a simulacrum of the wounding that the victim feels in the traumatic moment.

When I discuss the character of the Gorilla in Chauvet's *Anger*, I will examine critics' accounts of their own psychological distress at their readings of his brutal rapes, and examine these critics' descriptions of the consequences of their exposure

to Chauvet's text on their own psyches. Authors, as their own first readers, are also exposed to these psychological demands, perhaps to an even greater degree than their readers. In this work, I avoid speculating on authorial intention, but I will consider whether, within their texts, authors employ literary devices or narrative strategies that shield their readers and themselves from direct exposure to perpetrators of grievous abuses.

One example of an author's shielding of the traumatic moment from her readers occurs in Michelle Cliff's *Abeng* (1984), which is set in modern Jamaica. The protagonist Claire and her father, Boy, visit the family's hereditary property, Paradise Plantation, which is in ruins. Claire learns that an ancestor of theirs, a judge, had immolated his slaves on the plantation rather than free them at the time of the emancipation in Jamaica. The judge is a perpetrator *par excellence*; his cruelty is willful and arbitrary: Unlike the slavers who threw their human cargo overboard when they were running out of food, the judge derived no benefit from his murders. Yet, the representation of the traumatic events is occulted. The information on the crime is delivered within a stream of consciousness that takes place in the judge's mind, even though the judge is long dead at the time of the narrative. There is even an extradiegetic address to the audience, and a gesture to the place as witness—everything other than the direct representation of the traumatic moment when the slaves were burned to death. These strategies have the effect of pushing the trauma of being burned alive into a distant and hazy past, thereby attenuating the psychic pain of writing it and reading it.

Similarly, in Edwidge Danticat's *Farming of Bones* (1998), the infamous dictator Trujillo, who ordered the murders of many Haitians in the 1937 Parsley Massacre, is heard only through a radio, and the text emphasizes the difficulty of transmission. A buzzing hum intrudes at many points and some words, sometimes even whole phrases, are lost. The reader thus is kept at a distance from the arch-perpetrator of Danticat's novel, whose psychic agency is thereby diminished.

Trauma texts oblige us to think in unfamiliar ways about what it means to read empathetically. Ordinarily, empathetic reading is conceived of as a salutary undertaking. Derek Attridge, for example, urges us, as readers, to privilege the encounter with otherness in a text over other forms of textual analysis: "I do not treat the text as an object whose significance has to be divined; I treat it as something that comes into being only in the process of understanding and responding that I, as an individual reader in a specific time and place, conditioned by a specific history, go through" (39, see Metz 1474). Attridge imagines the encounter with the other as a disruptive, but constructive, reading moment that reinforces the humanity and self-understanding of the reader even as textual otherness irrupts into his consciousness in potentially unforeseeable ways. However, in a trauma text, that disruption can impart an experience of secondary traumatization to the reader that destabilizes rather than nourishes her. In relation to Holocaust texts, Shoshana Felman argues that a trauma text should be thought of as "a performative speech act," that is in itself a site of trauma (5).

Nonetheless, as the writings of Ronnie Scharfman on Chauvet's *Love, Anger, Madness*, illustrate, empathetic readings of trauma texts carry risks: unchecked

empathy may result in what Kaja Silverman describes as “idiopathic identification, the appropriation or assimilation of the experience of the other within the self” (23–24). When the reader identifies idiopathically with a protagonist, her personal outrage at the character’s victimizer may compromise her capacity to read both victims and the perpetrators as complex individuals. Crucial ethical problems also come into play as alterity is collapsed and readers assume that they understand the experience of others undergoing real traumas. Thus, I argue in this work for a practice for the reading of trauma literature that calls on stakeholders in trauma texts to maintain an ethical self-awareness in their readings so that they avoid conflating their positions as readers with characters’ experiences as victims of traumatic violence. In this manner, they may avoid transforming the travails of a character in a distant time and place into an allegory of themselves and their feelings. Critics and other readers should feel authorized to respond to the text in any manner they wish, including emotionally, but they should retain sufficient self-awareness so as to avoid shifting the focus of their investigations from the texts to themselves.

In my first two chapters, I explore important Caribbean trauma texts from the theoretical vantage of psychological and cultural trauma theory. In my last two, I apply certain of the precepts of these theories to the literature that emerged from the January 2010 earthquake in Haiti. Authors responded to the catastrophe with a body of writings that includes eyewitness testimony, monographs, poetry, and short fiction. I supplement these texts with the transcripts of interviews of prominent Haitian authors that I conducted in Port-au-Prince during three visits in 2012-2013.

I treat the transcripts of these interviews as texts in themselves. Rather than request that authors comment on their writings, I instead asked them, *inter alia*, to talk me through their processes of transforming the experience of the earthquake into writing.

I sought in my readings of Haitian earthquake literature to identify common thematic elements and distinct discursive modes that characterize these writings. It may be that the set of topics I identify would be useful as a template to the study of writings that respond to other natural disasters. Chief among Haitian authors' concerns in the aftermath of the earthquake is the aching question posed by Yanick Lahens, in a passage that I shall discuss at length, *Pour quoi nous ? Encore nous ?* [Why us? Always us?] (30). Her plaint is by no means simply rhetorical. Haitians are well acquainted with the geological causes of the earthquake; yet they search for meaning in other causations. In so doing, they interrogate both human and supernatural forces that have chosen Haiti as a particular target of their wrath. The novelist Dany Lafférière questions whether Haiti is *maudit* [accursed] (54), and he provides a biting critique of the word's different valence when it is used by non-Haitians.

In the context of a natural disaster, the role of the perpetrator takes on surprising significance. The perpetrator of psychological trauma wreaks his damage as an act of will—that is what makes the view of him, in the traumatic moment, so terrifying. He inflicts his transformative wound not as an accident—for example, as a byproduct of war—but out of a specific desire to damage his victim. However, in earthquake literature, in the absence of an identifiable malevolent perpetrator,

Haitians seek to personify an inclement earth so as to find meaning in their malediction.

If the position of the perpetrator is occupied by God, and if God is conceived of as just, victims may hold themselves responsible for offending God, as humans who experience misfortune have blamed themselves for offenses against the gods since the Greeks and long before. Alternatively, if a Judeo-Christian God is not responsible, malevolent supernatural forces may be invoked, as Dominique Batrville, a noted Haitian author, and director of the Haitian national press, described to me. In Haiti, scientific explanations of the earthquake coexist with more complex drives to find meaning in misfortune by recuperating an intentioned perpetrator position where none would seem to be required.

Finally, I will consider the implications of Haitian earthquake literature for theories of psychological trauma literature. The earthquake writings of Haitian authors offer a means of “reading back” from a contemporary experience of writing trauma to a theory that is intended to explain important aspects of how writing is produced and received. Perhaps my most salient finding is that Haitian earthquake literature offers scant support to the theory of “unspeakability.” Further investigation is required, but even when probed, Haitian authors do not indicate, even indirectly, that aspects of their experience remain inaccessible to them or beyond their capacity to represent them. Any insufficiencies, from the reader’s point of view, might be explained by other problems, including the incommensurability of language and pain (Scarry 3–26 and 161–180), the limitations of metaphor in describing sensation (such as the experience of hearing

and feeling the rumbling of an earthquake), authorial choices of fitting subjects of representation, and readers' lack of clarity as to their own desires for secondary experiences of traumatization, which at times raise ethical problems of voyeurism and vicarious victimage.

Haitian literature tends to confirm other important theoretical tenets of psychoanalytic trauma theory, including the utility of writing as a means of working through trauma and thereby promoting healing. Trauma is experienced by some as akin to death, and Syto Cavé affirms memorably that writing provided a way for him to reclaim his position *parmi les vivants* [among the living], a phrase which resonated sufficiently among other authors for it to be chosen as the title of one of the principal collections of Haitian earthquake writing (Berrouet *et. al.* eds.). Authors write on their own behalves, but in so doing they speak to and for their suffering collectivity, including for those whose voices were forever extinguished in the catastrophe. At the same time, they are acutely aware of their own impotence to provide material succor to their fellows; and they see the absurdity in trying to write amidst destruction and deprivation. In the end, as Lyonel Trouillot and Yanick Lahens write in similar terms, writing may appear to them both pathetically insignificant and yet that which they uniquely can do in the face of catastrophe. As Lahens asks, in words that were adopted as the title of another collection, *Comment écrire et quoi écrire?* [How to write and what to write?] (Pierre and Āurovičová, eds.). How indeed does one who is traumatized write when the world around is crumbling; and what precisely does one write about? Each of the Haitian authors of the earthquake answers these questions for herself and then begins to write.





## **A trauma reading of Merle Collins' *Angel***

I conclude this introduction with a reading of Merle Collins' *Angel* (1987)<sup>1</sup> that illustrates the manner in which characters may be interpreted as either perpetrators or victims, depending on the affiliations of their observers. Collins' novel provides an example of a literary character based on a historical person that exemplifies the intersection of psychological and cultural trauma that I have been describing. Set in Grenada in the period leading up to the 1983 American invasion, a charismatic figure, known only as Leader, positions himself as the voice of a class of victims of cultural trauma, even as he betrays the promise of the revolution that brought him to power. In so doing, he tears the fabric of his nation and wounds psychologically those who have fought for or sympathized with the revolution. The excessive agency of Leader manifests itself when he is introduced in the text in a letter written by Doodsie, the mother of the eponymous protagonist, to her friend, Ezra. When Doodsie writes, in the Grenadian Creole that Collins incorporates in her dialogue, "is real confusion in the land" (96) she refers to the economic and political instability that has left the Grenadian population vulnerable to demagoguery. Her husband, Allan, has been laid off and jobs are scarce. Doodsie recognizes that "the country need a shake up" like the one Leader is fomenting, but she feels profound misgivings about "the kind of person Leader is." She sees him as charismatic—"people like they goin crazy about him"—yet, foreshadowing the book's end, she

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<sup>1</sup> The present discussion is based on the original 1987 text, published by Seal Press. Collins has published a new edition in the Caribbean Modern Classics series (Peepal Press 2011).

writes “I know we need a change but not in this way. I don’t know where it will end” (7). Collins juxtaposes Doodsie’s description of Leader, about whom “people thinkin he is savior” with a picture on the wall of a blue-eyed Jesus who smiles down gently on Doodsie while she writes.<sup>2</sup>

For those who invest in him psychically, Leader is thus a redemptive figure, capable, if he rises to power, of curing their ills. Collins use the aliases Leader to refer to Eric Gairy, Grenada’s longtime pro-Independence leader and first Prime Minister, and Chief to refer to Maurice Bishop, the leader of the Marxist New Jewel Movement, who deposed Gairy in a coup in 1979 and was later himself overthrown and executed. Collins’ use of these appellations for Grenada’s two most prominent post-Independence national leaders is striking. The Jamaican scholar, Carolyn Cooper, writing in a 1995 article in *Caribbean Quarterly*, suggests that Collins uses this device to convey their quality as “prototypes,” in Leader’s case of “the charismatic leader - whose personal style elicits general approbation (or general revulsion) beyond the reach of ordinary party politics” (57). Cooper also sees a potential political motivation for Collins’ choice when she writes that the two aliases constitute a “mask of artifice”:

The politics of representation require particular fictional tact, especially when the writer is dealing with a subject as sensitive as the Grenada Revolution. Collins, both poet and novelist, effectively uses the mask of artifice to both protect herself and extend her account beyond the merely factual. (57)

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<sup>2</sup> In a 2010 interview with David Scott in *Small Axe*, Collins makes the explicit connection between the charismatic leaders and preachers in that era in Grenada: “Because that kind of individual relationship with the crowd, what [A. W.] Singham called “the hero and the crowd” kind of relationship, is something that Maurice had and is something that Gairy had. ... Is it the kind of preacher/leader figure that people felt they needed? (92)

There is, however, scant basis to concur with Cooper in her judgment that “Leader and Chief are not fully realized characters” (57), as Leader is copiously represented in the text as tracking Erik Gairy in his immaculate physical appearance, personal background as a trade union leader, style of speechmaking, self-apotheosizing tendencies,<sup>3</sup> and charisma. Nor is it necessary to ascribe any of Collins’ representations to “fictional tact,” much less a desire to “protect herself,” since the references to Gairy and to Bishop are immediately and unambiguously identifiable.

A better immediate explanation for Collins’ use of these aliases is that they are not exceptional in the specific historical context in which she writes; and indeed they are identical to Collins’ actual speech that she herself employed in analogous circumstances. In an extensive interview with David Scott that appeared in 2010 in *Small Axe*, she quotes from memory a conversation she had with Cletus St. Paul<sup>4</sup>, Maurice Bishop’s bodyguard, in Bishop’s residence, in which she herself referred to Bishop as “the Chief.” Collins asks St. Paul about something he said the particulars of which she cannot remember, but that she experienced as dismissive.

“The Chief tell you to tell me that? [Collins asks.]” And I remember him saying yes. And I remember saying to him, “Go back and tell the Chief this is a meeting he set up. What is going on?” And then he came back and said, “Look, the Chief said he can’t deal with it today because . . .” (118)

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<sup>3</sup> An obituary in the *New York Times* reports: “His party's election campaign rallies were characterized by prayer, the singing of hymns and speeches that portrayed Sir Eric as a messiah sent by God to rule Grenada. ‘He who opposes me opposes God,’ Sir Eric once said.” (“Eric Gairy, 75, Former Premier of Grenada Ousted in 1979.”)

<sup>4</sup> Collins refers to him as St. P. in the interview and Scott supplies the expansion. In an intriguing 1991 opinion piece in the *New York Times*, Doris Kitson, a journalist, asserts that St. Paul provided false testimony against the members of the New Jewel Movement that were tried and convicted for having given the order to murder Bishop.

The circumspection that both Collins and St. Paul exhibit in their exchange by avoiding the use of Bishop's name is likely interpretable as an ordinary gesture of respect that would be extended to anyone occupying a high office, coupled with, in this case, a practice of discretion in a cauldron of political infighting.

When these designations appear in dialogue in *Angel*, they convey both actual speech practices in that highly particular setting, and the trepidation that the characters experience when referring to these two leaders, whom they justifiably see as holding excessive power over their lives. Their practice may be compared to Chauvet's naming in *Colère* of the Gorilla, a militia commander who terrorizes the Normil family. At the same time, characters use these pseudonyms as a device to keep the figures of their national leaders at a psychological distance.

The text also mediates these characters' excessive agency by providing to the reader only indirect exposure to their voices. We hear Leader publicly preaching and orating, and we know that the characters listen to him frequently on the radio; but they never encounter him directly. *Angel* is a *bildungsroman* with respect to the eponymous principal character, but it also plots the trajectory of Leader's political career along its own historical arc. Early in the novel, Leader, who rose to prominence in the trades union movement, addresses an admiring (and inebriated) crowd. He assumes the position of Jesus as he exhorts his people:

Leader held up both hands, a calm gesture demanding silence. His spotless white suit glistened in the sunshine.

... 'My people,' said Leader, 'let us recognize the presence of Our Lord in our efforts today!'

'Thank you, Jesus!'

... Leader held up his hands. Silence fell. "he brought sunshine to his day so that we could confront Beelzebub in his chamber! And that is how we know that we shall overcome!' (24-25)

The scene is rendered with considerable humor. Townspeople show up at Leader's rally expecting to be entertained; one woman belches after swilling a long draught of Red Spot beer. Leader's "spotless white suit" suggests his quality of transcendent radiance, and his casting of the colonial governor as Beelzebub is, on the one hand, rhetorical, but serves on the other to provide a foil for Leader to overcome as he apotheosizes himself before the adoring crowd.

Similarly, Angel relates to Leader through the proxy of his photograph. In a key scene late in the book in which she defies her father, who continues to support Leader, even after it has become clear that he is betraying the people through corruption and nepotism, Angel gazes at Leader in the photograph on the dining room wall and sees that "Leader looked confidently back" (191). She notices the inscription above the photograph, "Christ is the Head of this House, its only Inspiration..." then, as the scene continues,

Suddenly Angel took up the scissors which rested on the machine near the window and flung them at the smug face in the photograph. The glass splintered. There was a silence inside. ... Doodsie and Regal [Doodsie's brother, a unionist and early supporter of Leader] walked slowly to the living-room. Looked up at the photograph. The broken glass curved across Leader's mouth. His eyes, out in the open now, stared back at them. (191)

Leader, identified both with Christ and Angel's domineering father, has been fetishized in the form of a photograph, and Angel is able to strike a blow against the fetish because, at that point in the novel, Leader has been politically weakened, and the potency of his fetish correspondingly diminished. With the protective glass of

the photograph broken, Leader appears to her more vulnerable and exposed than before; but his eyes still stare at her as if they emanated from a live human being.

In her act of hurling the scissors at Leader's face and in her exchange of perplexed gazes with his image immediately afterward, the scene is reminiscent of (though far from analogous to) Tia's flinging of a rock at Antoinette, followed by their desolate exchange of regards, which I discuss in the first chapter. Angel completes the demythologization of Leader by going to fetch a broom and dustpan. In a "round up the usual suspects" moment that immediately normalizes a stunning act of violence that has changed the terms of the present, Doodsie asks Angel only to "get a wet cloth" (191) to capture any remaining slivers of glass.

We know from the characters' frequent invocations of Leader's contributions to the liberation of Grenada, including, notably, the general strikes of 1951 that included widespread arson (4, 12, 14 *inter alia*), that Leader occupies a privileged place among victims of the cultural trauma of British colonialism. He suffered along with his people, and he came to represent, in his person, their struggles. At the same time, by his corruption and in his subversion of the promise of liberation, he inflicts a deep psychological wound on the people from whom he arose and that he now himself victimizes.

In the conversation that immediately precedes Angel's assault on the photograph of Leader, Jessie complains that Leader sends his own children to university abroad while he shortchanges domestic spending on education. Angel then says,

An Daddy heself know how he drainin the estates dry to have his private parties; everytime he come from a trip he on the radio talkin ... about what

he eat an what great hotel he stay, nothing about how his trip goin to help poor people forward... (190)

She goes on, again rather comically, to complain that out of ignorance Leader has embarked on a scheme to provide, as a priority, buying panties for the populace when what they need first are shoes. In a “let them eat cake” moment, the man of the people has lost touch with the people—Enjolras has become Marie Antoinette.

Angel’s reference to her father illustrates how Leader’s depredations, including environmental practices that deprive Grenadians of their livelihoods, are common knowledge; even an inveterate supporter of Leader like her father acknowledges them. Allan internalizes the conflict between his desire to identify with Leader, partly on the basis of race, with the growing evidence that Leader is betraying his people. When Allan enters his house, he knocks back a “mountain-dew,” itself a symbol of the complex relationships between imperialism and its products, the first of which Allan opposes, while the second of which he enjoys consuming. He notices that the photograph of Leader is missing from its accustomed perch and quickly finds it under Angel’s bed. When he suggests to Angel that she can choose where to put pictures in her own house, she leaves home, precipitating the essential moment of departure in the *bildungsroman*.

Angel and Allan’s conflict over the photograph quickly transforms itself into an argument about Leader himself. Angel explains to her father that she feels ashamed by the photograph, but in the moment she’s unable to articulate why and she reverts to a childlike mode of characterizing her antagonist as stupid:

[Angel] “Daddy, that picture on the wall will make me feel ashamed. I could never bring no friends here.”

[Allan] “Why? Why not?”



[Angel] "Because it's stupid, that's why." Angel's voice was rising.

...

[Angel] "A man who have the country in such a mess, we have him up on the wall like a hero. They would think everybody in this house stupid."

[Allan] "Meaning I am stupid, I suppose?" (200)

In part, Angel manifests her embarrassment at her father's honoring of a political figure that she and her friends regard as a fraud. She presents her father's willful disregard of the evidence of Leader's failures as stupidity, thus expressing herself in a rather typically adolescent form. However, the real terms of their difference are soon exposed, as Angel and her father engage in a heated dispute over race and human rights.

[Allan] "Well, well, well! You and you friends. I don't understand you all. Talkin about black people havin power and a whole lot of nonsense. An when black people really have the power now, you still looking for high brown people who still don't have your interest at heart to give the power to. ...

[Angel] "So because you Prime Minister skin black, you figure he interested in black people? Look how much he have for himself and watch who his friends are!"

[Allan] "You're the one who stupid! Because what hurtin the high brown people you supportin is the fact that they always been Grenada white an it hurt to see a black man have something."

[Angel] "Somethin that he sharing with you? And this ting about who high brown an who black is nonsense. All of us black, and if you fightin somethin an you honest about it an you know what you fightin for an what you fightin against is to all poor people benefit." (200-201)

At the core of their dispute are dueling versions of betrayal. For Angel, Leader has betrayed the people in whose name he rose to power through corruption and cronyism, among other abuses. For her father, Allan, Angel is, in effect, betraying her race by attacking the black leader who embodies his people's liberatory narrative and stands astride the institutions that were for so long in the control of white imperialists. In Allan's view, to oppose a black liberationist leader in favor of "high brown" alternatives is to be complicit with racist narratives that blacks are

incapable of governing their own countries. He comes close to suggesting that it constitutes an act of racial self-loathing. On the other hand, accepting abuse because the abuser is black and played an important role in liberation, while eliding the history of his victims, whose traumas are equally real whether they were inflicted upon them by a black or a white perpetrator, is a sure recipe for a haunting of its own.

The enduring trauma of Maurice Bishop's murder that frames the concluding section of the novel suggests that positive outcomes in countries that have succumbed to autocratic nationalist rulers are unavailable. A black autocrat mimics white colonial powers in his vitiation of national institutions that might serve as potential sources of opposition to his unrestrained power. Thus chaos follows his overthrow, which reopened the door to foreign intervention. A population that vehemently opposes colonialism wishes the return of the colonial power to restore order and ensure public safety; and shame is the result as subjects feel complicit in appearing to confirm racist narratives. Post-Independence subjects in Grenada and elsewhere have found their lives to be bookended by the cultural traumas of colonialism and gross post-Independence misrule. Although Angel and Allan stake out opposing positions with respect to Leader, both share the emotion of shame that his depredations caused—and that tragically drives them apart as individuals.

In *Angel*, the cultural trauma of the country's descent from Independence into misrule is crystallized in a specific sequence of traumatic events that took place in October 1983: the murder of Maurice Bishop by forces allied with the more radically Marxist Deputy Prime Minister, Bernard Coard, which precipitated the

invasion of Grenada by the United States under Ronald Reagan, who moved to forestall what he considered the threat of Cuban domination of the island. Collins herself describes the moment as traumatic in her interview with David Scott:

Yes, an entire strangeness. You're putting me back there. This is after all that trauma from the nineteenth to the twenty-fifth. [Bishop was executed on the 19<sup>th</sup> of October and the Americans invaded on the 25<sup>th</sup>.] This is also a period when, remember, you are not so sure what is the loss you feel. When the group that has been in charge is suddenly reviled. So that people were not so much angry about the American presence, as angry with the party" (141).

Collins performs a common effect of traumatization when she tells Scott, "You're putting me back there," suggesting that she is not simply returning in her thoughts to that moment, but re-experiencing it, if less intensely, in the present. Crucially, the traumatic effect is intensified by the identity of the perpetrators not as outsiders, but as members of their own nation. Collins blames "the party" (Bishop's Marxist New Jewel Movement) for having created the turmoil and power vacuum into which the American soldiers irrupted.

The shame stems, too, from Grenadians' own ambivalence about being not only bystanders to the invasion, but also its cheerleaders. The promise of liberation had been so entirely subverted, and the government had so completely transformed itself into precisely the kind of oppressors of which the independence movement had struggled to rid the island, that invasion by a neo-colonialist power was perceived as the new liberation. Thus, Collins says to Scott,

So when the Americans later on said they were 'welcomed,' and they were critiqued for saying that, I say, yeah. I'm not going to say it out [loud], but, yeah, they are correct. Because there was that sense that the RMC [the Revolutionary Military Council that ruled between Bishop's execution and the arrival of the Americans] really was the wicked one, so *this* was liberation. Unfortunately, if I'm honest, that is what happened. (142)

Collins is speaking at this point from outside the country some twenty-six years after the events in question, but when she says “if I’m honest,” she demonstrates the difficulty she still feels in articulating the memories that Scott elicits in the interview. In like manner, she also describes the dismay and disgust she feels at the sight of the triumphalist memorial at the airport and a national holiday that celebrates the events that marked the traumatic failure of the revolution.<sup>5</sup>

Shame is, as Jeffrey Kauffman, a psychotherapist, writes in his introductory chapter to his edited *The Shame of Death, Grief, and Trauma* (2010), “a pervasive feature of the human response to death and other loss ... shame is both a general and a particular feature of grief” (3). In trauma literature, it is always present, though not always visible, in part because shame itself is experienced as shameful. The sense of shame that the betrayal of the promises of Independence is central to Collins’ “Shame Bush,” which appears in her collection *Lady in a Boat*, published in 2003, twenty years after the invasion.

All these years, people say, and still Grenadians not talking  
Nearly twenty years and look is silence that reigning  
They remember good days, and that’s the constant lament  
Can’t forget the promise of that jewel of a movement<sup>6</sup>  
They remember mango nectar, guava nectar, mango juice  
They remember the airport, everybody plan, only one could produce

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<sup>5</sup> See the following footnote, written by Scott, in his interview of Collins (31n5): “For Collins’ own remarks on the monument near the airport, see, ‘Grenada—Ten Years and More: Memory and Collective Responsibility,’ *Caribbean Quarterly* 41, no. 2 (June 1995): 71–88. [Quoting Collins] ‘This monument to a new colonialism, unveiled by the President of the United States, and, it must be stated, welcomed by many Grenadian people, is a tragedy in itself. No such visible monument exists to the Grenadians who have died for the country’ (76).”

<sup>6</sup> The reference is to Maurice Bishop’s New Jewel Movement that deposed Eric Gairy and ruled from 1979 to 1983. The movement had a populist platform. Its name is an acronym for Joint Endeavour for Welfare, Education, and Liberation.

All over the land, the talk was popular education  
They remember schools in agriculture, the striving of a nation  
So is not as you might think that their memory short  
They just grieving for the hopes that destroy, how things get distort

But they don't talk because  
touch shame bush,  
see how it curl inside itself.  
Watch shame bush,  
see how it close to defend itself  
Study shame bush, let me see you do that reading  
You will understand the silence people keeping (*Lady in a Boat* 50–51)<sup>7</sup>

Collins figures the palpable but unacknowledged silence as a shame bush that has grown in on itself as a mechanism of defense, not against a predator, but rather against its own feelings of shame and loss. Grenadians in this poem are not suffering from deprivation *per se*, but rather from the loss of all that could have been, including agricultural reform, public education, and nation building. They're grieving not from personal loss, but from the destruction of their communal hopes.

As a result of Collins' remarkable and unusual position as both an eyewitness to the political framework of the events she describes and as an author, *Angel* sheds light on the connection between politics, trauma, and literature. Much more might be said about the political,<sup>8</sup> but we may certainly note the modes in which undigested traumatic memories destabilize processes of nation building, at least as they play out textually in her work and in her own published interview testimony. Larry Ray, a sociologist at the University of Kent, describes the tension between the

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<sup>7</sup> Collins herself refers to this poem in her interview with Scott (148).

<sup>8</sup> I am thinking of the long history of American interventions in Latin America and elsewhere that were undertaken putatively for the benefit of the local population or to forestall the spread of Communism.

formation of cohesive collective memory and the reality of plural identities in a 2006 monograph on trauma and memory:

National memories are not only the repository of definable and stable groups. Rather, they are unstable and constructed as a hybrid of conflicting passions that are actively assembled into a narrative of 'nationhood'. Attempting to maintain a personal narrative that instantiates and affirms a collective memory continually suppresses the irredeemably plural nature of modern identities. Against this background of instability and reconstruction, nationalism is an allegory of irresolution, an expression of fear of the transient nature of the nation. (152–153)

As Ray's discussion of nationalism would suggest, at stake in *Angel* is nationhood itself. We understand readily that narratives of nationhood will be, as Ray puts it, "constructed as a hybrid of conflicting passions." The "transient nature of the nation" that arises from contested narratives maps well onto Scott's title for his interview with Collins, "The Fragility of Memory." When seen through the story of the growth to intellectual maturity and political consciousness of a fictional character, these forces and the psychic fragility of citizens as they struggle to make sense of the past are rendered visible.

Collins, in her own courageous interview with Scott and in her powerful portrayal of Grenada from Independence to invasion, illustrates the complex relationships that authors of trauma texts maintain with the events they engage in their works. Collins writes about fictional characters who themselves live through the trauma wreaked by a liberationist leader who subverted the promise of liberation. She both participates in the creation of Grenadians' collective memory of that pivotal era and in so doing resists the silence that is so often the result of ambivalence and shame.

# Chapter One

## Recrossing the Sargasso Sea: Trauma, Brathwaite, and his Critics<sup>9</sup>

### Introduction

In his oft-cited and most controversial judgment in *Contradictory Omens* (1974), Edward Kamau Brathwaite asserts that white Creoles have forfeited their place in the cultural life of the Caribbean:

White creoles in the English and French West Indies have separated themselves by too wide a gulf and have contributed too little culturally, as a group, to give credence to the notion that they can, given the present structure, meaningfully identify or be identified, with the spiritual world on this side of the Sargasso Sea. (38)

His judgment came at the conclusion of his argument that the novel and several of its critics had ignored “vast areas of social and historical formation” (38) that inevitably separated black West Indians from the white Creoles who had pursued an agenda of cultural domination. Brathwaite’s seemingly harsh criticism of Jean Rhys’ *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) is rooted in a profound discomfort with Rhys’ personal identity as a descendant of the white Creoles who perpetrated vast abuses in the colonial era in which her novel is set. Whether intended or not, his pronouncement had the effect of raising doubts about the standing of *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) in the Caribbean canon. In the ensuing debate, Brathwaite brought discomfiting attention to his own “black West Indian” identity (38), as well as to that of the novel’s author. In turn, Brathwaite’s commentary, which includes references to

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<sup>9</sup> This chapter first appeared in *ariel* Volume 46, Issue 4, pages 89-122 and is used by permission of the publisher.

certain literary critics' ethnicities, has perturbed scholars who would prefer that he bracket his own position as a victim of cultural trauma and, especially, the racial identities of those whom he opposes, and stick to the texts at issue.

I propose in this essay to revisit what may seem to be an old debate for two reasons: Brathwaite's encounter with Rhys' text is a moment of considerable interest in Caribbean letters, and it has been misunderstood. Brathwaite's contemporaneous critics paid insufficient attention to the context of his writings in his professed personal intellectual itinerary or, as he put it, "where I'm 'coming from, as they say, & where I goin'" ("A post-Cautionary Tale" 70). Moreover, later critics failed to notice that Brathwaite's views had changed markedly from his well-known enunciation of them in *Contradictory Omens*.<sup>10</sup>

In addition, and perhaps more exigently, the terms of the debate are altered when they are considered in light of the evolving field of cultural trauma, which posits that traumas experienced by a collectivity mold its members' senses of their identities and affect their experiences of the present, even in the case of individuals that have no direct personal connection to the traumatic events. Ron Eyerman has

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<sup>10</sup> As one example, in a chapter in the *Routledge Companion to Anglophone Caribbean Literature* (2011), Rebecca Ashworth reproduces Brathwaite's notorious declaration and suggests that he has been influential in undermining Rhys' "credentials" as a Caribbean writer. She then praises Ellen O'Callaghan for developing an "alternative model through which to read Caribbean women's writing" that "allows 'outsider' Creole voices, such as Rhys', to be included within the canon" (210 quoting O'Callaghan 11-12). Arguably, in *Contradictory Omens*, Brathwaite was more interested in the manner in which Rhys' position as a white creole played out in her wholly improbable, in his view, construction of Antoinette, "a very sensitive white creole girl just after emancipation" (30), than he was in contesting Rhys' standing as a Caribbean writer. In all events, as I will discuss further herein, by 1996, Brathwaite himself had termed *Wide Sargasso Sea*, a "great Caribbean novel" ("A post-Cautionary Tale of the Helen of Our Wars" 63, emphasis added).



emphasized the manner in which “collective memory provides the individual with a cognitive map within which to orient present behavior” (65).<sup>11</sup> In *Contradictory Omens*, as I will discuss, Brathwaite describes the Caribbean subject’s imperative to situate himself with respect to the region’s plural histories. Individuals negotiate their relationship to the collective identity of the group with which they identify. Neither the individual’s own construction of his or her identity nor the individual’s conception of the collectivity’s identity is presumed to be stable but rather results from a continuous process of interpretation and understanding.

Jeffrey C. Alexander writes that collective memory is a “sociological process” that affects members of a “collectivity” who look back to a profound historical injury and in doing so recognize “ideal and material consequences” that result in an “identity revision” (22). Alexander describes the process as dynamic:

This identity revision means that there will be a searching re-remembering of the collective past, for memory is not only social and fluid but deeply connected to the contemporary sense of the self. Identities are continuously constructed and secured not only by facing the present and future but also by reconstructing the collectivity’s earlier life. (22)

Indeed, Brathwaite’s relationship to his own cultural history has evolved continuously throughout his long career, from its origins in his studies in a prestigious grammar school in Barbados and then at Pembroke College in Cambridge. Eyerman’s conception of cultural trauma as involving a continuous process of constructing identities that are shaped by a collective memory of the past offers a sharp and perhaps welcome departure from the genealogy of trauma that

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<sup>11</sup> See Arthur G. Neal’s *National Trauma and Collective Memory: Major Events in the American Century* (1998) for an early and influential articulation of collective memory as the site in which “collective trauma” is registered. (7–8 *inter alia*).

traces its origins to Sigmund Freud in that the subconscious, which inherently resists investigation, cedes its pride of place to an accessible if somewhat vague conception of collective memory or identity. Theories of cultural trauma may supplement the paradigm of psychological trauma, which takes as its object the traumatized individual, by clarifying the manner in which the traumatic histories of communities affect the formation of the identities of those that feel themselves connected to them. These connections need not be direct and may, ultimately, link figures like Rhys and Brathwaite as stakeholders in historical traumas, even if they trace their lineage to opposite sides of the perpetrator/victim divide.

Literary theorists concerned with complex texts set in one period composed by authors writing in another and critiqued, in the case of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, in a third, at least, may find it difficult, at times, to rely on conceptions of undifferentiated collectivities in either period that are presumed to have coalesced around an “identity.” However, when the object of investigation shifts from a collectivity to a particular individual’s own conception of his relationship to his community, a reader may be better able to evaluate the influence that an individual’s affiliations exercise on his writings. Brathwaite’s frequent invocations of identity in *Contradictory Omens* arise from his personal negotiation with the hybrid identities of a variegated Caribbean. He seeks to articulate “my own idea of creolization,” in which identity is not received, but asserted by the individual. Brathwaite generally uses “received” in a negative context, as that which is imparted by a colonial power over which the subject has little control, including cultural products (23), industrial goods (27) and education (37). In contrast, hybridity is not an objective condition,

but rather the result of the individual's own interpretation of his relationship to his cultural and ethnic history. Brathwaite writes, "Although there is white/brown/black, there are infinite possibilities within these distinctions and many ways of asserting identity. A common colonial and creole experience is shared among the various divisions, even if that experience is variously interpreted" (25). Brathwaite suggests that identity should be continuously interrogated by an individual with a stake in the region rather than simply assumed.

While Brathwaite sees identity as conditioning stakeholders' responses to texts, he never argues that commonality of race between a critic and a subject of inquiry confers an interpretive advantage. This mode of thinking is present in Laura Niesen de Abruna's essay "Twentieth-Century Women Writers from the English-Speaking Caribbean." She writes:

[T]here is a political problem in looking to Rhys, a white Creole writer, for a representation of successful syncretism between black and white Caribbean women. . . . Although Rhys cannot claim fully to understand the "Otherness" of most West Indian women, because most are African-Caribbean rather than white Creole, she does seem able to return to the West Indian Bertha Mason the dignity taken away by Charlotte Bronte. (96)

Although Niesen de Abruna describes this problem as political rather than literary, it is important to interrogate her assumption that commonality of race connotes understanding (and collapses "otherness") even when, in this case, the object of investigation is the fictional character of Tia, an impoverished and illiterate girl living in a destitute community of ex-slaves on a plantation in the first half of the nineteenth century. While Brathwaite claims that the readings he and others

produce are affected by their respective “derivations,” he does not argue that they imply a hierarchy of understanding.

Thus, Brathwaite disclaims objectivity in his own writing on *Wide Sargasso Sea*, as a consequence of his identity, and he implies that other Caribbean critics of *Wide Sargasso Sea* would be subject to the same effect. If their identities were plural, then so would be their readings of the text. He contrasts the diverse readings of Caribbean critics with those of “metropolitan critics who were impressed with its **fin-de-siècle** quality” (*Contradictory Omens* 34, emphasis in the original). These critics were, in his view, indifferent to the historical context of the colonial era in which the novel is set, and rather shared a certain nostalgia for *Jane Eyre*.

Among West Indian critics, on the other band, there was no such unanimity [of opinion on *Wide Sargasso Sea*], because here one's sympathies became engaged, one's cultural orientations were involved; one's perception of one's personal experience in its relationship to what one conceived to be one's history. It is dishonest, I think, to try to hold that it is possible to be an impartial critic in cases where one's historical and historically received image of oneself is under discussion. (34)

That Brathwaite is framing both black and white West Indians' historically received images of themselves within the reality of cultural trauma *avant la lettre* may be seen in his discussion of Kenneth Ramchand who, in Brathwaite's view, “sees the novel as an illustration of the ‘terrified consciousness’ (the tag is from Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*) of white West Indians in a black West Indies” (34). Certainly, non-Caribbean critics have produced diverse readings of *Wide Sargasso Sea* in the years since *Contradictory Omens* was first published. However, Brathwaite's insight into the effect of cultural trauma on critical writing remains fresh. When Brathwaite argues that it would be dishonest to insist on holding Caribbean critics to an

inherently unattainable standard of impartiality, he disrupts a convention of scholarly discourse that rules out critics' personal histories as a legitimate topic of critical discussion.

As Brathwaite perhaps infelicitously puts it, expanding the study of "derivations" to call attention to the ethnicity of an individual who, in his view, was engaging in mimicry, is not without its perils, as may be observed in his disparagement of certain critics whose views he implies are products of their ethnicities (34). Yet here, too, there is a distinction to be drawn. We may readily grant individuals' rights to invoke their cultural identities in their work but view speculation on the possible influence authors' unarticulated ethnic and cultural histories have on their writings to be unacceptable.

In order to appreciate the way that Brathwaite identifies Rhys with Antoinette and himself with Tia, as he later does, as I shall describe, in the *Barbajan Poems*, it is useful to consider *Wide Sargasso Sea* as a trauma text, although one that does not follow the model of canonical European trauma texts, especially those set during the Holocaust, in which perpetrators and victims are opposed in both individual and collective binaries (Metz 1022–23). Tia is a perpetrator, but she is also a member of a group of victims: the impoverished, recently freed slaves on the Coulibri plantation. Antoinette is both a victim of psychological trauma and a member of a group of perpetrators: the white Creole plantation owners. Psychological trauma and cultural trauma operate in opposing directions in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, as the victim comes from a group of perpetrators and the perpetrator from a group of victims. This opposition generates productive tensions;

relationships between individuals and communities are revealed to be more complex and more fully contextualized within their specific histories than has been previously understood. Tia is not simply the instrument of Antoinette's psychological and physical wounds but a particular character who must be studied in the context of her relationship to her community's historical circumstances.

Authors, readers, and critics respond to texts and one another in modes that are inflected by their respective relationships to traumatic histories staged in texts that they write, read, and discuss. Consequently, critics should exercise ethical self-awareness of the influence that their own identities have on their responses to the texts that they critique; and at the same time they should recognize that their dialogic partners are also affected by their identities. This is particularly the case in the investigation of trauma texts. In this regard, it may be helpful to think of a text in the manner that Derek Attridge describes: "I do not treat the text as an object whose significance has to be divined; I treat it as something that comes into being only in the process of understanding and responding that I, as an individual reader in a specific time and place, conditioned by a specific history, go through" (39–40). Cathy Caruth's principle that "History is precisely the way we are implicated in each other's traumas" ("Unclaimed Experience" 192) is a call for dialog between individuals that recognize and respond to the traumatic histories of the other. In short, critics and other stakeholders are obliged not only to consider the historical and cultural contexts of the texts that they investigate, but also how their own affiliations and those that are claimed by their dialogic partners affect themselves.

## **Crosscurrents of psychological and cultural trauma**

In a pivotal moment early in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Antoinette rushes toward her friend, Tia, a black girl of about her age, for shelter as her family's estate, Coulibri, burns to the ground in a fire set by disgruntled ex-slaves. Tia responds by throwing a jagged stone at Antoinette's head, grievously wounding her and setting off a decline in her mental health that progresses throughout the novel, which ends just before her suicide. In this traumatic moment, Tia acts as a perpetrator.

Through her willed act of violence, she transforms Antoinette into a victim who thereafter bears the psychological scars of her traumatization. However, as a member of a community that has suffered profoundly from slavery, racism, and economic exploitation, Tia is a victim of cultural trauma caused by the group to which Antoinette belongs. The traumatic moment in the narrative is precipitated by Antoinette's failed attempt to renounce her membership in this group of victimizers to join Tia's community of victims. Tia and Antoinette's reciprocal and opposing positions in the traumatic moment condition their responses to each other and the reader's response to the text.

Readers that connect their own personal histories with the traumas staged in the narrative may find these instabilities in the positions of victim and victimizer particularly fraught. Antoinette first hears Tia singing "Go away white cockroach, go away, go away . . . Nobody want you. Go away" (13). Her portrayal as racist and classist (not to mention as manipulative and generally nasty) stands as a stunning reversal to the overwhelming reality of white-black relations in the colonial Caribbean. To gain some insight into Antoinette's experience of her friend, we must

see Tia, in all of her ambivalence, through Antoinette's eyes in the traumatic moment.

Then, not so far off, I saw Tia and her mother and I ran to her, for she was all that was left of my life as it had been. We had eaten the same food, slept side by side, bathed in the same river. As I ran, I thought, I will live with Tia and I will be like her. Not to leave Coulibri. Not to go. Not. When I was close I saw the jagged stone in her hand but I did not see her throw it. I did not feel it either, only something wet, running down my face. I looked at her and I saw her face crumple up as she began to cry. We stared at each other, blood on my face, tears on hers. It was as if I saw myself. Like in a looking-glass. [27]

In this moment, Antoinette and Tia each experience an overwhelming sense of loss, with Antoinette's blood and Tia's tears making the psychic wounds of each visible to the other. In transforming Antoinette into a victim, Tia becomes a perpetrator, but she unavoidably wounds herself psychologically in so doing. Her act of violence disrupts the callous indifference she has developed toward all members of the group that has victimized her community. While Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's 1985 reading of the looking-glass in this scene as symbolic of Antoinette's narcissistic mirroring of herself onto Tia is perceptive and productive,<sup>12</sup> to see Tia only as a projection of Antoinette—to not see her at all—is to deny Tia agency in this moment as both perpetrator and victim and to rob her of her all too human capacity not only to experience suffering but also to inflict it. As an individual, she's subject to classic psychological trauma. Our reading of this pivotal moment is affected by our various relationships to the cultural traumas that the respective communities of Antoinette and Tia exemplify.

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<sup>12</sup> Spivak sees Tia as a *failed* mirroring by Antoinette, "the other that could not be selfed, because the fracture of imperialism rather than the Ovidian pool intervened" (250). Spivak acknowledges the point as "difficult" and returns to it; but in her reading, Tia has no more autonomy than Narcissus's reflection in the myth that Spivak invokes.



Antoinette's traumatic memories retain excessive agency in her subconscious. In the dream narrative in the penultimate paragraph of the novel, Antoinette, renamed Bertha by her husband in a stunning exercise of patriarchal domination, assumes the identity of the madwoman locked in the upper reaches of Thornfield Hall in England in *Jane Eyre*. She revisits the site of her original trauma in a dream just before she sets the hall alight with a candle and jumps to her death from its burning ramparts:

The wind caught my hair and it streamed out like wings. It might bear me up, I thought, if I jumped to those hard stones. But when I looked over the edge I saw the pool at Coulibri. Tia was there. She beckoned to me and when I hesitated, she laughed. I heard her say, You frightened? And I heard the man's voice, Bertha! Bertha! All this I saw and heard in a fraction of a second. And the sky so red. Someone screamed and I thought Why did I scream? I called "Tia!" and jumped and woke. (112)<sup>13</sup>

Tia's irruption into Antoinette's nightmare is recognizable as the manifestation of Antoinette's unassimilated memories of her separation from Tia through a violent act. Antoinette's experience is consistent with Caruth's characterization of "unclaimed experience," the term she coined to describe the manner in which traces of a victim's traumatic experience lie inaccessibly in her subconscious and manifest themselves periodically in nightmares, flashbacks, and repetition compulsions (59, 62).<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> This passage has been the focus of sustained scholarly investigation. Laura Niesen de Abruna, writing in 1990 in a work to which I referred earlier, sees Bertha's jump as liberatory and her apparent resolve to seek "connectedness with Tia" a successful act of revenge against Rochester, who had locked her in a "baronial cage" (96).

<sup>14</sup> Caruth's paradigm has received its share of critiques, perhaps most notably by Ruth Leys who faults Caruth's reading of the Tancred story in Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920). Leys is concerned that Caruth's understanding of trauma as being "unlocatable" and transmissible destabilizes the position of the victim and opens the door to turning "perpetrators into victims too" (297). More recent critics, including Naomi Mandel, have cast doubt on the doctrine of "unspeakability," which arises from Caruth's articulation of traumatic memory as fully interred in the subconscious, and therefore unavailable for representation. Still, the central insight of psychological trauma theory that victims bear unassimilated traumatic

The nature of the representation of trauma, however, is less important for my purposes than its reception. Trauma readings must remain alert to the manner in which the ideological biases of the narrative may inhibit the reader's capacity to respond to complexities and instabilities in the protagonists' positions. Antoinette narrates the first part of *Wide Sargasso Sea* from the standpoint of a young girl who is unaware of the larger context of race relations on her plantation. The reader knows that Coulibri is falling into decline and can infer that the ex-slaves are suffering from their loss of employment on the plantation; but the text itself is not concerned with the general condition of the ex-slaves in Jamaica, for whom the promise of the Emancipation Act of 1833 had been betrayed.

Indeed, apart from her mother's apprehension that Mason's plan to import coolie labor might provoke a violent reaction among the ex-slaves, the historical circumstances of the ex-slaves in the novel is of scant concern to any of the white Creoles in the novel. The white Creoles' concern for their own travails, in contrast to their disregard for the ex-slaves' history of profound abuse and exploitation, is illustrated by Annette's appropriation of the word "marooned" (10, 15), which she reorients from a touchstone of courageous black resistance to slavery to a metaphor for her family's condition of social and physical isolation from the local white plantocracy. The reader's only glimpse of the general condition of slaves comes in a remark by Christophine, her mother's longtime black servant, who expresses her

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experiences in their subconscious, which disrupt their experiences of the present, remains secure. In part because *Wide Sargasso Sea* was published before the work of Caruth, Felman, and others, it is a particularly valuable site for the study of psychological trauma as Rhys could not have constructed her characters to fit what has become a widely circulating knowledge of PTSD symptomology.

disdain for neighbors that have managed to perpetuate the cruel abuses of slave owners in the post-slavery era: “They got jail house and chain gang. They got tread machine to mash up people’s feet. New ones worse than old ones—more cunning that’s all” (15).

Rhys thus demonstrates her own awareness of the gross racist abuses that persisted after Emancipation. That her white characters are relatively oblivious to them cannot be read as a matter of authorial intention, and Brathwaite is concerned not with Rhys as an individual, but as a product of white Creole culture. His point in *Contradictory Omens* is that texts written from the perspective of the perpetrators of cultural trauma will occupy a fraught position as exemplars of the literature of the historically oppressed. These questions challenge readers to scrutinize their responses to texts that lay bare historic racial fault lines between those groups that suffered from cultural trauma and those that inflicted it.

### **Brathwaite and his critics**

Ironically, although Brathwaite disdained scholarly convention, his standing as a preeminent Caribbean intellectual made his judgment of the inadmissibility of *Wide Sargasso Sea* into the Caribbean canon unsettling. Had Brathwaite merely deplored the elision of Afro-Caribbean histories, his commentary would have passed without objection. However, in his attacks on Rhys, Kenneth Ramchand, and Walton Look Lai, he acts as an aggressor even as he positions himself as the inheritor of a traumatic history of Afro-Caribbean victims. Interpreting these dual positions requires a nuanced reading practice for Caribbean trauma literature that recognizes

how the respective positions of readers and critics condition their responses to trauma texts and one another.

For West Indian scholar, Frances O'Connell, Brathwaite's judgment on *Wide Sargasso Sea* was particularly consternating. "Imagine my alarm then when, researching the work of Jean Rhys, I read Edward Kamau Brathwaite's statement [produced above] ... Did this mean that I had to ditch Rhys from my project? Which writers could I legitimately include? Had I any right to my own opinion?" (34). Elaine Savory, whose doctorate is from the University of the West Indies and has worked on Rhys and Brathwaite over many years, is discomfited by Brathwaite's references to the race of scholars he critiques, but wishes to put his debate with Peter Hulme in a more positive light.

"Hulme's original essay and his reply (*Wasafiri* 20 & 23) both indicate his desire to circumvent race, as when he prefers Wilson Harris to Brathwaite on the grounds that Hulme reads Harris as being indifferent to the colour of the writer as long as the text is a Caribbean text." (34)

Savory is here defending Hulme's position that it is desirable to "circumvent race," agreeing with him that all that counts is whether the text is Caribbean. Nonetheless, she gestures to Brathwaite's stature when she writes at the end of her article that, "the Hulme-Brathwaite exchange will open the door to a more direct discussion of race in our work and in our times" (34). Since the Hulme-Brathwaite debate ended with each critic professing to be completely misunderstood by the other, while essentially denying the validity of the other's views, it is difficult to see how their debate would lead to more constructive discussions of race. As Savory herself gives no basis for her optimism, her view may be summarized to hold that critics of *Wide Sargasso Sea* (and, by extension, other works of Caribbean literature written by

white Creoles) should stick to the text, rather than bring Rhys' or other critics' races into the discussion, *but* Brathwaite must nonetheless be accorded the respect he is due for his contributions to Caribbean letters. Put another way, Savory's loyalty to Brathwaite's central agenda, and indeed to the scholar himself, impels her to seek to reconcile Brathwaite's various positions in the service of an outcome with which all participants in the discourse subscribe.

However, I contend that Brathwaite is not constructing an argument about *Wide Sargasso Sea per se*; but plays out his theory of what he calls "acculturation." If the only interest of the British cultural project is to subjugate local cultures to its own aims rather than to enter into dialog with them; then the only response that Brathwaite foresees to the products of a culture bent on acculturation is to exclude them from the Caribbean canon. Thus, at the core of his critique of Walton Look Lai's reading of the novel is his belief that "what really interests Look Lai about **Sargasso Sea** is not the deep subtle hopeless black/white 'West Indian' relationships set out in the quotation (above) but the relationship between creole and metropole- which was clearly Jean Rhys' concern also" (35 emphasis in the original). In other words, Brathwaite argues that Look Lai, like Rhys, was investigating an English novel set in the West Indies, not a West Indian novel engaged in the central concern of the era in which the novel is set, the "hopeless black/white 'West Indian' relationship."

Perhaps in part because *Contradictory Omens*, a slim volume published in Jamaica, exists in relatively few libraries, critics fail to notice, first of all, that the well-known last line of the quotation with which I began this chapter that refers to

the “spiritual world on this side of the Sargasso Sea” is not Brathwaite’s own language, but a quotation from a work of Walton Look Lai,<sup>15</sup> a historian at the University of the West Indies in Trinidad. Look Lai writes that

[Antoinette/Bertha’s] own final realization that personal salvation, if it is to come at all, will come, not from the destructive alien embrace of Thornfield Hall, but only from a return—however difficult—to the spiritual world on the other side of the Wide Sargasso Sea. (52, quoted in *Contradictory Omens* 38)

Brathwaite slightly alters the last line in his notorious declaration, but he is drawn to Look Lai’s imagery even as he opposes his interpretation of Antoinette’s suicide as an attempt to rejoin Tia in her spiritual home in the Caribbean. In his view, at best Antoinette could rejoin “the carefully detailed exotic fantasy of the West Indies” that like the “cold castle in England ... exist[s] inside the head” (36). In Look Lai’s reading, Antoinette’s jump is an affirmative and redemptive act.<sup>16</sup> Brathwaite writes, justly in my view, that Look Lai’s reading “is hopeful and optimistic, but totally lacking in recognition of the realities of the situation” (*Contradictory Omens* 38), by which he means the prevailing conditions of racial division in the West Indies.

Brathwaite’s reference to “the realities of the situation” is not grounded in his textual interpretation of the novel and he does not propose a more realistic reading

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<sup>15</sup> Brathwaite refers to Look Lai both in his text and in his footnoted reference to his work, as Wally Look Lai, rather than Walton Look Lai, the name in which Look Lai publishes. It may well be that Brathwaite knows him and is using his accustomed informal form of address in *Contradictory Omens* simply because it is familiar to him. Critics all, to my knowledge, refer to Look Lai as Wally when they are discussing Brathwaite’s reference to his ethnicity, suggesting again that they are simply using widely circulated quotations from works whose contents and contexts they have not independently investigated in the original. This small moment of misrecognition may illustrate the problem of derivative interpretations of the texts at the origin of this debate.

<sup>16</sup> Indeed, Niesen de Abruna later reads the passage similarly, *supra* 96n6.

of the friendship between the girls or of the dream sequence at the end of the novel. Rather, he dismisses the premise of the possibility of any fictional representation of friendship between two girls on opposite sides of the racial and ideological divide in the period in which the novel is set and in so doing negates it as a legitimate object of scholarly investigation. In Brathwaite's view, engaging with Rhys' text on its own terms by entering into a debate about whether the friendship is portrayed credibly or whether it is plausible that the two girls would have met would legitimize Rhys' undertaking. In *Contradictory Omens*, he contends that white Creoles have forfeited their access to the world of Caribbean spirituality not only by declining to participate in it but also by attempting to dominate it and replace it with their own culture. (Later, however, he considerably modified his position on Rhys and her work.)

Brathwaite's resistance in *Contradictory Omens* to the cultural products of white Creoles extends to the writings of non-Afro-Caribbean scholars. Brathwaite disparages Walton Look Lai as "a West Indian of Chinese derivation [who] is anxious to take the novel out of the boudoirs of the English critics and place it firmly in the West Indies where he maintains it belongs" (34). Look Lai, he suggests, shares the basic worldview of the metropolitan critics who see the novel as a fin-de-siècle romance. Although Look Lai argues that Antoinette has an authentic connection to the spiritual world of the Caribbean, he is more interested in her predicament within the framework of an English novel set in the West Indies than in engaging with the black West Indian world itself. Similarly, Brathwaite casts Ramchand, who was born in Trinidad, served in the Trinidadian government, and spent a large part

of his career at the University of the West Indies, as “a critic of East Indian derivation, whose orientation is ‘West Indian’” (34).

Brathwaite’s references to Look Lai’s and Ramchand’s racial identities have been the subject of endless protestations, notably by Peter Hulme, who argues that Brathwaite is nullifying aspects of their critiques of *Wide Sargasso Sea* on purely racial grounds (“A Response to Kamau Brathwaite” 49).<sup>17</sup> However when read in the context in which they appear in *Contradictory Omens*, Brathwaite’s provocations are best read as performances of his own outrage at the history of white Creole involvement in the Caribbean. They illustrate his central point that critics’ understandings of a particular text arise in a specific cultural context. He advances the unremarkable proposition that critics, he included, read texts in which their own racial identities are implicated through the lens of their own “historical and historically received” images of themselves. However, when the debate is viewed through the lens of cultural trauma theory, ordinary matters of interpretation may inflame wounds that arise from individuals’ relationships to historical traumas to which they feel connected.

### **Creolization, acculturation, and interculturalization**

Brathwaite’s 1974 discussion of “orientations” and “derivations” in relation to Look Lai and Ramchand is best understood not as an essentializing move, but rather as a product of his model of “creolization” in which he offers a taxonomy of different cultural heritages, each grounded in a racial/ethnic identification:

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<sup>17</sup> For a further account of Hulme’s argument on this point, see O’Callaghan 11–12.



My own idea of creolization is based on the notion of an historically affected socio-cultural continuum, within which (as in the case of Jamaica), there are four inter-related and sometimes overlapping orientations.<sup>18</sup> (25)

For Brathwaite, derivation refers to race/ethnicity and is fixed; while orientation is a matter of culture that, although linked to race, is mutable. When Brathwaite refers to Look Lai as “a West Indian of Chinese derivation” (34) and Ramchand as “a critic of East Indian derivation, whose orientation is ‘West Indian’” (34), he is not saying, as Hulme suggests, that their writings must be discounted purely because of their races. Rather, he is accounting for their “derivations,” which he defines as countries of origin (44), in a monograph largely dedicated to exploring plural cultures. Indeed, as noted previously in Ramchand’s invocation of Fanon to describe the trauma experienced by whites at the time of Emancipation, Brathwaite credits Ramchand with identifying himself as a West Indian, thus transcending his ethnic derivation as East Indian (34).

Although Brathwaite clearly connects race to culture, he does so primarily in his historicization of an individual’s understanding of his own identity, or, as he puts it, “one’s historical and historically received image of oneself.” He states his “conviction that we cannot begin to understand statements about ‘West Indian culture,’ . . . unless we know something about the speaker/writer’s own socio cultural background and orientation” (33). To interpret a particular statement about textual representation of “West Indian culture,” the reader must be alert to the speaker’s cultural history and his orientation (his “directions, positions,

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<sup>18</sup> “These are, in the first instance, European, Euro-creole, Afro-creole (or folk), and creole-creole or West Indian.” He notes two additional orientations: East Indians and Chinese “who came after the first main stage of creolization.” (25)

assumptions and ideals”). However, although Brathwaite extols the intermixing of races, he does not include white Creoles in the admixture, as he believes that they arrived in the Caribbean bent on dominating and enslaving it rather than entering into relationship with it. He sees no positive outcome, at least in the post-Emancipation era in which *Wide Sargasso Sea* is set, of countenancing representations of that world that are authored by white Creoles.

When critics cite Brathwaite’s comments on white Creoles as evidence of his racism, they duplicate the attitudes of the white Creoles in *Wide Sargasso Sea* who see themselves as victims of racism and racially motivated violence rather than as perpetrators of such offenses, as history would have it. In *Contradictory Omens*, Brathwaite seeks to find a pathway out of the patterns of interracial animosity and black alienation that plague the Anglophone Caribbean.<sup>19</sup> He does so by diagnosing two alternative modes of creolization: acculturation, which operates by the imposition of European cultures onto Afro-Caribbean peoples and constitutes a form of epistemic violence; and interculturalization, which conceives of a dynamic and reciprocal mode of absorption of European cultural norms into a cultural intermixing that recognizes cultural hierarchies even as it undermines them.<sup>20</sup> Brathwaite blames acculturation, which he associates with white Creoles, for turning racial groups living side by side into enemies that fight with each other for

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<sup>19</sup> Essentializing in a manner that contemporary readers may find rather shocking, but that recalls Frantz Fanon’s *Peau noire, masques blancs* (1952), he writes, “The Negro has a deep contempt, as has been said, for all that is not white; his values are the values of white imperialism at its most bigoted. The Indian despises the Negro for not being an Indian; he has, in addition, taken over all the white prejudices against the Negro” (49).

<sup>20</sup> The summary in this paragraph draws on Charles W. Pollard, *New World Modernisms: T.S. Eliot, Derek Walcott, and Kamau Brathwaite* (2004, 30).

superior positions as imitators of white Europeans. In contrast, he imagines that interculturalism will result in groups of different races opening themselves to horizontal influences as they together resist European cultural products.<sup>21</sup> Thus, Brathwaite declines to separate *Wide Sargasso Sea* from its status as a product of a white Creole culture that created the Afro-Caribbean folk through captivity, transportation, and enslavement and then eradicated their culture and spiritual foundation through acculturation.

Having set forth these patterns of creolization, Brathwaite applies them to his reading of *Wide Sargasso Sea*:

With this in mind, we may now turn to the passage quoted above [a longer excerpt of the traumatic moment that is quoted at the outset of this chapter] by a white creole expatriate West Indian-born novelist, which purports to describe the feelings of a very sensitive white creole girl just after emancipation. (34)

Brathwaite's disdain for Rhys betrays the psychic scars he carries from his personal identification with the Afro-Caribbean people victimized by white Creoles, as when he writes, "I'll always be attacked on this by those who don't want a blk norm for the Caribb" ("A post-Cautionary Tale" 70). He assumes the position of a victim of racism, which leads him to presuppose that critics that differ with him are motivated by their aversion to "a blk norm for the Caribb," a stance that would be unlikely to lead to open exchanges of views between Western and Caribbean critics. His equation of his critics to colonial powers that engaged in acculturation, as he described it, illustrates the enduring effect on his psyche of the wounds of racism and cultural domination that the white Creoles inflicted on the Caribbean. His

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<sup>21</sup> Brathwaite's vision of interculturalism was influenced by the Caribbean Arts Movement, with which he is associated (Walmsley).

apparent lack of empathy for the position of “very sensitive white creole girls” like Antoinette must be understood in light of Rhys’ own seeming indifference to the incomparably greater suffering of innumerable black children.

If we understand Brathwaite in this way, we are more likely to make sense of his widely cited remark that “Tia was not and never could have been her [Antoinette’s] friend” (36). If we remain mindful that Brathwaite’s claim is based in ideology, not on a close reading of the text, we may avoid interpreting it as a problem of realism, as Victoria Gregg does when she immediately follows this quotation on the impossibility of the friendship with an archival letter from Rhys to Francis Wyndham in which she suggests that she should have put Tia’s aggression into a dream rather than in the straight narrative:

In a letter to Francis Wyndham on 22 August 1962, Rhys says, “A lot that seems incredible is true, the obeah for example, the black girl's attack. I've [stet] stuck because it should have been a dream and I've tried to make it a realistic truth.

(Rhys, *Letters*, quoted in Gregg 96)

Rhys struggles with the idea that her readers might find some of her representations implausible. She suggests that they might have been more palatable to readers if they had been incorporated into a dream sequence rather than into straight narrative (which she terms “realistic truth”), but in my view the letter simply does not justify reading the text against the grain, if for no other reason than that the novel was then in manuscript form and Rhys could have revised it if she wished. (She writes, indeed, that “[p]art II is typed and *unrevised*” [214; emphasis in original]).

Gregg, however, uses Rhys' letter to reconcile Brathwaite's discounting of the relationship between the girls with Rhys' authorial choices:

It is possible to argue that Rhys' comments and the textual and structural operations of *Wide Sargasso Sea* are not that far removed from Braithwaite's central assertion. Both writers and Rhys' text show that the relationship between the two functions as a dream truth, a kind of death, because a "real" relationship would have been impossible. (96)

In Rhys' narrative, however, obeah was real, the two girls were friends, and Tia did attack Antoinette—these passages may seem "incredible" to Rhys' readers, but they are integral to the narrative as it was written and fully intended by the author.

In any event, Gregg bases her argument on a fundamentally different mode of analysis than Brathwaite's and assumes his complaint is with the realism of the relationship. For Brathwaite, the problem is not whether a black child and a white child might play together (perhaps especially in Annette's household, which was in a state of disorder and was isolated from its upper class Creole neighbors)—that is, whether the friendship was "realistic"—but rather whether the representation itself was permissible when authored by a white Creole because it falsified the general conditions that prevailed on plantations in the period, which he reasonably saw as being characterized by the absolute social separation between races that was a consequence of white Creoles' practices of racism and cultural domination. While we might sympathize with Gregg's motivation in wishing to show how her reading of the frontiers between straight and dream narrative sequences in the text might explain Brathwaite's discrediting of the premise of the relationship, the thrust of her argument domesticates and diminishes Brathwaite's analysis of acculturation in *Contradictory Omens* by converting what is essentially a question of admissibility—

that intimate white/black relationships in the historical context in which Rhys' novel is set were falsifying—into one of realism, a literary matter. Brathwaite believed the lack of realism in the Tia-Antoinette relationship stemmed from ideological barriers that could not be overcome by converting certain passages of straight narrative to dreams.

### **Cultural trauma and *Marly, the Planter***

The strikingly categorical nature of Brathwaite's views on race in *Wide Sargasso Sea* is best understood by reading them in their context in *Contradictory Omens*, where they are immediately followed by an extended quotation from the anonymous *Marly, or, The Life of a Planter in Jamaica Comprehending Characteristic Sketches of the Present State of Society and Manners in the British West Indies and an Impartial Review of the Leading Questions Relative to Colonial Policy*. Published in 1828, approximately a decade before the period in which *Wide Sargasso Sea* is set, *Marly* is so virulent in its racist treatment of blacks that if Brathwaite held it to be indicative of white Creoles' attitudes in that era, then his resistance to the depiction of the interracial friendship between Antoinette and Tia in *Wide Sargasso Sea* is easily explained.

Tia was not and never could have been her friend. No matter what Jean Rhys might have made Antoinette think, Tia was historically separated from her by this kind of paralogue: [Quoting *Marly*] "There is, I must confess, an involuntary feeling apparently implanted in the breasts of white men by nature herself, that black men are a race distinct and inferior [to them] . . . This distinction of colour forms, indeed, such an impassable boundary between these two races of mankind [that it would seem to result from] the general supposition that Providence [has decreed it] in the wise dispensation of earthly affairs." (*Contradictory Omens* 36)

Thus, the historical separation that Brathwaite saw as nullifying the pretext of friendship between the girls was a reflection of white, not black, ideology of the period which explicitly posited an “impassable boundary between these two races.” In using the term “paralogue” (biologically equivalent), Brathwaite lets his readers know that he considers the virulent racism of that era to be universal and indelible. Brathwaite’s curious formulation, “[n]o matter what Jean Rhys might have made Antoinette think” (of course authors make their characters think various things), suggests that the racism of white Creole society is so deeply ingrained that it trumps any other mode of thought Rhys may have intended for her character. Brathwaite’s disinclination to tolerate even a fictional rendering of a friendship that crossed racial lines in the era in which *Wide Sargasso Sea* is set may be an effect of the logic of cultural trauma, in which falsification of the past is a matter of psychological import in the present.

In Brathwaite’s reading of *Marly*, race and culture are equivalent in the Caribbean plantations of that period. Thus, he does not interrogate the validity of the implied claim in *Marly* that all members of the plantocracy subscribe to a white supremacist ideology; nor does he contemplate the possibility that their racism could be, for some at least, a matter of degree. He relies on *Marly* to support his position that white Creoles in that era, considered as a group, were irredeemably and absolutely racist. I do not believe that Brathwaite, even when he was writing *Contradictory Omens*, intended to pass judgment on Rhys’ text as an imaginative work; however, he clearly then felt that the false optimism implied by Antoinette’s

admiration for Tia, and Annette's reliance on Christophine as a confidante was deeply and damagingly falsifying.

*Wide Sargasso Sea's* relationship to history is both fraught and complex. Few critics hold Rhys to Brathwaite's highly debatable standards, which ask them to disallow a friendship that is indispensable to the narrative on ideological grounds. It is quite unlikely that other critics would introduce an extended quotation from *Marly* to interpret any aspect of *Wide Sargasso Sea*. In fact, the relationship between Rhys' personal history and the text is notable for its complexity. Hulme reads *Wide Sargasso Sea* "as a 'compensation' for the ruin of [Rhys's] family at the time of Emancipation,<sup>22</sup> a compensation that occludes the actual relationship between that family history and the larger history of the English colony of Dominica" ("The Locked Heart: *Wide Sargasso Sea*" 76).<sup>23</sup> Historicizing the text is further complicated by its relationship to passages on colonial life in *Jane Eyre*, which is set in the decades before Emancipation. (A temporal disjuncture of more than a decade exists between the settings of the two novels.) From the standpoint of purely textual interpretation, most critics take for granted that Rhys' text should not be held to any standard of historical accuracy other than that which it claims on its own

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<sup>22</sup> Rhys' own forebears on her mother's side, the Lockharts, owned the estate on which Coulibri is modeled, which was burned to the ground by arsonists. For Rhys' own description of her family history and her childhood in Dominica, including her own experience of being hated by blacks, see pages 33-35 of her 1981 autobiography.

<sup>23</sup> Hulme's title, "The Locked Heart: *Wide Sargasso Sea*," is undoubtedly a play on the Lockhart family name. This passage is quoted in Walmsley, whose own reading also discounts any presumption of historical specificity in the novel but instead prefers "an ideological rather than psychological basis for the post-Emancipation setting of the novel." She writes, "*Wide Sargasso Sea* can be seen to re-conceptualize the West Indian Emancipation of Slavery of the 1830s and, by implication, the West Indian decolonization of the 1960s, through a modified, high modernist lens that looks back to Nietzsche" (115).



terms; indeed, she consciously takes artistic license in all her historical representations (Ghosh-Schellhorn 179).

For these reasons, reading Brathwaite empathetically does not entail accepting the logic of his argument. His position as a victim of cultural trauma does not entitle him *ipso facto* to arbitrate which representations by which authors are permissible. However, the passages at issue must be read in the context in which they appear in *Contradictory Omens* so that a crucial distinction may be made: Brathwaite's purpose is not to break new interpretive ground in reading the novel; rather, it is to illustrate his theory of acculturation. Within the context of the colonial ideology described in *Marly*, which Brathwaite considers absolute, the only conceivable relationship between two individuals on opposite sides of the black and white color divide is one of exploiter and exploited, or racist and victim of racism. In his response to Look Lai in *Contradictory Omens*, Brathwaite refers to "the deep subtle hopeless black/white 'West Indian' relationships" (35). For his purposes in that moment, narratives of friendship across the divide falsify the conditions of the ideology of the era, even if they are credibly portrayed within the context of a given text. As a victim of cultural trauma, Brathwaite does not have the luxury of treating the question as a purely literary problem. As I discuss below, Brathwaite claims that these narratives partake of the same falsity as those of affectionate relationships between plantation mistresses and house slaves. For readers who identify themselves with the victims of slavery and see slave owners, including their families, as a class of perpetrators, falsely optimistic counternarratives of the past carry the potential to reopen psychological wounds in the present.

## Dialogues of misrecognition

In defending his writing on *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Brathwaite is motivated less by differences of interpretation than by feelings of being misunderstood and disrespected by his scholarly antagonists. In response to Hulme's critique of his use of "derivations" in relation to Look Lai and Ramchand, Brathwaite responds that Hulme's characterization of his writing is

*an utter travesty of what I say in CO [Contradictory Omens] & what I represent - where I'm 'coming from, as they say, & where I goin. But this 'case' has been repeated so many times against me as if 'true', that I suppose it has now become part of 'post-colonial' folk culture! & I guess that I'll always be attacked on this by those who don't want a blk norm for the Caribb ['norm' carefully defined in CO + Hoetink 1967 see also Nigel Boland (in 1992) on my ideas on creolization (1971, 1974); Michael Craton (1983) on my position on slave resistance culture, (1983); most lit critics (esp of the West Indian Lit Academic Estab) on my poetry; and now by a normally - normatively - brilliant much admired & enriching scholar like Peter Hulme & many of those on his List (above) who want to set themselves up as (XPAT) authorities on the Caribbean & its literature & who continue to nuse Rhys as their jaguar & paradigm*

[xcuse my **DUMBness** here but whenever p step into my sunlight I speak out... despite all the theory & bell-curve (perhaps because of it?) dem still behaving like Christofer Columbus & Prospero. Anyway is time for not only a clearing but a SHARING of the air & I hope this is the beginning of interchange]

*Hulme clearly has not ready my work - certainly none of it since the parts on WSS he quotes. ("A Post-Crutinary Tale of the Helen of Our Wars," 70)<sup>24</sup>*

Both the informality of his prose and the outrageousness of his attack on Hulme are striking. Brathwaite accuses Hulme of being motivated by a desire to deny that black Caribbean culture is normative, and by an assumption that blacks are unintelligent. He then links Hulme and other critics to the arch-perpetrators of the

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<sup>24</sup> I have endeavored to reproduce Brathwaite's typography as it appears in *Wasafiri*. I think it likely that most or all non-normative verbal forms are intended, except "nuse" in the last line of the main paragraph and a missing right bracket. The article includes an unsigned footnote, presumably from the editor of *Wasafiri* that reads, in part, "The format of this piece follows the authors [sic!] wishes."

cultural trauma of colonization, Columbus and Prospero. By essentially equating opposition to his writing with a manifestation of racism, Brathwaite closes off dialogue even as he simultaneously voices a plaintive hope that his invective will clear the air and set the stage for discussion. He thus reveals acute sensitivities that may only be understood as the result of longstanding patterns of racism and colonialism. He experiences criticism as an assault that he quickly links to his and his opponents' respective positions: he becomes an exemplary victim and his opponents become exemplary perpetrators.

Hulme declines to engage Brathwaite in dialog, drily replying that "Brathwaite's descriptions of Look Lai and Ramchand as of Chinese and East Indian 'derivation' clearly touched a raw nerve. There's not much I can say in response to the pyrotechnics that follow, since few of the fireworks relate to anything in my article" (49). He adds that these "'derivations' don't make their readings of say, the Antoinette - Tia relationship either more or less convincing: they are irrelevant to such readings" (49). Hulme fails to consider for whom these questions are "irrelevant." They are obviously not irrelevant to Brathwaite, nor should they be to critics who wish to engage with him.

To some degree, the gulf between the two scholars arises from their respective attitudes toward the conventions of academic discourse. Brathwaite's hybrid texts incorporate informal and poetic language in articles that take the form of scholarly writing or, at least, appear in scholarly journals. Hulme derides Brathwaite's impassioned argument as "pyrotechnics" and "fireworks" that are nonresponsive to the substance of his own article. Brathwaite accuses Hulme of not

reading *Contradictory Omens* in its entirety. At the heart of their reciprocal complaints of being misunderstood is their lack of sympathy for the other's reading practice. Brathwaite considers the ethnic and racial identities (his own, as well as those of authors and critics) not only to be fair game, but also essential to situating himself with respect to others' writings; Hulme does not.

Brathwaite's response highlights the problem he faces in entering into a dialog with a Western academic establishment that insists any discourse, even on a Caribbean text, may only take place on its own terms. Thus, Brathwaite, through his direct address to the reader ("xcuse my **DUMBness**") and his reference to the infamous bell curve, calls attention to attitudes of racial superiority he believes are harbored by white "XPAT" academics. Brathwaite is nothing if not fearless as he engages a topic that most would consider taboo: the attitudes of white scholars toward black Caribbean scholars. He mocks academic conventions, particularly the use of citations as sources of authority, through his playful use of elaborate citations to support his definition of the term "norm." He engages in consciously ungrammatical word play to mock Hulme's position as an authority on the Caribbean: "normally - normatively - brilliant much admired & enriching scholar like Peter Hulme" (70). He also seeks to reverse Hulme's disapproval of Brathwaite's invocation of racial identity in relation to Rhys, Look Lai, and Ramchand by suggesting that critiques directed against him are motivated by racist attitudes. In passionate defense of himself, Brathwaite appears to assume a "blk norm" for Caribbean culture in contrast to his nuanced consideration of race and

culture in *Contradictory Omens* that rejects any norm other than one based on the creolization of plural racial groups.

To begin altering the dynamics of this exchange from one of mutual recrimination to one of meaningful dialog, Western critics should grant Brathwaite the recognition he craves, at this point in his career, as a scholar and a victim. When he writes that it is “dishonest to try to hold that it is possible to be an impartial critic in cases where one's historical and historically received image of oneself is under discussion,” he makes the case that it is not only acceptable for him to invoke his own identity as an Afro-Caribbean in his criticism, but also that it is ethically necessary. At the same time, no critic should feel compelled to follow Brathwaite's example. When authors, readers, and critics grant each other latitude to draw explicitly on their own experiences of cultural trauma in light of their self-identifications with traumatized communities, literary texts may become privileged loci for dialogic encounters of stakeholders in historical traumas.

### **The evolution of Brathwaite's relationship to *Wide Sargasso Sea***

When later critics cite Brathwaite's challenge to the legitimacy of *Wide Sargasso Sea* as a Caribbean text, they typically fail to note that his views had long since changed. Perhaps ironically, by the time he wrote “A Post-crutionary Tale of the Helen of Our Wars,” in 1995, two decades after *Contradictory Omens*, Brathwaite had developed a considerable affection for Rhys and her novel, referring in the first sentence to “Jean Rhys' great Caribbean novel, *Wide Sargasso Sea*” (69), surely a graceful retraction of his notorious stance in *Contradictory Omens*. In the rather

obscure title of his article, he goes so far as to identify Rhys with Helen of Troy, an object of desire in whose name men fought one another.

In a remarkable passage in the article, Brathwaite reveals Tia's importance to his thinking in relation to Antoinette and himself, despite his earlier rejection of the creation of any black character by a white creole author. Brathwaite responds to what he believes is Hulme's willful misreading of his commentary on the Antoinette-Tia relationship:

This is unfair. My point has always been **THAT WE DON'T KNOW WHAT MIRANDA/Antoinette/Miss Ann IS FEELING AT ANY STAGE OF THE SLAVE/ PLANTATION CONTINUUM** because Prospero never wrote about her & is only now in the 1990s<sup>25</sup> that she's beginning to write about herself (Kosage, Elaine Savory, Michelle Cliff, Marina Warner) in the tradition of Rhys of course & her cousin Phyllis Shand Allfrey

What I'm saying is that is good to have Rhys' version **BUT THAT VERSION/VISION IN RELATION TO TIA** (who we know something about as STARK - my blk Caliban sister) may be guilt or wishful thinking on JR 's part & can be used by certain critics to create a sense of guilt in 'Tia '. But this is certainly not consonant w / the historical record (& I quote Long, **Marly** & other contemp source(s)... our postemancipation experience from 1834 to the PRESENT both here & say in S Africa where the Tia/Antionette relationship has not essentially changed ... since the post-colonialists – another Prosperean invention/interrogation/intervention want to operate in the Caribbean from ... false, liard & hypo (also hyper) critical stance that things now OK & can therefore be written about from the point of view of neo-appropriation masked as (pseudo)-familial cultural equality & understanding – the **Tia = Antoinette syndrome** . which is what the whole wash of books on Rhys at least in Hulme's reading appears to thrive on – a false or NO knowledge of Caribb (or 'creole') 'reality.'

In a manner consonant with the spirit of the Caribbean Arts Movement that he helped found, Brathwaite reaches for a performance of his critical position that captures some of the syntax of informal Jamaican dialect. He pathologizes as a

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<sup>25</sup> In other words, only after he wrote *Contradictory Omens*.

“syndrome” the attitudes of western critics as grounded in the transfer of guilt from the perpetrators to the victims.

His attention to the underlying ethics of subaltern representations is reminiscent of Spivak’s, although he locates the problem in the neo-colonialist’s “point of view of neo-appropriation masked as (pseudo)-familial cultural equality & understanding.” His concern is that western texts set in the Caribbean normalize a version of their authors’ cultures in an environment that the Western authors deem post-racial. For Brathwaite, the central dynamic of colonial appropriation is one of acculturation, the process of cultural domination as an instrument of neocolonial power. In contrast, Spivak is concerned with the way in which cultural domination reinforces the construction of Englishness at home. Brathwaite is less interested with the internal dynamics of Englishness than with simply keeping it out of the Caribbean, except to the extent that it coexists in a relationship of mutual influence with Afro Caribbean and other cultures, a proposition that he views as unrealistic given the history of English involvement in the region.

Thus, Brathwaite more or less condemns the entirety of Western criticism on *Wide Sargasso Sea* as emanating from a post-colonialist outlook. He invokes South Africa under Apartheid as an analogue to post-emancipation Jamaica to generalize his proposition that representations of friendship between races are inherently false and hypocritical in environments of pervasive institutionalized racism and discrimination. Rather than clarify historical oppositions between perpetrators and the oppressed, they undermine them through counternarratives of mutual recognition, as between Tia and Antoinette. At stake are not simply persistent

inequities in the present but histories of slavery and Apartheid that represent paradigmatic cultural traumas. Thus, Western critics that fail to historicize the text within the “historical record” are complicit in the injustices of the era in which the text is set. The connection he draws between Antoinette and Miss Ann makes clear his view of the inherent falsity of representations of friendly conduct by members of slaveholders’ families toward black subjects. Thus in his view, critics who take such representations at face value are hopelessly, if not willfully, ignorant of the historical realities of white/black relations in Jamaica.

Brathwaite insists that Antoinette can only be written about from the slave master/victimizer’s point of view (Prospero’s), and he refigures Antoinette from her position as a victim (in the context of patriarchy, but also of racist ex-slaves) to, on the one hand, Miranda, the daughter who sought to domesticate Caliban on the unnamed island on which they are shipwrecked, and, on the other, to the false Miss Ann, the figure of the condescending white mistress, who lords over her black servants. Brathwaite provocatively, but not ungenerously, credits Rhys and Phyllis Shand Allfrey as inspiring a tradition of white Creole writers that explore their own histories. His view is that the “feelings” of the figure of Antoinette, as a white Creole, will be revealed as these authors write about themselves—but that action will not disclose anything real about Tia or about any hypothetical friendship between the two. He emphatically rejects critics’ reading into Tia any sense of guilt when he writes that Rhys’ “version/vision in relation to Tia ... can be used by certain critics to create a sense of guilt in 'Tia.'” He appears to refer to Tia’s tears after she has wounded Antoinette, but his use of quotation marks around Tia’s name makes



the question moot. Clearly Brathwaite is happiest when the works of white Creole writers are interpreted only insofar as they illustrate the identities of white Creoles; but his invocation of the names of prominent Anglophone women writers nonetheless suggests his genuine respect for their work.

Perhaps most stunning in this article is Brathwaite's revelation of his personal investment in the character of Tia that, perhaps over the course of a lifetime of thinking about *Wide Sargasso Sea*, he has come to regard as a spiritual sister. When he writes that "we know something about [Tia] as STARK - my blk Caliban sister" (73) he identifies her with Stark, the sister he invented for Caliban in his too-little-studied *Barbajan Poems 1492-1992*. In this extravagant volume, Brathwaite lays out his own relationship to the long history of *The Tempest* in Caribbean literature as follows:

**Prospero** /the man who possesses us all  
**Miranda** /his motherless daughter  
**Antoinette** (out of Jean Rhys, Sargasso Sea) /his creole wife or daughter  
**Ariel** /the mulatto servant, Prospero's aerial or radar  
information/communication/media system, the Euro-orientated if nationalist victim-factor  
in the business (see Rodo, see Lestrade in DW's **Monkey Mt**)  
**Caliban** /Prospero's slave and symbol of the Caribbean rebel or more accurately  
wd-be rebel. A whole range of types develop out of this: the SAMBO/QUARSHIE, the  
ANANCY, the TACKY/SAM SHARP/TOUSSAINT LOUVERTURE/TOUSSAINT LEGBA  
rebels, the Cudjoe & GrandeeNanny or Palmares type Maroons, the Rastafari or  
Contemporary Maroons, the Bob Marley artistic & psychological Maroons; with all these  
personality types wrought or fraught with DICHOTOMOUS sometimes SCHIZOPHRENIC  
CONFLICTS (Mitt, Rhys, Fanon, DW, ?Michelle Cliff) result of the drama of 'creolization'  
(culturation, acculturation, deculturation, intercultural, reculturation, out & in  
culturation, culturation as ornament sometimes orNAMENT etc etc etc)  
**Stark** /Sister Stark, Caliban's sister, is my own imagination's invention and although I  
have been thinking of her for some time now (History, Society & Ideas classes at the  
UWI/Mona) she did not walk clearly away from me until the October evening 1991 at NYU  
when I spoke of Paule Marshall's then new book, **Daughters** and recognized Stark in what  
Marshall was doing - the first time that the Plantation has a black woman w/ firm feet,  
sensitive/aggressive breasts and a space & plan if not always a room of her own She begins  
in James Carnegie's **Mary (Wages Paid)** and now makes her way in & through the wonderful  
efflorescence of STARK WRITING since Mary Prince since Mary Seacole since Walker  
since Morrison since Brodber since Kincaid since Condé since Warner since Carolivia  
Heron since Cynthia James/ to name only a few  
w/Stark appear other daughters of the dust (indeed, many of them appear symbolically in Julie  
Dash's 1992 Gulla/Geechee film, **Daughters of the Dust**)

(*Barbajan Poems 1492-1992* 316)

It is quite extraordinary that in this autobiographical *tour d'horizon* of his personal archive, intellectual itinerary, and pantheon of authors from whom he has drawn inspiration, Brathwaite should promote Antoinette, Rhys' creation, to the third place in his personal *Tempest's* hierarchy. She is fully transformed from her position in Rhys' text as a victim of patriarchal oppression and realigned with the colonial master and perpetrator of cultural trauma, Prospero ("the man who possesses us all"), either as his wife (which would make her Miranda's step-mother), or daughter

(in that case, Miranda's half? sister). While Brathwaite does not make his thoughts on the significance of gender in women's writing explicit, he clearly celebrates it as a "wonderful efflorescence." Brathwaite names a male Caribbean writer, the Jamaican James Carnegie, who depicted plantation life in *Wages Paid* (1976), but then links ten consecutive women writers in a category he names for his own creation, "STARK WRITING." His grouping speaks to the flourishing of women's writing in the Caribbean in the 1990s, but he also identifies with women's double oppression. While it is difficult to be certain, I speculate that he finds black women's assertion of their places in Caribbean cultural life, their claim to a "room of [their] own," to be a necessary phase in the "drama of creolization" that resulted in the unwinding of acculturation.

In all events, his is a gesture of solidarity with the enslaved and victimized in the person of Stark (his creation) whom he identifies with Tia. Although Tia is Rhys' creation, and he might be thought to be appropriating her by adopting her as a sister, Brathwaite is clearly positioning himself as able to understand her as her creator could not, because both he and Stark/Tia are identified with Caliban, the dominated and enslaved. While he depends on Rhys to create Tia and credits her with having written "a great Caribbean novel," his underlying claim is that only he and those who have suffered like Caliban/Stark/Tia from Miranda/Anoinette/Miss Ann may claim spiritual kinship with her and represent her creatively.

More is at stake in this debate than the validity of particular representations in *Wide Sargasso Sea* or its inclusion in the Caribbean literary canon, a matter, in any event, long since settled in the novel's favor. For European or American critics to

engage fully with Brathwaite's writings or those of other Afro Caribbean critics concerning *Wide Sargasso Sea*, they must acknowledge the cultural trauma that inevitably affects the outlook of Afro-Caribbean critics. They must scrutinize whether they are prone to identify, perhaps unconsciously, more with the position of the white Creole losing some part of her privilege in that historical period than with the Afro-Caribbean subjects that were sacrificed to achieve it. Thus, although critical readers should not avoid empathizing with the character on which the narrative is focused, they should bring a heightened awareness to the historical cultural positions of all involved, including the author, themselves, and other critics.

## Chapter Two

### Trauma, Reading and Recognition in Marie Chauvet's *Colère*

#### Introduction

In *Anger (Colère)*, the second novella in Marie Chauvet's classic Haitian triptych, *Love, Anger, Madness (Amour, Colère et Folie 1968)*, readers are challenged to respond empathetically to disturbing descriptions of traumatic sexual assault. In scenes that are rendered unflinchingly, Rose Normil, the daughter of an upper-class Haitian family, submits to the wanton sexual demands of a brutal Duvalierist Commandant for a period of thirty days in order to save her family's landholdings from appropriation by the militia he commands that is unnamed, but may readily be identified with the *Tontons Macoutes*. Reading the scenes of Rose's rape has been, for many, including this writer, profoundly troubling. The reader senses that Rose's self-sacrifice is doomed—the imbalance of power between her feckless father and the armed and violent ascendant militia is simply too great. The Commandant will rape her (the characterization of the Commandant's sexual exploitation of her as rape is contested, as I will discuss) and betray her family, and at the end of the novella, she will die. Navigating the demands of the text requires a reading practice that recognizes one's own emotional responses to the text, while it preserves critical distance between the reader and the fictional victim—all while avoiding arbitrating which critical positions are acceptable. At stake is the recognition of Rose's agency,

not by her victimizer, who seeks to extinguish it, but by the critical reader who wishes to read Rose's character in its full complexity.

Rose-Myriam Réjouis begins her translator's preface to her 2009 English translation, which I have used in this chapter, of *Love, Anger, Madness*,<sup>26</sup> by citing Michel-Rolph Trouillot's exposition of the manner in which women became instruments of Duvalier's "conquest" of his political opposition through their subjection to various forms of sexual violence and coercion (xv, citing Trouillot 167–168). She then turns immediately to what she sees as lacunae in the criticism of Chauvet's text:

Indeed, there is torture-rape in each of the novellas ... and it is no wonder that in the last fifteen years most readers of the trilogy have focused on the plight of the female protagonists in the first two volumes. What is truly radical about Chauvet's writing, however, is not just that she writes about political sexual violence and about sexuality, but that she allows her male and female protagonists to cast a critical eye on everything, including themselves. Indeed, they are never unambiguously heroic, innocent, or even sympathetic. (xvii)

Réjouis' use of the word "plight" appears gendered, perhaps unconsciously so, but she is on firm ground in her observation that scholars, at least, have focused on the oppression of the female protagonists. Her comment would therefore seem to invite attention to Paul, Rose's brother, who has been all but ignored in the critical literature. He too is deeply traumatized by the events in the novel. In a long interior monologue, he relates his experience of "[Voices that] pursue me in my sleep and torture me" (200). He is torn apart by his inability to stop Rose from going to join the Commandant in his villa and fails in his attempt to kill her rapist

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<sup>26</sup> Translations other than of *Amour, Colère et Folie* in this chapter are by the author, except where indicated.

with a knife throw, but not before he subjects himself to the agony of seeing, through a window of the Commandant's villa, her splayed out naked on his bed in sexual congress with their tormentor (275). For all this, I do not propose to further advance a reading of Paul because my focus in this chapter is on the meaning of Rose's martyrdom (a characterization employed by Réjouis and others) and its implications for the reading of Caribbean trauma literature.

Later in her preface, Réjouis writes, "Vieux-Chauvet insists on making the torture-rape victim a thinking subject. In fact, Rose can't stop thinking. Her thoughts sometimes even wander past the fence posts that would make her martyrdom unimpeachable" (xx). Réjouis emphasizes Chauvet's deliberate construction of Rose as a fully-formed and highly self-aware character, rather than as the pathetic figure of a virgin transformed into a rape victim. The "fence posts" to which she refers are those that would forestall consideration of her complicity in her rapes.

Rose's character has been widely studied for the light it casts on the Duvalier regime's victimization of women, not simply as a consequence of the era's pervasive violence, but as one of its principal modes of sowing terror in the population. As Faedi Duramy Benedetta puts it in *Gender and Violence in Haiti: Women's Path from Victims to Agents* (2014), "Papa Doc dominated the entire country by eliminating potential rivals, prohibiting opposition propaganda and student demonstrations, raping girls and women as a weapon of political intimidation, expelling Catholic priests from the region, and creating his own private security force" (23).

The character of Rose is thus a victim of traumatic rape as a political instrument; however, to study Rose only as a victim would be to overlook the agency she exercises in Chauvet's text. Rose indeed makes choices that are highly discomfiting to the empathetic reader, including the fateful one to succumb to the Commandant and then to cooperate with his sadistic sexual demands. As Rose reflects on her own position as a member of the light-skinned upper class that has exploited the black Haitian dispossessed with which her rapist identifies himself, she expresses guilt for her own adolescent sexual desire and questions the validity of her family's rights to the land that she has given her body to preserve. These thoughts tend to blur the distinction between victim and victimizer that seem so apparent at the outset of the novella and disrupt the binary between the evil Duvalierist militia commander and the virginal Rose who is his prey.

Chauvet's construction of a character who questions the meaning of her membership in a class of victimizers even as she is undergoing a series of traumatic rapes, is extraordinary. Rose's victimization has been the subject of extensive criticism; but her own claims to being a member of a class of perpetrators have been largely overlooked in the critical literature on the novella. If readers discount Rose's choices, including her complicity with her rapist, then they effectively deprive her of the agency she claimed at the cost of her life. If we likewise read the Commandant only as a brutal victimizer, then we will fail to see him through Rose's eyes at the cost of our understanding of her character in the traumatic moment.

More broadly, if critics disregard Rose's musings as the product of a mind so traumatized that it has ceased to function, then they foreclose avenues of



investigation into the complex relationship of victim and victimizer that Chauvet's revolutionary text affords us. I thus propose in this chapter to consider the character of Rose as she stands at the intersection of psychological trauma theory where she is manifestly a victim, and cultural trauma theory, where she is a member of a class of perpetrators. In sum, I hope to show that reading the novella in light of the axes of trauma theory that I have described will enable a new, more complex understanding of Rose's character.

As I will show, Rose identifies with her victimizer and in so doing gains consciousness of the implications of her family's privileged position vis-à-vis the dispossessed. The grave wrongs that her class has inflicted on the Haitian black underclass must be redeemed. Her sacrifice may be seen not only as an attempt to preserve her family's lands, its efficient purpose, but also as necessary to an essential end of the text—the protagonist's recognition on behalf of her class—and for the benefit of Chauvet's readers—of the significance of the historical moment in which Chauvet found herself caught up. When I say that her sacrifice is necessary, I do not mean that it is justifiable. The text shows fully the abhorrent nature of the Gorilla's crime. It never suggests that rape was an acceptable response to the abuses that impoverished black Haitians had suffered; but it does historicize the rape in a manner that critics have generally passed over. Even gesturing to a basis for the Gorilla's self-serving justifications for his crime may seem transgressive; but the Gorilla's account of his childhood should not be dismissed if Rose's character and the purposes of the text generally are to be appreciated in full.

### **Empathy and the perils of the trauma text**

Chauvet's text provides an unparalleled canvas for the study of the manner in which critics' own affective responses to representations of traumatic violence influence their interpretations of trauma texts. Critics have long recognized the acutely disturbing quality of the text. Joan Dayan, the Robert Penn Warren Professor of Humanities at Vanderbilt, writes that "The chapter that describes [Rose's] violation remains one of the most disturbing memoirs by a woman in all of Caribbean literature" (*Haiti, History, and the Gods* 123). Elizabeth Walcott-Hackshaw, writing in *Small Axe*, reacts viscerally to the novella:

Chauvet's triptych is destabilizing, haunting, and unsettling because of the works' penetrating, "bare-all" portrayal of brutal atrocities, but it is also mesmerizing in its ability to create a theater in the mind of the reader where all these scenes are played out vividly and repeatedly. (40)

When she writes that the scenes are "played out vividly and repeatedly," she apparently describes the unsummoned images of violence that recur to her. (Ruth Leys traces the influence of Freud's conception of the "repetition compulsion" on trauma theory in *Trauma: A Genealogy*, 2000, e.g. 39, 104, 177.)

Chauvet's depiction of Rose's brutal sexual exploitation is so graphic that empathetic readers of the text have found it difficult to see beyond her victimization, and some have flattened her character into the position of a pure victim, devoid of agency. I am not arguing that readers should bracket their emotional responses to any text; indeed, remaining open to a text's affective valance is crucial to its interpretation. Reading practices for trauma texts must account for the effect of the scenes of violence they contain on their readers' psyches, but we must be vigilant not to blur the distinction between the character that is a victim and the reader who is not, even if she feels disturbed by the text's representations of traumatic violence.

As the cultural historian Alison Landsberg argues, “empathy recognizes the alterity of identification and the necessity of negotiating distances and is therefore essential to an ethical relation to the other” (24, cited by Gluhovic 14). In contrast to an ethical relation to a distinct other, unchecked empathy may result in what Kaja Silverman, drawing on the German philosopher Max Scheier, identifies in *The Threshold of the Visible World* (1996) as “idiopathic identification, the appropriation or assimilation of the experience of the other within the self” (23–24). In an extended discussion of trauma and ethics, M. Gluhovic describes idiopathic identification as a “conflation of subject positions... [that] involves the confusion of compassion with unchecked identification, vicarious experience, even surrogate victimage” (14). Silverman’s concern is principally ethical, but it plays out in literature by vitiating the critical distance necessary to perceive the full range of nuance in textual characterizations of all characters, but especially victims and perpetrators. If readers fail to distinguish between their own feelings and those of the victimized protagonists with whom they identify, either implicitly by foregrounding their personal outrage at the victimizers, or by appropriating victims’ experiences as their own, they lose the capacity to read both victims and perpetrators as complex characters. At stake is our capacity to interpret the character of Rose Normil in *Anger*, and, more generally, other victims in trauma texts, as complex and fully human, rather than as figures of victims who were stripped of their agency as an inevitable result of their victimization.

Ronnie Scharfman, a postcolonial scholar, characterizes the depictions of Rose’s rape in *Colère* as “among the most terrifying in literature” (241); and she

describes vividly their effect on her own psyche: “Each time that I reread [Chauvet’s novel], I approach it with feelings of intense fear, rage, impotence, claustrophobia, and disgust but also with fascination, pity, and admiration” (230). Indeed, Scharfman’s explicit claim is that she has herself been traumatized secondarily by her reading of *Love, Anger, Madness*. She identifies her symptoms as constituting “what psychiatrists define as post-traumatic stress disorder” (231). To erase any possible doubt as to the basis of her self-diagnosis, she refers her readers, in a note, to “Diagnostic Criteria for Post-traumatic Stress Disorder,” in the 1987 edition of *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (231n3). Scharfman posits that her secondary traumatization was not simply a product of reading the events in the text, but the text’s very purpose. In her view, Chauvet deliberately shocks her readers in order to transmit to the reader not simply an account of, but an experience of the pervasive violence against women that characterized the Duvalier era. She writes, “I would like to propose the hypothesis that this work functions as an act of resistance to the violence from which it springs, but that it can only resist by repeating, by violating the reader as it proceeds...” (229). Scharfman sees the destabilizing of the reader as instrumental to the functioning of the text as a mode of resistance to the violence it exposed. It is not enough that the reader learn something of the nature of Duvalierist violence through an ordinary process of empathetic reading; she must feel herself the effect of the depictions of violence.

Scharfman’s hypothesis collapses, at least to some degree, the distinction between the effect on a person’s psyche of experiencing a traumatic injury as opposed to that of reading about it. The point is a subtle one, for we have to

remember that Rose is a fictional character; and yet the critic must still distinguish the experience of rape that a character with whom she identifies undergoes, from that of reading about it. While Scharfman would undoubtedly concede the point, she nonetheless hypothesizes that readers are traumatized by their reading of a rape in a manner that is equivalent in kind, if to a lesser degree, to primary traumatization. Were this not the case, then her argument that Chauvet is deliberately shocking her readers into a personal encounter with rape would not be sustainable.

As noted, I am not suggesting that Scharfman or any other critic attempt to set aside her affective responses to Chauvet's text. The horror engendered in the reader at the rapist's crimes on the body of a defenseless protagonist may well be, as Scharfman argues, a willed outcome of Chauvet's construction of the traumatic event, which deliberately terrorizes the reader into vicariously sharing some part of the experience of living in the Duvalier reign. Scharfman writes, "Because she is as merciless toward her reader as the world that she depicts is toward its victims, Chauvet provokes both resistance and fascination. But she does not leave the reader indifferent" (231). Certainly, few readers would be indifferent to the brutal sexual violence that is visited on the young, sheltered protagonist of Chauvet's novella. There is, however, some slippage when Scharfman moves from that proposition to a suggestion that Chauvet treats her readers as the Duvalier regime treated its victims. Scharfman further takes the liberty of assuming that her own response may be generalized to other readers:

...one of the versions of violence that is at work in this text, and that threatens the reader, is situated on the discursive level in the form of the oxymoron, or its rhetorical relative, the paradox. The oxymoron both contains and expresses ambivalence; it produces ambiguity.

...

this trilogy violates us because certain of its textual apparatuses, including the oxymoron, destabilize our perception of the world. We do not know how to read it, if we have "gotten" it, on which side to take a position, because nothing is quite what it seems. Chauvet's text seizes us, transgresses us in our comfort by deconstructing our illusion of exteriority and innocence. (232-233)

Scharfman does not fully explain her usage of the oxymoron or the paradox, except to link it to the titles of the novellas, each of which she asserts undermines itself. (I see them as ironic, and don't follow her reasoning.) More to the point, Scharfman assigns remarkable agency to the text, which "threatens the reader," "violates us," and "transgresses us in our comfort," and in so doing, she argues, compromises the reader's capacity to interpret the text and thus, presumably, to write about it. The text itself stands in for the rapist, not simply by horrifying us with its description of his appalling acts, but actually by enacting a simulacrum of the rape itself upon its readers, causing them, if they are like Scharfman, to experience a range of PTSD-like symptoms.<sup>27</sup> Inevitably, these intense reactions, which may seem excessive to some readers less personally affected by the text, affect Scharfman's capacity to read the text critically, which she acknowledges when she avers, "We do not know how to

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<sup>27</sup> Scharfman's willingness to disclose her own perturbations at the reading is not without precedent in trauma studies. Shoshana Felman devotes part of the first chapter of the influential *Testimony: Crisis of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (1992), which she co-authored with Dori Laub, to an account of the experience of students in a seminar at Yale who were secondarily traumatized by their viewing of a videotape of an interview with a Holocaust survivor. While there are pronounced differences between the two texts and the manner in which they were read (one is a novel and the other a tape of an extended interview), both Scharfman's and Felman's discussions of these reading events are premised on the agency of a trauma text to traumatize the safe and privileged reader (or viewer).

read it, if we have 'gotten' it, on which side to take a position, because nothing is quite what it seems" (232-233).

Because Scharfman's argument is grounded in her own testimony as to her state of mind after reading the text, her self-representations are inherently incontestable insofar as they relate to her. Her extension of her experience to other readers (or, more precisely, to the figure of "the reader") is highly contestable; but this will ultimately be a matter that each reader may evaluate for herself. Still, the sense of Scharfman's testimony, and her implicit claim that other readers are likewise affected by their readings of the text, is that the text inhibits criticism by overwhelming the reader's capacity to assimilate it cognitively. Thus she draws on Caruthian theories in a novel way. Actual trauma victims are defined by Caruth as being inherently unable to "know" the traumatic event. Scharfman puts secondarily traumatized readers in the position of being likewise unable to know the text that is supposedly traumatizing them by serving as a proxy for the traumatic violence it depicts. For this reason, in Scharfman's view, affected critics cannot be sure that they have "gotten it."

For Scharfman, this opens the door to full-on self-study, as opposed to ethical self-awareness in the performance of textual interpretation, which, in the event, has been rendered unreliable, in her reasoning, by the power of the text. Thus she arrives at her largest claim, which is that the novel functions discursively as "an allegorical reading of the Haiti of Duvalier" (233). The corollary of this thinking is that the Gorilla and Rose are archetypes that stand in for Duvalier and for his victims. As soon as these two characters are reduced to archetypes of evil and good,

and thereby locked into opposing binaries, the potential is lost for nuanced readings of their relationship as two individual characters in a novella. I would add that readers, especially those living in comfort and security in a wholly different time and place from that in which the trauma narrative takes place, should above all avoid imagining that by reading a text they share in any way in the experience of the victim, or otherwise “understand” her suffering.

Scharfman does not examine the character of Rose as, in Réjouis’ words, “a thinking subject,” for her reading of Rose is largely allegorical: she serves in her reading, as a figure for the female victims of Duvalier’s reign of terror. Questions of Rose’s agency are rendered moot by this approach, since her individuality is sacrificed when she becomes a figure for all women who have suffered traumatic injury in the Duvalier era.

In distinction, other critics deny Rose’s capacity for independent thought and action, not because she is an allegorical figure for all victims, but rather because they assume that trauma extinguishes agency in the individual. An example of this view is provided by Marie-Denise Shelton, writing in 1992 in *Callaloo*, when she describes Rose and her brother as having been turned into pure victims by their victimization by the militia: “At the mercy of a merciless police apparatus, they are reduced to a larval existence or transformed into frightened animals” (774). Shelton’s grossly exaggerated characterization of Rose and Paul as either “larval” or “frightened animals,” which seem mutually exclusive, and her infelicitous doubling of “mercy” and “merciless” are suggestive of the strains that critics may face in writing about this scene.



Walcott-Hackshaw sees a similar extinction of agency as a result of the rape. Her view is that “the violation results in Rose's death; she becomes part of the living dead, a zombie, dead unto herself” ( 46). Correspondingly, she declines to treat the victimizer as a human being. Later in her article, she thrice in the same page characterizes the relationship of Rose to the Gorilla as “perverse” (50) shortly after she uses the same word three other times, also on the same page to describe Claire’s desire for Calédu in *Love [Amour]*, the first novella in the trilogy (48). In so doing, she explicitly equates the two victimizers, identifying Calédu as “the gorilla of *Amour*” (48). Walcott-Hackshaw’s six uses of perverse and her equation of the two victimizers, who function differently vis-à-vis the protagonists in their respective novellas, are so out of keeping with her otherwise nuanced examination of her subject, which is to “show how power and poetics in the novel render women and their bodies as sites of violence” (42), that they must be read as performative of her own anxiety at Chauvet’s destabilization of the line between victims and victimizers. Walcott-Hackshaw never explains what she means by “perverse,” or from whose point of view she issues that judgment, but she seems to deploy it as a means of disposing of, without investigating, the perhaps unpalatable for some sexual desire her female protagonists feel for the two Duvalierist commanders in their respective novellas.

### **The literary politics of rape**

When Rose submits to the Gorilla’s sexual demands, she does so in the face of blackmail—the only hope her family has to retain its lands is through the sacrifice of her virgin body to the Gorilla. Critics, however, vary in their characterization of her

act of submission, in particular as to whether it constitutes rape, inasmuch as Rose on her own initiative takes a series of affirmative steps that the Gorilla requires of her. I prefer to call the Gorilla's act rape because I think consent, as it is ordinarily understood, is nullified by the intense coercion to which Rose is subject; yet, I see the nomenclature as of secondary importance. For example, Valerie Orlando does not use the term rape in relation to Rose in *Colère*, whereas she does in considering the character of Claire, in the first novella *Amour* (109) and Cécile in the last novella, *Folie*, (104). Orlando writes, of *Colère*:

Rose, principal protagonist of the second novella, *Colère*, prostitutes herself in order to keep her family's property. The power that men hold over women in these novels varies from being subtle to violent, but is always definitively rooted in socioculturally defined gendered roles pertaining to women's place in the social order. (97)

Orlando's use of the transitive "prostitutes herself" recognizes Rose's agency, even as she immediately clarifies both the specific coercion to which Rose is exposed, and the generally coercive conditions to which women in that society were vulnerable.

The Haitian-American scholar, Myriam Chancy, concurs, writing in 2004 that "Chauvet's female protagonists live in an insulated, horrific world in which women are denied access to the means by which they might control their own destiny" (309). However, Chancy departs from Orlando's general finding that women have no acceptable choice available to them by implying that Rose should not have offered herself to the commandant, since her attempt was doomed and her motivation for doing so was flawed:

Rose has made a poor choice: she resists oppression only to be brutally violated in an effort to maintain her family's class status. She suffers in part because she is not attempting to undo the harms of the dictatorship but

because she attempts to safeguard her privileges under it; in doing so, she loses everything, including her self-respect. (311)

Chancy concludes her analysis of the novella by arguing that Chauvet “conveys a feminist analysis of the political climate” by showing how Rose was “limited by her class privilege;” but at the same time she observes that the “atrocities committed on her young body are hateful and irreversible.” The reversal of power from the upper-class to the dispossessed was accompanied by crimes that could only renew Haiti’s never-ending “cycle of anger and violence.” Thus, Chancy recognizes Rose’s agency, but in the end finds that she used it poorly in service of a doomed attempt to retain her class privilege.

In marked distinction to the critical stances of Orlando and Chancy, the francophone scholar Régine Jean-Charles views as transgressive any attempt to nuance the position of Rose as a rape victim by investigating her complicity with her victimizer. In an article in *The Journal of Haitian Studies*, “They Never Call It Rape: Critical Reception and Representation of Sexual Violence in Marie Vieux-Chauvet’s *Amour, Colère et Folie*,” Jean-Charles ties what she sees as some critics’ deliberate refusal to use the word rape in relation to Rose’s trauma, to a history of patriarchal and politically-motivated rape-denial. Paradoxically, her close reading seems to operate from the archaic premise that to prove the charge of rape, even as a literary matter, it would be necessary to find in the text that Rose physically resisted her victimizer. She locates such a moment of resistance when Rose declines the Gorilla’s order to prepare herself to be violated:

“Lie down,” he said, “lie down, spread your legs and put your arms out like a cross.”

I refused to obey, so he threw me on the sofa. (244)

Jean-Charles writes of this scene:

[Rose's] resistance cements our understanding of this scene as one of coerced sexual activity rather than a consensual, compromising act of martyrdom as many critics have interpreted it. (10)

Jean-Charles does not address the scene that precedes this one, in which Rose, without the knowledge of her family, visits the lawyer in order to meet the commandant, and then narrates, "After that, [the lawyer] left the room and closed the door. The lawyer had spoken to me beforehand and I knew what to expect. I began taking off my clothes..." (243).

Rose indeed both offers herself to the Gorilla and yet, as Jean-Charles writes, provides some resistance to him just before she is violated. Jean-Charles does not identify the "many critics" that supposedly hold the view that her surrender is "consensual, compromising." In fact, critics universally to my knowledge, contextualize Rose's act within the pervasive and unbearable coercion that the Duvalierist militia headed by the Gorilla exerts on the Normil family. The only text that Jean-Charles cites in support of her principal claim is the back cover advertising copy of a 2006 edition of *Amour, Colère et Folie*:

*Rose, moderne Antigone, est prête à se sacrifier pour que sa famille récupère une terre spoilée [sic—it should be spoliée] . . . elle va tenter le diable."*

[Rose, a modern Antigone, is willing to sacrifice herself so that her family may recover their dispossessed lands ... she will make a deal with the devil.] (10)

Obviously, the copywriter imagines she is interesting potential readers by invoking Antigone (and Faust), but it is a stretch to imply that these are indicative of the attitudes of unnamed critics, none of whom finds it necessary to summon the

examples of the ancients. Jean-Charles' own willingness to indict an anonymous copywriter, while avoiding naming her intended targets, most of whom would certainly be relatively prominent critics, is problematic on several levels. More ominously, the implication of Jean-Charles's argument is that critics who decline to use the word rape in their discussions of Rose are akin to unnamed authorities "within the legal system" that discredit rape survivors' testimony:

There is—among individuals, within the legal system, and throughout a larger society that discounts the experiences of rape survivors—an unflagging refusal to name rape. In this paper I will use the example of Marie Vieux Chauvet's *Amour, Colère et Folie* to show how this tacit and overt denial translates into cultural representations of rape as well as the critical reception of those representations by identifying the text as one that strains against this impulse to "never call it rape." (4)

Thus, the individuals referred to as "they" in her title, "They never call it rape..." are both rape deniers in the unnamed legal system and unidentified literary critics that see Rose as making a choice to sacrifice herself, almost as if it were a matter of simple courage or hubris.

Jean-Charles' project takes as its focus the "political context of the representation of rape [in] the case of Haiti" (5). Yet the political valence of her argument could exert its own pressure on a critic who finds complicity in the text, and prefers to use another term than rape, but would not wish herself to be exposed to a charge of engaging in rape denial. These are murky waters indeed for the critic that wishes to study Rose's choice to submit to the demands of the Gorilla. Navigating them demands a reading practice that allows for the highly charged responses to the text that Scharfman and Jean-Charles perform, without arbitrating

which critical positions are acceptable. Again, what is at stake is the erasure of Rose's agency, not by the Gorilla, but by the critical reader.

In sum, rather than read Rose as larval and textual characterizations of her sexual desires as perverse, and rather than rule out investigations of her complicity on the basis that they deny the reality of her rape, I suggest that she is best viewed as a complex individual who acts within a range of choices. These choices are, to be sure, conditioned by the threatened violence in which they are inscribed. They are excruciating to us, as empathetic readers—we cannot remain indifferent to a young woman who offers her body to preserve her family's land—but they are hers to make and ours to interpret.

### **Reading the victimizer**

If interrogating the quality of Rose's status as a victim is fraught, considering the self-justifying claims of her rapist must be even more so—and it has perhaps for this reason not been attempted. The Gorilla's character is so loathsome and violent and his acts are so horrific that I believe that Chauvet herself is troubled by the sheer evil of her creation, a point to which I will return. The question that imposes itself, therefore, is the purpose that would be served by an inquiry that seeks to humanize the Gorilla. Will "understanding" this character in his complexity serve to excuse him for his crimes? Yet when the commandant is read not only as a perpetrator, but also as a member of a class of victims, and Rose and the Normil family as exemplars of the class that exploited and mistreated him and the members of his community of the dispossessed, then Rose's acts of self-sacrifice and self-abnegation take on supplemental meanings that enrich Chauvet's text.

While Rose has received scant consideration as a thinking subject, the Gorilla has been accorded none at all. Likewise, his henchmen, notably the lawyer, who is of the same social class as the Normil family, yet aligns himself with the Duvalierists, have also been ignored. To the extent that critics discuss the Gorilla, it is to note that he is among the characters not named in the novella, which facilitates his grouping into an undifferentiated set of odious figures that advance the aims of a violent state by victimizing women. Elizabeth Wolcott-Hackshaw terms all of the Normil family's antagonists "terrorists," which they assuredly are not, at least not in the ordinary sense of the word. Her usage of the term reduces them to a status that discourages their investigation as individual characters, each with his own motives and modus operandi:

To affirm the arbitrariness and the possibility that this occupation could happen to any family, Chauvet creates the notion of a generic family model. No names are used in the beginning of *Colère*; the characters are introduced according to their familial title: the grandfather, the son, the invalid, and the mother. Only Rose and Paul, the two elder children, are generally designated by their first names. The terrorists are also designated by titles: "the gorilla," "the lawyer," "the boxer," "the men in black." We are thus allowed to read into the story of the Normil family a collective experience of state terrorization. (43)

It is not clear to me that the non-naming of these characters is a consequence of Chauvet's desire to create a generic family model, especially as Rose's father is called M. Normil in the text. Rather, it seems to me that the naming is a matter of the text's focalization on Rose, who thinks of these characters in those terms. More to the point, perhaps, referring to the gorilla and the lawyer as "terrorists" is reductive. These characters may be instruments of state terror, but the lawyer's role, for

example, is tertiary—he is an intermediary for the Gorilla and personally quite urbane.

When Rose first encounters the Gorilla, she is repelled by his “bony and disproportionately long hands dangling at the ends of his arms like the paws of a gorilla” (193). He is the only character in Chauvet’s triptych to be given the name of an animal. (The other unnamed characters are called by their function or their position in the Normil family, e.g. the lawyer, or the grandfather.) Arguably, Chauvet, who is her own first reader, herself uses the sobriquet to provide a measure of insulation from the character she herself has created.<sup>28</sup>

Chauvet shields her readers, and to some extent herself, from the perpetrator precisely by deforming him into something less, in some respects, than a man, and something more in others. The text introduces him to the readers by calling attention to his primate-like appendages, which he will use to probe his victim’s body, but otherwise makes him small of stature, reinforcing the image of a proto-

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<sup>28</sup> This proposition is admittedly speculative, perhaps inherently so, but it is worth noting that Marie Chauvet is exemplary as an *écrivaine engagée* in that her writing bears directly on profoundly important political concerns of her era, notably the depredations of the Duvalier regime, and places her personally at risk of retribution by supporters of the régime. There is, as yet, no biography on Chauvet, and Joëlle Vitiello’s introduction to her writing in the website *ile-en-ile.org* is perhaps the best single summary of what is known about her life. (I have a short unpublished recording of reminiscences of her from an interview I conducted with Syto Cavé, who was married to her daughter.) Vitiello’s narrative leaves no doubt that Chauvet was exposed to the same crackdown on intellectuals as other writers who were forced into exile in the mid 1960s, and describes her as withdrawing from public life while writing *Amour, Colère et Folie*. Chauvet sent the manuscript to Simone de Beauvoir, who arranged for its publication by Gallimard in 1968. Chauvet’s family bought all of the copies and suppressed its distribution, and Chauvet herself went into exile (and divorced her husband). Did the Gorilla represent for her, as well, a Duvalierist agent who would come for her, of the type that so many feared, and did she therefore figure him for herself as well, as a menace the thought of whom repelled her?



human. When he makes his first appearance before Rose, her father and the corrupt lawyer that arranges Rose's act of prostitution, the lawyer somewhat comically "rushed toward the little man, bowing very low" (193). As the commandant first smiles at Rose, the text notes his fat open lips, marking him as black, in contrast to Rose's own lighter color, which has a significant political valance in the Duvalier era, but also, perhaps, suggesting a disquieting racial attitude in the text itself. As Joan Dayan has noted, the commandant takes the reader "back to the white man's most deviously manipulated fear: that of virginal white ladies mounted by dark Calibans" (*Haiti, History, and the Gods* 123).

Indeed, the rage of the Normil family is not simply a consequence of their impotence in the face of the militia that is brazenly stealing their property and, as the novella wears on, threatening their lives. It is also their recognition that they are now feeling the consequences of the revenge of the darker skinned, predominantly rural Afro-Caribbean populations of Haiti of which the militias were largely composed, on the lighter "mulatto" class to which the Normil family belongs. The commandant and the sinister lawyer who arranges Rose's sacrifice of her body for her family's land (and demands a large sum of money for the service) treat Louis Normil with an analog of the disrespect with the mulatto class treated the dispossessed. When the commandant first prepares to rape Rose, he does so explicitly as a victim of racism and he directly links Rose, his victim, to those who victimized him, whom he holds responsible for his own prior suffering. Standing before the terrified Rose, just before he penetrates her brutally, the commandant explains himself and the role that he has destined for her:

Do you know what I was before I became this figure of authority protecting you with his powerful hand? No, I won't tell you. You might run out of here and you mean a great deal to me. Wait. I'm going to lock the door ... A flea-ridden beggar, that's what I was. Yes, my beauty, a beggar, despised, shunned by haughty little saint's faces like yours. And now, spread your legs. Wait, I'll undo your hair. It makes you look even more like a saint. I love the saints. A long time ago, when I was little, I would go sit in church for long hours and gaze at them. Put out your arms in a cross. You're pale. You look like you're suffering. You're perfect. That's it, suffer in silence." (245)

In defiling Rose, the commandant accomplishes an act of revenge against the class of *mulâtres-bourgeoisie* to which she belongs, and, at the same time, a blasphemy against the church that reinforced the divisions of class and race that separated him, a beggar, from privileged families like the Normil's.

The church is seen in the text as an enabler of the abuses of whichever class is in the ascendant, and thus is an object of rage for whichever class is under attack. Rose's grandfather feels "rebellion and vengeance" swell within him when he listens to a priest counsel submission to the militia from the pulpit: "'We must learn to submit,' the priest was saying. 'We must learn to resign ourselves, for nothing happens on earth without God's will'" (186). Chauvet's scorn for the Haitian church is evident in her earlier *La Danse sur le volcan* (1957), which is one of the few Haitian novels set in the revolutionary period (Vitiello). The protagonist, Minette, an adolescent growing up under slavery, muses about the massive hypocrisy of priests that teach the catechism and yet betray in their own acts the lessons they taught.

Pourquoi le catéchisme apprenait-il ceci et pourquoi les prêtres agissaient de cette façon-là ? Ils disaient : nous sommes frères et ils achetaient des esclaves et quelquefois ils les battaient et les suppliciaient. Pourquoi devait-elle se cacher pour apprendre à lire ? (9)

Why did the catechism teach us this [roughly, in summary, that all humans are created equal] and why do the priests act in this fashion? They say: we are brothers and they buy slaves and at times beat and torture them. Why must she [the protagonist, Minette] hide herself in order to learn to read? (Later, the text recounts the story of a Jesuit, presumably an actual historical person, who was chased off the island for the crime of teaching slaves to read.)

In a later passage that reads more as historical exposition than as fiction, Chauvet describes white slaveholders' suppression of *Pères savanes* (in a footnote, Chauvet explains that these are *Esclaves prédicateurs s'improvisant prêtres* [slaves with prophetic powers that appointed themselves as priests]) as a great error (*grande faute*). Once slaves were deprived of spiritual succor (*privés de ce secours spiritual*) they returned to their traditional beliefs, and elders among the tribe came to see the church and traditional Haitian religious beliefs as opposed in a binary: *le Dieu des blancs qui aimait les blancs et les dieux africains qui aimaient les noirs* (35) [the God of the whites that loved the whites and the African gods that loved the blacks]. In short, the commandant is settling scores that may be traced to the founding of the Haitian state, when the church chose to align itself with the colonists' practices of racism and slavery.

The Gorilla's screed, in which he claims the mantle of a victim, is indefensible as a justification for his abominable rape of the innocent Rose; and yet it is meant to be taken seriously, as an exposition of the patterns of violence that were reversed during the period in which the novella is set, in which brutality, exploitation, and rape were the return in kind for these same historical abuses in a never ending cycle of political dysfunction with vast human consequences. Chauvet's text notably does not play out the story through ordinary, self-interested individuals; rather she gives

both the perpetrator and his victim long meta-cognitive speeches addressed more or less directly to the audience, in which they reflect on their oscillating experiences of themselves as perpetrators and victims. Readers thus must grapple with these difficult passages in which a rapist claims to be a victim of scorn and mistreatment, and a rape victim refigures herself as a voracious sexual predator.

### **Agency and the victim**

It might seem to be a betrayal of the victim to dwell critically on these moments; yet they are arguably at the heart of the purpose Chauvet sees in her writing, which is less purely didactic than it is a raising of consciousness. In Chauvet's posthumous novel, *Les Rapaces* (1986) [No English language version has yet appeared, but the title may be translated as *The Predators* or *The Birds of Prey*] the protagonist, a poet, makes a sweeping declaration of his faith in the capacity of the writer to open "people's consciences":

So many books had already been written for a dead loss! ... To raise up hopes, he had convinced himself that he was the first to find the magic key that opened the people's consciences. Yes, he felt he was able to move the world. He was the chosen one. He, the black child with his crown of laurels, was entrusted with the miraculous message for his people. (N'Zengou-Tayo's translation of Chauvet 30, 327).

Chauvet undermines the proposition that authors affect social conscience through its voicing by an ecstatic and idealistic poet who is unlikely to be read by anyone; but if anything the question of the artist's actual capacity to advance the cause of social justice is less important than the artist's belief that it is possible. Chauvet does not simply show the cycles of victimization and suffering through the events in her narrative, she places within her text characters that reflect and expound on the

meanings of their acts. They do so in worlds gone mad, and their own madnenses, which Orlando points to in the case of Rose as the inevitable response to her radical deprivation of acceptable choices, are preconditions for their transmission of a “miraculous message.” In this schema, the mad writer is the ultimate martyr, which is why Rose’s willingness to accept the Gorilla’s appointment of her as a martyr is crucial to the transmission of Chauvet’s message.

Indeed, in a troping that is not without a certain dark humor, the bestial, hypersexual Gorilla with an outsized phallus is impotent unless Rose willingly performs her role as a martyr in his revenge fantasy. As he prepares to sexually assault Rose for the first time, he advises her not to resist: “...if you resist, I won’t be able to do anything. You have to do what I say, without hesitation, otherwise it’s no go, you understand? I can only be a man with pretty saint’s faces like yours, a defeated martyr with a pretty little face. Do what I say, do it or get out of here” (244). Crucially, Rose cooperates by arranging her body as he wishes, rather than accepting his invitation to flee. The Gorilla’s offer to let her go is sincere in the sense that he physically can’t rape her without her complicity in assuming the pose of a martyr, which is at the heart of the paradox that disturbed Jean-Charles. In this moment, there is a profound demand for recognition: Rose not only has to assume the position of a martyr, but she must first understand why she is doing so, and must, at some level, accept that she is standing in for the figure of the church that betrayed the poor blacks who sought comfort and refuge in their moments of need, albeit in a demented and criminal revenge fantasy.

Ironically, perhaps, this moment of Rose's transformation into a victim and stand-in for those of her class is recognizable as a perverse form of the action of witnessing that Kelly Oliver describes in her influential, *Witnessing: Beyond Recognition* (2001), in which trauma is unwound in the loving gaze of the other. In the terminology of Shoshana Felman, there is an "appointment to bear witness," which must be accepted for the testimonial act to succeed (Felman and Laub 3). Rose is both a victim and a witness to the expression of the Gorilla's traumatization, which manifests itself, ironically, in his impotence—except under conditions in which the political valence of his act is rendered visible. Chauvet's text figures the Church as an emasculating force, which the Gorilla overcomes only by turning the tables on it sexually, through the intermediary of Rose in the guise of his martyr. The mutual gazes in this scene between the predator and his terrified prey are hardly what Oliver has in mind; but they are nonetheless efficacious. The commandant requires that Rose not turn away from him. There is even an uncanny resemblance to the ethical act of witnessing described by Emanuel Levinas:

To be oneself, otherwise than being, to be dis-interested, is to bear the wretchedness and bankruptcy of the other, and even the responsibility that the other can have for me. To be oneself, the state of being a hostage, is always to have one degree of responsibility more, the responsibility for the responsibility of the other.

Levinas certainly never contemplated that the witness would be an actual hostage, nor that the state of being "dis-interested" would be found in Rose's defensive psychic splitting as she observes her own rape as if it were being visited on another version of herself that had already died. Yet there is a sense in which Rose accepts his appointment of her as his witness by granting of psychic agency to the other, the

precondition for which is her willingness to surrender some psychic autonomy to the other. Levinas's conception of responsibility is difficult and neither he nor Oliver would contemplate being raped as a form of witnessing, the more so since the theories of each situate themselves within profoundly ethical roots. Yet Rose allows herself to empathize with the Gorilla and to excuse, to some degree, his brutality. She submits, increasingly willingly to him until she acknowledges that she has come to desire him sexually.

Indeed, after recounting how the brutality of their intercourse leaves her each day barely able to walk, and after she describes that very night when he had thrust his fist into her until she bled copiously driving him to sexual ecstasy (248), in the same long train of thought she changes her mind about the animal he most resembles:

One could easily mistake him for a gorilla, but that's not the case. His hands are misleading since they're long and hairy, but he's just a dog; a poor dog craving affection who turns into a wolf as a result. A beastly couple, made for each other. A lascivious and insatiable panther! I will tear my impure body with my nails. A dog biting simply to defend himself, a poor dog used to kicks, who barks and bites to prove that he's something other than a dog. (251-252)

At this point, Rose identifies completely with his point of view. She likens the rapist to a bedraggled dog who is used to being kicked and in his act of rape is simply defending himself.

In reversing their roles, she changes his narrative of appropriating the body of a young virgin into that in which the conquest he intends is impossible because she is, on the one hand, already dead as an effect of psychic splitting, and on the other, already impure. She describes her enticement of a respected doctor and

friend of her family, to the great distress of his son, one of her playmates. She relates a night of “crying, pleading,” for him to have intercourse with her, which he rebuffed (246). She thus feels that before her rape, she was already impure, to such a degree that she was only technically a virgin. (“Thanks to him I have hit rock bottom. Submissive, too submissive for a virgin. Was I a virgin?” 248.)

She recognizes that in her brother’s eyes and in those of her community, she is permanently tainted as the mistress of the Gorilla. Contrasting Paul’s brighter future to her own, she muses, “As for me, I will slip down the slope of easy affairs, discreetly of course, very discreetly, with my saintly face” (250). However, while she realizes that she is irreversibly compromised, she sees herself as having regained the sexual purity she lost in adolescence. Thinking back to Dr. Valois, she thinks, “Once this torture is over, I’ll have even more innocence and chastity to offer him” (246). Through her suffering, she has expiated her sin of lasciviousness, and it makes a certain sense to her that she was forced to make her payment in kind.

Just as Rose undermines the commander’s objective of defiling her by reimagining herself as already impure prior to the rape, so she interrogates the premise of the novella’s plot by questioning whether her family justly owned their lands. Chauvet moves Rose’s emotional development along two axes. On the one hand she identifies with the position of the perpetrator, whom she comes to see as a victim; and on the other, she resists both of the alternative appropriations (her virginity or her family’s lands) by questioning whether either was rightfully theirs to begin with. Rose also recuperates the fabulous history of her great-grandfather’s acquisition of the land (202-204), which he exchanged for farm animals that he was



raising in the countryside and bringing to Port-au-Prince to sell. (When the landowner reneged on the deal, the great-grandfather murdered him, and then obtained title from a notary through an act of criminal violence.)

Rose thus comes to see the horrors that are being visited on her and her family not simply as the revenge of the exploited on the exploiters, amidst which she has the misfortune of finding herself in that historical moment, but as the inevitable consequence of the curse that lingers over the family from its entry into the ranks of the wealthy.

That sensuous Normil force! Hits hard! Hell had its eye on us for some time and now we're deep in it. The stakes have traced the infernal vicious circle [the militia stakes out the boundaries of the land that they are appropriating from the Normils and forbids the family to cross the line they demarcate 160], and maybe the hands that planted them are less guilty than ours. We are reaping what we sowed, the curse of our ancestors will disappear with our line. (250)

Rose thus feels personally implicated in the guilt of her class and her family, and senses that she alone is in a position to redeem the historical wrongs they have committed through the sacrifice of her body and, she seems to know from the beginning, her life. In this sense she is dying for their sins, and her constant references to herself as a martyr reflect her acceptance of the role that the Gorilla appointed her to perform. She depends on him to martyr her so that she may fulfill her self-appointed role as the expiator of her family's sins, as much as he depends on her to enact martyrdom so he "can be a man," rather than a despised beggar whom any woman would shun.

This dynamic—that each depends on the other to enact her or his part in the scene of martyrdom—helps explain the book's troubling sadomasochism that is

ordinarily passed over by critics. Marie-José N'Zengou-Tayo identifies sadomasochism as characteristic of the “neurotic / mad character” (39) that serves as the narrator in works that overlap those discussed by Orlando. She identifies Sapotille in Michèle Lacrosil’s eponymous work, and Véronica in Maryse Condé’s *Heremakhonon* as exemplary of “a relationship pattern where one of the protagonists is humiliated by her partner...” (34). In these works, the female protagonists accept physical abuse on the part of their husbands, but the sexual torture and Rose’s interrogation of her own possible enjoyment of it are, I think, without parallel.

Damning thoughts hunting me down night and day. Not once have I missed a meeting, not once have I been late. And yet I feel a burning pain when I try to move after these ordeals, and I have to make an effort to walk. I continue to rush downstairs so as not to worry my parents. Not a single day did he spare me. Tonight, he was crazy. He screamed, he sniffed and licked me like a beast. Then he thrust his fist into my body and watched in ecstasy as the blood poured out of me. Vampire! Vampire! I saw him sipping and getting drunk on my blood like wine. (248)

At this point, Rose and the Gorilla have become a “beastly couple, made for each other” (252), enacting a shocking sadomasochistic ritual in which she is a full participant. The only moment in Caribbean literature of which I’m aware that offers any kind of precedent for these scenes might be Fanon’s rape fantasy of the white woman that he describes in his controversial chapter, “The Black Man and Psychopathology” in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952):

... when a woman lives the fantasy of rape by a black man, it is a kind of fulfillment of a personal dream or an intimate wish. Accomplishing the phenomenon of turning around upon the subject's own self, it is the woman who rapes herself. We can find clear proof of this in the fact that it is not unusual for women to cry to their partner during coitus: "Hurt me!" They are merely expressing the idea: "Hurt me as I would do if I were in your place." The fantasy of rape by the black man is a variant of this: "I want the black

man to rip me open as I would do to a woman." Those who grant us our findings on the psychosexuality of the white woman may well ask us what we have to say about the black woman. We know nothing about her. What we can suggest, nevertheless, is that for many Antillean women, whom we shall call the almost white, the aggressor is represented by the typical Senegalese or in any case by a so-called inferior. (*Black Skin, White Masks* 156–157)

This is highly contested terrain, not least because Fanon, writing in his mid-twenties from a position of minimal clinical experience, claimed implicitly to understand the psychosexual fantasies of “the white woman,” while professing, about “the black woman,” to “know nothing about her.” Much might be said about this, of which little would be favorable,<sup>29</sup> but for present purposes, Chauvet seems to be confirming, under certain circumstances, or at least recirculating, Fanon’s rather preposterous claim about white women’s rape fantasies. Rose is a *mulâtre*, not a white woman of the type that Fanon describes, who is frequently blond (e.g. 118, 134), but she would fall under Fanon’s insulting category of the “almost white,” whose aggressor is black and a social inferior.

However critical readers feel about the Gorillas’ horrendous violation of Rose, in Chauvet’s text the protagonist’s fate is intertwined with his, and we cannot read her fully if we turn a blind eye to the person who transformed her into a victim—for it is upon that person that Rose gazed and reflected.

### **Psychic splitting as a response to trauma**

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<sup>29</sup> Anthony C. Alessandrini, in a section of his *Frantz Fanon and the Future of Cultural Politics: Finding Something Different* (2014), titled “Fanon against Fanon, Fanon beyond Fanon,” discusses various critical reactions to this passage from Homi K. Bhabha, Hortense Spillers, and Diana Fuss. (36–37).

Rose's responses to the Gorilla are unsettling because she appears to be complicit in her rape, but they are crucial to her capacity to salvage her agency to the limited extent she can in the brutal conditions she faces. Rose responds to her initial rape, perpetrated upon her when she is a virgin, through a process of psychic splitting, in which her mind separates from and observes her body as if it were distinct from her. The passage in which Chauvet describes the event is the primary locus of critics' understandable horror, some of whom, as I have discussed, experience their reading of it as an assault on their own psyches.

"I'll open you up until my entire fist goes in," he shouted.  
I could see his reflection in every mirror, unsightly and frightening.  
What's it to me? I would have brought dishonor on myself only if I enjoyed it as he did, but he slept with a corpse. A corpse, and he has no idea. That's my revenge.

...

What do I care! I am dead. I could laugh, watching him moan over a dead body. (245)

Rose's experience of psychic splitting in response to trauma is remarkably consistent with research performed well after the book was written. Bessel van der Kolk, Professor of Psychiatry at Boston University Medical School and founder and Medical Director of the Trauma Center at the Justice Resource Institute writes that traumatized individuals

can watch what is going on from a distance while having the sense that what is occurring is not really happening to them, but to someone else. ... When people develop a split between the "observing self" and the "experiencing self," they report having the feeling of leaving their bodies and observing what happens to them from a distance [three research citations omitted]. During a traumatic experience, dissociation allows a person to observe the event as a spectator, to experience no, or only limited, pain or distress; and to be protected from awareness of the full impact of what has happened. (192)

If Rose's response is seen as psychic splitting, it points to a contrasting interpretation of the scene from that offered by Wolcott-Hackshaw, who interprets the rape as a virtual extinction of Rose as a person. She writes that "the violation results in Rose's death; she becomes part of the living dead, a zombie, dead unto herself" (46). While the subject of zombies in Haitian culture is outside the scope of the present investigation, it may be said, broadly, that they are beings that are dead, buried, and then brought back to life by an intermediary, after which they are distinguished from the non-zombies by their lack of souls (Thomas 4). Rose simply cannot be described in that manner, but even if we grant Wolcott-Hacksaw's popular, western idea of the zombie as a nonhuman walking corpse, Rose is a thinking, feeling, autonomous subject, whose willingness to contemplate her own burden of collective guilt is strikingly original. Further, nothing about Rose in the pages of the novella that follow this scene suggests that she is dead to herself; indeed, even in the moment when she describes herself as dead, she does so to mock her aggressor and in so doing she makes clear she has lost none of her self-awareness.

The idea that she could harbor tender thoughts for her rapist is perhaps repellent, but Rose cherishes her observation that the Gorilla is increasingly attaching to her. In the midst of one of his rapes, he utters a proposal, apparently of marriage: "If you wish, I will keep you till death do us part," (250). She recounts the offense he takes when a peasant sees her removing her rain-soaked dress and he exhorts her to hide herself, as if her naked body was his alone to see. These passages may be soaked in violence—literally, with her blood—but they are,

inescapably, moments of intimacy and mutual recognition. These twin turnings of the tables—she refigures herself as holding sexual *and* emotional power over him—are instrumental to her survival as a thinking subject. Both assure that she remains far more than an abject, pure victim, and both tend to undermine the significance of a debate as to her qualifications as a martyr.

Chauvet's willingness to construct a character that responds to rape by interrogating her own culpability is strikingly original. Critics have recognized the potential of perpetrators to be victims as well, but their focus has been on individuals who have caused directly harm to others. Kali Tal, in *Worlds of Hurt: Reading the Literatures of Trauma* (1996), discusses the prototypical case of the soldier, as follows:

Much recent literature—popular, clinical and academic—places the combat soldier simply in the victim's role; helpless in the face of war, and then helpless to readjust from the war experience upon his return home. Feminist critics should be quick to voice their disapproval of an interpretation so drastically at odds with reality. The soldier in combat is both victim and victimizer; dealing death as well as risking it. Soldiers carry guns; they point them at people and shoot to kill. Members of oppressed groups, by contrast, often do not control the tools of violence. (10)

Chauvet, of course, recognizes that the Duvalierist militia is composed of members of an oppressed group that precisely has gained control over the tools of violence, which they use against women, among others.

Chauvet, however, explores a much more nuanced instability of position between perpetrator and victim, which is at the center of her second novel, *La Danse sur le volcan* (1957), which she wrote in Haiti on the eve of the ascension to power of François Duvalier. Set in the colonial period, at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, just before the revolution, the novel is largely concerned with the coming to racial

consciousness of a girl from the class of *mulâtres*. (Dalleo 130–131). Minette’s mother is preoccupied with ensuring that their family passes as French colonists. Minette’s consciousness of racial injustice is precipitated by her witnessing the whipping of a slave. Chauvet writes, straightforwardly, “Minette’s view of slavery underwent a sudden and profound change” (45). The author’s use of direct commentary rather than dialog or action to make her point suggests the centrality of this moment to the purposes of the text. For the protagonists in these two texts, coming to consciousness is precipitated by a specific event.

Minette in *La Danse sur le volcan*, and Rose in *Amour, Colère et Folie* occupy wholly different positions in their respective texts. Minette, like Chauvet herself, struggles to find a place for her creative endeavors, but is allowed time to mature in the pages of the novel, whereas Rose lives for less than a month and has not completed her schooling, nor has she any declared artistic or professional aspirations. Yet, like Minette, her direct experience with racial injustice, in the form of the Gorilla’s complaints of suffering from racism, awakens her own self-scrutiny.

It is difficult to overstate the originality of Chauvet’s construction of a character who, as a consequence of her own rape, entertains the proposition that it is the logical and even just conclusion of the injustices that have been perpetrated by members of her class on those they formerly oppressed but that have now seized power and turned the tables upon them. In this respect, she provides at least one canvas for the position of the perpetrator, which is generally unaccounted for in cultural trauma theory. The question Chauvet’s character poses is fundamental to the guilt that permeates the text—there are no innocent parties in Haiti. Rose, who

has no personal responsibility for the injustices she describes, is torn: if she voluntarily gives up her body to preserve lands that were unjustly obtained so as to maintain privilege whose costs have always been borne by the dispossessed, then is she victim, victimizer, or a combination of both?

Cultural trauma theory emerged in the early 2000s as a means for understanding the effects on a “collectivity” of the memory of a mass trauma that tore the social fabric of a society. Ron Eyerman, writing in a 2002 study, *Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity*, articulated the theory as follows:

As opposed to psychological or physical trauma, which involves a wound and the experience of great emotional anguish by an individual, cultural trauma refers to a dramatic loss of identity and meaning, a tear in the social fabric, affecting a group of people that has achieved some degree of cohesion. In this sense, the trauma need not necessarily be felt by everyone in a community or experienced directly by any or all. (2)

One of the principal aims of the theory was to explain the traumatization of individuals by events with which they had no personal connection, but that arose from their identification with communities that had been subject to historical traumas. Arguably, Haiti is a site of cultural trauma *par excellence* and Haitian literature bears testimony to the enduring scars of repeated historical trauma. To take one example among a multitude, Evelyne Trouillot’s *Rosalie L’Infâme* (2003) explores the way in which the horrors of the Middle Passage are transmitted intergenerationally and continue to mark the present of those who, like Trouillot herself, identify with the enslaved and betrayed.

Cultural trauma theorists have been concerned with victims who identify with traumatized communities, whether or not they have personal experience of the



traumatic events. They have not been specifically concerned with individuals who identify with communities of perpetrators. While Jeffrey C. Alexander (who is, along with Eyerman, a foundational theorist of cultural trauma theory) emphasizes the desirability of identifying the perpetrators of a historical trauma, which he sees as solidifying the narrative of the collectivity of victims. In his taxonomy of factors relevant to the study of cultural trauma, he begins with “*The nature of the pain*” (17 emphasis in the original) and concludes with “Attribution of responsibility”:

In creating a compelling trauma narrative, it is critical to establish the identity of the perpetrator—the “antagonist.” Who actually injured the victim? Who caused the trauma? This issue is always a matter of symbolic and social construction. (19)

Alexander then gives Germany as an example, asking “Did ‘Germany’ create the Holocaust, or was it the Nazi regime?” (19). Curiously, Alexander phrases his claim elliptically so that he leaves unclear whose work it is to establish the identity of the perpetrator except to say that it is a matter of “symbolic and social construction.” His concern is not with the necessity of knowing the perpetrator *per se*, but rather for the purpose of reinforcing the compelling nature of the trauma narrative, which serves the purposes of the community of victims. In the case of *Colère*, quite a different dynamic is in play. Rose’s interrogation of her connection to the perpetrators of the trauma clarifies what it means to bear the responsibility for the victims.

In *Peau Noire, Masques Blancs* (1952), Frantz Fanon stages the coming to consciousness of a young black man arriving in Paris who has the mantle of blackness thrust upon him by the chance remark of a racist Frenchman (“*Tiens un nègre !*” (*Peau noire, masques blancs*. 60). In a mirror image of this moment, Rose

comes to consciousness as a member of a predatory class through her personal traumatic exposure to a victim of exploitation. At the end of a page-long paragraph of interior monolog in which she describes the routine of the Gorilla's repeated rapes, she exclaims to herself, "We, too, belong to a race of wildcats and raptors, that's why we struggle so fiercely against those who've taken our lands. And the history of our property is quite murky. I heard my mother and father talking about it when I was six years old" (250). The rapes trigger not a feeling of shame in this passage, but a recognition of her own family's predation. In Fanon's traumatic moment, the mantle of blackness is thrust upon him; in Rose's moment, the mantle of lightness is thrust upon her.

In distinct contrast to Wolcott-Hackshaw's view that Rose is akin to a zombie after her rape, I suggest that rather than dying as a result of her rape, it is only then that she *begins to live* as a fully conscious subject. She is shocked into a position of mutual recognition with the Gorilla, after which she comprehends the full measure of her family's and her class's culpability. Rose discovers the crime that is at the origin of her family's ownership of the land, which prior to the invasion of the militia, she had taken for granted was legitimate. When the militia takes its first steps to literally stake out land it plans to appropriate from the Normils, Paul says of the militia, "They wear black uniforms and carry arms. And they have helped themselves to our land. That's all we know" (166). Rose's mother worries, referring to the patriarch who acquired the land and is buried upon it, that "They will desecrate his grave ... they will dig up his bones" (167). Rose shares her brother's

unexamined assumption that the family's lands are sacred and, in an unstated corollary, that they're entitled to the privilege they enjoy.

### **Feminisms of Amour, Colère et Folie**

There is no doubt that Chauvet's text is a searing indictment of the Duvalierist regime, in particular for its unleashing of a militia that terrorized the middle class. Hellen Lee-Keller, writing in 2009, draws on Fanon's *Les Damnés de la Terre* [*The Wretched of the Earth*] (1961; In English, 1963) to describe how the cycle of violence operated during the period, as a form of class warfare that Duvalier unleashed:

As Fanon forewarned about the pitfalls of a national consciousness that merely reproduces the conditions of colonization, Chauvet shows that the condescension and violence with which the *mulâtres-aristocrates* treated the Blacks, a remainder of the colonial legacy, has not ameliorated. Instead, the same brutality has been turned on them.

The explicit, violent actions are not limited to black male characters, but Chauvet includes scenes in which other various male characters inflict violence on women in order to illustrate that patriarchal violence is not limited to a few aberrant men. (1302)

In this passage, Lee-Keller discusses the first novella of the triptych, *Amour*, but the Normil family in *Colère* is equally a member of the class she names *mulâtres-aristocrates* that is subject to brutalization at the hands of those that they exploited.

In *Colère*, the connection between the postcolonial oppression of the class to which Rose belongs and the patriarchal violence against women of the Duvalierist militia is made by and through the character of Rose. She takes a hugely significant additional step when she considers her personal responsibility for that violence as a member of an exploitative class—even though she is personally innocent of any

personal tort other than enjoying her class privilege. She illustrates a largely unremarked form of cultural trauma, the psychic burden of the member of a class of victimizers—in Rose’s case the Haitian *mulâtres-aristocrates*. That she accepts her fate is troubling in relation to her character; but her assumption of responsibility for the wrongdoings of her class allows readers to gauge the effects of cultural trauma in the Duvalierist era from both sides of the perpetrator-victim divide.

Rose exemplifies a dual consciousness that is quite extraordinary. She is acutely aware of the psychic and physical injuries that her rapist inflicts upon her. At the same time, she is willing to consider his claims to having been himself a victim of racism perpetrated by members of the class to which she belongs. In contrast, the Gorilla exists in the novella only as a victimizer. When he presents himself as a victim he does so to justify his abuses. Chauvet has constructed his character as a victim of cultural trauma and an inflictor of psychological trauma, but not as one who is able to empathize with Rose or her family.

There is no doubt that *Amour, Colère et Folie* is foremost a feminist text, as Yanick Lahens first described it in an article in French in the *Journal of Haitian Studies*, 1997-1998, that situates Chauvet among those whom she identifies as constituting a new generation of Haitian women writers. She describes the goal of her article as “de souligner l’indéniable spécificité de leurs revendications féministes” [to underscore the incontestable specificity of their feminist demands] (87). In her foundational analysis of *Amour, Colère et Folie*, Lahens notes the contradictions in Rose’s actions, but her emphasis remains on “les structures sociales qui conditionnent ces comportements” [the social structures that condition

her behavior] (89). It might, however, also be observed that Chauvet's own gender assumptions condition her characterizations. That the Gorilla is not capable of empathy is consistent with his status as a perpetrator: a rapist is not empathetic by definition. At least in the historical context of the novel, casting the character of the rapist as a male is inevitable. On the other side, however, Rose's extraordinary capacity to see the pain of the other, even when that other is traumatizing her, and to offer herself as an instrument of recognition and healing may well be gendered. Her brother, Paul, is tormented by the trials of his sister and feels empathy for her that goes along with his own shame and self-loathing for failing to protect her. But he is not about to recognize the suffering of the dispossessed, nor his family's implication in the social injustices that allowed Duvalierism to arise. In this respect, Rose could be identified with the goddess Erzulie, whom Joan Dayan, writing in 1994, identifies as follows: "Maîtresse Erzulie-Freda, the mulâtresse blanche, is the lover of Ogoun, a very black god of war, often identified with Papa Dessalines" ("Erzulie" 6). Erzulie is more easily invoked than understood, but it does not require much imagination to see the Gorilla as a stand-in for Duvalier (as Scharfman has it, though for different reasons), nor to link Duvalier with Dessalines.<sup>30</sup>

### **The demand for redemption**

A sound critical reading practice for *Amour, Colère et Folie* must negotiate two opposing conceptions of victimization. On the one hand, Rose is patently a victim of horrific sexual crimes. These were a hallmark of the Duvalierist reign of

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<sup>30</sup> See, for example, David Nicholls, *From Dessalines to Duvalier: Race, Colour and National Independence in Haiti*, (1979).

terror and Chauvet has contributed immensely to exposing these crimes, which she did at great personal cost. On the other hand, Rose exercises agency in submitting herself to her victimizer and then in sympathizing with him. If critics fail to recognize Rose's independence and her capacity to make choices and experience conflicting emotions and desires in relation to her tormentor, and choose to see her only as a figure of Duvalierist violence, then an essential aspect of her character is lost and she will be a victim not simply of the brutal commandant, but of her critics as well. The consequence for Chauvet's text would be clear: Rose's character's recognition of the historical social injustices that Duvalier exploited will be lost, as will the potential for healing that trauma texts may afford. Though the character of Rose makes the ultimate sacrifice, her sympathy for the Gorilla's travails, including for the racist and classist abuses that he suffered in his childhood, leaves her psychologically traumatized and physical weakened, but still open to the claims of the other.

At the end of the novella, each character dies: Rose of exhaustion, and the Gorilla of a gunshot wound inflicted by one of his henchman who believes, thanks to some belated machinations of M. Normil, that the Gorilla is about to cheat him of a promised share of the Normils' lands. Each death—both are more or less murders—seems to me to owe more to the psychic demands of the novella than to the logic of its narrative, which in these last pages strikes me as hastily composed. (Vitiello notes that Chauvet wrote the draft of *Amour, Colère et Folie* in only six months.) If so, it may be helpful to consider Chauvet herself as a reader. Valerie Orlando sees Rose's death as marking the end of Rose's struggle against the

“phallocratic, dehumanizing forces that rain down on her body ... Fighting to the last page, she succumbs finally to death out of sheer physical and mental fatigue” (103-104). Orlando’s felicitous “Fighting to the last page” suggests that the narrative has no other logical endpoint. Chauvet never suggests that a woman’s resistance is possible to the Duvalierist regime, nor more broadly to the phallocratic order that prevails in Haiti.

The demise of the Gorilla seems to me to pose an interpretive challenge of a different nature. He exemplifies the brutality of a regime that is not constrained by law or custom and the most logical outcome of the novella would be his triumph—over Rose and her family and, more broadly, over the class that exploited the black Haitian underclass from which he arose. While in the terms of cultural trauma, he identifies with a community of victims, on a personal level he is irredeemably evil. In particular, while he seeks to avenge his prior mistreatment by members of the class to which Rose belongs, he shows no empathy for the psychic damage he wreaks on his personally innocent victim. It may be for this reason that Chauvet rather abruptly kills him off at the end of the novella. Given the absolute power that the Gorilla enjoys throughout the novella and the absence until that moment of any resistance to his evil projects, the Gorilla’s fate reads more as Chauvet’s fulfillment of a moral demand rather than as a logical development of the novella’s plot. It may perhaps best be explained by Chauvet’s own identification with Rose and a corresponding disinclination to allow the character of her tormentor to live and benefit from his crimes. My point in these last remarks is not to call attention to what I see as a weakness at the end of Chauvet’s narrative, but rather to illustrate

the manner in which authors of trauma fiction not only create characters, but respond to them—in this case by refusing to allow Rose’s torturer to escape the punishment that the Normil family itself was unable to exact from him. Several prominent critics have been affected by their reading of Rose, but Chauvet is the most exposed of all to the plight of Rose as she reads and rereads her scenes, as any author does. She creates her text, but once created, her character exercises, even on its creator, a certain autonomous agency, and thus a capacity to affect her, as it does any reader, psychologically.

### **A brief contrasting reading of Danticat’s *The Dew Breaker***

In a manner reminiscent of Chauvet’s triptych, Edwidge Danticat’s *The Dew Breaker* (2004) is composed in the form of nine interrelated chapter-stories, each of which may be read on its own and some of which themselves are divided into sections. The title takes its name from a Krèyol euphemism for an agent of the state that arrives at dawn to take someone away at an hour he’s most likely to be at home. Danticat’s perpetrator, like Chauvet’s, is a member of the Tonton Macoute militia, and thus is an agent of the terror Duvalier wreaked on the formerly privileged class of lighter-skinned educated Haitians. Like the Gorilla, the eponymous Dew Breaker is identified only as he is known to other characters in the book, e.g. as “father” or “Papa” in relation to the narrator in the first of the chapter-stories, “The Book of the Dead,” and as “the fat man” in relation to his superior and to the victim in the last chapter-story, “The Dew Breaker.” The principal names of these two perpetrators reflect their respective appearances: the long hairy arms and huge hands give the



Gorilla his name; the heavysset body gives the fat man his. (He slims down when he resettles in the United States.)

*The Dew Breaker* is set in the Haitian community in Brooklyn, where the protagonist, a former jailer and torturer in the Duvalier regime, has resettled incognito and lives a peaceable life as a barber and married father of a young woman artist. As a reviewer, Christopher Winks, writes, “The two major themes of *The Dew Breaker*—loss in general, and the specific loss or absence of the father—are conjoined in the opening sentence: ‘My father is gone.’” (185). When the novel opens, the protagonist’s father has gone missing from the hotel where they are staying, but the line is a bit of misdirection, for the father will soon return. He and his daughter, the first-person narrator of this chapter, are in Tampa where they have traveled to deliver to a Haitian-American collector a mahogany statue that his daughter has made of him crouching as she imagined him to have done in his cramped prison cell in Haiti, before escaping to the United States. It turns out that without telling his daughter, during his brief absence from the hotel, he has thrown the statue created by his daughter into a nearby lake.

He does this because he is unwilling to live any longer with the falsehood that the statue represents. He explains to her: “Ka, I don’t deserve a statue ... not a whole one, at least. You see, Ka, your father was the hunter, he was not the prey” (20). He goes on to explain, two pages later, “This man who cut my face [as I will discuss, he bears a prominent scar on his cheek] ... I shot and killed him, like I killed many people” (22). If the father himself isn’t gone, the statue is, along with the idea she had grown up with of her father as a hero. Instead, she learns that he was a torturer

and a murderer who fled Haiti with her mother because he'd committed one murder too many. He wasn't forced into exile by the Duvalierists; he was one of them. His crime was, in a small reversal, failing to observe an order *not* to kill someone—a priest who had attacked him during his interrogation.

The narrator's immediate concern is for her mother and she poses to herself the question, "Was she huntress or prey? A thirty-year plus disciple of my father's coercive persuasion? She'd kept to herself even more than he had, like someone who was nurturing a great pain that she could never speak about" (22). Later, she will learn that her father maintained the fiction that he was a victim until just after her birth, when he told her mother. Thus, both women in his life believed he was a victim and learned only much later that he had been a perpetrator. But it is not only that they have not understood who he is; once they know his secret, they are forced to collude with him lest he be exposed as a fugitive murderer in the Haitian community in which they live, which includes many forced into exile by the Duvalierist reign of terror. The disclosure would not only expose the family to their community's opprobrium, but could result in his deportation from the United States.

*The Dew Breaker* is certainly trauma fiction in the sense that it is concerned with the capacity of memories of past traumatic events to intrude into and to disrupt the present. It also takes as its subject a perpetrator, whom it characterizes fully, and in that sense it is of particular interest as such characters are fairly rare. For all that, for the most part, the novel transforms the protagonist into a victim of his own past. Danticat is not primarily concerned with his victims, except to the extent that they pose a risk to the protagonist—thus reversing the relationship that

they had in Haiti, in which the perpetrator exercised the power of life and death over the victims brought to his prison, where his role was principally to torture them. More generally, the book is not concerned with the victimizer *per se* as he lived during the period in which he traumatized his victims, but rather with the memories of a man living a good life who is tormented by his past, as revealed by his symptoms of post-traumatic disorder: "I ask my father, 'And those nightmares you were always having what were they?' / 'Of what I,' he says, 'your father did to others'" (23).

Similarly, the perpetrator is not present in the text to allow the reader to gain an understanding of the experience of his victims; rather a victim is introduced who explains the father's stigmata, a disfiguring scar across his cheek, and supplies the backstory required to explain his departure from Haiti. In the final chapter, "The Dew Breaker," the father is placed back in Haiti where he is performing his role as a jailer-torturer. A preacher is brought into his "death chamber" (223), and as the narrative has it, the preacher may be tortured, but not murdered. In a sequence that I find cartoonish, the preacher, during his interrogation, leans back in his chair, which breaks, furnishing him with a weapon in the form of a wooden leg with a jagged broken edge, which he uses to assault the Dew Breaker. His goal is to "strike the fat man's eyes" (226), but instead he slashes deeply his cheek. The protagonist takes out his gun and kills the preacher. The jailer, knowing that his own life is now imperiled for disobeying an order, staggers out of the prison, where he runs into a woman who is looking for the preacher, her stepbrother. She assumes from the jailer's bleeding face that he is a victim and ministers to his wound. He plays along

with her misrecognition:

“What did they do to you?” she asked.

This was the most forgiving question he’d ever been asked. It suddenly opened a door, produced a small path which he could follow.

“I’m free,” he said. “I finally escaped.”

(231)

In this passage, the Dew Breaker is able to assume the position of a victim, which is required if he is to be able to emigrate to the United States. In a bizarre reversal, Danticat uses the word “torture” to convey the woman’s empathetic reaction to the sight of the jailer receiving stitches for his wound: “she watched from a corner as the doctor pulled a silver thread in and out of his skin. It seemed like some kind of torture, the type you might inflict on someone you truly hated, but he didn’t seem very pained from it” (238-239).

The actual victim of the scene is characterized at some length, but it seems to me that he is cast as a paragon, and any sense of his character’s reality as a victim is undermined by an operatic apotheosis Danticat accords him in the impossibly short time between the muzzle flash of the torturer’s gun and his death: “The preacher knew that as soon as the burst of light that had left the fat man’s gun landed on his body, it would be over. Were he to come back, he could preach a beautiful sermon about this day...” (226). These thoughts continue for well over a page and they fulfill the resurrection he foresaw for himself earlier: “He’d dreamed his own death so many times that he was no longer afraid of it. He’d imagined himself ... burned at the stake like Joan of Arc, beheaded like John the Baptist. In all of his dreams, however, he always saw himself being resurrected” (200). In his ultimate moment, the preacher imagines that it is the torturer who will now bear stigmata from the

wound he has inflicted upon his face with the jagged edge of the chair leg: “Every time he looked in the mirror, he would have to confront this mark and remember him” (227). His claim to agency and his turning of the tables is reminiscent of Rose’s, though Danticat figures the preacher as actually inflicting harm on his antagonist.

The only way I can make sense of the character of the preacher is to liken him to Uncle Joseph, a preacher who is the subject of Danticat’s 2007 memoir, *Brother I’m Dying*, the memoir that followed *The Dew Breaker*. (There was a contribution to Scholastic’s young adult series, *The Royal Diaries*, in between.) Both characters’ roots are in Léogâne, a town 18 miles west of the capital that is a center of Haitian art. Danticat lived there with her uncle before leaving Haiti permanently to join her parents in Brooklyn. It is clear from her memoir that she idolized her uncle and her account of his unjust and racist treatment by the U.S. immigration authorities that led directly to his death is, for me, the most powerful writing in her corpus. My guess is that Danticat needed a victim to account for the scar that the dew breaker bears as the visible sign of the past crimes that haunted him, and wrote in a character based on her uncle.

In a chapter of a volume on memory published in Cameroun in 2013 titled *Outward Evil Inward Battle. Human Memory in Literature*, Adaku T. Ankumah writes about *The Dew Breaker* that “for Africans in the Diaspora, remembering plays a huge role in dealing with the present” (134). Ultimately, the differences in the characterizations of the perpetrators in the two novels is best explained by the nature of each author’s project. Danticat writes about the way in which the memory

of traumatic events in the homeland affects life in the diaspora. The Dew Breaker, in Brooklyn, is anything but a perpetrator in his current incarnation as a barber and married father. Indeed, he's the same person he was in Haiti only in the sense that he bears the memory of his past—otherwise they might be entirely separate characters. He's even undergone a physical change by losing the weight that had given him his sobriquet of the fat man. His link with his past is visible in his scar, which he rubs habitually in fulfillment of the priest's auguring that it will ensure he shall *never forget*, one of the most salient tropes of the post-Holocaust era.

In contrast, Chauvet operates at the level in which collective memory is formed. By taking us into the heart of the traumatic moment and by shocking us through our empathetic reading into an experience of Duvalierist terror, she binds together those who identify with the communities that were torn apart by violence, rape, murder, and expropriation of property. Her genius is to show us at the same time that Duvalierism did not arise in a vacuum and that there are no innocent parties to the traumatic events. Individuals like Rose may be personally innocent, but they know that they are members of communities that are responsible for cultural trauma. By refusing to redeem the Gorilla, except by his assassination, she makes him more human, not less. Duvalier's militias included individuals that vis-à-vis their victims were purely evil. She does not, therefore, allow the Gorilla credibly to justify his crimes; but she does allow the reader to grasp the context of cultural trauma in the postcolonial era that allowed the militias to take root and, for a time, to proliferate at the behest of a dictator. In this manner, she binds, ultimately, communities of victims and victimizers, whose relation to each other takes place at

the intersection of psychological and cultural trauma.

## Chapter Three

### Haitian Earthquake Trauma Literature, Part One

#### Introduction

The earthquake that shook Port-au-Prince and its surroundings for thirty-five seconds on January 12, 2010 claimed over 300,000 human lives and destroyed 1.7 million homes (Schuller and Morales 8). Haitian authors responded to this calamity with an outpouring of literary works that are of great significance not only to their intended audiences within Haiti and abroad, for reasons that will be explored in this chapter, but also to scholars concerned with trauma literature. The contemporaneous nature of Haitian writing on the earthquake that is exemplified in these texts, all of which were begun even as the extent of the catastrophe was just becoming known, provides an unprecedented prism by which crucial problems of trauma literature may be studied.

In this chapter, I examine in particular three monographs and two collections of essays: Yanick Lahens' *Failles* (2010); Dany Laferrière's *Tout Bouge Autour de Moi* [*Everything Around me is Shaking*] (2011); Rodney Saint-Éloi's, *Haïti, kenbe la ! / Haïti, redresse-toi !* [*Haïti, Arise !*] (2010) ; Sarah Berrouet, et al. eds.' *Haïti : Parmi Les Vivants* (2010) [*Haïti : Among the Living*] and Pierre, Beudelaine, and Nataša Ďurovičová, eds.' *How to Write an Earthquake / Comment Écrire et Quoi Écrire / Mou Pou 12 Janvyè*. (2011). The transitive form of the title of the last of these collections of earthquake writings, *How to Write an Earthquake*, calls attention to the relationship between writing and the construction of the memory of trauma. The earthquake is not an event outside a text, but one whose memory is created by it.



This use of the transitive is not new. Dominique LaCapra writes in a discussion of Hayden White's articulation of the "middle voice" in trauma writing: "I have alluded to the particularly difficult and knotty twist in White's argument represented by his appeal to the middle voice, which he takes as the appropriate way to 'write' trauma" (LaCapra 18). From this perspective the relationship of writing to trauma is reversed. Writing does not simply transmit the memory of trauma—either directly or belatedly, following Caruth—but rather writes it into existence. The writing then replaces, or even effaces, the direct memories that individuals have of the event itself. (See Bernal-Donals.)

The psychological and representational challenges that Haitian authors encountered in writing the earthquake have important implications for the study of contemporary psychological trauma theory. Whereas the important theoretical works in trauma studies that were published in the 1990s were grounded largely on Holocaust testimony gathered in the 1970s, Haitian authors began writing the earthquake within days of its occurrence. Their post-earthquake writings and the transcripts of my interviews with prominent Haitian writers allow new light to be shed on the doctrine of "unspeakability," which holds that the core experience of certain traumas is suppressed in the memory of the victim and is thus unavailable for textual representation.<sup>31</sup> The conception of trauma that has been articulated by Cathy Caruth posits that it is inherently "belated;" and that it cannot be known directly as it is experienced. She writes, "The historical power of trauma is not just

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<sup>31</sup> See, as a starting point, Saul Friedländer, ed. *Probing the limits of representation : Nazism and the "final solution" (1992)*, and for the debate on the theory's validity, Naomi Mandel, *Against the Unspeakable: Complicity, the Holocaust, and Slavery in America (2006)*.

that the experience is repeated after its forgetting, but that it is only in and through its inherent forgetting that it is first experienced at all" (*Unclaimed Experience* 17). Caruth's paradigm, which situates itself within a genealogy that traces itself to Freud, holds that the memory of traumatic experience reposes in the victim's subconscious where it retains the capacity to disrupt the individual's experience of the present in the form of nightmares, flashbacks, and repetition compulsions.<sup>32</sup>

My research, however, strongly suggests that this paradigmatic understanding of psychological trauma is not confirmed by the experience of Haitian authors that lived through the earthquake. In a series of interviews, I asked prominent Haitian authors to describe their own thoughts and actions during the earthquake itself and immediately afterward and then to tell me how and when they began to write about it. I especially probed whether they recognized gaps in their memories or other dislocations that might arise from what Caruth identifies as "a break in the mind's experience of time" (61).

To some degree, Caruth's theorizing resists challenges derived from interview material and other forms of testimony since it is grounded in a paradox: since a traumatic experience is, in her theorizing, held to be *ipso facto* unknowable to the victim, he or she cannot testify either to its presence or to its absence.

Nonetheless, the testimony of Haitian authors, especially when interpreted in

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<sup>32</sup> Caruth explains, "Ever since its emergence at the turn of the century in the work of Freud and Pierre Janet, the notion of trauma has confronted us not only with a simple pathology but also with a fundamental enigma concerning the psyche's relation to reality. In its general definition, trauma is described as the response to an unexpected or overwhelming violent event or events that are not fully grasped as they occur, but return later in repeated flashbacks, nightmares, and other repetitive phenomena.

conjunction with their published writings, is highly suggestive of a crucial distinction between unspeakability, which results from a failure of memory, and silencing, which results from a compulsion not to speak that which is in memory. Haitian authors report a near existential battle against silencing in the immediate aftermath of catastrophe, but it arises not from lapses in memory, but from their ordinary impulses to avoid revisiting painful memories, especially when they are most raw. There is a further distinction to be made between failures of memory and the deprivation of language. At times of great crisis, words may be elusive not because the memory is a blank, but because its agency is excessive and overwhelms the capacity of language to mediate it.

### **Writing and survival**

In the days immediately following the earthquake, Lyonel Trouillot, a preeminent force in the Haitian literary establishment,<sup>33</sup> visited many writers in the small and close knit Haitian literary community and asked each one to contribute to the collection of earthquake writings that was published in the fall of the same year as *Haiti parmi les vivants* (2010). In his short preface, Trouillot sets forth the central paradox of Haitian earthquake writing, which is that it is at once inconsequential in comparison to the scale of the cataclysm, and yet indispensable. For Trouillot, the

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<sup>33</sup> For an extensive bibliography and list of honors, see Kathleen Gissels's short biography on the Île en île website. To this may be added his roles within the writing community as Professor of Literature at the Haitian national university, leader of a weekly *atelier* for young authors (which I attended on one occasion), and organizer, along with Évelyne Trouillot, of the monthly *Vendredis Littéraires* gatherings at the Centre Culturel Marie Morriset (formerly the residence of the Trouillots' mother) at which a wide range of authors read and sing their recent works.

challenge to writing arises not from the author's incapacity to access his experience, but rather his sense that catastrophe has marginalized the purpose of his art and thus nullified its agency.

Que peut la littérature devant les grands malheurs ? Rien. Mais surtout pas se taire. Avec nos morts, avec nos mots, nous qui sommes revenus du déluge de pierres, écrivons pour trouver 'une place dans le monde des vivants.' (54)

What can literature do in the face of great misfortune? Nothing. But above all not be silent. With our dead, with our words, we who have returned from the deluge of rocks write to find "our place in the world of the living."<sup>34</sup>

Trouillot juxtaposes the near-homophones *nos morts* [our dead] with *nos mots* [our words], linking memory (especially of those that died) and language as the raw material available to writers as they seek a path out of the destruction that has been visited upon them and their society. Spiritual death is mapped metaphorically as a place from which one returns into the world of the living *through the act of writing*.

Trouillot urges Haitian writers not simply to resist the feeling that writing is incommensurate with the magnitude of the catastrophe and therefore pointless, but instead to affirmatively accept that it is imperative to their very survival. In Trouillot's view, to resist silencing is to affirm the writer's own existence, and thereby to assure him his place *dans le monde des vivants* [in the world of the living].

In my interview, Yanick Lahens, likely Haiti's foremost woman writer, credited writing as a process of personal healing:

L'écriture a représenté pour moi à ce moment-là—je ne suis pas allée consulter un psychologue—l'écriture a été pour moi une manière de commencer à mettre un peu d'ordre ... parce que moi je prenais des notes que j'ai gardées sur des bouts de papier.

Writing meant to me at that time—I did not go to see a psychologist—writing

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<sup>34</sup> Except where indicated, all translations in this chapter and the next are by the author.

was a way for me to start putting some order ... because I was taking notes that I kept on scraps of paper.

Lahens' memories were scattered literally on scraps of paper; but those scraps themselves represent specific moments in her experience of the earthquake that she orders as she commits them to paper.

Haitian authors write their experiences of the earthquake for their own purposes, but in so doing, they also serve as witnesses of the catastrophe for those who are unable to testify for themselves, either because they are no longer living or because they lack their own expressive outlets to transmit their experiences. As Shoshana Felman writes in her foundational *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (1992), "the appointment to bear witness is, paradoxically enough, an appointment to transgress the confines of that isolated stance, to speak for others and to others" (3). Through their writings, Haitian authors overcome their isolation in order to speak for themselves, but also on behalf of others and to those both within and outside their own community.

The title of the collection of essays, *Haïti parmi les vivants* is drawn from the the poet Syto Cavé's contribution, "Ma place parmi les vivants" [My Place among the Living"]. In his essay, Cavé expresses the feeling of being dead to himself, followed by his rebirth through the act of writing:

Quelqu'un m'a appelé hier pour me demander si je suis mort. Absolument, ai-je du répondre.  
Une amie m'a suggéré d'écrire, comme pour reprendre ma place parmi les vivants. (77)

Someone called me yesterday to ask whether I am dead. Absolutely, I had to reply.  
A friend called to suggest that I write, so as to reclaim my place among the living.

In his staging of a post-earthquake telephone call, Cavé reverses the expected pattern of one friend checking on another. Rather than the friend calling to find out whether he is all right, he imagines that his friend calls him to find out whether he is dead. His ironic *absolument* [yes, certainly] is premised on an imagined paradox: speech, which is available only to the living, is the means by which the speaker communicates to his interlocutor that he is dead. Its humor bespeaks a writerly detachment from and indeed commentary upon his own fragile psychic condition in the earthquake's aftermath when he was surrounded by death: In our interview, Cavé told me that two of his paternal aunts were killed in the earthquake, while his brother barely evacuated his mother and her two sisters from their house, just before it crumbled. The two survivors went to live with one of Cavé's brothers, but he describes them as living, *mais perdus, sans repères* (76) [but lost, without the familiar points of reference] in the house of one of Cavé's brothers. They talk repeatedly of returning to their home, which they are unable to comprehend has been destroyed.

The authors that I discuss in this chapter experienced differing degrees of personal losses in the earthquake, and their writings reflect these differences in ways that are themselves revealing. Syto Cavé, the young poet Inéma Jeudi, and many others lost persons whom they loved. Others, like Yanick Lahens, had the good fortune to escape direct injury, but struggle to explain to themselves why they were spared, invoking, at times, the will of God, which is a trope that I will discuss in the following chapter. The playwright Guy Régis, Jr. was at a theater festival in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, when the earthquake struck, and his personal response

to the earthquake illustrates the potential of distance from his family to intensify his own traumatic experience, rather than attenuate it, as might perhaps be expected. As I will explore in some depth in the following chapter, Dany Laferrière lived through the earthquake, but left Haiti very shortly afterward and repeatedly found it necessary to justify his decision to accept transportation out of Haiti, as if he is haunted by that choice. Edwidge Danticat, like Régis, Jr., was not in Haiti when the earthquake struck, but unlike the playwright who lives in Port-au-Prince, she neither lives in the country nor returned to it in the immediate aftermath of the earthquake. In her work she struggles to explain her own sense of devastation as she watches the scenes of destruction on television, aware of the discordance between Haitians' material deprivation and her comfortable and secure life. She feels profoundly connected to the victims even as she acknowledges that she is not affected as they are. These authors' writings are suffused by the haunting nature of the event and the difficulty many face of situating themselves with respect to it. Their struggles to write the earthquake for themselves and for their fellow Haitians constitute the very core of their writings.

### **Unspeakability**

At the heart of Cathy Caruth's work, which has had a decisive influence on trauma theory in the past two decades, is a conception of trauma that holds that a traumatic shock exceeds the capacity of the victim to assimilate it into conscious memory. Instead, it resides in the subconscious, from which it intrudes into the present in the form of nightmares, flashbacks, and repetition compulsions. Since the victim can neither "know" nor access the content of her own experience, she is held

to be inherently unable to represent it in language: her experience of trauma is thus “unspeakable.” Caruth’s doctrine has been hugely influential among scholars of trauma literature, among others.<sup>35</sup>

Caruth’s articulation of trauma reposes on a paradox: the greater the trauma, the less knowable it is to the victim:

In its general definition, trauma is described as the response to an unexpected or overwhelming violent event or events that are not fully grasped as they occur, but return later in repeated flashbacks, nightmares, and other repetitive phenomena. Traumatic experience, beyond the psychological dimension of suffering it involves, suggests a certain paradox: that the most direct seeing of a violent event may occur as an absolute inability to know it. (*Unclaimed Experience* 91)

A potential problem with this formulation is that it is difficult to test because of a further paradox to which it gives rise that tends to nullify any testimony that falsifies it. If trauma is inherently unknowable, then victims must be unable to testify to its content (what they experienced, as opposed to how it affected them afterward), and if they do testify, then their testimony must be about an event that was not in fact traumatic.

In its most extreme articulation, trauma is held to be an absence in the psyche of which not even a trace remains. In the introduction to *Trauma*:

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<sup>35</sup> Greg Forter begins an article in *Narrative* titled “Freud, Faulkner, Caruth: Trauma and the Politics of Literary Form,” as follows: “For the growing number of critics concerned to trace the links among historical forces, psychic experience, and literary expression, the growth of trauma studies since the publication of Cathy Caruth’s *Unclaimed Experience* (1996) offers an important opportunity for reflection” (259). Ruth Leys notes its influence throughout the humanities: “[Caruth’s] approach to psychic trauma...has received considerable approbation, not only from humanists in various fields but also from psychiatrists and physicians” (266).



*Explorations in Memory* (1995), Caruth sums up an important strain of contemporaneous thinking on trauma,

Henry Krystal, calling on the work of Cohen and Kinston, refers in his essay for this volume to the impact of an event in which “no trace of a registration of any kind is left in the psyche, instead, a void, a hole is found.” Similarly, Dori Laub has suggested that massive psychic trauma “precludes its registration;” it is “a record that has yet to be made,” (6–7)

It is not clear in Caruth’s writings how she defines a “trace,” or whether it is inherently unrecognizable, like a faint remnant of a cosmogenic event that physicists predict but that no instrument is yet capable of detecting.<sup>36</sup> Further, her reference to Laub’s discussion of “massive psychic trauma” begs the question of whether the intensity of the trauma affects the degree to which it is unspeakable. It would seem to follow that the greater the magnitude of the trauma, the less likely the victim is to remember it.

In all events, it is difficult to distinguish the extent to which Caruth’s theorizing is based on empirical experience, except to the extent that it relies on earlier cases described by Freud. In an essay included in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, Kevin Newmark identifies a central assumption of Freud’s (by way of Benjamin) that “consciousness arises on the site of, or instead, of, a memory trace” (237). In this discussion, Newmark is specifically describing “the special case of *trauma*” (237, emphasis in the original), and he is concerned with Freud’s understanding of the manner in which “accident victims” gain mastery over “the catastrophe in which they were originally implicated” (237).

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<sup>36</sup> At a conference on March 5, 2010, I heard Caruth describe traces as akin to an impression in a solid material of an object that was imbedded in it and then disappeared, such that it could be known only by that on which it made an impression. She did not describe these traces as partial or fragmentary memories.

While Caruth's theory has received its share of critiques from scholars in the humanities, notably by Ruth Leys, who devotes a chapter of her *Trauma: A Genealogy* (2000), to Caruth, and by Naomi Mandel in her *Against the Unspeaking: Complicity, the Holocaust, and Slavery in America* (2006), they have typically played out largely on theoretical grounds. The writings and testimony of Haitian authors, however, gives us a much nearer vantage to the connection between an author's direct experience of trauma and the texts in which the author transmits them.

I probed these questions in an interview of Syto Cavé on August 14, 2012, in which I asked him directly about his experience of writing the earthquake less than two weeks after its occurrence.

Syto Cavé : en tout cas c'est... ça a été un moyen de faire face à ce grand vide ; ça--ce traumatisme. Mais ça était aussi de se... en tout cas de se réapproprier les lieux mêmes en traversant ce paysage sinistre plein de trous et énormément de manques mais la mémoire devient à ce moment plus active. Toi, tu te rends compte de ceux qui manquent. Tu voyages à travers plein de traces et ça t'oblige à parler, à questionner tout ça. A parler à ces traces, à parler à ces vides, à parler de ces trous. Et aussi à des tas d'inconnus, non pas.... parce que c'est au fur et à mesure qu'on se rend compte de cet immense désastre et il y a des gens qu'on n'a pas su s'ils étaient vivants ou encore mort...

Jeremy Metz : Oui, justement.

Syto Cavé : On n'a pas pensé à eux. On ne peut pas penser à tout ... toutes les connaissances à la fois. C'est un an ou deux après tu rencontres un ami et tu lui demandes mais est-ce que tu as des nouvelles... ou bien il te parle de quelqu'un et tu lui dis comment va cette personne et cette personne n'est plus, voilà... c'est ... je crois qu'écrire enfin pour ceux qui écrivent ça a été un moyen pour exorciser et en même temps ça a été un acte de réappropriation des lieux avec toutes les souffrances que ça implique mais aussi... écrivant tu ... tu ajoutes des traces. Tu ... ça va t'aider à mieux voir en toi, à mieux voir ce qui s'est passé et aussi à redonner visage à tout ça. Je crois que ça a été un peu ça pour moi. Je n'ai pas ... j'ai écrit ce premier texte peut être deux ou trois jours après.

Syto Cavé : ...in any case it was...it was a means to face the great void; the trauma. But it was also to... in any case to re-appropriate the places themselves in traversing this sinister landscape full of holes and enormously many absences but memory becomes at this moment more active. You realize whom you are missing. You cross many traces [of what the earthquake destroyed], and that requires you to speak, to question all of that. To speak of these traces, to speak of these voids, to speak of these holes. And also of so many unknowns, not...because it's while one realizes this enormous disaster and there are some people that one didn't know whether they were alive or already dead...

Jeremy Metz: Yes, exactly.

Syto Cavé: One didn't think of them. One can't think of everything... all the acquaintances at the same time. It's a year or two later that you run into a friend and you ask him, but do you have any news...or else he talks to you of someone and you tell him how that person is doing and if that person is no longer living, there...it's...I think that to write finally for those who write it is a means to exorcise and in the same times it was an act of reappropriation of places with all of the suffering that this implies but also.... writing you..... you add some traces. You...it will help you to see better within yourself, to see better what has happened and also to give a face to all of that. I think that it was a bit like that for me. I didn't write the first text until perhaps two or three days afterwards.

With minimal prompting, Cavé produced a spontaneous and compelling account of the relationship between writing and trauma. He performs extemporaneously his thought process as he links writing to reclaiming space (*se réappropriier les lieux mêmes*) [to re-appropriate the places themselves] and filling in the holes in his memory (*en traversant ce paysage sinistre plein de trous et énormément de manques*) [traversing this sinister landscape full of holes and enormously many absences].

Crucially, memory does not fail in the face of these absences; it becomes more active (*la mémoire devient à ce moment plus active*) [memory becomes at this moment more active]. Writing affords the means to reclaim the very fabric of his life, with all the suffering that entails (*pour ceux qui écrivent ça a été un moyen pour exorciser et en même temps ça a été un acte de réappropriation des lieux avec toutes*

*les souffrances que ça implique*) [for those who write it is a means to exorcise and in the same times it was an act of reappropriation of places with all of the suffering that this implies]. In short, writing is not rendered impossible by the nature of the trauma, in a logic of unspeakability; it is required by it.

Cavé's near-contemporaneous writing, and his testimony of the manner in which writing allowed him to recover lost memories, is unparalleled in Holocaust testimony, which was typically produced decades after the events in question. Cavé's use of *traces* to describe remnants of memories and *vides* [voids] triggered by traumatic shocks is strikingly close to its use by Caruth and others. Cavé's testimony potentially casts light on the question of whether parts of his traumatic experience are "excessive" in the sense that they overwhelmed his psyche and were thus unrepresentable. While Cavé's testimony in itself should not be interpreted to prove a particular conclusion, it suggests nonetheless that writing for him is not inhibited by absences that he is unable to represent, because they are inaccessible to his consciousness. The holes to which he refers are not gaps in his memory, but a metaphor for the people and structures that populated his daily life that are no longer there. The act of writing reverses his feeling of living amidst these voids and it serves as his means for reappropriating sites of absence.

Yanick Lahens writes in *Failles* of a void in her memory of the kind that is seemingly predicted by Caruth. She describes herself as standing in a doorway without remembering how she arrived there, and her description of her state of mind in that moment as *un blanc total dans ma mémoire* [a total void in my memory] appears to be potentially significant:

Je ne sais pas comment je suis arrivée jusqu'à l'encadrement de la porte (un blanc total dans ma mémoire), mais cette image de moi debout, elle est là dans ma tête. Elle ne me quitte pas et ne me quittera plus. (22)

I don't know how I reached the door frame (a total void in my memory), but this image of myself standing there, it is there in my head. It never leaves me and never will leave me.

I asked Lahens about this blank in her memory during our interview and, uninterrupted, she offered this account:

Moi, quand j'ai parlé de blanc de mémoire c'était vraiment sur le moment, sur le moment c'est-à-dire qu'il n'y avait pas de passé, pas de présent, pas d'avenir. C'est un trou, je l'ai appelé blanc de mémoire, mais j'aurais pu dire trou ou le néant, un moment sur lequel je ne peux même pas mettre un nom. Pour moi, ça c'est différent après. Après il n'y a pas de trou de mémoire il y eu une volonté de survie, je me suis dit bon si on a pu survivre à cela, il faut tenir, et moi c'était mon obsession je tiens et les gens à côté de moi si je peux les aider à tenir je les aide à tenir. Donc, le blanc de mémoire c'était vraiment ce moment précis : et j'ai le souvenir de moi me tenant debout devant la porte et me disant : en fait le néant, c'est comme quelqu'un qui serait peut-être devant la fin du monde.

I, when I speak of a void in my memory it's truly in the moment, in the moment that is to say that there was no past, no present, no future. It is a hole, I called it a void in memory, but I could have called it hole or nothingness, a moment during to which I could not even put a name. For me, it is difficult afterward. After there is no hole in my memory; there is a will to survive. I tell myself good [bon] if one can survive this, it's necessary to hold on, and for me it's my obsession that I hold and the people around me if I can help them to hold on. So, the hole in memory it is really at this precise moment: and I have the memory of myself standing in front of the door and saying to myself: the nothingness in fact is as if someone were standing before the end of the world.

Lahens thus relates that the hole in her memory was that which existed during the thirty or thirty-five seconds that the earthquake endured. She arrived at the doorway and had the thought *at that moment* that she had not remembered rising from the sofa where she'd been reading to her two-year-old nephew and walking to the door.

That lacuna was quickly filled, even while the earthquake continued to shake her house, by a desire to survive, during which her capacity for remembering precisely the events she witnessed was fully intact. Her accounting for the hole in her memory during our interview is supported by the text of *Failles*:

Après coup, je découpe en morceaux les trente secondes que dure la secousse. Et je me dis que c'est fou, le nombre incroyable de pensées et d'images qui peuvent vous traverser l'esprit en trente secondes. (22)

After the shock, I cut up into pieces the thirty seconds that the shaking endured. I tell myself that it's crazy, the incredible number of thoughts and images that can pass through the mind in thirty seconds.

In short, the events, far from overwhelming Lahens' capacity to assimilate them, were instead entirely available to her in the aftermath of the earthquake, without requiring any excavation from the subconscious. If anything, the thirty seconds of the earthquake are stupendously full *de pensées et d'images* [of thoughts and images]. Not a single essay in the collections that I explore in these chapters nor any interview that I conducted confirms lacunae in authors' memory.

For all this, the earthquake poses problems of representation, even if they cannot be ascribed to failures of authors to register the event in their memories. Crucial aspects of the experience of living through the earthquake, including the sound that heralded its onset, resist transmission. Whether or not Syto Cavé or another author succeeds in describing fully his experience of living through the earthquake is a matter for a reader to decide. However, insufficiencies may well be ascribed to more conventional challenges that the authors face, including the problem language poses to the description of suffering and to authors' aesthetic and personal choices. An author may in some instances simply wish to place a veil

between her readers and certain of her memories for the sake of her or others' privacy.

### **Incommensurability and the testimonial imperative**

For the Haitian writer, post-trauma representation poses profound problems, not of unspeakability, but rather of incommensurability. Writers struggle to reconcile the solitary and at times seemingly inconsequential act of writing with the enormity of the tragedy that it undertakes to represent. For many Haitian writers, including Cavé and Trouillot, writing is an imperative: it both affirms their own lives and those of the people to which they belong; and it resists the silencing that has marked Haiti's past.

Valérie Marin La Meslée, in the foreword to *Haiti parmi les vivants*, joins her co-editor, Trouillot, in considering writing as an imperative, but does not concede its lack of utility in the face of catastrophe, even as a rhetorical device. Rather, she argues that the writer has a unique capacity to achieve transmission of the traumatic experience of the earthquake.

L'écrivain, dans l'afflux des nouvelles brutes et souvent brutales, détient ce pouvoir d'entraîner son lecteur dans le psychisme de la société. Personne ne peut, mieux que lui, transmettre le bruit des profondeurs de cette terre qui tremble et les échos qu'elle réveille dans son Histoire. (11)

The writer, in the rush of news that is harsh and often brutal, holds the power to lead his reader into the psychosis of society. No one can, better than he, transmit the noise of the depths of this earth that trembles and the echoes that it awakens in its History.

For Marin La Meslée, the author is the individual best able to transmit the experience of the rumbling of the earth, which she connects with the broader scope of Haitian history. The challenges of synesthesia, in this case transmitting an event

that was sensed both as a rumbling sound and as a feeling of shaking, are not limitations of writing, but its very *raison d'être*. While no individual can transmit to a reader the experience of hearing and feeling the earthquake, the writer is able to come closer than anyone else. By prioritizing the interests of the reader in connecting the earthquake with Haiti's traumatic history, Marin La Meslée endows the author with agency (*L'écrivain ... détient ce pouvoir* [the reader ... holds this power]) that allows her not simply to inform her reader of the psychological condition of Haitian society at that moment (*le psychisme de la société*) [the psychosis of society], but to relate the sound of the earthquake to echoes of Haiti's past.

In Marin La Meslée's vision, when writers record the range of their experiences, including fear, anger, frustration, and vulnerability to a seemingly capricious fate (*les blagues des joueurs de dominos sur les vivants et les morts*) [The caprices of domino players over the (fates of) the living and the dead], they overcome the inhuman nature of the tragedy (*se hisser au-dessus du désastre*) [raise themselves above the catastrophe]. In so doing, Marin La Meslée sees literature as fulfilling a vital need to bind together the Haitian people in a time of profound crisis. She writes, expansively, in a sentence without a verb or predicate, a kind of motto for literature, *La littérature, gage de communion universelle avec le peuple haïtien* [Literature, the guarantor of the universal covenant with the Haitian people].

### **Trauma and silencing**

Guy Régis, Jr., in his play, *De toute la terre le grand effarement* [In all the world the great stupefaction] (2011), characterizes the silencing imposed by



traumatic experience as an overwhelming of the psyche, which he terms *un effarement* [a stupefaction]. Two female characters, simply named “The older,” and “The younger” converse on a stage bearing a tree and a neon sign with the epigram, *Omnia mors aequat* [Death renders all equal.]<sup>37</sup>

La Plus Agée. —... Que s’est-il passé pour que tout se soit mis ainsi à tomber ? Qu’en juste quelques secondes ce grand effondrement avec les gens ? Non, rien à dire. Rien, je te dis. Comment on a dit ? Le grand effarement. Partout.

...

La Jeune. —Nous nous taisons déjà. Nous ne parlons plus. Nous ne parlons pas. Nous nous sommes déjà tués nous-mêmes. Nous nous sommes déjà tués. Nous parlons à peine, mais nous ne parlons pas.

The Older—What has happened so that everything has been falling this way? That in just a few seconds this great collapse with the people? No, nothing to be said. Nothing, I tell you. How does one say? The great stupefaction. Everywhere.

...

The Younger—We already keep silent. We don’t talk any more. We don’t talk. We have already kept silent ourselves. We already silenced ourselves. We barely talk, but we don’t speak.

Régis, Jr. stages the aftermath of the earthquake as an existential crisis that collapses the potential for human relations. La Plus Agée observes that the physical collapse (*effondrement*) is experienced as a stupefaction (*effarement*). La Jeune observes the silence that descends upon both of them. Her use of the reflexive *se taire* reveals that the silencing is self-imposed. The external collapse that is caused by the earthquake is mirrored by an internal one that its victims impose upon themselves. When La Jeune declares that for her the stars are extinguished, even if they continue to burn in the sky, she suggests that her own place in the universe has been snuffed

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<sup>37</sup> Photographs and a brief video from Régis, Jr.’s production of the play at the festival in Avignon in July 2012 may be found at <http://www.sacd.fr/Terre-Cri-Effarement-De-toute-la-terre-le-grand-effarement.2387.0.html>.

out. La Plus Agée responds by urging her to avoid the psychological auto-extinction of those who succumbed to the earthquake by silencing themselves. In effect, she equates as casualties those whose lives were extinguished by the earthquake's violence and those who responded to that violence by silencing themselves. While the syntax is fragmentary, as is not uncommon in trauma writing, and is intended to capture the disjointed nature of the characters' disturbed thought processes in that moment, she seems to be saying that enumerating or recognizing the dead is a condition for appreciating one's own survival. (*Compter ceux qui s'effacent, se sont effacés, pour fêter la vie qu'il nous reste à vivre après.*) [To count those that efface themselves, and are effaced, to celebrate the life that is left to us to live afterward.]

The characters in *De toute la terre le grand effarement* find themselves ineluctably drawn into a silence of their own making, but it is not one occasioned by failures of memory, or other forms of "unspeakability." The play furnishes details of precisely what the two characters witnessed, and some of these scenes of destruction are drawn vividly (29 *inter alia*). Crucially, there is no indication that the silencing is caused by a failure in memory arising from their incapacity to assimilate the events of the catastrophe in their consciousnesses. They both recognize that the event of the earthquakes constitutes a rupture in time that will forever change the manner in which victims experience the present. As La Plus Agée puts it, *Ce ne sera plus pareil maintenant. Plus comme avant désormais.* (13) [It will not be the same now. Henceforth not like before].

Thus, the event is shattering, but the crucial distinction to be drawn is that the disjuncture between the past and the unlivable present does not result from a

void in memory, but from the recognition of profound and irretrievable loss. In contrast, Caruth's articulation of trauma theory locates temporal disjunctions in narrative at the sites of voids in memory. Michelle Balaev, drawing on Caruth, describes in the introduction to *The Nature of Trauma in American Novels* (2012), the manner in which Freudian derived trauma theory has caused "literary trauma scholars" to rely on a conception of separate pathways in the brain for ordinary and for traumatic experience that are at the origin of temporal disjunctions in narrative:

The popular notion in literary criticism that trauma inherently produces a temporal gap and a pathologically fragmented self, works from a Freudian perspective of the mind that imagines normal external stimuli enter the brain in one fashion, but traumatic stimuli enter another region of the brain in a different fashion. Starting from this theoretical vantage point, literary trauma scholars have created a trend of defining traumatic experience as a timeless void that 'shatters' identity, producing a long-lasting muteness and lack of knowledge regarding the exact event. Because a traumatic event is never properly experienced or registered as a memory, it is never normally incorporated into consciousness. (6)

I am not entirely sure that Balaev is on firm ground in her characterization of a "Freudian perspective" on trauma that foresees a different "fashion" for the entry of traumatic stimuli into the brain, but she aptly describes the link between popular literary criticism's assumption that muteness is produced by an inescapable "lack of knowledge regarding the exact event." In standard psychological trauma theory, the victim has memories of his life before the traumatic event, then no memory of the event itself, and then a post-traumatic experience that is disturbed by the return of unassimilated memories of the traumatic experience. In contrast, in Régis, Jr.'s play and in Haitian trauma literature generally the disjunction is not caused by voids in memory, but rather by the overwhelming experience of loss that divides time into that which came before the trauma and that which comes after.

If we are not therefore to understand the silencing in Freudian terms—as pathological and unwilling—but rather self-imposed, how shall we account for it? The imagery of the play strongly suggests that the memories are so painful, and the sense of loss so crushing, that the earthquake has effectively overwhelmed not the victims' capacity to absorb their experience into consciousness, but rather their will to go on living with their traumatic memories. The feeling of being overwhelmed, as the character succumbs to the trauma as if she is in combat with it, manifests itself as a silencing. The silencing is not a result of trauma theory's posited "lack of knowledge regarding the exact event," but rather the pain of revisiting memories of loss, which victims manage by avoiding speaking of them.

The two characters in *De toute la terre le grand effarement* experience the earthquake as a radical deprivation of agency. Their silencing signals that, at least in the immediate aftermath of the catastrophe, they find their purchase on life to be tenuous; and indeed, at the end of the play, when the neon sign on the branch of the tree illuminates its epigram, *omnia mors aequat* [death renders all equal], we infer that the characters in fact die in the final scene.<sup>38</sup> At the same time, metatextually, through the medium of the play, they testify aloud to the playwright's resistance to his own silencing.

Victims are unable to recover their equilibrium not because their memory is disturbed, but because they understand that their losses are permanent. Georges

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<sup>38</sup> Horrifyingly, the characters' deaths are occasioned by their reenactment of the rape of Haiti by foreign soldiers as they penetrate each other sexually in turn, repeatedly, with one of them wearing the uniform of a United Nations soldier.

Castera enunciates the sense of unrecoverable loss, a near-universal theme in earthquake writing, in his poem “Le Point d’arrivée [The moment of arrival]:

Si on pouvait au moins comme avant  
prendre la mer dans nos bras  
pour danser la danse des métamorphoses  
si on pouvait mon amour  
redonner vie à la vie. (“Le Point d’arrivée” 69–70)

If we could at least as before  
Take the sea in our arms  
To dance the dance of metamorphosis  
If we could my love  
restore life to life

If trauma is often worked out in literature as resistance to silencing, the mechanisms that drive these tendencies are at once varied and uncertain. Yanick Lahens writes of the struggle against silencing in richly metaphorical tones.

COMMENT ÉCRIRE QUAND on est aux prises avec l’ombre ? ... Comment ne pas laisser au malheur une double victoire, celle qui nous broie corps et âme et celle qui viendra ensuite nous ravir notre seule parade face à lui, notre seule riposte à nous, écrivains ? (65)

How to write when one is struggling with the shadow [of depression and of death]? ... How not to cede to misfortune a double victory, that which grinds up body and soul and that which comes after to snatch away our only stance in which to face it, our only way of responding to ourselves, [who are] writers?

Lahens, like other writers, testifies to the manner in which catastrophe threatens the will to write. Her use of *malheur* (misfortune) is remarkably elliptical, but may be read as the emotional content of the earthquake, which has sufficient psychic agency to destroy body and soul (*qui nous broie corps et âme*) [that which scathes body and soul] and in so doing deprives the victim of her one instrument of resistance, writing.

During our interview, Dominique Batrville explained the way in which his traumatization in the earthquake caused him to remain silent until a *déclic* [sudden unsticking] allowed him to begin writing:

... j'étais traumatisé et incapable d'écrire sur le séisme, il m'a fallu trois ou quatre mois avant d'y parvenir. J'étais trop impliqué littéralement, j'avais vu cela en songe et tout. C'est aux Etats-Unis, à New-York que le déclic m'est venu. J'étais de passage à New-York pour parler du séisme dans différentes universités Columbia, Brooklyn College, Massachussetts College ; j'ai eu ce déclic et j'ai alors produit mon premier texte sur le séisme dont on fut tiré le film *Elégie de Port-au-Prince*.

... I was traumatized and incapable of writing on the earthquake; it took me three months on order to get there. I was too personally implicated, literally. I had seen that in a dream and everything. It was in the United States, in New York, that the click came to me. I was passing through New York to talk about the earthquake in several universities-- Columbia, Brooklyn College, Massachusetts College; I had this click and I then produced my first text on the earthquake, which was made into a film, *Elégie de Port-au-Prince*.

Batrville explains his silence after the earthquake not by a failure of memory, but to a feeling of personal involvement in its occurrence, arising from his dreaming it in all its details shortly before the event itself. Batrville may be suggesting that he feels some guilt for having dreamt the earthquake, a point to which I shall return in the following chapter. His description of a *déclic*, a word that is difficult to translate, but was also used by Guy Régis, Jr. and Évelyne Trouillot in our interviews, suggests the clicking of a stiff switch that unfreezes his blocked process, is itself revealing. The memories remain present, but Batrville is too traumatized to write about them until, suddenly, while traveling, he experiences an unsticking of his capacity to write his experiences, after which he quickly produced his first significant earthquake text, *35 Secondes, entre craintes et tremblements* [35 seconds between fears and

quakes]. (This was the text that he told me was the basis for the film, *Élégie de Port-au-Prince*.)

In summary, Cavé, Lahens, Batrville, and Régis, Jr. all testify to their struggle against a tendency to remain silent in the period immediately following the earthquake. All frame the silencing as symptomatic of the trauma they experienced. Yet, their texts and interviews leave no doubt that the silencing did not result from failures of memory, but rather from origins that were highly personal, and varying, including loss, mourning, powerlessness, and guilt.

### **Language under siege**

One explanation of this problem of the origins of silencing experienced by many authors likely resides in the nature of language itself. The pre-earthquake poetry of Georges Castera, the most prominent living Haitian poet, suggests that in times of crisis, the poet finds the language at his disposal itself to be under attack. As I noted earlier, the earthquake struck just before the large biennial literary conference in Haiti, *Étonnants Voyageurs*, which accounts for the presence in Port-au-Prince of Dany Laferrière and other literary figures and scholars that live outside Haiti. As it happened, the conference had taken as its title of one of Castera's best-known collections, *L'encre est ma demeure* (2006) [Ink is my home], which was both a gesture of recognition of Castera's contribution to Haitian letters, as well as an epigram for the central role writing plays in his life. The expression suggests that Castera, and, by extension, the other literary figures that were to be discussed in the conference, live within a world made of ink. Put another way, Castera imagines the poet as constructing his world with words, rather than using words to represent an

independent reality. Once constructed, he lives within a world of his own invention. In his love poem “*Le Hasard avant le reste*,” [Chance before the rest] which appears in his collection *Choses de mer sur blessures d’encre* (2010) [Things from the sea on wounds of ink], he writes,

[Excerpt]  
Dans ta chambre au grand lit  
de prose

j’ai marché pieds nus  
par quelle vanité du dictionnaire  
les mots de tous les jours  
soudains  
légers sans levain  
imitent la rotation du phare  
qui jongle jongle  
avec les ruses de vent ? (13)

“Chance before the rest” [Excerpt]

In your room with a large bed  
[made] of prose

I walked barefoot  
by what conceit of the dictionary  
of words used every day  
suddenly  
light without leaven  
imitate the rotation of the lighthouse  
that juggle juggle  
with the caprices of the wind?

In this poem, which like so many of Castera’s is addressed to a lover, the bed is made of prose, and words themselves are put to flight. The poet is able to feel no more or less than that which he writes. Words are light, ephemeral; they are prone to scattering in the wind. They are only partially under the control of the poet. They can’t exist without him, and yet the opposite is true as well.



In Castera's poem, "Billet Sanglant" [Bleeding Letter] (2006), Castera connects the solidity of physical spaces with that of the words that describe them.

à l'âge où les enfants épinglent  
des papillons pour transhumer le doute  
j'ai eu de grandes taches d'encre au cœur  
je dormais dans la chambre ficelée  
des mots  
solidement attachés  
cherchant l'équilibre du sang  
dans la dernière cervicale des anolis  
en coup de froid de décédé  
le soir entra dans mes os  
comme une pause perdue  
la poésie se réveille à l'aube.

at the age when children transfix  
butterflies in order to dispel any doubt  
I had some large stains of ink on my heart  
I slept in a room tied up  
with words  
solidly bound  
seeking an equilibrium of blood  
in the last vertebra of the spinal column  
a breath of cold of the dead  
in the evening entered my bones  
like a lost rest  
poetry awakens at dawn

Castera reveals that even as a child, his existence was inextricably tied to writing and he seems to say that he shunned the cruelties of companions of his age to live within a space composed of words arranged in sentences. The stain of ink upon his heart is both a symptom, or perhaps even a cause of his fragility. His sleep depends on the solidity of the words that hold together his bedroom. He experiences the loss of consciousness to sleep as akin to death, and his return to life in the morning is linked to the poetry that awakens him at dawn. His imagery recalls Syto Cave's

epigrammatic formulation of writing as a means of reclaiming his place among the living.

The title of another of Castera's poem, "Nature subversive," [subversive nature], which appears in the collection *Brûler* (1999) [to burn], suggests the fraught quality of nature in Haiti, which is at once bounteous and yet never reliable. Castera asks, *qu'apporterons-nous à l'écriture / qui ne soit vaine dissidence / anonyme hilarité ?* [what do we bring to writing / that is not vain dissent / anonymous hilarity?] as he laments the inconsequential and, indeed, risible act of writing. In the following stanza he uses twice the line *les mots sont morts* [words are dead], linking through the addition of a single consonant writing and death. For Castera, words live quasi independently of their authors, and neither their meaning nor their purpose may ever be taken as settled. In moments of doubt, the poet experiences them as having died. In "Point commun," in the same collection, Castera again interlaces *mots* (words) with *morts* (dead) to emphasize the connection between writing and death:

mais toujours des mots des morts des mots  
mes phrases perdant des morts  
en chemin de mots  
...  
être poète  
c'est habiter la mort (59)

But always some words some dead some words  
my lines losing some dead  
along a road of words  
...  
to be a poet  
is to inhabit death

To be a poet, Castera writes, is to inhabit death. The elements of his craft, words, are living things that are themselves always at risk of dying. Ink, words, and sentences stand in for each other and are always fragile. Their collapse entails the death of the poet.

Castera's celebrated poem, "Certitude," in *l'Encre est ma demeure* is breathtaking in its seeming anticipation of the earthquake that would strike a decade later:

Ce n'est pas avec de l'encre  
que je t'écris  
c'est avec ma voix de tambour  
assiégé par des chutes de pierres

Je n'appartiens pas au temps des grammairiens  
mais à celui de l'éloquence  
étouffée  
Aime-moi comme une maison qui brûle. (31)

It is not with ink  
that I write to you  
it's with my voice of a drum  
assailed by the cascades of rocks  
I do not belong to the time of the grammarians  
But to that of eloquence  
Suffocated  
Love me like a house on fire.

In this poem, in the moment of crisis, Castera finds that ink, standing in metonymically for words, loses its power to reach his lover. He tries to call to her directly with his voice, which is itself besieged by falling rocks. At that moment, he finds his eloquence stifled. The house he has built of words is burning, and he must appeal for love in the absence of his poetry.

In this manner, when an author's physical world is being destroyed, he may find that his apprehension of it is too enmeshed with language to allow him to write

about it. When his habitation or those of his fellows is destroyed, he experiences the assault as being visited on his capacity to deploy the tools of language to describe it.

### **Traumatic experience and trauma fiction**

I have discussed Guy Régis, Jr.'s play, *De toute la terre le grand effarement*, in connection with its staging of silencing and the nature of the temporal disjunctions present in the dialog of the two protagonists. I propose to turn now to the significance of Régis, Jr. geographical location outside of Haiti at the time of the earthquake, which may offer a compelling locus for considering a definitional question that has, perhaps, received too little attention in trauma theory: how an author's personal experience of a traumatic event affects her production of what is commonly described as "trauma fiction"? In our interview, on August 18, 2012, Régis, Jr. told me that on the morning of January 13, 2010, watching images of Haiti appear unexpectedly on the television in his hotel room in Burkina Faso, he'd at first thought he was learning about a new *coup d'état*. Then he realized that he was instead seeing photographs of Port-au-Prince in ruins. He was unable to reach his family or friends by telephone or other means for two days and in that period was wholly ignorant of whether they were alive. In talking about his own psychic response to the earthquake, he recognizes the distinction between living through the earthquake physically, and learning of it second hand; but he reports autonomic physical responses that are notably similar to those reported by Haitian writers who lived through the event.

Nous [he and those who were with him in Burkina Faso] on a vécu ça très très durement aussi hein, on a pas vécu le tremblement de terre dans notre

corps...mais quand on est à l'extérieur... à un moment je ne voulais plus rentrer dans le métro par exemple. Parce qu'après je suis rentré à Paris.

we [he and those who were with him in Burkina Faso] found that very, very difficult to live with, eh, we didn't live through the shaking of the earth in our body...but when one is outside...at one time, I didn't want to go down into the Métro for example. Because afterwards I returned to Paris.

Régis, Jr.'s fear of an enclosed space is reminiscent of Lyonel Trouillot's account after the earthquake, *J'ai développé une peur bleue des douches et des salles de bains* (27). [I developed a blind fear of showers and bathrooms.] Trouillot's use of the expression *peur bleue* [blind terror, or, colloquially, scared to death] signals the excessive nature of the fear. It might be perfectly rational in Haiti to avoid interior spaces that might have been weakened structurally in the earthquake and would be subject to collapse thereafter, particularly in the aftershocks that continued for days; however, both Trouillot, who was in Haiti, and Régis, Jr., who was not, describe an uncontrollable psychological terror that is triggered by an external physical cue of the original traumatic moment in which so many Haitians were trapped in the rubble.

Because Guy Régis, Jr. was traumatized indirectly in the earthquake, he occupies something of a middle ground between an author who has himself experienced the traumatic event he describes, and one who is writing in the genre of trauma literature without a close personal connection to the events he narrates. In *De toute la terre le grand effarement*, the question might be framed to ask whether, in some significant sense, the two women on the stage are providing a voice for Régis, Jr.'s own psyche that depends on the reality of his personal traumatization, i.e. Is it conceivable that Régis, Jr. could have written the play had he not himself been

traumatized? I don't think the question is answerable, even by the author; nor do I think that there is any necessary, or even plausible absolute hierarchy available between representations that are grounded in an author's own experience of trauma, those that depend on the author's empathy for people he knows, and those that draw on an author's general empathy for the unfortunate. At the same time, theories of trauma literature often collapse the positions of those experiencing trauma and those writing about it. In so doing, they do not distinguish representations of trauma that authors construct in accordance with their knowledge of the conventions of the genre, e.g. temporal disjunctions in narratives focalized on victims, *versus* representations that arise from the authors' own experiences of trauma that they are endeavoring to transmit in their texts.

Questions of authenticity and empathy will inevitably come into play as those with varying degrees of connection to the traumatic events they narrate situate themselves with respect to their victims. Guy Régis, Jr. enacts the alienation of the characters from each other in *De toute la terre le grand effarement* by causing them to address their speeches directly to the audience rather than to each other.<sup>39</sup> The characters' lack of names (they are simply referred to as The Older and The Younger) too, suggests that they are figures for the general condition of Haitians, rather than particular individuals. In an afterword to the play, Régis, Jr. writes of his choice to eschew ordinary names for the characters:

Tel choix pour que ce soit des figures symboliques de la grande famille haïtienne et non des prénoms d'identifications reconnus par-devant un officier d'Etat civil, un corps social apparenté. (58)

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<sup>39</sup> See the video clip from the play, previously cited in *supra* n37.

[I made] such a choice [to omit names] so that they would be symbolic figures for the great Haitian family and not first names that were recognized beforehand by a civil servant, or a recognized administrative service.

This declaration is one of several that are notably expansive and suggests the author's distaste for governmental regulations that taxonomize Haitians into specific civil statuses (and for governments, generally). Régis, Jr. earlier in the afterword asserts a distinction between his own writing and that of *poètes charognards* [vulture poets] who write in the aftermath of catastrophes for personal gain. The universalizing move he's making to identify his characters with the *grande famille haïtienne* [the great family of Haitians] seems rather unreflective, but it may be read as signaling the opposite, that these characters speak directly for the author, who grounds his status as a trauma victim in his identity as a Haitian. In other words, the intimate, highly charged and often fragmented language in his characters' speeches echoes, to a remarkable degree, Régis, Jr.'s own psychic process, rather than utterances attributable to generic Haitians. He seems to be imagining less what his characters might be feeling and thus saying, then capturing what passed through his own mind as he coped with his own experience of silencing.

*De toute la terre le grand effarement* is clearly trauma literature, as are the many writings of authors that experienced the earthquake directly. The question remains whether a novel whose characters live through a traumatic experience, after which they exhibit certain of the symptoms of PTSD, should be considered as trauma fiction, even if the author has no personal connection to the trauma itself. The way we answer it depends in part on our reading objectives. If they are

principally pedagogical or interpretive, then we may bracket the author and simply consider the text, knowing that it will likely be more comprehensible if we are cognizant of the conventions of the genre of trauma fiction, e.g. fragmentary discourse, susceptibility to the intrusion of the event into the present through nightmares of flashbacks, and temporal disjunctions. If, however, our objective is at least in part to understand the way in which traumatic experiences of individuals and communities are worked through in literature, then considering carefully the position of the author is of real consequence and we must pay attention, at the very least, to the self-representations of the author in the text.

At the same time, such distinctions will never be stable and authors that have experienced trauma will of course be influenced by their acquaintance with trauma theory, especially the symptomology of PTSD, including that which predates their own traumatic experiences. Studies of the problems of Holocaust testimony may be instructive in nuancing our readings of earthquake testimony.<sup>40</sup> Haitian authors began writing within days of their traumatic experiences, not decades, yet they are writing for specific audiences and their objectives are, of course, at times rhetorical.

Edwidge Danticat, Dany Laferrière, and Yanick Lahens write principally for audiences outside Haiti, and each has received enormously prestigious awards for her or his work.<sup>41</sup> As I will discuss in the following chapter, the works of these

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<sup>40</sup> There is a significant body of scholarly discussion of the problems of Holocaust witnessing, including Raul Hilberg, *Sources of Holocaust Research: An Analysis* (2001), Annette Wieviorka, *The Era of the Witness* (2006), and Gary Weissman, *Fantasies of witnessing: postwar efforts to experience the Holocaust* (2004).

<sup>41</sup> Danticat received a MacArthur foundation fellowship in 2009, Lahens was awarded the Prix Fémina in 2014 for her novel, *Bain de lune*, and Laferrière was inducted into the French Légion d'Honneur in 2015.



prominent authors manifests a concern for their potential effect on the image of Haiti on their readers in the West. For the most part, however, the Haitian authors that I discuss in this chapter and the next are not widely read outside Haiti. Each of their works must be examined individually for clues as to the way in which it is shaped for its intended audience, which typically encompasses the tightly knit circle of Haitian writers. Temporality also plays a decisive role in contrasting Haitian earthquake writing with Holocaust writing that was produced many years after the events that the witnesses recall. While Haitian earthquake writings are, of course, still textual constructions, they offer an immediacy that sheds compelling light on their authors' lived experiences of the traumatic event and their subsequent transmission of those experiences in text,

### **Authors' personal trauma**

In Évelyne Trouillot's novel, *Absences sans frontières* (2013) [Absences without borders], Gigi, who is raising her granddaughter in Haiti while her son is trapped in New York by the vagaries of United States' immigration laws, finds herself, shortly after surviving the earthquake, trembling *à la plus petite envolée de feuilles dans la cour* (149) [at the smallest rustling of leaves in the courtyard]. Gigi had always thought of herself as fearless, and had faced many hardships in her life, but in the midst of bathing one day she panics when she is startled by the backfiring of a truck, and flees her modest dwelling into the street outside covered only in a towel. For Gigi, interior spaces are not places of safety, but the opposite—of existential vulnerability. When a traumatic memory is triggered by an unexpected noise, she impulsively runs outside.

It is not surprising that fictional descriptions of characters' vulnerabilities to flashbacks should mirror nonfictional accounts of witnesses like Lyonel Trouillot who, as I have just discussed, reported feelings of intense fear when he found himself in a close enclosed space. We infer that the panic attacks experienced by Évelyne Trouillot's Gigi are grounded in the actual experience of individuals known to the author. Évelyne Trouillot, who lived through the earthquake and remained in Haiti in its aftermath, would, for example, certainly be acquainted with the intense fear that enclosed places triggered in her brother. It is possible that Trouillot is relying on conventional trauma theory for Gigi's symptomology; but it seems more likely that she is thinking of her brother and his actual lived experience.

How then do we account for Guy Régis, Jr.'s statement in our interview that although he did not himself experience the earthquake, he nonetheless avoided the Paris Métro? He appears to have been traumatized by the event as a matter of empathy, especially for those close to him. Indeed, his agony while he waited to learn the fate of his two daughters, and his profoundly rooted identity as a Haitian, caused him to experience the earthquake *as if it happened to him*.

Régis, Jr. told me that he was particularly affected by the images he saw, first of the physical destruction of the presidential palace in Port-au-Prince, and then of the scenes of suffering Haitians about which he voiced the same concern as Dany Laferrière and Yanick Lahens, as I shall discuss in the next chapter, that Haitians are shown as objectified and are turned into objects of pity or worse.<sup>42</sup> Indeed, Régis, Jr.

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<sup>42</sup> We discussed the "obscenity" of certain earthquake images for their potential to elicit voyeuristic or other unethical responses in their viewers. The term "disaster pornography" is associated with Brendan Gormley, head of The Disasters

compares the images of suffering Haitians to those of starving Ethiopians, suggesting that they leave indelible impressions in viewers that thereafter inevitably associate Haitians with misery.

Without invoking a “hierarchy of suffering,” we might expect that those who experienced the earthquake directly as a threat to their existence would be more affected by it than those who learned about it after the fact through viewing images and listening to the testimony of friends and family. Indeed, trauma theory is premised on the physical registration of shocks that are inassimilable cognitively. However, Régis, Jr. seems to have internalized a physical “rememory”<sup>43</sup> of an event that he learned about through reading and listening that is as potent as a memory that he would have registered from an event that he experienced personally. Indeed, he presents his distance from the event as *intensifying* the traumatic sequelae. Toward the end of the interview, I referred to Trouillot’s description, in his writing, of his fear of bathrooms and Régis, Jr. describes an instance in which he felt the ground shaking beneath his own feet.

On a eu ... tous à l'étranger ... on était ... et d'ailleurs je me souviens j'ai vu quelqu'un qui a vécu le tremblement de terre, c'est mon ex-femme que j'ai vu là-bas en France qui m'a dit, “non, mais vous” qu'elle a l'impression qu'on est pire qu'eux, en fait qu'on a vécu en retard avec beaucoup ... la, la distance,

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Emergency Committee. For a description of his work in Haiti, and his critique of the way in which unclothed female bodies are displayed in some earthquake photography, see Aida Edemariam, “Brendan Gormley: 'I wasn't very charitable,’” *The Guardian*, January 22, 2010.

<sup>43</sup> I am using this term to signify the role of narrative in creating memories that then function in the psyche as the remainder of actual traumatic experiences. In this sense I depart from Toni Morrison’s use of the term to signify the memory of a memory. For a discussion of rememory in *Beloved*, see Timothy Spaulding (72).

c'est qu'on est resté un peu ... peureux. Ils avaient aussi des traumatismes assez, assez bizarre ici, c'est qu'ils pouvaient rester, ils sentaient la terre trembler. Moi aussi j'ai vécu ça. J'avais la sensation que la maison tremblée. Euuhh, je ne sais pas pourquoi.

We all had... all of us abroad ..., we were ... and as a matter of fact I remember by the way I saw someone who lived the earthquake, it's my ex-wife that I saw there in France who told me "no, but you" that she had the sense that it was worse for us [who were abroad than those who were in Haiti], in fact that we lived with a delay ... the, the distance, that we remained a bit ... fearful. They also had traumatismes some, some bizarre here, that they [those outside Haiti] felt the earth shake. I also had that. I had the feeling that the house was trembling. Euuhh, I don't know why.

In this description, Régis, Jr. comes close to claiming that his distance from the event actually intensified its traumatic effect on him (although he reports that the suggestion came from his ex-wife). He declares that even Haitians who were abroad when the earthquake struck began feeling in its aftermath the trembling of their own homes.

Thus, when Régis, Jr.'s character, *La Plus Âgée*, in *De toute la terre le grand effondrement* declares, *Personne, plus personne ne pourra dormir du doux sommeil du juste*, [No one, no one any more will be able to sleep the sweet street of the just] she's evoking the same post-traumatic syndrome of a radical loss of personal security that I have been discussing. Her permanent loss of the capacity for untroubled sleep is bleak and totalizing: No person who lived through the earthquake shall ever again be able to sleep soundly.

We are, of course, in the realm of fiction, yet Guy Régis, Jr.'s discussion in our interview of his own destabilization suggests strongly that he is grounding his dialog in his own experience of the earthquake, as he lived it at a distance. At the same time, as a matter of dramaturgy, the play would be unthinkable had his two

protagonists not themselves witnessed the horrors that make their post-earthquake lives unlivable. Given his professed distaste for imagery of suffering Haitians, it is perhaps not surprising that Régis, Jr. does not produce the content of the horrors that the two protagonists witnessed; rather he turns his focus on what he regards as the depredations of the international relief workers, security forces, and journalists. His strategy is one of many examples of elisions that are not manifestations of the doctrine of “unspeakability,” but rather must be understood as the consequences of authorial choices.

## **Chapter Three**

### **Haitian Earthquake Trauma Literature, Part Two**

#### **Introduction**

When the earthquake struck Haiti on January 12, 2010, prominent authors and scholars of Haitian literature were gathering in Port-au-Prince for Haiti's major biennial literary festival, "Étonnants-Voyageurs," scheduled to be held on January 14-16, 2010, a synchronicity of potentially great significance to the study of trauma literature, as Haitian authors and Haitian and North American scholars who resided outside experienced the earthquake first hand, a circumstance that affected profoundly their work in the ensuing months and beyond. Some authors, including Dany Laferrière and Lyonel Trouillot began recording their experiences in notebooks, almost from the very moments that the catastrophe struck the island. At the behest of Trouillot and others, in subsequent weeks, many other Haitian authors wrote essays, poems, and short fiction, some of which are collected in *Haiti parmi les vivants* (2010) [Haiti among the Living]. In the previous chapter, I discussed the implications of Haitian trauma literature for central aspects of trauma theory that derive from the Holocaust, in particular the relationship between silencing and the doctrine of unspeakability. Authors coalesced, to some degree spontaneously, around certain thematic concerns, including the role of the divine. In this chapter, I investigate these themes, an undertaking that I hope will provide the elements of a potential template for the study of other literatures of natural disaster.

In writing the earthquake, authors chose certain characteristic modes of expression. Frequently, they write in brief bursts of prose that have the quality of contemporaneity, and serve to transmit their authors' own moment-by-moment experiences as the earthquake struck. Their effect is that of an author addressing her readers directly, just after the events she describes. Short writings, each of which is devoted to a single slice of experience, appear to be the discursive mode *par excellence* for writing the earthquake.

Several authors had arrived recently at the Hotel Karibe, an unofficial conference hotel, when the earthquake struck at 4:50 p.m. Their accounts offer windows into the writers' own experiences of the events as they unfolded, and, remarkably, into their perception of their fellow writers as they also lived and recorded them. Dany Laferrière describes his affective response to the sensations he experienced before he was cognitively conscious that they were being caused by an earthquake. Like other writers, his first memory is one of sound: *Au début j'ai cru percevoir le bruit d'une mitrailleuse (certains diront un train), juste dans mon dos.* (10) [At first, I thought I heard the noise of a machine gun (some later said a train), just behind my back].

Rodney Saint-Éloi, a Haitian author who like Laferrière lives in Canada, was dining with his friend when the earthquake struck. He picks up Laferrière's narrative from a short time later. After some discussion, several of those present in the hotel's public areas decided to return to their rooms for their luggage, but not to stay there, as they were concerned that the weakened structure might have been at risk of collapsing. Saint-Éloi describes his friend at this moment:

Dany Laferrière est redescendu avec ses bagages. Il est totalement pris par son verre de rhum, et par son cahier d'écriture qu'il noircit. Il chasse la peur, je crois, en griffonnant n'importe quoi. Il a, pendu à son cou comme une amulette, son passeport dans un petit sac de toile. (52)

Dany Laferrière has come down with his suitcases. He is completely absorbed in his glass of rum and in his notebook that he is covering with ink. He dispels his fear, I think, by scrawling anything. He has, hanging at his neck like an amulet, his passport in a little cloth sack.

Saint-Éloi's impression is that Laferrière writes at the moment of crisis because, like the glass of rum he drinks, it comforts him (and because, as a writer, that's what he *does*). In these early moments, writing for Laferrière is not a matter of fulfilling material goals (recording source material for later use). In Saint-Éloi's account, Laferrière performs the act of free writing as a means of mediating the psychic shock he is registering. He keeps fear at bay by writing—anything will do. Writing becomes the process by which Laferrière works through the otherwise inassimilable experience of survival amidst the earthquake's vast destruction of Haitian life and property. Saint-Éloi's emphasis on the physical act of writing, rather than its signification (he describes Laferrière *en griffonnant n'importe quoi* [scrawling anything] places writing within the realm of the automatic and affective, rather than that of the rational and symbolic.

Yanick Lahens describes the title of *Failles* (2010) [Fault lines, Fissures, Schisms, Cracks, Splits] as having imposed itself upon her, rather than the reverse, as if the emotions she felt as she sat down to write were so intense that she was more a conduit for the language she used than its author. The title, too, illustrates the way in which her understanding of the Haitian land changed permanently after the earthquake. Before, Lahens understood *faille* principally as signifying a crack or



weakness. Afterward, she would forever associate it with the geological fault whose abrupt shift was the proximate cause of the catastrophe. In the days following the earthquake, hearing the word triggers an intense psychological and physical response. She feels the earth tremble under her feet so that she must steady herself in order not to collapse.

*FAILLES* FUT LE PREMIER TITRE qui s'imposa à moi. Impossible d'entendre ce mot sans ressentir la pointe acérée d'un objet, là, dans la poitrine, à l'endroit du cœur. Impossible de l'entendre sans me retrouver au-dessus d'un grand trou béant avec dans les oreilles une rumeur qui gonfle, monte pour retomber en milliers de couteaux. A l'écoute de cette simple syllabe, je ne peux m'empêcher de regarder là, sous mes pieds. A l'écoute de cette simple syllabe, j'hallucine et sentirai comme des milliers d'autres, des jours durant, la terre trembler sous moi. Je me retiens quelquefois pour ne pas trébucher et défaillir.

Failles, un mot comme jamais entendu avant le 12 janvier 2010. Pas de cette façon-là. Un mot trou noir. Un mot sang. Un mot mort. Un mot ouvrant soudain en moi des résonances. (16)

SCHISM WAS THE FIRST WORD that imposed itself on me. Impossible to hear this word without feeling the sharp point of an object there in the chest, right where the heart is. Impossible to hear it without finding myself standing again above a gaping hole hearing a growing rumble in my ears, climbing only to fall back into thousands of knives. At the sound of this simple syllable, I cannot stop myself from looking down at my feet. At the sound of this simple syllable, I hallucinate and I will feel as thousands of others, for many days, the earth trembling beneath me. I sometimes have to pay attention not to stumble and collapse.

Schism, a word as if never before heard before January 12, 2010. Not in that way. A black hole word. A blood word. A dead word. A word suddenly opening resonances in me.

Once defamiliarized (*comme jamais entendu* [as if never before heard]) *failles* becomes imbued in Lahens' psyche with talismanic significance that exceeds the rational. *Failles* becomes *Un mot sang. Un mot mort.* (A blood word. A dead word.) While *failles* takes on new significance for Lahens, it retains its original meaning and serves in her book as a *leitmotif* for the manner in which the earthquake exposed

and intensified historical fault lines in Haitian society of class and race. Generally speaking, in contrast to authors in the Haitian diaspora whose work we shall examine later in this chapter, Lahens sees little reason to believe that the outpouring of Haitian and international relief efforts would do any more than exacerbate the already considerable misery of those on the wrong sides of Haiti's economic fault lines.

That Yanick Lahens, at least as she presents herself in her text, was traumatized by the earthquake is certain. Her susceptibility to a sensation that triggers an irruption of the past traumatic experience into the present is a defining characteristic of clinical post-traumatic stress disorder (Young 22–23). Lahens' psychically charged language in the passage quoted above represents a striking departure from the dispassionate lucidity that has characterized her work for decades. Lahens describes in vividly corporeal language a reversal of the ordinary course of her writing in which she chooses her words. Not only was the title of the work imposed upon her, but also her words spew forth in very short order as if unbidden:

Toutes ces pages en deux mois et demi pour dire. Les mots sont sortis comme des éclats d'un corps. Certains projectiles m'avaient atteinte bien avant le 12 janvier et s'étaient ce jour-là seulement enfoncés plus profondément dans ma chair. (142)

[I wrote] All these pages in two and a half months, to show you. The words left me as if in explosions from a body. Certain of the projectiles had hit me well before January 12th, but it was only then that they lodged more deeply in my flesh.

In this passage, Lahens imagines words as flesh bursting from a body that has been struck by projectiles. Remarkably, she describes the earthquake as intensifying the

force of psychic blows that she has sustained previously, by which she likely invokes indelible images of Haitians suffering that were cruelly intensified by the widespread homelessness caused by the earthquake.

*Failles* is both the title of the book and that of the first of thirty-one short chapters in a book of 157 pages. Her chapters are devoted variously to personal narrative, particularly of the days following the earthquake, social critique of Haitian society, and historical perspective, frequently bearing signs of having been written in haste, perhaps in a single sitting each. In its structure, *Failles* resembles Dany Laferrière's *Tout bouge autour de moi* [Everything Around me is Shaking] (2011), which he also began writing immediately after the earthquake, and which is arranged in even shorter sections. The most significant collection of immediate post-earthquake writings, *Haïti: parmi les vivants* [Haiti: Among the Living] (2010), likewise is composed of works of short fiction, poems, and personal narrative, brief memoirs from twenty-five Haitian novelists and poets that average about five pages each.

All of these volumes were written while the authors' personal memories of the catastrophe were still raw, and their writing was therefore undertaken *à vif* [while the event is raw and without rehearsing] in a term used by several Haitian authors, including Évelyne Trouillot during our interview, when she describes the way in which writers seek to concretize their memories of important events in their immediate aftermath. She identifies short texts as the form that which was best suited to the task:

Évelyne Trouillot : [She is discussing the relative paucity of literary treatments of important historical eras in Haitian history, especially that of

the Duvalier regimes.] Même pour des évènements récents il y a très peu de littérature. Les gens avaient peur que ces souvenirs disparaissent. Peut-être qu'on a besoin de distance, de temps de recul. C'est comme pour le tremblement de terre. C'est très difficile d'écrire à vif. On peut faire quelque chose mais aller en profondeur demande du temps.

...

Jeremy Metz : [Speaking of *Haïti parmi les vivants* and her short story in that collection, "Besoins Primaires"] J'ai beaucoup aimé votre recueil de nouvelles.... C'était des textes à vif.

Évelyne Trouillot : C'était des textes courts aussi. Il y est question de tremblement de terre mais le tremblement de terre y est un prétexte.

Évelyne Trouillot: Even for recent events there is very little literature. People feared that their memories would disappear. Perhaps we need separation, some time to distance ourselves. It's this way for the earthquake. It is very difficult to write in the moment. One can do something, but to go more deeply requires time.

Jeremy Metz: [Speaking of *Haïti parmi les vivants* (Haiti among the living) and her short story in that collection, "Besoins Primaires" [Basic Needs] I very much liked your collection of short stories. ... Those were written while it was raw.

Évelyne Trouillot: Those were, in fact, short texts. They are about the earthquake, but the earthquake was also a pretext.

Trouillot talks about the difficulty of writing while emotions are raw, which is corroborated by the extraordinary psychic toll that Lahens describes in her writing of *Failles*. Trouillot's calling attention to the short lengths of the contributions to *Haïti parmi les vivants* is likewise consistent with Lahens' and Laferrière's method of structuring their texts in short sections, and suggests that collections of short essays may be the form *par excellence* of literary responses to the earthquake written in its close aftermath. Trouillot describes too the tension between the need to write more reflective texts on the earthquake from the vantage of temporal distance from the

event, with the anxiety that if the events are not recorded quickly, memories of them will fade.

At the same time, Trouillot does not see her own writing on the earthquake as necessarily different from her ordinary range of concerns. When she talks of the earthquake as a “pretext” for her short story, “Besoins Primaires,” she describes her use of the earthquake to stage, under extreme circumstances, an ordinary aspect of human relations. In her short story, a twenty-two year old servant is trapped in the ruins of an upper class family’s house, along with her employer’s oldest son, whose age is not identified, but may be inferred to be about seventeen. The two live through three days of emotional and sexual intimacy, only to quit each other upon leaving the ruins of the house, with nary a backward glance, certain to resume their theretofore utterly separate lives. In effect, Trouillot’s short story illustrates the point she and Lahens both made in their interviews that any hope Haitians might have had that the earthquake would cause a diminution of the barriers between among social classes quickly prove illusory.

### **The Earthquake and the Divine**

Lahens deploys *Failles* [Fault lines, Fissures, Schisms, Cracks, Splits], the title of her monograph, repeatedly as a metaphor for the many fissures in Haitian society that the earthquake exposed and exacerbated. It expresses Lahens’ own belief that Haitian society is riven by ruptures of class, race, and ideology that divide Haitians from each other and act as a barrier to the brighter future that they so desperately need and deserve. In contrast, Lahens’ title for the second chapter, “L’Événement ou le doigt de Dieu” [The event, or the finger of God], seems curiously enigmatic.

Indeed, she never quite sets forth her own understanding of the relationship between the catastrophe and divine will.

The chapter title invokes the divine in relation to the role of chance in determining which individuals trapped within a collapsing building would survive. In the moment, Lahens' intuition is that an individual she identifies only as P. (almost certainly her husband, Philippe W. Lahens) has survived, but reflects on others that had harbored the same conviction about members of their families whose hopes were not borne out. While her reasoning is not entirely clear, when she writes, *La certitude n'a rien à voir avec le doigt de Dieu* (24), she seems to pay tribute both to God's power to choose who will survive the earthquake and who will not, and to the futility of predicting the working of God's providence.

Despite its provocative title, the chapter itself is primarily devoted to a moment-by-moment account of Lahens' own experience in the earthquake. She begins, *Je suis au living avec Noah,<sup>44</sup> mon neveu. Deux ans et quatre mois* (21). [I'm in the living room with Noah, my nephew. Two years and four months old.] Her emphasis on factuality in this opening, which is accentuated by the fragmentary second sentence, signals the direct, unmediated quality of her eyewitness testimony. Of course, the sophistication of Lahens' literary and critical corpus suggests that the unmediated tone is to some degree constructed; but fragmentary passages' effect on the reader, whether intended or not, is that of spontaneous eyewitness testimony.

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<sup>44</sup> I'm not certain whether Lahens invented this name, and if so whether it is a reference to the Biblical flood. Her use of an initial for her husband (or if not her husband, than someone else) suggests she might well be shielding her nephew's name from publication.

At the end of the chapter, P. returns home from his place of work, and utters a succinct commentary on the scale of the devastation he has witnessed on his way home: *J'ai vu l'Apocalypse*. [I saw the Apocalypse]. Without initiating a new paragraph, Lahens breaks from the present-tense, direct description of the scene in her house, as it unfolded, to a connection she makes to a passage, which she quotes, from her most recent novel, *La couleur de l'aube* (2008) [The Color of Dawn]: *L'Apocalypse a déjà eu lieu tant de fois dans cette île* (27). [The Apocalypse has already taken place so many times on this island.] She connects the dead bodies on the streets caused by the earthquake that were witnessed by P. with the dead on the streets caused by political and criminal violence that also leaves corpses on the streets that she describes in her earlier novel (27).

Perhaps curiously, in *Failles*, Lahens abridges the citation from *La couleur de l'aube*, without providing ellipses. The passage she reproduces in *Failles* reads as follows: ***Mais l'Apocalypse a déjà eu lieu tant de fois dans cette salle, tant de fois dans cette ville, dans cette île*** (141, the words without emphasis appear in *La couleur de l'aube*, but not *Failles*). In our discussion, Lahens told me that she had been concerned when writing the novel in 2008 that she “would be going too far” in terming Haiti’s recent history apocalyptic. Indeed, the words that are included in the novel, but omitted in *Failles*, link the Apocalypse to a specific moment: the agony of a young victim of violence in a hospital ward. She places the death of the youth in the context of a history of political repression and deadly violence, although the reference is also a commentary on Haitian history. In *Failles*, Haitian history, of which the earthquake is only the latest catastrophe, is its only object.

Lahens' use of *Apocalypse* in the last paragraph of the chapter in *Failles* serves primarily to contextualize the devastation of the earthquake within Haiti's violent history, as a form of a malediction, alternatively human or natural, that is visible in Haiti's repetitive cycle of catastrophes. At several moments in *Failles*, Lahens invokes a personal Judeo-Christian God, signified by its capitalization, in contrast to the lower case plural *dieux* that signifies an anthropomorphized extraterrestrial power that is capable of wreaking havoc on earth. In her work, the Judeo-Christian divinity operates on a personal level in which individuals tend to associate their disparate fates in the earthquake to the will of God, while Haitian folkloric gods tend to visit their malefactions on the Haitian population as a whole.

Lahens suggests, too, that Haitians generally are preoccupied with the problem of reconciling the earthquake with their conception of a benevolent Christian God. She describes hearing a pastor in a street full of debris extolling Jesus before his flock as their sole salvation, and links him to a character of dubious motives, Pastor Jeantilus, in *La couleur de l'aube*. Lahens sees the incongruity of professions of faith amidst the devastation of the earthquake, perhaps because she is wary that it will lead to blaming the victims or to associating good fortune with moral superiority. In the end, Lahens declines to engage, at least directly, the question of how the earthquake and perhaps other catastrophes or genocides relate to the will of the Judeo-Christian God.

Lahens, however, incorporates lower-case gods as a vivid metaphor for the malevolent nature of the catastrophe, in a form that gestures to Afro-Caribbean spirituality. In the book's first chapter, she writes,



Le 12 janvier 2010 à 16 heures 53 minutes, dans un crépuscule qui cherchait déjà ses couleurs de fin et de commencement, Port-au-Prince a été chevauchée moins de quarante secondes par un de ces dieux dont on dit qu'ils se repaissent de chair et de sang. (12)

On January 12, 2010 at 4:53 p.m., in dusk that was already seeking its colors of ending [of the day] and beginning [of the night], Port-au-Prince was shaken by one of those gods that are said to nourish themselves with flesh and blood.

In this passage, which is quoted on the book's back jacket, a monstrous god of a breed that gorges itself on human flesh and blood shakes the earth. This god does not simply will the catastrophe; he brings it about directly by personally upending the city. Lahens use of *dont on dit* [of which it is said] as a distancing mechanism allows her to incorporate the horrifying imagery without implying that she subscribes personally to a non-Christian belief system that posits a hostile and enraged god, except as a matter of her cultural identification with the Haitian people.

While Lahens leaves unanswered her interrogation of *le doigt de Dieu*, she herself struggles to find meaning in the never-ending suffering of the Haitian people. In a manner that brings to mind a reversal of the Jewish doctrine of chosenness (or perhaps not), she plaintively asks "why" the Haitian people has been chosen seemingly for misfortune:

Haïti. Pas une mais deux failles. [A chasm between the classes is the second.] Une histoire particulière, si particulière. Et encore plus de souffrance. De misère. Pourquoi nous ? Encore nous ? Comme si nous n'en avons pas eu assez. Fin 2009, une lueur au bout d'un long tunnel sombre. Lueur éteinte en moins d'une quarantaine de secondes. Comme si nous n'étions au monde que pour prendre la mesure du malheur : Encore et encore ... (30)

Haiti. Not one, but two schisms. [A chasm between the classes is the second.] A particular history, so particular. And still more suffering. More misery. Why us? Always us? As if we have not already had enough. At the end of

2009, a ray of hope at the end of a long dark tunnel. A ray that was extinguished in forty seconds. As if we were on earth only to measure the extent of the misfortune. Again and again...

Lahens suggests that the earthquake's timing was particularly cruel as economic and political conditions in Haiti were showing modest signs of improvement at the end of 2009, compared with the crisis in 2008 when there were riots over the cost of food. In this respect, her narrative emphasizes the cruelty of either circumstance: the earthquake snuffs out hope when conditions seem to be improving or it deepens despair when conditions are already horrendous. In all events, her cry for an explanation (*Pourquoi nous?* [Why us?]), which is rhetorical, but also addressed to God (and also to her readers, of course), expresses her sense of gross injustice that borders on malediction.

### **Accursedness**

While Lahens is fully invested in the tragedy of the Haitian people, she rejects the appropriation of accursedness by non-Haitians, which she sees as a trope with racist overtones. In a chapter on international relief efforts and the international press, both of which she generally excoriates for their tendency, in her view, to place their own interests ahead of those of the needs of the Haitian people, she equates directly such thinking with racism:

Mais qu'est-ce qu'une certaine presse a pu véhiculer comme clichés ! A commencer par les quelques scènes de pillage. Cette presse tenue par la vitesse ne supporte pas les nuances et les gomme. Elle est avide de ces images qui nourrissent le voyeurisme, confortent le racisme ou l'idée de la malédiction divine, ce qui revient à peu près au même. (85)

But what about the clichés circulated by a certain element of the press! Starting with the scenes of sporadic looting. This press motivated by deadlines could not handle nuances and mixed up everything. It is avid for

those images that nourish voyeurism and reinforce racism, or the idea of a divine malediction, which amounts to about the same thing.

Lahens, in fact, does not supply instances in which foreign journalists called Haiti accursed (*maudit*). She critiques the press for expediency, hinting that lazy writing itself is a form of racism. She links images of looting to racist narratives of malediction. Ultimately, in her view the subtext of these accounts holds Haiti responsible for its misfortune, which results, in the perspective of the Western press, from Haitians' self-afflicted dysfunction, exacerbated by a divinely willed series of calamities.

My own reading of the kind of press accounts to which Lahens is likely referring (articles in the prominent French news magazines and newspapers, including *Libération*, to which Lahens contributed in an article reprinted as a chapter of *Faillies*) does not support a charge of racism, at least not so obviously that it would not be *apropos* for her to cite an example or two. It appears in all events that Lahens sees that the question of accursedness as unavoidable for Haitians (and indeed she contemplates it herself), but, in the hands of foreign observers, risks feeding longstanding narratives of Haitian incapacity and blight that are indisputably racist.

In Évelyne Trouillot's recent novel, *Absences sans frontières* (2013) [*Absences without Borders*], the subject of Haitians' struggle with the divine in the aftermath of the earthquake is given a nearly extradiagetic treatment in the form of a short essay voiced by the protagonist, Géraldine, a young woman whose father is trapped in the United States in immigration limbo. The character, surely speaking directly for Trouillot says:

Beaucoup [many Haitians] se tournèrent vers la religion, vers l'idée d'un grand dessein qui justifierait pareille calamité, ou celle d'un châtement pour les péchés humains, suivi d'un grand pardon qui nous réunirait dans une clarté divine rédemptrice en un temps à venir et un lieu à nommer. (187)

Many [Haitians] turned to religion, to the idea that such a calamity would be explained by a grand design, or a punishment for human sins, followed by a great pardon that would reunite us in a divinely redemptive clarity in a time and space to be named later.

Trouillot's character voices a kind of Panglossian belief that all manner of human events fit into a divine scheme that ultimately results in the best of all possible worlds. At the same time, the book's focal character, Géraldine, immediately disclaims this belief, however comforting: *Je n'arrivais pas à me laisser bercer par un futur bienfaisant. La venue prochaine de papa m'agonisait suffisamment* (187). [I am unable to allow myself to be comforted by a benevolent future. The coming arrival of Papa was torturing me enough.] While I am reluctant to generalize, the following pattern that is present in this text is characteristic of Haitian earthquake literature, though to be sure in various forms and to varying degrees: It is difficult to reconcile a benevolent deity with the cruelty of the misfortunes that have struck Haiti's vulnerable and impoverished population, but ordinary Haitians find solace nonetheless in their religion. Further, while Haitians frequently reflect on the seeming malediction that hangs over their island, any such speculation may only be voiced by Haitians themselves.

In his monograph, *Tout bouge autour de moi* [Everything Around me is Shaking] (2011), Laferrière interlaces, in short sections, his own eyewitness testimony of his experience of the earthquake with short essays on the historical and social context of Haiti at the time it struck. He goes a step further than Lahens

by calling attention to what he deems as the remarkable solidarity of the Haitian people in the immediate aftermath of the earthquake. Generally speaking, Laferrière, like Lahens, is concerned that the word *maudit* (accursed) encodes a racist view of Haiti's plight that absolves imperial powers of their share of responsibility for the miserable conditions that prevailed in Haiti when the earthquake struck. He devotes a section of his book, which he titles "*La guerre sémantique*" ["The Semantic War"], to the term, *maudit*, which he particularly blames Canadian and French journalists for originating as an essentializing shortcut. Curiously, he appears to argue that when Haitians use the term they do so from a sorry mimicry:

Et là, je vois poindre un nouveau label qui s'apprête à nous enterrer complètement : Haïti est un pays maudit. Il y a même des Haïtiens désespérés qui commencent à l'employer.

...

Je connais un pays qui a provoqué deux guerres mondiales en un siècle et proposé une solution finale et on ne dit pas qu'il est maudit. Je connais un pays insensible à la détresse humaine, qui n'arrête pas d'affamer la planète depuis ses puissants centres financiers [the United States] et on ne le dit pas maudit.

...

Il suffit qu'une personne lance le mot « malédiction » sur les ondes pour qu'il se métastase comme un cancer. Avant qu'on se mette à parler de vaudou, de sauvagerie, de cannibalisme, de peuple de buveurs de sang, je me sens encore assez d'énergie pour contrer ça. (54-55)

And there, I see a new label laid [like an egg] that is ready to bury us completely [finish off the work of the earthquake]: Haiti is an accursed country. There are even despairing Haitians that are starting to employ it.

...

I know a country that provoked two world wars in one century and attempted the Final Solution and no one says that it's accursed. I know a country that is indifferent to human distress that relentlessly impoverishes the planet from its powerful financial centers [The United States] and no one says that it's accursed.

...

It suffices for one person to utter the word "malediction" on the air in order

for it to metastasize like a cancer. Before anyone starts talking about voodoo, savagery, cannibalism, of people who drink blood, I feel just enough force to oppose it.

Laferrière ascribes remarkable agency to the word *maudit* (accursed), even when it is uttered by foreign journalists and printed or broadcast outside Haiti. At the best of times, the writings of foreign journalists would be available to the few educated Haitians that consume French media; thus it is hard to credit his assertion that Haitians are inspired by foreign journalists in their adoption of the term to describe their plight. His choice of “cancer” and “metastasis” as metaphors is curious, as cancer is not communicable. His pathologizing of *maudit* is reminiscent of Fanon’s psychopathology of alienation in *Peau noire, masques blancs* (1952) [Black Skin, White Masks], in which a racist utterance is registered corporally and indelibly. Of course, racist assumptions that Western elites harbor toward Haitians has been a principal theme of Laferrière’s literary corpus, beginning with his first novel, *Comment faire l’amour avec un Nègre sans se fatiguer* (1985) [How to Make Love to a Negro without Getting Tired]. For all this, it is fair to ask whether Laferrière is himself engaging in this passage in the kind of essentializing that he deplores in Western journalism (and it is likewise also to the point to ask whether the inflammatory reference to bloodthirsty cannibalism is not a bit excessive).

In short, Laferrière’s critique of the term *maudit* as an explanation for Haiti’s endless cycle of catastrophe generally, and the earthquake specifically, is essentially the same as Lahens’: that it is ultimately racist and operates in a manner that is highly prejudicial to Haiti’s image in the West. He finds it lamentable that Haitians too use the term, but it is difficult to credit his explanation that they do out of a

sense of hopelessness (they are *désespérés*) or that they are taking their cues from foreign journalists whose poison spreads like a cancer. Generally speaking, his objective is to denarrativize Haiti as a primitive country of voodoo, savagery and the like, and to replace racist and derogatory imagery of this type with an alternative vision of Haitians setting aside their differences in their moment of crisis in order to help each other in their hour of need. It is to this alternative vision of *un peuple digne* [a dignified people] that Laferrière devotes much of his book and, in the year following the earthquake, which he spent traveling the globe, his testimony on radio and television to the magnificence of ordinary Haitians' responses to the catastrophe. In this, he departs from Lahens, who limits herself to opposing the conception of Haiti as accursed, but declines to extol Haitian behavior in the earthquake's aftermath. Indeed, few, if any, Haitian authors put a positive spin on any aspect of conditions in Haiti in the aftermath of the earthquake, when they write for a Haitian audience.

In an interview conducted on August 9, 2012 in Port-au-Prince, I asked Dominique Batrville, a prominent Haitian novelist, playwright, poet, cultural journalist, and director of Les Editions des Presses Nationales d'Haïti,<sup>45</sup> about Laferrière's rejection of the idea that Haiti is a *pays maudit*, and he responded in a tone that frequently seemed to convey to me a sense of irony,

Jeremy Metz : Toi tu es du côté fataliste alors que Laferrière est de l'autre côté. Lui ne veut pas admettre le malheur, les images du pays maudit il les rejette.

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<sup>45</sup> For a short biography and a bibliography by Giscard Bouchotte, see <http://www.lehman.cuny.edu/ile.en.ile/paroles/batrville.html>.

Dominique Batrville : C'est son point de vue, son attitude de citoyen de voir les choses ainsi. Moi je ne dirais pas qu'Haïti soit un pays maudit puisque personnellement je suis dans le courant des Haïtiens qui tentent de redonner à Haïti sa verticalité, et je descends en droite ligne de citoyens, de personnages historiques haïtiens qui ont lutté jusqu'au bout pour Haïti. Je descends de Benoît Batrville, guérilléro qui a tenu tête aux américains de 1915 à 1920. [As Batrville goes on to explain, his ancestor was beheaded in a campaign in which his commander, Charlemagne Péralte, was *crucifié*].

Jeremy Metz: You are on the fatalist side while Lafférière is on the other. He does not accept images of misfortune, and rejects images of accursedness.

Dominique Batrville: It's his point of view, his attitude as a citizen to see things in that way. I would not say that Haiti is an accursed country because personally I am among Haitians that seek to give back to Haiti it's verticality. I descend directly from citizens, historical figures that fought to the end for Haiti. I descend from Benoît Batrville, guerilla that fought off Americans from 1915 to 1920.

Batrville seems to be saying that Laferrière's denial that Haiti is the object of a malediction is an act of patriotism, which would be consistent with my interpretation that Laferrière is writing and speaking primarily to his audiences in Canada and France. Batrville doesn't say that he himself rejects the proposition that Haiti is *maudit* but rather that he would not say so (*je ne dirais pas*), because he too is among those who are trying to change the narrative of perpetual Haitian victimization, to one of glorious and brave resistance. When he talks of restoring Haiti's *verticalité*, he means both the connection of individuals to their own personal histories and, more generally, to Haitian revolutionary history. *Verticalité* is also certainly a metaphor for Haitians standing tall in their own eyes. Still, it is difficult to be comfortable with Batrville's defense of Laferrière, which comes perilously close to claiming that falsifying the country's current history is an act of patriotism.



## The earthquake and the supernatural

Lahens, Laferrière, and Trouillot interrogate the role of the divine in Haiti's misfortune along conventional Judeo-Christian principles. They raise the familiar problematic of reconciling an all-powerful and benevolent deity with the large-scale suffering of innocents that leads some to imagine that if God is punishing Haiti, then there must be a reason for it. They see their role as opposing any moves to cast Haitians as responsible for their suffering because such is the will of God. They recognize the inclination of Haitians to succumb to fatalistic thinking, and deplore its potential, when voiced by non-Haitians, to encode a racist subtext.

For Dominique Batrville, however, the earthquake fits a more radical and non-Judeo-Christian narrative of the supernatural. In our interview, Batrville was invested fully in an assertion that he himself had foreseen the earthquake, both as a matter of prophesy, in a novel that he wrote and then destroyed in a depressive fit, and then later in a dream two days before the earthquake:

Dominique Batrville : Moi, quand j'avais vingt-six ans j'avais écrit un roman sur Port-au-Prince qui s'intitulait *Le Récitant*. C'était un roman kafkaïen qui annonçait tout ce qui allait arriver après toutes les catastrophes qu'Haïti allait subir pendant les prochaines vingt-cinq années.

Jeremy Metz : Tu l'avais prédit ?

Dominique Batrville: C'était un roman presque prophétique, un roman prémonitoire. J'avais fait une déprime et j'avais plongé le manuscrit dans un récipient rempli d'eau.

When I was twenty-six I'd written a novel on Port-au-Prince titled 'Le Récitant' [The Storyteller]. It was a Kafkaesque novel that heralded everything that would occur in the next twenty-five years.

Jeremy Metz: You predicted it?

Dominique Batrville: It was almost a prophetic novel, a novel of premonitions. I had an episode of depression and submerged the manuscript in a container of water.

It is worth noting that Dany Laferrière devotes a chapter in *Tout bouge autour de moi* [Everything Around me is Shaking] to Batrville, “Un ami nomade,” [“A nomadic friend”] in which he recounts his gladness at coming across him as if by accident immediately after the earthquake, as he then knew his friend was safe. In the course of describing Batrville, with notable affection, he remarks on his periodic bouts of deep depression (82-82). This hardly clarifies the extent to which the manuscript Batrville described to me was prophetic, but it does support his account of having destroyed it.

Later in the interview, when I asked Batrville to describe his experiences during the earthquake, he recounted that he alone, among those he was with, immediately recognized the sounds that announced the earthquake.

Les agents de sécurité de l’Université croyaient que c’étaient des affrontements armés qui allaient se produire dans le quartier. Alors que j’avais déjà vu le séisme en songe par deux fois le 10 janvier 2010 [two days before the earthquake] et je l’ai écrit dans l’un de mes textes ‘Élégie de Port-au-Prince,’ dont on a fait un film d’ailleurs.

The security guards at the university thought that it was [noises of] an armed conflict that was taking place in the neighborhood. Whereas I had already seen the earthquake in a dream twice on January 10, 2010 [two days before the earthquake] and I wrote about it in one of my texts, “Élégie de Port-au-Prince” [Elegy of Port-au-Prince], from which a film has been made by the way.

Batrville attributes his quick recognition of the unfamiliar sounds to his uncanny premonition. In fact, other authors, including the prominent poet Syto Cavé, report

their confusion upon hearing the unaccustomed rumbling.<sup>46</sup> Batrville's claim that he had special powers of comprehension that arose from his prophetic dreams positions him as a seer. At the same time, he sets the stage for a conception of the earthquake as a supernatural event, rather than one that is purely geological, to which intention thus may be assigned.

In Batrville's thinking, such as he expressed it in our interview, there are capricious and destructive gods; there is a fully anthropomorphized earth, ready to take revenge for its despoliation at the hands of rapacious human beings; there are certain individuals with such excessive power that they can cause the earth to move; and there are prophets, e.g. Batrville himself, who have the gift for foretelling the future, in the context of a cyclical and apocalyptic history.

Jeremy Metz : Mais pour [Jacques Stephen] Alexis c'était toujours un repère, un point d'où l'on pouvait s'évader, c'est un peu comme Maryse Condé. C'est vrai qu'il y avait des temps de sécheresse, mais jamais on n'avait vu la terre agir de façon aussi violente, jeter des morceaux de béton sur la tête des hommes.

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<sup>46</sup> I did not recognize rumbling as an earthquake in a similar circumstance (albeit to a vastly lesser degree). I happened to be in a newly inaugurated convention hall in San José on October 17, 1989 when the Loma Prieta earthquake struck. I ran across the large open exhibit space, which was littered with falling debris from the ceiling, down stairs and outside thinking the building was collapsing because of a major failure in its construction. I did not understand that we'd been hit by an earthquake until someone outside said so; thus it is entirely credible to me that Haitians would not have recognized the rumbling as signaling an earthquake. (San José is 35 miles from the epicenter of the earthquake and had a magnitude of 6.9; whereas Port-au-Prince is 16 miles from the epicenter of the earthquake, which had a magnitude of 7.0. At equal distance a difference of 0.1 in magnitude is equivalent to about 10% in strength.)

Dominique Batrville : C'est les semences de la colère et en disant cela je fais référence à un auteur haïtien Anthony Lespès, qui a écrit on a trop violenté la terre dans son livre *Les semences de la colère*.<sup>47</sup>

Et la figure de retour c'était l'homme qui était un peu responsable ...

Je parle aussi de la transgression de l'univers dans mon récit, dans ma nouvelle il y a une séquence où je parle des orgies que provoque le séisme, des orgies cosmogoniques "Gouyad, gouyad pour la rotation de la terre. Gouyad, gouyad pour la circonvolution de la terre." C'est de l'ordre de la perversion, parce qu'il y a plein de gens qui étaient prisonniers des décombres d'appartements, d'hôtels où certains étaient en position de coït.

Jeremy Metz : Tu en parles aussi quand tu dis qu'il y avait des gens sortis de l'Hadès qui forçaient les gens à s'accoupler, une espèce de cauchemar. Et qu'en est-il du lien avec les Duvalier ?

Dominique Batrville : Sur le plan politique, Duvalier comme métaphore c'est un cyclone, le père comme le fils. Dans le bestiaire haïtien Duvalier c'est un tigre.

Jeremy Metz : C'est l'homme tout-puissant.

Dominique Batrville : Le tout-puissant, le maître. A sa mort [that of François Duvalier in 1971], lors de ses funérailles la terre avait tremblé parce que c'était un être dit "python tellurique" [python that springs from the earth, i.e. is not the product of sexual reproduction]; c'est rapporté par Bernard Diederich,<sup>48</sup> par pleins d'historiens, j'en parle dans mon roman.

Jeremy Metz : Donc, tu rentres dans la mythologie du règne de Duvalier.

Dominique Batrville : Tout à fait, la mythologie du pouvoir, absolument.

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<sup>47</sup> Haitian classic novel, first published in 1949, recounting the struggle of a colony of Haitians, forcibly returned from the Dominican Republic. The band struggles to cultivate a barren, weed-infested plot of land.

<sup>48</sup> Diederich was a correspondent for *Time Magazine* and author of *The Murderers Among Us: History of Repression and Rebellion in Haiti Under Dr. Francois Duvalier, 1962-1971*. There's a fascinating clip from a newsreel on Duvalier's funeral that emphasizes the transmission of a kind of spiritual power from François Duvalier to his son, Jean-Claude Duvalier, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tdVK1TNgcDA>. At the very end of the clip the sound of cannons is discernable and these may be those that Diederich refers to at the end of his book, citing the phrase of Homer Bigart, of *The New York Times*, who was himself citing a phrase he was borrowing, "cannons of condolence" (266).

Jeremy Metz: It's true that there were times of drought, but never had anyone seen the earth act in so violent a fashion, throwing blocks of concrete on the heads of men.

Dominique Batrville: It was the seeds of wrath and in saying that I make reference to a Haitian author Anthony Lespès, who wrote that the earth had been too violated in his novel *Les semences de la colère* [The Seeds of Wrath].

And the recurrent figure was that man was a bit responsible...

I also talk about the transgression of the universe in my account, in my short story there is a sequence when I talk of orgies [of the gods] that provoke the earthquake, cosmogenic orgies "Gouyad, gouyad for the rotation of the earth. Gouyad, gouyad for the circumrotation of the earth." It's a matter of perversion, because there are many people that were prisoners in the ruins of apartments, of hotels, including some in position of intercourse.

Jeremy Metz: You also talk about this when you say [write] that there were men exiting from Hades that forced people to have sex, in a kind of nightmare. And what about the link to Duvalier?

Dominique Batrville: At the political level, Duvalier as a metaphor is a cyclone, the father like the son. In the Haitian bestiary, Duvalier is a tiger.

Jeremy Metz: He's the all-powerful man.

Dominique Batrville: The all-powerful, the master. At his death, [that of François Duvalier in 1971], during his funeral the earth trembled because he was as a being a 'python tellurique' [python that springs from the earth, i.e. is not the product of sexual reproduction]; it was reported by Bernard Diederich, by many historians, I talk about it in my novel.

Jeremy Metz: Thus you enter into the mythology of the reign of Duvalier.

Dominique Batrville: Definitely, the mythology of power, absolutely.

Batrville acknowledges that man (through a process of return that is difficult to decode in the audio recording) is to some degree responsible for the earthquake (*c'était l'homme qui était un peu responsable*). Remarkably, though, he imagines "transgressions" of "cosmogenic" gods who engage in an orgy so strenuous that it affected the rotation of the earth and thereby caused directly the earthquake (*des*

*orgies qui provoquent le séisme*).<sup>49</sup> He imagines that the gods' sexual excess is enacted in human victims that were also found in coital positions. Obviously, Batrville is in the domain of myth, and yet the linking of sin to a natural disaster caused (if not willed) by the gods is suggestive. Finally, Duvalier is held to have such excessive agency (Batrville terms him a *python tellurique*) that Batrville believes that the earth shook, literally, during his funeral. In that sense, he likens Duvalier not only to a python and a tiger, but also to a cyclone, a destructive force of nature.

### **Earthquake opportunism, politics, resistance to mysticism**

Among certain Haitian writers, the earthquake provided an opportunity to advance a political agenda. Myrtha Gilbert, a Haitian sociologist, published a pamphlet in the months following the earthquake that reprinted, with a new introduction, four of her previous essays in which she excoriates a wide range of domestic and foreign institutions, organizations, and enterprises for their rapacious environmental, agricultural, economic, and political practices. In effect, she uses the earthquake as a means of drawing attention to her causes and of affirming their timeliness. She also advances an implied claim of foresightedness, in a manner that might be found to be opportunistic. Nonetheless, whether or not the pamphlet is held to have any literary interest, its title, *La Catastrophe n'était pas naturelle* [*The Catastrophe was not Natural*] and the general lines of its argument, that we are too quick to categorize the catastrophe as natural, and to absolve ourselves from

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<sup>49</sup> He may be imagining legends of the kind attributed to the ancients that thunder was caused by the gods warring on Olympus. (See e.g. *Iliad*, Book XXI.) His thinking is also reminiscent of Washington Irving's *Rip Van Winkle* (1819), in which thunderous noises were the result of a game of ninepins being played in the mountains by mysterious bearded men.

responsibility for it, sets forth an important dimension of Haitian thought on the earthquake.

Dans cette publication, nous avons donc mis en contexte des évènements et analyser des faits “oubliés” par la mémoire sélective des porte-parole du système. Et nous avons aussi rappelé que des voix avisées comme celles de Jacques Roumain, de Paul Moral, de Georges Séjourné et d'Anthony Lespès—pour ne citer que ceux-là—mettaient en garde depuis longtemps, contre les dangers d'un système qui menaçait d'anéantir notre société.

Car, compte tenu des circonstances dramatiques qui ont entouré le séisme du 12 janvier et l'émergence des prophètes d'occasion, il nous a paru opportun de donner une plus large diffusion à ces analyses, pour rappeler au peuple haïtien que le caractère mortifère de maints phénomènes naturels dans notre pays, n'est pas inscrit dans les astres, encore moins dans les desseins de Dieu pour nous faire expier d'hypothétiques péchés. (xii)

In this publication, we have therefore put into context events and analyzed facts that have been “forgotten” by the selective memory of press secretaries of the system [the establishment]. And we have also recalled that wise voices like those of Jacques Roumain, Paul Moral, Georges Séjourné and Anthony Lespès—to cite only these [among many]—have been warning us for a long time against the dangers of a system that menaces to obliterate our society.

For, taking account of the dramatic circumstances that surrounded the earthquake of January 12 and the emergence of opportunistic prophets, it seemed to us opportune to give a wide circulation to these analyses, to remind the Haitian people of the deadly character of many natural phenomena in our country, that it's not inscribed in the stars, even less in the plans of God to make us expiate our supposed sins. (xii)

Gilbert is railing against those who, like Batrville (and indeed, quite possibly, Batrville specifically), claim to have foreseen the event (calling them *prophètes d'occasion* [opportunistic prophets or charlatans]). Likewise, she rejects any suggestion that the earthquake was the product of supernatural design (*inscrit dans les astres*), or that it was a means by which God punished mankind for its supposed sins (*d'hypothétiques péchés*). Thus, she argues against all strains of mysticism that

tend to promote the interests of false prophets while absolving the unregulated foreign and domestic forces that have despoiled Haiti by destroying the environment and engaging in unsafe building practices. In her view, all forms of mystical determinism come at the expense of ordinary Haitians whose only hope for a better future lies in political, economic and environmental reform.

While Gilbert castigates false prophets that she believes turn the catastrophe to their own advantage, Gilbert herself capitalizes on it to promote her pre-existing agenda of radical reform. Indeed, her quick repackaging after the earthquake of previously published essays is intended to confirm her as a secular visionary in her own right. Rather than see those with power and money as potentially having the means to contribute to Haiti's reconstruction, she argues that they are no more than an additional cause of Haitians' misery. Thus she uses the earthquake to buttress her agenda of revolutionary populist social change. Gilbert ends one of her essays with this call to action:

Méfions-nous des recettes des "amis" et des coupables compassions. Méfions-nous de l'aide alimentaire, une arme à double tranchant qui a fait jusqu'ici beaucoup plus de tort que de bien au pays.

Mobilisons-nous pour une réorganisation totale de l'économie haïtienne, à tous les niveaux, en faveur des majorités, en faveur du peuple haïtien. Nous devons y arriver, nous pouvons y arriver. (10)

Let us be wary of solutions of "friends" and those with guilty compassion. Let us be wary of food aid, a weapon that cuts both ways and has up to now caused much more harm than good to the country.

Let us mobilize for a complete reorganization of the Haitian economy at all levels, in favor of the majority, in favor of the Haitian people. We must overcome, we can overcome.

Like Lahens and Laferrière, Gilbert rejects tropes of accursedness but her concern is not over the term's racist overtones, but rather its potential to absolve the elites of



blame for the Haitians' condition because it allows them to masquerade as saviors rather than as the perpetrators they really are.<sup>50</sup> At the same time, Gilbert's rhetoric is so harsh and so categorical that she minimizes the obvious natural dimensions of the earthquake so as to shift the blame for all the destruction in Haiti to classes of individuals she identifies as perpetrators. She suggests a kind of metonymy in which the weakness of the Haitian building stock stands in for a political and economic system that is *tellement pourri, tellement décadent, tellement inhumain, qu'il amplifie de façon tragique les moindres sautes d'humeur de la nature* (xii) [so rotten, so decadent, so inhuman, that it amplifies in tragic fashion the slightest burst of anger of nature]. In so doing, she invests nameless elites with such excessive power and such malevolence that she comes close to suggesting that the earthquake was simply a trigger, or even a pretext, for finishing off a people whose suffering is a willed consequence of international elites' unbounded drive to dispossess Haitians of their country's wealth for the sake of their self-enrichment. In effect, she is casting contemporary Haitian and Western elites along the lines of the least savory colonial and neo-colonial exploiters of the Haitian people.

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<sup>50</sup> It is worth remembering the extent to which Haitian intellectuals and other members of the elites know each other. Gilbert is targeting officials such as Yanick Lahens' husband, who was the ex-deputy director of the Haitian central bank, and now lives in very considerable comfort. In contrast, university professors like Gilbert and public intellectuals like Batrville may be paid pittance and live precariously. A truly nuanced reading of these texts must take account of the personal exposure of authors of differing social and economic positions to the enduring and corrosive social and racial fissures within Haitian society.

## Earth enraged

In addition to divine and human perpetrators of the catastrophe, in the aftermath of the earthquake, Haitian authors, including Gaspard Dorelien and Chenald Augustin, anthropomorphized the earth as itself a malevolent actor, rather than as an innocent, or neutral, instrumentality of a divinity or other force that causes it to shake, wreaking destruction on its human inhabitants. In so doing, they reverse the conventional relationship of a benevolent, fecund, feminine earth that suffers to the exploitative men that despoil it. As Dominique Batrville points out in a passage from our interview cited earlier, canonical novels, including Anthony Lespès' *Les semences de la colère* (1949) and Jacques Romani's *Gouverneurs de la rosée* (1944), depict the earth as inhospitable at times, but never malignant. In Roumain's prototypical *roman engagé* [political novel], Haitian peasants face a drought that brings them near starvation; but it is clearly attributed to agricultural mismanagement, political oppression by the local authorities that interferes with the peasants' capacity to organize improved cultivation means, and a feud within the community that inhibits the sharing of desperately needed spring water. In the end, the hero of the book gives his life to resisting the authorities and to overcoming the feud, and the earth provides redemption at the narrative's conclusion in the form of improved fertility. Rather than willfully antagonizing the protagonists, the earth in these novels suffers from the vicissitudes of human dysfunction that prevent it from serving in its natural role of nourishing human life.

Pre-earthquake Haitian literary texts generally figure the earth as a victim of humans, rather than the reverse. Critics Rafaël Lucas and R. H. Mitsch cite

approximately thirty Haitian literary works written between 1970 and 2000 in which the earth is represented as having been degraded by avaricious humans, frequently through rapacious political and economic policies. This dynamic changes decisively in certain Haitian earthquake texts that refigure earth as a malicious agent, frequently anthropomorphizing it in their imagery.

In Gaspard Dorelien's poem, "Elle n'est pas venue d'en haut," (2011) [It Didn't Come Down from Above], the source of malevolence is explicitly relocated from the divine (*en haut*) to the earth:

Elle n'est pas venue d'en haut  
Vent froid  
La grêle n'est pas venue d'en haut  
Notre mort centenaire  
Notre quotidien  
Addition de survie  
Il ne faut pas laisser le cœur trembloter  
La terre  
Singe téméraire  
A égaré le sien  
Vent glacial  
La giboulée n'est pas tombée du ciel  
Cause  
Pour compter les morts  
Les doigts ne suffisent plus  
Là-bas  
En Haïti  
Les cœurs résonnaient le tam-tam  
Percussion des premiers nègres  
Effroi de la terre  
Il ne faut pas laisser le cœur trembloter  
La terre  
Mégère de sangsue  
A englouti nos maisons  
Nos amours  
Nos faux espoirs  
La mort n'est pas venue avec la pluie  
Pour compter les disparus  
La mémoire ne suffit plus

Brise glacée  
La tornade n'est pas du firmament  
Désormais  
Ici  
En Haïti  
La mort est un nombre pair  
12  
Il ne faut plus laisser le cœur trembloter  
La terre a peur du tambour-battant  
La mort est ennemie de tout tam-tam qui résonne.

"It Didn't Come Down from Above"

It didn't come down from above  
The wind is cold  
The hail didn't come down from above  
Our hundred-year death  
Our daily Survival count  
The heart mustn't be allowed to tremble  
The earth  
A reckless monkey  
Has misplaced its own heart  
The wind is icy  
The sleet didn't fall from the sky Reason enough  
To count the dead  
There aren't enough fingers  
Over there  
In Haiti  
The hearts echoed the tam-tam Percussion of the first negroes  
Terror of the earth  
The heart mustn't be allowed to tremble  
The earth  
A hellion leech  
Devoured our houses  
Our loves  
Our false hopes  
Death did not come with rain  
To count the disappeared  
Not enough room in the memory  
The tornado comes not from the firmament

from now on  
Here  
In Haiti  
Death is an even number  
12

The heart mustn't be allowed to tremble any longer  
The earth dreads a snare drummer  
Death is the enemy of all resounding tam-tams.  
(Translated from the French by Nataša Đurovičová.)

Dorelien situates the earthquake within a repeating cycle of natural disasters that occur every hundred years.<sup>51</sup> He juxtaposes the hundred-year cycle with the everyday (*Notre mort centenaire / Notre quotidien*), as if life in Haiti is always at the mercy of periodic catastrophe. He also gestures to the original crime of slavery, equating the rumbling of the earth with the sound of traditional drums issuing from slave encampments (*Les cœurs résonnaient le tam-tam / Percussion des premiers nègres*).

Dorelien leaves no question that henceforth the earth, not the skies, is the agent of destruction (*La tornade n'est pas du firmament / Désormais*). Refigured in the masculine gender, the earth is an impious monkey, and, in the feminine, a sorceress using leeches. The earth is a cruel betrayer of its own, the destroyer of houses and loves, the source of false hopes.

In Chenald Augustin's "La terre suspend sa ronde de papillon" ["The Earth Suspends its Butterfly Cycle"] the earth is transformed in the moment of the earthquake from its association with the rounds of the butterfly (fertilizing flowers) to a voracious and destructive force that strangles those same flowers.

"La terre suspend sa ronde de papillon" (Extrait)

La terre se met en colère  
Des centaines de milliers de fleurs  
A peine écloses

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<sup>51</sup> Haiti has a long history of devastating earthquakes, including large ones in 1751 and 1842.

Sont étranglées  
Entre les larves dévoreuses de la terre

La terre a hurlé au point que des étoiles  
Deviennent cendres  
Coulant sur un fleuve rouge de sang

Le soleil est allé se coucher  
Avec des décombres et des taches de sang dans la gorge

Port-au-Prince, Jacmel, Léogâne, Petit-Goâve  
Des cimetières à ciel ouvert  
Des silences ensanglantés

Les rues désertes  
Les maisons closes  
Les enfants jouent avec leurs ombres affamées  
Un oiseau crucifie l'odeur des villes mortes à l'horizon

Port-au-Prince, Jacmel, Léogâne, Petit-Goâve  
Des cimetières à ciel ouvert  
Des silences ensanglantés

...

“The Earth Suspends its Butterfly Cycle” (Excerpt)

The earth is gripped by fury  
Hundreds of thousands of flowers  
Barely budded  
Are crushed  
Among earth's voracious larvae

The earth screamed until the stars  
Became ash  
flowing on a river red with blood

The sun has lain down  
With ruins and clots of blood in its throat

Port-au-Prince, Jacmel, Léogâne, Petit-Goâve  
Open sky cemeteries  
Bloodied silences

Deserted streets  
Closed houses

Children playing with their starved shadows  
A bird crucifies the stench of dead cities to the horizon

Port-au-Prince, Jacmel, Léogâne, Petit-Goâve  
Open sky cemetery  
Bloodied silences

(Translated from the French by Nataša Đurovičová.)

In Augustin's imagery, the earth replaces the butterflies that pollinate flowers with voracious larvae that devour them. There is no suggestion of any human cause, just the effect of the catastrophe upon them as the cities of man are transformed into open graveyards. Indeed, the earth's relationship with the sky is reversed. It rages so loudly that it turns the stars to ashes (*La terre a hurlé au point que des étoiles / Deviennent cendres*).

### **Representing the personal**

The title of Marc-Endy Simon's collection of poems, *Je ne pardonne pas au malheur* (2010) [*I do not forgive my misfortune*], turns to the deeply personal, the death of his twenty-four year old son in the earthquake, which he experiences as being irredeemable. Echoing testimonies of some Holocaust survivors that genuine survival is impossible,<sup>52</sup> Simon writes, in a long poem titled, after his son's name, "Loubendy," that [*Loubendy*] *n'est pas mort / ceux pour qui / il était la raison de ne pas rompre la digue / ce sont eux qui sont morts* (7) [*Loubendy is not dead / those for whom / he was the reason for not allowing the breaching of the dyke / it is they who are dead.*] Simon might have himself survived the earthquake, while his son died in

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<sup>52</sup> In one well known example, in Art Spiegelman's *Maus* (vol. II), Art tells Françoise in reaction to antisocial behavior of his father that in some sense his father, a Holocaust survivor, did not, in fact, survive his losses, particularly that of his wife. (98)

it; but in a tragic reversal he sees his son as the one who lived, perhaps in his memory, while those for whom he was everything apprehend themselves as dead.

The title personifies *malheur* [misfortune] as if it were a perpetrator in itself and could be pardoned. Ordinarily, *malheur* would signify the consequence of an accident or misdeed, and it would be the human agent that caused it that would ask to be forgiven for inflicting it. Simon seems to acknowledge that the magnitude of the pain would suggest a pardon be requested and perhaps granted, but in this case there is no available subject that could receive a pardon. Simon is using the word metonymically, to stand in for the event that caused it (the *malheur* being the earthquake in all its destructiveness); but also, perhaps, to say that the pain of losing a son takes on a reified personal meaning and as such is irredeemable.

To the extent Simon is willing to locate the agent of his pain, in the first stanza of the first poem in the collection, “Après le 12 janvier,” he associates it with a brutal earth:

Ecrasés sous une sorte de cauchemar indissoluble  
Nous portons dans nos entrailles  
La brutalité de la terre qui s'ébroue (5)

Crushed under a sort of indissoluble nightmare  
We hold in our guts  
The brutality of an earth that snorts [in the manner of a horse]

It is important to remember that these poems of Dorelien, Augustin, and Simon were written in the close aftermath of the earthquake and are articulations of their authors' own pain, even as they are at the same time speaking for and to their own suffering community. The poems were written while their authors' emotions were raw and should not be taken as their final judgment on the earth as malevolent; yet



as trauma victims it is to be expected that their sense of the earth is likely forever altered.

Dorelien, Augustin, and Simon represent the earth as an inherently impersonal perpetrator. It may be cruel, but its cruelty is visited upon Haiti and Haitians collectively. While they feel the weight of chance in the incidence of injury and death,<sup>53</sup> they do not experience the destruction as directed against them personally. However, Emmelie Prophète, in a short prose work titled “Je Te cherche,” [I search for You] (2010) imagines herself in a personal relationship with an earth that is placing her life in peril, as if it had singled her out. Prophète does not identify her relationship to the person for whom she’s searching (though her description in her poem of her body as *Ton corps frêle* [Your frail body] suggests it may have been her daughter), but her capitalization of the pronouns Tu/Toi and related possessives makes it clear that she or he is everything to her. In her first-person narrative, she describes the agony of searching for her beloved in a city in ruins, in which the normal order has been overturned: *La ville a chaviré. Les corps, les maisons se sont mélangés. Les repères ont disparu* (135). [The city has been toppled. Bodies and houses are mixed together. The familiar places have disappeared.] In a passage reminiscent of Simon, who disclaims survival in the absence of his son, she writes, *Un demain sans Toi veut dire un temps qui n'existe pas.* [A tomorrow without You is a time that does not exist.] She imagines herself in a

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<sup>53</sup> The greatest factor was whether a person happened to be inside a building that collapsed. Claude C. Pierre, a prominent poet and professor of linguistics told me that he would ordinarily have been in an academic building that collapsed, but fortuitously had been at an appointment with his dentist.

struggle with an earth that would wish to engulf her, and from which she has to fight to free herself:

Personne ne respire. J'essaie de courir. Je ne suis pas certaine de mes mouvements. La terre tremble sous mes pieds. Essaie de me retenir. De m'attirer vers elle. Je me bats. Je ne suis pas la plus forte. J'ai peur. (135)

No one breathes. I try to run. I am not sure of some of my movements. The earth moves under my feet. Tries to hold me back. [She's referring to the earth.] To draw me toward her. I struggle. I am not the stronger one.

Prophète imagines her experience of the earthquake as akin to a nightmare. She struggles against it in terror, knowing that it is stronger than she is.

Prophète's imagery recalls my interview in January 2012 with Inéma Jeudi, a young poet and protégé of Lyonel Trouillot, in which he talked about a poem he'd written in Krèyol, whose title he translated as "Plus galant que moi" [More gallant than I]. He explained that his lover had been killed in the earthquake and that the earth had been more "gallant" because it had known how to hold her close. He figures the earth as a romantic or even sexual competitor that was able to take his lover from him by exerting a more definitive embrace. Jeudi appears to be blaming himself in part for letting her go, as if he was insufficiently gallant and perhaps unwilling to make to her a commitment of marriage. He may be saying that the earth then preempted him.

Jeudi was also suffering from his memory of witnessing the death of the secretary of his academic department. He recounted that when the earthquake struck he'd been in a doorway that had protected him, while he saw the ceiling in the room in which the secretary was sitting collapse upon her. He described candidly the tremendous emotional and physical toll that his traumatization and his

feelings of guilt at having survived while those he loved and those close to him perished was taking upon him.

Literature provides these courageous individuals with a medium of expression that allows them to confront their own desperation and their sense of unrecoverable loss, even as the very act of writing signals their willingness to go on living. Simon's declaration that he is dead may be taken at face value: some part of him died with his son in those ruins. Yet in his fidelity to his son's memory and in his act of recording his own pain in his poetry, he affirms his willingness to awaken each morning. Loubendy ends with this stanza:

Chaque fois que la terre réplique  
Abandonne les pierres  
Ces mauvais conducteurs de sentiments  
Et viens reposer en paix  
Entre les phrases de ce poème  
Pour m'apprendre à me réveiller vivant. (9)

Each time that the earth reacts [in an aftershock]  
Leaves alone the stones  
These poor conveyors of feelings  
And comes to rest in peace  
Between the lines of this poem  
To teach me to wake up alive.

Simon, in the stanzas that precedes this one, imagines the spirit of his son returning to the earth, stirring up in him memories of his early childhood, and bringing him a sense of peace. Above all, however, it is the process of writing itself that teaches him to live in his loss (*m'apprendre à me réveiller vivant*<sup>54</sup>).

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<sup>54</sup> It seems likely to me, but is not certain, that this line was inspired by Syto Cavé's now well known line, written within days of the earthquake, that is discussed at length in the preceding chapter.

## Writing of trauma from the diaspora

Edwidge Danticat has on several occasions published for American audiences accounts of her anguish at watching news of the earthquake unfold on her television screen at her home in the United States. Like others in the diaspora, she desperately awaited news of family members with whom all communication links had been severed. For many Americans, Danticat, who writes in English and lives in the U.S., is the preeminent voice of Haiti.<sup>55</sup> It is therefore quite understandable that Danticat's readers would look to her to interpret the disaster. Danticat's article in the *New Yorker* on February 1, 2010,<sup>56</sup> "A Little While," fulfilled a similar function to Yanick Lahens' article in *Libération*, on January 19, 2010, "*Haïti ou la santé du Malheur*" ["Haiti or the condition of misfortune"] in its highly literary mediation of the experience of the earthquake for audiences in North America and Europe, respectively.

However, while Lahens places the French reader of her article *in medias res*, conveying what it felt like to stand *dans l'embrasure d'une porte* [in a doorway] when *le sol se dérober sous vos pieds* [when the earth gives way under your feet], Danticat essentially describes what it was like to watch the catastrophe unfold on

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<sup>55</sup> In an article in Brown University's (where Danticat received an MFA) alumni magazine, Charlotte Bruce Harvey writes that "Over the nearly two decades since she earned her MFA in 1993 at Brown, Danticat has become one of the most celebrated writers in the United States and the principal interpreter of all things Haitian to the outside world". Obviously, alumni magazines extol their subjects, but Harvey's point is valid. As she notes, Danticat was sought out by many journalists for commentary on the earthquake in its immediate aftermath.

<sup>56</sup> The issue was dated February 1, but had appeared about a week earlier, as we may learn from an online conversation on the *New Yorker*'s web site in which Danticat participated on January 25, 2010. "Ask the author live: Edwidge Danticat." (*New Yorker*)

television. She provides the perspective of a Haitian émigrée watching the same CNN newscasts as her readers. Her testimony transmits the experience not of knowing what the earthquake felt and sounded like, but rather the experience of *watching* and, like Guy Régis, Jr., *not knowing* the fate of members of her extended family. She begins her first essay on the earthquake, published less than two weeks after the event, with the dramatic moment when she learns that “My cousin Maxo has died.<sup>57</sup> The house that I called home during my visits to Haiti collapsed on top of him.” In these seemingly simple declarations, Danticat evokes one of the earthquake’s harsh reversals: just as the earth is transformed from a source of sustenance to the locus of widespread destruction, so does the home morph from a shelter into a site of lethal peril to its occupants.

Like Guy Régis, Jr., Danticat learned of the earthquake through the media and from family and friends in Haiti. However, unlike Régis, Jr., she does not claim in her writings to have suffered the same post-traumatic physical sequelae of claustrophobia or the imagined “ghost shaking” of the earth. For Régis, Jr., Haiti remains his home; his children live there; and he knows that he will soon return to share in their life among the ruins of their city. In sum, we learn from the experiences of these authors that it is important to recognize degrees of traumatization that depend, in part, on the respective positions of the authors, both

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<sup>57</sup> Maxo figures prominently in Danticat’s *Brother I’m Dying* (2007), the story of his father, Danticat’s uncle, Joseph, who dies in the US Department of Homeland Security’s custody at the Miami airport while he’s attempting to establish his persecution at the hands of the *Tontons Macoutes*, and thus his status as a political refugee. Danticat blames the INS for a combination of negligence, incompetence, harshness, and racially tinged discrimination that led to Joseph’s death in a holding cell.

in kind and intensity, and to study the way in which they are enacted textually.

Certainly, they belie binaries that oppose the traumatized and non-traumatized.

Indeed, in an interview on November 11, 2010, discussing the loss of Maxo and other Haitians, Danticat says “There are degrees of trauma, and sometimes, if people can hear you, or read you, your trauma seems more pressing. But there are people who suffered so much more; I render this space to them.” (“Edwidge Danticat: Return to Haiti”). Danticat recognizes that she occupies a position of great privilege relative to the vast majority of Haitian victims. In a June 2013 interview, she juxtaposes hearing of her MacArthur Foundation Fellowship award in the fall of 2009 with, only a few months later, learning of the disaster that had befallen the Haitian people.<sup>58</sup> Danticat’s literary and personal identification is as a Haitian, and she is at all times conscious of the infinitely greater distress of those who remained in Haiti. When she says, “I render this space to them,” she is, in a sense, declaring that she is rendering them a service through her writing. Her profession is at once a dedication and an appropriation of their experience as the source material for her writing.

As in the case of Guy Régis, Jr., Danticat’s absence from Haiti brought its own intense psychic challenges. Danticat feels guilt not simply because she was absent from Haiti during the earthquake, but because she did not hasten to join her extended family members there in its aftermath. In her *World Pulse* interview, she talks about a conversation in which one of her relatives asks on the phone about her

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<sup>58</sup> In her June 2013 interview in *Wild River Review* she cites the unanticipated financial windfall of \$500,000 from the MacArthur Foundation, with Haitians’ general financial ruin, almost as examples of the capriciousness of fate.

one-year-old baby. She reports her response: "I cried and apologized. 'I'm sorry I can't be with you,' I said. 'If not for the baby.'" Later in the interview, she frames her dilemma along gender lines:

I've never had such a pressing question of loyalty in my life. It's the eternal female dilemma, I think. But then there was also this feeling of helplessness. Like what could I do? I'm not a doctor. I'm not a rescue worker.

Danticat's invoking of what she terms "the eternal female dilemma," undoubtedly owes something to the fact she was being interviewed for a publication of an international feminist organization; but her remarks may be read as a frank and unrehearsed account of those considerations that she was weighing at the time. She did travel to Haiti for a short time, about a month after the earthquake, but in the interim she was anguished by feelings of guilt for not dropping everything and getting on a plane. Her conflicting emotions were experienced by other diasporic authors, including Dany Laferrière, who was in Haiti during the earthquake, but left within two days, and the essayist and practicing psychiatrist, Joël des Rosiers, who was in Québec, where he lives, when the earthquake struck. At a gathering on May 3, 2013, at the recently inaugurated Centre Culturel Anne-Marie Morriset, which occupies a familial residence of the Trouillot family, des Rosiers described how he had packed his bags, and told his psychiatric patients that he would be absent for two months. However, he recounted, shortly before leaving someone told him he would only be in the way; and that the skills he had would then be of little use. He appeared to me to be asking for understanding from the many members of the Haitian literary establishment who were there.

The earthquake threw into relief dramas of authenticity that Danticat and other Haitian authors in the diaspora face generally. In *Create dangerously: the immigrant artist at work* (2010), Danticat addresses the misgivings she believes Haitians feel about her work. She explains that Haitian Americans had found particularly objectionable the leitmotif in her first book, *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (1994), of virginity testing performed by mothers on their daughters, a ritual that she described as profoundly humiliating to the young women. She writes of overhearing a man at a Haitian-American fundraising gala who said about her “Why was she taught to read and write? That is not us. The things she writes, they are not us” (32). Danticat defends her claim of virginity testing, while conceding that the practice is perhaps not as widespread as portrayed in her book, which, she points out, is a work of fiction. Still, the clear implication of this passage is that to the degree that she writes about life in Haiti in manners that Haitians find less than flattering, she will be accused of inauthenticity. She does not appear to entertain the possibility that having left Haiti at the age of twelve, and having visited it only infrequently and for short periods thereafter, she might not have a sure grasp of the current culture, however that is defined, and what Haitians object to is not unflattering representations, but erroneous ones.

In addition to authenticity, Danticat is plagued, apparently, by accusations that she is exploiting Haitian culture for financial gain. She writes:

“You are a parasite and you exploit your culture for money and what passes for fame.” is the second most common type of criticism I get from inside the community.

Anguished by my own sense of guilt, I often reply feebly that in writing what I do, I exploit no one more than myself. Besides, what is the alternative for me or anyone else who might not dare to offend? Self-censorship? Silence? (33)



It is not quite clear what Danticat means by “I exploit no one more than myself,” since the point would seem to be that as an author she determines the degree of her self-disclosure, whereas when she writes of Haitians, she appropriates their lives as her raw material. Authors necessarily draw on the lives of others for their material, and whether their use of them constitutes exploitation would seem to depend on the substance and circumstances of any particular representation; but Danticat clearly wrestles with what she perceives as ethical dilemmas that are particularly acute for diasporic authors writing about misery in their home countries. In Danticat’s case, she’s explicitly dealing with the dilemma of writing about conditions of deprivation from a personal position of comfort and wealth—which she attained precisely by writing about the miserable conditions in her country of origin. The question of language, too, plays a role, as she cannot be thought of as contributing to Haitian literature that is read within Haiti. Some of her books that are written in English are available in translation in Haiti, but her Haitian readership is almost certainly restricted to a few dozen intellectuals that read her in the English in which she writes.

In a *New York Times Book Review* article on Danticat’s *Create Dangerously*, titled “The Other Side of the Water,” (a translation of a Krèyol expression for Haitians living abroad), Amy Wilentz, an American journalist and author, who has written extensively on Haiti, focuses on precisely these questions.<sup>59</sup> She writes that

The diaspora conflict is particularly painful in the case of writers and artists who live elsewhere but use Haitian material in their work. ... [Danticat] describes herself as ‘anguished by my own sense of guilt.’ For Danticat, the

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<sup>59</sup> Wilentz quotes the same passages from *Create Dangerously* that I have used.

burden of responsibility and indebtedness is dreadful, her escape from the world she writes about fraught with emotion and self-loathing. Her guilt is the worst kind: survivor guilt.

It might seem curious that in a review that foregrounds ‘survivor guilt,’ Wilentz does not engage the earthquake, except to name it among a list of depredations of human origin that have caused the loss of Danticat’s friends and relatives. This is largely explicable by the hybrid nature of the book under review, as *Create Dangerously*, although published post-earthquake in the fall of 2010 is based on a series of lectures that Danticat gave at Princeton in 2008, with the addition of a final chapter that reprints the *New Yorker* article on the death of her cousin, Maxo.

Wilentz’s judgment that “for Danticat, the burden of responsibility and indebtedness is dreadful” seems to me a bit overstated: I don’t see evidence for the claim that Danticat’s writing is “fraught with ... self-loathing” and I particularly question her dramatic conclusion, “[Danticat’s] guilt is the worst kind: survivor guilt.” This formulation appears to me to be tinged with Holocaust rhetoric; at least I don’t see Danticat herself making the leap. In fact, Danticat herself is careful not to claim the status of a “survivor.” She uses the term several times in *Create Dangerously*, but in each case, she is referring to individual Haitians that have escaped a particular political or natural disaster. For example, she writes, “Dany Laferrière was an additional survivor of the earthquake” (*Create Dangerously* 161). Indeed, slightly earlier she talks about how she “might have been [among] either additional victims or survivors of the earthquake” if she had, like Laferrière traveled there for the conference *Étonnants Voyageurs* (160). In other words, in this passage, she disclaims the status of a “survivor.”

Furthermore, Danticat did not “escape from the world she writes about,” as Wilentz suggests, as Danticat makes clear in her memoir, *Brother I’m Dying* (2007). It could be that Wilentz’s use of “escape” reveals her own sense that Haiti is so miserable a place that any departure constitutes an escape, but such is not the attitude of Haitian writers, nor of Danticat, at least not explicitly. In all events, As Danticat describes it, her aunt and uncle had raised her and her brother in a loving household, which she left with much trepidation to rejoin her parents who had emigrated many years earlier.

For all this, Wilentz’s basic point is well founded. Danticat identifies herself as Haitian and the entirety of her corpus is set in Haiti or, to a lesser extent, in the Haitian-American communities in the United States.<sup>60</sup> She has prospered in a manner that is unavailable to the authors that remain in Haiti and write in French. Martin Munro, in a chapter titled “Edwidge Danticat: Home Is Where the Hurt Is,” in his book, *Exile and Post-1946 Haitian Literature: Alexis, Depestre, Ollivier, Laferrrière, Danticat* (2007), raises a key ethical question when he suggests that books on Haiti that emphasize the suffering of Haitians engender in their readers a false sense of solidarity with people about whom they essentially know nothing. Munro further describes the problem of language for diasporic Haitian authors, especially Danticat, who writes in English for an audience of Americans, further isolating her from the people on whose stories she draws for her source material.

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<sup>60</sup> *The Dew Breaker* (2004) and *Brother, I’m Dying* are largely set in Haitian-American communities in the United States, though the scenes set in Haiti are crucial to each of the narratives.

Dany Laferrière, who fulfills to some degree, for Canadian French-language audiences (and audiences in France, as well), the role that Danticat performs for Americans, as the preeminent informant of all things Haitian, faced a similar dilemma of divided loyalties in the days immediately following the earthquake. As I noted earlier, he was at the Hotel Karibé, eating an early dinner with his friend, the Haitian author Rodney Saint-Éloi, who had recently taken up residence in Canada, when the earthquake struck. In *Tout bouge autour de moi*, Laferrière recounts the anguish he felt when he was called upon, two days after the earthquake, to decide whether to return immediately to Canada on a charter arranged by the Canadian embassy. Laferrière describes his own conflicted thinking at that moment:

On a dix secondes pour savoir si on reste là où on est ou si on va ailleurs. Cela fait une différence mais je ne suis pas encore tout à fait sûr d'avoir pris la bonne décision. Je balance entre mon cœur qui me dit de rester avec les gens, et mon esprit qui me dit que je serai plus utile là-bas pour ces mêmes gens. Finalement, je me dis que c'est peut-être la dernière fois qu'on me propose un rapatriement.

We have ten seconds to decide whether we stay there where we are [in Haiti] or if we go elsewhere. It's a big difference and I am still not altogether sure that I made the right decision. I weigh my heart, which tells me to remain with the people [in Haiti] and my mind, which tells me that I will be more useful far away for these same people. Finally, I tell myself that it's the last time I will be offered repatriation.

Once arrived at his home, Laferrière endures *une nuit d'angoisse* [an anguished night] in which he is psychologically neither still in Haiti, nor yet arrived at his own home in Canada. Thereafter, he remains conflicted. (*...je ne suis pas encore tout à fait sûr d'avoir pris la bonne décision*). [...I am still not entirely sure that I made the right decision.]

It is hardly surprising that both Danticat and Laferrière felt highly conflicted about their great privilege compared with those in Haiti, and their decisions not to travel to Haiti, in the former's case, or to remain there in the latter's. Both were forced to weigh their family situations. As I noted, Danticat cites the needs of her young child. Laferrière factored in his wife's distress (55-56). Fundamentally, though, each came to the decision (or at least came to justify their decisions) to remain abroad by arguing that they would be of more use to the Haitian people by writing texts and giving interviews that brought news of Haiti to their audiences outside Haiti (*...je serai plus utile là-bas* [I would be more useful there [in Canada] (53). Laferrière leaves no doubt that the book in which this passage appears, *Tout bouge autour de moi* [*Everything Around me is Shaking*] is in part a fulfillment of that promise. He returns to this topic in a later section of the book titled "*La notion d'utilité*" (106-107) [The notion of usefulness]. He advances quite energetically the proposition that those who are not relief workers would do best to stay away so as not to encumber the relief operations, utilizing a proverb: *à trop l'entourer on risque d'étouffer le malade* [To surround the patient too closely is to risk suffocating him]. He goes so far as to recount the story of a Haitian-Canadian acquaintance without particular skills who traveled to Haiti to offer what help he could, only to find himself incapable of supplying his own basic needs, and thus, as Laferrière puts it, himself swelling the ranks of those who depended on international aid. Danticat makes the same claim in her interview with *World Pulse*: "People were saying that going back meant eating food that survivors could otherwise eat." Somewhat bizarrely, Laferrière cites the example of François Duvalier to argue that just as it is

possible for people to be useful to Haiti from outside Haiti, so it is possible for people to be worse than useless and still live within the country. Laferrière concludes his section on *utilité* by saying, fatuously, *Ce pays a besoin d'énergie et non de larmes* [This country has need of energy and not tears.]

For all this, I think some forbearance is desirable in examining writings that were rushed into print after the earthquake, and the same is true for published interview material. Danticat and Laferrière are real people with real lives, and there is no doubt they struggled with finding a course of action that they could live with. Indeed, for our purposes, the extemporaneous quality of these hastily composed writings, which were published on a schedule that allowed them to be as timely as possible, is itself useful in gaining insight into the authors' thought processes, including those that are self-justifying or even self-aggrandizing.

Thus, it is unexceptionable that Laferrière and Danticat should choose to remain in North America and their very similar modes of explaining their decisions would be of little consequence if it were not for their moves to assuage their own guilt by assuming the mantle of ambassadors speaking for their people, even though their knowledge of the conditions then being faced by Haitians was indirect and generally speaking, limited to their reading of accounts by Western reporters and their contacts with members of the elite. Even this would be less problematic if they were not each taking as their objective the burnishing of the image of Haitians in the eyes of their Western readers, also members of elites, with the purported purpose of keeping Haiti in the public eye and, presumably, supporting ongoing fundraising efforts.

Laferrière casts himself explicitly as a witness for the Haitian people in an interview with Patrick Simonon on France's national television station, TV5, conducted on the first anniversary of the earthquake. Simonon asks him what his thoughts are at that moment, and he says Laferrière's first remark is that he's spent the year traveling *un petit peu partout dans le monde pour témoigner ... de la manière dont les haïtiens se sont comportés...* [here and there throughout the world to testify...about the manner in which the Haitians conducted themselves...]. Laferrière's claim is that they behaved with great dignity. Danticat is a bit more circumspect, but her interviewer in the Brown alumni magazine, wrote the following, based on the conversation the two had just had:

... Danticat felt powerless. She wanted to help, but her one-year-old was having trouble feeding, making travel impossible. So, Danticat says, "I did what I do."  
Which is to say, she wrote.

... As a masterly writer of fiction, memoirs, and essays, she has demonstrated the influence a writer can exert in keeping a country's plight before the world's eye. In the United States, she's raised money for nonprofits and given book readings, doing whatever she can to remind those with money and influence that more than a million people—half of them children—are still without homes, that schools and hospitals need to be rebuilt, that Haiti's infrastructure, always fragile, has been decimated.

In *Create Dangerously*, Danticat likewise casts her role as a writer as one of great responsibility. Her first chapter (the first lecture she gave in the series at Princeton) begins with a detailed description of film footage of the execution of two young Haitians, Marcel Numa and Louis Drouin, in 1964 by the Duvalier régime. (They had earlier emigrated to the United States, but returned to Haiti in order to fight in the anti-Duvalier guerilla group, Jeune Haïti.) Danticat writes that they were "immigrants, like me. Yet they had abandoned comfortable lives in the United States

and sacrificed themselves for the homeland” (7). She calls the story of these two young men her personal “creation myth” that imbued her career as a writer with a sense of purpose: to tell hidden, or little known stories like this one, so as to keep them alive in memory. She doesn’t address the matter of the language in which she writes, and it seems to me that her writing exclusively in English for an audience outside Haiti begs the question of whose memory is at stake. She then summarizes her book as follows:

Create dangerously, for people who read dangerously. This is what I’ve always thought it meant to be a writer. Writing, knowing in part that no matter how trivial your words may seem, someday, somewhere, someone may risk her or her life to read them. (10)

It is rather difficult to stomach her explicit comparison of herself to these two young men who were executed for their armed revolutionary activity, especially when one considers that she is pronouncing these words while giving a lecture in a prestigious endowed series at Princeton. The words ring the hollower since she has chosen to write only in English and only for audiences outside Haiti. Even if we could imagine that in some future circumstance someone in Haiti could get into trouble for reading a book by Edwidge Danticat, her American readers of her pieces in the *New Yorker* and elsewhere are not going to be putting their lives in danger by reading her work. Of course, Danticat’s point is that writers ought to create *as if* someone’s life depended on their words, and her purpose may be understood as inspirational or motivational, as she herself was inspired by learning of the two Haitian martyrs. But the general thrust of her claim for “dangerous” writing is that her duty is to write as if great political or social importance were, at least potentially, attached to her words. In the case of her writings on Haiti, she assuages her guilt by creating



her own narrative of utility, which consists of telling the story the Haitian people in a manner that emphasizes their dignity. Indeed, in her last chapter of *Create Dangerously*, Danticat writes approvingly of Laferrière for doing exactly what she was attempting herself: “A few days later, he returned to Canada, where he lives, to tell of what he had seen: of the bravery and dignity of Haitians” ... (161).

Laferrière, for his part, appears to be particularly interested in defending Haitians against reports of looting and other criminality in the immediate aftermath of the earthquake. In so doing, he testifies about a matter about which he knows next to nothing directly, and impugns the motives of journalists who were in fact reporting from the field, and not the confines of a luxury hotel, like the Karibé. To illustrate his counterfactual claim that looting was not a problem in Haiti after the earthquake, Laferrière contradicts rumors that he says are circulating of thefts in his luxury hotel by citing conversations he held with housekeepers at his hotel, who remained on duty after the earthquake, and who apparently assured him that there had not been any at all that day (50).

As for certain non-Haitian journalists who are reporting on looting and other crimes, Laferrière accuses them of wishing to confirm widely held negative (and, we infer, racist) stereotypes of the Haitian people:

Finalement, on n’a pas eu ces scènes de débordement que certains journalistes (sûrement pas tous) ont appelées de leurs vœux. J’imagine les premières pages des quotidiens si les pillages s’étaient multipliés. Et les commentaires à la télé du premier venu sur un pays de barbares. Au lieu de cela, on a vu un peuple digne, dont les nerfs sont assez solides pour résister aux plus terribles privations.

Finally, we didn’t have scenes of chaos that some journalists (though certainly not all) had called forth from their own desires. I imagine the front pages of the dailies if the looting had multiplied. And the commentaries on

television of the first to arrive in this country of savages. Instead of that, we saw a dignified people, whose nerve was solid enough to withstand the most dreadful hardships.

Laferrière, who had remained in the grounds of his luxury hotel, except for a brief tour by car with Lyonel Trouillot through relatively affluent sections of Port-au-Prince, was in no position to judge the accuracy of the reporting to which he refers, and much less to impugn the journalists' motives by suggesting that they were inventing degrading images that they wished to see (*ont appelées de leurs vœux*). In his interview on TV5MONDE, Patrick Simonon asked him what struck him about the *comportement* [conduct] of the Haitian people. Laferrière responds immediately, *mais leur extraordinaire élégance* [but their extraordinary elegance] and later recounts *J'ai vu des petites filles qui se sont comportées en héroïne* [I saw little girls who behaved as heroes] and contrasts them with French girls who wouldn't leave their rooms because, he suggests, their mothers were trapped within. In other words, Laferrière testifies that Haitian girls in the hotel behaved heroically, while French girls did not.

It would serve little purpose to document the well-known and easily confirmable reality that Haiti experienced profound and traumatizing breaches in public order and security in the aftermath of the earthquake, and came to depend heavily on international police forces to keep what order there was. It hardly even needs saying that not all Haitian comported themselves in the manner described in Laferrière's fantasy.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> See for example, a photo essay in the Guardian, published January 18, 2010, six days after the earthquake, titled "Haiti earthquake chaos: looters, violence and victims,

It is also hard to know what to make of Danticat's children's book, *Eight Days: A Story of Haiti* with illustrations by Alix Delinois (September 2010). This short book, written for American schoolchildren, ostensibly to teach them about the earthquake, imagines a child stuck in the rubble of his house for seven days, only to walk out unscathed into the arms of his parents on the eighth. The protagonist, named Junior, keeps up his spirits during this time by inventing stories based on memories from his happy childhood. Obviously, such was not the experience of actual Haitian children, who suffered grievously. Tens of thousands died cruelly in the ruins of Port-au-Prince, and hundreds of thousands were left homeless. Danticat would not contest that reality; but she answers the concern in an interview in which she's quoted as saying that she wrote the book first for her own daughter:

"I wrote this story to try to explain to her what had happened," Danticat says, "but also to find a kind of hopeful moment in it so it wasn't, at least to a child, all devastation." (NPR Books (Review))

If Danticat's and Laferrière's books were placed alongside all the literary texts written in French by Haitians who had experienced the earthquake and remained there, then their massive falsifications and elisions might be of little consequence. Yet, Danticat and Laferrière's voices are incomparably more prominent in the West than the voices of Haitian authors residing in Haiti, for whom finding publishers in

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(<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/picturegalleries/worldnews/7017906/Haiti-earthquake-chaos-looters-violence-and-victims.html>)" or an article in the same publication on the previous day, "Haiti earthquake: criminal gangs return to rule slums after escaping from prison."

(<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/centralamericaandthecaribbean/haiti/7010543/Haiti-earthquake-criminal-gangs-return-to-rule-slums-after-escaping-from-prison.html>) For a report among a great many on the problem of rapes see <http://www.cnn.com/2012/04/26/world/americas/cnnheroes-villard-appolon-haiti-rape>.

the United States or France is all but impossible. As Michel-Rolph Trouillot and many other scholars have argued, the silencing of Haitians whose narratives do not comport with the political objective of those in positions to write them have constituted a trauma in itself.

To represent the Haitian people as paragons would be to essentialize them as surely as the negative stereotypes that Laferrière justly opposes.<sup>62</sup> An even graver consequence would be acquiescence to a politically inspired silence concerning Haitian double victims—of the earthquake and of human abuses in its aftermath. Indeed, within the context of Haitian history, which has been deeply scarred by the suppression of narratives told from a Haitian perspective, and specifically of the stories of victims, any such move would appear to be especially problematic. By adopting a standard of “utility” or service to Haiti, Danticat and Laferrière have, in effect, ruled out narratives of predation, corruption, irredeemable suffering, and hopelessness that in their view would run counter to the image of dignity, courage, and so forth that they have taken as their objective to advance. In so doing, they emulate Holocaust narratives that make Jewish Holocaust victims into paragons thus dehumanizing them, as I have argued elsewhere. When authors “defend” Haitians against representations that are not consistent with their “dignity” by

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<sup>62</sup> I have focused on Danticat and Laferrière, because they occupy preeminent roles in contemporary diasporic Haitian literature, but there are many works written in the west that assume positivist frameworks. For example, Martin Munro, in his introduction to *Haiti Rising: Haitian History, Culture and the Earthquake of 2010*, writes “What [Haiti] needs, what it has needed for more than two hundred years, is genuine and lasting support, understanding, and respect; and it is in this spirit that the essays in this book have been assembled.” The book had as one of its explicit aims “to raise funds for Haitian artists,” which is obviously commendable, but hardly consistent with relating narratives at odds with the kinds of stories favored by Danticat and Laferrière. (1–2)

refusing to write them, they falsify the lived experiences of their putative subjects and replace them with their own inventions.

Ultimately, I do not think that the question of the physical location of an author is determinative of the psychological truth of her narrative. Certainly, only an actual direct witness could have written a narrative like Lyonel Trouillot's twenty-five page "Chronique de l'Après" [Chronicle of the Aftermath] that recounts his experiences immediately after the earthquake, including his movements about the city and his conversations with his author friends and numerous other individuals in varying positions in Haitian society. But authors other than Danticat or Laferrière outside Haiti, who also had great empathy and concern for Haitians, produced literary responses to the suffering of the Haitian people that recognized both their courage and their depredations. Only a handful of Americans will read, for example, the poem of Joujou Turenne, a Haitian author and storyteller living in Québec who, like Danticat, learned of the earthquake from afar. Her "Nausées entremêlées, douleurs entrecroisées" [Crisscrossed Thoughts, Entwined Pain] was completed nineteen days after the earthquake.

Il y a une douleur plurielle logée dans des poupées russes.  
Une de ces poupées a le ventre vide,  
Affamé de dignité pour mon peuple dont on montre des images d'horreur  
sensationnelles...inutiles pour comprendre l'essentiel.  
L'essentiel d'une douleur teintée de combativité, de courage, de témérité.  
Il y a les Américains qui font de la médecine de guerre et amputent à ciel  
ouvert.

Il y a les chiens qui dépriment parce qu'ils sentent trop la mort.  
Il y a la nuit, des femmes, des filles, violées, violentées.  
Il y a que ce n'est pas le moment pour une peine d'amour.  
C'est pas le moment pour une peine d'amour.

Il y a mon peuple, my people, blood of my blood, sans Requiem, en ce moment, qui enterre ses morts.<sup>63</sup>

There is a manifold pain, layered inside Russian nesting dolls.  
One of those dolls has an empty stomach,  
Starved for dignity for my people, shown only for sensationalist images of horror...useless for grasping what is essential.  
The essential of a pain colored by combativeness, by courage, by boldness.  
There are Americans practicing war medicine, amputating under open skies.  
There are dogs depressed by too much stench of death.  
There is the night, the women, the girls, violated, raped.  
There is that this isn't time for heartbreak.  
This isn't the time for heartbreak.  
There are my people, mon peuple, blood of my blood, Burying their dead for now without a Requiem. (Excerpt) (trans. by Nataša Ďurovičová)  
(excerpt)

Turenne's poem is based on a profound connection to those in Haiti ("Il y a mon peuple, my people, blood of my blood"), and she is perhaps writing for them, as well.

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<sup>63</sup> Turenne mixes French and English in this line.

## Conclusion

Earlier in this work, I interpreted Cathy Caruth's oft-quoted maxim, "History is precisely the way we are implicated in each other's traumas" (*Unclaimed Experience* 24) as "a call for dialog between individuals that recognize and respond to the traumatic histories of the other" (*supra* 36). Caruth's maxim is sweeping in its breadth, and its meaning, despite her use of "precisely," is not immediately scrutable; and so it is not surprising that others have deployed it in differing manners. Stef Craps, for example, cites the maxim at the beginning of a chapter of his 2012 *Postcolonial Witnessing: Trauma Out of Bounds* to support the proposition that "traumatic colonial histories ... have to be considered in relation to traumatic metropolitan or First World histories for trauma studies to have any hope of redeeming its promise of ethical effectiveness" (72). I propose in these last few pages to offer a brief study of Caruth's aphorism as a springboard for re-examining the central themes of this dissertation, and in so doing to bring it to a conclusion.

Caruth's maxim first appears in her 1991 article in the *Yale French Review*, "Unclaimed Experience: Trauma and the Possibility of History" (192). Most scholars, however, cite its second appearance, five years later, in a revised version of the essay that constitutes the first chapter of her similarly (but not identically) titled and highly influential 1996 book, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma Narrative and History* (24). Caruth uses Freud's *Moses and Monotheism* (1938), which she terms "one of the first works of trauma in this century" (182)<sup>64</sup>, to illustrate perhaps the

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<sup>64</sup> Caruth's claim is curious, since Freud's 1896, "The Aetiology of Hysteria," is usually cited as an early foundational work on trauma (Leys 20, esp. 20n6), but it

central claim of her corpus, which is that traumatic experience is unknowable directly and therefore not available to the conscious thought of the victim.<sup>65</sup> In brief, *Moses and Monotheism*, which Freud wrote in London just after he'd fled the Nazis, theorizes, provocatively, that Moses was not a Hebrew, but rather "a fervent follower of an Egyptian pharaoh and his sun-centered monotheism" (Caruth, "Unclaimed Experience" 183–184). Freud posits that Moses was murdered in a rebellion by his followers, who came to regret their act, which they covered up and replaced with the triumphalist and false counternarrative of Exodus. Caruth argues that in this foundational myth of the Jews, history is replaced by a vestigial traumatic experience of loss and guilt. Importantly for Caruth, Jews therefore cannot "know" their history other than as a lingering experience of trauma. In short, history has disappeared in favor of trauma. Caruth's move goes far beyond "emplotment," the manner in which "historical events are given narrative form" (Richardson 160), to deny that in the case of traumatic histories there are any externally knowable historical events to be emplotted.

As to the "we" of "History is precisely the way we ...", the sentence following the famous maxim clarifies its sense: "For whether we as German—or as English-speaking readers—cannot read this sentence without, ourselves, departing" (192). Both Caruth and Freud are writing, explicitly, on opposite sides of the Holocaust, and it would be very difficult to find in this maxim, when read in context, either a

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may be that Caruth means that the work should be categorized as trauma literature in a manner that is distinct from Freud's theoretical work.

<sup>65</sup> Caruth draws on Freud's conception of *Nachträglichkeit*, also described as belatedness or deferred action. Ruth Leys provides an extensive critique of Caruth's theorizing in the final chapter of *Trauma: A Genealogy* (2000, 16–17, 266–297).



call for dialog as I have it, or an ethical summons to Metropolitan/Colonial comparative studies as Craps has it (as much as each of us might wish that it did).

Why then do scholars quote Caruth's maxim, as I, and, apparently, Craps did, without investigating its context? In the first place, I imagine that it reads holistically, as a kind of moral summons for us to recognize that we are all connected to each other—a nice thought. By discounting the historical context of traumatic experience, the maxim invites readers to ignore *its own* context. For non-historians, there is perhaps something seductive about reducing history to little more than our own involvement or “implication” in other people's traumas—in our case, through the medium of reading, particularly when we may do so from a position of privilege and comfort. Caribbean trauma texts written for and read by Western audiences would seem to provide an ideal medium for the realization of “connection,” as readers in one place and time respond empathetically to the misfortunes of traumatized individuals and communities in another.

Trauma texts may indeed connect readers to the traumatic histories that they depict, though I would argue that their historical specificity is crucial to their meaning. While I believe that readers have a right to respond to all texts, including trauma novels, in any way they wish, I have in this dissertation urged readers to maintain an ethical awareness of their own psychic and emotional responses to trauma texts so as to retain their critical detachment from these texts. Caribbean trauma texts have the capacity to provoke their own reading errors through the extraordinary demands they place on empathetic readers, as critical responses to Marie Chauvet's *Amour, Colère, et Folie* illustrate. Critics must avoid conflating their

own positions as readers with those of the characters with whom they identify if they are to be able to interpret these characters, especially when they are victims of traumatic violence, as autonomous, complex individuals.

Trauma texts also offer the capacity to connect critics of different origins to each other, when each recognizes the other's stated histories and affiliations. I encourage critical readers not to assume that authors, characters, or other critics are motivated by or implicated in particular traumatic histories, except to the extent that their affiliations are made visible textually. For example, critics should recognize Kamau Brathwaite's stated self-identification to historical communities of slaves as affecting his views of the writings of white Creoles; but critics should not assume, as he did in *Contradictory Omens*, that other critics' writings are inflected by unarticulated affinities that they assume on the basis of others' races or ethnicities.

Standing behind these forces is the figure of the victimizer. Readers may be repelled by his character and identify with his victim; and indeed feel an echo of the victim's terror when they read descriptions of the traumatic violence to which she was subjected. They may further be wary of engaging in any critical project that would seek to "understand" the perpetrator and thereby lead to attenuating his responsibility for his crime.<sup>66</sup> However, careful readings of perpetrators are essential to understanding the transformative experience of the victim in the traumatic moment. Perpetrators and their victims are the fulcrum by which psychological trauma theory is joined with cultural trauma theory as readers recognize that victims of traumatic violence may be members of groups that have

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<sup>66</sup> See Metz (2012) 1022 for a discussion of this phenomenon in Holocaust literature.

perpetrated violence on others; and perpetrators of violence may identify with groups that have been historically victimized.

More complex readings of perpetrators and victims in Caribbean trauma texts have the potential to both draw upon and influence the course of trauma studies. I have found that works that are not themselves influenced by trauma theory are particularly helpful in advancing this dialectic. Rhys', Chauvet's, and Collins' novels were all written before trauma studies and the symptomology of PTSD gained currency. Haitian earthquake literature, written in the immediate aftermath of the disaster, on the other end of the spectrum, is also relatively unaffected by authors' knowledge of the conventions of trauma literature. Haitian authors' grappling with concerns that include accursedness, the benevolence of the earth, and the role of the divine and the supernatural, seems to me to have theoretical significance. Much remains to explore.

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