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Belaboring Masculinity: Ecology, Work, and the Body in Michel Ponnamah's *Dérive de Josaphat*

Michael Niblett

Speaking in 2001 in an interview with Renée K. Gosson, the Martinican writer Raphaël Confiant responded to a question about the “industrialization and overdevelopment” of his native island by asserting that, for him, the real issue was not so much industrialization, but rather the *deindustrialization* of Martinique. “When I was a kid,” he explained,

I saw factories everywhere. At the entrance to each town, there was a factory. Today, it's a ruin. There were distilleries. There were trains that transported the sugarcane. There was an entire industrial activity. And when the sugarcane industry was ruined at the end of the 1960s, Martinique became deindustrialized. You see, sugarcane is an industry because you can't transform it without a factory. [. . .] On the other hand, the banana, which replaced sugarcane, is just a fruit. You don't need to transform it. You cut it, put it in a box, and send it to Europe. So, in reality, we've gone from being an industrialized country to being a deindustrialized country [. . .]. For me, paradoxically, our *lieux de mémoire* are the ruins of our factories. All these abandoned distilleries and factories that are everywhere in Martinique, plus the train rails that you see in the countryside preserve the memory of industrial activity. (Gosson 2005, 143-44)

Confiant goes on to note how the hollowing out of Martinique's productive structures has gone hand in hand with its increasing dependence on subsidies from France, such that the island now has only the pretence of an economy. Non-productivity has been combined with

an influx of excess credit from the metropole and a forced transition to what Édouard Glissant has called a “consumer colony” (Glissant 1989, 43). In this regard, Martinique’s peculiar economic trajectory now seems precociously emblematic of tendencies within global capitalism since the 1970s, during which the neoliberal regime of accumulation has been able to counteract falling rates of profit through financialization and new rounds of accumulation by dispossession, but has singularly failed to launch a productivity revolution capable of instigating a new, system-wide long wave of accumulation (Moore 2012, 244).

It is against this backdrop of what might be termed the “precocious neoliberalization” of Martinique that I want to examine certain issues surrounding feminist theory, the gendering and racialization of labor, and Indo-Caribbean masculinity.¹ I will do so via an analysis of *Dérive de Josaphat* (1991), the first novel by the Indo-Martinican writer Michel Ponnamah. As it happens, Confiant’s commentary on the deindustrialization of Martinique quite brilliantly captures the world evoked in Ponnamah’s text. Set on an abandoned plantation, *Dérive de Josaphat* follows the meandering journey of its title character, a former agricultural laborer, as he walks across the land upon which he once worked, partially guided by the rusted remains of the railway line that once traversed the estate. Emphasizing the decline of the sugar industry and the hollowing out of Martinique’s productive economy, the plantation has been divided up into plots and sold off to land speculators. For the aging Josaphat, the plantation really is, as Confiant suggests, a *lieu de mémoire*. As he encounters various material traces of the old system of production (such as the rusted train tracks) or is sensually recalled to some aspect of plantation life (through the smell of particular plants, for example), he is reminded of past incidents and events, one recollection the spur to another until the text becomes a web of memories. The way in which the landscape here functions as a repository of, and an aid to, memory exemplifies Glissant’s assertion that “our landscape is its own monument: its meaning can only be traced on the underside. It is all history”

(Glissant 1989, 11). By this Glissant does not mean that the landscape merely bears the imprint of the activities that have taken place within it; rather, he is suggesting that it actively contributes to producing historical change. “The individual, the community, the land are inextricable in the process of creating history,” he declares. “Landscape is a character in this process. Its deepest meanings need to be understood” (Glissant 1989, 105-06).

Glissant’s claim is an important one with respect to the argument I wish to put forward in this essay, which turns in part on the way in which extra-human nature has been made to serve as a source of unpaid work for capital. Whether it is, say, the biophysical processes through which soil fertility is maintained or fossil fuels produced, or the hydrological processes through which groundwater is replenished, the work thus performed by extra-human nature is treated by capital as a “free gift” (Marx 1967, 745). This is so because of the peculiar way in which capitalism’s law of value operates. As the environmental historian Jason W. Moore has observed:

On the one hand, capitalism lives and dies on the expanded reproduction of capital: value-in-motion. The substance of value is abstract social labour, or socially necessary labour time, implicated in the production of surplus value. On the other hand, this production of value is particular – it does not value everything, but rather only labour power in the service of commodity production – and therefore rests upon a series of de-valuations. Plenty of work – indeed the majority of work in the orbit of capitalism – does not register as valuable. (Moore 2014, 6)

Such de- or un-valued work includes that performed by extra-human nature, as I have indicated. But it also includes certain work performed by humans. This includes so-called “women’s work” (such as that involved in the reproduction of the domestic sphere), the

devaluation of which has been intimately connected to the production and ramification of gender differences under capitalism. Similarly, capitalist accumulation has historically been inseparable from the racialization of labor, not least via the elaboration of racial hierarchies that facilitated the appropriation of unpaid work (most obviously in the form of slavery). The “ethnicization of the world work-force,” argues Immanuel Wallerstein, was crucial to capitalism, enabling “work-forces to be created in the right places and at the lowest possible levels of remuneration.” Racism, he continues, was “the ideological justification for the hierarchization of the work-force and its highly unequal distributions of reward” (Wallerstein 1983, 76, 78).

The sources of devalued or unpaid work I have identified here were neatly summarized by Maria Mies in *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale* as “women, nature, and colonies,” a trinity she describes as forming the “underground of capitalist patriarchy or civilized society” (Mies 1986, 77). In what follows, I explore how an analysis of capitalism’s relationship to this “underground” trinity – one that over “the last four or five centuries” has been “declared to be outside civilized society, pushed down, and thus made invisible,” even as it constitutes “the base of the whole” (Mies 1986, 77) – might be mobilized to think through the relationship between masculine identity and work. With specific reference to the Martinican context and the Indo-Caribbean experience, I will examine the pressures placed on traditional conceptions of masculinity by structural unemployment. Central to my approach will be the category of “waste,” the many meanings of which – wasted bodies and wasted lives, wastelands, waste matter of various kinds – provide something like a key through which to tease out the interconnections between wage-labor, unemployment, and unpaid work. The focus on waste is especially apt given the significance to my critique of deindustrialization in Martinique. For in the interview with which I began, Confiant goes on to suggest that symptomatic of the hollowing out of

Martinique's productive economy is the fact that the island's "largest economic product isn't the banana. It isn't rum or pineapple either. It's its own trash. [. . .] How sad that the largest product of this country is its trash" (Gosson 2005, 146).

Masculinity, the Feminization of Labor, and the Indo-Martinican Literary Field

Studies of masculinities in the Caribbean came to prominence in the 1980s. However, there already existed an important body of work from earlier decades that had explored questions of masculine identity and behavior. Family studies from the 1950s and 1960s, such as Edith Clarke's *My Mother Who Fathered Me* (1957) and R. T. Smith's *The Negro Family in British Guiana* (1956), as well as influential anthropological texts such as Peter J. Wilson's *Crab Antics* (1973), had broached issues such as male marginalization and the quest for "reputation" (Reddock 2004, xvii). But as Rhoda Reddock has shown, with the publication in 1986 of Errol Miller's *The Marginalization of the Black Male*, as well as contemporaneous work by Barry Chevannes, there emerged a new literature on masculinity in the region (Reddock 2004, xvii). This literature seemed to strike a chord with men in the Caribbean "who had grown concerned over what they perceived as the unacceptable transformations in the discourse on gender relations, the challenge to male leadership and authority, and the new visibility of women and feminist politics in public life" (Reddock 2004, xiv).

Contributing to this renewed focus on masculinity were the pressures exerted by developments in the labor market following the emergence of the neoliberal regime of accumulation in the 1970s. The reorganization of gender relations, including the increased exploitation of cheap female wage-labor, has been a component part of the restructuring of human and extra-human natures through which capital has sought to counter rising costs by securing what Moore calls the "four cheaps": cheap food, energy, raw materials, and labor

power (Moore 2012, 225). This restructuring has exacted a “huge toll on traditional conceptions of masculinity” (Nurse 2004, 26). Discussing the increasing feminization of labor, Keith Nurse emphasizes how these “shifts in global production structures have had a dramatic impact on the economic situation in the Caribbean region. There have been increasing levels of structural and technological unemployment in male-oriented jobs” (Nurse 2004, 26). The consequences of this are then sketched by Nurse in broad terms: “Masculine identity is very bound up with work. [. . .] The role of the breadwinner is an important source of authority for men within the context of patriarchy. A decline in this role, for example through unemployment, has been manifested to result in the loss of self-esteem and problems like domestic violence and reduced sexual potency” (Nurse 2004, 25). Similarly, Linden Lewis highlights “the exploding of the myth of the male breadwinner, the persistence of unemployment and the feminization of some aspects of manufacturing and of certain jobs in the region” as being at the “core” of the “considerable gender trouble engulfing the contemporary Caribbean” (Lewis 2004, 254). “Unemployment”, he argues, “coupled with bleak prospects of future work, dwindling chances of realizing the goal of home ownership, for example, and a growing recognition of one’s powerlessness to control one’s own social reproduction, among other things, have tended to dislocate familiar gender roles for men, leaving them groping for ways to negotiate this new territory” (Lewis 2004, 251-52).

With respect to the transformation specifically of Indo-Caribbean masculinities in this period, there exists relatively little scholarship on the topic (one important exception is Niels Sampath’s essay “An Evaluation of the ‘Creolization’ of Trinidad East Indian Adolescent Masculinity” [1993]). In light of this gap, Reddock highlights Caribbean literature and popular culture as a crucial source of information on Indo-Caribbean masculinities (see Reddock, this volume). With this in mind, I want to read Ponnamah’s *Dérive de Josaphat* with an eye to what it tells us about the pressures placed on Indo-Caribbean masculinity by

the decline of the sugar industry in Martinique. A few words are in order first on the development of Indo-Caribbean writing in the French Caribbean. Although many historical and sociological accounts of Indians in the French Antilles have been produced, Francophone Indo-Caribbean authors have been less visible in the Caribbean literary field than their Anglophone counterparts. To some extent this can be attributed to the minority status of the Indian communities in Martinique and Guadeloupe (2-3% and 7-15% of the population, respectively) and a corresponding relative lack of political visibility (Singaravelou 1994, 87). The first novel by a Francophone Indo-Caribbean writer did not appear until 1972. Maurice Virassamy's *Le Petit Coolie noir*, based on the author's childhood in Martinique, detailed the hostility experienced by Indians on the island, its bitter tone reflecting what Chamoiseau and Confiant describe as Virassamy's "distaste for Martinican society" (Chamoiseau and Confiant 1991, 47). Subsequent writers, however, have sought not only to celebrate their Indian inheritance, but to do so as part of an affirmation of Caribbean-ness. The Guadeloupean novelist Ernest Moutoussamy, for instance, argues that: "When today the young speak of a pilgrimage to the source, it is not a question of a return to the country of the ancestors, but of drawing from there the elements indispensable to the understanding and consolidation of an Antillean Indianité." Hence, he adds, it is "a matter of resuscitating the past, of maintaining the collective memory, of enabling the appropriation of aesthetic values in order to authenticate an Antillean identity" (Moutoussamy 1989, 72).² What interests me here are the frequently masculinist literary modalities through which the effort to inscribe an Indian heritage into the Antillean present has been pursued in Francophone fiction.

Moutoussamy's own work is an interesting case in point. Take, for example, his 1987 novel *Aurore*. Set in India and the Caribbean, it tells the story of Râma, a young Brahmin expelled from his family home and brought to Guadeloupe on board the *Aurélié* in 1885 as an indentured laborer. The narrative details the brutality of plantation life and the methods by

which control is exerted over the indentured, including the suppression of the Tamil language and the promotion of Christianity over Hinduism. Against this, Râma seeks to revitalize Indian culture. This revitalization, however, is also intended to enable the community to begin to assert itself in Guadeloupean society: “With their Tamil spoken at night, which, in order to banish, the tyrants had in times gone by cut out the tongues of those refusing capitulation and betrayal, they revived India, fought against the forgetting, inspired the young while turning them resolutely towards Guadeloupe. [. . .] They thus fertilized the future, searching for a solution to their integration into this hostile world” (Moutoussamy 1987, 118-19).³ This struggle to articulate an Indian identity that is simultaneously Caribbean finds symbolic expression in the romantic plots that infuse the novel. Râma’s initial plan for forging an alliance with the Black community involves cultivating a relationship with Maya, the black mistress of the plantation manager. Later, he determines to propose to her, wishing to start a family on the island. By so doing, he muses, “Guadeloupe would truly become his homeland. This union would put a definitive end to the temptation to return, would transform exile into sanctuary, and would increase further the prospect of integration into the local society” (Moutoussamy 1987, 145).⁴ But this symbolically freighted coupling fails to materialize. Râma, however, does get married at the end of the book – to Aurore, his bride-to-be back in India prior to the break with his family. Aurore, it transpires, had followed Râma to Guadeloupe twenty years earlier, but had been unable to find him. Râma locates his former lover, who has been forced to serve as the mistress of a planter, and flees with her and her child. The subsequent betrothal of the pair becomes emblematic of Râma’s (India’s) definitive implantation in the Caribbean.

The reconciliation of Indian and Caribbean identities is thereby mediated through the masculinist form of the novel’s romance paradigm, the affirmation of an Antillean Indianité manifesting itself in the affirmation of the patriarchal family. Indeed, the symbolic weight

with which the marriage plot is invested not only inscribes the narrative's nationalist sentiments within the patriarchal discourse of the nation-as-family; it also makes submission to the model of the patriarchal family something like the condition of entry into Antillean society. Early in the novel, Râma's quest to reconcile his Indian heritage with the realities of Martinique is focused primarily on forging a class-based united front with the Black community against exploitation by the plantation owners. Towards the end of the narrative, however, this directly political plot recedes (Râma's efforts having been thwarted by an outbreak of ethnic violence in response to a strike by Black workers) and the Râma/Aurore romantic plotline comes very much to the fore. The result is that the grounds on which Râma's integration into Antillean society is enabled now seem to be that of a potential reconciliation not between two exploited groups, but between competing (African and Indian) patriarchies.

In view of Moutoussamy's novel, an instructive comparison can now be drawn with the way in which Ponnamah's text treats the theme of Indianité and its relationship to Antillanité. Like *Aurore, Dérive de Josaphat* presents the plantation as a kind of womb of identity, a matrix of creolization in which the cultural specificity of the Indian community is gradually modified and incorporated within a new architecture of cultures:

In the world of the plantation, one discovered that the other was not a threat, an enemy, but a human being, a soil in which one could plant the humanity one carries in oneself and which can only flourish if it is rooted in a relationship with others. Just like the approach by sea to the island, to approach the other appeared difficult, off-putting. However, one could, in navigating it carefully, discover a cove tucked away somewhere, but one that hospitably opened up on to the trails of the deep country. (Ponnamah 1991, 74)⁵

There is, for sure, a certain nostalgic air to Ponnamah's depiction of plantation society (in this he recalls *Confiant*, whose own fiction has been criticized on this score [Price and Price 1999]). But the romantic register that we find in *Aurore* is absent, and the differences between the novels' central protagonists are striking. Râma is portrayed as a heroic male savior, a virile and energetic young leader whose standing amongst the other indentured workers is tied to his strength as an estate laborer and his ability to find ways within the system to institute new modes of subsistence (such as his establishment of a system of barter with the Afro-Caribbean laborer Vitalien). Josaphat, by contrast, is aged and unemployed, his meandering journey across the abandoned plantation symptomatic of the way he has been cut adrift by the loss of his job. His body, moreover, is failing him: he spends the novel fatigued and wracked by pain. Significantly, this pain is most intense at moments when he recollects some aspect of plantation life, such as when, for example, he detects the odor of cut cane and is "suddenly overcome with a feeling of faintness, a tiredness that spread throughout his body and made him yawn. He swayed. The air was charged with the noise of straw being trampled on, the hiss of leaves from coconut palms, and snatches of voices. Josaphat reopened his eyes. His heartbeat had accelerated. His chest vibrated" (Ponnamah 1991, 10-11).⁶ Later, when similarly tormented by his memories, he emits "an odour of putrefaction that seemed to spread over his entire body" ["une odeur de putréfaction qui semblaient gagner tout son corps"] (Ponnamah 1991, 49). The novel thus appears to suggest that Josaphat is effectively disintegrating under the weight of a history he has yet to fully come to terms with, something underscored by the images of liquefaction that attend his descents into memory. He appears increasingly swamped by the past: after being overcome by one recollection, for instance, the narrative describes how he "shook his head as if freeing himself from immersion" ["secoua la tête comme s'il se dégageait d'une immersion"] (Ponnamah 1991, 39). Seeming almost to

dissolve in the stream of his memories, Josaphat at times enters a state of near delirium, unable to distinguish reminiscence from reality.

Josaphat's decrepitude – the wasting away of his body – underscores his position as something like a waste product of the plantation. Fed into the machinery of production, he has been used up and spat back out like so much bagasse, his body crushed and drained and now rendered redundant by deindustrialization. In this sense too, his decaying body is emblematic of the pressures placed on traditional masculine identities by the restructuring of the global economy since the 1970s. Lacking not only energy and virility, but also direction and purpose as he wanders across the decaying estate lands, Josaphat seems to manifest the symptoms – loss of self-esteem, reduced sexual potency, and so forth – commonly associated with the dislocation of hitherto hegemonic masculine behaviors and, in particular, the explosion of the myth of the male breadwinner.

Certainly an interesting comparison can be drawn between Josaphat's lassitude in the era of deindustrialization and the various references in the novel to potent sexual activity during the heyday of the plantation. Indeed, the novel draws out the way in which an explicit connection is established between the sugar manufacturing process and the codification of sexual relations:

[Josaphat] had a smile on seeing the embarrassment of men and women to use certain words such as cut, put, take, jump, sleep with, do, as if the sexual charge these words carried altered any other sense they might have, just as it imprinted itself on the symbolism of flowers, fruits, and vegetables such as [. . .] mimosas, [. . .] banana horns, and sugarcane – this last image being developed in relation to the factory where the *sirop-batterie* served to express sexual pleasure, the ineffable character of

which was rendered through the hyperbolic image of a bag of sugar melting in a spoonful of water. (Ponnamah 1991, 34-35)⁷

Later, Josaphat makes reference to a man known on the plantation for having “cut” many a woman with the “cutlass he carried between his legs” (Ponnamah 1991, 59), an image that neatly captures the imbrication of patriarchal sexual relations with the brutal, alienated labor of the sugar estate and its corollary, an alienated and objectifying relationship to extra-human nature. Such descriptions reflect the masculinist erotics of plantation society. But the text seems frequently in danger, at least on the level of content, of affirming such masculinism, rather than offering it up for critique. This ambivalence is perhaps most notable (and most problematic) when Josaphat muses on the historic rape of black female workers by white planters and attempts to make of this violence a potential gateway to rebirth: “As to the raped women [. . .], Josaphat would readily have transformed them into lovers, from the moment that the desire of the white man had managed to revive in them sensations and emotions that the whip or poker had annihilated” (Ponnamah 1991, 75).⁸ Of course, the novel is not necessarily endorsing Josaphat’s view; and there is a clear sense in which the character is trying to find some way to process a history so horrific he finds it hard to contemplate. And yet given the narrative emphasis on the plantation as a matrix of creolization in which cultures were combined and reborn in new configurations, it is hard – as with the novel’s presentation of plantation life more generally – not to detect a certain troubling nostalgia in its depiction of sexual activity on the estate. Thus, when at the end of the novel the ailing Josaphat is knocked over by a van, his plight dismissed by one onlooker who comments “‘*An Coolie?*’” [“‘It was only a Coolie?’”] (Ponnamah 1991, 109), this apparently pessimistic conclusion on the status of Indo-Martinicans in Martinique might be viewed as also mourning the decline of a certain kind of patriarchal order, or of signalling the failure or breakdown of

that reconciliation of competing patriarchies on which *Aurore* seemed implicitly to end. However, there is an alternative way of reading the novel's presentation of Josaphat's wasted body in terms of its relationship to the organization of gender relations under capitalist patriarchy; and it is to this that I turn in conclusion.

Waste, Unpaid Work, and the Reproduction of Material Life

Discussing the "masculinist culture of the French West Indies," A. James Arnold has argued that many male authors from the Francophone Caribbean have been guilty of replicating and reinforcing such masculinism in their fiction (Arnold 2002, 169). He outlines what he calls the "erotics of colonialism" to be found in the work of the *créoliste* writers Chamoiseau and Confiant, for example, drawing attention to how it differs from, yet relates to, the "phallogocentric discourse of Césaire's vision of Negritude" (Arnold 2002, 169). Arnold cites in particular Césaire's play *Et les chiens se taisaient*, which features an agonistic male protagonist – the Rebel – whose tragic, sacrificial death unites the community and raises collective consciousness. The Rebel displays a kind of super-masculinity, one that resists the typical discursive feminization of the colonized male yet still remains locked in the colonial erotic framework, its features defined against a sexual norm occupied by the male colonizer, the liberation it promises inseparable from a masculinist heterosexual paradigm. This latter point is emphasized by the play's representation of the Mother and the Lover, symbolic female figures confined to stereotyped roles. As Arnold observes, "the suffering male hero of Negritude must transcend these representations of feminine weakness in order to realize his salvatory maleness in the radiant future beckoning beyond his present sacrifice of self" (Arnold 2002, 170). The renewal of the community and the shaping of national consciousness are thus marked out as male prerogatives.⁹

Now, *Dérive de Josaphat* too seeks, through its agonizing male protagonist, to articulate a new vision of national community, here one that incorporates the Indian heritage. But the difference between Josaphat and Césaire's Rebel is striking. Whereas Césaire's agonic hero is defined by his salvatory maleness, his death characterized by a sense of conflagration and transcendence through sacrifice, Josaphat's final moments are relatively low-key. There is nothing transcendent about the unceremonious traffic accident that leaves him sprawled out on the road. Rather, the impression of him as having been reduced to waste, to bagasse, is heightened. Thus, the novel seems to take its distance from the typical masculinist tropes through which nationalist discourse has tended to be articulated in Martinique. This difference, I would argue, can then be read back into the way the novel looks to uncover and manifest a collective Martinican history through Josaphat.

As I have suggested elsewhere, given the way in which Josaphat, as a result of the sensuous connection he establishes to his surroundings, becomes a vessel through which the history of the plantation comes to light, it is not too farfetched to re-read Ponnamah's novel as an extended rite of possession (Niblett 2012, 183). Adrift in a trance-like delirium, Josaphat is continually displaced as the central consciousness of the narrative by a stream of memories that temporarily possess him in order to make themselves manifest. Crucially, he channels not only his own but also those other pasts sedimented in the landscape. His memories are no longer exclusively "Indian," as it were, but rather "Martinican" since they invoke the experiences of all those, Blacks and Indians alike, who have worked on the land. The Indian specificity represented by Josaphat is thus rearticulated as part of a totality of legacies grounded collectively in the Martinican environment in terms of the labors of the oppressed.

But it is not just the labor of the estate workers and the histories with which it is imbricated that Josaphat mediates. Precisely through the sensuous connection he establishes

to the flora and fauna surrounding him, he also becomes associated with the unpaid work provided by extra-human nature in terms of its reproduction of material life. The un-valued significance of this work is at one point highlighted by the novel – tellingly, at the very moment Josaphat is contemplating the way in which the profusion of vegetation and animal-life he encounters initiates his descents into memory: “[He] considered a Saint-Vincent yam vine [. . .] [and] thought of the windfall it would provide to the one who would reap the yam without having to plant it. It was an example of the generosity of nature, which can provide everyday sustenance when we least expect it, in the form of vegetables or fruit” (Ponnamah 1991, 52).¹⁰ For capitalism, such unpaid work is a boon if it can be brought within the reach of, and rendered subject to, capitalist power, yet still remain outside the circuit of capital (Moore 2014, 2). In this way it can be appropriated as a “free gift” in the service of commodity production, enabling a greater throughput of energy within the production process without driving up costs. Typically, however, capitalism’s relationship to such unpaid work is bedevilled by contradictions. On the one hand, its position outside the circuit of capital ensures its “cheapness.” On the other, from the vantage point of capital’s logic of endless accumulation, the time this work takes – precisely because it is not directly subordinate to the law of value and the metric of abstract labor time – is a *waste of time* insofar as it runs up against the imperative to turn a profit within the socially-necessary turnover time. Seeking, as a result, to more closely control and speed-up the delivery of unpaid work to commodity production, capitalism tends to commodify, and hence erode, what it had previously been able to treat as a “free gift.”

If, therefore, Josaphat’s ailing, wasted body speaks to capitalism’s tendency to “waste” its wage-laborers, sapping their energies before spitting them out as unemployed refuse, it also resonates with capital’s denigration and de-valuation of the unpaid work involved in reproducing material life. Crucially, moreover, it is not only the unpaid work of

extra-human nature that Josaphat's condition alludes to. Women, of course, have been another prime source of unpaid work; and they too have tended to be construed under capitalist patriarchy as, in a certain sense, waste – as brute matter in contradistinction to the rational mind of the white male norm. As Luce Irigaray notes in her analysis of the masculinist effacement of the female sex that subtends phallogocentric discourse, the “rejection, the exclusion of a female imaginary certainly puts woman in the position of experiencing herself only fragmentarily, in the little-structured margins of a dominant ideology, as waste, or excess, what is left of a mirror invested by the (masculine) ‘subject’ to reflect himself, to copy himself” (Irigaray 1985, 30). Irigaray goes on to show how the conventional association of women with extra-human nature causes both to be codified as “waste matter” by phallogocentric representation, which must repudiate and expel the messy precincts of material reality upon which its processes of abstraction and conceptualization nevertheless depend:

Is not the ‘first’ stake in mimesis that of re-producing (from) nature? Of giving it form in order to appropriate it for oneself? As guardians of ‘nature’, are not women the ones who maintain, thus who make possible, the resource of mimesis for men? For the logos?

It is here, of course, that the hypothesis of a reversal – within the phallic order – is always possible. Re-semblance cannot do without red blood. Mother-matter-nature must go on forever nourishing speculation. But this re-source is also rejected as the waste product of reflection, cast outside as what resists it: as madness. (Irigaray 1985, 77)

What Irigaray writes with regards to the scene of representation can be re-cast with reference to Ponnamah's novel in terms of the exploitation of those sources of unpaid work – “women, nature, and colonies” – which capitalist patriarchy disavows and yet which constitute its “underground.” Signal here is the scene referred to earlier in which Josaphat reflects on the tendency for sexual activity on the plantation to be euphemised in relation to the sugar manufacturing process. The codification of sex in these terms is suggestive of the way the unpaid work of the reproduction of life has been pulled into the orbit of, and rendered subject to, capitalist power and the demands of commodity production. The resulting contradictory unity of different processes or logics (reproduction of life / reproduction of capital) might then be said to be embodied by Josaphat himself, his decaying, rotting body inhabiting a zombie-like, living dead state (recall the odor of “putrefaction” that surrounds him) that figures the contradictory relationship between wage-labor and unpaid work, between value and not-value (or waste), at the heart of capitalist production.

Thus, as much as the decrepit Josaphat signifies the dislocation of certain traditional conceptions of masculinity with the reorganization of global production structures, his very appearance as a kind of waste product associates him with that which has been de-valued and marginalized precisely in the service of perpetuating such conceptions of masculinity. From this perspective, his agonistic journey might be viewed not as the elegiac expression of the decline of a particular kind of patriarchal order, but rather as figuring both the painful effort to break with this order and the possible emergence of an alternative social formation (something emphasized by the novel's break with the narrative trope of the heroic male savior as the vessel through which the creation or renewal of the national community is achieved). Josaphat's imbrication with the landscape – the way he feels himself dissolving into his surroundings as he is recalled to the memories embedded therein – points to a mode of subjectivity and an approach to extra-human nature different to that instantiated under

capitalist patriarchy and brutally manifested in the alienated, objectifying relationship to land and labor intrinsic to plantation agriculture. Hence, although the novel at times seems to replicate the erotics of colonialism while falling back on a nostalgic vision of life on the sugar estates, it simultaneously points in a different direction. The way in which Josaphat's wasted, decaying body is convulsed and, as it were, further corroded by the memories that manifest themselves through him, his habitus transformed by his sensuous connection to the landscape, suggests something like the sloughing off of the prevailing masculinist paradigms he otherwise embodies. In this sense, his re-membering of the past as the precondition for the articulation of a new architecture of cultures becomes also a means to project, implicitly, the need for this new architecture to be founded on a radically different mode of gender and sexual relations.

In conclusion, therefore, Ponnamah's novel exemplifies a number of the ambiguities and tensions surrounding the dislocation of traditional gender roles since the 1970s. With the neoliberal restructuring of the economy and, in particular, the increasing feminization of labor, masculine identities were subject to new kinds of pressures and challenges. This led some to speak of masculinity as being "in crisis," or of men as being "at risk" – a discourse that gained ground in the Caribbean in the 1980s. Appearing in 1991, *Dérive de Josaphat*, with its directionless, unemployed, ailing protagonist, could be said to speak to this conjuncture (and, more specifically, to the phenomenon of deindustrialization in Martinique and its social fallout). But perhaps more interestingly, in its simultaneous reiteration and critique of the masculinist erotics of colonialism, it speaks to the way certain variants of the "masculinity in crisis" discourse have, in interrogating the pressures on traditional masculine identities, failed to attend to the way in which the socio-economic transformations responsible for these pressures are inextricably linked to the perpetuation and, indeed, intensification of the systemic inequality of women. The feminization of labor has not

alleviated the tendency towards the feminization of poverty under capitalism. Indeed, in the context of continuing stagnation in the global economy, capital has sought to ratchet up the exploitation of its primary sources of unpaid labor – women, nature, and the colonies – in a desperate bid to drive down its system-wide costs of production. Thus has the neoliberal era been one marked by ferocious new rounds of gender violence (Bhattacharya 2013), ecological asset stripping and the renewed plundering of extra-human nature (Moore 2012), and new forms of imperialism in the global peripheries (Harvey 2003). If Ponnamah’s novel cannot quite break free of the masculinist paradigms with which such exploitation is bound up, it does at least implicitly raise the issue of capitalist patriarchy’s systematic subordination of the reproduction of life to the reproduction of capital, holding out the frail hope that society might be organized otherwise.

Notes

¹ With the phrase “precocious neoliberalization” I intend a nod to Sydney Mintz’s well-known argument as to the “precocious modernity” of the Caribbean region (Mintz 1996, 298).

² “Quand aujourd’hui les jeunes parlent de pèlerinage aux sources, il n’est point question d’opérer un retour au pays des aïeux, mais d’aller puiser là-bas, les éléments indispensables à la compréhension et à la consolidation de l’indianité antillaise. [. . .] Il s’agit de ressusciter le passé, d’alimenter la mémoire collective, de faciliter l’appropriation des valeurs esthétiques afin d’authentifier l’identité antillaise.”

³ “Avec leur tamoul de la nuit pour le bannissement duquel les tyrans avaient coupé jadis bien des langues refusant la capitulation et la trahison, ils ressuscitaient l’Inde, luttèrent contre l’oubli, gonflèrent la jeunesse en la tournant résolument vers la Guadeloupe. [. . .] Ils fécondaient aussi le avenir, cherchaient des solutions à leur intégration à ce monde hostile.”

⁴ “Guadeloupe deviendrait véritablement sa patrie. Cette union mettrait fin définitivement aux tentatives de retour, transformerait l’exil en asile et dégagerait encore plus nettement les perspectives d’intégration dans la société local.”

⁵ “Dans la société de l’habitation, l’on découvrait que l’autre n’était pas une menace, un ennemi, mais un être humain, un terreau dans lequel pouvait prendre la part d’humanité que l’on porte en soi, et qui ne peut fleurir que si elle trouve à s’enraciner dans une relation avec d’autrui. Tout comme l’abordage de l’île, l’approche de l’autre paraissait difficile, rebutante. Toutefois l’on pouvait, en navigateur avisé, découvrir une anse frêle, mais hospitalière ouvrant sur les pistes du pays profond.”

⁶ “. . . soudain gagné par un malaise, une lassitude qui s’étendait à toutes les parties du corps et le faisait bâiller. Il vacilla. L’air se chargeait de bruits de paille piétinée, de feuilles qui glissaient dans un chuintement de cocotier et d’éclats de voix. Josaphat rouvrit les yeux. Son rythme cardiaque s’était accéléré. Sa poitrine en vibrat.”

⁷ “Et il eut le sourire en revoyant la gêne des hommes et des femmes à employer certains verbes comme couper, mettre, prendre, sauter, coucher, faire, comme si la charge sexuelle dont ces mots étaient porteurs en altérait tout autre sens et s’imposait pareille à la symbolique des fleurs, fruits et légumes tels les bonbons de jeune filles, les sensitives, les cordes à violon efflorescentes, les bananes cornes, les cannes à sucre – cette dernière image l’entraînait jusqu’à l’usine où le sirop-batterie servait à exprimer le plaisir sexuel dont le caractère ineffable était

rendu par l'image hyperbolique du sac de sucre fondant dans une cuillerée d'eau."

⁸ "quant aux femmes violées [. . .], Josaphat les aurait volontiers métamorphosées en amantes, dès lors que le désir de l'homme blanc était parvenu à ranimer en elles, des sensations et des émotions que le fouet ou le tisonnier avaient annihilées

⁹ On the masculinist encoding or en/gendering of the national project in the Caribbean, see (Kutzinski 1997, 286-88).

¹⁰ "[II] examinait une liane d'igname Saint-Vincent [. . .] [et il] pensa à l'aubaine de celui qui récolterait cette igname sans avoir eu à la planter. C'était la un exemple de la générosité de la nature qui pouvait procurer un ordinaire au moment où l'on s'y attendait le moins, sous la forme de légumes ou de fruits."

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