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Abstract

Nonhistory: Slaver and the Black Historical Imagination

Xavier Lee,

2022

This dissertation examines the theoretical significance of slavery in contemporary novels by black writers of English and French expression. I contend that black authors like Gayl Jones, Edouard Glissant, Léonora Miano, Sherley Anne Williams, Jean Métellus, and Fred D'Aguiar use literature to revise historical narratives and generate new histories of slavery. By reading novels as historical texts, I theorize nonhistory as a critique of the epistemological limitations of historiography. I argue that Black Francophone and Anglophone Atlantic writers of the postcolonial and post-Jim Crow era narrate the past as a nonhistory whose discursive and aesthetic afterimages expose the disjointed experience of time engendered by the lived experience of antiblackness.

This project questions the endurance of slavery in the black historical imagination. In thinking with black Anglophone and Francophone writers, I consider how literary texts explore complementary dimensions to historical inquiry. By theorizing nonhistory as a historiographical tool, I question what kinds of subjunctive knowledges might be invented to explain the often-disjointed experience of black time.

The dissertation consists of three chapters. Chapter 1, "Dark Modern," considers the catalyzing role of slavery in the *longue durée* of African modernity through a reading of Léonora Miano's novel *La Saison de l'ombre* (2013). I argue that Miano repurposes the colonialist discourses of African 'darkness' to pen an alternative narrative of African modernity. I pay special attention to the novel's exploration of maternal grief and dispossession as essential to Africa's abolitionist nonhistory. In Chapter 2, "Tragedy of Origins," I theorize the interpretive *experience* of tragedy in Jean Métellus' historical drama

Anacaona (1986). By reading how the playwright transforms the history of Anacaona, the slain queen of Xaragua, into a historical tragedy, I question how black and Native historical imaginaries are structured by a sense of tragic inevitability. In final chapter, "Other Moods," I explore conspiratorial poetics of two late 20th century novels: Fred D'Aguiar's *Feeding the Ghosts* (1998) and Sherley Anne Williams' *Dessa Rose* (1986). Working in the wake of contributions to black feminist and postcolonial historiography, I argue that D'Aguiar and Williams' novels draft a speculative historiography that questions "what might have happened" when historical narratives yield only uncertainty or silence.

Nonhistory: Slavery and the Black Historical Imagination

A Dissertation
Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School
Of
Yale University
In Candidacy for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

By
Xavier Lee

Dissertation Chair: Marta Figlerowicz

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Note on Translations

All translations from French and Spanish in this dissertation are mine unless otherwise stated.

Introduction: Nonhistory

You colonists who remain, hear me out! I will awaken the ashes of the countless victims you have thrown into the tomb and call on their voices to unveil your crimes. I will exhume these wretches that you have buried alive. I will interrogate the revenants of my unfortunate countrymen that you have thrown alive into burning ovens; those whom you have skewered, roasted, impaled and a thousand other atrocities invented in the pits of hell!

(Baron de Vastey, *Le système colonial dévoilé*, 35)

History is the fruit of power, but power itself is never so transparent that its analysis becomes superfluous. The ultimate mark of power may be its invisibility, the ultimate challenge, the exposition of its roots.

(Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*, xix)

Sign : signified

A ghost haunts black life in the Atlantic: the ghost of slavery. Like it or not, whenever we are discussing the ‘black past’ — either as myth or as fact — we are, in some way, making reference to the slave. Slavery is unavoidable, precisely because slavery is the origin. It is the place in which the sign *black* comes to identify an entire race of man; it is the place in which we — subjects in Western Europe’s ‘world’ — begin to develop a certain kind of knowledge about the personality, temperament, and usefulness of the ‘African.’ It is the origin of a world, the beginning that is also an end-times.

Slavery exerts a tremendous power in shaping the ways that black people think about and narrate themselves as a people in time and space. Although the era of rampant and legal slaveholding in the Atlantic world is long behind us, slavery animates black

historical imaginations. But why? Emancipation in the United States was achieved in 1865. In the British colonies, the enslaved were freed in 1833. In France's colonies, emancipation arrived in 1848. Despite a century and a half of distance, black writers continue to use the English and French languages to write fictional histories of the slave past from the vantage of the emancipated, 'postcolonial' present. That these stories often take on explicit *hauntological* themes is beside the point. Discourses of spectralism intimate temporal disjuncture and the degradation of a linear model of temporality. Black fiction writing registers the permanence of slavery's haunting in its iterative and ongoing theorizations of the collision of past and present.

My goal in this dissertation is to explore these theorizations, follow them to their logical conclusions, and juxtapose their truths against those of historians, anthropologists, philosophers, and critical theorists. The purpose is not to weigh one truth against another; I do not want to determine the value of historical knowledge of *this world* vis-à-vis the worlds invented by creative writers. Rather, my goal is to bring the literature of slavery and the history of slavery together so that we might better understand how both modes of *historiographia* (lit: "the writing of stories") inform the narrative experience of black temporality. Much can be said about the metaphysical nature of temporality, the European imposition of linear models of time on the peoples they conquered and colonized, the stalling of social progress, the telos of *development* and the enduring legacy of these ill-fitting systems, but I will speak on these in passing in this dissertation. Instead, I focus on historiography's relationship to narrative logic and humanistic ideals which struggle to theorize the slave-cum-black subject. Before diving into such a project, I'd first like to issue a warning: *we would be wise to avoid confusing the sign for its signified.*

Why such a warning? Isn't it, in a sense, an obvious and universal prerequisite of being a literary critic? Even though we are living in a time of 'postmodern' truths (or metatruths), I find that statements about the 'produced' or 'performed' or 'constructed' nature of our world are often not taken seriously, particularly when it comes to thinking about black history. Indeed, 'race is socially constructed,' but what does *social construction* truly mean in a world — and an academy — inundated in neoliberal logics that shore up social identities in the name of an as-of-yet unattained humanism? If the black subject is indeed 'the African' as a particular, inalienable type of man, any critique of 'black history' would ultimately be an exploration of 'the history of black people,' the term *black person* being an obvious and perhaps universally understood signifier. The problem that arises from this perspective is that it ignores what we often know but cannot integrate into our knowledge of the past. For one, Africans did not consider themselves a unified people prior to the arrival of Europeans in the 15th century. The ease with which 'African' is used to group an entire continent full of people into a stable identity category betrays centuries of fractious and at times hostile political relations between local polities on a vast continent. If there is a notion of a unified African experience or identity, it developed in the context of Africa's encounter with the expanding European and Middle Eastern 'worlds,' when Africans were faced with slave alterity as a lived experience. Likewise, the term '*black*' has a particular history to it and developed in the context of the English language to bear witness to the experiences of slavery, racism, colonialism, and difference as political and social conditions. These definitions do not extend backwards in time, despite their apparent ossification as stable and presumably transhistorical 'facts.' We may immediately know what an 'African' is (or, better yet, what one looks like) and might thus

feel compelled to accept the universality of our understanding what an African is, but any attempt to use this obvious analytic to explore how Africans understood themselves throughout history becomes immediately complicated. If we were to ask the first African slaves who arrived in Hispaniola in 1503, they would likely not have known of themselves as ‘Africans’ or ‘negros’ or ‘black.’ The ways these people would have thought of themselves is perhaps lost to us, as they never wrote down their opinions, and may not have considered such philosophical questions of identity and origin immediately useful to the hardship-laden lives in Hispaniola’s gold mines. Any attempt to tell the histories of the black race must at some point wrestle with the unavailability of such anachronism, of our inability to recover political self-thought from an archive committed to the substantiation of invented notions of human difference. We are, for better or for worse, stuck with these terms, with their ease and unease of use. To think of black people as anything other than black, as anything other than ‘descended from Africans’ or as anything other than ‘peoples south of Sahara’ feels absurd. This is, precisely, the problem.

We ought to be wary in this dissertation of confusing the sign (‘black,’ ‘African,’ ‘Negro’) for its signified (~~Man~~), if only because whenever we are talking about the ‘sign’ we are only grazing the surface of its signification. The same is true of the word ‘history.’ It is now somewhat of a cliché in critical historiography to point out the various different meanings of the lexeme *history*, the contexts in which that lexeme changes meaning, and the means by which university scholars have complicated this conversation through comparative philology (i.e., the distinction in German between *Geschichte* ‘history-as-narrative’ and *Historie* ‘history-as-past’). So, I won’t rehearse them here. Nevertheless, there are three important meanings of history worth exploring in this introduction:

history 1) ‘the past’ / ‘what happened’

history 2) narratives of that past / ‘what is said to have happened’

history 3) the form in which these narratives are written

The slippage between history 1 and history 2 is, as I mentioned above, a common observation by historiographers and philosophers of history. Similarly, history 2 and history 3 has been the source of critique by what we might deem ‘metahistorians’ like Hayden White, Louis Mink, Arthur Danto, and Michel Foucault. Less attention has been paid to the connection between history 1 and history 3, although I suspect the ongoing ‘crisis’ of the humanities will, with time, shed further light on how the market and professional exigencies of university historians shape the kinds of knowledge they produce and the histories they tell. Nevertheless, the histories told by university historians are only one segment of the conversation; their monographs, typically bound for university presses, are but a subgenre of a genre of *historical works*, itself a snapshot of a far larger topography of *historical utterances (énoncés)*. While we might turn to history 1 in search of a standard that regulates the veracity of histories 2 and 3, the relationship between history and truth is far more subject to political narratology than our capacity to ‘excavate’ historical truths. For many scholars of history, myself included, histories 2 and 3 play an active role in installing a vision of the past as *the past itself*. What authorizes one historical narrative over another is *power*. Power establishes the inherent meaning of social reality; it is what officiates the election of one truth over another. Black history has, for the most part, been written to disprove a dominant truth about black ahistoricity, about black people’s *noncontribution* to the history of Western Europe’s ‘world.’ The slave that produces cotton for New England’s textile mills, or the sharecropper that chops sugar cane to be exported

and used in French *patisserie* contributes nothing to Western history, despite being essential to the development of Europe's and North America's enduring industrial and financial supremacy. Black writers have striven to rewrite this history, but also to jettison the history of slavery from the narrative of black history. Colonialism and slavery often appear in the black historical imagination as incursions and interruptions in a glorious history of the race that dates back to the Egyptians. The reason these narratives of "African origins" of European and Middle Eastern classical civilization have not installed as 'truth' has little to do with evidence and everything to do with the order of power that immediately disqualifies them as pseudohistory. My intention here is not to meet the historian's suspicion with my own suspicion or to write a new history of the black race, but to explore the uneasy distinction between fact and fiction from the postmodern perspective of a black scholar at once aware of the distinction between sign and signifier but inevitably *stuck* with such insufficient language. After all, why does it matter what race the Egyptians were? It is unlikely that they thought of themselves in modernity's *racial idiom*, the essential frame of race's facticity that necessarily colors the past as impossibly *pre-racial*. It is not possible to think of the Ancient Egyptians as *before race*, as the term would suggest they were also *before humanity, before skin*. This is the trap in which we now live, unable to *unthink* race, but also unable to think *beyond it*, either.

The allure of the history of black Egyptian pharaohs speaks to an essential fact about history's function as a meaning-making technology. In all its forms, history reveals itself as a form of *literature*. The sign *literature* betrays a perhaps overstated connection to the written: descending from the Latin *littera*, from which we receive the word *letter*, 'literature' suggests, at least philologically, the primacy of the written word. I would argue

that such a way of approaching ‘literature’ is unnecessarily reductive, as well as privy to age-old debates over the inherent Eurocentrism of the written / oral divide. For me, literature is the assemblage of narratives within a given culture or among a given people, whose genres (i.e., romance, folktale, gossip) or modes of communication (i.e. a book, a text message, whispers) or commitments to notions of authenticity or realism (i.e. eyewitness testimony, slanderous hearsay, absurdism) are but secondary to the primary concern of telling a story. This definition of literature is necessarily capacious, as it allows us to think about a variety of different objects and occurrences as ‘texts’ while keeping us aware of the importance of form in the narration of stories. In this dissertation, I focus primarily on the particular kind of narrative logic that history shares with the novel form, but a similar project could be done on black nonfiction writing or poetry or theatre, as well as vernacular forms of media like Twitter.

History, to me, is a literature with a set of its own genre conventions. For one, histories are supposed to be interested in real or true events, either by explaining the past in narrative form or arguing that previous narratives have told the wrong story. History often assumes a secular understanding of the ‘real’ by grounding itself in empirical realities established by a scientific worldview. Historians tend to consider themselves writers of *nonfiction* because of these commitments to truth. Nevertheless, the reality of the historian’s endeavor of telling the ‘true’ story of a past they ostensibly did not inhabit (otherwise it would be another form, like *autobiography* or *testimony* or *memoir*) betrays this bill of ‘nonfiction.’ After all, how can we be certain that this historian’s picture of the past is true if none of us have ever been there to verify it? History, in this sense, is always conjecture; always speculation; always fiction. No one knew this better than Edouard

Glissant, the Martinican philosopher and novelist whose *Discours antillais* is, perhaps, this dissertation's most significant intertext. For Glissant, the power dynamics that install one story of the past as *the past itself*, or which turns a *story (histoire)* into capital-H History (*Histoire*) have created hauntological effects in Caribbean experience. The slave past occupies the citizen present; to tell the account of this "tormented chronology" means developing a historiographical method that can account for the temporal breakdown between past and present. For Glissant, the solution to the "West Indian writer's quarrel with history," as Edward Baugh framed it, is not new history, but *nonhistory*.

History : nonhistory

In *Le Discours antillais*, Glissant provides a framework for exploring the epistemological problems born from the violent origins of the black race within a distinct grammar of human evolution that scholars see as symptomatic of the development of *modernity* and its distinct coterie of symptoms and legacies¹. What is apparent for Glissant is that the experience of black history is difficult to incapsulate within a European model of linear temporality, especially when what animates that historical experience is a phobic response to the *effacement* of black agency. Slavery in general and the experience of the slave in particular pose problems to the narratological and political fundamentals of historical inquiry and scholarship, precisely because the agency of the human being called 'black' often disappears in the very moment of its discovery. The result of the imposition of the European notion of 'history' onto conquered Caribbean peoples, when combined with the near-total dismissal of creole cultural forms of history-making and *chronosophy*, results

for Glissant in the dissolution of historical time itself. “The Antilles,” he writes “are the place of a history made of ruptures and whose beginning was a brutal uprooting, the Trade.” With such a violent origin that inscribed itself — through the quills of Spanish *cronistas* — as the ‘beginning’ of Caribbean history, Caribbean people’s experience of time has been one of “shock, of contraction, of painful negation and of explosion.” Time refuses its own chronology, defies attempts by Caribbean men and women to chronologize bygone events as part of a distinct *past*. How, Glissant wonders, might one write the history of “discontinuity within continuity?” How can one manage the “impossibility for the collective consciousness to get around” such an improbable experience of time? If history, as Michel de Certeau describes it, “begins in effect by the difference between past and present,” how might one narrate a past “which is not yet history?” (de Certeau 9; Glissant *Discours* 224)

Enter non-history. If there remains a cognitive need to cleave time into distinct units of ‘what happened’ ‘what is happening’ and ‘what will happen,’ to name but one reductive model of temporality, then non-history functions as a critique of history’s political limitations. For Glissant, Caribbean time is haunted by its subterranean past. The “clamor of Matouba,” “the volley of shots at Moncada” continue to sound in the Caribbean world, despite these events having taken place centuries or decades prior to the ‘now’ of the Caribbean present. The past “strikes” the Caribbean with a “overwhelming suddenness,” a presence that defies the notion of such events having taken place in a time distinct from the now. “Our history is presence at the limits of the sustainable,” Glissant writes, “presence which we must reconnect seamlessly to the complex thread of our past” (226).

A symptom of nonhistory is *historical longing* (*désiré historique*). For Glissant, “the

relationship between history and literature is concealed” by historical longing, or the “obsession with a primordial trace” from a bygone era. Writers, regardless of their commitments to generic form, “struggle towards” the elucidation of these traces, but not with the intention of installing a totalitarian definition of the past. The narratives that historical longing produces “bear the peculiarity of obfuscating what they reveal.” What one discovers in the attempt to restore the primordial trace to its ‘place’ in the past is not really a new bank of answers (“a reserve to comfortably draw from”) but a world far more oriented by the “known unknowns” explored by myth. Historical longing is a symptom of myth’s uneasy relationship to both history and literature as scribal technologies, produced by history’s inextricable relationship to power and literature’s preoccupation with the exploration of meaning. The role of the writer is to explore the territory between these three edifices, to commit to the page a narrative of the past that signifies on the present in the form of prophecy. If historical longing is a symptom, then, of nonhistory as a condition of postcolonial life in the Caribbean, the work of the writer is “explore the haunting (*lancinement*)” that persists between the unfinished past and the ongoing present.

Nonhistory is the project of narrating the *inassimilability* of events; it is the forbidden and incomplete chronology of forgotten events. It is a testimonial project that, in the process of testifying to history’s methodological and epistemological limitations, also amplifies the absence of narratives that refuse to be historicized. As a metacritical tool, nonhistory brings into view the vast underwater portions of inassimilable facts, unknown uncertainty, and irrecoverable lives beneath the surface of any verified historical narrative; it is the *conditional* multiverse that exists alongside any given history. Nonhistories are inherently subjunctive and unverifiable; they constitute the questions that

historians either cannot ask (without risking their credibility as *historians*) or cannot answer from within the disciplinary framework of their practice. In recent years, the practice of critical fabulation (formulated by Saidiya Hartman and Michel Foucault) has emerged precisely to answer nonhistorical questions and to explore their unanswerability. I follow in Hartman and Foucault's footsteps by thinking with figures like Edouard Glissant, VY Mudimbe, Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Paul Gilroy and the many critics of the secular calendar imparted by Europe on the world in the name of humanism.

The tool of the *nonhistory* opens the door for a new set of methodological problems concerning the narrativization of the black past and the recovery of the slave subject. For one, nonhistory centers the narrative and discursive function of history by situating it within the creative arts of being, rather than scientific or near-scientific notions of objective fact. History is, after all, an assemblage of statements about the past that have been organized into discursive or narrative units. Nevertheless, historical thinking is mediated by what Michel-Rolph Trouillot names a "pretense to truth," meaning that the genre form of the *history* is always in some way fettered to the real, the evident, and the verifiable. Novelists are not so concerned with this genre convention; rather, they actively forego notions of historical truth in order to explore history as *lived experience*. For Glissant, history and literature "encounter the same problematic" of forming "a collective relation between men and their environment in a place that changes in itself and a time that perpetuates itself through self-alteration." History, in other words, might better be understood as a narration of the *experience of being* in time and place; a physical phenomenology in story form. The social constraints of antiblackness, and the political

alienation of colonization produce a distinct experience among black people forged by the former and hardened by the later. Black history, then, is an exploration of these “twin abominations” of slavery and colonialism as the conditions of black being in time and space.

This would be an ideal or perhaps even redemptive definition of history. My intention here is not to dismiss the work of historians committed to such a project. My scholarship would be nowhere without the work of historians like Vincent Brown, Marisa Fuentes, Ranajit Guha, Michel-Rolph Trouillot and Stephanie Smallwood, to name but a handful. These names are, however, not coincidental; each of these historians makes a commitment to a critical approach to the construction of an archive, the constitution of a historical subject, and the limitations of a historical practice of ‘re-membering’ the forlorn subject of history. Be them Indian peasants or slave girls convicted of insubordination, historians of the ‘long present’ have pushed the boundaries of historical inquiry in ways worth highlighting here. That said, nonhistory is exactly that which cannot enter into our knowledge of world-historical events as *historical*. It is the leftover material on the cutting-room floor, the scraps which do not figure into the historian’s text or the indecipherable matter in the archivist’s box in need of a key. History will always be limited to the finitude of historical facts; nonhistory is as infinite as the imagination.

Not every detail one finds in the archive is meaningful. Not every event hails upon the present. History — especially *university* or *professional history* — is governed by a set of professional and intellectual criteria that imposes a set of secondary conditions on the historical account *as fact*. This often means that certain details and certain figures cannot make it into the account, even if their absence is felt as a haunting. What black writers have

done is magnify these haunting omissions and elisions, exploring the gaps between *history 1* (“what happened”) and *history 2* (“what is said to have happened”). All of the texts considered in this dissertation meditate in one way or another on this spectral figure in the living archive. The nameless, faceless captive who managed to climb back aboard the *Zong* after being thrown overboard; a certain ‘Dinah’ who led a revolt on a coffle and was sentenced to death, but had her execution date commuted so that she could give birth to her yet-unborn child; an Arawak queen who continues to rouse Caribbean history with her songs whose lyrics and melody have been all but forgotten; and the countless stories of mothers whose children disappeared from the village, never to be heard from again. These are stories difficult to narrate in history, if only because we only know of these people incidentally. It was a ledger — an index of commodification — that committed the story of the African who climbed back aboard to *Zong* to memory. We cannot know anything more about this figure; cannot know their name, cannot know their homeland, their native tongue, how many children they had had or perhaps wanted to have. The number of things we *do not know* about this person far outnumbers what *we do know*; everything else must be invented, as recovery yields no further answers. Reading “against the archival grain” will only yield but so many answers, but our questions of the documented and undocumented past will never cease. Nonhistory is not a remedy to this endless sequence of empty queries, but an attempt to explore the implications of what remains “known unknown” information.

I have been greatly influenced by Glissant’s formulation of nonhistory and have chosen this idea as the theoretical backbone for this project because of its elegance and its exacting relevance to the problems at hand. That said, Glissant’s notion of *nonhistory*

developed during a time of reflection in Caribbean historiography, particularly from other *nonhistorians* like Derek Walcott, Sylvia Wynter, Kamau Brathwaite and Wilson Harris. At stake for all five is a widening gap between the European epistemological fundamentals of historical scholarship and the ordinary lives and creolized cultural practices of Caribbean people. For Walcott, nationalist and postcolonial obsessions with cultural mimicry and the allure of power are to blame. “In the Caribbean, we do not pretend to exercise power in the historical sense” when the dominant understanding of history is the narration of the development of Europe’s expanding ‘world.’ Indeed, what “energizes” Caribbean societies is the “spiritual force of a culture shaping itself, and it do this without the formula of politics” (4). Rather than look at the power differential between Western Europe and its forlorn colonies, Walcott wonders after what might exist beneath the surface of imposed expectations of human development. How might we struggle against the ideological misreading of ‘mimicry?’ (Walcott, 6) Sylvia Wynter similarly quests after an alternative politics for the Caribbean future that might be drawn from a reevaluation of misinterpreted episodes of its past. Juxtaposed against the totalitarian authority of the plantation is the ‘plot’ on which folk cultures emerge on the bias to the market exigencies of capital. For Wynter, Caribbean history is tainted by its imperial narratology; through ruses of rhetoric, it installs a vision of the past that suits the plantation economy while also threatening folk historiographies with irreality. By accepting folk culture “as a point outside the system where the traditional values can give us a focus of criticism against the impossible reality in which we are enmeshed,” Wynter suggests that a seditious form of historiography — a nonhistory, aligned with the political-imaginary work of the ‘novel’ — might be achieved as a counterweight to the imperial residues of contemporary Caribbean historiography.

Brathwaite is of a similar opinion to Walcott when he writes that Caribbean history has, since its conception, rejected “the European political subdivision of the region” and has thus been beholden to “European empirical scholarship” and the epistemological forms descended from it. Like Wynter, Brathwaite calls for more attention to the legacies of the plantation as an overarching theme, a unifying precondition, of Caribbean historical phenomena (2). “The mainstream of cultural continuity in the Caribbean derives from the function requirements of the plantation society, past and present,” as the plantation provides the organizing locus for Caribbean cultural forms, both hegemonic and subversive. For Brathwaite, as well as Walcott, many of the problems posed to Caribbean historiography stem from the dismissal of local cultural forms as a veritable archive. “Until a major oral recording project can be undertaken, and until we begin to give thought to the techniques of collecting information from ‘live’ informants,” Caribbean history will continue to serve a singular, postimperial purpose (4). Harris takes a book from Brathwaite’s page in his exploration of limbo and vaudou as “arts of the imagination” too often ignored in Caribbean historiography. For Harris, “the West Indies — history-wise — appears [...] to be little more than an adjunct of imperialism,” especially in light of the discourse of *nothingness* and ahistoricity to which Caribbean historians have been made to respond. Such a forced discourse of response to imperial ideologies of world-historical insignificance put too much strain on the Caribbean historical imagination while also dismissing local forms of chronosophy as irrelevant or insufficient sources of historical understanding. “Arts of the imagination,” like the practices of limbo and the religion of vaudou, only appear as primitive vestiges in a developmentalist notion of history hellbent on dismissing black and brown peoples from contributing to or even figuring within the

march of progress. What the Caribbean needs, according to Harris, is a philosophy of history attuned to the goings-on of the folk both in the countryside and in the city, an imagination that represents Caribbean life as it has been and continues to be.

Caribbean writers demand a *descriptive philosophy of history* that explains the curious problem of a past which is unfinished and a present looming over the precipice of an unknown, unknowable future. This requires a rejection of the *prescriptive philosophies of history* inherited by European colonizers that were never devised to capture the particularities of Caribbean being and thus only serve to fashion an illusion of stultified humanity, botched agency and developmental decay as the truth of the Caribbean region. Unsurprisingly a similar conversation emerges in the context of West African historiography, where the inheritance of professional history in the early 20th century by African historians served the purposes of exploring new nationalisms. African historiographers have studied the development of university history in Africa (often confused with *history* itself), and questioned its commitments to often Eurocentric conceptions of historical thinking (at times to the detriment of African oral histories). Valentin-Yves Mudimbe and Bogumil Jewsiewicki suggests that African historians found themselves invariably in conversation with pervasive myths of African *ahistoricity* in their quests to enshrine precolonial history as “the melting-pot of truly African experiences” while foreclosing colonial history as little more than a “parenthesis, a time of acculturation and domination” (2-3). Such a project gave a rather prescriptivist tone to African history; the goal of the historian of Africa became the *construction* of a “glorious past” while passing it as an archeological finding. Other historians have taken issue with the seemingly inevitable periodization of the past into episodes like *precolonial*, *colonial*, and

postcolonial. Richard Reid writes of how the term *precolonial* “privileges the ‘colonial’ and attributes to the latter a transformative power and a significance that is [...] greatly overstated” (136). The impact has been a ‘foreshortening’ of the African past that only informs us of the African continent’s interaction with Europe’s expanding ‘world.’ African history, in other words, cannot escape the specter of the colonial incursion which constitutes its ‘birth story’ within a secular calendar of world events. Such a dilation of historical time puts perhaps too heavy an emphasis on nineteenth-century Africa and, as I argue in chapter 1, only particular aspects of that century’s history — namely that of its anticolonial resistance. Nevertheless, the ‘colonial’ period in African history can be reformulated in a variety of different ways that expand or shrink this dilation of African historical time, but nevertheless maintain a discursively inevitable tie to Europe. The books with which African history has been written and on which African history has been modeled figure within what Mudimbe calls “the colonial library,” the epistemological archive in which the Portuguese ‘discovery’ of inhabited lands south of Cape Bojador was inscribed as an episode in Europe’s ‘worlding’ endeavor².

Even if the idea of history as a particular kind of narrative project is a European idea — and we might question whether even *this* is true — the development of professional history in Africa has led to similar struggles of adaptation. Mudimbe traces the development of the *idea* of African history to the 1940s when he writes that “African history was supposed to have begun with the European discovery off the continent in the fifteenth century, and African societies became historical the moment of their colonization,” further consolidating the notion that Africans not only lacked history (as in, a sense of *chronosophy*, a knowledge of time) but the notion of history was itself a colonial

inheritance. It was only in the mid-century that African historiography was able to develop “independent of a Western presence” by virtue of changing ideas concerning ideas of “subjectivity, regional autonomy of cultures, and relativism of values” (Mudimbe 21-22). The problem is that Africans *did* have history, but it was integrated into their local cultural systems often dismissed by European colonizers and African évolués as pagan and uncivilized. The proliferation of *university historians* in Africa has come into conflict with what Jewsiewicki calls “historical narrators,” the one “closer to their colleagues in western universities than to the peasants of their ‘own’ national society,” the other performing the past for ‘the people’ and thus beholden to “resonance[s] in the collective consciousness” of their audiences. The difference in approaches is the presence of ‘historical actors’ in the audience; as Isidore Ndaywel è Nziem suggests, the historical narrator and his audience are ‘actors’ in an ongoing history of the African present, whereas the often western audience of the university historian is not³. The critical distance of the historian’s subject position aside, the kinds of knowledge about the African past that are produced by all three — African historians, Africanist historians, and African folk narrators — have significant effects on African history as Africans *live it*. Thus, for Mudimbe, Jewsiewicki and Ndaywel è Nziem, historical knowledge should serve a particular purpose, even if, at the level of discourse, it claims to serve the singular deity of ‘truth.’

What is apparent to me is that there looms over Caribbean and African historiography the specter not only of colonialism and its imposition of a particular mode of being that African and Caribbean peoples have struggled to meet, but also slavery as the original rupture that complicates the African and Caribbean relationships to the European notion of historical time. African and Caribbean notions of history are proposed as

alternatives to a totalitarian notion and practice of history inherited by racist colonial administrators, slave-code legislators and historical narrators of empire; but rarely do these ‘alternative histories’ succeed in dislodging the capital-H History that marks Africa’s entry into world affairs as a purveyor of slaves and the Caribbean’s addition to the European world map as a site of extraction and dispossession. These are preconditions to any history of Africa, any history of the Caribbean; even when we stake our interests in other topics, historians and nonhistorians of the black past alike still find themselves working in slavery’s wake, historicizing the ‘world’ that slavery built. African American history, too, figures within this discursive terrain. As Arlene Keizer notes, “African American history was submerged under the totalizing narrative of Western history until very recently,” a condition that not only shaped the production of historical ‘truths’ but also conditioned the ways in which said truths could be uttered (*énoncement*). Nonhistory does not escape this order of discourse, but charts an alternative path by virtue of its suspicion or disinterest in the recovery of historical truths. The ‘discovery’ of Olaudah Equiano’s potential birth in South Carolina, rather than in what is now Nigeria, as he described it in his 1789 *Interesting Narrative*, is an interesting case in point. The historian Vincent Carretta discovered archival materials to support Equiano’s ‘creole’ birth and thus casts into suspicion the entirety of his *Narrative* as a historical document. Indeed, how could Equiano have been born in two places? Which is his real birth story? If he was born in Igboland, how might we make sense of the baptismal reports Carretta uses to frame the question of Equiano’s “probably fictitious” account of his youth, including his oft-cited description of the Middle Passage? Why lie and what constitutes the beginnings and end of this lie (Carretta xvi)? As Michelle Wright suggests, “the ambiguity about Equiano makes it difficult to locate him

in the linear spacetime of the Middle Passage epistemology,” which necessarily inscribes the flow of lives *out of Africa* and *into the Americas* as unidirectional. This question of historical uncertainty and epistemological contradiction results in “the meaning of his *Narrative*” coming under scrutiny (23). Is it now a work of fiction because of this piece of falsified evidence, from a time in history when there were but only scant documents testifying to Equiano’s *very* existence? Or does the text enter into a new relationship to history and literature as complementary techniques of exploring the past? It is this space of ambiguity — to void of the known uncertainty — that the nonhistorian begins their work, precisely at the point where only a speculative history can advance.

What the ‘Equiano affair’ brings into view is the troublesome problem of ‘truth’ in history’s varying definitions. For Glissant, ‘truth’ never really enters into history’s equation. Historicity is located in the distinction between history as statement (*énoncé*) and history as lived experience (*vécu*), the likes of which always makes recourse to a narrative sequentialization of events understood as *real*. History, therefore, is not immune to the ruses of politics, the lures of nationalism, and the machinations of discrimination. As a political technology, history often serves the purpose of *installing* a narrative of the past *as that which really happened*. University historians train themselves to be perpetually wary of ‘ideology’ for precisely this reason, but no individual subject is entirely immune. The absence of objective ‘truth’ is juxtaposed by the preeminence of lived experience as constituting a multitude of truths. I personally am not prone to dismiss Equiano’s narrative as a fabrication because new evidence has emerged to question the validity of his narration of his early life. To me, such a critical suspicion of the ex-slave’s narrative mirrors the long history of dismissing slave testimonies. William W Nichols writes of a “cavalier treatment”

paid to slave narratives in Southern historiography, wondering why “scholars have been viscerally reluctant to confront ex-slaves’ views of themselves and their past” (407). Despite his disappointment with historiographical aversions to slave testimony, Nichols remains optimistic that “the slaves’ view of slavery will become an integral part of American history before too many years have passed” (408). He said this in 1971; in many ways, the problem endures in African American historiography, where the use of slave testimonies as archival sources is typically adjoined with caveats on the ‘authenticity’ of the account. After all, how ‘authentic’ can an ex-slave’s testimony be if it is given to a mainly white audience on the abolitionist lecture circuit, or a white, foreign ‘culture worker’ from the Federal Writers’ Project? As Dwight McBride makes clear, the “discursive terrain” in which a testimonial account is given will always shape any truths rendered therein. Historians are trained to take these kinds of ‘formatting’ into account when seeking out the ‘truth’ in the discursive web of statements in the archive, but many have stayed wary of such first-hand accounts. Indeed, we should be suspicious of the ways black historical narrators were ‘hailed upon’ by a variety of factors to doctor their own testimonies, but we should also steel ourselves from the suspicion that the ‘truth’ remains somewhere beneath or behind the tendered testimony. Indeed, “personal recollection of the past is always a highly subjective phenomenon,” just as the interpretation of testimony is similarly subjective and thus subject to a variety of ‘external’ conditions. The point is not that slave testimonies are always truthful, but the question of ‘objectivity’ is not clean of the politics of the interpreter. What is one person’s truth is another falsehood; if we ‘catch’ a witness in a lie, the nonhistorian speculates on the meaning and the value of the lie, as well as that of the truth with which the lie enters into a relation.

My intention in outlining an itinerary for a nonhistorical kind of scholarly and narrative practice is not to dismiss history outright. History is essential to the work of nonhistory, if only because history quests to establish a common terrain on which the process of speculation can take place. History and nonhistory are complementary projects. The practice of history explores what happened by examining all that has been said, all that persists, and all that testifies to a particular ‘truth’ of the event; nonhistory seeks after what history cannot find. When it comes to the history of the slave, an extrapolitical being defined first and foremost by their position *outside* the *socius*⁴, the inherent political apparatuses of historical thinking lose some of their steam. We know a lot about Equiano, not only from what he said (and published) in his *Narrative*, but also because of the lacework of documents that historians have used to validate his presence in eighteenth-century Atlantic history. We might speculate about his birth, wonder why he lied or if he lied, and find satisfaction in whatever hypotheses we generate about these questions. The same cannot be said about the people Equiano *writes about*, those individuals who enter it and exit from the paper trail of historical *énoncés* in the moment Equiano lifts his pen from the paper. His sister, his parents — these are figures we cannot account for in history, for we only know of their very existence through what Equiano says about them. We can only speculate on their lives, as our current methods cannot with any degree of certainty answer any of our questions about them. As Kwadwo Opoku-Agyemang notes, “we know Equiano’s fate because he survived to write his life-story; and the history he reflects upon is the full narrative of Africa abroad, the history of the African diaspora in miniature.” This paradigmatic story of a racial *us* also reveals, in its silences, the nonhistory of what we cannot know: “what we read is not the full story, only a portion of it. For Equiano’s mother

came home from the farm one evening to find her only daughter and youngest son stolen. *We do not know her story. Nobody knows the story of her grief*" (26, italics mine).

Infamous lives

Although I emphasize Glissant's role in shaping my ideas in this dissertation, I must also admit my debts to Toni Morrison. Indeed, *Beloved* haunts this dissertation. Many of the questions raised about the limitations of history and the creative potential of nonhistory are answered in *Beloved*, a text which has, as Stephen Best notes, reinvigorated an entire field of historical scholarship concerning blackness' originary relationship to slavery⁵. The suffering of *Beloved*, the daughter Sethe managed to kill when she and her family of fugitive cargo were apprehended, is the suffering of Mary, the slain daughter of Margaret Garner, the woman on whose image Sethe's is traced. While we know surprisingly little about Margaret, save some descriptions of her as "a mulatto, about five feet high, showing one-fourth or one-third white blood"⁶ and the proceedings of her trial, we know even less about the two year-old slave girl Mary. In her inaugural moment in the historical record, she appears in the gruesome scene of her own murder: "Margaret Garner, seeing that their hopes of freedom were vain seized a butcher knife that lay on the table, and with one stroke cut the throat of her little daughter, whom she probably loved the best" (Coffin 559-60) This is the account of an eyewitness — not to the crime, but to its proceedings in the Cincinnati courts — the abolitionist Levi Coffin. Other sources emphasize the brutality of Mary's murder, writing that the posse of slave catchers found the two year-old "weltering in its own blood, the throat being cut from ear to ear, the head almost severed from the body" ("Stampede of Slaves"). Coffin describes Mary as "almost white, a little girl of rare

beauty” (563). Other than this sole description, there is no more information about the girl.

Mary Garner’s ghost — the gap she embodies in the archive of historical events — marks off an epistemological limit to historical thinking. Mary Garner’s is not a life we can ‘excavate;’ it was her death that ushered her into popular knowledge, but only as the victim of the barbaric crime of an ambiguous suspect. We cannot *know* any more about Mary Garner’s two years of life; what games she enjoyed playing with her siblings, what her favorite foods were or if she liked her hair styled in braids or pigtails. She enters into and exits history as a ‘fact’ within the broader mythos of her mother’s infanticidal love, within the litany of cases surrounding the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act, as one among many black lives lost along the Underground Railroad. Mary’s is a forgotten but also forgettable life, not only because it was a life spoiled before it could really blossom, but also because hers — in life and in death — is a “not a story to pass on.” In transforming Margaret and Mary’s story into a novel, Morrison felt the need to move beyond the fixities of the historical account, of our knowledge of the Garner clan. “The historical Margaret Garner is fascinating, but, to a novelist, confining,” she writes in *Beloved*’s foreword, “so I would invite her thoughts, plumb them for a subtext that was historically true in essence, but not strictly factual in order to relate her history to contemporary issues of freedom, responsible and women’s ‘place.’” Morrison does not defame the dead in using Margaret and Mary’s lives as a fount for creative inspiration. Rather, the novel strives to “invite readers into a repellant landscape,” “to pitch a tent in a cemetery inhabited by highly vocal ghosts” (xvii). The novel’s project rests on an inhabitation of the present *within the past*, born from the tension between the “herculean effort to forget” and “memory desperate to stay alive” (xix). To put it in the words of Glissant, *Beloved* bears witness to a “prophetic vision of the past”

and testifies to the endurance of unfreedom as a condition of black life.

The case of Mary Garner is paradigmatic of a broader set of issues relating to black knowledges of the past and the impediments to cultural archeology. Mary's experience is lost to history; we cannot recover it, for we can only account for her very existence in the moment of her death by her mother's hand. Hers is a story of infamy whose spark is extinguished in the moment of Mary's — of Margaret's — collision with power. Michel Foucault writes of similar figures in French history, whose existences "are reduced exactly to what has been said about them." For these lives of infamous men and women, "it is scarcity and not verbosity that make fact and fiction equivalent to one another." We might speculate about these people and their lives, as many historians do, but our speculations will always be just that. Black history bears the weight of all of the lives we cannot account for, be them slaves thrown overboard, captives dead of dysentery in the slave castle's dungeon, the one or two prisoners-of-war on the coffle who managed to escape into the surrounding woods, or the stories survivors simply refused to tell. We can only know of so many of these instances when we encounter them in an authorial account, often from the dispossessor's pen. The 'truth' — if it exists — dwells beneath the surface of the ledger or diary or lab notebook; 'reading against the grain' has resurrected some, but there are too many that cannot be recovered. This, of course, says nothing of those millions who never left a trace behind and thus, in an evidence-based model of historical conjecture, *may have never existed*. Much of black history must be invented, precisely because much of black history has yet to be described, has yet to figure in the present as its prerequisite past. Not all pasts amount to a present, but every present bears witness to its unique past; this is the essence of *history*. These are the questions that concern a *nonhistory* of lost and

irrecoverable experience. These are the questions we must ask of the unspeaking dead.

The archive is not silent, although it bears witness to its own silences. Its stories chart a careful trajectory around whirlpools of unknowing. While the archive is chatty, we continue to feel the infrasound of what it does not — cannot — say. Historians of slavery have had to make recourse to the imagination in their quests to recover — or at least re/member — the spoiled lives of captives. Stephanie Smallwood argues that “American slavery has exposed the methodological limits of the discipline of history,” a problem she does not associate with the archive per se, but “the critical philosophical assumptions that shape and structure our understandings of history” as a humanistic, humanizing project (120; 127). When the archive speaks, however, its idiom is encoded by the stricture of power. Careless readers often reinscribe the language of dispossession into historical victims or allow their contemporary biases to bleed into their vision of the past, creating the eerie verisimilitude between enslaved and emancipated forms of representational misrecognition. Marisa Fuentes makes this very clear when she writes that “enslaved women appear as historical subjects through the form and content of archival documents in the manner in which they lived: spectacularly violated, objectified, disposable, hypersexualized, and silenced” (5). The delicate task of ‘detaching’ the captive that appears only in the form of a silhouette from the web of violent discourse that ensnares them in the document is further complicated when the social constraints that jettisoned the slave from humane treatment *in history* continue to question the validity of their humanity in the present. Discourse itself traps the subject within the sign of its misrepresentation, threatening to replace the person with the thing that has been made to represent it; human beings, persons, become things, whores, ‘heads’ and ‘hands’ in acts of curious social

metonymy that are not so easily undone now, in our ‘emancipated present.’

For Saidiya Hartman, “the archive is a death sentence, a tomb, a display of the violated body” precisely because the concerns of the humanitarian historian cannot undo the violence of the past, cannot rectify the disjointed and dismembered representation of the captive in the language of their captivity. She argues that the stories often written about the misrepresented “are not about them, but rather about the violence, excess, mendacity and reason that seized hold of their lives” (Hartman “Venus,” 2). Any attempt to tell this story only exposes us to the *primal scene* of misrecognition and textual damnation; to stage such a scene as a recovery transforms the historical scene of violence in the archival into a perversely triumphant scene of subjection. For Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak, the result of such deliberate or unintentional misrepresentation is the “construction of a fiction whose task was to produce a whole collection of ‘effects of the real,’” the likes of which installs the sign as the ‘truth’ of its signified. The fiction that transforms a woman into a captive is, of course, “an open secret that cannot be part of official knowledge.” These fictions surreptitiously order the discursive terrain in which histories are ‘excavated,’ ascribing politicized meaning to newly-minted historical facts and calling it ‘truth’. This processes is what Spivak refers to as “worlding,” or “the *reinscription* of a cartography that must (re)present itself as impeccable” (228) not only for the immediate purposes of the consolidation of power (as was the case in British India) but also as the primary condition for the development of new historical knowledges now inextricably bound the order of discourse of “imperialism-as-history” (215). Postcolonial and precolonial historiography finds itself bound to the discursive precondition of an imminent colonial ‘parenthesis,’ which mirrors but is not identical to the ‘parenthesis’ of slavery in the narrative project of

black history. This is the world in which we now live, a world in which we are, in David Scott's words, "stranded in the present" of imperialism's history (Scott 13).

That the historians Fuentes and Smallwood develop their nonhistorical methodologies and historiographies from the writings of both Hartman and Spivak, literary critics and fabulists of the archive, is not incidental. As I have mentioned above, fiction writers and the literary critics that study them have been aware of the productive uses of fiction in the exploration of lost experience for a long time. Although the texts I explore in this dissertation are not *traditional* historical novels in the sense outlined by Gregor Lukacs, their relationship to a parallel itinerary to historical inquiry nevertheless signals the writer and the critics' commitment to a deepened relationship to the past than the disciplinary conventions of university history and the concomitant epistemological limitations of historical thinking can perhaps yield. The goal of this dissertation is to explore how a dissolution of the formal distinction between history and literature might yield novel interpretations of the endurance of antiblack suffering in a post-emancipation world. The texts I consider here were written in the contemporary period (i.e. post-1960), but each of them questions the elisions of time that make the enslaved past signify so heavily on the emancipated present. Whether we call them *hauntings* as scholars like Joanne Chassot and Wendy Walters view them, or attempts at the consolidation of subjectivity and identity after an era of imperial victimization, as Arlene Keizer and Ashraf Rushdy see it, is perhaps besides the point. Slavery haunts the present precisely because it cannot be accepted as 'the past' when the primary conditions of slavery — antiblackness, racial capitalism, biopolitics — continue to shape black life, despite the dubious fact of black emancipation. In 2022, black people around the world are still questing towards

freedom, despite the apparent victories of liberal democracy and self-determination. By considering slavery as a ‘frame,’ I attempt to explore the enduring issue of freedom in black Atlantic literatures.

On method

In drafting an itinerary for this investigation of the black historical imagination, I resist the urge to ‘center’ this project in a particular place or around a particular language community. This project spans the various disciplinary figurations which have been used to study African and African-descended peoples. Its geopolitical scope exceeds the continental breadth of ‘African studies’ while questioning the formation of the African as an object of historical inquiry. Like many of our inherited identity markers, what constitutes an African at any given time is the subject of intense debate, with each definition accompanied by its own set of critiques. Rather than add my own definition of what an African is or is not, I consider the African a distinct *form of blackness*. If blackness is the racial project produced mainly by the exportation of African captives to the New World and thus conceptually tied to the legacy of the slave trade, the experiences of Africans constitute a significant albeit often ignored perspective. Perhaps one of the most significant works of literary-cultural criticism to investigate the problems outlined in this dissertation is Paul Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic*, a text which has, since its publication in 1993, been the source of consistent criticism from scholars of African studies for its erasure of African contributions to the black “counterculture of modernity”⁷ Although my work is, in a way, indebted to Gilroy, I find this omission worrisome. *Nonhistory: Slavery and the Black Historical Imagination* might thus be read as an expansion of Gilroy’s thought, especially

given the ways that African American and West Indian literatures have influenced contemporary African writing over the past six decades.

In putting Western Africa *back* into the ‘Black Atlantic’ that first emerged on its littoral, this project also moves beyond the often exilic framework of ‘African diaspora studies.’ For one, who fits into the notion of ‘African diaspora’ is, like the notion of an ‘African,’ a subject of debate. Are, for instance, first-generation migrants from Senegal living in Paris part of the ‘African diaspora?’ What about their descendants, or the descendants of their descendants? How are these experiences structured by the various histories of voluntary and involuntary migrations in the Atlantic World? The term ‘African diaspora’ has more often than not been used to speak specifically about a nonconsenting party of deportees and exiles, bound for the plantations of the Americas. Thus, the inclusion of African peoples whose ancestors never experienced the transit has often excluded them from the otherwise vast scope of the ‘African diaspora.’ We might assume that this has to do with a question of historical experience; peoples of the diaspora claim the slave trade and deportation as part of their origin story; Africans, in general, do not. These generalizations ignore a nonhistory of migration and resettlement by peoples of the diaspora in Africa, such as the recaptives of Sierra Leone, the Congo settlers of Liberia, and the imported creoles of Cape Verde and São Tomé and Príncipe, African island nations that were uninhabited prior to Portuguese settlement in the fifteenth century. These marginal histories, and the various smothered voices of African captives who managed to escape the transit across the sea, constitute a significant counter-narrative to the popular interventionist narrative of African historiography. If interests to connect black studies’ critique of race as a structure of lived experience and postcolonial African cultural studies,

we might begin in these sites of creole acculturation.

My intention here is to think about the black histories of captivity that *totalize* in African and African diasporic perspectives insofar as the figure of the captive has become the metonym of blackness in the Atlantic world since 1492. To think about the history of captivity as a history of the ‘African type’ or a history of ‘the black subject’ means moving beyond the paradigmatic gulf that either relegates the diaspora to the position of an adjunct to African history or transforms Africa into little more than an genetic Eden, disappearing from historical time post-exile. By considering the ways that African, West Indian and African American writers have used literature to write nonhistories of slavery, I am attempting to move beyond the at-times arbitrary divisions which scholar have used to delimit a truly vast discursive topography. My hope is that this approach will serve as a model for a post-identarian approach to black study, one that considers the infinite experiences of being black in an antiblack world as constituting a *Tout*, as opposed to an *Un*.

My interest in attempting a disciplinary model of *toutmondisme* has invariably brought me to approach both English- and French-language material. Like Gilroy, my scope of *The Atlantic* is limited by disciplinary limitations; had I been a better scholar of Portuguese and Spanish, I would include these perspectives as well. Nevertheless, I pay special attention to the various histories of imperial contact that have coalesced in the foundation and stabilization of ‘world’ Anglophone and Francophone literatures, particularly of Africa and the Americas. As a comparatist, I am committed to the epistemological and literary-critical merits of comparative inquiry, especially when it concerns the antiblack linguistic technologies that moor blackness to forms of spoiled

human life. In Francophone West Africa and the Caribbean, the histories of French republicanism and its concomitant aversions to overt discussions of race in political policy strikes a peculiar chord when one considers France's role in the slave trade and its civilizing/humanizing missions in 'darkest' Africa. French-speaking black people have inherited this history of contact and conquest and have used the French language as the vehicle for meditations on the contradictions of that history. A similar narrative is true of English-language literatures of West Africa and the Caribbean. African and West Indian authors have varying approaches to the history of slavery specific to the particularities of each nation or region's spacetime and accompanying national imagination. To this broad federation of Anglophone writers, we might also add African American writers, often treated as a distinct island community in American academia. In thinking about history as *event* as well as *experience*, I breach these linguistic and national barriers in order to explore how such a radical juxtaposition of black experiences might inform a *total* image of the black historical imagination.

The writers I consider in this dissertation are not meant to represent a coterie of canonical or 'most significant' authors. I have striven to look at lesser-known writers to minimize the allure of the cults of individual genius often attached to figures like Glissant, Chamoiseau, Jones, Morrison, Johnson and Soyinka, and probe beneath the surface of various canons for similarly boisterous perspectives. Among scholars in the Anglo-American academy, Sherley Anne Williams is perhaps the most well-known writer I consider in this dissertation, with *Dessa Rose* being the work she is best known for. Fred D'Aguiar has enjoyed a longer and more productive career than Williams, who tragically died young in 1999. D'Aguiar's work spans poetry, fiction and nonfiction, but his work

remains under-appreciated, both in the United States and in the United Kingdom. Léonora Miano is quite well-known in France as one of the architects of the Afropean movement. Her works have won many awards, including the Prix Femina in 2013 for *La Saison de l'ombre*. That said, the process of translating her works into English has been slow, and these translations have, as of yet, not incited critical attention by the Anglo-American academy. Jean Métellus is perhaps the least well-known of the four writers under consideration, both in the Anglophone and Francophone academies. A Haitian writer who spent the majority of his adult life in political exile in Paris, Métellus wrote prolifically in French but was rarely translated into other languages nor studied critically. The texts I consider in this dissertation are not necessarily exemplary, nor do I suggest they constitute their own canon or counter-canon. Rather, I consider them because of the ways each novelist explores a nonhistorical examination of the past that, when considered as a whole, illuminates the various thru-lines of the black historical imagination.

Each chapter explores a text — or in the case of chapter three, a pairing of texts — and thinks with the authors about an essential problem in the historiography of slavery. Chapter One, “Dark Modern,” considers how the Cameroonian novelist Léonora Miano charts an alternative path of modern African history through the metaphor of ‘darkness.’ Her 2013 novel *La Saison de l'ombre* centers around a remote village that experiences two catastrophes at the same time; a great fire and the disappearance of 12 men, 10 of which were but young boys. The novel’s realist representation of the disappearance of these men and the subsequent quest for answers by their mothers and wives is offset by its representations of physical darkness as a prophetic metaphor for tumultuous times to come. The novel is intentionally vague chronometrically and geographically; the reader is never

quite sure of where or when its events take place. Nevertheless, *our* knowledge of the Atlantic slave trade and the spread of its effects into the African hinterlands animates an otherwise opaque novel of motherly dispossession and epistemic changeover. My reading of *La Saison de l'ombre* attempts to place the novel within a reconstruction of African history and to analyze the novelist's signification of 'darkness' as a discursive condition of historical narratives of colonialism and postcolonialism that continue to animate African historiography. In particular, I pay close attention to the ways that African historiography has narrated (or struggled to narrate) the expansion of slavery in 19th century Africa with the advent of colonial intervention in the name of abolition.

Chapter 2 takes us from Africa to the West Indies, at the turn of the fifteenth century. In this chapter, "Tragedy of Origins," I consider how the Haitian novelist and playwright Jean Métellus transforms the history of Anacaona, the Arawak queen of Xaragua, into a tragic history of the Haitian people. *Anacaona* (1986) narrates the story of the Spanish arrival in Hispaniola, their exploitation of the Native Americans' hospitality and the attempts at rebellion by rebel Spaniards and Native warriors that ultimately amounted to death and destruction. Métellus' play narrates these deaths while also gesturing towards Hispaniola's black future. Although it does not afford them any lines, the play nevertheless pays special attention to African captives who, after arriving in Hispaniola to replace the exhausted Natives as a source of labor, choose a fugitive life in the hills over a life of bondage. My reading of Métellus' play questions how the playwright historicizes the development of a Native itinerary of resistance as an African inheritance; historical sources and philology tell us a different story. My interest is not to brand Métellus as 'anti-Indigenous' for ascribing the dual Native/black practice of marronnage to black people.

Rather, I analyze how such a revision of the historical record prophesizes the Native Haitian past to the black Haitian present in terms of tragedy.

Chapter 3, “Other Moods,” explores the grammatical mood of historiography in two novels: Sherley Anne Williams’ *Dessa Rose* (1986) and Fred D’Aguiar’s *Feeding the Ghosts* (1998). Williams and D’Aguiar’s novels explore similar instances of ‘infamy’ as described above. The source material for *Dessa Rose* appeared in the figurative marginalia of histories of slave revolt in the United States whereas the story of *Feeding the Ghosts* mirrors that of the slave ship *Zong*. In both accounts, human lives were reduced to juridical proceedings and sentences in local newspapers, thin façades hiding more excruciating truths beneath their polished and highly circulated surfaces. In this chapter, I explore what I call “the language of captivity” as the discursive web in which enslaved peoples’ lives were ensnared. Historians and nonhistorians have sought to recover these individuals; in Williams and D’Aguiar’s cases, the historical subject is replaced with a fictional representative through whose eyes we (the reader) might inhabit marginalized and forgotten episodes of the black past. This chapter theorizes the “language of captivity” as the veil that disguises human life as cargo and considers the ways that both novelists quest for a world outside of antiblackness’ literal and metaphysical hold.

The conclusion offers a closing meditation on unwitnessed experiences. In thinking with Toni Morrison’s call to “tear down” the veil that shrouded slave testimony out of respect for white audiences, I question how the past holds on to knowledge we may never retrieve and wonder after how we might live with not knowing. Fabulation opens the door for thinking otherwise about the historical text and the archival trace, but what might we make of information deliberately withheld, of experiences we can only imagine? How does

the black contemporary thirst to *know* betray our ancestors' will to *forget*?

These chapters each strives to use literature to chart a path between the philosophy of history, historical scholarship and critical historiography. Each of these writers is well aware of the problems that come with narrating such a history, and each has devised their own itinerary for a new historiography of slavery and its afterlives. Although I do not always agree with each author's political or metaphysical considerations, I nevertheless consider how each constitutes a particular perspective on an issue that transcends the individual genius of the author. The black historical imagination — the assemblage of discourses about the past that constructs not only what has been said (*énoncés*) but what can be *conceived* about the black past — is not a provincialism of the historical novelist, but essential to the ways that black historical narrators engage with and understand the past, whether as historians or nonhistorians, university scholars or community griots, eyewitnesses or storytellers. My task here is not to silo certain authors into piles of 'correct' and 'misguided,' or 'accurate' and 'anachronistic,' but to consider the usefulness of both fact and fiction in the exploration of the black past.

Chapter 1 : *Dark Modern*

Omens of novelty

Léonora Miano's fourth novel *La Saison de l'ombre* (2011) (hereafter shortened as *Saison*) begins after two catastrophes strike the remote community known as the Mulongo: first, a massive fire razes many of their buildings to the ground; as the villagers fight back the flames, they then discover the disappearance of ten initiate boys and their two adult guides. At the behest of the village's elderly midwife, Ebeise, the mothers of the missing young boys are corralled into a single place on the outskirts of town. "That way," Ebeise says, "their pain will be contained in one clearly defined space and won't spread throughout the village." The quartering of the grieving women will be a major theme for the first section of the book, especially when one of the women, Eyabe, refuses her ritual sequestration.

As the villagers rebuild and search for the missing twelve, a third cataclysm strikes. The titular *shadow* (*ombre*) that the villagers refer to as "Mwititi" or simply "Evil" (*le Mal*) appears at the site where the women are cloistered. As the women sleep, a "shadowy presence comes to them, to each of them, and each one recognized without a doubt the voice that spoke to them." Despite immediately recognizing the voices of their disappeared sons, none are able to identify the shadowy figure that appears in their dreams: "The darkness [...] was thick. They could not make out anything." To each of the women, the faceless voice makes the same supplication: "Mother, open yourself to me so that I might be born again." The women are unsurprisingly skeptical of such a presence. "Evil is real," after all. "It knows how to pass itself off for things it is not." Nevertheless, the voices insist:

“Mother, hurry. We must act before daybreak. Otherwise, all is lost.” (14)

An ominous message, no doubt. Despite all of the women having the same dream, none of them discuss it. “None of them would pull their sister aside to whisper to her: he came. My firstborn. He asked me...” Instead, the women attempt to ignore what had happened to them the night before, making idle chatter, “exchanging banalities that one says when doing household chores.” Nevertheless, the women study the darkness outside of their lodging, unaware of the fact that “in the sky, the sun had already taken its place” (17). Something outside of the little house to which they had been confined so thoroughly blocked out the sun that the women assume it to still be nighttime.

Ebeise and her son Musima — now the clan’s *Ministre des Cultes*, in absence of his father Mundene — are the first to notice Mwititi hovering over the shack. Visible from afar, “a thick fog hovers above the dwelling.” The narrator describes Mwititi as “a cold smoke” (*une fumée froide*), albeit with a degree of incredulity. Mwititi “extends night around the dwelling,” obscuring Etume, the sun’s name at early morning. Neither Ebeise nor Musima know what to make of the shadow. “Could it be a manifestation for her suffering?” The younger asks his mother, who informs him to assume his duties as the “master of mysteries” (*maître des mystères*) and interrogate each of the mothers.

One by one, Musima interviews the women. “Woman, how did the night treat you? Good, thank you. Woman, do you know about the shadow?” Each woman has the same response: “Mwititi is deceiving. It came to me, bearing the voice of my... firstborn son. The one who has not been found. I know it was not him.” Despite having said very little, the women feel as if they “said too much.” Only one of them — Eyabe, the village hair-braider, endowed with a certain *masculine* spirit — gives a different response: “The

shadow is all that we have left. It is what our days have become.” Then Eyabę becomes the interrogator: “And you, man; what do you know about Mwititi? Do you think it’s enough to sequester ten women in a corner of the village so that the community can get away from it?” Refusing the deference that is owed to a newly onboarded *Ministres des Cultes*, Eyabę then rises “without having been asked to do so,” and dresses herself in a crown of leaves and anoints her face with white clay, a substance that “symbolizes the face of the deceased who come to visit the living” (26). Unlike the other women, who still hold out hope that their sons will be found or might still be alive, Eyabę has assume the worst and has already begun the process of mourning.

From the opening pages of the novel, Mwititi is introduced as both a narrative metaphor for the “unprecedented” events and as a physical anomaly. Miano’s narrative style in *La Saison de l’ombre* filters the reader’s perspective through the epistemology of the now-endangered Mulongo people. Even if the reader is prone to use their historical knowledge to ‘synchronize’ the novel’s narrative time with a secular chronology of ‘human events’ (namely, African history) the novel *exercises indifference* to the authority of this external knowledge. Miano’s references to Mwititi and its various heteronyms, such as ‘Evil’ (*le Mal*) or ‘the shadow’ (*l’ombre*) or ‘darkness’ (*les ténèbres*) suggests that Mwititi function as an omen of unknown, unknowable future adversity. Since we are bound to the sheltered worldview of the Mulongo characters, previously unaware of such things as “the ocean,” the reader is left to grasp at Mwititi’s meaning in a similar manner as the novel’s characters. The problem is that Mwititi changes form, becoming both metaphorical ‘darkness’ and a physical ‘shadow.’ In this overture to the chapter, I track Mwititi’s various meanings across *Saison* and theorize how this anomaly signifies on the histories of slavery,

abolition and colonialism that construct the notion of ‘modern’ Africa.

At first, Mwititi is assumed to be a manifestation of maternal grief. Ebeise conjectures to the all-male council of elders that Mwititi is “the form that our silences can take,” manifesting as the collective sorrow (*chagrin*) of the bereaved mothers. The only way of dissipating it would be for the women to speak to one another plainly about their feelings. This task is, admittedly, much easier said than done. Not only are all the women in varying degrees of mourning — some believing their sons can be found, others seeming almost unbothered by their children’s absence, and others still, like Eleke, beginning to go mad from Mwititi’s manipulation of their dreams —but they are also actively suspected of malfeasance by the village elders. At the center of suspicion is Mutango, the chief’s incestuous and covetous brother. Although Ebeise regrets how her recommendation to confine the women has enflamed preexistent misogynistic distrust among the Mulongo, she hopes that “they might collect their thoughts and say to one another things that only they would understand.” (36)

Ebeise later expands her hypothesis about Mwititi’s physical nature: “If Mwititi is the form that silences take, it wouldn’t only cling to the common dwelling.” Ebeise’s suspicion turns out to be true, although it is Eyabe who proves it. In the refugee village of Bebayedi, a place beyond the boundaries of the Mulongo’s mental map of the world, Mwititi also lingers, but there the people have devised new strategies for how to live in it, to resist. The people of Bebayedi are an amalgamation of refugees from various communities besieged and disrupted by Mwititi’s advance. The community is small, with few cultural rites and shared traditions; they do not even have a common language.

Nevertheless, “in Bebayedi, future generations will know that it was necessary to take flight to protect oneself from the birds of prey (*des rapaces*).” The people will tell their children the reasons for why they built stilted houses on the waters of the Kwa: “Madness took hold of the world, but some refused to live in darkness (*les ténèbres*). You are the descendants of the ones who said no to the shadow (*l’ombre*).” The narrator’s use of the terms ‘darkness’ and ‘the shadow’ here does not suggest a distinction between the two concepts; the ‘refusal’ of darkness in the first sentence mirrors the denial (*dire non à*) of the shadow in the second.

The “new people” of Bebayedi are represented as a novel kind of people, born from the shadow but also refusing its rule (*règne*). In contrast, the Mulongo are bound by prophecy to be undone by darkness. Before Mukano, the *janea* (chief) of the Mulongo, sets out to seek an audience with the Bwele queen Njanjo, he visits the *ngambi* (oracle) for advice. The *ngambi* has only a dour and concise comment for the chief: “Son of Mulongo, nothing will ever be as it had once been. The reign of Mwititi is upon us” (163). In this brief passage, Mwititi appears alongside “Evil,” juxtaposed between temporalities; the one in the present, in the exchange between the *ngambi* and *janea*; the other in the past, as an instruction from Mukano’s father, the previous Mulongo chief: “Evil only exists [...] to be struggled against. You must fight, even if you yourself may never see the day of victory.” That Mukano had forgotten the second part of this phrase — the part about fighting evil, a remark that seems curiously to contradict the Mulongo’s staunch traditions of pacifism — seems ominous considering recent events, as fears of war with the Bwele have reached an all-time high. In this passage, Mwititi is described in terms of its unwelcome and unsolicited novelty, as a sea change whose reverberations have yet to cease and whose

consequences at present cannot be adequately predicted, not even through divine or spiritual means. The *ngambi*'s words also indict Mukano's authority as the village chief, insinuating that his own rule is nearing its end. In his stead, only darkness will rule. A grim prediction, for sure; but one that is also destined to come true. After Mukano's visit among the Bwele yields few answers, the village is attacked once more. Many flee into the swamplands flanking the Mulongo territory, where they — the *janea* included — drown in the mud.

In its most self-evident appearances, Mwititi represents the unknown aspects of a new world progressively unveiling itself: the death-world of "the African." It foreshadows the fate of the captive as shrouded in metaphorical or speculative uncertainty and the physical darkness of the slave's ship's hold or the castle's dungeon. In Bebayedi, Eyabe finds Mutimbo, one of the two Mulongo guides, moribund from an infected spear wound in his ground. Relieved to finally be reunited with one of his clansmen, Mutimbo informs her of what has happened to the eleven other men who disappeared: "Nocturnal shadows were still in the sky when some Bwele men threw their hunting nets on them." The men were quickly subdued, bound, and led away from Mulongo land. Along the way, Mutimbo overhears his Bwele captors complain about their orders from their queen, Njanjo, "who had formally forbidden the coffle of captives be driven during the day." One of the reasons for this, another Bwele conjectures, was that "they were accustoming them to darkness" (*l'ombre*). These words in particular stick out to Mutimbo: "Where we are sending them is darkness (*les ténèbres*). Permanent darkness. They must be prepared for it" (128). The darkness here is strongly referential of the belly of the slave ship, that *gouffre-matrice* that transforms living beings into instruments or 'movable goods' ¹ Regardless, the Bwele

captors admit to “not know[ing] any more than this.” No one in *Saison*, be them Mulongo, Bwele, Bebayedi or Isedu, knows what happens to those taken across the sea. The darkness of the slave ship constitutes the final destination, the cataclysm of the human being disguised by language as a good. The long walk, contouring the borders of the Bwele country, avoiding unfortunate passersby, and traveling by cover of night, is a process of *seasoning* the captives for a life of dark uncertainty within the bowels of “the embarkations of the strangers coming from pongo by the seas” (113)

I would argue that Mwititi’s primary function in *Saison* is to metaphorize the novelty and inexplicability of ongoing events within the Mulongo’s indigenous systems of knowledge. Its dark opacity, its ubiquity, and its coincidence with catastrophe demonstrates the unpreparedness of the Mulongo way of life for the exigencies of an inchoate political and economic system, that of the Atlantic slave trade. Mwititi is modernity’s dark harbinger. Its relationship to notions of novelty makes this clear. At several points throughout the text, the narrator highlights the lack of precedence for unfolding events. A "grave evil just befell the village," the likes of which cannot be named within the narrator's simulated historical vantage (14). Later, the fire is described as a "dark premonition, the sign of doom for the clan" (31). Before the council, Ebeise describes the general situation in the village as “unheard-of” (*inédite*) and later, the destruction of spirituals reliquaries and the subsequent lack of ancestral protection is qualified as "unthinkable" (42). These scant and diffuse references infuse transpired and recollected events with touches of doubt and incredulity. The political imagination of the Mulongo people, who had for so long lived in pacifistic isolation, cannot comprehend what is happening. The people ultimately cannot survive it, either. By the novel’s close, those who survived the second Bwele attack have

joined the community at Bebayedi, where they are now a part of a “new people.” Miano’s word choice here is rather important. In describing Bebayedi as “sheltering a new people,” she describes Bebayedi’s novelty in absolute terms. Bebayedi’s is a people unlike any other in history; their newness (*neuf*, as opposed to *nouveau*) is unequivocal. There is nothing in the novel to suggest that the Mulongo way of life will continue as it had, just as the *ngambi* presaged. New life, however, exists among those who say no to darkness.

My reading of *Saison* considers how Mwititi functions as a theory of African modernity that narrates two coinciding catastrophes of our time: blackness’ symbolic relationship to the commodity (*slavery*) and the violent introduction of sub-Saharan Africa to Europe’s discursive ‘world’ (*colonialism*). Situated at a vague point at which the ‘premodern’ glides into the ‘modern,’ *Saison* uses Mwititi to narrate the novelty that has become symptomatic (for better or for worse) of the ‘modern’ in African cultural studies. There are, of course, various definitions of modernity and Africa is perhaps the place where the term *modernity* is most contentiously applied. I am not interested in offering a comprehensive or authoritative account of African modernity here. Rather, I seek to explore how Miano’s novel offers a theory for narrating a particular history of blackness that draws the African studies and African diaspora studies into a rare moment of mutual exchange. What animates this transatlantic dialogue is the originary, ethnogenic violence of the slave trade and the subsequent manufacture of a coterie of symbolic images of Africa and Africans in the Western-cum-global imagination. Mwititi’s appearance in the wake of the abduction of 12 Mulongo men intimates its function as a metonym of modernity, in the sense that it imposes a novel mode of being that immediately threatens with obsolescence the

world that preceded it. My reading of Miano's novel focuses primarily on how the novelist narrates African slavery as a foundational if under-examined aspect of modern African history. *Saison* simulates an African experience of the transatlantic slave trade as a constituent element of the development of 'modernity' in Africa.

Historical literature in Africa is, admittedly, very old. Without mentioning the rich tradition of oral histories, kings' lists, and folktales that predate the import of European narrative technologies like 'writing,' 'universal dating schemes' and 'realism' as well as generic forms like 'the history,' and 'the novel,' modern African fiction has reflected a rich interest in history since its beginnings. Much of this canon of historical fiction, as Tim Woods notes, responds directly to colonialism and its epistemic violence. The task was to "restore to the victims of colonialism (at least symbolically, if posthumously) the dignity that the perpetrators of colonialism took from them," amounting to both "a process of mourning and attempts at a proper burial" for those slain by the colonizer (9). Woods' project, while informative to my own, nevertheless focuses primarily on a narrow and at times vague vision of the African past which authors and historians often describe in "glorious" terms. Colonialism, as Mudimbe and Jewsiewicki suggests, is often construed in African nationalist historiography as an interruption of the "glorious past" and the "radiant future," with African historical fiction bypassing the present through modes of prophetic historiography. Miano is not particularly interested in the colonial period in *Saison*. The "chicken-footed men" are not quite colonizers, but guests of the Isedu monarch. The relationship is far more lateral, like that of business partners, than that of conqueror and vanquished, as the archetypical model of colonial relations would prescribe it. Nevertheless, the specter of colonialism haunts *Saison* in its prophetic symbolism of

Mwititi as a reference to nineteenth-century discourses of 'African darkness.' I argue that Miano appropriates the image of the nineteenth-century image of the 'dark continent' into a metaphor for slavery in both African memory and historiography. Indeed, the "shadow is the form our silences take" when the ability to acknowledge one's history as prey has been transformed by the ideological carnage of colonialism and the epistemic 'development' project of post-colonialism.

Miano pays special attention to the experiences of mothers robbed of their children. For me, the language of *theft* provides a useful tool for examining bondage's invasion into kinship as an essential property relation. Miano's gendered treatment of the experiences of bereaved mothers highlights a critical gap in the historiography of the African experience of slavery. For Joel Akinwumi, the novel constitutes a memorial literature whose itinerary is "to rewrite a collective history obscured by an incomplete (*lacunaire*) historiography." Part of this process may include wrestling with the inherently fluid nature of vernacular narratives of the slave trade routinely difficult to assimilate into an documentary or scribal practice of historiography (Akinwumi 188). Miano's choice to write from this perspective in light of a dearth of archival materials, constitutes a black feminist practice of *nonhistory* tasked with "rethinking the roles of black women preyed upon by the normative and reductive strictures of patriarchal structures" both in the historical event and its narration as history (Akinwumi 188). If Patrick Manning is right when he argues that the "tragic hero" of the African story of slavery is male "because the surviving records of slavery give prominence to men, both as enslavers and as slaves," Miano's novel questions what belies the notion of victimization that undergirds Manning's argument. Were the mothers, wives, daughters, sisters, and female community members of the millions of men stolen from their

communities or captured in the night not also *victims* of the slave trade? Did they not bear, in some sense or another, the wound of their loved one's disappearance and deportation? How might we measure — or even comprehend — the gendered violence of such losses?

dark modern

Africans, in general, have never thought of themselves as living on a '*dark continent*.' This is an idea that has been imposed onto Africa as its 'truth.' Our inability to make sense of African historical development with European or Asian metrics continues to encode African politics as *developmentally stalled*, inherently *tribal*, and anthropologically backwards. These are admittedly racist and colonialist ideas, developed during a time when imperialism was in vogue, but they persist in our postcolonial present as essential problems in for the inter discipline of 'African studies.'

To seek out the history of the idea of African darkness, we must acknowledge its externality to African epistemologies and belief systems. In searching for a source, we might assume that the notion of "darkest Africa" developed in antiquity. If we associate *darkness* with *blackness* (and perhaps we are wise to make this association) we might then turn to the Greeks as the source for this particular *mûthos* about Africa. The Greeks, after all, were the first in Europe to describe the peoples far upstream of the Nile explicitly by the color of their skins: *Aithiops*, or the "burnt-face one."² Aethiopia, the land of the 'burnt-faced people,' or the land of the blacks, would signify the lands beyond the scope of the known and livable world for centuries. The coincidence of darkness, a perhaps universal signifier of the unknown and the unknowable, and the curiously dark complexions of the sun-burnt folks beyond the classical zone of habitability might seem almost obvious.

Or perhaps the emergence of the “dark continent” extends only to the late medieval period. The Portuguese, squatting on the edge of Europe, were the first to transgress the traditional boundary of the habitable zones at Cape Bojador. Tempted by the opportunity to discover a new pathway to India, the Portuguese ‘discovered’ a significant portion of the African coast, furnishing the developing European idea of Africa with its geographical and ethnographic fundamentals. For scholars like Sylvia Wynter, James Sweet, Josiah Blackmore and Herman Bennett.³ The opening up of the New World to European exploration, colonization and exploitation — much at the expense of the Native Americans who had lived there for millennia — also coincided with the beginning of a new relationship between Europe and its southern neighbor. The Atlantic collision of the three continents of Europe, Africa and America was mediated in part by the triangular trade that would develop over the next four centuries: manufactured goods from Europe, raw materials from America, and peculiar ‘movable good’ of the slave from Africa. The racial codes that quickly developed to secure the power of the European masters, the annihilation of the American natives, and the productivity of African slaves would resonate with Catholic iconography and theology, relegating the black African pagan to a life of benevolent captivity. For this, we have Bartolomé de Las Casas, in part, to thank.

Neither itinerary is quite right. In actuality, the myth of “darkest Africa” dates only to the nineteenth century. Although this ancient trope is laden with antiblack stereotypes of feckless and perpetually primitive natives, impenetrable and untamed jungles and murderous beasts, the particular iteration of ‘dark Africa’ that developed in nineteenth-century Europe bears the modern inflection of the slave trade as a *casus bellum* for European intervention. The triangular accord between the three shores of the Atlantic

began to change in the late eighteenth-century, as abolition gained mainstream appeal among Western intellectuals and politicians. In the spirit of the Enlightenment and the widespread acknowledgment of basic fundamental rights for all human beings, the likes of which were immortalized and committed to posterity in the 1789 Declaration of the Rights of Man, slavery became increasingly incompatible with Western notions of human progress and the developing concept of ‘civilization.’⁴ These shifting dynamics would be disastrous for Africa, precipitating the colonial encounter that has, for over a century, determined the form and content of African politics. Nineteenth-century Africa saw the greatest uptick in slavery in the history of the continent; by the end of the century, during the era of European conquests, the number of black people in captivity in certain parts of Africa outnumbered free people.⁵ The implementation of Western-style agriculture, the construction of massive and impressive precolonial cities, the development of complex creole cultures and the fundamentals of anticolonial resistance owe much to this period in African history, often viewed romantically as a “glorious past” separated from a fully autonomous and self-sufficient future by the “parentheses” of colonialism and its interminable aftermath. But what, we might ask, is so glorious about an era of pandemic unfreedom?

To narrate the history of Africa as a history of slavery means not only attuning ourselves to the flows of capital and human beings in and out of the continent, but also listening closely for the subtle intonations of unfreedom within Africa’s cultural archives. As I shall argue, the European intervention into Africa that sparked the colonial period was but an episode in the long history of European global expansionism and a symptom of the developing imperial sensibility that reached its fever pitch in the nineteenth century.⁶ As

Europe and North America transitioned from eighteenth-century slave trading to nineteenth-century ‘free trade,’ the nascent humanist ideology of abolition facilitated the development of a lucrative plantation system of slavery in Africa which, in the coming decades, became the precondition for colonization in the name of *humanitarian intervention*. In order for Europe to justify its increasingly imperial interests in the African continent, it first had to rhetorically render that place *dark* within the European imagination, to strip Africa of history to implant thereon a *sign* of the continent — barbarous, primitive, self-enslaving, puerile— that would become indistinguishable for the thing itself.

The coincidence of slavery and darkness in *Saison* resonates with nineteenth-century European discourses of expansionism and humanitarian interventionism. Such a transhistorical reading exposes the ghostly outline of African modernity’s *slave nonhistory*.

Darkness became associated with Africa as Europeans continued to embrace the paradigm shifts of the Enlightenment throughout the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Europe was entering into a new age, fueled both by ongoing revolutions in medicine, industry, political philosophy, and religion. Meanwhile, Africa’s primary purpose to Europe — as a literal *factory* for slave labor⁷ — was changing significantly. The British imposed a blockade on West Africa, beginning in 1808, that severely sanctioned African polities who had only years prior provided British planters with slaves. The establishment of the repatriation zones of Freetown, Monrovia, Bathurst (Banjul) and, later, Libreville would constitute the first attempts at African colonization in the nineteenth century. Europeans had established colonies and coastal outposts prior to this moment;

Ancien Régime France had a presence in Senegal since the mid-seventeenth century; the Portuguese had established outposts in Angola in the late sixteenth century. These settlements had mainly served the purpose of furnishing planters in the Americas with slaves, and this was, in short, the extent of European interaction with African sovereigns for four centuries. This changed in the nineteenth century, as the spirit of the Enlightenment began to color the use of enslaved labor in a lurid light. In the wake of the various revolutions against tyranny and despotism, the persistence of chattel slavery in Africa became a humanitarian issue necessitating intervention. Europe found itself violently awakened to its agency and hailed upon by providence to steward the ‘lesser peoples’ of the world on the path to progress. Abolition entailed imperialist intervention in the names of humanitarianism and civilization. It had also become apparent by the end of the nineteenth century that such an intervention would not be entirely bloodless. Howard Temperley frames the paternalism of the British abolitionist-imperialist project in direct terms of ‘pacification.’ The British aim was “to bring peace to Africa” “by mobilizing Africa’s own resources against the trade.” This could only be done with a “strike at the roots” in the deep and unknown interior of the continent from which the majority of the enslaved were presumed to have originated (Temperley 4). The term *gunboat diplomacy* developed in such a context. That the importation of peace would necessitate bloody conflict is perhaps only to be expected; after all, in at least one sense of the word, to *pacify* means “to subdue.”

British imperial interests in Africa shifted significantly under the reign of Victoria I. Richard Brantlinger argues that the myth of the Dark Continent “developed during the transition from the British campaign against the slave trade, which culminated in the

outlawing of slavery in all British territory in 1833, to the imperialist partitioning of Africa, which dominated the final quarter of the nineteenth century” (Brantlinger 173). The victories of the antislavery movement, the heavily publicized and circulated accounts of Victorian explorers like Richard Burton and David Livingstone and the “merger in the social sciences of racist and evolutionary doctrines” culminated in the production of the “myth of the Dark Continent,” the new discursive paradigm on which Europe’s imperial epistemology of Africa would be grounded. These sentiments developed slowly; while “the British abolitionist program entailed deeper and deeper involvement in Africa” over the course of the century, “abolitionists before the 1840s were neither jingoists not deliberate expansionists” (Brantlinger 174). This of course would require a thorough examination of the term *expansionism*, a term in postcolonial studies perhaps too often conflated with *imperialism* and *colonialism*. We might consider expansionism as the broadening of political, economic, and cultural networks. These networks do not always involve *direct* political or economic control, but often subtler forms of influence that over time became enfolded within the more rigid structures of colonial rule, cultural hegemony, and military dominance. The work of missionaries, often carelessly included in the broader project of *colonialism*, fits more neatly into this framework of *expansionism*. William Cohen makes this rather plain when he writes that most missionaries were not directly advocating conquest despite invariably contributing to “the expansionist tone” of nineteenth century European politics. In fact, missionaries often came into conflict with the civilian colonial governments and military officers. Olúfẹ́mi Táíwò makes similar note of “tension between administrators and their missionary compatriots” in his polemical study of an African modernity forestalled by colonialism (Táíwò 11).

I disagree with Táíwò when it comes to the expansionist role of Christian missionaries. The evangelical nature of the Christian faith is, by nature, expansionist; evangelists charge themselves with spread the word of the Bible through acts of service and proselytization. Although African Christians have found alternative means of reading the word of God and interpreting Christian truths, how Christianity arrived in Africa as an *extension* of a European religious humanism does not discredit the missionary pulling double duty as an agent of European cultural imperialism. In fact, expansionism is a way of considering the *longue durée* of the European presence in Africa as constituting slow and methodical steps towards the eventual colonial intervention, the *navel* of African historiography. It preceded and precipitated colonialism in the sense that the European *desire* to conquer, steward and ‘civilize’ Africa was guided in part by the curious project of ‘freeing’ Africans from a primitive state of nondevelopment. Slavery became but a symptom of this *sociocryonic* position, to borrow Táíwò’s terminology, for it provided a reason for European intervention during a time when Britain and France saw themselves as the most advanced and most progressive societies in human history.⁸

The paternalism that characterized ideas of Africa oversaw a transformation in the image of the African in the European imagination. Although the discourse of the African’s perpetual backwardness predates the anthropological revolution of the late nineteenth century⁹, the 1859 publication of Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species* and the subsequent development and circulation of evolutionary biology as a basis for anthropological inquiry infused a longstanding tradition of symbolic antiblackness with a secular sense of ontological certainty. Instead of being a primitive pagan who lived in an environment either too hospitable or too inhospitable for ‘culture’ to take root, the African became a being

frozen in the secular time of anthropology. Admittedly, such a pessimistic view of the African might seem out of sync with the civilizing mission, which at least in part assumed that conversion was possible. Temperley frames this with a rather ominous and perhaps unanswerable question for late nineteenth century imperialism: “Could Africans be raised up into the higher reaches of civilization?” (Temperley 177).

Although I have spoken thus far of the British and French abolitionist projects in Africa together, I would now like to discuss how each ‘civilizing mission’ differed. In short, the British were less tolerant of slavery than the French. In the decades following the Napoleonic Wars, British publicists propagated the myth of British cultural superiority. Fueled in part by the material gains of the Industrial Revolution, the British people under Victoria I began to conceive of themselves as “not only richer but better — more devout, wiser, more just than any [society] the world had seen before” (Curtin 245). The development of an imperialist *ego* recasted Britons into “a conquering, governing, and civilizing ‘race’” endowed with the right to subject to their authority “the dark races” deemed incapable of self-governance (Brantlinger 196). The 1880s Scramble for Africa was but an episode in a long history of British abolition on the continent. If we are to consider this moment “the beginning of colonialism,” we relegate the aforementioned *longue durée* of British expansionism and colonization as but episodes in the prologue of African modernity, rather than a substantive story arc with its own internal dynamics and rich lore.

The role of abolition in French colonial policy in Africa is markedly less clear. The historiography of French abolition in Africa unilaterally describes a sense of tolerance for African institutions of slavery. Such lax treatment of slavery in France’s sphere of

influence brought French and British interests into conflict on more than one occasion.¹⁰ According to Alice Conklin, there were two specific elements of the French ‘civilizing mission’: “the rational development [...] of the colonies’ natural and human resources,” (which in French imperial lingo was deemed a *mise en valeur*) and the systematic “evolution” of African cultures “to the extent that these cultures did not conflict with the republican principles of French civilization.” The latter policy took aim at, among other things, slavery; the former policy sought out its replacement with “legitimate trade” (Conklin 6). The implementation of these two policies was rather vexed, as the French often tolerated or even actively supported African institutions of slavery when it suited their imperial interests. Thus, a contradiction arose; while metropolitan officials endeavored to abolish the slave trade in France’s African sphere of influence, local military officials in Senegambia turned a blind eye to the development of lucrative plantation economies fueled by slave labor¹¹. Escaped slaves would sometimes flee to French territory in Saint-Louis, where they believed themselves to be freed upon entry on French soil. In many cases, French officials would return said slaves to their masters. Victor Schœlcher, France’s most prominent abolitionist and the champion of 1848 *Décret* formally (and finally) abolishing slavery on French soil, took issue with such violations of French law in colonial policy, averring in 1880 that “slaves are not freed where there is no slavery.” (Schœlcher qtd. in Klein 62).

The myth of the Dark Continent, as Brantlinger frames it, “defined slavery as the offspring of tribal savagery and portrayed white explorers and missionaries as the leaders of a Christian crusade that would vanquish the forces of darkness.” The culpability for this darkness shifted over the nineteenth century: “blame for the slave trade, which the first

abolitionists placed mainly on Europeans, had by the midcentury been displaced onto Africans.” When we include the sensationalized stories of cannibalism, human sacrifice, witchcraft and the wanton sexual appetites of primitives, Africa’s “darkness” seems to practically hail upon Europe’s assistance. Europeans saw themselves as doing the work of God in bringing Christianity, human responsibility, and free labor to Africa (Brantlinger 196). Thus, we cannot entirely relegate, as Olúfẹmi Táíwò would have us believe, that the machinations of religion — emblemized by the Christian missionary rather than, say, the Muslim imam — were not in some way involved in European expansionism, especially when the sensorium and the rationale of imperialism was so thoroughly invested in the language of religion. More significantly, the religious connotations of cultural evangelism within the ‘noble’ cause of abolition infused imperialism with a legal righteousness. The *droit d’ingérence* (or “the right to intervene”) that would become standard in twentieth-century humanitarian policy owes much to the role of abolition in nineteenth-century European expansionism.¹² The post-Enlightened sensibility that Europeans brought and at times enforced in their conquered African territories was seen as a moral duty. The humanitarian project of abolition has become mineralized in French and British historiography and thus resistant to critique. For Françoise Vergès, the effect of such a “conviction of doing well by others” creates a “moralizing vision of history and transforms all alternative analyses of the archives into a demand for ‘penance.’” (Vergès 110). If post-imperial France and Britain still cling to the idea that Europeans brought civilization and goodwill to Africa, the discourse of abolition as a *reason* for European intervention has taken the mythic form of “depoliticized speech” (Roland Barthes as cited in Brantlinger 174)

To flood Africa with the light “reflected through an imperialist ideology that urged the abolition of ‘savage customs’ in the name of civilization,” Europeans of the nineteenth century needed to first turn her dark (Brantlinger 173). Born from the “superiority feelings of the conquerors over the conquered, the administrators over those whom they administered,” the myth of ‘dark Africa’ is essential to the narrative history of the African slave and to intellectual history of African freedom (Curtin v). What I have taken to calling the *dark modern* is the arc of the political romance of African history that remains outside of the purview of a postcolonial liberal humanism averse and hostile to the destabilizing questions of agency that frame the history of enslavement in Africa. *Darkly modern* are the histories of modernity in Africa stifled by the idioms of the multiethnic nation-state, the Eurocentric dilation of historical time in Africa to the past two centuries, and the enduring epistemic violence of colonization that have together conditioned a commitment in African historiography to disavowing Europe’s *truth* for Africa. As Caroline Neale puts it, the historical narrative of Africa changed in the 1960s to “provide a basis for pride in past achievements,” and “achieve intellectual decolonization,” without a sense of what an *achievement* or *decolonization* could entail within an enduringly Eurocentric project of African development. The dark modern is a nonhistory of discarded and disqualified material, an autopsy of the irrecoverable or insignificant or infamous lives that no longer fit within the new histories of the continent. It is a means of narrating how histories of Africa jettison the figure of the slave from the political project of the nation-state, despite slavery constituting a vestibular position between African self-governance and European domination. Where, in the narratives of the glorious past, do slaves reside? How might we integrate their stories into the narrative project of ‘modern’ African history? If they have

no substantive role, if their existences cannot be recovered as historical subjects, how might our nonhistories of the African past bear witness to these “graves without bodies?”

As both historical and contemporary phenomena, ‘domestic slavery’ in Africa exposes the limitations of a humanist critique of colonialism. If it is true, as it has been argued, that local forms of slavery were *softer* than their American counterparts, how do we explain the development and expansion of American-style plantation economies in West and East Africa, where the labor force was provided mainly by slaves, and the owners of the means of production were mainly African slaveholders? Was the harshness of the American system due explicitly to the cruelty of the Euro-American situation? Were African planters any more benevolent if it was Europeans and Euro-Americans who taught them their craft? Is it merely racism that makes captivity unbearable?

The dark modern is African history written on a bias. It is a cartography of the gap of the captive’s absence from community life, a simultaneous narrative of the slave who has yet to reach the coast and those they have left behind. It is a means of narrating the story of theft that has become paradigmatic of Africa’s long history of dispossession, extraction and ‘underdevelopment.’ The dark modern is the story of the darkness that clings to the cabin in which twelve mothers have been confined, wondering where their sons have gone, when their sons will ever return. Darkly modern is such a pandemic and paradigmatic grief.

On theft

Sixty million and more, *stolen*. ‘Africa’ is the site in which the Negro slave, that peculiar combination of person and thing, the “living crypt of capital” (Mbembe 18), is said to originate. If historians, anthropologists, and sociologists of slavery agree on one

thing, it's this: plantation slavery in the Americas was by no means unique in its transformations of men and women into 'movable goods.' What, however, distinguishes slavery in the modern Atlantic world is its *modernity*.¹³ A New World to the West; new knowledges of the East and South; a Native population curiously unfit to work swindled land; the first signs of centuries of social and political transformation in Europe, to be driven and funded in part by the expansion of trade around the world and the invention of new commodities; among them the Negro slave, an animate instrument. Like the serf, the Negro had very little, if any, legal protections. But unlike a serf, the Negro was outside of the realm of politics itself. The institution of slavery defines the slave as a dishonorable subject; what jettisons the slave into social degradation is the violence of kinlessness. Slavery, in Claude Meillassoux's terms, is "the antithesis of kinship." Voided of the possibility of social reproduction, stripped of the right to posterity, the slave reduces to little more than bare life and unprotected flesh. Humanism cannot reinstate the subject within the scene of such cataclysmic undoing. To the slaver, there is no need to deny the slave's humanity; the slave willingly offers it up in exchange for their life.

Slavery, thus, is a process of ontological transformation; a conquest that replaces a body with a thing, a person with a chattel. The transubstantiation of men and women into flesh constituted a violent and valuable alchemy in the event of capture. I am haunted by this statement from Patrick Manning, who describes the process by which Africans came to understand themselves in a unifying language of the commodity:

To consider Africa at the time of the greatest extent of slavery and the slave trade, we must imagine a situation in which everybody knew the value, as a captive, of everyone he or she met. What seems to a twentieth-century person as normal response — to refuse, when possible, to put a money value on a person — was replaced in Africa with a conscious and unconscious commodification of anyone encountered. People were forced to think of how much they could get for selling a neighbor, or

how much they would pay to ransom a loved one. (122-3)

Prior to the moment of ‘Africanization,’ which we might consider a moment of discursive alienation by either the Western (*negro*) or the Eastern (*‘aswad*) observer, people living in sub-Saharan Africa prior to the twentieth century understood themselves and one another first and foremost as potential commodities ¹⁴. In a period of unending warfare and banalized exchanges of life for life, captivity became an essential element of the African ‘pattern of life.’ There is enough in the archive to tell the story, the moment of capture. What is lacking is our ability to account for its *experience*, to imagine or reimagine it from the protection of the present and its assurances of at least nominal forms of freedom. If we are to understand African political formations to be descended from the same primal ‘stock’ as Diasporans, it would then be wise to assume that the curious slippage between *the slave* and *the black* begins in Africa, rather than off its coast. Almost all the new critique of slavery that has emerged in the ‘afterlives’ discourse — inaugurated by the likes of Toni Morrison, Saidiya Hartman, Frank Wilderson, Orlando Patterson, Hortense Spillers, Christina Sharpe, Achille Mbembe and Paul Gilroy, to name but a few heavyweights — has focused primarily on the experience of the *creole*, American-born slave. Little has been written on her Old-World counterpart: the bossal, born and ‘captured’ in Africa. This section, aptly named after the crime enframed by the primal scene of Atlantic blackness, is a sketch of the experience of capture in *Saison*.

We needn’t embellish the ugly truth: for much of modern history, the Negro was a good. For proof, we need only look at the Code Noir, that oft-cited and oft-misquoted document of the Ancien Régime that declared with stunning clarity that the negro was a *meuble*. Although French and Spanish students might confuse the juridical term *meuble* / *muebla* for its contemporary meaning (“a piece of furniture”), it is important that we resist

this lexical slippage. As elegant a metaphor as it might seem, “the Negro is a piece of furniture” is not quite right. Rather, the black African becomes in the moment of capture or sale not only a symbolic thing, voided of the honor befitting a human subject, but a commodity or *movable good (bien meuble)*. The captive becomes a body of various new and violent significations, all of them animated in part by the exigencies of market economics.

Africa’s interactions with Europe are often written as a history of exploitation and extraction. First, it was predominately “human resources” which were pilfered; then, it became gold and ivory and other exotic goods; then rare minerals and precious stones like cobalt, uranium, and diamonds. We might also add to this list of contraband the uninventoriable libraries of cultural texts, among them coveted *objets d’art* held prisoner in art and ‘natural history’ museums. Indeed, all modern African history, as Nathalie Etoké suggests, might be narrated through the lens of theft. Melancholy for Etoké is “both a collective and individual, public and intimate affective state” that “damns” the Sub-Saharan and the Diasporan “to develop a relationship to the world and to themselves inescapably bound to loss: loss of land, of freedom, of language, of culture, of one’s gods, of one’s self, of one’s loved ones, of one’s origins, of one’s freeborn ideals.” The systematic stripping of the African of their social footing in time and space is a unifying element. It is “the terrain of survival,” insisting that Africanized subject “resist decay and relish life while fighting against everything that strives to profane it” (28). To Freud, melancholy is the pathological result of the grieving process (*Trauer*) run amok. For Etoké, *melancholia africana* exacts a “therapeutic” effect that emboldens the will of “slaves, the colonized and their descendants to endeavor to go beyond depressing conditions

engendered by the foundational violence” of dispossession.

Kinship, as Orlando Patterson notes, is at bottom a property relation. My mother and father exercise a kind of proprietary claim on me as their child. Their stake on me (*parenthood*) comes to bear on concepts like inheritance, the management of our family estate and affairs, etc. Although we are not a noble family — nor a tremendously wealthy one — the nature of US law considers their relationship to me in some way or another an admittedly abstracted relationship of property. The same could be said for the inverse; my parents are my property. To pose this so glibly might seem absurd. “The fact that a man does not say he ‘owns’ his wife, or that she is part of his property, is purely conventional,” Patterson observes. Convention renders it *impolite* for my parents to call me their property, their *thing*. Convention, similarly, secures the power of the master to make proprietary claims on the body of their slave or on the products thereof. “It is *impolite* to say of one’s spouse or one’s debtor that they are part of one’s property. With slaves politeness is unnecessary” (22).

The above citations are sourced from a section of *Slavery and Social Death* that sought to correct a longstanding (even still) myth about the nature of slavery. Slavery is not merely the ‘possession’ of human beings by other human beings but a system of symbolic, social, and legal meanings and valuations that signify on the originary property relation of kinship. Even if a slave is considered “like a mother” to her master — as we shall see with Mammy / Dorcas in *Dessa Rose* — a slave is first and foremost a *being without kin*. For Patterson, this is the result of *natal alienation* and *general dishonor*; for Meillassoux, the culprits are *desocialization* and *depersonalization*. Although these two theorists disagree on the minute details of this process, they agree that the captive’s prior

kinship relations are voided and rewritten by the master. In lieu of a connection to one's social world, the slave becomes tethered by an unambiguous institutional link to their master. We might steel ourselves to the humanistic urge to restore organic kinship relations to the captive and thus resist the onticidal violence of slavery's death-world, but such a restoration means very little in a social environment where slavery has been both normalized or legal sanctioned. It would admittedly mean even less in societies where slave labor had become essential elements of economic and social life.

Saison has much to offer this picture of the captive (non)kinship, particularly as it collides with the concept of *woman* in Mulongo society. Despite being a patriarchal society, ruled by a male *janea*, Mulongo inheritance is matrilineal. The cultural explanation for this is couched in the Mulongo's semi-mythical history. The second of the community's leaders — the namesake of the tribe, Chief Mulongo — established the scepter of power would pass from mother to son after the secession of his people and the death of his mother. Motherhood "endows women with an honorable status," among the Mulongo, to such an extent that men "are happy to marry a woman who has already given birth." Of course, what is being celebrated here is not necessarily motherhood, but the assurance of fertility. (36) A woman who has already given birth is likely to be able to produce a male heir through whom social status is reproduced. The passage of rights from mother to son and the execution of power as a male right transforms Mulongo women into ceremonial vessels of a power that only executable by their sons or husbands. Thus, Mukano covets his half-brother Mutango for inheriting the throne through the latter's royal mother; despite both being princes, only Mutango's claim to the throne bears any legitimacy. This amounts to an "injustice" for Mutango: "If women were considered children until they reached the age

of menopause, it was absurd that they transmitted the right to rule, especially when it was men who exercise this supreme authority” (13). With the assistance of allies in and outside of the community, Mutango hoped to change this “incoherent” stipulation after his brother’s removal; in an almost comedic moment of *peripeteia*, Mutango loses all claims — both extant and possible — to the throne by the novel’s end.¹⁵

If, in the order of modernity, the African is a commodity, the slave is the stolen object and *Africa*, broadly conceived, bears the mark of its absence. Africa’s narrative of modernity begins with the theft of the subject from the heart of communal life. Absence begets a perverted presence that cannot be properly laid to rest and mourned. One’s *kith and kin* become another’s *kith and kine* in the process; the proprietary nature of kinship inverts into its “antithesis,” the scourge of bondage. *Saison* narrates this devolution from *ingenuus* to *captus* without sparing the *dominus*; in this view, it is not original, neither as work by an African writer nor as a work of French literature. Rather, what often escapes both literary and historical accounts of the ‘enslaved past’ are the experiences of “those left behind” to mourn a loss ad infinitum. As the subjects of property loss, the robbed present an angle of African history that *Saison* puts front and center. Theirs is an history that testifies to the therapeutic pain of memory and remembrance when forgetting seems perhaps too easy. My reading of *Saison* in the following section considers the theoretical purchase of such perspectives.

Women whose sons have not been found

Mothers are valued among the Mulongo, but seemingly only if they produce sons

who can then exercise their value. Outside of this political dynamic of reproduction, women are generally subordinated. The conflict of the mother's sequestration at the beginning of the novel dramatizes this conflict between subordination and procreative value. Borrowing the language of the villagers, the narrator refers to most of the cloistered women as "the ones whose sons have not been found" (*celles dont les fils n'ont pas été retrouvés*). Christiane Achour highlights the ways that the narration "questions itself on how to refer to these women," who, one after the other, are called by Musima to testify to the appearance of Mwititi above the space of their confinement (135). The only exceptions to this rule are Ebusi, whose son Mukudi is the sole survivor of the 10 Mulongo boys, and Eyabę, the novel's protagonist. Elekę and Ebeisę are special cases, as well; rather than their sons, it is their husbands who have been stolen. Eyabę performs her *travail de deuil* rather promptly before anyone has truly accepted that their children will never return. Ebusi is unable to make sense of her son's strange appearance in her dreams. "My son may have left behind this life," she concludes, following Eyabę out of confinement, "I cannot confirm anything. All that's left for me to do is to make my plea to the ancestors so that they protect him" (40)

I propose that we consider the figures of Eyabę and Ebusi — and to a slightly lesser extent, Elekę and Ebeisę — paradigmatic figures of the *robbed*. *Saison* narrates maternal grief as a response to the invasion of a mother's claim on her own child. For the Mulongo, a woman's male child is the manifestation of her will and the executor of her power; the theft of the male heir, therefore, signifies the theft of a woman's power. Eyabę and Ebusi are associated with mourning in the novel because both women attempt to make sense of the loss of their firstborn sons in light of the tremendous uncertainty and inexplicability of

their present situation. In this sense, what is being mourned is not only the loss of one's kin, but the loss of the innocence and power; a prerequisite for the novelty of modernity.

First, we'll look at Eyabę. As I mentioned above, Eyabę is the quickest to accept that her child is dead. Painting herself with kaolin, she leaves the site of the women's isolation and returns to her family compound. Upon entering the courtyard, she stands before the banana tree (*dikube*) that she had planted "the day her son first came into the world," whose roots were nourished by her interred placenta. "Wherever you are," she says, "will you hear my heart calling you? I know you have suffered. Yesterday, you came to me in a dream... I am sorry for not understanding immediately. If you come back to me, I will open up and shelter you all over again" (26). A mother's prayer, muttered "without opening the mouth." To everyone gathered to watch her, Eyabę seems to have "lost her mind." Nevertheless, a miraculous thing happens. "The tree falls, as if uprooted by a powerful hand," revealing a crevice where a flowering plant now grows. "A flower that had no business growing in a place like that. A little flower that a child might show to his mother so that she might contemplate the beauty of things." The sight of the flower incites Eyabę to "execute the dance of the dead, stomping the red earth with her bare feet until she reached the threshold of her home" (27).

The uprooted tree is a grim omen. Mukatę, Eyabę's stolen son, was among the 9 Mulongo boys who died, being thrown overboard the slave ship before Eyabę had reached the coast herself. The death of the tree that fed on his placenta suggests that Mukatę is already dead, although the reader and Eyabę are none the wiser. The flower that emerges from the space where the banana tree had grown nevertheless offsets the gravity of the tree's death, suggesting that there is new life and beauty that comes with loss. Flowers

appear only rarely in *Saison*, and each of their appearances is characterized in one way or another by the presence of death and decay. The flower growing from the soil nourished by Eyabę's placenta most clearly mirrors the sudden growth of *manganga* flowers that appear at the very close of the novel, once the survivors of the second attack on Mulongo had relocated to Bebayedi. In the swamps that flank Mulongo, the bodies of nine men are found. Among them is Mukano, the *janea*. The night after the discovery of the bodies, "a flower called manganga began to grow in abundance in that part of the swamp" (241). As preparations on a sanctuary to honor the dead continue, the sudden growth of flowers in a part of the wood associated with the victims of drowning seems in its own way a monument to loss. Although a description of the *manganga* flower is not provided, the connotation of its appearance here and the phrasing of the passage suggest that the two flowers are similar symbolically analogous to one another. Both grow and fruit from decay and death; both appear in seemingly inexplicable circumstances; both are omens of a positive future. The only other instances of flowers in the novel are associated with darkness. As Mutango awaits the arrival of his Bwele contact, Bwemba, the narrator remarks the growth of "white flowers with delicate petals" growing in the shade (*l'ombre*) of giant trees. The flowers "extend towards the sky a yellow pistil, exuding the aroma of carrion" (76). Later on, when Eyabę reaches the country of "the coastmen" (*les côtiers*), she witnesses the funeral of a local noble and remarks, for the first time, the so-called "chicken-footed men." In addition to making note of their "truly bizarre legs," she also observes the flower-like shape of parasols: "Above their heads, strange flowers of shining tissue, with wooden stems held aloft by servants, kept them in the shade (*l'ombre*)" (169).

Although all four of the named female characters experience loss in one way or

another, with Ebeise and Eleke losing their husbands and Ebusi (temporarily) losing her son, Eyabe's experience of mourning is the most deliberately depicted. Her public performance of grief in her family compound, when coupled with her shocking kaolin-covered skin, signals only madness to the townspeople gathering to watch her. Only Ebeise seems to understand her. When the janea calls on Ebeise to bring Eyabe before the village elders, Ebeise refrains, helping Eyabe on her journey from Mulongo in search of answers. Upon reaching Bebayedí and discovering a mortally injured Mutimbo, Eyabe orchestrates a second *travail de deuil*. On his deathbed, the wound in his groin festering with pus and maggots, "smelling of rotten meat," Mutimbo utters his final words: "I don't have much time left. It's better this way. Sing to send me off. Like we do back home." Immediately, a problem arises: how to send off the dead "like we do back home" without the proper rites, the right conditions? First is the lack of a witness before whom "the ancestors are invoked." Then, there is the issue of language. "Eyabe does not understand the language of Bebayedí," despite "some words seeming familiar to her by their sounds but having a different meaning from the one she would have assigned." (147) In ideal circumstances, she would teach the villagers the required songs, but "it would not make much sense to teach [the songs] to them if they could not understand their meaning" (142). To put it differently, the *meaning* of Mulongo funerary rites is not purely ceremonial, but imbued with essential value that cannot be merely parroted. Food and dance, however, offers a universal language. Eyabe would teach the women to execute "the dance of the dead" and to prepare a feast in which everyone would take part. With Mutimbo interred, she would continue on her journey.

The scene of Mutimbo's funeral is perhaps one of the most striking in the novel. Its

emotional weight rests on the tension between Eyabę's self-doubt in the face of crushing adversity and the knowing responses of the people of Bebayedi, "who know the passage into death more than anyone else." She does not sing "one of the numerous Mulongo dirges for sending the deceased to the beyond." Another song, with "an unknown tune" (*air inconnu*), comes to her; a song "for confronting this unheard-of situation." Nevertheless, the inappropriateness of the funeral situation is distracting; "the lyrics of the funeral dirge escape her." Eyabę shivers at the thought that "old Mutimbo will be doomed to wander simply because she had faltered." An interior plea to Nyambe, the Mulongo's divinity, does not seem to soothe her. Only the appearance of the people of Bebayedi, not understanding her words, but understand her meaning, strengthens her resolve. A woman enters the house in which Mutimbo lies at rest, lets out a shout that "liberates Eyabę from her anxieties." The fear of being the only person to lay Mutimbo to rest, of potentially dooming her clansman to a purgatorial existence, dissolves as Eyabę sobs, at once for Mutimbo and for her people. As the other women join in, "responding as a chorus to the phrases that punctuate the dirge," Eyabę feels assured that Mutimbo will "be rightly led to the other side" of existence. God (*Nyambe*) and the spirits (*maloba*) had not "abandoned them in loneliness." The people of Bebayedi are quite familiar with death, having "come into the world in pain." Although the Mulongo funerary rites are not followed, their rites and execution patterns impossible in such isolated and dire circumstances, a new funerary tradition emerges for the present circumstances (147).

Another character mourns Mutimbo's death, albeit without knowing: his wife Eleķę. The relationship between Eleķę and Mutimbo is presented as somewhat anomalous; they are the only married couple in the novel to marry for love, rather than status. For this

reason, Mutimbo does not take on another wife (50). Before Eyabē's journey from Mulongo reveals the fate of Mutimbo, we are presented with Elekē's sudden sickness. Like her husband, she has a terrible pain in her groin, albeit a phantom pain. Like her husband, Elekē is dying of a fever. "It is not an ordinary fever," like those that could be treated by taking herbs to "clean the blood." As the village's healer, Elekē is quite aware that what has stricken her is beyond the pale of traditional medicines. Who to turn to next? The spiritual guide, Mundēnē? He, too, is with the captives; his replacement, Musima, would know even less than Elekē about her ailment, him being barely older than a child. Elekē's psychic wounding and subsequent death in the novel most thoroughly depicts *Saison's* weak investments in magic. The titular shadow might be easily dismissed as a flight of authorial fancy; a metaphor which need not be taken seriously, let alone read literally. Similarly, the dreams that assail the robbed can easily be reduced to somewhat unsubtle forms of foreshadowing. Elekē's death, however, most vividly signals the novel's supernatural aspects. She complains of "an atrocious pain in her groin" but how does one heal "when there is no wound or the even the slightest scrape?" (51). The wound on Mutimbo's ground, delivered by his Bwele captors before he is left to die in the woods, mirrors the pain on Elekē's, despite her not having experienced the wounding. Her subsequent death similarly mirrors that of her husband, although the people of Mulongo have no knowledge of the old man's passing, and Eyabē, in Bebayedi, is unaware of Elekē's death.

Of the four named women, Ebeisē's story is the most understated. We are only presented with a moment of doubt from Ebeisē's perspective, as she acknowledges that her husband does not visit her or Musima in their dreams.¹⁶ For the remainder of the novel,

Ebeise busies herself with more pressing matters in the village, such as burying the twenty-seven villagers who died in the second raid. The same is not true for Ebusi, whose experience of mourning is markedly more reserved than Eyabe. Like Eyabe, Ebusi leaves the place of the mother's sequestration, against the orders of the elders. Like Eyabe, Ebusi dresses herself in clay to *faire son deuil*¹⁷ but washes it off in shame. Ebusi "hates herself for not having the courage to appear before the chief with clay on her face" as Eyabe had. Washing her face in silence, Ebusi "thinks she betrayed her son a second time;" the first instance being her refusal to "open up" for his spirit when it came to her in her sleep. In the first hundred pages of the novel, Ebusi and Eyabe are presented quickly as character foils to one another. Eyabe is strong-willed, rash, and intractable; Ebusi is markedly more reserved, doubtful and timid. The women also foil one another in their resolve. Eyabe accepts that her son is dead and sets out for answers, as well as to properly lay his spirit to rest. Ebusi wants to believe her son, Mukudi, is dead, but she soon begins to doubt this. As Mukano delivers a speech before his departure for the Bwele country, Ebusi appears in the crowd: "If Eyabe's son had disappeared in the land of water, hers was still on earth. Otherwise, she would know it. Otherwise, she would have clearly understood the garbled words that came to her in her dreams, the day that dawn went dark." To soothe her sadness and longing, Ebusi begins to chant Mukudi's name. She is the only one to forsake the prohibition on saying the names of the disappears; the other women refer to their missing sons as such, or as "their firstborn," out of fear that saying their names would jeopardize their still-unknown status. Ebusi goes against this interdiction, foregoing an interdiction that even rebellious Eyabe does not cross. "Pronouncing the name brings her peace." She finds that, "in saying the name of her firstborn son, she brings him back home, consecrating

his presence here.” She does not worry about “occult forces” that might take advantage of the “vibration of his name,” which she dismisses as mere superstition. In lieu of fear, she finds solace in Mukudi’s name: “It is in being named that all things that can exist” (153). To refuse the name, in short, is to will the child into death; to speak the name of the stolen is to return him to his prior state. The peace that comes with chanting Mukudi’s name does not restore Ebusi’s ailing mind; it actually seems to do the opposite, launching her into a state of dejection that, perhaps ironically, saves her from dying in the second raid on Mulongo. At the story’s end, she flees Mulongo with Ebeise for Bebayedi, where she is reunited with Mukudi.

The reunion of Mukudi and Ebusi is rather bittersweet. While the mother used her son’s name as a tether to a hopeless world, the son, having experienced the profound violence of capture, rejects his given name. Mother called her son, but the son did not respond, having claimed a new name. “I did not hear you because that is not my name anymore. The one you are talking about died with the others,” Mukudi says somberly to his mother. “I don’t know who I’ve become, but we will find out together” (239).

Saison represents the position of the robbed in feminine terms, as the work of mourning is feminized through Eyabe’s *travaux de deuil* for her son Mukate and Eleke’s husband Mutimbo, and the supranatural bonds between a mother and son are metaphorized through Ebusi’s longing for her missing (but not) dead Mukudi. The novel’s focus on feminine experiences of mourning have been noted by a number of critics. *Saison* is a novel whose female characters, in Joel Akinwumi’s terms, “know how to exploit sociohistorical changes to show themselves as equal to men and confidently leave their mark” in history, primarily by rejecting the prefabricated and hegemonic role for women “as historical

victims,” particularly in the grand narrative of African history (195). In a similar vein, the novel’s representations of haunting also infuse its ambition to transcend a simple story of historical tragedy. As Anouchka Nyama observes in a broad study of Miano’s early novels, “haunting [...] is generated by pain and collective guilt, but just as much by the need to go beyond an impossible mourning” (Freud’s *melancholia sui generis* vs. Etoké’s *melancholia africana*) (205). Because mourning in the novel is closely associated with the figure of the mother, the work of transcending melancholia for the sake of the community becomes an aspect of the novel’s feminist critique of the historiography of African slavery.

More importantly, the novel’s narration of the experiences of “the remaining” (*ceux qui restent*) resonates with historical and anthropological scholarship on the impact and memory of slavery and the slave trade in Africa. As a work of *historical fiction*, *Saison* bears witness to the under-theorized and under-examined experiences of those who lost loved ones and testifies to that multivalent loss as a constituent aspect of African historical experience. As a work of *critical historiography*, probing the shadows of the historical record for new material, *Saison* dares to ask how the dead which have not died — that “new category of individuals” — might be mourned; if one’s funerary rites revolve around laying the body of the deceased in their earthly repose, how does one mourn a bodiless death (30)?

The past twenty years have seen a resurgence of interest in African institutions of slavery, but with a different twist. Rather than focusing on slavery from written materials from the perspective of the captor — in earlier works like that of Meillassoux, Martin and Klein — more attention has been to oral and vernacular culture in various African cultural memories. Rosalind Shaw’s study of Temne divination rituals in Sierra Leone deconstructs

the oblique concept of “tradition” too often juxtaposed against “modernity” in African studies, making note of the occult valences of the slave trade that animate the symbolism of sacred, presumably age-old customs. “Modernity itself is hardly recent,” Shaw states, “experience of turn-of-the-millennium forms of modernity are [...] mediated by layers of earlier historical experiences of modernity” which, for the African, are born from “globalizing commercial flows of foreign wealth, the growth of new elites based on that wealth, and various processes of enslavement through which, over the course of nearly four centuries, people were transformed into alienable commodities” (16; 17) In Ghana and Benin, memories of resistance to the slave trade have led to the erection of specific *lieu de mémoire*, among them the famed castles of Cape Coast, Elmina, Osu, and Ouidah. Nana Opoku-Agyemang makes it rather plain that oral sources have been underutilized in the study of slavery in Africa when she states that “perhaps nowhere is [the history of Africans’ attempts to ward off enslavement] more alive than in both material and intangible forms that still survive,” among them oral accounts of resistance to slavery along the coasts of Ghana. (53).

Lack of access to written materials on the slave trade in African countries also adds to the necessity to turn to alternative sources. As Elise Paraiso notes, the independence of Benin from France in 1961 was followed by the loss of “a mine of information” when the sole Portuguese official living in the Fort de São João Baptista de Ajuda burned essential documents on the Portuguese slave trade at Ouidah. This “scorched earth” tactic came after the Beninese government seized the Portuguese outpost. While the Portuguese immolation of government documents pertaining to slavery may seem a grim homage to the fateful destruction of similar materials in post-emancipation Brazil, the destiny of materials held

in the French fort at Ouidah is similarly telling. The French did not destroy their records; they simply took them back with them to France, depriving the new nation of Benin — previously Dahomey, one of the largest furnishers of slaves on the Atlantic coast— of the resources with which to probe its own history of theft and dispossession (Paraiso 102). Efforts have been made to rectify the loss of materials, including ‘organic’ oral materials more vulnerable to the ravages of time. A concerted effort by scholars of Western Africa working with UNESCO produced four volumes of oral testimony and scholarship thereon in the 2000s: an inaugural collection of scholarly essays on oral narratives, edited by Djibril Tamsir Niane in 2001; a collection of oral narratives from West-Central Africa in 2003, edited by Jérôme Kwenzi-Mikala; a collection of oral narratives from Senegambia, edited by Mbaye Guèye in 2003; and the only English-language collection, this time of oral accounts from Nigeria, Ghana and Benin in 2004, edited by Alaba Simpson. These publications stemmed from the broader “Slave Route Project,” first launched by UNESCO at Ouidah in 1994.

Stories of the robbed have been difficult to excavate from the collective memory and the written archive of African history for reasons which demand further investigation. Too often, the story of slavery in Africa is described in external terms, but the living memory of slavery in Africa firmly grounds the events of dispossession as beginning on African soil. The majority of enslaved people in the New World prior to the nineteenth century were African born; *bossales*, rather than *creoles*. In theorizing the violence enacted upon Africa and Africans throughout modern history, it is necessary to not forget this essential point. Miano also reminds us to stay abreast of the interpersonal ties that were categorically ruptured and left in disrepair by the violence of the slave trade. The Ghanaian

poet Kwadwo Opoku-Agyemang provides us with some clarity when he writes that “the captured Africans left behind them graves without bodies in the collective memory of surviving kinfolk” (26). It is telling that, to match diasporic and continental scars, Opoku-Agyemang turns to the figure of the grieving mother, in this case that of Olaudah Equiano:

To discover a measure, one small teasing inkling of the impact of slavery and the slave trade on African societies we shall have to think of Equiano's mother, her pain and suffering at the sudden and irrevocable loss of her children, the uncertainty and wild fears she carries all her life-long years. We shall have to consider the measures she takes and the adjustments she will make to her life, her family, and her society. And then we shall have to take this bundle of untamed agonies and multiply it not by one woman, not by one family, not by one fearful village but by a continent of people, living hearts of unspoken fear. We shall have to consider what such precarious living does to motherhood, fatherhood, attitudes to child rearing, community organization, education, the arts, religion, science, medicine, the very ontological basis of society. This is merely a way to enter Africa's culture under siege.

As far as we know, Equiano’s mother never wrote anything, or had anything she said recorded. Thus, we can only imagine her experiences; her “pain and suffering” exists only in simulation. A face in the swarm of lives who have lived and died, Equiano’s mother lives on through her son’s writings on his experiences of captivity and freedom. Nevertheless, hers was an experience perhaps paradigmatic of most Africans living on or near the coasts, having known someone who had been captured and sold, sometimes to white slave traders. The focus on the captive’s testimony in the New World has invariably left the experiences of “those who remain” behind. Given that such memory continues to fray with the passage of time, as the predicament of African slavery evolve into the conundrum of African ‘postslavery,’ such experiences of loss and melancholia fade from the historical record. *Saison* does not strive to reconstruct this memory, but to use fiction to highlight the half-life of such memories. Like the dead and the stolen Mulongo, the disappeared must be mourned in a fashion fitting the time and circumstances of their

dispossession. They alone do not bear the wound of capture; the shadow of theft “is upon the world” itself.

Quitting our flesh

The stories of the stolen form the basis of black diasporic experience. Theirs is the horrors of the slave ship and the terrors of the plantation, those “novel chronotopes” of the Black Atlantic, of our modernity. This has been the historical picture thus far: a man is captured by another, led in a column from the hinterlands to the coast, stowed away in a fetid dungeon punched through with an ominous ‘door of no return’ in Ouidah or Cape Coast or Calabar or Gorée or Bissau. Africanization — and with it, *objectification* — happens at some indeterminate, indeterminable point along the way, in the transferring of hands. Onto the ship and across the sea, the ship’s hold is a womb in which the person matures into a thing. At the docks on the other side of the world, the ship voids itself of cargo, slicked in oil. An auction of naked flesh, a coffle; chains. If I have been crass, it is only because the story itself has become trite in the diasporic imagination. So common, in fact, that it often nauseates black people with its banality, its inescapability. This story, though it might speak to certain ‘key’ historical experiences, is only one vantage. Many captives did not make it to “the coast” but circulated in “the interior,” changing captors along the way, and sometimes finding freedom. These stories of ex-captives and recaptives often evade the historical imagination. They don’t belong to the diaspora because they have yet to experience the *unbirth* of the crossing. Curiously, they also don’t belong to African history because these liberated parties would eventually be *absorbed* into the communities they joined or wherever they were ‘repatriated.’ Few narratives persist of the

intercontinental traffic and even fewer are widely accessible, let alone the subject of influential academic scholarship. In lieu of authentic testimonies, we have our historical imagination.

The slave narrative is primarily an Anglo-American genre of testimony. Very few examples exist in French, as the French presence in nineteenth century America was limited primarily to the Caribbean, a region where the genre never knew great success. The French Atlantic, as Christopher Miller frames it, suffers from a tremendous African silence, that transcends differentiating narratives of deportation and installation. Like Miller, I remain skeptical of the myth of silence that shapes Francophone discourse on slavery. Indeed, the ‘silence’ teems with “some significant creative sound” if we are willing to listen for it (364). Nevertheless, the absence of a literary tradition of slave testimony *originating* in the French language has had a significant impact on the formation of Francophone African and Francophone West Indian literatures of slavery. The effect has been a “practice of diaspora” *avant la lettre*; Anglophone materials have been translated into French, where they have inspired French-language historical scholarship and literary inquiry. Miano was herself a scholar of Toni Morrison, having written her *mémoire de maîtrise* — the French equivalent of a master’s thesis — on *Beloved*. The influence of diasporic cultures is self-evident throughout her work, including in *Saison*, where the voices of the stolen appear rather confidently in the generic form of the slave narrative. Mutimbo’s testimony is given to Eyabé upon their reunion in Mulongo. Mukudi’s is the longest; Miano delivers his testimony in one uninterrupted passage, all from the first-person perspective. A third testimony — that of the “mute child” Bana — appears at the very end of the novel. While the first three narratives are more traditional in scope, taking the perspective of a singular

experiential *je*, the third involves the ‘multitude’ of a collective *nous*: that of the reborn boys within the singular body of the once-mute child. All three narratives are juxtaposed against Eyabé’s own experience. All three figure the slave’s impossible *je/nous* as in conflict with their capacity to act as an autonomous subject. Although slave narratives have always been associated with expressions of “political subjectivity,” this crisis of selfhood in *Saison*’s internal slave narratives is more akin to contemporary novels about slavery than to ‘authentic’ slave testimonies¹⁸. As Arlene Keizer notes, contemporary historical novels “represent slavery in order to explore the process of self-creation under extremely oppressive conditions.” This question of subjectivity is markedly more pronounced in ‘postmodern’ novels; ‘modern’ novels of slavery pre-1960 were markedly more interested in ‘documentary’ forms of literary protest (Keizer 10).

Mutimbo’s narrative comes first in the novel. Like Atlantic slave narrative, Mutimbo bears witness to his experiences of captivity from his own perspective of his phenomenological ego, his *je*. Yet, Mutimbo’s narrative also provides a crucial source of intelligence. It is in Mutimbo’s account that the reader is provided with the greatest amount of information about the broader context of the novel’s ongoing events. From Mutimbo, we learn that the “coastmen” have been in contact with the “bird-footed men coming from *pongo* by the ocean” who sell them slaves in exchange for “reeds that spit thunder and cast out fatal projectiles.” With these “weapons,” the ‘coastmen’ “subdue their captives with ease” (133). The Bwele do not have these weapons yet; later, we learn that they aspire to one day traffic directly with the bird-footed men and potentially obtain such weapons (113). Despite controlling a larger territory than the “coastmen,” the Bwele remain a “sister community” to them, serving as “intermediaries when new captives from the interior were

needed.” This information profoundly disturbs Eyabę, who “covers her mouth with both hands to keep herself from screaming, from shouting that the world had gone mad, that dark forces (*forces obscures*) were at work.” Her heart “trembles in her chest” with such an intensity that she feels “on the verge of coming to pieces.” Nevertheless, this useful amount of reconnaissance fuels the plot in ways worth mentioning here. Without Mutimbo’s narrative, Eyabę’s journey for closure would meet its end in Bebayedi, rather than in the “land of water” she learns of from Mutimbo. Similarly, the passage of knowledge from one clansman to another has an epistemological function. Considering such events “outside the confines of what her mind could comprehend,” Mutimbo passes on his story to Eyabę so that *she* might bear witness to his act of witnessing. “I really prayed, and the spirits heard me,” he says when he first sees Eyabę. “I thought I’d die a thousand deaths before seeing someone else from home, someone to tell my story... someone to tell it to the others” (126).

Between the two narratives, suicide is a significant unifier. Both Mukudi and Mutimbo question their inaction in their testimonies and in both cases “Mulongo spirituality” is partly to blame. Here we might also make note of the differences in their ages. Mutimbo and Mundęę, Ebeisę’s husband, were the two adult attendants. Since Ebeisę and Eleķę are both menopausal, and thus offered a position of status typically unfit a woman in Mulongo society, we might also assume that Mundęę and Mutimbo as their husbands are similarly “of mature age” (*d’âge mûr*) (83). This is significantly contrasted by the age of the ten young men. At several points across the novel, the boys are referred to as “initiates,” marking them as social, rather than ‘physical,’ adults. This could mean that the boys, as a cohort, are anyway between 14 and 22 years old; young enough that they

are still considered “children” but still capable of occupying social positions and ideals of manhood and maturity. The difference in the ages between the ten boys and their two spiritual guides becomes apparent only in this later definition of the *initié*. Devoid of the wisdom that comes with years of lived and second-hand experience, the young Mulongo men do not have the same religious reservations as their elders. Suicide and murder figure centrally among these reservations. “Mulongo spirituality forbids the taking of one’s life,” the narrator states in the midst of Mutimbo’s narrative. “Any act of resistance, in such conditions, would be suicidal.” The Mulongo believe that their god, Nyambé, had “split up his own energy to spread it and thus live in all things.” To take one’s own life — or to take the life of another — constitutes a form of sacrilege. “I imagine it is for this reason that we kept walking,” Mutimbo conjectures (128).

Mundɛnɛ, the “minister of worship” for the Mulongo, is similarly against suicide. When Mukatɛ suggests that the remaining nine boys “abandon their bodies” so their spirits would return to their mothers and be “reborn,” Mundɛnɛ “cautions” (*mettre en garde*) them: “quitting our flesh to get out of this ordeal is forbidden.” The account of the Mundɛnɛ’s warning is transmitted via Bana, who acts as a medium for the nine dead initiates. The uncertainty of the young men in the face of religious prohibition figures in Bana’s testimony as a form of doubt: “Should we have listened to [Mundɛnɛ?] Our mothers did not recognize us.” Rejected by their mothers, who mistake them for the shapeshifting forms of “Evil,” the nine boys cannot return to their bodies, either “the chicken-footed men” having thrown them into the sea (238).

The two older Mulongo captives are more thoroughly ingrained in Mulongo spirituality, and thus more resistant to the idea of taking another life. As a people born from

pacifism, the sacredness of human life has poorly prepared the Mulongo for the exigencies of a novel situation of unending violence. The tension between young boys who have yet to really *absorb* cultural dogma and adult men in some ways *stuck* in their ways is one of the many battlefields for the war between tradition and modernity in *Saison*. Its significance here, however, is more thoroughly connected to the question of suicide, agency and freedom that distinguishes Mukudi and Bana's narratives from that of Mutimbo. For the initiates, suicide is an act of resistance to an impossible situation. Its transgression of religious orthodoxy demonstrates the inflexibility of tradition under the tremendous pressure of an entirely novel circumstance: that of the eschaton-genesis of the slave trade. Mutimbo doubts his religious convictions but does not ultimately forsake them. We never receive Mundene's account, as he is "taken away with the other unknown captives" aboard the slave ship. His warning, however, and his status as "minister of worship" suggests an even firmer conviction than Mutimbo. Despite demonstrating a distinction between their reactions, the novel does not seem to moralize the suicidal action to rebel or the ontocidal decision to comply. Both options result in a death without rebirth, or a *mort en sursis* where life which is not quite life ¹⁹. The boys are not reborn as individuals by their mothers but conjoin within the "multitude" of the mute child Bana. Mundene is carried away to endure the uncertainty of the crossing.

Like Eleke's astral wound and the physical appearance of the "cold vapor" known as Mwititi, the figure of Bana is another aspect of the novel's investments in the surreal and the magical. Bana is first introduced in Bebayedi, as one of the other two people sharing Mutimbo's hut. The other person is a woman "on the verge of giving birth," whose role in the novel remains unremarkable. Indeed, her only characteristic — being pregnant — only

doubles Bana's latter function as a medium for the nine dead Mulongo boys, her unborn child in some way gesturing to the possibility of new life in a world ruled by the specter of death. Bana's origins are unknown. His scarifications and hairstyle suggest that he is a "native of the coast country," where he likely belonged to the servant caste, "former captives transformed into subjects." His ears, however, are intact; a cut-off ear "being the definitive sign of the conquered in the coast country." The fact that the child cannot or does not speak only further complicates the question of his origins. Along the way, he takes on the name *Bana*, which in "the Mulongo language" (Duala) means 'the children.' Eyabę suspects that the child may have confused the word for 'child' (*muna*) for 'children' (164). Given the fact that the people of Bebayedi speak a pidgin language composed of bits and pieces of other languages, including the Mulongo's own tongue, this suspicion seems justifiable. Nevertheless, Bana's decision to name himself 'the children' is an early foreshadowing of his plural character. Later in the novel, Mukudi calls Bana ominously as "a multitude." There is no explanation given, although the question ails Eyabę. When she and Bana are taken captive and made to board the ship, Eyabę jumps overboard but Bana completely disappears. He only reappears at the novel's close, where his true identity is revealed. "Eyabę told them about what happened under water, when she drowned," the narrator recounts. "Bana was there, to the extent that he could show himself in the world of the living. He held aloft his nine faces which spoke with one voice." The subsequent passage is the totality of Bana's narrative, told from the aforementioned perspective of the nine *unborn*.

Eyabę is eventually saved by Njanjo's men, who fish her out of the sea. They then return her to the slave castle, in anticipation of selling her again. She is only saved by the

haggard and now-tongueless figure of Mutango. The nature of Mutango's humiliation and subjugation by the Bwele princess Njole has voided Mutango of his virility. The cutting off of the tongue seems to mirror literal castration (*émasculation*), as Bwemba foretells Mutango that the Bwele female archers "will emasculate you or cut out your tongue, if they are feeling merciful" (114). Prior to his reappearance at the novel's close, Mutango had been referred to principally with the epithet "the fat" (*l'adipeux*). His obesity is associated with his class status as a prince, thus freeing him from quotidian labor, and his specialization as a hunter. In the slave dungeon in the Isedu country, he is now so "emaciated" (*amaigri*) that he can pass himself off as Eyabę and thus take her place in the diaspora.

Mutango's character is without question the most complex in the novel. No other character in the novel evolves to the same extent as Mutango. Indeed, from the moment Mutango is introduced to the novel, the novelist describes his character as disagreeable and conspicuous, only to redeem his character at the novel's close. In the opening passages, he skulks around the house into which the mothers have been hidden, noticing Mwititi at the same moment as Ebeisę and Musima, but doing little with that information. He plots a rebellion in Mulongo against his brother and aspires to have the Bwele install him as Mukano's replacement. His coveting the throne bespeaks a deeper sense of misogyny, as he believes his claim to the throne outweighs his brother's by virtue of being fathered by the same man, the former *janea*. Miano even includes pedophilic incest in the list of Mutango's disagreeable traits: when Mulongo is on fire, Mukano interrupts "the passions (*les ébats*) of the enormous nobleman and a girl so young that she likely had not had her first period." Only when Mukano looks closely does he discover that the young girl,

begging him for forgiveness and aid, is one of Mutango's own daughters. In light of these vile acts, Mutango's appearance at the novel's close reads as a kind of redemption. In replacing Eyabē in the crossing, Mutango sacrifices himself for another person. That this other person is a woman only strengthens this scene of intervention. Like Mundē, Mutango has no rendered narrative of his captivity. Without a tongue, Mutango cannot testify to his experiences in spoken language outside of "gestures." The fact that both characters that represent the diaspora do not bear witness to their experiences of the crossing in *Saison* marks off these testimonies as patrimonies of the "land across the water." Disappearing beyond the waves, these characters' absence seems oddly unacknowledged by the novel's close. This is particularly true for Mundē; while readers may still view Mutango without sympathy by the novel's close, in light of his own sacrifice, there is no reason, outside of his orthodoxy, to dismiss Mundē. Our attention is rarely brought to a mourning Ebeise.

Then, there is Mukudi. The son of Ebusi was the only one to actively resist his Bwele captors in the coffle by rejecting food. Mukudi's hunger strike weakens him to such an extent that he is no longer considered a desirable captive. Mukudi mimes the complaints of his captors on the coast: "There were supposed to be twelve of us, but one of us [Mutimbo] was now missing. Plus, I was too weak, and our uncle Mundē was too old" (188). His experience of survival guilt is plagued by this decision to act as an individual, rather than as a part of a group. The other does not follow him in his hunger strike, likely viewing his decision to slowly take his own life from the same vantage as Mundē. When Mukudi is too weakened to participate in the boy's collective suicide, he bears witness to the guilt of his own survival. Such is the extent of his torment that it strips Mukudi of his

name, of his identity. “The one you’re speaking about died with the others,” he says to his mother. “I don’t know what I’ve become, but we can find out together, if you like.”

Mukudi’s narrative is related in one interrupted block of text from his perspective, then again, a few pages later in the third person. His is a narrative of survivor’s guilt:

The man asked himself what compelled him, not to manifest this refusal of fate, but to single himself out like this. Why break with brotherhood? Why stomp on solidarity? What result was he looking for? Passing on (*le trépas*) is not extinction. The deceased simply inhabited another dimension. Yes. Nevertheless, it was difficult for him to cover his face. If he had truly wanted death, it was only so that so this ordeal might end. No more suffering. The possibility of reincarnation mattered very little. Death, as he so envisioned it, should be an end. Meanwhile, his brothers chose life over dead. Until the very end. The choice they made was imbued with dignity. The spiritual guide [Mundene], hearing the Mukate’s song, warned them. Although he disapproved of their action, he understood it just as well. (217)

This passage should remind us of the communal nature of initiation among the Mulongo. As had been the case years ago for Ebeise and Eleke, the initiation of the cohort of ten boys creates a shared common experience, strengthening relationships in the community in the process. Initiation in *Saison* amounts to a botched rebirth. The above passage underlines a sense of fraternal camaraderie that had been severed by the long walk to the coast. Mukudi laments his individualism in a way that the other characters do not fully understand, for his coming-of-age as a Mulongo man has been compromised by the antilife of captivity. As the only principal character who survives captivity, Mukudi’s experiences remain opaque to Eyabe and Ebusi, who plead for him to celebrate the life he has been given, rather than mourn his unfinished death. As a once-stolen thing, Mukudi bears witness to his commodification in a language that his mother cannot comprehend. “This is why you didn’t respond to me? Because you don’t want your name anymore?” his mother asks at their reunion in Bebayedi, on the banks of the Kwa river. In its waters, Mukudi hopes to baptize himself anew, with a new name.

The stories of the stolen are many. As mentioned above, certain parts of Africa saw greater populations of enslaved people than free people at the dawn of colonialism. The sudden disappearance of these captives into civil society *should* alarm us. How can African captives and their descendants bear witness to a captive past within a historiographical project which has often dismissed African forms of slavery as what Frederick Cooper calls “a conveniently benign foil” to American slavery (Cooper 103)? To study the transubstantiation of African *kin* into black *capital* need not begin off the littoral of Africa. The slave’s relationship to blackness is not a provincialism of the Middle Passage, but of the novel conditions of possibility that inaugurated the economic *common sense* of the trade in human flesh. Its impacts in Africa have been two thousand seasons of exploitation, extraction, domination and unlife. A death world of darkness. Colonialism is but an episode in this saga and an admittedly late one. Modern history is a story of global dispossessions, land, religion, custom, language. For black people, born of but not necessarily *in* the originary crossing, dispossession is a genesis.

Thieves

In thinking about modern African history as a story of theft, we have examined how the disappearance of the captive from community life has a profound impact on the experiences of those left behind. The robbed, those many millions left to tend “graves without bodies,” constitute a counterculture of African modernity, a *dark modern*. Theirs is a more somber story of fitful survival, perpetual flight, and constant fear. Their topos is the refugee community, the forest around the ransacked compound, the vault of inaccessible caves, the *village de liberté*. The stolen became goods enfolded into the flows

of capital into and out of Africa. Their bodies became the subjects of a calculus of human life, born from the nothingness of spoiled kinship. To mourn the tremendous loss, to act out the unitary melancholia at the heart of the black experience means first acknowledging the legacies of theft that have shaped black identity politics. It means finding an impossible peace with how Africa's introduction to 'modernity' was, for many millions, grim, bleak, *dark*. The slave and the colonized exit from the same womb of dispossession.

I'd like to close with a point about the 'thieves' in this equation. In *Saison*, the role of the African 'middleman' is played by the Bwele and Isedu, for whom "human life is not a sacred thing" and "war is a ritual" (192). These characters figure in the novel principally as villains, born from predatory cultures. We see the Bwele more than the Isedu; the Mulongo were aware of the Bwele but had no prior knowledge of the "coastmen" prior to the great fire. The characters of Bwemba, Njanjo and Njole appear mainly as thugs who treat the Mulongo as repositories of flesh. Bwemba, the Bwele hunter who betrays Mutango, also acknowledges that the Bwele are, in their own way, a prey culture of the Isedu, a smaller nation whose strength has been consolidated by foreign trade with the "bird-footed men." Miano does not pay special attention to either community, giving them only enough detail to qualify them as antagonists to the Mulongo. The novel is clearly moralistic towards these characters; their barbaric rituals and wanton disrespect for the Mulongo earns them a particular ire, although Miano offers us little in terms of justice. Indeed, the events of the novel's close suggest that the death of nine Mulongo boys will not substantially impact the Isedu and Bwele's unadulterated theft of life. If anything, the only change to the unfolding effects of slave modernity is the disqualification of the Mulongo as a source for flesh.

What I am not interested in doing here is moralizing against vague African ‘elites’ whose wealth or prestige descends from this traffic. Such trite critiques of ‘fratricide’ only make sense within a nationalistic ideology that struggles to extend to the time of the slave trade. I do not view the agent of ‘neocolonialism’ as an analogue to the African ‘middleman,’ as such a perspective attempts to explain an issue in the past through the lens of a contemporary set of problems with which it has little connection. Such a gesture, however popular, does not read history as a prophetic vision of the present, but uncovers the presence of the present as false archaeology. That said, many choose to see it this way, perhaps because it allows the ‘unity’ of the African people to remain secure. One can always exile or terminate traitors with impunity when the notion of a ‘traitor’ is universally applicable and obvious.

“The primitive signifier” of Africans selling Africans does not take into consideration the ways people in Africa thought of themselves and other people ²⁰. As Anne Bailey observes, “Africa became a continental force only in the modern era.” Although trade networks existed that connected all the regions of Africa to one another, as well as to ‘the rest’ of the Old World, African polities remained “largely distinct and separate from one another” (59). In the place of asking unanswerable question about ‘responsibility’ or ‘culpability,’ the likes of which is unnervingly common in diasporic inquests of the past, I close this chapter by acknowledging how any question of African complicity loses meaning. Can we meaningfully lay blame on African ‘kinglets’ for the “murder of brother by brother” when the *identity* of ‘the African’ has its roots in the colonial encounter? On a continent where interethnic conflicts *remain* common, the notion of a transpolitical solidarity seems inappropriate. Négritude — a twentieth-century

phenomenon, responding principally to the ideological warfare of French colonialism — sought to rectify this lack of unity by inventing a common identity (“the Negro”) with which to build a new vision of the black past, present and future. In an era of postcolonial nationalism, when the consolidation of the extraction colony has resulted in the near effacement of the organizational system that came *before* colonialism, the backward glance of African historiography sometimes struggles to make sense of the logic of African actions, let alone African agency. Slavers — black and white — stole life from Africa. ‘The African’ was born from the gap.

Chapter 2: Tragedy of origins

No action

Anacaona was an odd choice to premiere in the *grande salle* of Paris's Théâtre National de Chaillot. Written by the Haitian novelist, playwright, poet and neurologist Jean Métellus, it tells the real-life story of the titular Taíno queen of the kingdom of Xaragua, a polity of Hispaniola¹. The play's events take place shortly after the arrival of Christopher Columbus — *Guamiquina* to the Taíno — in 1492. The events which figured prominently in the first chronicles of New World history — the massacre of the retinue of Spaniards left behind at the fort of the Nativity, the siege of the fort of Santo Tomás, the capture of Caonabo by Alonzo de Hojeda, and the death of Anacaona by the ruse of the Spanish governor, Nicolas de Ovando— are not directly represented on stage, but reported as hearsay spreading throughout the kingdom. Characters are often seen contemplating shared news, or relaying information to other characters (and the audience) in the form of discourse. The effect is a play almost entirely devoid of action; for this reason, it performed poorly with French theatergoers. Many found the piece too long and contemplative, peopled with odd, marginal characters and strikingly devoid of action. Some critics found the poetic language “solemn, almost stiff” (Noetzel-Aubry). One critic noted the actors' difficulty with their dialogue, remarking that Laurence Roy, who played the titular role of Anacaona, “is not immediately convincing;” another, in a rather acerbic review, claimed the actors “often stumbled through their lines,” giving the impression that Vitez had selected “novices” (*des débutants*) (Léonardini; Nataf).

Métellus and Vitez defended their joint visions for the production when responding

to criticism. “I cannot show the Indians in chains, the fights,” Métellus sighed in an interview with Christian Leblé, “audiovisuals make us lazy.” (Métellus with Leblé). Vitez was of a similar opinion, stating that he “likes that you don’t really see any action on stage; you don’t really even see the exchange of ideas that ordinarily contributes to the conflict of ideas” in theatre. The play intentionally narrates the “before and the after of action,” with its cast of historical actors functioning more like messengers and reporters. (Vitez 657). In choosing narration over representation, historiography over the *imitation* of action, Métellus writes a history of Haiti’s native past that becomes present, embodied, and real when performed. To tell such a story of betrayal and dispossession, the calamity at the genesis of the Haitian nation, at the genesis of the sign of the ‘New World’ means writing what Vitez described as a “tragedy of origins.” As Vitez put it in his defense of the playwright’s monotonous dialogue, “Métellus was a poet who “sets out to give, or to return, to this nation a memory by telling the story of the initial massacre that founded it” (565).

In this chapter, I consider how *Anacaona*’s overt historiographical construction informs our tragic understanding of the *stories* of the slain queen of Xaragua, both as a historical figure and a mythical heroine of the Haitian past. Métellus’ decision to narrate Anacaona’s story as a *dramatic tragedy* compounds with popular interpretations of Anacaona as a tragic heroine *in history*, exposing a readerly dimension of tragic sentimentality that transcends literary formalism. Tragedy in *Anacaona* enshrines historical events in the language of prophecy; our reaction to the unfolding of cataclysmic events that appear to the play’s characters as prophecy is one of tragic human fallibility; we are unable to save Anacaona from the inevitable fate of her death, itself a constituent event of her and her country’s history. The audience watches with fear and pity as historical

monarchs of another world march headfirst into the death world of *our modernity*. The dispossession and enslavement of millions issues from their missteps.

Tragic history

History is often tragic, tragedies often historical. But how does one write the past as tragedy without manipulating it, intentionally fictionalizing it? Whereas history is often treated as a *literate act* of truth-telling with a stronger conviction to notions of truth than concerns for pathos, tragedy is typically understood as a *mimetic form* defined by its adherence to a set of classical conventions, such as *peripeteia*, *hamartia* and *catharsis*. To put it another way, history is a process of organizing the past into truth statements, whereas tragedy involves a discourse of feeling that ‘imitates’ the performed event. The two are not incompatible; one can perform history through the formal conventions of classical tragedy and, as I argue, read tragedy as a commentary on its signified history. The hybrid genres of *historical tragedy* and *tragic history* borrow from history’s commitments to the ‘true’ and its subservience to the ‘real’ while nevertheless organizing the past in such a manner as to instill the intended spectatorial affects of fear and pity, the likes of which, when executed properly, lead to emotional purification in the viewer. These Aristotelian definitions of tragedy and history may no longer be useful in a postmodern era marked by intentional ruptures of literary form and historical narratology, and thus the question of tragedy’s usefulness or purpose in a world devoid of *grands récits* are still worth asking².

My reading of *Anacaona* argues that we view tragedy as a *mode of interpretation*

which might illuminate Métellus' dramatic retelling of Haitian history. Here we might make a distinction between tragedy as a formal genre of storytelling and tragedy as a textual hermeneutic indebted to but also exceeding Aristotle's prescriptions for the genre. Although I pay attention to Aristotelian principles of tragedy, such as mimesis, hamartia, and catharsis, my intention is to assess the lines of contact and departure between Métellus' historical tragedy and the historical sources that documented these events. In writing Anacaona's story as a tragedy, Métellus is making a significant intervention into the historiography of the long Haitian present. Haiti's contemporary quest for freedom from neocolonialism, dictatorship and perpetual debt begins the originary violence at the origins of the Haitian state. A tragic, *prophetic* vision of the past makes this all but clear. Anacaona's death and the subsequent dissolution of her people and state strike us because the story of her betrayal and crucifixion underlines an essential failure of human action which the audience is powerless to prevent. How could they, after all? It would mean changing history. The effect of the audience's helplessness in the face of events foretold by both *prophecy* and *history* instills the classical feelings of fear and pity. We fear the ramifications of Anacaona and Caonabo's imprudence; we pity what their deaths *will mean* for their forgotten people and 'humanity.'

The origin of Western tragic theory dates to Aristotle's *Poetics*. Therein, the philosopher gives a rather straightforward definition of tragedy: "tragedy is an imitation (*mimesis*) of an action that is admirable, complete and possesses magnitude; in language made pleasurable, each of its species separated in different parts; performed by actors, not through narration; effecting through pity and fear the purification of such emotions" (10).

The bulk of the remaining manuscript of *Poetics* is dedicated to the exploration of these formal ideals. *Anacaona* hits each of these points on the head. The titular queen's resistance to the Spanish through her composition of *areytos* (song-dances) and her sense of grace and grandeur in the face of unforeseen events qualifies her actions with magnitude and admirability; her failure to succeed in protecting her kingdom and people, her execution by the hands of Ovando, and the flight of Yaquimex, her aide-de-camp, mark the completion of her narrative arc; the play's rich language ideally instills pleasure, although Métellus has been criticized for the academic tenor of his French, the likes of which might alienate certain audiences at home and abroad³; the play is broken into four acts, each composed of several scenes, taking place either at court in Yaguana or in various, unnamed Spanish settlements; dialogue is performed by a cast of actors figuring within two distinct camps: Native and Spaniard; the final act of the play, in which Anacaona's prophesied doom is completed when she is betrayed by her Spanish guest in a bloodbath effects the feelings of "pity and fear" that are the hallmark of Classical Greek tragedy

The playwright seems less interested in Aristotle's 'unities' of time, space, and action. *Anacaona* does not take place in the span of a single day (unity of time), but over some eleven "moons." The exact length of a *moon* is ambiguous; it may seem tempting to associate a moon with a month (as the words, in both English and French, are etymologically related), but the playwright's editorial rationale for changing eleven or twelve years into eleven or twelve months remains unclear⁴. This radically diverges from the historical timeline, which begins with Columbus' 'discovery' in 1492 and ends in 1504, with Anacaona's execution. The scope of time in *Anacaona* aligns it more with Aristotle's theories of epic, a descendant of tragedy "unrestricted in time" (Aristotle 9). *Anacaona* is

not situated in one place, either (unity of space). Métellus rarely gives setting information for his scenes; when he does, its usually in vague terms, for example, in Act 1, Scene 5, Métellus locates the proceeding events “at Anacaona’s home:” does this mean at her palace? Or in Yaguana, the seat of power? Or Xaragua, the kingdom itself? Other scenes clearly take place in Spanish strongholds, although they are unnamed. Act 2, Scenes 1 and 3 seem to take place in the fort of Santo Tomás, in Caonabo’s territory of the Cibao. Indeed, every scene principally dealing with a Spanish character — apart from those in Act 4, set entirely in Xaragua — would logically take place *elsewhere* from *chez Anacaona*. Of course it could be argued that the events of the play *do* take place in one ‘place’: Hispaniola. This literalist reading of the unity of space nevertheless ignores the fact that Hispaniola, the second-largest island in the Caribbean, is almost 30,000 square miles in size.

Finally, there is the unity of action. For Aristotle, action is part of *plot*, “the organization of events.” It is the unity of plot — rather than those of time and space — that most closely allies tragedy with history, if only both are structured by an essential sequentialization of events. Tragedy, in short, cannot exist without plot: “so the events, i.e., the plot, are what tragedy is there for, and that is the most important thing of all” (11). Métellus’ interpretation of the unity of plot is perhaps the most radical; *Anacaona* does *not* imitate actions so much as report them by means of other characters. Events within the play’s spacetime, such as Columbus’ arrival and reception by the cacique Guakanagarik, his building of the Fort of the Nativity, Caonabo’s destruction of said fort, and virtually all other moments of ‘action’ are purposefully withheld from the reader. The play’s refusal to render any semblance of motion or activity, other than the action of reportage itself, is perhaps its most explicit acknowledgement of the playwright’s interest in nonhistory. By

refusing the *mimesis* of action and transforming historical occurrence into explicit *texts* (the 'text' of gossip, hearsay, and reportage) Métellus acknowledges how tragedy's sense of fear and pity emerged from our position in the present, outside of the temporality of *plot*. Tragic knowledge of the past is always incongruous with the temporality of the event, as we always occupy a *future position* to the event. Tragedy emerges precisely from this external position from behind the glass wall of the present.

Aristotle has surprisingly little to say about historiography in *Poetics*. He distinguishes it from poetry, writing that "the function of poetry is not to say what *has* happened, but to say the kind of things that *would* happen, i.e., what is possible in accordance with probability or necessity." History is, more simply, an account of "what has happened" (16). In chapter 3, I'll return to the dialectic of "what happened" (*realis*) and "what might have happened" (*irrealis*), but here I'd like to highlight how the grammar of Aristotle's statement demarcates the poet's work from that of the historian on the grounds of an engagement with *a priori* or *a posteriori* forms of knowledge. The poet is first and foremost a *maker* for Aristotle; historians do not make, so much as recount past events. For this reason, Aristotle asserts that "it would be possible to turn the works of Herodotus into verse, and it would be a history in verse just as much as in prose," for history's genre convention, its essence, is its narration of *real* past events. The critic BL Ullman states sardonically that "If Aristotle had had his way history would have become a science," defined by its unshaken commitments to narrating the past as an essential chronology and having no aesthetic dimensions at all other than those necessary for its ascetic project (53). Greek tragedians and historians were not beholden to Aristotle's distinctions. Ullman notes that "Herodotus was influenced by epic poetry, the source of the stories of tragedy; *per*

contra, tragedy sometimes drew on history,” as is the case of Aeschylus’ *Persians* (27). Classical French drama, such as Racine’s *Britannicus* and Corneille’s *Horace*, to name but two examples, similarly made heavy use of historical materials, inventing characters, or scenarios where necessary, such as Corneille’s invention of Sabine, the wife of the historical figure Horace.

In *Anacaona*, the use of historical materials, sourced from chroniclers and historians like Peter Martyr, Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo and Bartolomé de las Casas collides with the inclusion of fictional characters such as First and Second Indians, the priestess Altabeira and the rebel Yaquimex. I would not argue that these inclusions disqualify the work as a legitimate historical text, but they do signify on the *form* in which Métellus presents the history of Anacaona’s tragic fate. The problem of imitation thus becomes confused in a text where the poetic and the historical, the subjunctive and the indicative, are purposefully intermingled. This is true of *Anacaona* the play, but it is also true of the *legendary* (a collection of tales, particular relating to the lives of saints) of Anacaona within the historical archive.

Next, we might consider the question of *catharsis*, or the “purification of emotions.” As intimated above, only a portion of the *Poetics* remains from antiquity. The translator Malcolm Heath understands catharsis to respond to an emotional inappropriateness or excess: “by stimulating the emotion to which they are excessively prone, tragedy discharges the tendency to excess” in audiences susceptible to such intemperance (xxxix). Catharsis, then, provides a therapeutic experience for the audience by allowing them to bear witness to the “forms of distress” of fear and pity within an imagined scenario at a distance from the exigencies of ordinary life. Fear and pity are not random emotions for

Aristotle, but “occur above all when things come about contrary to expectation but because of one another” (xlii). Tragedy underscores the failures of human agency and our fundamental lack of control over events larger than ourselves, such as the inevitable flow of time or the destruction of nations. For Ato Quayson, tragedy hinges on *causal plausibility*, a three-part narrative condition that, when well-executed by the playwright, “[triggers] sympathy for the sufferer and perhaps an active response to their suffering” in the audience ⁵. Tragic astonishment thus “encapsulates the relation between choice and unforeseen consequences” (Quayson *Tragedy*, 12). It is for this reason that some tragic theorists lament the casual misuse of the terms *tragedy* and *tragic* in everyday speech and its conflation with accident. The location of causal plausibility is difficult to ascertain in an increasingly secular world, where acts of nature do not betray the presence of an anthropomorphic, divine will. At the same time, the distinction between *tragedy* and *accident*, the one inherently meaningful and the other not, is subject to ideology. As Raymond Williams suggests, the only thing that distinguishes the story of a mining disaster or the death of a family in a house fire is “the character and quality of the general meaning” which categorizes these events as accidents and, say, the death of a king by his closest attendant as a tragedy (71). Like Williams, I see tragedy not only as a genre convention related to the *authoring* of tales of suffering, but also an audience’s *response* to such stories, to such suffering. Meaning dwells wherever the reader finds it, meaning that there might indeed be meaning in seemingly random events.

Black and Native histories bear the weight of their cataclysmic origins in their almost inevitable sense of tragic human error. Black and Native histories strive to either transcend this sense of tragic human failure by directing our gaze towards brighter futures

or seeking out an impossible peace with the historical fact of pandemic dispossession. In thinking about the *tragic* as an interpretative discourse that might add something of value to critical historiography, I am most motivated by Quayson's theory of real-life tragedy and David Scott's theory of tragic action. Both Quayson and Scott, in differing ways, concern themselves with an application of literary-philosophical notions of tragedy to historical events. For Quayson, the events that led to the 1995 state execution of the Nigerian activist Ken Saro-Wiwa exposes not only "ethical misapprehensions" pertaining to a tragic theory of political culture, but also a "misapprehension of historical processes themselves," the likes of which become, as discourse, enfolded into narrative dynamics not dissimilar from living forms of drama. History reveals its textual reality in its recourse to narrative techniques like plot, as well as interpretative technologies like tragedy. We might be quick to shuck the facts from the fictions, but there is meaning in the fictions which have been told about Saro-Wiwa's death, just like all the facts of his life do not seem to bear inherent meaning on his tragic death. The texts of Saro-Wiwa's life, mythologized and politicized into a martyr's legendary, *exceeds* the historical details of his life, especially when said texts are purposefully reiterated, rewritten, and rehearsed as a tragedy (*Calibrations* 63).

For Scott, a funeral dirge for a socialist future in the Caribbean rung out in 1983, as the socialist government of Grenada, under the authority of the New Jewel movement, fell amid an American invasion. Although the conflict in Grenada is often considered as little more than an aside in the political theater of the Cold War, its relevance for a tragic theory of Caribbean politics remains pertinent almost forty years later. For Scott, "tragedy arises from the fact that well-intentioned actions of willing and self-determining agents are

pervasively vulnerable to contingency” and “outcomes that are never predictable or entirely knowable in advance.” Tragic events snowball through a sequence of chain reactions, but nevertheless are structured around the “plurality of concatenating actions” (22). Scott and Quayson’s focus on action and consequence as the defining dynamic of an interpretative theory of tragedy highlights our inability to foresee the future effects of ongoing human actions. Such a critique resonates with *Anacaona*’s use of prophecy. Even when aware of the outcomes of their actions, Anacaona and Caonabo cannot escape fate, especially when ‘fate’ here has become synonymous with the authoritative text of their lives, be it in legend or in history. Tragedy’s manipulation of “the temporality of action” is tethered to the incongruence between our contemporary knowledge of the event and the inability of human beings to avoid or abate an impending, ruinous catastrophe. It is a condition of our external position from the historical record, as onlookers watching the past unfold in real-time from behind the glass wall of the present. In theater, we experience this sentiment of helpless spectatorship as dramatic irony; we know exactly what Altabeira’s prophecy will mean, even if we do not quite know how it will play out. In real-life, it is our knowledge of the collision of human actions and consequences *then-unforeseen* that fuels this reaction of fear and pity.

The narrative arc of tragedy does not bend around hindsight, although the tragic hero’s too-late recognition of their *hamartia* is pivotal to many tragedies. Rather, it is our knowledge as the audience, as participants in the imitation of the event and performers in said imitations, that ignites our ever-distant sense of pity and fear. We are always distant from the *time* of tragedy, and it is this distance that allows us to not only understand human actions as tragic, but to experience the abreaction of tragic sentimentality. Anacaona’s life

and death, and the precipitating fall of Xaragua and all of Taíno Hispaniola with it, are only tragic from our historical vantage in the perpetual *aftermath* of her execution in 1504. This is true not only of the literary representations of Anacaona throughout Haitian and Caribbean literature but also of the ways in which she has been inscribed into the long account of the European conquest of the New World as a faceless cacique among the thousands toppled, murdered, and forgotten.

A prophetic vision of the past

As a historical drama, *Anacaona* sticks close to the documentary account of Anacaona and Caonabo's lives. Except for a handful of Native American characters and the hybrid figure of Roldadilla, all of the characters in the play were real people involved in one way or another with the fall of Xaragua. Some of the play's most dramatic events — such as the Battle of Vega Real, the failed seizure of the fort of Santo Tomás, the capture of Caonabo, the massacre at Yaguana and Anacaona's execution — make explicit references to contemporary or near-contemporary sources that first documented the play's imitated events. That said, the playwright does take some creative liberties in writing his history, one of the most significant being the play's use of prophecy. Altabeira's prophecy functions both as a device of tragic action, foretelling the fates of characters unable to avoid them, but also as a direct reference to the historical realities the play seeks to represent. The prophecy aligns the events *Anacaona's plot* with the historical inevitability of her and Caonabo's demise: prophecy's warning *becomes* history's mandate, its 'truth.' Described in the *dramatis personae* as Anacaona's 'confidante,' Altabeira arrives in the first scene of

the play with a message given to her by a *butio*, or an Arawak priest. She admits from the beginning that “she has not managed to understand it,” despite it being her “mission” to recite it before her queen and her consort. Alternating her address to both Anacaona and Caonabo, Altabeira delivers the prophecy that seals the fate of Maguana, Xaragua, as well as all of Taíno Hispaniola:

Cease being beautiful and proud
Your kingdom will resist for a long while
But you will perish by believing yourself charming
And you, cease being brave and valiant
Your courage will doom you.

And above all you must be beautiful
But disabuse yourself of your virtues
You will have Spanish slaves
But victory will quickly change sides

And you, you need courage to fight
Because the malice of men is infinite
Your daughter will have a Spanish lover, but she will not have a husband
Her beloved will be taken prisoner by his own brothers
Flee from honor and glory
But if you resist them
You both will assuredly cause the end of you and yours
Charm is elastic and passes through the ropes
So is it that courage that breaks like a link drowns in the sea
And that one quits this life with neither home no prayer
If you can lose, you, your beauty and, you, your valor
You both will, for your own good, be wiser

Charm follows its path by always captivating
And courage its course with unflinching assertiveness
It is fortune that wants charm to captivate and force to grow

(And pointing successively to Caonabo and Anacaona).

You, you will live a long time and will die on this land if you agree to mistrust
your own strength

You as well, will live a long time if you doubt your charm and your faith
May it please Yocauna that you might both be fed more by tears than flowers,

by fear rather than fervor

This is what was told to a *butio* by men and women without navels (12-4)

The first two lines of the first stanza are addressed to Anacaona, whose primary characteristics in the prophecy are her feminine charm and beauty; the second are addressed to Caonabo, who is identified by masculine characteristics of valor, strength, and power.⁶ In these first few lines, the tragic flaws of both characters are revealed, albeit in a manner that escape both their comprehension. Of course, what would it mean for Anacaona, “the golden flower,” and Caonabo, the “lord of gold,” to deny themselves their most fetching characteristics, especially in the face of such adversity as the Spanish incursion within their lands? To ask a monarch to “flee from honor and glory,” lest they “assuredly cause the end” of their kingdom and their lives might seem immediately contradictory. After all, how can the fate of the people be saved by the monarch’s flight from battle, by tactful timidity for the one and uncharacteristic inarticulateness for the other?

In an interview with Laure Lasfargues, Métellus made note of the uses of prophecy among the peoples of Hispaniola, stating “premonitions and oracles were for the people of Ayti provided guidance and a way to live in harmony with nature” (Lasfargues). JC Kamerbeek reports that the Ancient Greeks had a similar relation to oracles. The occurrence of prophecies and oracles in Greek drama “was taken as a matter of course by the audience and presumably not, in the first, as a dramaturgic convention or means” (Kamerbeek 29). We cannot have the same expectations of Métellus’ audience of French theatergoers in the 1980s, but the mimetic representation of a prophecy as a dynamic of realism is the same. Given the fact that “the stories that served as the material of tragedy were, all of them, fixed in their main outlines” by the authority of the preliterate urtext⁷,

the consultation of oracles in Greek tragedy functions not only as realistic representations of what a Greek king like Oedipus or Aegeus would do, but also as a novel retelling of the story's events in the form of a prediction whose outcome the character cannot know, but which the *audience inevitably does*. Kamerbeek makes this clear when he argues that "a stronger case can be made for the oracles as *interpretation of the events* than for the events as the results of the oracles" (29-30).

Altabeira's prophecy establishes anticipation for the remainder of the play, conditioning a sense of dramatic irony congruent with the historical narrative of Taíno Hispaniola's fall. The prophecy spells doom for both characters, albeit for different reasons. Caonabo's characterization as a fierce warrior who strikes first and asks questions later is compounded by his sense of cultural exteriority, his disinterest in religious traditions, and his masculine arrogance. For Métellus, Caonabo was a stranger among the Taíno, a usurper king and a conqueror whose war of conquest happens before the events of Columbus' 'discovery.' His response to Altabeira dramatizes this cultural distance: "What a long and indecipherable message." He continues: "Honorable Altabeira, dignified messenger of the gods / Go back before the sacred source / So you might there hear more lucid words." The monologue that issues from these opening lines expounds on Caonabo's alterity from Hispaniola, placing his birth on the "island of Ayay" in the midst of a hurricane that "uprooted trees / unfettered the sea / spreading, dispersing and unleashing death." In his "very first bath," Caonabo was washed with the blood of his father's captives. This talk of "captured prisoners" in his monologue intimates, albeit subtly, that the slaves in whose blood Caonabo first bathed were indeed Taíno, as goes the myth of the 'cannibal'

Caribs who preyed on the peaceable Taíno of the Greater Antilles. Thus, there is weight at the end of Caonabo's monologue response to Altabeira's prophecy when he commands her to "say to the Arawak gods / That they have a son purified by the earth, the water, by blood and fire / A man unconquered (*indompté*) and why not unconquerable (*indomptable*) as well." (15)

The union between Anacaona, a Taíno princess, and Caonabo, a Carib invader, is the source of significant chatter on Hispaniola, even prior to Columbus' arrival. In Act One, scene two, two of the play's invented characters, First and Second Indians, discuss the marriage of the two monarchs as itself "an unfortunate premonition." First Indian considers their union to be part of the troublesome "history of the land" which, we might deduce, *did not* originate with Columbus. Second Indian attempts to dispel First Indian's trepidation, arguing that "a Carib is not a stranger / They're a brother from another island and like us threatened" by European outsiders. The two characters represent two distinct opinions concerning Caonabo's 'belonging' and optimal role in Hispaniolan society. First Indian exercises suspicion towards "marriages against nature" to men like Caonabo who rule "by terror and by force," while Second Indian preaches conciliation with Caonabo who, "although Carib, has carved a kingdom among the Arawak," both through his warrior exploits and his marriage to Anacaona. Their dialogue is interrupted by Caonabo, who, having overheard, berates both for "worrying [themselves] with marvels and prophecies." Speaking of himself in the third person, the king of Maguana declares "Let it be known that Caonabo has never put his trust in anything other than his spear, his ax and his poisoned arrows / His secret, his strength is there." The introduction of this character dynamic between First and Second Indian not only adds another narrative dimension to the myth of

Caonabo's non-Hispaniolan ancestry, but it also brings into questions the critique of the Spanish's anti-Native violence as animated primarily by the dynamic of invader/settler.

Caonabo's foreignness foils him with Columbus, another foreign ruler, albeit markedly absent from the play's *dramatis personae*. His association with the Caribs positions him in a vestibular position between the Taíno, a peaceful people in a hitherto paradisiac location, and the gold-hungry Spanish invaders. In the mythicized prehistory to Columbus' 'discovery' of the Americas, the Caribs of the Lesser Antilles were a warrior people who often captured, enslaved and, allegedly, ate Taíno peoples. The belief in the cannibal Caribs has fallen out of favor in historical and anthropological scholarship on the Caribbean.⁸ In the Haitian cultural memory, Caonabo and Anacaona have entered into legend as representative figures of ferocious valor and poetic beauty, perhaps to such an extent that their characters — and what characterizes them — remain 'fixed' within the cultural imagination. The image of Caonabo as "the stranger king," versus the *knowledge* of Caonabo as likely from Hispaniola, like his wife, might condition his characterization as such in a play based more on powerful and persistent cultural images than vetted historical truths.

In his response to Altabeira, Caonabo reveals that hubris will drive him to "miss his mark" (*hamartia*). An irascible man of swift and sudden action, Caonabo refuses to heed the words of the prophecy, believing himself to have a direct line to the superior god Yocauna, who "watches over his movements." Later in the play, after a series of military failures tempers his fire, Anacaona discusses her husband's character with Altabeira, stating how he is "self-assured and believes himself to be at the reins of his own fate." Convinced of his divine purpose, Caonabo "disdains advice and does only as he pleases."

That said, Anacaona “believes in” her husband’s choice to reject the gifts sent to him by the Spanish administrators. She stands behind her husband’s judgment, even if she can admit that his arrogance (*orgueil*) drives him to make brash decisions. Métellus’ word for ‘drive’ is *démanger*, which normally means “to itch,” but here means something more akin to “to cause to want,” or even “to inspire to do” (56). This includes the work of divine middlemen like seers and priests, who only muddle the words of Yocauna. Thus, it goes that when Altabeira asks her mistress “does he believe in oracles?” Anacaona responds rather plainly “much more in himself.” (57)

It is this hubris that seals Caonabo’s fate. In attempting to liberate Hispaniola from its Spanish invaders, Caonabo falls prey to his enemy’s traps, disguised as gifts. In the midst of the siege on the fort of Santo Tomás, Caonabo is convinced to meet with the garrison’s commander, the knight Alonzo de Hojeda. First Indian later reports the news of Caonabo’s capture at court in Yaguana:

FIRST INDIAN — Caonabo has been captured
He accepted an audience with the Spaniards
There were ten of them
They offered him clothes like they themselves wore
They gave him adornments of heavenly origin, handcuffs
That only the sovereigns of Spain wore during lavish ceremonies, or so they
said
Caonabo accepted all of it
And since he could not get away from them
They tied him up, put him on a horse’s rear
And made off with him. (58)

A dour sendoff for a “hurricane” of a king. Trapped by handcuffs of “heavenly origin,” believing them to be the instruments of the richest monarchs of Spain, Caonabo is manipulated by the Spanish emissary Hojeda. In a prior scene, we see Hojeda and the priest Frère Buyl contemplating how Caonabo might be captured. In a letter delivered by an emissary and read aloud by Hojeda, Columbus suggests that they stroke Caonabo’s sense

of self-importance, slowly whittling down his resolve with a steady stream of lavish gifts. Believing him to “walk about nude,” Columbus advises that they dress him in clothes that might be easier to grab hold of, thus impeding him from slipping away⁹. While Frère Buyl finds Columbus’ ignorance of the situation in Hispaniola a constant source of frustration, he admits that the Admiral of the Ocean Sea’s idea is sound, if but in part¹⁰. “We must cover the king of the Cibao in all sorts of presents, shower him in respect, and send him golden crowns” so that “he’ll end up believing himself important and essential” (55-6). In short, as Hojeda concludes, the Spanish must “let him believe that he is the greatest of his brothers,” the fellow caciques of Hispaniola (56).

We may never know the ‘truth’ of how Caonabo was arrested, as all extant accounts seem to contradict one another. Métellus’ story borrows from a perhaps romantic rendition, appearing in only one of the significant contemporary sources: Bartolomé de las Casas’s *Historia de las Indias*. Not having seen smelted metal before, the Taíno in Las Casas’ account associate Spanish bronze (*latón*) with the heavens (*turey*). After isolating Caonabo, Hojeda succeeds in having him mount a horse (an animal that had, prior to 1492, not been seen in the Americas for millennia) and adorn the brass handcuffs, the cacique entirely unaware of the machinations of the Spaniards. The Amerindians in Caonabo’s retinue, “always fleeing when near a horse,” watch their king and his captors disappear from sight, unaware of what exactly has happened (Las Casas 86-7). This story is repeated in the *Histoire des cacique d’Haïti* by the Haitian writer Emile Nau, a book Métellus is likely to have consulted when writing *Anacaona*¹¹. No other source material makes reference to these “bronze manacles from heaven.” Each source characterizes Caonabo’s capture differently; some emphasize the cacique’s dastardliness, while others emphasize

manipulation without detailing the ruse. Oviedo ascribes Caonabo's death to Hojeda's sense of "cunning and caution to be found in experienced captains." Although Oviedo describes Hojeda as "crafty" (*mañoso*), he does not provide explicit details for Caonabo's capture (Oviedo 56). Martyr describes Caonabo as a somewhat fearful and constrained man, "like a skerry amidst many waves in the middle of the sea." Caonabo connives to murder Columbus himself by traveling with a large retinue of guards and passing them off as his cortege. The Spanish predict his "fraud" and capture him (42). Sepúlveda's history, written sometime after both Martyr and Oviedo, repeats the former's account.

The absence of any mention of *turey* handcuffs in other contemporary sources might immediately disqualify Las Casas' account as either a fabrication on his part or as a snippet from a legend he was reporting. Even if these manacles never existed, they figure within the mythic text of Caonabo's life as both a historical figure and as a tragic hero of anticolonial resistance¹². The manacles relate back Altaberia's prophecy, in which she claims "so is it that courage that breaks like a link drowns in the sea." While we might immediately associate the symbolism of the handcuffs with the speak of bindings (*liens*) from the prophecy, it is Caonabo's connection to his fellow caciques, weakened by his self-aggrandizement and superiority complex towards the Taíno, that "breaks like a link." The transmission of news of his capture by a messenger denies the audience the spectacle of the event while also transforming it into a story, into *history*¹³.

Historical time dilates to account for a swift, purposeful sequence of events that, in reality, had taken weeks of planning and imprudent action to accomplish. The messenger delivers the news detailing the culmination of Caonabo's attempts to expel invaders from Hispaniola in plain, ascetic language. The play's time accelerates around Caonabo's

capture, which in response recedes quickly from memory. Scenes 3, 4 and 5 of the second act move quickly through the Spanish plot of flattery, its effects on Caonabo's "vainglory" and his subsequent capture, constricting what Hojeda predicts will be a "a very long endeavor of rejection from his brothers," into only several minutes of dialogue. As critics have complained, denying the audience the opportunity to witness Caonabo's capture is an indeed odd choice, especially given the theatricality of Las Casas' source story. Métellus defended his decision to refuse writing scenes of "Indians in chains" on representational and aesthetic grounds, but it is also worth underlining how such a decision also functions as a historiographical device, in which the event is always out of reach, never reproducible outside of discourse, of fables, stories, gossip and hearsay. Even if it leaves audiences dissatisfied and bored, I believe that such an intervention asks important questions about tragic modes of *writing* history, as well as the ways that histories resonate with our tragic experience of history.

To Caonabo, his pride; to Anacaona, her charm. Upon his death offstage in act 2, scene 5, Bohéchio bequeaths the throne of Xaragua to his sister, establishing her as the sole female cacique on Hispaniola. Her marital title as queen consort of Maguana is an addition to her natural right to the monarchy of Xaragua. Her "noble descent" compounds her poetic prowess as a *samba*, a composer of areytos (23). Above all, the Spanish fear Anacaona's motivational power. Although she tends to avoid direct conflict in warfare, Anacaona's areytos are responsible for fanning the flames of rebellion across the island, much to the chagrin of the Spanish authorities. The combination of her poetic powers and her royal born majesty are the primary characteristics of Anacaona's charm. The playwright invests energy into this trait in order to transform her, by the play's close, into a martyr figure.

Whereas Caonabo's tragic error is rooted more in his self-important actions, Anacaona errs by using her charm to form an alliance — to make peace — with the Spanish. She ignores the advice of her second-in-command, the rebel Yaquimex, who suggests that she and her kingdom flee, as the gods had suggested in the prophecy. Instead, she imprudently accepts the interview with Nicolas de Ovando and seals her fate:

ANACAONA. — I've accepted this officer [Ovando] not with the heart but with the mind

This successful union would have been the second to take place in my life
I know the secrets of political alliances

I imposed peace on all the borders of this country by marrying Caonabo; that warrior who was always waging war waged war no more because I was Queen to his King, an because I had with my areytos riled the courts of all the cacicazgos well before our union

Between Caonabo, who I managed to love — and whose loss I suffer even if we spent little time together, with him bound to manage his kingdom and me mine — and me, it was not a romance (*idylle*), but a simple political alliance, at least at first

And since that union no Carib has come to attack us

He also lost his bellicose disposition living an Arawak life

There is peace in alliance. But ally with whom? And when? And why? (101)

Pressed with the impending invasion of her country, Anacaona is faced with a choice: rebel and doom her people to a war they likely cannot win; or sue for peace with her invaders. Of course, there is the third choice, intimated by the prophecy's calls to "flee from honor and glory," and Yaquimex' advice to take the lead of the black men who "revolt and make for the mountains with lightning speed." Anacaona does not take this advice and remains adamant in the fact that Xaragua's fertile and productive plains "belong to them," and that Ayti (Hispaniola) is "their country / not the Spaniards'" (81). The first option, albeit bleak, may still have dealt a substantial blow to the Spanish. With the assistance of Cotubanama — the cacique of Higüey, the other yet-unconquered kingdom — Anacaona could have led a significant rebellion, composed in part by the remaining Taíno peasants-

cum-warriors and the rebel Spaniards taking refuge in Xaragua. Nevertheless, she chooses peace over warfare because of her experience with diplomacy. After all, her brother had given her hand to Caonabo in order to cease the latter's incessant fighting with the other caciques. We might even suspect that, had Bohéchio not used his sister as a diplomatic tool, Caonabo would have conquered the other cacicazgos. In this regard, Caonabo's outsider status is once again emphasized in order to form him into a political bridge between the peaceable Taíno and the Spanish conquerors. If it worked on him, winning for the people of Hispaniola a ceasefire with their Carib enemies, why wouldn't it work for the Spanish?

In the above passage, we see a bit of Caonabo's pride in Anacaona's dialogue. Like her husband had in life, she thinks of herself here as exemplary. There is a certain weight in her "I" statements that transcends her royal metaphorization as "the people," giving her character a hitherto uncharacteristic egoism. "I've accepted" Ovando's invitation; "I know the secrets of political alliances," having orchestrated a successful one already with Caonabo; "I imposed peace" in Hispaniola, not only through marrying Caonabo, but because "I had with my areytos riled" the combined power of "the courts of all the cacicazgos," perhaps as an alliance *against* Caonabo. The bravado with which Anacaona speaks puts her at odds with the gods. "Things are looking grim," she bemoans before Yaquimex and Altabeira, asking "should I really divest from my virtues?" Altabeira, suddenly understanding the prophecy, responds to the queen: "You have been advised to do so." Anacaona does not listen. Instead, she organizes a lavish reception for Ovando:

ANACAONA — *To Altabeira*. Do not forget any of the preparations: have the
room adorned with finest decorations at court
The most powerful of the cacicazgos
The most populous, the fullest of hope

Agrees to meet Ovando, a new dignitary
His apparent goodness and his desire for peace
Making promises of easier tomorrows
May Xaragua shine during these feast days
May the beauty of each of our daughters be radiant
May the bodies, the hair and the faces be resplendent!
Virgins will go with me to the meeting this lord
Every house will be festooned
Let us prepare these unforgettable festivities.

This opening part of Anacaona's feast monologue frames several important aspects of her own hamartia. For one, the problem of charm appears in her decision to throw a lavish party, forgoing the counsel of Anacaona and Yaquimex, as well as the prophecy's advice against her charms. The verbs in the three subjunctive statements — shine (*briller*), be radiant (*rayonner*), and be resplendent (*resplendir*) — make subtle allusions to the qualities of gold, the object that has fueled the Spanish conquest. By commanding that Xaragua's *people* in general, and its own in particular, be transformed into metaphors of gold, Anacaona attempts to seduce the Spanish into an alliance. Attention is brought not only to the physical beauty of her kingdom, with every house "festooned" with flowers and garlands, and its bountiful foods like "corn, manioc, pistachios, potatoes, beans / the spoils of the land and of the sea / and the fruits of the soursop and guava trees," but most importantly to its human resources. Anacaona declares that "virgins will go with" her to meet Ovando, their bodies serving as tributes not dissimilar in value to gold before the island's veins had begun to run dry and its labor force weak. The intended effect of "the breath of flutes, the zeal of the day, the freshness of the wind / the burning perfume of our flours, our fruits and our spices," in short, all that Xaragua *can* offer, is to "intoxicate" (*enivrer*) Ovando.

After Anacaona delivers her long monologue of instructions to Altabeira, she asks the priestess one final time to verify the prophecy. "Had the oracles foreseen such a feast?"

She asks, to which her confidant responds with a sharp “no.” Like Caonabo, she dismisses the labor of oracles in matters of state: “You see, as I was saying to Yaquimex, when you are responsible for a kingdom, you cannot always rely on prophecies.” The two characters continue this repartee for several minutes, Anacaona asking if the oracles had foreseen events *set to transpire* and Altabeira responding in the negative. The conversation verges on the comedic when the two women’s discussion breaks down into a difference of semantics. “They only said that you would have Spanish slaves, and that the victory would quickly change sides,” Altabeira reminds her queen, only for Anacaona to retort that “hostages are not slaves.”

These are the last of the play’s rare moments of levity. What comes next is the unfurling of the prophecy in the following two scenes. Again, Métellus denies us a front-row seat to the action, putting our attention first on Altabeira, who delivers a monologue from another room, conjecturing that her Queen may indeed have beaten fate, and then on Yaquimex and “the Indian,”¹⁴ discussing the massacre that has just taken place at Anacaona’s court. Act Five, Scene three — the play’s final scene — opens with Yaquimex bearing news of Xaragua’s fall: “Xaragua is in flames / The Queen has been hanged / All the Indians have been shot or burned / The place of the feast is an immense hearth / This is Ovando’s doing.” Yaquimex claims to have left the room after Anacaona throws herself before Ovando, begging him to call off his men who have started to kill her people. Thus, it is “the Indian” who reports Anacaona’s last words and how she was killed:

THE INDIAN — When the Queen, with ropes around her wrists, found herself at the foot of the cross planted before that supposed house of feasts, between Ovando and two Spaniards, she said to them: “You can set fire to my kingdom, burn the body of my people

But by getting rid of me, you will deliver me from myself

And you will effectively transform me into the great Lady of Ayti

She who stood up for almost eleven moons¹⁵ to the oppressors of Aytians
My children will recognize me
They will recognize themselves in me
By resisting all the invaders to come
But yours will curse you
And will banish you from their memory
Such is the fate of valets” (136-7)

Anacaona’s final words testify to her experience of martyrdom. Becoming in death “the great Lady of Ayti,” she mythicizes and sanctifies herself in her final expression as a poet-monarch. Mention of self-deliverance, especially from one’s flesh, is immediately reminiscent of the Christian rhetoric concerning the mortal body of Christ. In speaking of herself as being “transformed” into an icon, rather than a mere human being, she acknowledges how her life and death will be transformed into the icon of national identity and resistance for “her children.” In this sequence, Anacaona accomplishes what Edouard Glissant calls a “prophetic vision of the past,” in which the haunting dynamics of the past are “‘revealed’ continuously in the now.” The effect is the dissolution of temporal distinctions between past, present, and future, the likes of which are unnerving inapplicable to a people for whom the past “is not yet history” (226). The identities of Anacaona’s “children” will be explored further in the second section of this chapter, but for now, it is important to linger on this point a bit longer. “My children will recognize me,” she proclaims, “but yours will curse you / and will banish you from their memory.”

The effect of “the Indian”’s account of Anacaona’s death is to highlight her martyrdom. The play’s reported scene of execution most closely aligns it with a subgenre of the historical play that Herbert Lindenberger identifies as the “martyr play.” For Lindenberger, the martyr play “works rhetorically to excite the audience’s admiration of the martyr and convince it of the rightness of [her] cause,” often by making either subtle or overt reference to the passions of Jesus Christ (46). The descriptions of her death are

labored and explicit to highlight the audience's sense of fear and pity. In the midst of the great conflagration at Yaguana, where tens of Anacaona's vassals were burned alive in the ceremonial *buhio*, the Spaniards "hoisted the Queen over the highest part of the cross, the rope around her neck." "The Queen whose smile had been snuffed out / Passed away at the end of the rope, her arms dangling at her sides," he continues, "Thus dead like Caonabo / by treason, without the typical rites." The morose description of Anacaona's mangled body, "the wind blowing her hair in every direction," "a black foam spilling from her lips, tinging her garlands and wrapper (*pagne*)," "her tongue lolling and lips blue," contrasts significantly with Anacaona's characteristic charm and beauty. As Linderberger suggests for the 'martyr play,' "both the suffering and the transcendence of the Passion story lend their shape" to the *Anacaona*'s conclusion, where Anacaona dies not only so that, in death, she will become "the great Lady of Ayti" but so that Haitians of future generations may call on her as a saint of political resistance, as a mother to their tragic origins.

Unlike Caonabo's capture, accounts of Anacaona's death are less varied in historical sources. Nearly all of the early histories tell of a massacre at Yaguana, orchestrated by Ovando and his forces. Similarly, the method of Anacaona's execution — hanging — is stable across the texts in which her death is mentioned¹⁶. Some of these accounts, as Samuel Wilson acknowledges, "offer partial and conflicting accounts of Ovando's visit" to Yaguana (134). In Oviedo's account, Ovando hears word of a ploy to flee (*se alzar*) among Anacaona and her vassals, denying the Spanish their needed alimentary tributes from Xaragua. The news of their potential flight and a potential ploy to murder the Spaniards in the region leads Ovando to brutally subdue Xaragua. He has his men draw more than forty of Anacaona's vassals into a *caney* (another word for *buhio*, or

large hut) and burned alive. Anacaona is later “brought to justice” three months later, when she is hanged (85). The Spanish use a ruse to distract and ambush the Taíno gathered at Yaguana; Ovando has his horsemen pretend to joust (*jugar a las cañas*) so that the Native Americans are not suspicious of their arms. Sepúlveda makes similar reference to an “equestrian display” that the Spanish used to beguile the Taíno into a sense of false security and wonderment. Once the entire cavalry had filed into the place of the forum, “a trumpet’s signal” set the same events described by Oviedo in motion. “Some forty” ‘kinglets’ (*reyezuelos*) were locked into the place in which Ovando himself had been lodging and burned alive, with Anacaona’s fate following three months later. Sepúlveda, who in other contexts has been described as the principal ‘defender’ of the Spanish colonial mission in the New World, takes issue with Ovando’s tactics at Yaguana, describing them as “having in [his] opinion more deviousness and cruelty than a sense of justice and proper procedure” (61-2).

The “jousting game” appears in Las Casas’ *Historia* as well, but so too does the lavish reception of Ovando’s men by the Xaraguan people. This detail is missing from both Oviedo and Sepúlveda but appears in *Anacaona*. The gathering of Anacaona’s vassals amounted to such a “marvelous court of well-disposed people of both genders” that it was a “sight to see.” Nevertheless, the same event transpired; Ovando’s men, upon the signal, attacked their hosts, killing many with swords and lances, and burning others. Las Casas puts the number of murdered vassals at 80, rather than forty. Anacaona is hanged “in order to honor her” (*por hacelle honra*) as a monarch.

My readings of a sampling of contemporary Spanish sources exposes the evasiveness of the historical truth of Anacaona’s life and death. What can we know about

Anacaona besides what has been written by *cronistas* like Oviedo or well-meaning patrons like Las Casas? She enters into a narrative of Caribbean history at the moment in which she is destined to disappear. Like Hartman's paradigmatic figures of Venus, or Spivak's nameless Rani of Sirmur, Anacaona's is an absence whose voicelessness in the historical archive resists our attempts to give her a presence in the now of our political present. Hers is a tragic story because it cannot be avoided; she must die so that the distinction between the *prehistory* of the pre-Columbian Caribbean and its unfinished *history of the present* can begin. Native dispossession is what animates this temporal distinction between terra nullius and civilization; it is the unfinished prelude to our modernity. Her death figures in the *grand récit* of Columbus' 'discovery' that has imposed a particular narrative of the past (history 2) as the past itself, as the dominant paradigm through which past events are stitched together with meaning. When we write stories of Caonabo, Anacaona, Bohéchio, Guakaganarik, Manicatex, Mayobanex, Guarionex, Cotubanama — any of the caciques of Haiti, we cannot outrun the inevitability of their deaths, the impossible dualism of their pressingly meaningful but statistically meaningless murders by Spanish conquerors in search of gold and glory. Even if we were to write speculative stories of their survival, the 'truth' haunts whatever we might imagine. Such is a tragic reading of our present, marooned in a world opened up by the 'discovery' and secured with millions of unaccountable deaths.

It is told that, in the void left open by Native disappearance, black life in the New World takes shape. But how does such a rationalization, ever repeated in narratives of black and Native solidarities render the European perspective the authoritative one? To put it another way, is there a way to divest the European narrative of New World colonization,

its *imitation* (history 2) from the power that establishes it as the only meaningful narrative, as *what happened* (history 1)? Métellus seeks out such a historiography in *Anacaona*'s references to African slaves running for the hills of Hispaniola. Marronnage forms the bridge between black slave and Native colonisé. While the story of marronnage in the New World is almost as old as the 'discovery' itself, Métellus conditions it as a black invention that reaches the Natives too late. The effect is a solidarity that speaks directly to a present marked by Native absence and in which Haitian identity is constructed principally from narratives of revolution and its tragic aftermaths. In such a vision, the disappearance of Taíno Hispaniola necessarily preconditions the emergence of Black Haiti.

"Africa has come"

At the play's close, once Anacaona's death has been reported to the audience by "The Indian," we are left with only the figure of Yaquimex on stage. As I mentioned above, Yaquimex is one of Métellus' invented characters, functioning as Anacaona's new advisor after Caonabo's capture. The figure also appears in Métellus' last historical play, *Henri le cacique* (2005). There, Yaquimex is the true name of the real-life cacique Enriquillo (Henri in French), whose relationship to Anacaona has been a subject of scholarly debate for decades¹⁷. Yaquimex seems to be Métellus' way of situating his own family history into the events of the Taíno genocide. The name *Yaquimex* is likely derived from the Taíno name for Métellus' hometown Jacmel (*Yaquimel*), with the addition of the *-ex* suffix found in the names of other Arawak men. Métellus has written extensively elsewhere about Jacmel in other works, including in the novel *Jacmel au crépuscule* (1981) and in the final

canto of *Rhapsodie pour Hispaniola* (2015). This final song, “Colomb à Jacmel,” considers Columbus’ stopover in the bay of Jacmel while waiting out a storm.

The coincidence of Caonabo’s capture and eventual death at sea and Yaquimex’s occupation of the former’s position at court signals a political paradigm shift in *Anacaona*. With Caonabo and the failed campaign at the Vega Real goes the dream of a successful expulsion of the Spaniards. Hispaniola had lost too many of her sons to put up a substantial fight against a better armed and better funded military power such as Spain. Yaquimex’ alternative to expulsion is a state of perpetual war in marronnage. By taking to the mountains, Yaquimex intends for Anacaona to establish a new kingdom in heights of Hispaniola’s mountains. He associates this tactic with the enslaved Africans whom the Spanish bring to Hispaniola to work the gold mines:

YAQUIMEX — Some black men have arrived in the country, brought here by the Spaniards to cultivate the land because our brothers are now so few in number

ALTABEIRA — They work much, from dawn to dusk and dusk to dawn
And what frightens me is that they sing while working

YAQUIMEX — Many of them have already reached the mountains

ALTABEIRA — The Spaniards whip and beat them
They seem stronger than us

ANACAONA — Are there many of them?

YAQUIMEX — They are now in Marien, Magua and Maguana
Where there are practically no more Indians

ANACAONA — Where are they from?

YAQUIMEX — A country called Africa

ANACAONA — Ayti is no longer ours! (81-2)
Like all the events in *Anacaona*, the introduction of African slaves occurs offstage.

Never do we see these “black men” nor hear from them. They occupy a spectral role in the

play, akin to figures like Columbus, the ‘naive’ cacique Guakanagarik who first welcomed Columbus to Hispaniola, “the great” Las Casas, Higuenamota, Anacaona’s daughter with Caonabo, and Fernando Ghevara, the man to whom Higuenamota is engaged, against the blessings of Frère Buyl. Unlike these characters, all of whom have names that have descended from the 15th century, “black men” in *Anacaona* appear unnamed and unseen. This is quite odd considering how significant the political practice of marronnage becomes in the second half of the play. Similarly odd and problematic is Métellus’ recourse to essentializing distinctions between the bodily fortitude of Africans vis-à-vis Native Americans. “They seem stronger than us,” Altabeira complains, subtly highlighting black men’s ability to withstand the floggings of their captors in ways that the Taíno cannot. When we add onto this their indomitable work ethic, working “from dawn till dusk and from dusk till dawn” and their growing numbers in lands voided of adult men, Anacaona’s lamentation “Ayti is no longer ours” is perhaps not unwarranted. These opening lines frame Africans as part of the Spanish invasion of the land, with the Africans functioning as an improved form of manpower that will eventually replace the native presence. Again, this myth has been transmitted to us through the ages; the Negro slave is “stronger” and more durable than the Amerindian, with a longer life expectancy, a greater immunity to Old World maladies, and a greater capacity for pain and suffering. Métellus seems disinterested in critiquing this myth but mobilizes it to the detriment of the Native characters. Indeed, their being outmatched and outgunned by black laborers succeeds in making the Native plight more sympathetic; but it also conditions them as weak and helpless in the face of ‘stronger’ beings, be them European or African.

When Anacaona screams “Ayti is no longer ours!” we should read it as a clear and

overt nod to the black epilogue adjoined to the native story of the Caribbean. It is a prophecy whose deepest truth is understandable only to us. Although the notion of the land ‘belonging’ now to the black descendants of African slaves might immediately strike us as dubious, especially in light of recent scholarship on the trope of Native erasure and creolized forms of indigeneity in Caribbean studies, I would not jump to the conclusion that Métellus’s double entendre in the above statement implies usurpation. Rather, it gestures towards marronnage as a shared inheritance. Today’s Haitians recognize the origins of their people in Taíno Hispaniola not only by calling themselves Haitians (Aytians), but also by acknowledging the Native origins of Haitian cultural resistance. One of these practices is marronnage, but in *Anacaona*, it is black men that teach the Taíno to rebel with flight. What are the implications of this inversion?

In this section of the chapter, I explore how this question of order and origin (who taught whom to *maroon*?) animates *Anacaona*’s description of marronnage as a shared heritage that connects black Haitians to their Taíno ancestors. I juxtapose the play against anthropological and lexicographical scholarship to explore how the histories of the word *maroon* contradicts its contemporary association with black fugitives. The implication of this conflation leads Métellus to inscribe marronnage as an African invention that might save Natives from their situation, a notion that, perhaps unintentionally, reinscribes Natives in the language of their helplessness. The history of the word *maroon* — which does *not* appear in *Anacaona*, even if its mentions are obvious — reveals a joint history of African and Native practices of tragic resistance that Métellus, through Yaquimex, prophecies as a Haitian national patrimony.

Let’s return to the news of arrivants “in the country.” After *Anacaona*’s

lamentation, Yaquimex continues describing the black men with whom he has communicated through gesticulations. Of importance in the following passage is the framing of *marronnage* as an idea that these African captives seemingly arrived with, and which Yaquimex hopes to imitate among the Native population:

YAQUIMEX — The Spanish will not get very far with these black men
They are more resistant than us
If they smile during the day and sing while laboring
At night they gather and speak of escaping their condition
They are the ones who gave me the idea
That we can fight the Spaniards
By taking refuges in the mountains

ANACAONA — But the plain belongs to us
Ayti is our land
Not that of the Spaniards

YAQUIMEX — This is true, but these Spaniards behave like arrogant conquerors
These black men, they revolt and make for the mountains with lightning speed
There, no one can reach them. (82)

This passage takes place immediately after the one printed on the previous page, in which “some black men” arrive in the country. In a motion similar to the dilation of time around Caonabo’s capture, time here is dilated to an almost absurd amount. Africans seem to arrive in the country with the intention to run away; *marronnage* becomes an African holdover, perhaps something carried with them from across the seas, rather than developed in the New World. This sense of guile piques Yaquimex’s interest. The black men tell him that “they pretend to be content until they have a good sense of the land,” singing while they work to fool their captors. Meanwhile, “they gather and speak of escaping their condition,” their fate (*sorti*) by taking off for the mountains. By refusing the conditions of their bondage and mounting a rebellion in the heights of the island, the black men give

Yaquimex the idea that another future is possible, but only through refusal. Anacaona cannot accept this alternative destiny. “The plain belongs to us:” to give it up for a fugitive life in the mountains would mean ceding sovereignty of the fertile farmlands of the Artibonite plain to the Spanish. We should be careful to see this suggestion on Yaquimex’ part as simply one of geography. Xaragua was the most prosperous, the most productive and the most fertile of the cacicazgos, likely because of its location on the large plain of western Hispaniola. A life in the mountains, where many of their crops might struggle to grow, and where the soil is likely not to be as fertile, would be a considerable challenge for a people more or less ‘spoiled’ by good fortune.

Fight, ally, or maroon; these are the queen’s options. Ultimately, she chooses to ally herself with the Spanish, and is killed for her efforts to win peace for her people. The play laments Anacaona’s decision to rely injudiciously on her charm, using Yaquimex as the porte-parole of the author:

YAQUIMEX — En route towards the mountain peaks
Our brothers from Africa are already ahead of us
The Spaniards cannot reach them
The plain has given us up, has betrayed us
Let us live in the heights
By making for the virgin and sacred mountains
Aya bombé, Aya bombé

Let us live and die as freemen
Among the locks of vines
Within boulders’ caves
Let us live near the thunder and the gods
With our brothers from Africa
Brought here four moons ago to this pitiless land
Our duty is to fight
To avenge Anacaona
And our disappeared brothers
Our bodies demand vengeance and retaliation
Bows and arrows in our hands
Spears and clubs at the ready

Little by little
 Let us march towards the mountains
 Solid shinned and agile armed
 Ready kneed and sure footed
 Let us march towards these solitary mountains
 And fight
 Let us crush the Spaniards in our path
 These fomenters of ruses
 These shouters of lies
 No longer at our knees
 Heaven awaits us
 Let the sun, the moon and the stars cover our heads
 No more tears or complaints
 Let us shout our fury
 Without taking a breath
 Let us redden the land with the blood of Spaniards
 Aya bombé, Aya bombé (137-8)

The play's salutation is noteworthy for a number of formal and lyrical features, including the repetition of the first-person plural imperative. Expressions like "let us crush," (*broyons*) "let us shout," (*crions*), "let us redden" (*rougissons*), "let us march" (*marchons*) give the impression of Yaquimex speaking before an audience of natives ready to *se alzar*, to run away. This is not the case. In this scene, only "the Indian" remains. A sole individual, however appropriately named, does not represent the remaining masses, those few survivors from Yaguana. Does Yaquimex thus speak to the audience, asking *us* to "march towards the mountain / solid shinned and agile armed / ready kneed and surefooted?" Perhaps, but would that make the audience in this scene 'Indians' by proxy? There's also the refrain of "Aya bombé, Aya bombé." This phrase has persisted in Haitian and Dominican folk culture as a political slogan against a life of bondage. Métellus translates it as "we would rather die than be enslaved" (*mourrons plutôt que d'être asservis*), the battle-cry of the maroon. The land of Xaragua has become a traitor. "The plain has given us up, betrayed us," Yaquimex sighs, but a better life is more possible nearer to the heavens.

As I mentioned above, the words *maroon* or *marronnage* do not appear in *Anacaona*. This is, in a way, historically accurate. The first mention of the term in Spanish (*cimarrón*) dates to Oviedo's 1535 *Historia*. Prior to this appearance, other terms such as *huidos*, *alzados*, *bravos* and *fugitivos* are attested in archival documents. These terms in Spanish vary in meaning from 'fugitive' to 'feral;' in Spanish and French, the word *marron* still bears these connotations¹⁸ (Arrom 50). There is little consensus for the origin of the word *maroon*; some believe the word to be descended from the Spanish word *cima* 'peak.' Others contest this as a folk etymology, pointing to orthographical confusion in fifteenth century Spanish materials that suggests against a known connection between the words *cima* and *cimarrón* ¹⁹. Another possible source is from the Arawak language. José Arrom connects it to the word *simara*, or "arrow" and notes that "when the root *simara* is modified with the durative ending *-n*, expressing a sense of continued action, *simaran* could thus be translated as an arrow set free from its bow, escaping the dominion of man or, as Oviedo wrote, 'fugitive.'" (56)

Although the word was first written down in 1535, its use in spoken language likely predates this moment. More importantly, the *practice* of marronnage is attested as early as 1502, although it is often associated with black slaves from Africa, rather than Native slaves from the Americas. In a letter that the historical Ovando sent to the Catholic Monarchs, he requests that no more black men be sent to Hispaniola because "they would run away and join the Indians and teach them bad habits, and we have never been able to capture them" (Tardieu 239). The statement by Ovando that African slaves "would run away and *join* the Indians" (emphasis mine) contradicts the play's representation of marronnage as a black invention *imported to* the New World and bequeathed to Native

Americans. Its logic inverts the mythos of marronnage as a political tactic of black life, reminding us that the practice of marronnage and the word *maroon* itself are indigenous inventions which were adopted by the black “brothers” of the Taíno.

What, then, are the implications of the attribution of the origins of marronnage to Africans rather than Amerindians? If Métellus is purposefully misreading or misconstruing historical ‘facts,’ what are his ends? As I’ve suggested above, *Anacaona* prophesies black people as the agents of Xaragua’s political and cultural survival. The play’s final lines, at the end of Yaquimex’ monologue, signal this quite forcefully:

YAQUIMEX — Dignified sons of the mountain
Show devotion to our covenant
Without fear in war
Our duty is to fight
Aya bombé, Aya bombé
The sky has thundered
The sea has groaned
The earth has trembled
The wind has bellowed
The mountains have quaked
Africa has come
Aya bombé, Aya bombé (140)

The very land itself serves as a herald for the coming of a new age in the Caribbean — but it is not one of Europe, but of Africa. The chorus of the earth’s tremors, groans and quakes announces the arrival of Africa as a savior for a land voided of her children and her peace. The grammar of these final lines is somewhat different, for Yaquimex speaks *into* the future, rather than of it. Rather than directing his brothers and sisters to march *towards* the mountain, he speaks now of “dignified sons (or children) *of* the mountain,” with whom a covenant of resistance has been made. The arrival of Africa in the final lines of the play is thus a metaphorical transition; with Anacaona dies the Native American past to the European present. From the heights of the mountains, the African future bides its time.

There are multiple ways to read *Anacaona*'s final recourse to blackness. Marie-Agnès Sourieau is quite positive of Métellus' closing invocation, claiming that "an important dimension of the mental universe created in Métellus' play is the introduction of black men into the Caribbean history beginning with the Indian tragedy." "Faced with the passivity of the desperate Indians," she continues "black men handle the situation themselves," adopting the "positive role of the necessary and indispensable saviors of the land" ("Mythe," 130). María Isabel Barros Blanco is similarly optimistic, writing that "black men, fleeing for the mountains in order to prepare the war against the domination of the Spaniards, symbolize the hope for liberation," figuring in the play a "form of redemption for the Indians and the hope to live and live on in the memories of men and in history itself" (700). Helmtrud Rumpf is of a similar opinion to Sourieau and Blanco, writing that "Indian heritage only survives through the actions of black men, namely the black maroons (*nègres maroons*) with whom the last indigenous survivors united." *Anacaona* and Caonabo continue to live on in Haitian folk culture where "in stories, songs and paintings, an image of Indian ancestors is transported to the present" (231-2). For these critics, the Taíno form part of the Haitian ancestral canon and thus endure in Haitian folk culture. Their stories, their lives are the inspirations for works like *Anacaona*.

Other scholars are more critical of the political significance of Métellus' prophetic transition from red to black. Carla Fratta writes that Métellus "attributes to black men the initiative of organizing a rebellion against the Spanish and redressing the wrongs suffered by the Indians," highlighting the "almost providential" coincidence of the arrival of black men and *Anacaona*'s execution around roughly the same time. "The savior role attributed to black men is evident," Fratta declares, "and so too is a sort of subordination of the

Indians to black men” within the final scenes of the play. Fratta’s critiques resonate with those of Shona Jackson, who takes issue with the epistemological significance of the discourse of indigenous extinction, despite “a growing body of work in the academy and the ongoing efforts of indigenous groups in the Caribbean.” The myth of indigenous extinction in the insular Caribbean, despite the “continuing and continuous presence” of Native peoples in Caribbean societies, has become pandemic to the region, particularly on the mainland, where Indigenous populations live on in large numbers and often without access to state resources. Symbolically, the pervasive concept of extinction “is a realization of a dialectic of being in the postcolonial period that remains Hegelian and in which Indigenous peoples are made to *work* for Creole social being and political sovereignty” in the wake of historical dispossession (532). In black Caribbean literature, these dynamics sometimes manifest as the sovereign claims of creoles to the land bequeathed to them by their indigenous ancestors, a critique that secures the meaningfulness of Native genocide in creole rights to land and identity. The result is, as Fratta presumes, a kind of necessary epistemological violence which Métellus does not entirely escape, especially at the close of *Anacaona*, when the transition from American past to African future is all but willful.

My take is somewhere in the middle of both of these ‘camps.’ While I acknowledge that there is, perhaps, no means of *indigenizing* black Caribbean identity without in some way coming into conflict with the fact of Native dispossession as its necessary precondition, I also acknowledge that the distinctions between entrenched racial categories in the present betrays the complicated *longue durée* of acculturation and *métissage* which might authorize black claims of Native descent, be them tangible or imagined. I take

Métellus seriously when he claims Anacaona as an ancestor. He attested in an interview with Christian Leblé that his mother's family descends from Anacaona's line. Her roots are in Léogâne, the site of Anacaona's presumed court (Yaguana). While we might view such claims to noble descent with a degree of skepticism, I wonder what such an urge to disbelieve might insinuate about the entrenched nature of modern racial categories. Why is it absurd or unbelievable for a Black Haitian man to have an Arawak queen for an ancestor? What is not important is the *truth* of this claim, as such a truth is likely not easily verifiable. After all, where are Anacaona's remains? Rather, the story of noble descent, connecting black Haitians to the Native ancestors in time and space, is more important than the physical truths of such connections.

Nevertheless, the play's recourse to naturalized distinctions between Natives and black men, and its final transition from Native 'Ayti' to a Black 'Haiti' calls into question *how* the memory of Native dispossession and genocide functions rhetorically in the play. If we are to see Haitian history as a series of recurring tragedies, as Métellus insinuates through his overlaying of Caonabo with the figure of Toussaint Louverture, and the execution of the poet-monarch Anacaona with the exile of many of Haiti's most prominent writers and intellectuals (Métellus included) under the Duvalier regimes, what, then, does *marronnage* as a dual inheritance signify within a historical world in which slavery and dispossession are not the only yokes to be endured? Indeed, how does one maroon from *this* world set into motion by the 'discovery?' Is there an outside to modernity's mutating classifications of Man, to the obviousness of racial differentiation, to the ongoing catastrophe of Native dispossession written as a perfective or inevitable events?

Métellus does not offer as any answers for these questions, but instead suggests that

answers may come in a future story that has yet to be written. “Africa has come,” he declares at the close of *Anacaona*, heralding a new era for a now-new corner of the world. But the arrival of Africa in America is not celebrated in the final stanza of Yaquimex’s monologue but lamented. As Anacaona cried at the first news of the black men’s arrival, “Ayti is no longer ours.”

Native and black pasts, imagined and lived, are tragic. Fear and pity are what animates the experience of this history for those who claim them as part of their heritage. History reveals its haunting properties when the past cannot be successfully distinguished from the present, when the events of sixteenth-century Hispaniola continue to resound in the present. Such histories are as inevitable as they are inescapable. Even when we believe ourselves to be writing triumphant stories of resistance and rebellion, of joy and levity, we do so in full awareness of the darkness which frames a dominant image of the past. Our tragic experience of history issues from the manipulation of the “temporality of action” and the incongruence between what we know about the past and the ways that we try to write histories in the language of prophecy. Yet, historical characters can never know what looms beyond the future’s horizon; they can never escape the death that has been foretold by fate clothed as history. The lamentable conditions of global antiblackness and Native dispossession in the present condition this vision of the past, framing past events in the language of the ship’s log and the conqueror’s *crónica*. What other means are there to install nonstories in the spot where the ‘truth’ resides? We are, in the words of David Scott, “stranded in the present.” Such is the tragic tonality of nonhistory’s prophetic vision of the past.

Chapter 3 : Other Moods

Irreal history

In her essay "Venus in Two Acts," Saidiya Hartman provides the metalanguage for a generation of scholars to engage in historical critique and recovery through the guise of "critical fabulation." By unsettling the alleged stability of historical narratives and reading 'against the grain' of archival materials, Hartman attempts to "make visible the production of disposable lives" in both the historical event and its reproduction as narrative. The end goal is not an act of arousing the ghosts in the archives from their slumber but "to tell an impossible story and to amplify the impossibility of its telling" (Hartman 'Venus,' 11). She takes the lead from Michel Foucault for whom fabulation questions the kinds of lives that may have existed beneath "names that no longer say anything," and "brief words which may very well have been false, mendacious, unjust and outrageous" (Foucault, *La vie*, 14-5). Fabulation requires an attention to the corrupted composition of the trace so that the ruinous nature of power may be reexamined in a new light. This process of excavation is also an act of witnessing; to fabulate calls into question the production of a discourse that enthrones the historical narrative as legitimate and enframes the past within a language of *identity*, which for the slave is also a language of *captivity*. Foucault and Hartman agree that this kind of work cannot be done entirely within the disciplinary formations of history if the grammar of historiography holds firm to "the limits of fact, evidence and archive" (Hartman 9).

By throwing the historical account into crisis, we may excise power from history and question what Michel-Rolph Trouillot argues is history's primary genre convention:

“its pretense of truth.” (Trouillot 6). It is this claim to truth that structures history’s *narrative mood*. History, in order to claim *truth*, must narrate itself indicatively; it may state *what happened* within time and space, among which people and to what end. We might call this narrative convention of historiography its *indicative mood*. The work of fabulating – of wondering *what might have happened* — swaps history’s indicative mood for another narrative modality. We might question the historical record (interrogative), wonder “what if things had been different?” (hypothetical), meditate on the uncertainty of facts (subjunctive), command others to “defend the dead” (imperative), pass on a story that may never be proven (inferential) and express a wish that may never be granted (desiderative). It is here, in the gap between *le su et l’incertain* that we are able to ask all of the questions that history sometimes cannot answer. To write a nonhistory, one must do so in the *irrealis*.

When the captive only appears in the historical record in fleeting outline, refusing to speak, or being denied a say, a new method of retelling their stories becomes necessary. One needs tact and craftiness to piece together a ruined life, to resurrect a misremembered corpse. And to what avail? Like Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak, I wonder if there is something potentially violent in the desire to “establish something like a simulacrum of continuity” between the souls of the murdered and the drowned and “the mental theatre of the archivists” who tend to the remains (Spivak *Critique*, 207)? How might our desire for them to speak only tighten the fetters that keep them bound to violence?



Figure 1: Marie-Guillemine Benoist, *Portrait d'une Nègresse* (1800). The woman depicted is believed to have been an ex-slave from Guadeloupe, named Madeleine. Almost nothing is known about Madeleine's life, and all that is known has been recounted by people who knew her. The absence of historical materials *by her* limits our ability to recount her story as a *historical subject*. The necessary recourse of writing the history of her life through the eyes of her ex-captors *reinscribes* Madeleine in the language of her own captivity.

To tell the story of a past that cannot be recollected, that cannot be written as *history*, we must make recourse to arcane tools like speculation, conjuration, and clairvoyance. The historical novelist is a medium; and like many mediums, their works receive persistent

claims of crockery. What I seek to do in this chapter is to explore the no-man's zone between "the known and the uncertain," between stories that we know and the experiences we may never recover. It is too easy to say that slaves did not write and thus were unfit historical narrators, although many are trained to believe such statements as 'methodologically sound.' What is necessary is also an attention to the *epistemic violence* that encrypts the testimonies of the slave within the language of captivity. When the slave appears in the archive as but a hollowed-out presence, the archival source evidences their transformation from *person* into *thing*. The rote and mechanical nature of this dispossession in archival materials like ships logs, diaries, bills of purchase, portraits of slaves and novels means that whenever the slave testifies, it appears in an unintelligible language. Like a tree falling in the woods, the slave who speaks but is categorically misheard might as well not speak at all. In lieu of a decryption key which might, in the process of translating, mangle even further the captive's discourse, we might also *invent* or *fabulate* that testimony in the irrealis. When the past responds to our thirst for answers with more questions, sometimes we must generate our own answers.

We might resist our urge to see the word *realist* in *irrealis* and its counterpart, *realis*; the *irrealis* is not a fantastical historiography, but a conspiratorial interpretative practice. The 'truth' is now under surveillance; what becomes essential is not "what we know" but "what cannot be *verified*." The two novels I consider in this chapter – *Dessa Rose* (1986) by Sherley Anne Williams and *Feeding the Ghosts* (1998) by Fred D'Aguiar — question slavery's "worlding" project by fabulating historical figures who appear in history only as silhouettes. In retelling the stories of a hanged rebel leader and a lone survivor of the 1781 *Zong* massacre, Williams and D'Aguiar expose how the moment of the slave's introduction

to the historical archive amounts to a kind of epistemic violence, consigning the soul to a life of prolonged enslavement that persists even after the memory of the person has faded from public recollection. In the same way that marronnage only replaces captivity with the unfreedom of fugitivity, death for the captive cannot amount to freedom if dispossession persists in the narrative texture of their lives in the archive. Williams and D'Aguiar are aware of the ways that the enslaved live on in the tales we tell about them and are attentive to the political artifice of such retellings. In penning histories that rewrite, redact, revise, and repurpose the past, Williams and D'Aguiar use literature to critique the political power inherent to history as an intellectual practice and a technology of knowledge.

the language of captivity

In both *Dessa Rose* and *Feeding the Ghosts*, the writing of history begins with the jeopardization of the event and the fabrication of narrative. For Williams, the outline of the plot for *Dessa Rose* appeared in two unrelated historical incidents; the first involved a pregnant slave who led a rebellion, was captured, and was ultimately sentenced to death but whose execution was postponed until after she gave birth to the natally enslaved stock in her womb; the second featured a white woman who gave sanctuary to fugitive slaves on her dilapidated and remote plantation. In her 'Author's Note,' Williams laments the fact that the two women didn't meet, despite the events of their induction into the archive occurring at roughly the same time and not too far away from one another. Williams traces the account back to Herbert Aptheker's *American Negro Slave Revolts* by way of Angela Davis's essay "Reflections on the Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves." Neither Aptheker nor Davis mention that enslaved woman was named Dinah, a fact that

appears in one of Aptheker's sources. The transmission of historical fact through these three texts means that whatever may have remained of Dinah's life in the archive had been significantly distorted by the time it reached Williams in the late 1960s, when the penning of *Dessa Rose* began¹. Nevertheless, the outline of Dinah's life that remained in the discourse of slavery, even if it figured as a footnote or anecdote in an endless string of banal violations, ultimately provides more than enough energy for the work of fabulation to begin. Williams charged herself with writing "a story worth telling, that focused not on slavery as an institution but on slaves as people" and excavating the various experiences, terrors, and triumphs of the enslaved who figure in the archive as fleeting images, disembodied names or rough measurements, if they appear at all (Williams, "Lion's History" 250).

Novelization also opens the door for historiographical critique and the rather 'impersonal' nature of slave narratives within the abolitionist tradition. She writes that testimonies like those of Frederick Douglass "provide fascinating accounts of escapes from slavery, gruesomely detailed recollections of the horrors of slavery, but surprisingly little about their personal lives," and that what she sought to make real for her readers was the fact that the enslaved "had felt, and thought, deeply about their fate and the fates of others." (Williams *Lion's History*, 251; 252). In a sense, Williams highlights the generic constructions of the slave narrative as counterintuitively dehumanizing, for their writers were either prohibited from engaging with their intimate lives by their white abolitionist editors or perceived of themselves entirely within the ontological terms of their chattel status. The self-effacement essential to the slave narrative as formal testimony undermines, rather than emphasizes, slave humanity. In *Dessa Rose*, testimony and technologies of

power ultimately govern the intelligibility of Dessa's lived experience, which is at once the experience of Kaine and Dorcas, two dead slaves on whose behalf she bears witness. I pay close attention to the function of testimony and witnessing in *Dessa Rose* in order to explore how the lives of the enslaved are distilled and transformed into materials with which Rufel and Nehemiah make antiblack claims to truth. Nehemiah's presence in the novel exemplifies the political dynamics of archival discourse through his attempts to 'read' the text of Dessa's person for evidence of her irascibility. His character personifies the epistemic violence that 'reduces' the slave to a thing and stands against Dessa as the novel's primary antagonist. Rufel's position is a bit more complicated, as Rufel is at once sympathetic to Dessa's plight as a runaway slave mother, transgressing the boundaries of social decorum to nurse the newborn infant while Dessa recovers, but nevertheless refusing to accept Dessa's account of the world. What Dessa says, and how she says it, offends Rufel's threatens the sanctity of Rufel's world and awakens her unawareness of the interior lives of the enslaved. To both Rufel and Nehemiah, Dessa speaks on behalf of the dead slaves who cannot speak, who figure in the novel as the slain and the misremembered -- Kaine and Dorcas.

In addition to recovering lived experience from the archive, Williams sought to address a problem in the historiography of slavery. Prior to the 1960s, black historical novels (or neo-slave narratives, as they have been called elsewhere) were few and far between. There are many conjectures for why this is the case besides the willful forgetfulness engendered by the badge of shame which the history of enslavement has come to represent in black historical consciousness. One rather simple reason that Williams notes is that the archival work necessary in producing a historical novel was also

not always feasible for black writers prior to the 1960s. She names Margaret Walker, the author of the novel *Jubilee*, often regarded as the first 'neo-slave narrative,' as an example of this structural barrier to historical fiction: "It was not, for example, until Margaret Walker Alexander had the security of a tenured position at Jackson State University that she had the time to do the research that led to *Jubilee*," before she suggests that this novel, as well as those by Arna Bontemps and to a lesser degree Frank Yerby, "presaged" the modern era of Black historical fiction writing (Williams "The Lion's History," 248)².

Despite these economic barriers to access to archives, the predominant historiographical project around slavery posed another impediment to black historical fiction in the 1960s. Much of what was available prior to the 1970s "focused on issues [...] in which the slave's voice was largely missing, his or her person treated as mute commodity," and which "issue[d] from a mindset that saw the Negro as a pawn of History" rather than a being capable of significant impact. The discourse which assigned the slave a subordinate role in the production of history remained a problem for the effective rewriting of these roles insofar as this discourse and the histories it bore stood in the way of any effective meditation on history and its violence. Added atop of this was the significant space provided to William Styron's controversial novel *The Confessions of Nat Turner* within the American literary zeitgeist, the likes of which participates, in the words of Ashraf Rushdy, in "a social project in which African American culture is both appropriated and denied its history" (Rushdy 55). Indeed, the alleged inventiveness of Styron's novel, in terms of form, subject matter and the appropriation of slave rebellion leader Nat Turner's story and narrative voice, are all in some ways addressed in *Dessa Rose* and its manifold meditations on the extractive nature of Nehemiah's engagement with Dessa's story.

Rushdy homes in on the shifting trends in historical scholarship of slavery during the American midcentury, highlighting that the metadiscursive prerogatives (and desires) of historians of slavery during the 1950s and 60s were increasingly under fire by “social activists, organic intellectuals and progressive academics” more interested in the resistance, defiance, and intimate experiences of enslaved persons. Prior to this point, the dominant history of slavery perpetuated an anesthetizing myth “based on ideas of docile slaves, documented by reference to planters’ records and outdated sociological stereotypes” (Rushdy 40).

Writing against this demeaning history, born from a methodological prescription to “ignore published ex-slave autobiographies” and other materials whose authenticity and reliability are still debated in certain historiographical circles, Williams wrote *Dessa Rose* as a response and a eulogy to the uses and abuses of history, to the violence in the archive, and to those millions of lives who are nothing more but discourse and genetic material. As Adélékè Adèèkó rightfully notes, *Dessa Rose* is a ‘theory’ novel that theorizes possibility, mourns the unremembered, and meditates on what it means for a slave to bear witness. In this regard, *Dessa Rose* constitutes a counter-history of violence.

For D’Aguiar, the novel offers the opportunity to reimagine the lost so that they be mourned and lain to rest. For him, history explicates, but literature “provoke[s] into thought” and the work of reconciliation is often “a little bit hurtful, risky, dangerous, but enriching” (Dickow). Novelists like D’Aguiar and Williams work in tandem with historians to create a deeper feeling of the phobic past in an urge to not only remember the misremembered and forgotten but, in the words of M. NourbeSe Philips, to “defend the dead.” Literature serves as a memorial function by earmarking the unspeakable event many

would rather forget in an attempt to sooth the reverberating trauma of survival. "Slave narratives written by contemporary black and white writers," he writes "took up the public role of commemorating black lives," and that the act of writing fiction "from the viewpoint of the enslaved" emphasizes the absent and discredited voices of the enslaved in history (Rice et al, 225; 226). D'Aguiar doesn't believe that books should replace concerted efforts by local governments to commemorate the dead, nor should the creative inventions of the past replace the genre fictions we call history; rather, a concert of efforts is necessary to avoid the reoccurrence of the event. The central overlapping thesis in many of D'Aguiar's interviews and essays is precisely this one: "It mustn't happen again." The work of the fiction writer, he contends, in combatting the reemergence of a world predicated by the terrors of bondage, is to attend to the lives who only figure in the archive in the irrealis: "those who didn't have their names registered" (Dickow).

Feeding the Ghosts narrates the story of the *Zong*, the fateful ship which one day in November 1781 began to void itself of 130 of its sick human cargo with the hopes of collecting insurance on their heads. D'Aguiar made the decision to retell the story of the *Zong* in 1994 during a public reading of *The Longest Memory*, another contemporary slave novel, at the Liverpool Maritime Museum. While the recollection of the event alone is enough to turn one's stomach, it is the political poetics of the *Zong's* narrative in public and historical memory that led D'Aguiar to write the story anew. He notes that the archive of the *Zong* and its crew's case against their insurances is marked by "the language of stock and trade not traffic in people," and that a story could be drafted that humanizes the captives while still emphasizing the tragedy of their disposal (de Frías, 420). Such a story of 'unrecorded memory' would contrast the "record of history in books" and give voice to the

'subjugated knowledges' of those thrown overboard. For the character Mintah, D'Aguiar used the outline of a person who managed to climb back aboard the *Zong* after being disposed, a factum that underlines the iniquity and falsity of the killing act of disposal itself; had the murdered truly been beyond hope of convalescence, one of them would likely not have been able to climb back aboard the ship. Although Mintah's life is the result of invention, the likeness of Kelsal and Captain Cunningham are drawn from their real-life counterparts, First Mate James Kelsall and Captain Luke Collingwood. D'Aguiar never comments on the meaning of his cosmetic change to Kelsall's name, nor his decision to entirely rename Collingwood's representative character. This act of misremembrance, however small and seemingly insignificant, nevertheless destabilizes the image of the historical figure and suggests an alternative series of events to *Feeding the Ghosts*' alternate history. Perhaps it is only through the backdoor of misremembrance that the story of the *Zong* might be told from the perspective of its cargo, those people whose lives were nothing more than actuarial figures, ethnic markers, and estimated ages. By creating another *Zong*, another massacre, another set of jettisoned captives, D'Aguiar refuses the hegemony of the very discourse that transformed captive life into insured flesh.

My reading of *Feeding the Ghosts* attends to the position of Mintah as a witness — both to the *Zong* massacre and to her own survival. I consider the role of epistemic violence in *Feeding the Ghosts*' meditation on the failures of human sympathy. Although the novel seems to propose Collingwood as its primary antagonist, my reading focuses more closely on the figure of James Kelsal, with whom Mintah has a prior relationship and with whom Mintah hopes to establish a bond of mutual recognition. She is ultimately betrayed when Kelsal refuses her plea and orders her to be thrown overboard and later tortured. I

emphasize this affective gulf as *Feeding the Ghosts*' most pressing contribution to the counter-history of enslavement and contend that Mintah's testimony to her experiences and her betrayal constitute the impossible document attesting to what Fred Moten terms "the resistance of the object." Like Williams, D'Aguiar compromises the historical event by injecting new matter therein and bringing our attention to the technologies of history and power which construct the presumably static and preeminent unit of the event. In doing so, my reading of *Feeding the Ghosts* poses a serious problem to the work of reconciling the ache of black history. Just as Mintah's testimony, as the necessary 'evidence' in both the fictional and historical trials, is dismissed as untrustworthy and uncreditable, so too do the black experience of history and its various modes of narration lay claim to lived experience as the basis of truth in flagrant refusal of the episteme that dictates the terms of black nonbeing

Both *Dessa Rose* and *Feeding the Ghosts* argue that epistemic violence against the enslaved and their descendants fashions the affective, legal, and ideological superstructures that condition pornotropic violence against the body as necessary elements of slavery's project of extraction and domestication. Rather than indulge a historical desire that labels both spectacular and mundane violence as aberrations from the worlds of law and human rights, I contend that the overarching role of discourse depersonalizes the enslaved and encodes historical remembrance with enslavement's deleterious (il)logics. Our inability to identify the slave as an agentic subject or to include the black subject within the evolutionary progression of Man ultimately deprives the captive of the authority to speak to their experiences as fact, producing a vicious cycle in which experience is continually subjugated and dismissed in our attempts to transform it into knowledge. The epistemic

violence the enslaved experienced not only shaped their lives as incarnate labor and excess material in the living flesh but has also robbed them of a participatory or recoverable role in history. Leaving behind very little with which we can build a picture of their intimate lives, or having their testimonies categorically discredited as ‘inauthentic,’ enslaved people experience social death both in life and its afterworld.

'Mammy' ain't nobody name

Dessa Rose begins in the subjunctive mood: with a dream. Dessa, a young enslaved woman from a plantation in Alabama, has fallen asleep after a day of interrogation by her captor, Adam Nehemiah. Immediately the scene of torture returns from the dream-memory of her life with Kaine, on her master’s old plantation; “chains rasped, rubbed hatefully at her ankles and wrists” from her prison in the root cellar (14). Like her real-life counterpart, Dessa has been sentenced to hang for fomenting rebellion while in transport from one slave market to the next. With the assistance of several other captives, one of them the Negro driver Nathaniel, Dessa succeeds in killing several of her captors but is ultimately caught, tried, and sentenced to die, but with one caveat: she must first rear the enslaved stock that she harbors in her womb. Only once the child is born and claimed may the ‘devil woman’ be killed. Her captor is Adam Nehemiah, a Northern pamphleteer who interviews Dessa as a case study for his new book, *The Roots of Rebellion in the Slave Population and Some Means of Eradicating Them*. The prologue ends when Dessa’s dream runs aground, the images of her partner and sister still visible “against closed eyelids.” Before it really starts, *Dessa Rose* initiates the reader to the profound sense of loss which shapes Dessa’s life. She clings to her memories in order to steel her resolve, answering the questions of the strange

Northerner and testifying to her experiences. "...was I white, I might woulda fainted when Emmalina told me Masa done gone upside Kaine head, nelly bout kilt him iff'n he wa'n't dead already," she narrates, meditating briefly on her mistress's dramatic fainting spells (18). Despite remaining conscious, the news of Kaine's brawl with his master profoundly impacts Dessa. "Memory stopped the day Emmalina met her as she had come out of the fields, Dessa came back to that moment again and again, recognizing it as dead, knowing there was no way to change it, arriving at it from various directions, refusing to move beyond it" (58). The act of speaking her story dredges up the deadened sensation and makes the event happen again and again with all its acute panic and dread. Her captor listens but does not hear her. The account of Dessa's narrative, provided in the inset sections of "The Darky," are what Nehemiah has "deciphered" and transcribed of Dessa's testimony, channeled through his biases, his ignorance, and his greed for notoriety.

Nehemiah's role in the novel is to write Dessa's story and thus to commit the event of the rebellion to history. Deborah McDowell and Ashraf Rushdy make note of how his name mirrors this function in two ways: he is the Biblical figures of Adam (the giver of names) and Nehemiah (the chronicler) and an avatar of the historical figure of Nehemiah Adams, a Northerner who, like Nehemiah, writes proslavery pamphlets and supports the institution of slavery, despite, at the same time, being entirely uninitiated into its banal horrors (McDowell 148; Rushdy 144). To write his book, Nehemiah gathers stories of enslaved rebels, runaways and dominicides in order to create managerial knowledge on how rebellion may be avoided. Through interviewing Dessa, a slave compelled to attack her master and then lead a rebellion, Nehemiah hopes to "trac[e] the darky's career back, perhaps to her first mutinous act" and theorize the rebellion's origin within the slave

consciousness. Thus, he reads against the grain of her criticism, listening for information which may reveal the workings of the primitive mind shuttling between servility and brutality. Nehemiah is a chronicler, and thus a historian, but his desire to theorize slave consciousness, and thus name the pathologies therein, undergirds “the Darky”’s examination of epistemic violence. In his arrogant attempts to “read” Dessa, he fundamentally misinterprets the nature of her captive experience. As he writes that experience into existence as a testament to its pathology, he also inscribes Dessa within the narrative order that first subjected her to the dishonorable life of bondage. In writing the chronicle of Dessa’s life, Nehemiah subjects her to the epistemic violence of the account.

“The Darky,” like “The Wench,” uses the form of ‘veiling’ to examine the competing claims of authority and authorship in the archive. By veiling, I make reference to WEB DuBois’s theory of double consciousness, but from the exterior perspective of the onlooker who reads the Black body within the language of captivity. Thus, the body becomes the site of a “cultural text” inscribed, as Hortense Spillers would have us believed, by the symbolic regime that reduces the African to a thing (Spillers 67). Much of the formal criticism of *Dessa Rose* focuses primarily on the first section in which the narrative role of Adam Nehemiah is to extract information from Dessa in order to fabricate a history predicated on her subjugation. By muting her claims to agency and self-accountability, Nehemiah attempts to ‘read’ the mechanics of her criminality within her testimony of refusal. Significantly less attention is paid to Rufel’s relationship to ‘veiling,’ perhaps because Rufel, unlike Nemi, experiences an ideological sea change as the novel progresses. It is only when Rufel and Dessa come to understand the wretchedness of their collective experiences of racialized and gendered nonbeing do the two women move beyond the

prejudices of their day and towards the prospect of antiracist feminism. Nehemiah, as the novel's antagonist, is given no opportunity to build solidarity with Dessa or Rufel. His narrative function is to imprison Dessa within discourse, whereas Rufel's role is to demonstrate the means by which the whiteness of the master class can be overcome through acts of mutual recognition. Rufel manages to let go of her claims to write a history of experience whereas Nehemiah remains obstinate in his authority to fabricate histories.

Much has been written on Williams parodies both William Styron's novel *The Confession of Nat Turner* and his historical narrator Thomas Ruffin Gray. Rushdy's reading of the novel takes this as a point of departure for a broader critique of *Dessa Rose* as a theoretical novel interrogating the makeup of slavery in historiography. Nehemiah labors towards the production of a document which may at once curry him monetary reward and propose a grand strategy of slave management. While Nehemiah's ignorance is on display throughout "the Darky," he still acknowledges that a book theorizing how slavery revolts may be culled will sell. Herbert Aptheker, whose book *American Negro Slave Revolts* serves as an antithesis to a document like Nehemiah's, argues that such a persistent and all-encompassing fear of rebellion led to the development of a sophisticated "machinery of control," the likes of which included the development of this contradictory iconography of simultaneous meekness and barbarity, rooted in the perceived mental inferiority and bestial brutishness of the African body (Aptheker 53). Slavery strives to correct this ontological lack by conditioning the captive African to accept their status as a living instrument. What mechanizes this 'seasoning' process is violence, but not just against the physical body; the violence of discourse plays perhaps the most important role. Within the epistemology of the captor, the slave rebellion is nothing but an irrational eruption of the black body's

primal and innate brutishness and thus a pathological problem to be corrected, if not prevented. The discourse of captivity forecloses the enslaved person to speak to their experience for it translates the language of testimony into the proofs of subjugation. This is precisely the harrowing question which Spivak asks again and again in her investigation of deconstructionist thought and the symbolic order of the postcolonial archive: “can the subaltern speak?” Nehemiah does not understand that Dessa testifies to her rejection of “the slave owner's fundamental right to exist as master,” as Adéèkó puts it, for the sign of slavish simplemindedness remains incompatible with the slave who kills “because [she] can” (Adéèkó 163). The refusal of the slave master's world is a form of counter-violence that is perhaps more deadly and contagious than any mythical ailment. Knowledge of this would make Nehemiah really dangerous, but he is too self-assured to acknowledge this key fact. In his journal, he anatomizes the events of Dessa’s rebellion, pausing when her story seems to defy logic in its simplicity:

The master smashed the young buck's banjo.

The young buck attacked the master.

The master killed the young buck.

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

These are indeed the events of the story which Dessa affirms in her words, but we are made to question her account, if only because the events seem disturbingly banal. All sorts of suspicions emerge, none of them rooted in Dessa's testimony. Immediately, the chronicler cobbles together a theory to explain the through-line of Dessa’s story. The ideas drift from Kaine’s haughty sense of self to the misplaced jealousy of the plantation mistress, to an unfounded theory of “that strain of white blood that had made the young buck so rebellious” (38). In the second chapter of “the Darky,” when narrative attention to Nehemiah's perspective is paused in order to illumine, if but briefly, a more objective

rendering of past events, we are provided with no further justification for the events. The narrator relates that "Master had smashed the banjo because that was the way he was, able to do what he felt like doing." and Kaine retaliated against of him because it was in his power to do so. In *Dessa* Rose's philosophy of power, the discourse of slavery forecloses agency for those marked as 'object,' but creates a backdoor for the slave who rejects the collar of their nonbeing. "White men exist because they did," and the verb *do* underlines the symbolic connection between doing and being and thus between agency and ontology: "and a nigger could, too." (58) Kaine rejects the imposition of nonbeing when he strikes his master, demonstrating, as Fred Moten reminds us, that "objects can and do resist" (Moten 1). "This is what Kaine's act said to her. He had done; he was. She had done also," by attacking her master and severing the social tie which prescribes her objecthood. Once this line has been crossed, it becomes increasingly difficult for the rebellious slave to revert the slave to their primal inertness. The management of an enslaved population, as Adéèkó notes, is predicated on the policing of this incredibly fine line between ideological submission and the rebellious act of refusal (Adéèkó 163). This is lost on Nehemiah, for he "fails to grasp the logic of the slave's counter-violence" by categorical denying the possibility of the slave's internal drive towards freedom.

Dessa follows Kaine's example and attacks her Master, almost killing him, before maiming his daughter, Young Mistress. Nehemiah's questions recover the discarded image of her counter-violence, transported her into the frightening desert of her subconscious mind. Unlike her Master, who laughs as he strikes Kaine down with a shovel, Dessa shrinks at the pleasure that comes with hurting those who have harmed her. "Frightened at her own response, she was almost ashamed," the narrator writes before giving an important caveat:

“but not of the deed: No. Never that, but surely it was wrong to delight so deeply in anyone else’s pain.” (58) Despite the cathartic ecstasy that may come with revenge, Dessa maintains a moral conscience hardened by the undeniable humanity of both the enslaved object and the enslaving subject. She denies herself the pleasure of righteous sadism, if only because the momentary sweetness will not bring Kaine back from death.

“The Darky” ends with Dessa’s escape from the root cellar. Nehemiah is unable to track her down and Dessa finds refuge at the Rufel’s abandoned plantation, where she promptly gives birth to her son Mony. This passage into fugitivity brings Dessa from one authoritarian to another. Whereas Nehemiah writes Dessa’s story within the language of her subjugation before the law, Rufel commits violence through the intimate discourses of slavery’s ghoulish sentimentality. Rufel’s character reminds us that the written word is not the only vehicle for epistemic violence against the enslaved and that the excavation of the civilization slavery produces should not be limited to documents which attest to social phenomena, like Nehemiah’s *The Roots of Rebellion*. What enters into the archive in written form only constitutes a fraction of a discourse's *énoncés*, or the speech acts which are understood and taken as true within an archive. Put another way, the sentiment of racialized and gendered iconographies contributes to slavery’s urtext, providing the fabric for the veil which stands between the regarding subject and the regarded object³. In Heideggerian terms, discourse is a technology that transforms the slave into a thing by revealing within them the preeminence of their chattel status while simultaneously creating the necessity within social life for a ‘machinery of control’ which will police the boundary between subject and object, captor and captive⁴. Nehemiah extracts information from Dessa in order to concoct a “fantastical fiction,” ‘occasioning’ (*veranlassen*) within Dessa’s

testimony the elements of slave criminality already inscribed by the symbolic order of the plantation (39). In contrast, Rufel leans into slavery's jaunty sentimentality, a discursive apparatus that Hartman argues "ensures submission and docility more effectively than either the whip or the chain" (Hartman 52). Slavery's sentimental discourse labels "the abject status of the will-less object" by circumscribing our ability to make sense of the slave's unknowable actions: it forms the confirmation bias that beguiles the onlooker into believing that crafted image and living being are one in the same. Perhaps it is the production of a discourse (and thus a 'world') which is slavery's ultimate aim. For Spillers, the *causa finalis* of slavery is the domestication of the slave's essence, transforming the captive's primordial being-for-itself into a self-contained *being for the captor*. Slavery manufactures the slave as a necessarily spoiled form of Man while inscribing the act of social ruination with an essential common sense; the slave occupies the vestibular position between the bare ontology (*being-in-itself*) of objects and the *being-for-itself* of human beings⁵. Such is the relation of onticidal power derived from the sovereign right to inflict another person with the mark of nonbeing.

For Rufel, the vertiginous psychodrama of slavery's discourse manifests primarily in her authoritarian claims on the image of her enslaved attendant, Dorcas. Dorcas toils under the veil of Rufel's sentimental relationship to her as a surrogate mother, and her nickname "Mammy" both performs her function and ironizes how little Rufel really knows about her. Rufel's perspective as both victim and beneficiary of the system of slavery demonstrates the complexities which are often lost in the narrative distillations of slavery as history. Williams drew the material for Rufel's character from the archival clippings of a white woman in North Carolina offering safe harbor to fugitive slaves and included her

in the novel to explore how the two historical women - the one the pregnant leader of a slave revolt in Kentucky, the other a white woman "living in a very retired situation" and harboring fugitive slaves in North Carolina — “might come together and then find a basis for mutual respect” (Jordan 286). Both women must learn to reject the discourse of slavery that casts a veil over their person, reducing them to a social form of Man. To Dessa, Rufel is like any other white woman; capricious, hateful, eternally suspicious, and envious of enslaved women, and capable of the same caliber of senseless cruelty as any white man. Throughout “The Darky” and “The Negress,” Dessa begins to disambiguate image from person and, through intimate proximity to Rufel, understand the fact that what jettisons her from the world of the living is not racial ontologies of white and nonwhite, male and nonmale, but the intricate web of social and political meanings that elide the person in the production of the political image. It is only when Dessa witnesses Rufel’s vulnerability to the sexual predations of white men that she is able to reconcile her inborn fear of white womanhood. Rufel similarly learns to peer beyond the veil of difference through her interactions with Dessa, but the degree to which Rufel's positionality as a former/failed plantation mistress animates her will to write a sentimental history of Dorcas’ life ultimately aligns her with Nehemiah as a fabricator of histories. Rufel makes claims to kinship and affection that undermine repressed knowledge about Dorcas’s person and insults black women whose claims to kinship are arbitrary ‘invasion’ of affective ties by the demands and misuses of ‘property’ (Spillers 74). In the wake of Dorcas’ death, Rufel clings to the image of Dorcas’ performance of servility and believes that 'Mammy' is not an illusion of discourse — a lie — but indistinguishable from Dorcas’ person. Through unwritten *énoncés*, Rufel writes the story of Dorcas’ life through memory and (en)frames

the now-dead captive within the language of captivity. In claiming the enslaved woman as mother — while also acknowledging the impossibility of this gesture — Rufel overwrites whatever kinship relations Dorcas' may have or may not have borne. Within the text of Rufel's sentimental experience, she warps reality and maintains a captive hold on Dorcas' person in death, just as she had in life.

Deborah McDowell makes an excellent observation in her reading of Rufel's ideological investments in cultural typologies of enslaved and free black people from nineteenth century popular culture. Her interactions with the runaways at Sutton Glen are articulated by the uncanniness between the living beings in front of her and the abject images of black people in the American imaginary. Despite having lived among enslaved persons her entire life, Rufel has never really *seen* them. What is expected is never what she receives; the anticipation of the minstrel's exaggerated "bulbous lips and bulging eyes" is met with the sobering handsomeness of Nathan's "shadowy eyes and strongly defined features" (McDowell 133). These shifts in consciousness, from imagined concepts of the monstrous black body to the vague outlines of human beings thereunder, are likely the result of Rufel's own troubled consciousness. We are made to believe that it is Rufel's "ruined" status that enables her ability to move beyond the veil of discourse. She is, after all, the abandoned wife of a conman whose slaves had fled in the months since his absence, only to be replaced with runaways from other plantations. It is perhaps her fallen status that creates the conditions for Rufel to acknowledge the structure of antagonism which separates her from the fugitives she harbors at the Glen.

A look at Dessa and Rufel's confrontation over the name 'Mammy' may illuminate a picture of this dynamic. At stake in this pivotal scene are the rights to name another as

kin and the means by which slavery legitimates certain claims and discredits others. Interrupting Rufel's incessant reminiscing about the days before her husband had abandoned her and Dorcas had died, Dessa declares "Wasn't no 'mammy' to it," and that "'mammy' ain't made you nothing!" This shocks Rufel, who attempts to respond, but is cut off again by Dessa's declaration: "you don't even know mammy." The scene then unravels as the two women both make claims to Mammy despite speaking about different people, neither of which is Dorcas. Dessa speaks of her own mother, and the ways that her mother's relationship with her children was routinely invaded by the caprices of their masters. The chapter closes on this note, as Dessa's bitterness and anger dissolves into the anguished recital of her lost siblings' names. In this scene, Dessa's claims to her mother contest with Rufel's claims to Dorcas as her surrogate mother. The interwoven, multivocal conversation ultimately provides a meditation on Rufel's desires to fit Dorcas into a particular form of black womanhood which Dessa actively professes is a lie. "'Mammy' ain't nobody name, not they real one," she cries in an attempt to shake Rufel loose of the sentimental network that affixed to Dorcas' person the outline of the mammy archetype.

The mammy is a trope of a servile, sexless, and deferential black woman that, like all discursive images of African bondspeople, was more rooted in fantasy than in reality. Michele Wallace, in her reading of the 'Mammy' trope in history and culture, takes the lead of Deborah Gray White when she asserts that "actual Mammies were probably relatively rare" and that the power they wielded over the domestic aspects of Southern planter life were political fictions with little to no basis in the lived experience of poor and enslaved Black women. The idea of the 'Mammy' casts black women as the beneficiaries of slavery's alleged "moral instruction," producing a form of female human being defined by her

contradictory lack of sexuality and innate predisposition towards mothering, even if her own children had been stolen from her (Wallace 139). Thus, the word *mammy* comes to symbolize the childless thing that mothers, or, in the words of Maria Lugones, the object “sexually marked as female but without the characteristics of femininity” (Lugones 28). It’s no shock that Dessa, whose mother Rose had been taken from her, would take issue with Rufel’s misuse of the term. For Dessa, ‘Mammy’ is a title she cannot claim in her own mother and a role she strives to maintain for her newborn child. Slavery conditions white children to perceive black women as 'Mother' while at the same time denying black children the ability to claim their own mothers as such. Black women, then and now, are standing-reserve for roles they struggle to exercise for their own families. The enslaved woman, performs the Mammy trope knowing that her affections, even when feigned, are nevertheless being filtered into her captors, rather than her own human progeny. Images do not have interiority and thus whatever inner life Dorcas may have had is lost on Rufel, for she can only see Dorcas within the language of captivity; as the mothering thing that is the Mammy.

It comes as no surprise that Rufel is thoroughly disenchanted by Dessa’s insensitive prodding. The confrontation between the two women robs Rufel of "her comfortable, and comforting image of Mammy," but also contests Rufel's experiences of the world, of Mammy "lay[ing] claim to her affections” (147). She holds close to bitterness but is can no longer unsee the gap between ‘Mammy’ as performative image and Dorcas’s human person. She mourns the loss of her innocence, although Dessa lends her no pity. Her memory of Dorcas and the world built upon Dorcas’ subjection dissolve into the performance text of an enslaved women bearing a veil:

Mammy had not liked France. Oh, it was pretty enough, she said when Clara Carson asked, or so Mrs. Carson had reported often to her friends, when she still talked about her new slave before company, before she learned, Rufel thought with new bitterness, that it was better to have an old servant named Mammy than to have a "French" maid who couldn't speak French. Had Mammy minded when the family no longer called her name? Was that why she changed mine? Rufel thought fearfully. Was what she had always thought loving and cute only revenge, a small reprisal for all they'd taken from her? How old *had* Mammy been? Why had they gone to France? Rufel had never asked. Had she any children? (129)

This passage brings attention to the artifice of sentimental fictions. Even if the Mammy is a mothering figure, the term was applied only retroactively to Dorcas in order to blend in with social norms. The acknowledgment that having a Mammy was more desirable than the disappointing commodity of a "'French' maid who couldn't speak French" tells us a bit about Rufel and her family's fabrication of Dorcas' story. Rufel claims that Dorcas had been purchased for her as a gift for her thirteenth birthday and does not mention that Dorcas had previously toured France with her former mistress; what good with these details do, if not demonstrate, in some small way, how the uses of the slave body are at once the uses of the master?⁶

This scene highlights the recovery of Dorcas' from the living archive of Rufel's memories and a disambiguation of Dorcas' person from the image of 'Mammy' that stood between her and her mistress. The name 'Dorcas' does not conjure the same sentiments Rufel believed the two women bore for one another. Saying Dorcas' real name conjures an image of her face, but she finds "no comfort in the familiar image," as if Dessa "had taken her beloved Mammy and put a stranger in her place" (128). Slowly, the human details of Dorcas' life reemerge from the recesses of Rufel's mind: a fondness for blackberries, silkwork and the oak tree in the kitchen yard. This is all she can recall, and the "ignorance" of not knowing more about her beloved confidant, her surrogate mother, is "worse than [the] grief" of her sudden death." The intimate details of Dorcas' inner life, her thoughts

and feelings about the world and her loved ones, whoever they may have been; she shared none of these with Rufel.

Rufel leans on Dorcas for emotional support as her primary confidante; emotional labor is indeed part of the job requirements of the mammy. From a young age, Dorcas had provided emotional support to the impressionable young woman, “prais[ing] where Mrs. Carson had criticized, hugg[ing] where Rufel's own mother had scolded” (124). When Bertie, Rufel’s husband, heads North for another con and never returns, it is Dorcas who helps Rufel manage the plantation. As Michele Wallace underlines, Dorcas is in many ways “more in charge of the Big House than either master or mistress,” a plantocratic myth that does nothing but emphasize the absence of her power as Rufel’s personal possession. Without Dorcas, Rufel begins to question the nature of her relationship, for Dorcas stood between the fact of her abandonment and the dream of her family’s unity; mother, father, children, and slave. As Williams writes, “Bertie would not return. Rufel never voiced this fear aloud or even phrased it to herself. It had been unthinkable to say when Mammy lived; it was impossible now that Mammy was dead.” The transformation of the unthinkable acknowledgement of her abandonment to its impossibility in the wake of her beloved slave's death informs the degree to which Dorcas was not only Rufel’s emotional support, but an essential aspect of her emotional wellbeing. In her absence, “nothing had filled the silence where her voice used to live,” for Rufel not only grieves Mammy’s death — but not Dorcas’s — but also acknowledges that her perfect plantation life died with her.

As strongly as Rufel would like Dessa, Nathan and the other fugitives squatting on her plantation to believe that Dorcas loved her, the novelist gives us enough information to understand that whatever love may have existed between the two was structured by the

mortal peril in which the slave went about her life. In a key scene in which Dorcas dotingly mocks a pubescent and awkward Rufel before she hesitates. Rufel registers the momentary panic in Mammy as she asks Rufel, and thus herself, “May I? Is it alright to tease?” The moment of brief disquiet marks a turning point in their relationship, for “Rufel was relieved by that hint of uncertainty; it made the darky seem more natural and herself a bit more comfortable” (124). Once more Williams cobbles the voids of Rufel’s misgivings with tropes of slavish servility that exchange the organic subject for the *image* to which they have been assigned. In the adult Dorcas’ acknowledgement of her uncertain position to mock her mistress, she affirms, without speaking, her subordinate status. That Dorcas can accomplish this without the intervention of the whip only underlines the completeness of her captivity. After all, Dorcas does not abandon Rufel even when her other slaves disappear for a life of freedom. Why she sticks around is but a number of questions which *Dessa* *Rose* refuses to answer.

Dorcas, like Kaine, is a hauntological presence in *Dessa Rose*, for she figures in the novel as disembodied discourse lacking a speaker. Unable to narrate her story, she exists only in Rufel’s mangled and misremembered memories of her person — no one else has known her as intimately as Rufel had and this is the true tragedy of her life. If it weren't for *Dessa*, “that uppity, insolent slut” “trying to tell [*her*] something about” Dorcas, we are prone to believe that Rufel would have entrapped Dorcas’ person within the captivity of her sentimental memories until her death. Whereas Nehemiah wants access to *Dessa*’s lived experience so that he might translate her story into the language of captivity, Rufel holds fast to the idea of ‘Mammy’ as Dorcas’ person. In doing so, Rufel exercises a typical form

of sovereignty over Dorcas' body as a commodity, but also shapes and wills an image of her person to suit her wishes. As Rushdy eloquently puts it, "Dorcas becomes both the subject of Rufel's narratives and subject to them." The irony of Dorcas' subject position within narratives predicated on her submission only drives home the artifice of veiling as epistemic violence. What really is double consciousness if not a simultaneous acknowledgement and dismissal of the obfuscated self, an inner struggle with agency and the abject images with which the world of slavery builds knowledge about black people as always already subjugated beings, commodities, slaves? Mammy loved Rufel, this is true, but we may never know what Dorcas felt for her captor. Had Dorcas seen Rufel as the child into whom she could or could not have poured her motherly affections? Was she as Rufel feared, "spiteful, bitter, secretly rebellious?" The novel offers no convenient answers. What it does tell us is that the death of Dorcas and the death of Mammy are two different events in Rufel's life. Dorcas' person dies of a cold before the novel begins, but Mammy, Dorcas' veil and alter, is killed by Dessa. Dessa does not mourn the loss of an imposed image but grieves how Dorcas was kept alive in the bondage of her mistress' mind for months after her death.

Unintelligible testimony

Feeding the Ghosts, like *Dessa Rose*, fabulates the subjunctive lives of the enslaved who could not speak by following a lone survivor figure — a Christian English-speaking captive named Mintah. The novel narrates the story of the *Zong* massacre, a grave episode in human history in which 132 Africans were thrown overboard aboard a British slave ship in November 1781. The *Zong*'s story is often told through the lens of the subsequent legal

battle over the insurance the ship's owners sought to collect on the murdered heads of their stock bound for the slave markets of Jamaica and the Americas. Perhaps like no other historical event, the legal documents of the 1783 *Zong* case captures the profound epistemic violence which both rendered the enslaved person a good while subsequently acknowledging the originary bad faith of antiblack racism in its recognition and subsequent denial of slave humanity. The commodification and devaluation of black life articulates the 132 drowned lives and earmarks the tens more who died and were discarded overboard before that fateful November night, west of Jamaica, when the killing began. The term used in the proceedings of the case, as James Walvin points out, relate the captive African to horses, for the insurance policies on the two were similarly devised; as Lord Mansfield, the judge presiding over the case, spoke in the transcribed proceedings, "if they die a Natural Death they did not pay, but in an Engagt if they are attacked and the Slaves are kill'd they will be paid for them as much as for Damages done for goods and it is frequently done, just as if horses were kill'd they are paid for in the gross, just as well as for Horses killed but you don't pay for Horses that die a Natural Death" (Walvin 153). There is little information about who these 132 men, women and children may have been. What languages did they speak? How had they been enslaved? Did they know where they were going, why they were being kept below the decks of a strange, foul-smelling ship? What did it feel like when the first of them was taken above deck and thrown overboard? What of the 10 or so who flung themselves overboard, rather than wait to be picked — or worse, live with the guilt of having survived? D'Aguiar's question concerns the 131st African aboard the *Zong*, the one reported to have climbed back aboard, despite the alleged and attested state of starvation and sickness among the enslaved. What happened to this person? Were they

returned to the sea?

The *Zong's* story haunts us in the same way that Dorcas haunts Rufel; it constitutes the limits of what may be known, crossing over into the unreal world of questions, conjectures, and whims. What we have — scattered court documents, legal proceedings, insurance claims — tell us nothing about those lost lives. We have no record of where those who survived ended up. While the *Zong* has attained a kind of historicity larger than the historical event of its massacre and case, it is also a parable of the epistemic violence which slavery engendered in the past and which persists in our present. Those unrecoverable lives, stripped bare by the bodily stigma of dishonor and cast off by their passive willingness to be murdered, are not marginalia in the history of the *Zong*, as its chroniclers and historians would have us believe, but rather the displaced and drowned subjects of the *Zong's* historicity. To shift the story of the *Zong* from the perpetrators to the slain is to do a kind of work only a novelist can for the drowned cannot speak for themselves, not even within the language of their captivity.

Readers familiar with the *Zong* story will immediately notice that D'Aguiar's retelling of the events includes a number of narrative interventions and historiographical embellishments. The first difference, occurring in the first few pages of the novel, is the alteration of Captain Luke Collingwood's name to Cunningham. D'Aguiar never provided a reason for this in any of his interviews or essays, nor is there any justification for the change in the novel's narrative material. While the *Zong* ship and its story of drowned cargo exists within D'Aguiar's narrative world, it is helmed by an entirely different man operating under similar albeit distinct motives. We may speculate what such a characterological change may mean for the novel. One suggestion is that the story of the

Zong may hold more power than the emergent fiction of its individual its crew and cargo. The *Zong* exists as an originary social text and myth whose subsequent retellings only reinforce its cultural import. This gives D'Aguiar the creative liberty to uncover personalities from the vague outlines of the faceless and nameless Africans aboard and dramatize the mass killing through the willfully imagined anguish of the ship's crew. This is essentially what Toni Morrison describes as her poetic principles when she sat down to write *Beloved*. I discuss this more profoundly in chapter 3, but Morrison admits that the archival frame of Margaret Garner's story of fugitive infanticide was more powerful than its specific historical details and narrative content. It seems that D'Aguiar operates under similar circumstances in *Feeding the Ghosts*. While many of the novel's details mirror those of the historical case of the *Zong*, suggesting rigorous historiographical and archival research on the part of the author, the narrative decision to change what we accept as historical truth intimate D'Aguiar's narrative and theoretical intention to compromise the historical event within a subjunctive universe of possibility. *Feeding the Ghosts* thus mirrors the *Zong* massacre and its case in order to expose the backwardness of its dehumanizing logics and to reimagine the story that could never be indicatively told. With narrative embellishments and narrative misremembering, the novelist designs an entire world in which the subaltern speaks but is ultimately unheard, her testimony forgotten. In the midst of a triumphant narrative or survival and subsequent ache of survival, *Feeding the Ghosts* laments the discursive violence that enframes the African as “not quite a human being” within the language of captivity. What veils Mintah and the other 131 victims is their function as goods in transport. It is this feat of human ingenuity that this novel grieves and those lives it memorializes.

It is worthwhile to catalogue some of the historical embellishments which distinguish our *Zong* and D'Aguiar's. Let us begin with the figures of Collingwood / Cunningham. This name change, although it is likely to be the most apparent to readers familiar with the *Zong* story, is not the only intervention into Collingwood's historical life; our world's Collingwood was purported to be dangerously ill during the massacre, having relinquished his control of the ship to the next in line. This normally would have been the first mate, James Kelsall — which in *Feeding the Ghosts* is written Kelsal, with only one L — but Kelsall had been dismissed from his post by the beginning of the massacre (Walvin 87). James Walvin notes that "it remains unclear who was in command of the ship" during the day the three-day killing began. He notes that control of the ship had been passed to its sole passenger, a man named Robert Stubbs, but the identity of the person who gave the order to begin the killing is anybody's guess (96). Collingwood would not survive the sickness that incapacitated him and would die in Jamaica. His log would similarly be lost and would not figure in the eventual insurance trial against the ship's owners. All of these details, perhaps trivial at first glance, bear weight in *Feeding the Ghosts'* retelling of the event. Not only does Cunningham survive the trip back from Jamaica to England, but his ledger makes the journey back with him and serves as the authoritarian document against which Mintah's written survivor's testimony cannot stand. Collingwood's oral account of the events establishes a dominant narrative that his ledger realizes his experience of the events. This is perhaps the reason behind such a name change: if D'Aguiar's intention was to compromise the historical story of the *Zong* as a narrative essential to British historical consciousness of the slave trade and its abolition, maintaining the names of historical figures while manipulating the events these figures experienced and would subsequently

represent would risk creating a conflict over the authority of the events. Rather than propose a contentious history of the *Zong*, *Feeding the Ghosts* manipulates the story so that historical fiction and fictional histories can exist relationally. In doing so, he negates the impending critique of historical revisionism in the formulation of a subjunctive history of uncertain credibility. This literary artifice calls into question the clamorous authority of the written document that yields history and thus constructs a story in which the subterfuge of archival power is laid bare in the form of history's violent excesses.

The survival of the ship's ledger plays an important role in the second portion of the novel, which follows the trial. Cunningham's ledger is a principle means of his characterization, present in all scenes in which he figures as the repository of the ship's memories and an archival technology of the inevitable culling. D'Aguiar not only rediscovers the lost log of the *Zong* in his retelling, but also emphasizes the ledger's purpose as a technology of epistemic violence. It bears a quality of "honesty," fastidiously documenting the disposal of each and every slave despite the captain's attempts to "disguise the exact circumstances" of their demises (97). It crafts a legible narrative of the tragic events by willing into and out of existence the bits of information that make the "necessity" of the *Zong* massacre tangible through what Wendy Walters calls its "multiple and accretive" powers to warp reality and spawn histories (Walters 101). This evidence, of course, excludes the human navigational errors that led the *Zong* to wander leagues beyond its target in Jamaica or the degree to which the enslaved thrown overboard were truly sick and not just picked at random. Nevertheless, what is unsaid can only be speculated and thus can never be declared as fact. The ledger transforms what is written into a narrative of the event, dismissing, and drowning the subjugated knowledges whose elimination

legitimizes its unequivocal status as 'truth.' It is clear that Cunningham's "scrupulous" recording of the events on the *Zong* serves the proleptic purpose of contesting the claims by the representatives of the ship's insurers that his decision to cull the ship's stock was indeed one of 'necessity.' The document's primary purpose as an archival technology is to attest to the dire circumstances aboard the slave ship, but it also plays the secondary role of erasing Mintah. The fact of her existence as an able-bodied slave thrown overboard for her rebelliousness and sold into slavery once she was discovered to have climbed back onboard would jeopardize the entire trial. With the stroke of a pen, Cunningham blots out her life.

In contrast to Collingwood / Cunningham, the figure of First Mate James Kelsall remains mostly intact. Why? As I mentioned before, there is only a typographical distinction between the James Kelsall of our world and the James Kelsal of *Feeding the Ghosts*. Kelsal's role as first mate and his insubordination against the captain are identical in *Feeding the Ghosts*, but his relationship with Mintah is a D'Aguiar's invention. It is mainly the connection between Mintah and Kelsal that animates *Feeding the Ghosts*' critique of slavery and its disruption of an (albeit optimistic) human capacity for compassion. His unwillingness to answer Mintah's calls for mutual respect is the origin of the novel's central drama. Kelsal had once been taken care of by Mintah when he was found febrile and delirious on the African coast after a shipwreck. Though he doesn't remember much of his time among the natives in the Danish mission, he maintains a memory of Mintah and the destroyed mission in an interred portion of his mind. "Mintah was his past," D'Aguiar narrates, "Not his way of walking into his future." The choice to integrate the story of Kelsal's story into Mintah's underlines the novel's thesis on the

limitations of compassion. Our world's Kelsall was one of two eyewitnesses who gave testimonies at the civil trial, and he claimed to have at first objected to the plan, although he would inevitably consent to and actively participate in the plot, like D'Aguiar's Kelsal (Burnard 2). His objections are noteworthy and more substantial to his character in *Feeding the Ghosts*, and the addition of his past experiences on the African continent and his subsequent rejection of that part of his life story leads to a failure of recognition at the center of the novel's emotional drama. Mintah recognizes Kelsal as the man authorizing the senseless killing of African captain and harasses him by beckoningly repeating his name, pleading with him to recognize the culled as more than just stock. It is Kelsal who ultimately asks the captain's permission to dispose of Mintah, rejecting her attempts to make him recognize her — and through her, everyone else — as what one of the crew called "primitive people, but still people" (16). Mintah's call inflicts Kelsal with a complicity he wishes away with the discourse of her 'sickness.' When Mintah's testimony appears at court to the surprise of everyone, Kelsal gives the following statement concerning Mintah's 'temperament:'

I admit she was not physically sick like the others, but her sanity was questionable, and once insane an African is useless as labour since he does not respond to orders or punishments. The temperament of the mad infects the others into similar disregard for authority. This was her condition when I had her ejected from the ship. In my view her mind was unsuited to a life of servitude. She would forever be a thorn in the side of authority. Her manner would spread dissent among the slaves and disrupt the workings of a plantation. (158)

This passage builds on an earlier description of Mintah's 'sickness' at the scene of her disposal. There, the captain marks her death with a "rapid, reluctant stroke in his ledger" while acknowledging that "she is not sick [...] though she is enough of a nuisance to cause trouble on this ship." What Kelsal terms 'insanity' mirrors the captain's own terms, "insolence" and "stubbornness," suggesting that a sick, disposable slave needn't

necessarily possess an ailed body. Rebelliousness among captives spreads and destroys: "Behaviour liable to fuel discontent and promote an insurrection among the slaves was the worst sickness of all" (48). In the trial, Kelsal builds a similar narrative of pathological temperament, not dissimilar from 19th century pseudoscientific diseases like "dysaesthesia aethiopica" and "drapetomania."⁷ Madness infects and infests the healthy slave, and thus Mintah needed to be quarantined away from the other captives, despite not bearing the symptoms of dysentery (*flux* in 18th century medical parlance). By marking Mintah's rebelliousness as abnormal, Kelsal also underlines the perceived tractability of the healthy slave within slavery's symbolic lexicon. A mind 'unsuited' for servitude, nevertheless, opens another door: for what is Mintah's mind suited? Freedom? Does culling the rebellious slave dislodge the prospect of further rebellion, if the act of rebellion is as minute as the rejection of slavery's world or as mundane as calling the first mate by his name? Can the mind, like the body, be broken and reshaped by the everyday excesses of slavery's epistemic violence? If we are to believe Giorgio Agamben's point that the slave is first and foremost a body owned by another — an object that both creates and is created by subjects — where does the temperament of the slave enter into the picture?

When the lowly and chronically abused cook's assistant Simon appears at court with Mintah's book, the otherwise straightforward arc of the trial is compromised. Mintah's existence jeopardizes the otherwise authoritarian narrative of the *Zong*, in the sense that her written testimony of survival contests the specious reason of the crew. "Were she indeed sick she would not have been able to climb out of the sea and back up the side to conceal herself on board," the representative of the insurers contests. "How many others like her in good condition were simply unable to seize hold of a rope in time and so were

left swimming in the sea until they drowned from exhaustion?" (156). In the wake of new evidence, all of the crewmen are asked to give testimonies reflecting on the autopoietic evidence of Mintah's survival. Whereas the boatswain and the second mate only embolden their support of the captain's decisions, Kelsal rejects Mintah again by denying that he remembered her from the Danish mission. The scene of his confession reveals a duplicity to which only the narrator and the reader have access. Juxtaposed against his memories of Mintah reteaching him his name in the throes of delirium and mopping the sweat from his brow is a lie for the official record: "I accept that this Mintah may have remembered me from the fort, but I do not remember her" (158). The insult of Mintah's call for recognition both crosses the line between Kelsal's past "among Africans" and his present as the first mate of a slave ship, but it also demands that he see beyond the legal, social, and cultural discourses which beguile the gross killing of human lives as a "necessity."

The grammar of Kelsal's statement sheds light on the originally antagonism within the discourse of slavery. Kelsal wields his testimonial "I" as a subject position, denying the autonomy of the object who testifies. When he declares that "she *may have* remembered me," he not only acknowledges that the unknowable, but also underlines the ways that her claims to truth are always already inconclusive. That modal verb *may* emphasize how Mintah's testimony is defined by its inability to assume truth, even from her subject position as a *superstes*, or what Agamben defines as "a person who has lived through something, who has experienced an event from beginning to end and can therefore bear witness to it" (Agamben *Remnants*, 17). It stands in stark contrast to the declarative mood of Kelsal's testimony: "but I do not remember her." Returning to the proper order of

things, Kelsal's choice of words, however arbitrary, articulates the distinction between statements of truth and the subjunctive conjectures of the object that speaks.

Strangely enough, it is not Kelsal who is visited by the psychic drama of betrayal, but Cunningham. As new testimonies are given after Mintah's account is presented before the trial, Cunningham is overcome with the guilt of his crimes. His momentary physical debility accelerates the proceedings of the trial, for the preceding judge, Lord Mansfield, hastens the attorneys to give their closing remarks after Cunningham collapses:

Captain Cunningham stood there oblivious to the words of encouragement and consolation from his crew. His right hand covered his eyes, his left gripped the railing around the witness box and steadied him on his feet. His body rocked as if ordered by sea water. He leaned forward to some invisible list in the building that had become a ship for him. These proceedings were the recurring nightmare of the sea as his home, and the land some figment of his mind. He was forced to share the sea with Africans. All the Africans he had ever dumped into the sea, living or dead. All were alive again and crowded round to get at him. The noise they made calling his name was so loud in his head that it became another type of silence. (165)

This passage marks a departure from Cunningham's normally unbothered disposition by depicting him as a guilty party. The trigger for this episode is unknown, but we may conjecture that the appearance of Mintah's testimony dislodges the otherwise routine legal proceedings of the trial. In an inversion of the original event in which Mintah calls Kelsal's names from within the depths of the ship, the captives, and the captain people the waters around the ship while they call his name. "The sea as his home" figures as a "recurring nightmare" and the word *proceedings* bears the double entendre of juridical

minutia and the rueful and ongoing visions of his past crimes. This contrasts his angered internal dialogue from the page before, in which the narrator writes that Cunningham had “made the sea his bed, a deck his pillow” and that “[dreamt] of the sea more nights than he recalled on land” (164). The contradictions of how Cunningham feels and how he narrates his feelings suggests a distinction between felt experience and narrative. Despite having made a career for himself as a mariner and slaver, Cunningham nevertheless bears witness to his feelings of shame, regret, and guilt.

The most stunning line in this passage is the last one, in which the psychic noise of the dead crowds the mind of the mass murderer, filling it with such a din that it becomes the background noise of slavery's world, “another type of silence.” D’Aguiar paints the architect of the *Zong* massacre as a man who nevertheless registers the human tragedy he willingly designs, underlining how the desire to demonize the excesses of slavery’s world only throws a veil over the grim spectacle of the *Zong*’s story. Although no reader is likely to sympathize with an unrepentant killer like Cunningham, the decision to depict his trauma within a subjunctive, dream world in which the jettisoned speak ultimately suggests that for the *Zong* story to be told at all, we must acknowledge how humans destroy one another through the machinations of a symbolic order of difference. Stripping Cunningham of his humanity only emphasizes an image of the enslaved past as barbaric and ignoble — when, in fact, this far from the truth.

When Cunningham collapses on the land, the lawyer for the investors "steps in to reassert the power of the ledger as primary evidence," securing the trial through a thoroughgoing disavowal of Mintah's book as a "fabrication by the insurers." (Walters 118; D'Aguiar 168) It is partly due to the spectacle of the man’s sudden collapse, stoked by the

“malice” of the insurers, that the trial ultimately goes in the underwriters’ favor; even Lord Mansfield “blinked away the water gathering in the rim of his eyes” after watching Cunningham’s traumatic episode (158). The attorney representing the underwriters, Mr. Drummond, solidifies in his closing remarks the discourse of history as always already antiblack by dismissing the possibility of an African woman's written account of her survival as the fantastical machinations of avaricious insurers. He asks a leading question to the court, ironizing its logical incompatibility within the language of captivity: “are you seriously suggesting that an African female literate in English would be bought by the captain unknowingly and concealed on his ship and he would have no inkling of her presence in a voyage of over ten weeks?” Of course, the reader knows that this statement of improbability masquerading as a question is in fact true. Mintah’s abnormal qualifications as at once Christian, literate and English-speaking (despite having grown up at a Danish mission) mark her as distinct from the rest of the African stock, but also adds to the air of civilized noblesse that marks her as ‘unsuited’ for a life of servitude. Whereas one could read D’Aguiar’s decision to demarcate Mintah's exceptionalism in both her character and her survival as an authorial flaw, I suggest we read Mintah's questionable exceptionalism as essential to *Feeding the Ghosts*’ critique of discourse.

In contrast to Williams’ thesis on the correlation between the ordinariness of the field slave like Dessa and the everyday heroism of refusal, Mintah’s exceptionalism, and verisimilitude to the European conceptualization of the civilized human only underline the artifice of race as a barrier to human recognition. History favors particular experience legitimated by structures of power and endows the favored with the sovereign authority to warp reality through discourse and thus create new temporalities, new modalities of being,

and finally, new worlds. Mintah's testimony, despite constituting a veritable counter-history, is dismissed because it is not permitted to "install [itself] as history" by nature of its "insurgent, disruptive" and insolent narrative of a life only imaginable in an alternative modality of (im)possibility (Hartman 13). Even if her story contains "details that directly contradict what the captain claims in his ledger," the primacy of the ledger maintains a documentary legitimacy over the apocryphal "ramblings" of a slave (155). It is the ledger, after all, that survives the trial. It is the ledger that bears witness to the *Zong* within its own language and then will away its fiction as historical truth. Disgruntled with Lord Mansfield's verdict in support of the ship's investors, Simon secrets away with Mintah's book and neither are ever seen again.

the autographical slave

In closing, I turn my attention to the connection between emancipation and writing in *Feeding the Ghosts*. A longstanding critical trope in African American literary criticism, popularized by the application of deconstructionist ideas on language and writing to slave narratives and the genres of literature the slave narrative form begot, centers on what may be termed the phenomenological relationship between literacy — and more specifically writing — and the sudden inability for the enslaved to accept their ontologies as chattel. In a meta-analysis of the topos of literacy in African American literary criticism, Lindon Barrett advances a distinction between writing the Black body into existence through autobiography and the categorical underdetermination of the Black mind in American culture (Barrett 439). Within slavery's objectifying discourse, this is only logical: the slave is an object defined by "the use of the body," and Agamben defines use quite generally

within a relation of practicality, rather than production: “the slave plays, in modern terms, more the part of the machinery or fixed capital than of the worker ... which is not direct to production but only to use.” (Agamben, *Uses* 11) As the “animate instrument” whose function is defined not by what it produces, but how it is used, the slave is defined by the conditions on which their body may be rendered useful to their master and thus shares their body with the master, in the sense that the uses of the slave’s body are indeed the use of their master’s. Given that this is foundation of slavery in both ancient Greece and the plantocratic New World, the slave narrative emerges as a genre which contends with the reduction of the Black subject to a laboring body via writing. The choice to give Mintah the ability to read, write and speak English distinguishes her from the other slaves, disrupting the antiblack logics that were often deployed to justify their social classification as stock. By asserting her accoutrements of Western civilization, she insults Kelsal, is labeled insolent and thrown overboard. Mintah's self-writing presents the logical impossibility that structures *Feeding the Ghosts*' critique of the discourse of captivity and the logical impossibilities it cannot name, namely the slave that speaks. As the second mate attests, "an African female who can speak English, who is thrown overboard and climbs up the side of a sailing ship and to crown it all finds the time to write in her hideaway on board! Not possible" (162). The fact of Mintah's self-writing defies explanation and are thus dismissed as fantasies against which they testify in bad faith. With words alone, Mintah is willed out of existence, murdered again within the symbolic order of discourse: her book becomes "penned by a ghost" (169). What good is a testimony that no one acknowledges as fact, despite knowing it to be nothing but? Such a book could never exist in our world and even in the world of *Feeding the Ghosts* in which the survivor/third party

speaks, it cannot be taken seriously. Like so many slave testimonies in our world, Mintah's only speaks in a subjunctive modality and thus already acknowledges, in the moment of its expression, its apocryphal status.

Conveniently, we never find out what Mintah wrote in her book. Mr. Wilkes, representing the insurers, gives a rough overview of its contents, but we are not made to believe that this is all Mintah wrote therein. In the final section of *Feeding the Ghosts*, Mintah seizes hold of the novel's narrative voice and describes the process of her finding writing supplies, conveniently, among the belongings of Captain Cunningham. She declares that she must "write everything that happens to me and everyone around me" as a mode of testimony and witnessing. Walters is right to describe the process of testifying as a kind of "exorcism," for Mintah's language around her written account suggests an inverted process of jettisoning (Walters 12). Rather than flinging overboard the sick and dying, she writes them into existence in order to purge herself of the taint of their collective *thingification*. She writes to find "a way to get what I see on this ship out of her," expelling the tragic events partial to the Crossing in an attempt, however futile, to rebuild a bond with the lost home of the continent. Slowly, as she writes, memories return of her life before captivity: she finds in Cunningham's chest "the soil I thought I would never see," "wood [...] with roots and flowers," "the river where I used to beat clothes and bathe that soil," "blades of grass [...] with dew on them" (191). Writing in the moment of captivity not only offers her a way out of the traumatic amnesia of rupture, but also testifies to her experience as the witness for those who cannot bear witness; as the incomplete *superstes*. All of this she claims to have written about in her lost account in the oral testimony of *Feeding the Ghosts'* final section, a "detailed knowledge" that has yielded not "an iota of difference to

history” (229). However, not all accounts are taken seriously. In order for certain historical accounts to be considered canonical, others must bear the mark of apocrypha. Thus, the final sections of *Feeding the Ghosts* and *Dessa Rose* return to the voices of the enslaved survivors who bear witness where others may not, who speak for the slain whose killings motivated them to defy, refuse and to kill. what is the role of oral testimony in *Feeding the Ghosts*? Does reflecting on one's surviving the Middle Passage in written form fail to illuminate the sensoria of the dispossessed as narratively void of useful information? And if so, how does oral testimony fare as a vehicle for speaking one's truth?

In the epilogue of *Feeding the Ghosts*, D'Aguiar returns us to the scene of the ghostly *Zong* with which the novel opens. The prologue and epilogue mirror one another in their absence of temporality. Rather than situate the reader *in situ*, the novelist begins from the asynchronous nether of the slave ship, inside what Edouard Glissant terms the "gulf-womb" (*gouffre-matrice*) of the hold⁸. The declaration with which the novel begins — "the sea is slavery" — also grounds its epistemological critique of slavery's technologies of discourse through its homage to Derek Walcott's "the sea is history," one of the novel's two epigraphs. The *Zong* in both worlds is a place in which "death has begun but remains unfinished because it recurs," like Cunningham's treacherous nightmares in which the murdered call out his name. The two statements — "the sea is slavery" and "the sea is history"— reveal through the commutative property the understatement at the heart of *Feeding the Ghosts'* narratological intervention: "history is slavery." The act of witnessing and testifying for Mintah, "this one-hundred-and thirty-second body" among the damned, constitutes a dead end. Her account, unlike Dessa's, does not receive an oral or literary afterlife through passage from generation to generation. Rather, the novel closes with

Mintah's death — the final death of the *Zong's* disposed cargo — in a blaze in her home in Jamaica. The deeply poetic moment of Mintah's immolation among the 131 carved effigies marks closure for Mintah's life arc, but also for the novel's meditation on testimony. Mintah's narration of the final section is not *supposed* to be for someone else but is a process of expulsion and autopoiesis through speech, rather than writing. The final lines of the novel give us a sense of interrupted closure in this regard, for writing/speaking cannot recover those lost to the sea. Existing beyond the temporality of living things and persons, the *Zong's* dead are always in the process of dying and being killed in the endless cycle of violent rupture that is the Middle Passage and the perpetual state of injury that is enslavement.

Conclusion: After history

To call oneself ‘black’ — to claim African descent — means acknowledging, in way or another, the ways that black people have been conscripted to defend their history, to prove their *historicity*. Black historical consciousness emerges from this originary condition of denigration and negation; the black historical subject does not exist, *cannot be found*, within the idioms of colonialism and slavery. Making a life in the wake of these “twin abominations,” as the Ghanaian playwright Mohammed ben-Abdallah frames it, means reckoning with the impossibility of one’s origins, of the insufficiency of language to describe historical experiences that exceed representation. How to tell the history of the dubious humanity of an entire race of ‘Man?’ Is there a means of writing history for humans whose history is always suspicious, who are constantly told over and over again that they only recently *received* history, that for them history is a *foreign* and *irrelevant phenomenon*? As I warn in the introduction, we should be wary of the easy and enticing slippage from signified *back* into sign, to confuse the ‘image of the Negro’ for the person labeled Negro in time and space, in history. Yet, we are *stuck* with this political language, with the sociological fiction of race. And in some ways, this fiction is our undoing. It maintains the stench of colonialism and slavery despite the decades and centuries between these ventures. Ours is an exhausting experience of a dubious modernity.

In writing this dissertation, I have been moved by the quiet contemplation that stands in as an alternative response to a question for which there are no certifiable or verifiable answers. In thinking with the historian and thinking *after history*, I am struck by the urge to question the silent ancestor about the experiences they do not share. It is an

invasive desire, no doubt, to pry beyond the surface of the performed and shared self to find something else, something darker, truer, and more vivid beneath the surface. It is a violent wish to ask the trauma victim to revisit the primal scene of unmaking and testify to an experience either purposefully suppressed or subconsciously repressed. I have thus far avoided the language of trauma and memory precisely because of how this project and the writers, scholars, and thinkers it thinks with are invested in a practice of painful remembrance, of reliving the enslaved past through language, through invented and recovered testimony. Ours are generations of postmemory, too; over the shoulders of our ancestors, we gaze backwards at the past while they flee towards the uneasy promises of the present. To tell black history — to think black history — means reckoning with this dualism of sufferings past and present and the prospect of brighter futures.

In concluding this dissertation, I am reminded of a passage in Toni Morrison's essay "The Site of Memory" about barriers to remembrance. In this excerpt, Morrison describes how the task of the historical writer (a position triply felt by people who are, like Morrison, "black and a woman") is "rip down the veil" for experiences black historical narrators deemed "proceedings too terrible to relate:"

Whatever the level of eloquence or the form, popular taste discouraged the writers from dwelling too long or too carefully on the more sordid details of their experience. Whenever there as an unusually violent incident, or a scatological one, or something "excessive," one finds the writer taking refuge in the literary conventions of the day. "I was left in a state of distraction not to be described" (Equiano). "but let us now leave the rough usage of the field. and turn our attention to the less repulsive slave life as it existed in the house of my childhood" (Douglass). "I am not about to harrow the feelings of my readers by a terrific representation of the untold horrors of that fearful system of oppression... It is not my purpose to descend deeply into the dark and noisome caverns of the hell of slavery" (Henry Box Brown). Over and over, the writers pull the narrative up short with a phrase such as, "But let us drop a veil over these proceedings too terrible to relate." In shaping the experience to make it palatable to those who were in a position to alleviate it, they were silent about many things, and they "forgot" many other things. there was a careful selection

of the instances that they would record and a careful rendering of those that they chose to describe. Lydia Maria Child identified the problem in her introduction to “Linda Brent’s” tale of sexual abuse: “I am well aware that many will accuse me of indecorum for presenting these pages to the public, for the experiences of this intelligent and much-injured woman belong to a class which some call delicate subjects, and others indelicate. This peculiar phase of Slavery has generally been kept veiled; but the public ought to be made acquainted with its monstrous features, and I am willing to take the responsibility of presenting them with the veil drawn [aside].” (“Sites,” 90-1)

Writing in the present of emancipation and decolonization’s *future*, Morrison questions what writers like Henry Box Brown, Frederick Douglass, Olaudah Equiano and Harriet Jacobs leave off the page. Morrison is right to acknowledge the role of “popular taste” as one of testimony’s many conventions. In some ways, the atrocities to which enslaved persons bore witness exceeded the sensibilities of their audiences; or so they assumed. The result is self-censure with a flourish. While white audiences in the *present* of abolition were spared the inhumanity of black experience in an antiblack world, black audiences in abolition’s *future* bear the weight of *withheld experience*. If nonhistory is an attempt at “reestablishing the tormented chronology” of black lived experience, it begins at the moment when the ancestor ceases their narration, either to spare us the pain of reliving horrors endured and half-forgotten or subjecting themselves to trauma’s transtemporal agony. Like Morrison, I endeavor to pull back the veil that shrouds testimonies withheld, submerged, and buried. I wonder after what the ex-slave Cudjo Kossula Lewis really sees when Zora Neale Hurston writes that he was “no longer on the porch with [her],” in Mobile, Mississippi:

"We sleepee on de ground dat night but de king and de chiefs hang dey hammock in de tree and sleepee in dem. Den nothin' doan harm dem on de ground. Po' me I sleepee on de ground and cry. I ain' use to no ground. I thinkee too 'bout my folks and I cry. All night I cry.

"When de sun rise we eat and march on to Dahomey. De king send word to every town we passee and de headman come out. If dey got a red flag, dat mean dey 'gree dey ain' goin' pay no tax to de Dahomey. Dey say dey will fight. If it a white flag, dey

pay to Dahomey whut dey astee dem. If it a black flag, dat mean dat de ruler is dead and de son not old 'nough to take de throne. In de Africa soil when dey see de black flag, dey doan bother. Dey know it be takin' advantage if dey make war when nobody in charge.

"De heads of de men of Dahomey got 'gin to smell very bad. Oh, Lor', I wish dey bury dem! I doan lak see my people head in de soldier hands; and de smell makee me so sick!

De next day, dey make camp all day so dat de people kin smoke de heads so dey don't spoil no mo'. Oh Lor', Lor', Lor'! We got to see dere and see de heads of our people smokin' on de stick. We stay dere in dat place nine days. Den we march on to de Dahomey soil."

Kossula was no longer on the porch with me. He was squatting about that fire in Dahomey. His face was twitching in abysmal pain. It was a horror mask. He had forgotten that I was there. He was thinking aloud and gazing into the dead faces in the smoke. His agony was so acute that he became inarticulate. He never noticed my preparation to leave him.

So I slipped away as quietly as possible and left him with his smoke pictures. (49) Kidnapped from his village in Yorubaland, Kossula was among one of the last African captives (*bossales*) in the United States. He was transported into Mobile Bay aboard the *Clotilda* in 1860, long after the 1807 abolition of the international slave trade. In the above scene, Kossula recounts the story of his capture to Hurston; in the process of bearing witness to what happened to him, he is made to relive his misfortunes in real-time. He stops his dialogue and is transported back across the sea to the primal scene, to the sight of the heads of his countrymen curing in the fire. The last two paragraphs of this excerpt are marked by a radical distance of the observer, who does not recount what Kossula sees, but *what she imagines him to see*. The witness can no longer withstand the effects of bearing witness; telling one's story as history triggers the acute disruption of time; the past invades the present, becomes indistinguishable from it. Spacetime doubles in on itself; "Kossula is no longer" in Mobile, but back home in "de Africa soil." Hurston fades from view as Kossula's face contorts with "abysmal pain." The result of such pain is inarticulateness; words cannot describe "proceedings to terrible to relate." We cannot know what Kossula knows. We cannot see what Kossula sees, and thus Hurston extrapolates from her

perspective as a witness bearing witness to another's bearing witness. As Dori Laub makes clear in his reading of the psychic structure of Holocaust testimony, "there are never enough words or the right words, there is never enough time or the right time, and never enough listening or the right listening to articulate the story that cannot be fully captured in *thought, memory and speech*" (85).

I've written this dissertation in full knowledge of my own thirst for knowledge about my ancestors. For generations, my family's slave past has gone unacknowledged. We are lucky to have a rather robust genealogy of my father's maternal family, connecting all of the far-flung branches of our clan to a singular couple in the nineteenth century. In the book, the names of these two ancestors are unmarked; "Father: (Unknown) Paul; Born about 1834 in Bamberg County, SC. Date of marriage unknown. Date of death unknown. Mother: Mother's Name (Unknown). Born about 1839 in Bamberg County, SC. Date of death unknown." To this couple, my grandfather's grandmother – Edith Paul — was born in 1859. Given the absence of Edith's parents from the archive, we might assume they were enslaved; although I cannot be certain. I also cannot be certain if Edith herself had been born into slavery, having been born in two years before the outbreak of the American Civil War. My grandfather was a young boy when his grandmother died in 1943. The last time I saw my grandfather before his passing in 2020, I asked about the family tree, about our seemingly inevitable history of slavery. "Did you ever ask your grandparents – or even our parents — about slavery? About what things had been like before emancipation?" He seemed shocked at my questions, although his shock almost immediately melted into concern. "No; you didn't ask questions like that. Not back then."

Our ancestors could not have known that we would one day yearn for their

testimony. Many of them left behind their writings and stories with which we, in the present, can build a simulation of the past. But what we have will always pale in comparison to what we don't. Ours is an avarice for traumatic memory, for knowledge of how our forebears managed to survive an unlivable past not too dissimilar from the world in which we now live, a world in which black freedom remains an object to be attained, despite the ostensible abolition of those "twin abominations" of slavery and colonialism.

Notes

Introduction : Nonhistory

¹ Many projects have studied the relationship between modernity, colonialism, and African & African diasporic expressive cultures. I cannot hope to give an exhaustive list, but several books I've found particularly useful in thinking through these problems are Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*; Aiwaiwo, *How Colonialism Preempted Modernity in Africa*; Kwame Gyekye, *Tradition and Modernity*; Achille Mbembe, *De la postcolonie: essai sur l'imagination politique dans l'Afrique contemporaine*.

² In *The Idea of Africa*, Mudimbe questions the logic of Africa's 'discovery' in the fifteenth century when he argues that the political apparatus of *discovery* figures within an epistemological archive he deems "the colonial library." "It becomes apparent that indeed the fifteenth-century discovery was not the first contact of the continent with foreigners," a fact that only betrays the European viewpoint of this 'fact' which now has become Africa's exonymic reality (17)

³ Ndaywel è Nziem is actually speaking about African historians, rather than what we might term 'vernacular' or folk historians. Nevertheless, the implications of historical experience as a formal aspect of the work of African history are worth exploring here: "In Africa, historians who study African history live it too, and they have to put with the consequences and the setbacks of history, in the most intimate and personal manner. That makes all the difference. Africanists [Western scholars of African history] can change their

field: if unsatisfied with Zaïre, they can try to become specialists on Senegal or Sierra Leone. They can even retool themselves and immerse themselves in another reality entirely: China, Canada, India. African historians, however, do not have the chance of such mobility. Even were they to become specialists on India or China, they still, in spite of everything else, would experience African history no less. That is the principal characteristic of African historians. They do not engage in a cult of theory. Instead, by their very proximity to the ‘empirical field,’ they tend to maintain a sense of proportion, refusing to treat theory as an endeavor of pure erudition not clearly tied to problems of praxis. The problems Africans perceive as being ‘true’ problems often are different from what Africanist scholars inform them are the ‘true’ problems (Ndaywel è Nziem, 25-6)

⁴ See Claude Meillassoux, *Anthropologie de l’esclavage: le ventre de fer et d’argent* (1986). Meillassoux describes in detail the slave’s transformation into an “absolute stranger” through processes of desocialization, decivilization and depersonalization. Against Meillassoux’s critique we might position that of Orlando Patterson, who in *Slavery and Social Death* (1985) considers slavery a structural phenomenon born from the slave’s natal alienation and general dishonor. Both scholars agree that the function of honor operates a primary role in reducing the social subject into the asocial slave, although the processes by which dishonor is obtained is different for each theorist. Work is needed to reconcile both approaches, especially in the context of African and New World slaveries, the likes of which are perhaps too often conflated with one another.

⁵ In *None Like Us*, Best writes that “the rise of *Beloved* moved the entire field of

literary studies to a central place within African American studies,” a motion that resolved “what Eric Slauter describes as literary criticism’s “trade deficit” with the discipline of history.” Black studies’ elaborations of Morrison’s project have ensured that the black Atlantic will function critically as a place to “make history for those who had lost it” while also “secur[ing] the recent rehabilitation of melancholy in cultural criticism” (68)

⁶⁶ Levi Coffin’s full description of Margaret is that she was “a mulatto, about five feet high, showing one-fourth or one-third white blood. She had a high forehead, her eyebrows were finely arched and her eyes bright and intelligent, but the African appeared in the lower part of her face, in her broad nose and thick lips. On the left side of her forehead was an old scar, and on the cheek-bone, on the same side, another one. When asked what caused them, she said “White man struck me.” That was all, but it betrays a story of cruelty and degradation, and, perhaps, gives the key-note to Margaret’s hate of slavery, her revolt against its thralldom, and her resolve to die rather than go back to it” (562).

⁷ See Yogita Goyal, “Africa and the Black Atlantic;” Paul Tiyambe Zeleza, “Rewriting the African diaspora: Beyond the Black Atlantic” and Charles Plot’s “African Aporias: Africa and Paul Gilroy’s Black Atlantic.”

Chapter 1: Dark modern

¹ See Glissant, *Poétique de la Relation*, esp. chapter 1: “La barque ouverte.”

² See Valentin-Yves Mudimbe, *The Idea of Africa* (Indiana UP, 1994), pp. 26-30; Christopher Miller, *Blank Darkness* (U Chicago UP, 1985), pp. 6-14; pp. 29-30

³ See Sylvia Wynter, “The Eye of the Other: Images of the Black in Spanish Literature” in Miriam da Costa, ed. *Blacks in Hispanic Literature: critical essays* (1977); Wynter, “Columbus and the poetics of the *propter nos*,” *Annals of Scholarship*, 8.2 (Spring 1991); Wynter, “1492: A New World View;” in Vera Lawrence and Rex Nettleford, eds. *Race, discourse, and the origin of the Americas: A new world view* (1995); James Sweet, “The Iberian Roots of American Racist Thought,” *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 54.1 (1997); Josiah Blackmore, *Moorings: Portuguese Expansion and the Writing of Africa* (2008); Herman Bennett, *African Kings and Black Slaves: Sovereignty and Dispossession in the Early Modern Atlantic* (2019).

⁴ See David Brion Davis, *Slavery and Human Progress*, pp. 231-316.

⁵ In *Slavery and African Life*, Patrick Manning writes that “the last half of the nineteenth century was the period in which slavery expanded to its greatest extent in Africa. If there is any time when one can speak of African societies being organized around a slave mode of production, this was it. For the Western Sudan, many accounts show the majority of the population to have been in slave status. Even for East Africa, great numbers of people were enslaved in this period” (42).

⁶ There is a clear division in the quality and the scope of the scholarship on European abolitionism and colonialism. Scholars of the British situation have been aware of a discursive connection between British imperialism and abolitionism since the 1960s; Philip Curtin’s magisterial account of the British ‘image of Africa’ (1964) and subsequent projects by Patrick Brantlinger (1988), Howard Temperley (1991), and Kevin Grant (2005)

have laid the groundwork for an *abolitionist* critique of British colonialism. The French situation is somewhat more nebulous; English-language scholarship by William Cohen (1980), Alice Conklin (1997) and Martin Klein (1998) constitutes a useful archive here. We might also include Christopher Miller's *Blank Darkness* (1985) and *The French Atlantic Triangle* (2008) to this list, although Miller only speaks of abolition in passing. French-language scholarship on the topic is notably scarcer, as the contours of French abolition within the *mission civilisatrice* were notably vexed when it came to implementation; of these, François Renault and Serge Daget (1985), Jean-Paul Gourévitch (2004), Olivier Pétré-Grenouilleau (2004) and Françoise Vergès (2007) are some standout contributions, although even these listings are somewhat general in their attention to abolition

⁷ See Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother* (2006), p. 11: “The lesson imparted to the captives by the grand design [of the slave castle] was that slavery was a state of death. Who else but the dead resided in a tomb? But the Royal African Company and the Company of Merchants didn't imagine their human cargo as a pile of corpses, nor did they consider these dank rooms a grave. As they saw it, the dungeon was a womb in which the slave was born. The harvest of raw material and the manufacture of goods defined the prison's function. The British didn't call it a womb; they called it a factory, which has its first usage in the trading forts of West Africa. (The very word ‘factory’ documents the indissoluble link between England's industrial revolution and the birth of human commodities.”

⁸ To corroborate these statements, which at first glance may seem unnecessarily

hyperbolic, I point to Alice Conklin and Philip Curtin, who speak to the French and British contexts respectively. Conklin argues in the first few pages of *A Mission to Civilize* that “few French citizens doubted that the French were materially and morally superior to—and that they lived in greater freedom than—the rest of the earth’s inhabitants.” Even if faith in Republican and Imperial France’s implementation of the values of the 1789 Declaration varied throughout the nineteenth century, “no one questioned the premise of French superiority upon which the empire rested, or even that the civilizing mission could in fact be accomplished” (2). Similarly, the developing image of English society (and to a lesser extent, the British society) as “not only richer but better — more devout, wiser, more just than any the world had seen before” in Curtin’s account of “British ideas and actions” lends a sense of national grandeur and pomposity to British imperialism that is reflected in contemporary cultural texts like literature and political debates (245).

⁹ “British discussion of Africa in the early nineteenth century necessarily took their departure from the eighteenth-century image of Africa. They began with the accepted “fact” that Negro Africans were, at best, barbarians who had never known civilization. They were also Negro in race. Were these two factors related? If so, what was the precise nature of the relationship? Would the racial heritage of the Negroes prevent the rise of civilization in Africa, or would their racial characteristics themselves change with the “improvement” of the African way of life?” (Curtin, 227)

¹⁰ William Cohen notes that French missionaries had at one point devised an evangelical strategy “centered on the purchase and freeing of indigenous African slaves.” The goal was to create a corps of French-trained native Christians who would encourage

the spread of European cultural values. Such a project developed in Dahomey (current-day Benin) during the 1870s. A similar project developed in Zanzibar, where the British consul charged the French with “encouraging the trade.” By injecting the markets with wealth, the French were invariably incentivizing human trafficking (269).

¹¹ Martin Klein writes of a ‘contradiction’ in French colonial policy in 1880s Senegal, where “public opinion and the increasing openness of the cities of Senegal forced Senegal to make manumission available to slaves,” while “the expanding peanut economy led to the greatest import of slave labor in Senegal’s history.” Mass emigrations into the region necessitates the development of a ‘legal fiction’ to explain the simultaneous expansion of enslaved labor and its abolition under a consolidating imperial project. The result was nominal *disannexation* that “banned [slavery] in areas of direct administration, but tolerated and protected [it] in most of rural Senegal” (75) Jean-Paul Gourévitch makes note of a similar conflict of interests in French colonial policy when he writes that “representations of the French authority negotiates with local chiefs as if slavery did not exist,” despite its status as “one of the first nations to have abolished slavery.” (Gourévitch 161)

¹² See Françoise Vergès, “Approches postcoloniales de l’esclavage et de la colonisation,” *Mouvements*, 3.51 (2007); particularly page 107 where the author writes that “the fight for the abolition of the slave trade in African and Asian countries saw to the emergence of a jurisprudence located at the border between internal and international law. It was one of the first formulations of the defamed law of our time “the right to intervene,”

whose principles were first established by abolitionism.

¹³ Patrick Manning makes this rather clear when he writes that “Slavery has been an institution common to many — perhaps most societies — in recorded history. What distinguishes Africa and Africans with regard to slavery, however, is *modernity*. The enslavement of Africans increased in the modern period, a time when enslavement of most other peoples was dying out” (27). Mbembe is also tactful when he associates the commodification of the Negro in the above-cited passage to “the order of modernity” in which the signifiers *Negro*, *African*, *Sub-Saharan* and *black* first gained their current identarian meanings. (17)

¹⁴ In lieu of a substantive investigation of the Arab slave trade and its vestigial presence in African historical discourse, I make two references to significant and underappreciated texts. Both, interestingly enough, are by Senegalese authors. The first is well-known in French, although as of 2021, it has not been translated into English: Tidiane N’diaye’s *Le génocide voilé* (Gallimard, 2008). Setting out to explore the impact of the “Oriental slave trade” which predates and, in some cases, succeeds the transatlantic trade, N’diaye’s work is a significant volume to the historiography and cultural memory of slavery within the longer history of Islamic conquest and evangelism in the Sahel and Sudan regions of Northern Africa. The other essay is Mbaye Lo’s essay “Black Africans in Arabic Sources: A Critical Assessment of Method and Rhetoric” (in Fallou Nom et al., eds. *The Palgrave Handbook of Islam in Africa* (Springer, 2020). Lo’s essay is a sprawling account of a millennia of interactions between Muslim conquerors and the peoples of sub-Saharan Africa. For Lo’s treatment of the conflation of Arabic terms for ‘black person’

(‘aswad) and ‘slave’ (‘abd), see pp. 414-8

¹⁵ It’s worth reprinting Meillassoux’s point about capacity and possibility in regard to enslavement from page 108 of *Anthropologie de l’esclavage*: “Si la désocialisation prive l’individu des rapports sociaux qui en font une personne, elle ne le prive pas nécessairement des *capacités* à renouveler ces liens. Par la *dépersonnalisation*, qui opère au sein de la société esclavagiste, l’individu perd cette faculté.”

¹⁶ ”L’accoucheuse laisse couler ses pleurs. Son amie [Eleke] lui prend la main : *Fille d’Emene, qu’as-tu de ta force?* — Ah, ma sœur, répond la matrone, *la puissance de notre mère m’a désertée longtemps. Je m’interroge sur mes décisions. Et puis, il y a la disparition de mon époux. Il ne s’est manifesté, ni à moi, ni à notre fils aîné. Ce n’est pas normal. J’ai peur...*” (49)

¹⁷ I borrow this phrasing from Anouchka Nyama’s essay on *Saison*, where she says the following: “La pratique du deuil nécessite un rassemblement collectif, un moment de communion pour partager la douleur de la perte. Dans de nombreuses coutumes du centre de l’Afrique ce moment collectif est une étape importante pour « faire son deuil ». C’est ainsi qu’à travers son écriture, Miano invitent les Subsahariens et Afrodescendants à ce rassemblement autour de la douleur commune afin de la regarder ensemble sans honte ni culpabilité ; et trouver collectivement des mécanismes pour se réinventer et aller de l’avant.” (209)

¹⁸ For more on the valences of political subjectivity in the slave narrative, see Rushdy 1999, pp. 7

¹⁹ See Meillassoux, chapter 5

²⁰ See Mbembe 2000, p. 17

Chapter 2: Tragedy of Origins

¹ Here I would like to point out my usage of the word *Hispaniola* in this chapter, rather than its Taíno names, such as Quisqueya, Bohio or Haiti / Ayti. I use the term *Hispaniola* instead in order to distinguish between the modern-day Republic of Haiti, which was named by Jean-Jacques Dessalines as a tribute to Haiti's native forbearers, from the island that had once been called Haiti or Ayti (as well as the aforementioned names). I mention this because parts of Hispaniola that now figure within the Dominican Republic were also part of this earlier Haiti or Ayti, including almost all of Caonabo's territories in Maguana. To prevent confusion between modern and premodern uses of the term, I use *Hispaniola* to refer to the island (including the land areas of Haiti and the Dominican Republic), although I do this admittedly with a bit of hesitation and in full view of its potential inelegance.

² Here I'd like to highlight some significant work on the 'death of tragedy' as they are relevant to the aforementioned point about tragedy's enduring usefulness. Among them, George Steiner's *The Death of Tragedy* (Alfred Knopf, 1961), the edited volume *Rethinking Tragedy* (The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), Blair Hoxby's *What Was Tragedy* (Oxford University Press, 2015) and Terry Eagleton's *Tragedy* (Yale University

Press, 2020) stand out to me.

³ Marie-Agnès Sourieau implicitly attaches Métellus' plays (including *Anacaona*) to Vèvè Clark's admonishment of French-language theatre on the Haitian Revolution "obscur[ing] the fact that the culture represented was then, as now, bilingual and diglossic — speaking both Haitian Creole and French, or Creole alone" (Clark cited in Sourieau, "Métellus" 61). Nevertheless, Sourieau does not believe Métellus' project involved "constructing a mimetic drama," but a vision of history "deeply anchored in the Western conception of the linear form of chronology," that might "hallow Haiti's founding myths." ("Métellus," 62). The *sanctification* that seems to happen with the French language might be critiqued here, as the connection between Métellus' choice to write in French and the capacity of the French language —as opposed to creole — to "hallow" Haitian history is both unclear and problematic. Nevertheless, the question of language in Caribbean studies, where the relative ubiquity of creole languages and the relative absence of creole literatures continues to raise eyebrows, is worth raising, if only in the form of this footnote. The decision to write *Anacaona* in French by an author who lived in France, spoke and wrote in French, and hailed from a nation which considers the French language a part of its cultural patrimony should not be controversial; rather, our attention might be drawn to the *register* of the French language in *Anacaona*, the likes of which might be a significant barrier to certain audiences, as I mentioned above.

⁴ Another explanation, deserving of further inquiry, is that Métellus is referring to a lunar calendar, in which one 'moon' would represent one lunar year. The Taíno are reported to have used a lunar calendar. In her own narration of Anacaona's story, the

Haitian American novelist Edwidge Danticat writes that “the Taino measured time through agricultural seasons and a lunar calendar” (3)

⁵ “When Aristotle notes in the *Poetics* that the plot of a tragedy must have a beginning, a middle, and an end, he is not simply calling for the mechanical temporal sequencing of the tragic action, but rather for the establishment of the terms of what [Martha] Nussbaum glosses as causal plausibility. As she notes, whether with respect to literary tragedy or real life, for the victim of suffering to elicit sympathetic identification from the witness to their suffering, it has to be shown, first, that they were not culpable for the catastrophe that befalls them, second, that even if they were somewhat culpable, the scale of the catastrophe vastly outstrips their culpability, and third, that the catastrophe has undermined the sufferer's capacity to make ethically informed judgments. It is these three elements that collectively define causal plausibility for the audience and in the eye of the one that bears witness, thus triggering sympathy for the sufferer and perhaps an active response to their suffering. And yet, in the literary representation of suffering, causal plausibility entails a number of other elements, not all of which necessarily comply with Aristotle's notion of the ideal plot. At issue are the elements of circumstance and contingency, and sometimes even of the contrast between the human domain and that of the natural world (...)” (9) See Martha Nussbaum, “‘The ‘Morality of Pity’ : Sophocles’ *Philoctetes*” in Rita Felski, ed. *Rethinking Tragedy* (Johns Hopkins UP, 2008)

⁶ Grammatical gender in the original French makes these distinctions a bit easier to notice, outside of pure context. Anacaona is told to “cease being beautiful and proud” (*cesse d’être belle et fière*) and the feminine adjectives “beautiful” (*belle*) and “proud”

(*fière*) betray the addressee of these statements. This is mirrored by the gods' command that Caonabo "cease being brave and valiant" (*cesse d'être brave et valeureux*), the adjectives *brave* and *valeureux* inflected to match Caonabo's masculine gender. This is lost in English, a language which does not possess grammatical gender, let alone inflect adjectives for gender.

⁷ By this, I mean to make reference to the distinction between the text of, say, *Oedipus Rex* by Sophocles and the folk account of Oedipus that predates and prefigures Sophocles' published (and extant) version. When we speak of someone like Oedipus or Anacaona as figures who have entered into history more as literary/mythic figures than as historical actors, we are always walking the line between the figure within the authored account and the figure that exceeds the narrative act itself.

⁸ William F Keegan traces the myth of the Carib cannibals (the word *cannibal* itself being a transcription of *Carib*) to Columbus' *Diario*, or his field journal and logbook from his first voyage. Keegan writes that "As Columbus had heard while sailing along the north coast of Cuba, the "Caribs" or "Cannibals" lived in Hispaniola. Yet the *diary* gives the impression that each new landfall was viewed as threatening to the Lucayans on board, and every unfamiliar island was the home of the Caribs. Thus, any descriptions of "Caribs" from the first voyage must be read as garbled hearsay. The peoples of the Windward Islands today called the Island Caribs were never encountered [in Columbus' first journey]. What the Spanish learned of Caribs clearly reflects the mythological beliefs of the Taínos and not a record of living people" (20).

⁹ The playwright includes a parenthetical in the middle of Hojeda's lecture of Columbus' letter, writing "Truth is, the Admiral believes Caonabo is a child, but let's move on." It is uncertain whether this line is to be read aloud as Hojeda's dialogue, breaking from his lecture of Columbus's letter, and thus offering his own opinion in the midst of his reading; or if this is a stage direction. The parenthetical appears in the text like all other stage directions, although it offers no staging instructions for the actor or the director.

¹⁰ Many of the Spanish characters are distrustful of Columbus. The figure of Roldadilla is at the center of these suspicions. This hybrid character, composed of the two historical figures of Francisco Roldán, a seditious colonial functionary who briefly established in 1498 his own breakaway colony, and Francisco de Bobadilla, the second Governor of the Indies, following Columbus and preceding Nicholas de Ovando. The historical Bobadilla was sent by the Catholic Monarchs as a judge, with the expressed purpose of investigating reports of the malfeasances of the Columbus family. The courtly rumors of Columbus's origins figure in *Anacaona* as hearsay, particularly in Act Three, Scene One, when Roldadilla's character is introduced. Roldadilla in particular mocks Columbus for his excessive and seemingly performative piety: in the midst of a battle between Manicatex, Caonabo's vengeful brother, and the caciques of Magua, Columbus "began to pray" when temporarily denied the ability to make his pilgrimage to the Royal Monastery of Santa María de Guadalupe. Whispers of the potentially Jewish "mysteries of his origin" have scandalized court; Columbus' usage of the term "Second House" to refer the Second Temple in Jerusalem also incites suspicion and, for Frère Buyl, irritation. These dynamics are more explored in *Colomb*, where Bobadilla and Roldán appear as separate

characters and the suspicions surrounding Columbus' origins are more thoroughly on display.

¹¹ I suspect Métellus to have read Nau's book for a two principal reasons. 1) Nau was Haitian himself and thus would have likely given a sense of validation to Métellus' nationalist project. As Isabelle Jezequel supposes, Métellus likely had read many of the plays and historical texts about Anacaona by Haitian writers, Nau included (170). 2) While the spelling of some of the Spanish characters differs, such as "Boïl" for "Buyl," and "Ojeda" for "Hojeda," the spelling of the Native American characters is identical between Métellus' text and Nau's history. This is somewhat odd, considering the lack of consistency for these names in both historical source materials (like Spanish *crónicas*) and historical scholarship. Included in the index of Nau's book are a list of Taíno names. One of them, which he defines as "Mother of God, virgin" is *Attabeira*, likely the source for the name of the character Altabeira.

¹² I prefer Peter Heehs' definition of myth as "a set of propositions, often stated in narrative form, that is accepted uncritically by a culture or speech-community and that serves to found or affirm its self-conception." Drawing on the modern mythographical work of Roland Barthes, Heehs' definition sheds some light on the authority of nonauthoritative texts, like the nonhistories — both literary and vernacular — that I consider in this project. If we approach myth, as Barthes suggests, as a form of *doxa*, constituting the basis for cultural understanding and group identity, we might the persistence of certain 'truths,' like that of Caonabo's 'turey manacles,' even after academic and public historians have attempted to discredit them. These form part of the *story* of the

event, even if they do not fit into its *history*. In this project, I seek to unsettle the arbitrary and admittedly porous boundary between *story* and *history*.

¹³ See earlier mentions of history 1 vs history 2 from the introduction.

¹⁴ It is difficult to say who “the Indian” is supposed to be, as the play does not include him in the *dramatis personae*. We might assume with some degree of certainty that “the Indian” is likely to be played by the same actor as either First or Second Indian, although I would not argue that these are the same characters. His name also suggests singularity. The definite article in his name, *The Indian (L’ Indien)*, distinguishes him from First and Second Indian, but his character’s appearance in the final sequence, juxtaposed against Yaquimex’s final soliloquy, does not give him significant gravitas. Indeed, he functions mainly as an emissary and an observer to the events of Obando’s massacre.

¹⁵ The events of *Anacaona* seem to take place within the span of one year. In reality, the events portrayed in the play span eleven years, beginning with the siege of the fort of La Navidad in 1493 to Anacaona’s death in 1504. Métellus provides no explanation for this dilation of years into “moons” (*lunes*). We might immediately associate a “moon” with a “month,” as the words, in English, are etymologically and semantically related. I believe Métellus might be referring to a lunar year, as opposed to a solar year, in which the length of a year is determined by *lunations*, rather than the revolutions of the earth around the Sun.

¹⁶ It’s worth noting that Martyr makes no reference to Anacaona’s death.

¹⁷ Some sources, like Oviedo, argue that one of Anacaona’s nephews, the cacique

Guaorocaya, fled the massacre at Yaguana, only to be captured and hanged sometime later. Scholars have associated the two figures of Guaorocaya and Enriquillo, arguing at times that they were the same person. Others argue that the two were distinct relatives of Anacaona

¹⁸ The historian Jérôme Froger suggests that the French word *marron* is actually far older than its proposed Spanish etymon, predating the Columbian encounter by several centuries. He attests to the fact that. “The word *marron* was already in use in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries within a context that had nothing to do with colonialism” (161). He associates the French word *marron* with medieval slavery in Southern Europe, on the latifundia at the base of the Alps. “At the end of the Carolingian era, slaves “took refuge in the Alps where they made homes for themselves by clearing the land” (163). This “first marronnage” is fascinating if only because the conditions under which the term developed — either in Alpine Europe or in the Caribbean Americas — are for the greater part identical to one another. The only difference — and it is quite the difference indeed — is that the *servi* who fled from the *villae* of the Carolingians were not typically black or brown, as was the case in the Spanish Caribbean.

¹⁹ Jose Arrom dismisses this etymology when he acknowledges that the word *cimarrón* was sometimes written down, by scribes, with an *s*, rather than a *c*. Given that these scribes at the Spanish court would have likely been familiar with the spelling of the word if the word was of Spanish origin and descended from the word *cima*, the four occurrences of the word being written *simarrón* suggests against such a correlation (Arrom

55)

Chapter 3: Other Moods

¹ In the essay "the Lion's History," Williams writes that she later learned Dinah's name, although she does not name when. She does not mention Dinah's name in the Author's Note to *Dessa Rose*, so it can be assumed that she learned this information between the publication of *Dessa Rose* in 1986 and the publication of the essay in 1993.

² In her study of black historical novels of slavery, Hazel Carby considers the novels of Bontemps and Walker as an opening gambit for new methods of rewriting the conventions of slave narratives. She contends that the formal narrative elements which defined 19th century slave narratives and their fictive descendants — escape, emancipation, and death — are reinvented by Black authors writing in the 1970s and 80s, such as Williams, Ishmael Reed, David Bradley and Toni Morrison. For more on this formal study of slave narratives, see Hazel Carby, "Ideologies of Black Folk: The Historical Novel of Slavery" in Deborah McDowell and Arnold Rampersad, eds, *Slavery and the Literary Imagination*. Johns Hopkins Press, 1989. 125-143

³ See Michel Foucault, *L'archéologie du savoir*. Gallimard, 1969; specifically chapters 1 "Définir l'énoncé," and 3 "La description des énoncés."

⁴ See Martin Heidegger, "A Question Concerning Technology" ("Eine Frage nach der Technik")

⁵ Much work is to be done on the phenomenological being of captives; what I have

done here is offer but a sketch of a sketch, mainly through oblique reference to Jean-Paul Sartre's *L'être et le néant*. I'm not convinced that Sartre (or Martin Heidegger, to whom he was responding) has much to tell us about the social dynamics of enslavement as an essential frame for a captive person's experience of the world. Nevertheless, I find Sartrean language (especially as it resonates with Spillers' own phenomenological language) useful here.

⁶ See Giorgio Agamben, *The Uses of Bodies*. Translated by Adam Kotsko. Stanford UP, 2015; particularly section one, chapter 1 "The Human Being without Work," pp. 21-23.

⁷ Toni Morrison talks briefly about the invention of these diseases within the broader discursive construction of blackness (and its pathologization) in the 19th century. For more, see Toni Morrison, *The Origin of Others*. Harvard University Press, 2017. Also consider reading the original essay in which these terms were coined, cf. Samuel Cartwright, "The Diseases and Physical Peculiarities of the Negro Race," *Southern Medical Reports*, vol. II (1850)

⁸ See Edouard Glissant, *Poétique de la Relation*. Gallimard, 1990, particularly chapter 1 "La barque ouverte." Interestingly enough, Glissant and D'Aguiar's books, written only 7 years apart, both open with epigraphs from Walcott and Edward Kamau Brathwaite.

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