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## Haiti Unbound

Kaiama L. Glover

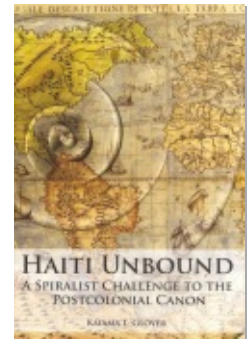
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Haiti Unbound  
A Spiralist Challenge to the  
Postcolonial Canon

Contemporary French and Francophone Cultures 15

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KAIAMA L. GLOVER

**Haiti Unbound**  
**A Spiralist Challenge to the**  
**Postcolonial Canon**

LIVERPOOL UNIVERSITY PRESS

For S. V.

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## Preface

*Such a spiral is human being! Within this spiral, nothing but self-inverting dynamisms. One no longer knows if one is rushing towards the center or escaping from it. That which characterizes the spiral is, therefore, the fact that it obeys no predetermined order and, perhaps even more so, the fact that this figure describes only one specific instance of disorder.*

—Gaston Bachelard<sup>1</sup>

*If someone needed a visual explanation, a graphic picture of what the Caribbean is, I would refer him to the spiral chaos of the Milky Way, the unpredictable flux of transformative plasma that spins calmly in our globe's firmament, that sketches in an "other" shape that keeps changing, with some objects born to light while others disappear into the womb of darkness—change, transit, return, fluxes of sidereal matter.*

—Antonio Benítez-Rojo<sup>2</sup>

First black republic in the world, first independent country in Latin America, and first autonomous non-European state to carve itself out of Europe's universalist empires, Haiti has been central to the very concept of socio-political modernity. Its profoundly hybrid people and traditions, represented over the past two centuries by an exceptionally prolific community of writers and artists, affirm its relevance to cultural and aesthetic conceptions of modernity as well.<sup>3</sup> From Indigenism and marvelous realism to the implementation of a politicized practice of Surrealism, the Haitian aesthetic tradition has been marked by a fearless capacity to imagine alternatives—alternatives that recall the revolutionary origins of the island nation and that firmly insist on Haiti's presence on a global stage. Despite this should-be centrality, however, Haiti has in many ways been relegated to the periphery of the so-called "New World"—historically and contemporarily, politically and literarily. Marked by exceptionalism, the voices of some of its most important writers have been muted by the geopolitical realities of the nation's fraught post-revolutionary history. In *Haiti Unbound*, I offer a close look at the works of three such writers: the Haitian Spiralists Frankétienne, Jean-Claude Fignolé, and René Philoctète. Interred physically within the nightmare of "Papa Doc" Duvalier's totalitarian regime<sup>4</sup> but unwilling to be silent in the face of unsatisfying creative and social realities, these



three individuals began in 1965 to re-imagine their world—the world—as a spiral. Dynamic and open-ended, the spiral—as Frankétienne, Fignolé, and Philoctète envisioned it—would be operational on multiple levels, incarnating a precise artistic attitude while evoking essential phenomena at work in every aspect of the natural world. Integrally reflective of the processes by which organisms and living systems grow and develop, the biological, physical reality of the spiral was as significant to their insular existence as to the wider world from which they were so acutely cut off. It represented a formal testament to the possibility of the infinite.

From the structure of the double helix that defines every living being, to the swirl of stars, gas, and dust that compose the galaxy, the very foundations of the universe unfold in a spiral, implicitly putting even the most dramatically isolated beings into relation. The spiral is connected, moreover, to certain region-specific elements of Haitian reality. It is present in the bands of the hurricane winds that regularly ravage the island, and it makes up the structure of the conch shell, an object that functions symbolically to recall the rallying cries of Haiti's revolutionaries.<sup>5</sup> The spiral further signifies within an even more specifically local context: it is the form that decorates the entire length of the *poteau-mitan* (the wooden post that stands at the center of every Haitian vodou temple [*peristyle*] around which all ceremonies revolve) and, as such, is an integral element of Haiti's most fundamental belief system. The spiral also explicitly informs the writing practice of the three authors on the level of content and form. It provides the point of departure from which they write the specificity of being and creating in Haiti. The very idea of the spiral recalls the foundations of the Caribbean oral tradition, according to which stories unfold cumulatively or cyclically; are relatively unconcerned with any purely narrative structure or horizontal, linear development; and are subject invariably to the frequent and spontaneous interventions of the public. The interplay of repetition and deviation at work in the spiral form thus provides a structural point of departure that decisively anchors the Spiralists' fiction in a Haitian geo-cultural space. "Characteristic of the dialectic," as Frankétienne asserts,<sup>6</sup> the spiral accounts metaphorically for the overwhelming presence of conflicted characters in their work—the zombies, schizophrenics, and oppositionally paired twins that people their narratives. Troubling also the idea of time's unfettered linear passage, the spiral allows Frankétienne, Fignolé, and Philoctète to present—that is, quite literally to make present—Haiti's complicated past as integral to and explicitly implicated in its contem-

porary circumstances. This movement of multiplied or fractured beings back and forth in time and space demands a certain style of writing: indeed, while Frankétienne, Fignolé, and Philoctète each make distinct stylistic use of the spiral, they all embrace its connotative associations with accumulation, acceleration, tumult, and repetition. From the structure of their narratives to the games of frenzied wordplay in which they indulge, all three authors consistently mobilize the barely contained whirlwind of the spiral. A delicate balance of centripetal and centrifugal forces—of opposing pressure to at once collapse inward and release outward—the spiral effectively allegorizes the tension between the insular and the global at work in their fiction. It offers a path via which the three authors have been able to universalize their creative perspective without literally or figuratively abandoning the particular space of their island.

Having made the decision to stay and to write in Haiti throughout the stifling dictatorships of François and then Jean-Claude Duvalier (1957–71 and 1971–86, respectively), Frankétienne, Fignolé, and Philoctète long remained isolated—on a very physical level—from other parts of the Caribbean. Essential to this anchoring in the geographical space of Haiti has been a philosophical commitment to avoid explicitly defining Spiralism. That is, the Spiralists' refusal of exile has been bound from the outset to a certain refusal of theoretical codification. Rather than supply a set of specific standards for what or how literature should be, the three writers have preferred “to be considered anarchists of the written ... demolishers of myths” (Raymond Philoctète 21). The extent to which the Spiralists actually make good on such rhetorical claims varies, of course. While Frankétienne, Fignolé, and Philoctète certainly insist that they are dedicated above all to the processes of challenging, questioning, and searching rather than labeling or defining, they by no means entirely resist the temptation to describe their own aesthetic and its intellectual underpinnings. For the most part, however, stylistic considerations take precedence over the theoretical, and any ideology is revealed primarily through the formal strategies at work in their creative writings. The three authors have avoided taking any plainly political stance—a position that undoubtedly reflects the many dangers faced by intellectuals in Haiti during the period of the Duvalier dictatorships. It must be noted, however, that even those Spiralist texts published after the ousting and exile of Duvalier *fits* in 1986 exhibit abhorrence for the overtly ideological. Rejecting *a priori* the notion of a literary school or system organized according to particular rules, the three authors deliberately

remain ambiguous when it comes to defining their philosophical perspective—a factor that contributes to the difficulty one faces when attempting to discuss the Spiralist aesthetic and that is responsible in part for the lack of comprehensive studies on Spiralism.

Indeed, while Spiralism has been acknowledged by numerous scholars and writer-intellectuals of the Americas as a crucial contribution—both to the French-speaking Caribbean literary tradition in general (as in Patrick Chamoiseau and Raphaël Confiant's *Lettres créoles* [1991] and Régis Antoine's *La Littérature franco-antillaise* [1992]), and to Haitian literature in particular (as in Léon-François Hoffmann's *Le Roman haïtien* [1982], Charles Arthur and J. Michael Dash's *Libète: A Haiti Anthology* [1999], and Martin Munro's *Exile and Post-1946 Haitian Literature* [2007])—it has suffered a certain occlusion with respect to regional literary canons and has not yet been accorded the attention of a full-length study. Hoffman and Antoine are among the few scholars to have proposed truly critical approaches to Spiralism, yet neither one of these theorists devotes more than a dozen or so pages to the aesthetic. In *Le Roman haïtien*, Hoffmann offers five very brief references to Frankétienne, even though the latter's first three novels were published well before the appearance of his study. Régis Antoine's *La littérature franco-antillaise* devotes no more than six pages of analysis to Frankétienne's work, makes brief mention of Philoctète, and does not acknowledge either of the novels Fignolé had published by this time. Jean Jonassaint's special issue of *Dérives*, "Frankétienne, écrivain haïtien," provides in 1987 the first instance of sustained critical engagement with the Spiralist aesthetic. As the title of this rich collected volume clearly indicates, however, the focus is exclusively on Frankétienne. Jonassaint similarly keeps the spotlight on Frankétienne in his more recently published edited volume, *Typo/Topo/Poétique* (2008). This singling out of Frankétienne reflects a tendency among those interested in Spiralism to look primarily at the most "famous" (and most famously outspoken) of the three authors. Indeed, while the fall of the Duvalier regime and beginning of the twenty-first century have certainly increased awareness of Spiralism in the academy, Frankétienne has received by far the lion's share of attention. As Rachel Douglas, author of *Frankétienne and Rewriting: A Work in Progress* (2009) has noted, "Spiralism has turned into something of a one-man literary movement, that one man being Frankétienne" (67). In addition to Jonassaint and Douglas, both of whom have very pointedly argued that Frankétienne is the most (if not the only) relevant and committed "Spiralist," scholars Rafaël Lucas and

Anastasil Makambo have likewise focused on Frankétienne as the figure-head of Spiralism. Thus far, Philippe Bernard's *Rêve et littérature romanesque* (2003) and Yves Chemla's essays in *Africultures* and *Notre Librairie* are the only published studies (all in French) that consider Figiolé's Spiralist practice, and Philoctète remains almost entirely unattended to by scholars.<sup>7</sup>

*Haiti Unbound* fills, then, a rather astonishingly empty place in the assessment of postcolonial<sup>8</sup> Caribbean aesthetics. Affirming the presence of a spiral-based aesthetic in major prose fiction works of each of the three authors, I frame my analyses here in an interrogation of the criteria for inclusion in New World traditions, considering the manner in which new centers and margins have been created in the already peripheralized space(s) of the Americas. And while I mean absolutely to emphasize the singularity of the Spiralists' aesthetic and discursive interventions, I make a point in this project to put Frankétienne, Figiolé, and Philoctète in dialogue with regional writers and intellectuals, and so to consider the extent to which Spiralism not only connects with but significantly enriches contemporary models of literature and theory in the postcolonial Caribbean. Dovetailing productively with Edouard Glissant's theory of Relation, Frantz Fanon's socio-diagnostic approach to postcolonial collective psychology, Benítez-Rojo's repeating island, and Derek Walcott's interrogation of historical narrative in the Caribbean, among others, the Spiralists' aesthetic philosophy resonates unmistakably within a tradition of regional self-creation. More a phenomenon than a literary movement, Spiralism is based in adamant irresolution. Its writers offer only explorations and interrogations of reality rather than vehicles for any fixed message; they effectively challenge the expectations and assumptions posited by many of their contemporaries. Advancing a philosophical perspective and aesthetic praxis that propose real shifts in representations of Haiti and the Caribbean, their works have the potential to redefine the way in which critical appreciation of postcolonial Caribbean literature has been constructed up until now. Given this, an examination of Spiralism demands interrogation of the circumstances—both literary and socio-historical—that have resulted in its positioning on the margins of postcolonial and francophone literary studies. I make a point, therefore, in *Haiti Unbound* to consider the relative silence surrounding the three authors, a silence that I believe sheds some light on the whole of literary culture in the French-speaking Caribbean and Haiti's place within it.

Such questions of inclusion and exclusion lead me to examine the

tensions among processes of containment and gestures of refusal, among implicit offerings of legibility and insistent discourses of opacity—issues that are at once pertinent to the particular case of the Spiralists and crucial to discussion of the postcolonial Caribbean in general. Touching, then, on the socio-political role and destiny of Haiti in the Americas, *Haiti Unbound* engages with long-standing issues of imperialism and resistance culture in the transatlantic world. As such, this project emphatically articulates Haiti's regional and global centrality. It offers “big picture” reflections on the field of postcolonial studies and close-reading-based analyses of the philosophical perspective and creative practice of a distinctively Haitian literary phenomenon. Most importantly perhaps, I advocate here for the inclusion of three largely unrecognized voices in the disturbingly fixed roster of writer-intellectuals who have thus far interested theorists of postcolonial (francophone) literature.

It is my contention throughout this study that the Spiralists' geographical isolation has in fact allowed them to develop and nourish a decidedly original and subversive approach to literature—an approach largely unbounded by the demands of the Euro-North American culture industry that so marks the literary production of the Caribbean region. Situating themselves, for the most part, outside the theoretical and academic debates so prevalent in the world of Caribbean letters, the Spiralists have quietly, consistently, and vehemently produced innovative works of fiction that push to their most radical limits many of the already subversive elements of New World literature. The three authors propose their aesthetic as, on the one hand, the humanist continuation of Haitian Indigenism and, on the other, a step toward the complete renewal of world literature, presenting first and foremost a formal revolution. While committed, like Indigenism, Negritude, *antillanité*, or *créolité* to an exploration of the insular landscape and its folk culture, the Spiralists propose essential changes to the way in which the artist approaches the re-presentation of these realities.<sup>9</sup> The three writers seek insistently to narrow the divide between the written and the lived—to identify “the exact moment when a single word might be worth more than a field of wheat” (Frankétienne, *Ultravocal* 38–39). As writers in and of a culture that, historically, has found itself significantly influenced by external models, often to the detriment of its own creative evolution, Frankétienne, Fignolé, and Philoctète have crafted an aesthetic based on the conviction that every narrative must invent its own form in order to accurately relay the ever-evolving external world. By the choices they make in their fiction, the Spiralists highlight the possibilities for un-mediated connections between

the individual and the universe—connections that in many ways transcend the at-times limiting boundaries of national and, even, regional identity while remaining inextricably invested in a rooted political ethics. Emerging from this position of committed iconoclasm and a sense of territorial rootedness, the Spiralists' works resonate with Césairean or Fanonian notions of violent, purifying apocalypse. Their writings are literary *tabulae rasae*: unsettled and unsettling spaces from which they as writers and, they imply, the postcolonial collective might be reborn—voodoo-style—as warriors.

This insistence on creative inventiveness as fundamentally expressive of (yet by no means bound to) political engagement in the particular context of an obscurantist and violent Haitian state was not born, of course, with Spiralism. Specifically, there is an unambiguous filiation between the Spiralist ethic-aesthetic and that of the Haïti Littéraire group, founded in 1960 by Villard Denis (Davertige), Serge Legagneur, Roland Morriseau, Anthony Phelps, and René Philoctète himself. The poetry of these founding members, the so-called “Group of Five”—to which, according to Phelps, Frankétienne was a “satellite”—reposes on some of the same critical and creative principles that underlie Spiralism.<sup>10</sup> Writing at once under Duvalier's thumb and nose, the Haïti Littéraire poets similarly developed a stylistically singular, oblique expression of political engagement.<sup>11</sup> As Phelps describes the phenomenon, “Creating under the dictatorship obliged us to become masters of the ellipsis, to say something without saying anything, to take recourse in metaphor. The atmosphere of terror in some respects forced us to get closer and closer to the very essence of poetry” (Phelps, online journal). What this meant on a practical level was that these young poets worked specifically to craft an aesthetic that would tell their stories without naming names. Thus, in the process of negotiating the outright danger of the political climate in which they wrote, they—like the Spiralists for whom they laid the terrain in many respects—invested in the new, the unexpected, and the oblique. As such, they demanded heightened effort and attention from readers of their works.

The Spiralists' texts similarly ask a great deal of their reader. As Frankétienne declaims in remarks that begin on the front and continue on the back cover of his second prose work, *Ultravocal*, (explicitly enfolding the narrative within), “Literary production is valuable only through creative readings, readings of which the task is to arrange, with relative ambiguity, the diverse structural elements of the work ... The reader, as invested as the writer in the creative function, is henceforth

responsible for the destiny of the written.” Calling upon the reader to implicate himself or herself in this manner effectively resists assumptions of authorial omniscience and obliges a certain engagement with the work—that is, of course, when it does not produce the opposite effect: irritating the reader (or the theorist!) to the point where he or she abandons the text altogether. It is a risky tactic. Indeed, inasmuch as the three authors construct their textual universes unbound by theoretical absolutes or predetermined objectives, they upset traditional diegetic systems in ways that undermine the complacency of the global literate—an explicitly engaged practice that continues, I would argue, along the resistance path of Caribbean anti-colonial discourse. In other words, there is a tangible politics at work in the Spiralists’ literariness, one that casts their formal innovation as defiant insistence on Haiti’s particular presence in an increasingly de-particularizing “chaos-world.”<sup>12</sup>

Writing from a creative perspective that echoes the multiple resistance strategies of the Haitian Revolution, Frankétienne, Fignolé, and Philoctète have established themselves as participants in a veritable combat with respect to existing literary conventions. They insist that every intellectual has both the potential and the obligation to put his or her exceptional creative abilities at the disposal of the collective—that, used correctly, the written word might serve as an instrument of revolt, the vehicle for a solitary cry with the power to awaken the collective. This revolutionary impulse is, of course, consistent with the stated intentions of most writer-theorists of the French-speaking Caribbean. But again, the Spiralists’ struggle takes place less in the crafting of a specifically delineated theory or movement than as a function of the narrative choices they make in their works of prose fiction. As writers from a region marked by subaltern mutism, the Spiralists consistently toy with and even sabotage the Word, this unit of meaning that so effectively stands between the postcolonial Caribbean writer and the non-reading public by which he or she is most often inspired. Their works refuse to rely on any overly specific aesthetic principles, and thus they amount to so many intricately woven webs of accumulated images, repeated sequences, and ambiguous characters among which the reader stumbles, disoriented and often somewhat ill at ease. In the rare instances in which the Spiralists venture to reflect explicitly on their creative perspective, they are interrogative and lyrical in tone, descriptive rather than dogmatic. They point out complexities without offering—or even seeking—resolutions. All three authors operate from a position of purposeful chaos. They offer ostensibly direct and unmediated access to individuals and to events,

inviting the reader to become caught up in the spiralic movement of the worlds they create. They make no attempt in their writings to order confusion, to compensate for missing information, or to provide authoritative answers—and they offer few critical guidelines with which to contextualize their creative output. It is perhaps not surprising, then, as I discuss at length in the following chapter, that Spiralism has remained somewhat limitedly appreciated as an aesthetic movement despite the fact of its significant and varied corpus—the numerous works in both French and Creole the Spiralists have produced over the past four (plus) decades.

Frankétienne alone boasts a list of nearly 50 titles, including books of poetry, plays, and novels; Fignolé has published six novels, four essays, and three short stories; and Philoctète is the author of three novels, one published and three unpublished plays, and several collections of poetry. In the face of this vast and still-expanding body of work, I have had to be quite pointed in my own delimitation of a corpus for *Haiti Unbound*. To begin with, I have chosen to focus on works of Spiralist prose fiction for this study, and this for several reasons. First, I am convinced that the novel—particularly the Spiralists' take thereupon—offers a platform for the reconciliation of elements that in other contexts would be considered exceedingly disparate. To the extent to which the novel has room, as it were, for other genres, it provides the ideal space within which the three authors have been best able to explore their concept of the “Genre Total,” referenced specifically in Frankétienne's first prose narrative as a guiding principle of the Spiralist aesthetic. As Edouard Glissant has very clearly articulated, “The novel is an effort to recuperate all of reality. Not only a perceptible or dreamed reality but the reality that we think about, that we ponder, that we predict. It is an attempt at totalizing reality, in all its details, with the goal of attaining complete understanding” (“Effort” 1). It presents an *a priori* open and heterogeneous form that aims for a multi-directional exploration of human existence. In addition to recognizing this inherent flexibility of the novel genre, I very much agree with Marie-José N'Zengou-Tayo's assertion that—in the Haitian context especially—“there is a process of recreation at work in storytelling, a process influenced by ideological commitment” (377). This is, of course, very much in line with the ethic-aesthetic of Spiralism. Moreover, inasmuch as my project considers issues of canon formation in a literary context largely dominated (after Césaire, since Roumain) by the novel, I have made the decision to exclude Spiralist works that fall outside of those parameters. Perhaps most importantly, I am responding to the fact that all three writers only began to write in prose after the explicit formu-



lation of a Spiralist perspective in the mid-1960s. This suggests, I believe, that the crafting of the Spiralist aesthetic was bound urgently to a desired practice of self-expression through narrative fiction. Indeed, Frankétienne writes only poetry prior to 1968—a period Jonassaint refers to as “his years of apprenticeship” (“On Frankétienne” 112)—at which point he turns almost exclusively to prose for the next more than three decades. Neither Figolé nor Philoctète produced narrative fiction before the advent of Spiralism, Figolé having published only essays prior to the publication of *Possédés* in 1987 and Philoctète volumes of poetry until 1973. The novel presents, in fact, the sole genre overlap between the three authors, as Figolé has published neither poems nor plays, Frankétienne and Philoctète no essays. And while the latter two authors have both written theater pieces, they have done so in two different languages: Frankétienne has adapted only one of his nine plays into French from the original Creole,<sup>13</sup> whereas Philoctète has published exclusively in French.<sup>14</sup>

Of the many prose fiction narratives the Spiralists have written—and, in the case of Frankétienne and Figolé, continue to write—I have elected to look exclusively at six major works: Frankétienne’s *Mûr à crever* (1968), *Ultravocal* (1972), and *Les Affres d’un défi* (1979); Figolé’s *Les Possédés de la pleine lune* (1987) and *Aube Tranquille* (1990); and Philoctète’s *Le Peuple des terres mêlées* (1989). As I argue throughout this study, these works are connected by specific, primary configurative elements that affirm the philosophical and aesthetic tenets of Spiralism, connections that have thus far gone largely unexamined. Given my intention to consider Spiralism at its origins and in its foundations, as a coherent literary perspective, I have had to bear in mind a certain number of practical considerations: notably, the fact that Philoctète died in 1995 whereas Frankétienne and Figolé continue to write and publish to this day—well beyond the fall of Duvalierism—and so are immersed in considerably different socio-historical circumstances than those in which the authors’ earlier prose offerings were crafted. Indeed, Frankétienne now travels with some frequency outside of Haiti and, since his 1993 publication of *Oiseau schizophone*—“a turning point in his production” (Jonassaint, “On Frankétienne” 118)—has tightened the spiral of his literary project, as it were. Rewriting and transforming many of his first texts, including the three discussed here, he has embarked on a creative path that builds on and explodes outward from these first, foundational works.<sup>15</sup> In the case of Jean-Claude Figolé, I have also considered only his first novels, for the aforementioned practical reasons and because

these ambitious, template-setting narratives quite satisfyingly exemplify the specific manner in which Fignolé implicates the spiral in his later works. In addition, *Les Possédés de la pleine lune* and *Aube Tranquille* were both published by Parisian press Les Editions du Seuil and so are far more extensively circulated than his more recent fiction. I have similarly chosen to look at the one novel by Philoctète that is truly “in the world,” so to speak. Indeed, *Le Peuple des terres mêlées* has been translated into English and Spanish,<sup>16</sup> and so necessarily is more readily asserted in global discussions of francophone (and) American literature.

While personal acrimony, creative evolution, and mortality might appear to have produced a certain disparity among the works of the three Spiralists, there exists nevertheless an aesthetic baseline from which each author has—the pun is intended—spiraled out. In other words, the fact that Frankétienne became the most prominent—perhaps the “ultra-vocal”—of the trio must not efface what I maintain is an equally rigorous commitment to the spiral metaphor on the part of Fignolé and Philoctète. Put otherwise, Frankétienne expresses one version/vision of Spiralism, Fignolé another, and Philoctète another still. I am suggesting that Spiralism be considered from a perspective not unlike that which scholars use to comprehend the diversity and complex inclusiveness of Surrealism, a principled aesthetic perspective that has similarly allowed for multiple, disparate, and even contradictory individual creative expression.<sup>17</sup> In effect, while Frankétienne, Fignolé, and Philoctète have all identified themselves as Spiralists, each of the three has presented himself as creatively independent of his two Spiralist co-founders. As Philoctète remarked rather ruefully in 1992, “unfortunately, Frank went his own way, and so did Jean-Claude and I” (René Philoctète, “Entretien” 623). It is by no means my intent here, then, to insist on an alliance the authors themselves no longer recognize. Rather, I explore the authors’ individual implications of the concept of Spiralism in their early prose fiction, and so uncover their common commitment to the spiral as a structural and metaphorical frame. I identify those foundations that might enable scholars to recognize the elements of commonality that exist/persist between the works of the three authors, then as now. It is my aim in *Haiti Unbound* to provide an initial practice of reading the Spiralists’ work that will ultimately encourage and facilitate discussion of their other, less well-known, and under-examined contributions.

The Spiralists' unwillingness to participate in the codification of their literary practice is the very essence of the challenge to, the pleasure of, and the necessity for critical engagement with their works. In the introductory chapter of this project, I consider the relative scholarly reluctance to do just that. I explore the mechanisms by which Spiralism has been made marginal to regional canons and reflect on the not-unrelated subtle mainstreaming of ostensibly subversive postcolonial discourses by the Euro-North American academy and critical machine. I examine specifically the quandary of undermining, challenging, and opposing the repressive practices of colonialism and its aftermath from an ex-centric position within an imperial structure. I address the overall fact of Martinican hegemony in the scholarship of French-speaking Caribbean literature and note the implicitly evolution-based perspective this hegemony has produced, calling into question certain exclusionary practices at work within this already frustratingly peripheralized space. For, indeed, the Spiralists are by no means the only (Haitian) writers to have been marginalized by the contemporary geopolitical phenomena that determine the global recognition and circulation of cultural products from communities outside of the world's capital centers. In looking specifically at the production and positioning of the Spiralist authors, I necessarily consider a number of broader questions regarding canon formation in the postcolonial Americas and examine certain phenomena at work in this region still so exceedingly determined by the practices of empire. As part of these reflections, I emphasize the possibility and the necessity of including Haiti and its artists more regularly in discussions of francophone Caribbean and postcolonial literature, without assuming that the fact of Haiti's admittedly extraordinary history renders it incomparable or irreconcilable with its regional neighbors. I suggest that to take up the issue of Spiralism's insertion into a larger American context is to acknowledge the situation of Haiti itself—historically and contemporarily, politically and literarily—on the edges of the so-called "New World." I therefore investigate in this introduction both the "consequences" and the advantages of the Spiralists' anchoring in Haiti and of their corresponding hesitation to engage in the practice of theory in the manner of their Martinican contemporaries. I establish the general foundations of the Spiralists' philosophical position and provide an initial point of entry into their aesthetic.

Moving, in a sense, from (refusal of) theory to practice, I turn in the subsequent chapters of *Haiti Unbound* to close readings of the texts themselves. Each of these central sections opens with a brief, orienting

discussion of broad thematic and stylistic tendencies that are then rigorously scrutinized in the chapters that follow. Examining in Part II the configuration of characters, in Part III the presentation of time and space, and in Part IV the formal strategies at work in the Spiralists' texts, I identify the ways in which the fictional universes of all three authors rely specifically on the narrative possibilities offered by the spiral form. And though I consider each of the novels discretely within each of these parts, I have organized my reflections in such a way as to emphasize the underlying points of intersection among them and thereby to illustrate the extent to which a critical appreciation of the spiral makes possible the most provocative and productive analyses of Frankétienne, Fignolé, and Philoctète's writing practices. As such, I address the six works of my corpus from a different angle in each section and place them in conversation with one another in accordance with their particular implementation of the spiral. I offer readings and re-readings—combinations and recombinations—of the six novels in a very conscious “spiralizing” of my own critical practice.

Part II of my study concerns the Spiralists' response to the question of how to write the postcolonial subject. Though configured differently by each of the three authors, individuals and communities in all of the Spiralists' narratives are, I argue, absolutely broken by violence and therefore struggle profoundly with the possibility of sustained solidarity. In the first chapter of this section, I consider the disconcertingly unstable narrators and changeable protagonists of *Mûr à crever* and *Ultravocal* as they reflect the “unrepresentability” of the subaltern voice. I note the ethical ambivalence of Frankétienne's thoroughly opaque, physically and psychically fractured non-heroes. I continue this inquiry in the following chapter with my analysis of the zombie as presented in *Les Affres d'un défi*. I investigate Frankétienne's defiance of racist caricatures of vodou and his assertion of its value as a practice of cultural resistance; I note the manner in which Frankétienne at once situates the zombie figure within a specifically Haitian folkloric universe and highlights both its extra-insular and extra-regional applicability. From the zombie I move in my third chapter to other figures of productive instability in the works of the Spiralists. I look at the doubled and tripled characters—the overlapping (pieces of) beings—presented in Fignolé's *Les Possédés de la pleine lune* and *Aube Tranquille*, as well as in Philoctète's *Le Peuple des terres mêlées* as so many broken bodies and minds struggling literally and figuratively to recompose themselves. Though less blatantly allegorical than Frankétienne's living-dead, the fragmented characters of Fignolé's

and Philoctète's fiction prove no less troubling to the narratives they inhabit.

In the third part of this project, I look closely at the physical worlds in which the Spiralists' tales unfold—at the dysphoric landscapes and historical lacunae that are the epicenters of Frankétienne's, Figiolé's, and Philoctète's vertiginous spirals. I argue that each author offers the reader a mirror of the troubled relationship between identity, place, and the past in the postcolonial Caribbean. In Chapter 4, I consider the way in which the banal yet complex quotidian present of the postcolony is explored in *Mûr à crever* and *Les Possédés de la pleine lune*. Anchored in meticulously described urban and rural spaces, respectively, these works examine the “unhomely” nature (as Homi Bhabha would have it)<sup>18</sup> of contemporary Haitian reality. Chapter 5 looks at Figiolé and Philoctète's critical engagement with specific events in regional and world history. I examine the refusal of grand narrative fixity and subsequent privileging of the smaller, constitutive histories of individuals and communities in *Aube Tranquille* and *Le Peuple des terres mêlées*. Leaping backward and forward in time, featuring events recounted from a variety of competing and even contradictory perspectives, these novels are marked by a base atmosphere of tension; with spirals that collapse in on themselves, distinctions between past and future are rendered shaky at best. I look at the extent to which *Aube Tranquille* in particular evokes a past that remains dynamic and pervasive, “haunting” the contemporary insular space as an active force in the present rather than a phenomenon that one has the luxury of contemplating from a position of remove. Then in considering the diversified present of *Le Peuple des terres mêlées*, I examine the tragic ways in which transnational geography and history are manipulated to serve the agenda of contemporary regional power structures. In the final chapter of this section, I consider *Ultravocal* and *Les Affres d'un défi*—two texts that remain spatio-temporally unanchored and whose narratives seem to unfold in space(s) unbound by temporal parameters. The labyrinthine worlds presented in these novels avoid the multiple binaries that orient space in much francophone Caribbean literature, and so are never qualitatively fixed or consistent. They fully embrace Haiti's unique psychic space while directly and indirectly evoking such broad concerns as environmental degradation, industrial pollution, and natural disaster. Explorations of the marvelous real and its inverse, the textual universes they propose are at once distinctly Haitian and limitlessly allegorical.

In the three chapters that make up the fourth part of this study, I explore

the Spiralists' stylistic approaches to their prose fiction, considering separately the works of each author and his particular implementation of the spiral as structural and syntactic narrative model. I look closely at each writer's uniquely manifested commitment to narrative im-mediacy—to showing rather than telling. I argue, that is, that Frankétienne, Fignolé, and Philoctète have been less concerned with theoretical conceptualizations of the island space and its people than with the immediate representation of their reality. Rather than endeavor to assemble infinitely scattered parts into a continuous, forward-moving, and traceable narrative whole, the Spiralist authors have incorporated the broken and the lacking, the confused and the silent into their fictional works. In Chapter 7, for example, I pay particular attention to Frankétienne's rejection of the hierarchical opposition of the oral and the scribal, and his investment in the latent but fundamental "ultravocality" of the written. I evaluate the vodou aesthetic at the heart of his style and the combination of fatalism and subversive playfulness this aesthetic allows. Chapter 8 focuses on Fignolé's engagement with the Caribbean oral tradition. I examine the author's weaving together of multiple narratives and voices into frenetically oral literary works, a process that involves the melding of folklore with Joycean literary techniques to create profoundly hybrid texts. In the final chapter of this section, I consider Philoctète's writing of collective trauma as it impacts possibilities and methods of narration. I argue here that the manipulation of language integral to the functioning of totalitarianism is most compellingly related by a Spiralist formal strategy of "schizophrenia," a stylistic choice that functions productively to at once express and critique the often alienating and tragic realities of human existence in Haiti as well as throughout the Americas.

My concluding chapter further reflects on and draws conclusions about the literal and literary implications of the spiral. I comment here on the de-polarized inside/outside, centrifugal/centripetal, insular/international dynamics that at once root the Spiralist aesthetic in Haiti and extend its value outward to a wider regional and even global space. I highlight the points of convergence between the Spiralists' ethic-aesthetic and that of their regional peers, and offer brief remarks on Spiralism's local and potentially universal resonance. Emphasizing the singularity—the creative freedom—that characterizes the works of Frankétienne, Fignolé, and Philoctète, I evoke their dedication to rigorous opacity, to relational participation in an individuated, chaotic world reality, and to the defiant interrogation of all hegemonic systems—including that of the postcolonial itself.

## NOTES

1 *Poétique de l'espace* 193.

2 *The Repeating Island* 4.

3 Valerie Kaussen's excellent 2008 study *Migrant Revolutions* offers a well-researched and convincing discussion of the implications of Haiti's revolutionary nationalism for global conceptions of modernity from 1804 to the present. She notes the increased attention paid to Haiti's revolution by literary scholars, historians, anthropologists, and others in the last two decades and its configuration as an inherently modern phenomenon: "Decentering modernity and approaching it as a dynamic, cross-cultural phenomenon, Susan Buck-Morss, Michel-Rolph Trouillot, Sibylle Fischer, Laurent Dubois and others all assert that the Caribbean, not Paris, witnessed the Enlightenment's most crucial concrete experiment" (5).

4 For a sophisticated, in-depth analysis of the reign of absolute violence and rhetoric of national unity by which the Duvalierian State maintained totalitarian authority for nearly three decades in Haiti, see anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot's 1990 study, *Haiti: State Against Nation: The Origins and Legacy of Duvalierism*.

5 In 1968, Duvalier's government commissioned a statue to commemorate the slaves who had revolted against France during the Haitian Revolution. Titled "Neg Mawon" ("Le Nègre marron" or "The Unknown Maroon"), the statue depicts a slave whose chains have been broken and who holds a conch shell to his lips.

6 The full text of Frankétienne's declaration reads as follows: "In geometry the spiral presents itself like an open curve, made up of a succession of connected arcs. In astronomy, the spiral is found in the structure of the galaxy; nebulae and massive stars are spread along a spiral ... In biology, life, whatever its form, develops a spiral structure during its evolution. The phenomena of fertilization, of cellular multiplication and reproduction unfold in the dynamic of the spiral motion ... The general impulse of life has an upward nature. This movement does not progress along a straight line, which would symbolize death. It is rather a movement in the shape of a spiral, which reproduces some aspects of the past but at an infinitely superior level. It is a movement from the bottom to the top, from the simple to the complex. And in each spiral structure, each new turn is deeper and richer than the last one. The spiral defines the perpetual movement of life and of all evolving things; it is the characteristic of dialectic" ("Interview" 389–90).

7 While Spiralism has been somewhat overlooked by scholars in Europe and the United States, it should be noted that both Frankétienne and Figolé enjoy remarkable popular appreciation in Haiti. In Frankétienne's case, this is due largely to the numerous staging of his plays in Creole as well as to the audio recordings he has made of his writings. Frankétienne has recalled, in fact, a situation in which an "illiterate peasant woman" recognized him in the street, stopped him and quoted a line from one of his plays: "In mid-1994, I was coming out of the bank one morning. A cart passed me by on the street, one of those carts filled with rice sacks, bleating goats, chickens strung upside down, and a few peasants. I was heading over toward my car when I hear behind me a woman's voice cry out: 'Mwen vlé wé mouch!' ('I want to see some flies'), which is a line from my play *Pelintet*. In Haiti, that line—that is Frankétienne. I turn around and I see a peasant woman ... who repeats: 'Mwen vlé wé mouch! So Franck, when are you going to give us something else?' I answer: 'Soon. Mba ou yon bagay!' I was floored and filled with joy. An illiterate peasant woman recognizes me. It is the most wonderful thing that could have happened to me" (Chemla and Pujol 117).

In a nation where over 50 per cent of the population cannot read or write in either French or Creole, such an incident bears enormous significance. Jean Jonassaint

recalls a similar incident: “I cannot forget that in the midst of the period of protest against the Aristide government, the immigration agent who greeted me at the airport in Port-au-Prince on August 8, 2002, upon learning that I was Frankétienne’s guest, asked me: ‘When will Frankétienne give us another *Pèlmtèt*?’ How better to indicate the exceptional place of this cultural giant within the Haitian cultural space?” (“On Frankétienne” 117). Fignolé, for his part, has implicated himself personally in the region of Les Abricots, troubled site of much of his fiction, working closely with inhabitants on agricultural development projects. He, too, has been rewarded by a certain following among Haitians: “Generally, when a bookstore sells thirty copies of a book in a month, that’s a big achievement. In three months, a single bookstore sold 400 copies of *Possédés*” (Magnier 47).

8 I have accepted as my working definition of “postcolonial” the critical model proposed years ago by Bill Ashcroft, Garrett Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, for whom the term is meant “to cover all the culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day” (2), or more recently by Chris Bongie, for whom “postcolonial” serves as “an historical marker, covering approximately the last half of [the twentieth] century and describing certain societies that have been or still are under the formal or informal control of another nation, as well as the cultural artifacts that these societies have produced” (*Islands* 13).

9 It is significant, and somewhat disappointing, that in *Migrant Revolutions*—a study that so thoroughly and compellingly argues for readings of Haitian texts that emerge from and (post)modernize Haiti’s modernist literary tradition of revolutionary socialism—Kaussen makes no reference to the Spiralists’ writings aside from a brief mention of the fact that Frankétienne has written in Creole and a misidentification of Fignolé as having been president of Haiti in the 1950s. As I argue throughout this book, all three of the Spiralist authors engage at once with local political struggles and with far-reaching, extra-insular concerns in ways that would seem entirely relevant to Kaussen’s project.

10 Phelps offers the following description of the ethic-aesthetic of the *Haiti Littéraire* group: “Refusal of the poetry of police reports. Refusal of the anecdotal: expression of the quotidian—not brutishly, but with a sense of movement that elevates it several degrees. Refusal of reliance on ideological slogans. Poetry and thus culture must never be subject to politics. Refusal of folklorizing poetry. Openness not only to the Caribbean, but to a greater humanism that allows us to break out of the ghetto of Negritude ... No school. Just a single criterion: the quality of the poem.”

11 It is worth noting that while Frankétienne, Fignolé, and Philoctète remained in Haiti (aside from the six months the latter spent in Canada), Phelps, Legagneur, and Morrisseau all chose permanent exile in Montreal while Davertige embarked on a twenty-year nomadic journey through New York, Paris, and Montreal.

12 This is the term used post-1990 by Edouard Glissant to express his conception of the world as an infinitely related and relating space of unpredictable and constant association; it is Glissant’s positively charged spin on phenomena of globalization.

13 I am referring to Frankétienne’s 1985 play *Kaselèzo*.

14 There are certainly books to write that would intersect with and very usefully complement the project I present here: a study of Frankétienne’s theater in Creole—Jean Jonassaint and Vèvè Clark have already published some very interesting work on this topic; a study of Philoctète’s poetic evolution—his “pre- to post-” Spiralism trajectory, that is. Rachel Douglas’s analysis of Frankétienne’s practice of rewriting is a particularly successful example of such author-specific approaches to the Spiralist aesthetic.

15 Douglas’s *Frankétienne and Rewriting* offers a meticulous and highly insightful reading of the multiple iterations of these works.



16 Mireia Porta translated Philoctète's novel into Spanish in 2004, and Linda Coverdale translated it into English the following year. The latter translation includes a preface by Haitian-American novelist Edwige Danticat as well as an introduction by Haitian novelist, poet, journalist, and playwright Lyonel Trouillot.

17 An understanding of the Spiralist aesthetic as developed by Frankétienne, Figolé, and Philoctète is very useful, for example, to a reading of Lyonel Trouillot's 1989 novel *Les Fous de Saint Antoine*.

18 Cf. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*.

# I

## Introduction

### The Consequences of Ex-Centricity

*Ordinarily, we look at insularity as a mode of isolation, a sort of spatial neurosis. In the Caribbean, however, each island is an opening. The Inside-Outside dialectic recalls the Earth-Sea confrontation. It is only for those anchored to the European continent that insularity equals imprisonment. The Antillean imaginary frees us from suffocation.*  
—Édouard Glissant<sup>1</sup>

In considering the most prevalent voices that figure in critical discussion of postcolonial literary production in the French-speaking Americas, one cannot help but notice the overwhelming presence of works by writer-intellectuals from France's overseas department of Martinique. While this phenomenon might be explained, to a certain extent, by the simple fact of the island nation's incorporation into the French state and consequent visibility with respect to Euro-North American academics and publishers,<sup>2</sup> I would argue that there is something more subtle at play here as well. Specifically, it would seem that there exists an important correlation between the fact of the physical journey to Paris embarked upon by Martinique's most prominent writers and the production of an explicit, self-defining theoretical perspective—a perspective that effectively generates the principal intellectual frame within which the works of these writers can be read. In other words, by providing explicit interpretive foundations for their literary production, certain Martinican writers have effectively demanded scholarly engagement with their work; they have situated themselves physically and discursively with respect to the metropolitan center, and so have opened the door to a transatlantic dialogue dedicated to the theorization of their own aesthetic creations.

Given this very rewarding interaction between historical metropolitan center and (post)colonial periphery, it is crucial to think about the consequences of ex-centricity—of *not-Paris*—for francophone writers of the Americas. Taking as my point of departure the notion that critical appreciation of writers in the French-speaking Caribbean is meaningfully

## 2 *Haiti Unbound*

connected to a given author's theoretical training in France, I consider what happens to those writers—like Frankétienne, Fignolé, and Philoctète—who choose or are obliged to remain physically anchored in the space of their island. What are the consequences for those who refuse the voyage to Paris along with certain of the theory-centric underpinnings of literature this voyage implies? Further, in what ways might franco-theory-centric approaches be deployed in analyzing New World literature in French without abstracting or de-specifying regional or local traditions? These are the questions that interest me here. To be clear, I do not want to suggest that theory in the French-speaking world is or should be the exclusive province of white Europeans, or that the writers of the French-speaking Caribbean have not added immensely to literary conversations on both sides of the Atlantic. Nor do I seek to cement facile binaries of center and margin. On the contrary, I myself implicate the theoretical interventions of French-speaking Caribbean writer-intellectuals throughout my own work, and I readily acknowledge that the processes of dialogue and exchange between Europe and the Americas have been and continue to be productive and self-interrogating. I recognize, moreover, that these are questions that have been and might still be posed in a wider context. The extent to which (former) empires are or need to be concerned with their positioning vis-à-vis (former) imperial centers is at issue throughout the postcolonial world, implicating as it does questions of “legitimation,” borrowing Bourdieu's terminology, and dissemination of the literary text. In (formerly) colonized nations where an indigenous publishing infrastructure and reading public are largely absent, the question of who evaluates and assigns value to aesthetic production is a necessarily thorny one. Finally, neither the preceding remarks, nor the analyses to follow, mean to imply that theorizing precludes aesthetic engagement—that creativity and explicit ideology are entirely antithetical. Rather, I am interested here in considering the very fact or practice of theory as it pertains to the canonization of postcolonial voices in the French-speaking American islands—the “meta-” consequences and conditions of inclusion in or exclusion from a pre-existing French/francophone discursive space.

### THE ATTRACTIONS OF *FRANCOPHONIE*

Until about five decades ago, the world counted 47 nations whose language was officially French and over which France was politically

sovereign. Indeed, France exerted enormous cultural and political influence over an extensive array of territorial possessions during much of the twentieth century. The establishment of France as *la mère patrie*—and of Paris as her glorious center—in the hearts and minds of many of the empire’s colonial subjects was the result of a very particular and deliberate strategy. That is, while the primary ambitions of the imperial agenda were unquestionably military positioning and economic expansion into extra-European territories, the promulgation of *francophonie*—a policy of psycho-cultural boundary-extension—was a clear secondary objective: “brown people into Frenchmen,” as it were. As the exploitative practices of French imperialism became less and less tolerable, however, so too were the values inherent in *francophonie* increasingly called into question by colonial intellectuals and writers. Paradoxically, the contestatory discourse produced by France’s colonial subjects very often emerged from within the geographic center of the nation’s colonizing project—that is, from Paris. Synecdochal signifier of empire, France’s capital city was necessarily a site of acute ambivalence and profound irony—of the Audre Lorde variety.<sup>3</sup> It was in Paris, of course, that so many tools of the intellectual trade—tools that would be employed in the proverbial dismantling of the master’s house—were first picked up, plunging legions of colonial and tentatively postcolonial intellectuals into a schizophrenic double bind. How exactly could these individuals carve out a psychological or political anti-coloniality within yet without this seductive metropolis? How exactly were they to negotiate this space where, on the one hand, the oppressive, assimilationist, and otherwise troubling ideologies of French imperialism originated and, on the other, where many of the most useful technical and aesthetic means of self-expression were initially revealed? In other words, while Paris inevitably represented the ethos of imperialist subjugation toward which the alienated (post)colonial individual’s resentment and frustration was to be most logically directed, it was also the space of that individual’s apprenticeship—the space out of which a subversive perspective was often first formulated. A decidedly uncomfortable cornerstone of literary production and apparent inevitability for the francophone elite, Paris has served at once as a space of painful disillusionment, productive self-interrogation, and community-building catharsis.

The path toward relative “post-”coloniality has meant, then, the creation of a very unusual set of circumstances for politically and creatively progressive writers of the French-speaking Caribbean. Without the territorial rootedness of sub-Saharan Africans or the pre-existing

literate cultures of North Africa and Asia, and without a collective ontology that predates colonialism, Afro-Caribbeans in general have had to be particularly wary of the poisoned apple Paris might represent. Indeed, among the diverse peoples of France's (former) empire, the writer-intellectuals of the French-speaking Caribbean have been uniquely troubled by this existential quandary; and those of the French Antillean islands of Martinique and Guadeloupe—"a region that since 1945 has seemingly defied the historical trend of decolonization to become ever more closely tied to its French colonizers" (Nesbitt, *Voicing Memory* 3)—have found themselves in an even more ambivalent position. In a discussion of the 1921 novel *Batouala*, for example, Régis Antoine comments on Guyanese-Martinican<sup>4</sup> author René Maran's fundamental faithfulness to the "ensemble of values that proceed from secular humanism ... from a certain idea of universal progress that itself emerged from the spirit of the Enlightenment, and thus from a certain faith in man. Worldview that validated, of course, the equation: colonization = civilization" (*Littérature* 155). While I certainly do not want to suggest that Antilleans writing a half-century or more after Maran exhibit an equally profound alienation, I do want to insist that the underlying complexity has by no means disappeared. It persisted. It persists. The fundamental notion of Paris, France, as a simultaneously inclusive/including and exclusive/excluding center has been nuanced and reformulated, manifesting in the literary choices of several of the most celebrated mid and later twentieth-century writers of the French-speaking American islands. Called upon to insert themselves into an intellectual space from which, historically, they have been excluded, these writers found themselves sharpening their revolutionary horns during their provisional exile in Paris while endeavoring mightily to remain alert to the trap of cultural assimilation.

Whereas the difficulty of negotiating this complex dynamic is certainly well known to scholars of postcolonial literature, what has been less thoroughly considered is how the very framework in which the relationship between France and its (former) American empire unfolds might have impacted regional canon-formation. Indeed, one of the less-acknowledged ways in which a metropolitan influence pervades the literary universe of the French-speaking Caribbean is made manifest by the exceptional amount of theory generated within the region and embraced by the Euro-North American critical machine and academy. In literary responses to the particular socio-political realities of postcolonialism, francophone Caribbean writer-theorists have traditionally balanced a creative and a critical impulse, dedicating themselves as much to the

production of poetry and prose fiction as to articulating a discursive space within which to appreciate these “primary” texts. For many, an ideological agenda is explicitly laid out in theoretical essays and then implicitly (and often not-so-implicitly) confirmed in the context of their creative writings. As Cilas Kemedjio quite rightly points out in *De la négritude à la créolité*, “each generation of writers attempts to impose a prescriptive model in an institutional context where literature consistently posits itself as a component of the quest for solutions to socio-political malaise” (11). Roger Toumson echoes this notion in the first volume of *La Transgression des couleurs*, describing Afro-Antillean literature as “an ensemble of works belonging to the same diachrony, having as principle objective the same psycho-social problematic ... a discourse that, constructing itself as a system, comments on its own construction, and that, as it forms, offers a commentary on its own formation” (105). I would argue that this implicit reliance on theory for authorization—this systematization of critical paradigms—risks shoring up the very forces of containment against which the formerly colonized intellectual is meant to have been writing.

Of course, the formulation of these indigenous theoretical perspectives should not merely be seen as a phenomenon of unreflective subaltern mimicry. An indisputably subversive impulse motivates the practices of writing and theorization from and in (former) French colonies. Francophone Caribbean intellectuals are indeed deeply committed to pushing the limits of French theory—to politicizing, radicalizing, and otherwise structurally defying French-European theoretical models. Moreover, to create art in the postcolonial Caribbean is, in and of itself, to declare an autonomous subjectivity; it is a process of establishing psycho-social creative strength that is then buttressed by the production of corresponding theoretical constructs.<sup>5</sup> As Nick Nesbitt asserts in the preface to *Voicing Memory*, his masterful study of the francophone Antillean appropriation of French-determined theoretical models, the production of literature serves a critical function in the French-speaking Caribbean and has historically been the means by which writers of the region have proclaimed a certain intellectual and aesthetic empowerment. The writers Nesbitt considers, with the exception of the Haitian-American Edwige Danticat, are all “products of Parisian training in the *Sciences humaines* between 1930 and 1980” (xiv). They are so many eager students from the Afro-Americas encountering Frobenius, Lévi-Strauss, Hegel, Marx, Sartre, et al. and then putting them in the service of their own subversive agendas.

While it is undeniable that these Parisian encounters bore nourishing fruit for the process of postcolonial disalienation, I would argue that the phenomenon has also produced a number of problematic attendant realities. In ways that subtly—but, I think, meaningfully—recall the blatant assimilationism of the *doudouiste* poets and the bourgeois elite’s shipping off of its most promising youth to Paris, the extensive theorization of literature and culture by creative writers can, at least to some degree, be considered a legacy of a dependent relationship to imperial France. And this situation is particularly noticeable in the case of Martinique, France’s principal overseas department—its postcolony. From the 1930s to the present day, writers from Martinique have been very much focused on constructing a theoretical space for their works and for their aesthetic philosophies in a literary canon-to-come<sup>6</sup>—a theoretical space that would rigorously exclude any perspectives that smacked of assimilationism or alienation. The Martinican student editors of the 1932 magazine-manifesto *Légitime défense*, for example, dedicate several essays to denouncing the assimilationist tendencies of the national bourgeoisie, its writers in particular. Using virulent caricatural descriptions, Jules Monnerot mercilessly derides those “raised in the cult of fraudulence ... who, after their secondary studies, go to France to try, generally with success, to ‘earn’ the title of ‘Doctor,’ that of ‘Master,’ *and so on* ... They show themselves to be desperate to conform to the ways and character of the majority of their European condisciples” (4). Maurice-Sabas Quitman angrily laments the fact that “the French Lesser Antilles have, for centuries, so assimilated the lessons of French civilization that black Antilleans are now incapable of thinking other than like white Europeans” (7). The authors’ sincere outrage and impassioned condemnation of such unconcealed assimilationism is somewhat ironic, however, considered in the light of the magazine’s political and theoretical underpinnings. Written and published in Paris in French, *Légitime défense* is, in large part, a resounding pledge of allegiance to the political and aesthetic platforms of Marxism and Surrealism. The entirety of the magazine’s political content is expressed in the language of these European ideologies, and the pages of poetry that close the issue are replete with the provocative juxtapositions and abstract imagery of the French *avant-garde*.

Contemporary of the *Légitime défense* writers, Martinican poet Aimé Césaire similarly walked the line between anti-assimilationism and obligatory *francophonie* in his articulation of Negritude. His intellectual life in Paris was marked by an affiliation with African intellectual Léopold

Sedar Senghor with whom, among others, he participated in the short-lived activist journal *L'Étudiant noir*. The writers of this magazine distanced themselves from the *Légitime défense* group, criticizing the latter as fundamentally bourgeois and assimilated. To some extent more self-aware, perhaps, than his compatriots at *Légitime défense*, Césaire explicitly confessed to the ironic parameters of his intellectual existence. His well-known description in *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* of his own cowardly self-distancing from the miserable black man he encounters on a tramway reveals his vulnerability to the almost irresistible temptations of Frenchness—of non- (and even “anti-”) blackness. Césaire admits to his latent Francophilic aspirations and uses this confession as a catalyst for the formulation of a purified Pan-African identity. Despite this committed Afrocentrism, however, Césaire nonetheless integrated both Marxism and Surrealism into his formulation of Negritude, establishing a firm ethno-literary platform for his movement in the pages of *Tropiques*, the journal he founded upon his return to Martinique and published between 1941 and 1945. As is the case with *Légitime défense*, several of the essays in *Tropiques* are based on a condemnation of the imitative aesthetic practices of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Martinican bourgeois writers.

Césaire's role in facilitating Martinique's transition from colony to department of France in 1946 made him in turn an easy target for younger generations of anti-colonialist Martinican writers. Though as a student in Martinique Edouard Glissant, for example, had participated in the electoral campaign that made Césaire mayor in 1945, he would later propose his own theoretical ideology, *antillanité*, in the place of a Negritude he felt belonged to the socio-historical past. “Negritude,” Glissant asserts,

corresponded to a particular historical situation and to a period when, the African states not yet being independent, cultural activity for Blacks amounted to a sort of cry—to a brutal revindication of the dignity of being and creating. Today, when African politics have entered into a phase of active construction, we must give a constructive content to our cultural combat. (cited in Ormerod, “Beyond ‘Negritude’” 361)

At the time he wrote these words, Glissant had already spent several years as a student and political activist in Paris, publishing his first prose work, *Soleil de la conscience*, while there. In this long essay, Glissant describes his Parisian experience as an enlightening period out of which he had emerged better equipped to appreciate his Afro-Antillean identity. He makes absolutely no mention of Césaire's influence on this coming to consciousness, despite the fact that, as Antoine somewhat sarcastically



notes, “*Tropiques* undoubtedly helped to pull together and nourish the first thoughts of a Frantz Fanon, of a Georges Desportes, maybe even of an Edouard Glissant, before the latter ended up determining that it made sense to enroll in a program for ethnographic studies in Paris” (190).

In their 1989 manifesto, *Eloge de la créolité*, Creolist writers Patrick Chamoiseau and Raphaël Confiant and linguist Jean Bernabé similarly established themselves as having moved beyond the offerings of their predecessors. Although their essay dutifully acknowledges the stepping-stone usefulness of both Césaire and Glissant, the Creolists treat Negritude as outmoded and *antillanité* as inaccessible. Perhaps the most directive of the writer-theorists discussed here, the Creolists unabashedly proclaim *créolité* the most relevant contemporary aesthetic philosophy of the (French-speaking) Caribbean. Their manifesto, which “began life as a talk presented in the suburbs north of Paris” (Gallagher 21), and subsequent critical writings on *créolité*—among them Confiant’s rather combative denunciation of “papa Césaire,” titled *Aimé Césaire: une Traversée paradoxale du siècle*—lay out what amount to a number of specific criteria for postcolonial francophone political and literary authenticity. In this, the authors adopt patently and somewhat troublingly Franco-European rhetorical strategies. Saint Lucian poet and Nobel Laureate Derek Walcott argues that “[n]othing is more French than the confident rhetoric of this manifesto. It echoes, in its emphatic isolation, all those pamphlets outlining programs for a new painting, a new poetry, that erupt from metropolitan ferment, and that, reaching out to embrace a public, baffle it by their vehemence” (224). Although, like Césaire and Glissant, the Creolists maintain a principled distance from Paris, the prestigious French literary prizes they have received—including a Goncourt for Chamoiseau and a Novembre for Confiant—attest to a firmly rooted presence in the European spotlight.

Thus from the fervent and outraged young editors of *Légitime défense*, to Negritude poet Aimé Césaire, to champion of *antillanité* (and, more recently, *Relation*) Edouard Glissant and his self-styled successors, the manifesto-writing Creolists, Martinican writers have consistently made a point of calling into question the usefulness of their predecessors’ philosophies in realizing postcolonial objectives. Enjoying a quasi-celebrity status determined to a certain extent by Euro-North American arbiters of social and aesthetic value, these writers have engaged in “the type of academic one-upmanship that is so common in the lively debates surrounding postcolonial criticism and, particularly, *theory* today” (Huggan 2, emphasis mine). In the case of all these writers, there is a

fundamental questioning of the relationship between the Antillean elite and Paris, as site and as symbol. Indeed,

throughout the region, the notion of the writer as maroon exerts a kind of gravitational pull of the literary sensibility and recurs with remarkable regularity ... All of these writers are essentially making the same point about the need to transcend the hierarchical, the fixed, the linear in dealing with the region's collective experience. (Dash, "World" 115)

Yet while each of these intellectuals expresses an awareness of the dangers of cultural assimilation and subsequently endeavors to craft the most Caribbean-centric discourse possible, they all nonetheless play out their subversion within a frame that remains unchallenged on the most fundamental level. That is, to whatever extent these authors question France's colonial and postcolonial behavior and criticize her racist, xenophobic, assimilationist ideologies, they all engage with the former imperial power on her own terms, implicitly affirming the designation of theory "in Western academies [as] the most prestigious and valued mode of production" (Miller 7). Thus while the majority of these Antillean writers explicitly rebuff the recuperative snares of *francité*, none thoroughly investigates the degree to which the act of theorizing, in and of itself, in many ways replicates practices codified in metropolitan France. They tacitly accept France's conception of herself as the authoritative theory-producing power, and so have relied heavily on the practice of theory as the most efficacious means of inserting themselves into that power structure.

This image of French theoretical pre-eminence is, of course, part of a broader phenomenon. As Lawrence Kritzman has pointed out in "A Certain Idea of French," New World academics have similarly venerated French intellectualism, making French departments

the "in" place to be ... the *locus* of intellectual ferment and the center of avant-garde critical thought in the American university. Most everyone in other humanities programs and the humanistic social sciences suffered from French theory anxiety. French thought ... became an object of intellectual fetishism. From the 1960s on, French criticism became associated with "theory." (146)

Mary Gallagher goes on to draw an explicit connection between such "fetishism" and the embedding of Antillean writers in the university system of the United States. She confirms that the "American academy has, since the late 1970s at least, been noticeably in thrall to French literary and cultural theory, and in the late 1980s and 1990s, postcolonial theory notably." She continues: "That French Caribbean writers who have associated themselves or who have been associated with 'theory' should be courted by the US academy cannot, therefore, be

regarded as unexpected” (265). This incorporation of self-theorizing writers into the North American university system—a process both confirmed and facilitated by the publication of texts and awarding of prizes in France—creates a somewhat awkward dynamic. Indeed, as Nesbitt also acknowledges in *Voicing Memory*, “while the critique of exploitation at the heart of decolonization received perhaps its most original and developed formulation among Antillean thinkers, the region’s dependency upon the French metropolis short-circuited the practical implementation of this critique” (3). Looking closely at this paradox, it would seem that greater attention need be paid to the specific, if subtle, means by which the former imperial center recovers certain ostensibly subversive discourses.

We might return to the fact that Antillean theoretical practices have tended toward a rather unsatisfying adherence to very Western, post-Enlightenment notions of progress and absolute truth, so much so that a distinctly evolutionary literary trajectory has become apparent in the regional literary tradition. Indeed, among the more disturbing effects of the postcolonial (Antillean) emphasis on theory has been a propensity toward a locally cannibalizing auto-canonization—this phenomenon whereby successive generations of writer-intellectuals “define their liberatory enterprise by anathematizing previous generations of Caribbean authors” (Bongie, *Islands* 352). It is readily apparent that each of the multiple systematizing theoretical neologisms that emerges from Martinique declares itself a departure from and advancement with respect to its precursors. As a result, twentieth-century literary production in the French-speaking Caribbean has consistently been marked by a process of building up and tearing down—of “space-clearing,” to use Anthony Appiah’s formulation (149)—and the subsequent creation of a *de facto* canon. This positing of the theoretical perspectives of particular authors as replacements for and/or improvements on those of their predecessors has also been adopted by many of us who theorize this literature. Beverly Ormerod’s “Beyond ‘Negritude’: Some Aspects of the Work of Edouard Glissant,” for example, is an insightful article whose very title reveals a certain foregrounding of linearity and advancement. Her reflections on Glissant’s contributions to regional letters open with a paragraph-long appeal to move forward from Césaire’s Negritude and Fanon’s Africa-oriented discourse. Making what is again a revealing language choice, Ormerod writes, “*In place of négritude*, Glissant offers in his poetry, novels, and theater a *new world view*” (362, emphasis mine). This is an attitude that recalls, to a certain extent, Sartre’s posi-

tioning of Negritude as a counter-assertion to be recuperated by a Hegelian dialectic of cultural progression.

This progression-based canon is one that (we) scholars of the region's literature have done much to cement without perhaps being sufficiently attentive to what non-theorizing voices from the region "bring to the table" through the sheer fact of their creative writings. We have had a tendency, that is, to encourage—if not to expect—postcolonial New World writers to write books and then to write books about the books they write. While this is not uniquely a (francophone) Caribbean reality, it is nonetheless particularly ironic given, as I have noted above, the wholesale upending of Eurocentrism aimed for by these writer-intellectuals. German philologue and ethno-linguist Ralph Ludwig's mini-anthology of francophone Caribbean writings on orality and literature, *Écrire la parole de nuit*, offers a fascinating example of this persistent pairing of theory and practice. The eight writers who contribute to the volume—writers whose "success" is confirmed in Ludwig's introduction by the fact that "they have obtained important literary prizes or are already translated into other languages" (14)—each provide a work of short fiction as well as a corresponding theoretical essay (the exception to this is, interestingly, Guadeloupean woman writer Gisèle Pineau, who does not offer a theoretical text). Here, then, we have a quite striking instance of this juxtaposition of showing and telling so prevalent in the domain of francophone letters.

These are phenomena that have not gone unnoticed, of course. As Annie Le Brun remarks in the context of her passionate, if hyperbolic, defense of Aimé Césaire slash pen-lashing of the Creolists, *Statue coupée*,<sup>7</sup> there is often on the part of francophone Caribbean postcolonial writers a hyper-awareness of the importance of Western theoretical approbation. In "Critique Afrocentrique de la créolité," scholar Ama Mazama, comments on the latent Eurocentrism of the Creolist project, denouncing what she considers to be the authors' premature relegating of Césairean Negritude to a socio-historical moment past/passed in the interest of establishing themselves globally as the modern-day bearers of Antillean cultural values. And in a well-known 1993 essay, "Order, Disorder, Freedom, and the West Indian Writer," Guadeloupean novelist Maryse Condé contends that specific directive discourses have, in many respects, supplanted literary tradition in the francophone Caribbean ever since the birth of Indigenism and Negritude. As each of these scholars has rightly noted, literary culture of the twentieth-century French-speaking Caribbean has been largely dominated by certain figureheads

of *francophonie*—individual authors or socio-aesthetic philosophies who claim (or are granted) the role of “representative” at any given time, for any given time. This “star-system,” to evoke Charles Forsdick and David Murphy’s succinct expression, creates “a risk, therefore, that just as (Anglophone) Postcolonial Studies has been dominated by certain theoretical or regional paradigms, so might the fully diverse potential of Francophone Postcolonial Studies be eclipsed by prominent trends in scholarship” (Forsdick and Murphy 12)—trends initiated by a closed group of Antillean writers and then promoted by Western academics as both exemplary and broadly applicable.

Concomitant with this scripting of explicitly delineated, evolutive theoretical models is the problematic side effect of transparency. Indeed, theoretical guidelines propose a specific manner of reading; they go beyond neutral presentation to provide a particular path to accessing a text. Like introductions, as considered from a Foucauldian perspective *à la* Richard Watts in the introduction to his excellent study *Packaging Postcoloniality*, theory “helps the receiver of the text decode it” (1), and so risks exercising “a form of discursive control,” “limiting and disciplining what might otherwise be a liberated discourse” (2). In its laudable efforts to multiply interpretation and understanding, theory also mitigates what might otherwise be the productive anxieties that the reader experiences when confronted with the bound and meaning-full entity that is the book, particularly within what is meant to be a particularly subversive context. I mean to suggest that inasmuch as these Caribbean writer-theorists have provided European and North American academics/critics with the interpretive tools with which to decipher and appreciate their own creative works, they have allowed for a somewhat excessive legibility. As Françoise Lionnet has observed,

The tendency in France seems to be more toward “integrating” the complex ethnic, cultural, and discursive patterns of both the French and the francophone corpus under the broader umbrella of *francophonie*, as does an influential anthology. Francophone writers who get anointed by Parisian publishing houses and receive critical acclaim followed by major literary awards are the ones who make it into the canon of contemporary literature, and their works generally get subsumed under established national, aesthetic, or formal categories. That is, they become legible in terms of such categories instead of providing an opportunity for a radical rethinking of the existing parameters of formal, let alone cultural, analysis. (“*Francophonie*” 260–61)

This transparency would seem to contradict stated efforts to focus inward, regionally, and to maintain opacity—the term is Glissant’s, of course—in the face of European and North American universalist

presumptions. One might worry, then, that the process of critically engaging with the metropolis accounts for a too-important share of the *raison d'être* of this “peripheral” literature.

It is a peculiar paradox that these islands have been at the forefront of a tradition of “writing back” to a centre of which they are supposed to form an integral part ... It is no doubt because of, rather than despite, this double bind, that Martinique, the most fully assimilated of the Overseas Departments, and an island which has no political or institutional claim to the word “post-colonial,” has produced some of the key theorists of this expanding academic area. (McCusker 113)

These ironies present themselves, of course, beyond the boundaries of the French-speaking world and evoke more general postcolonial grapplings with Enlightenment-faithful notions of cultural authority. They underlie, for example, Graham Huggan’s articulation of a “postcolonial exotic” as the capitalism-friendly commodification of recuperated oppositional discourses. Huggan interrogates what he dubs the “mediating roles of postcolonial writers/thinkers” (viii) who intervene critically in order to render (their own) marginal texts legible to post-imperial metropolitan centers—texts that end up, then, at once countering and contained by the market-driven system that frames both the “culture industry” of alterity and the “transnationally conceived academic field” (x) of postcolonial studies. The postcolonial intellectuals identified by Huggan find themselves subtly mainstreamed,<sup>8</sup> collaborating with those they seek to undermine, and resembling in this way nothing so much as Elie Kédourie’s embattled “marginal men” or Appiah’s “*comprador* intelligentsia”—the “relatively small, Western-style, Western-trained, group of writers and thinkers, who mediate the trade in cultural commodities of world capitalism at the periphery” (240). It is my contention, then, that the codification of even insularly generated theoretical perspectives risks recuperating these non-hexagonal francophone discourses and leaving Eurocentric epistemologies largely intact while, even more distressingly, excluding important ex-centric voices.

### THE HAITIAN “SITUATION”

The ambivalent adherence to the notion of theory as authorizing center for the Martinican writers discussed above is, I would argue, at least in part responsible for a certain sidelining of other regional writers. In other words, the “big voices” of Césaire, Glissant, and the Creolists have in some respects come to drown out other, less “fêted” (Gallagher 9)—but

equally provocative—contributions insofar as earning global critical recognition is concerned. Condé’s aforementioned essay and Lionnet’s *Autobiographical Voices* both take this phenomenon into consideration, focusing on what the formation of a regional canon that includes almost exclusively male Martinican writer-intellectuals has meant for women writers of the Caribbean. Departing from a not-unrelated questioning of processes of in- and exclusion, I consider here the consequences of a “theory-less,” “not-Paris” ethos for Haiti and its literature.

To begin with, Haiti’s writers have been quite explicitly set apart by their Antillean compatriots. That is, writer-intellectuals of the French Caribbean departments have exhibited a decided uneasiness as far as Haitian literature is concerned. As francophone scholar Régis Antoine points out, Haiti’s creative reliance on elements characterized as non-Cartesian by early twentieth-century discourses of Antillean resistance have in the past kept the island republic somewhat on the outskirts of a regional francophone affiliation.

Up until 1940, caught up in their concerns with issues of identity, young Antillean intellectuals were not at all prepared to study myth and the imaginary, priority having been given to ideology and to poetics. Take, for example, the image that they created of Haiti, which they reduced to the land of vodou and first site of the victorious emergence of Negritude, thus ignoring the ensemble of peasant based popular culture ... ignoring the Haitian novels that spoke precisely the ‘dramas of the land,’ ignoring Indigenism. Fifty years later, René Ménéil again noted that suspiciousness about all that seemed to resemble folklorization, and that resulted ... as much in lacunae in anthropological knowledge as in a legitimate refusal of exoticism. (*Littérature* 188)

While one might argue that Negritude likewise sought a revalorization of a non-French cultural agenda not far removed from the Haitian Indigenist perspective, the former movement nonetheless placed itself within a familiar rhetorical frame—a quasi-manifesto-founded cry of resistance in the *Cahier* and *Tropiques*, bolstered by an aesthetic alliance with Surrealism and the much-celebrated friendship/patronage of André Breton. As Nick Nesbitt has so accurately affirmed, “Césaire was inextricably bound to the culture he critiqued” (121).<sup>9</sup> In other words, whereas Negritude’s content was unquestionably counter-cultural, its fundamental structure reflected contemporary French paradigms of *avant-garde* self-expression.

Insofar as the academic community is concerned, the Haitian republic has also quite clearly been marked by a limiting geo-political and literary exceptionalism, its writers largely ghettoized by the fact of Haiti’s exceptional history. On the one hand, scholars often evoke the broad symbolic

resonance of Haiti's revolution in the wider world, noting the extra-insular relevance of the principles of universal freedom for which the Haitians fought. Indeed, as Michael Dash has argued, "it is through Haiti that we can grasp the inescapable historical nature of the other America and the first Caribbean experiment with a foundational poetics and a collective self-invention in the face of the colonial refusal to grant opacity to the subjugated other" (*Other America* 42). At the same time, however, postcolonial theorists have tended to emphasize the uniqueness of this event and, in so doing, to place Haiti outside of discussions of regional literature and culture. The island republic is thus caught up in what Benítez-Rojo labels "the argument between those who argue that centripetal forces are stronger than centrifugal ones in the Caribbean and those who think the opposite; that is, the old unity/diversity debate." (37). Martin Munro describes this phenomenon of exceptionalizing marginalization as the paradoxically constraining "excess of history" (*Exile* 108) that forever marks Haiti as schizophrenically failed with respect to itself, and irrevocably different with respect to its neighbors. Indeed, while scholars have become increasingly committed to the critical cultivation of a regional unity among the various islands of the Americas, and particularly among those connected by a common colonial language, Haiti stands apart. Ever since its seizing of independence, the island nation has been perceived as an absolute anomaly—its past, present, and future readable almost exclusively through the lens of the seminal moment of its revolution. This violent and spectacularly transgressive claiming of black sovereignty in 1804 has effectively destined Haiti to the status of shining example for its sympathizers, and cautionary tale for its detractors. The nation has thus found itself at once glorified as "the land where Negritude stood up for the first time" (Césaire, *Cahier* 24), and then vilified and pitied as "the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere." From either perspective, Haiti's cultural presence on the world stage has been marginalized as the spatio-temporal site of a never-ending story of carnage and brutality. In both present-day and historical evocations of the revolution, the narrative is one of "barbarism and unspeakable violence, outside the realm of civilization and beyond human language. It is an excessive event" (Fischer 4). Valerie Kaussen argues that "the 'problem with Haiti' is not its imputed belatedness and difference, but rather the incompatibility of current Caribbean post-colonial theories of creolization, multiculturalism, and hybridity with Haitian histories of decolonization, revolution, and militancy ... In this critical context," she insists, "the continuing tradition of the Haitian



Revolution can only be approached negatively or not approached at all.” (18) As Dash also asserts, “the Republic of Haiti, independent longer than any of the countries discussed in *The Empire Writes Back* and presumably wrestling with a post-colonial reality since 1804, inexplicably gets short shrift” (“Postcolonial” 231).<sup>10</sup> Thus while the revolution marked an aggressive bid on the part of the newly independent Haitians for inclusion in a global—if reconfigured—world order, the event has had an ironically isolating effect on Haiti’s positioning with respect to other parts of the Caribbean.

There can be no question, of course, but that the Haitian Revolution represents a singular event in New World—indeed, in human—history. It marks the ultimate postcolonial gesture of refusal<sup>11</sup>—“ex-centric” act *par excellence*—and is *the* critical move (and by that, of course, I mean both essential and fault-finding rather than theoretical) of Haitianity. But Haiti’s black leaders were not interested in constructing “an isolated African-American enclave that could have played no role in world affairs” (Genovese 88). They envisioned full “participation in the mainstream of world history rather than away from it” (92). The act of writing in the island nation thus reflects both a principled exceptionality and a “strategy for achieving recognition in a modern global culture” (Dash, *Other America* 46). Maximilien Laroche nicely captures this relationship between Haiti’s literary ambitions and its revolutionary past:

If there must be a redefinition of the Haitian man, that is what Haitian literature dreams of, it can only be crafted in conjunction with the entirety of the Caribbean and the Americas ... Haitian literature concerns not only the Caribbean and the Third World, but all those invested in moving beyond the world order put into place in 1492. (*Littérature* 18)

Nevertheless, one cannot help but note a certain amount of critical discomfort with Haitian literature’s representation of and infusion with its legacy of revolutionary violence—a discomfort that in fact has a great deal to do, I believe, with “not-Paris.” Another passage from Nesbitt’s *Voicing Memory* is particularly revealing. Nesbitt writes,

[B]y 1804, after *years of violent warfare* had decimated the island, this revolution overthrew the world order of the previous century to institute the world’s first black republic. For all its momentous implications, the Haitian Revolution remained largely *quarantined within the confines* of a single Caribbean island, the young nation working through its own *dialectic of terror and enlightenment* as slavery and colonialism lived on elsewhere throughout the nineteenth century. (xii, emphasis mine)

A leading scholar of Haitian history and literature, and unambiguous “sympathizer” as concerns Haiti’s contemporary plight, Nesbitt quali-

fies the Haitian Revolution as the bold and isolated precursor to what he refers to as the “second Antillean revolution”—the decolonizing efforts of the post-World War I writers and theorists he examines and who, again, aside from Danticat are “all products of Parisian training in the *Sciences humaines*” (xiv). These next-wave revolutionaries, Nesbitt asserts,

seized the arms of their oppressors in an uprising that *transformed the political and economic face of the planet*, bringing an end to European colonialism. The astounding fact of this revolution as it occurred in France’s colonies, however, is that it proceeded—with important exceptions—*not through the redeployment of absolute terror, violence, and destruction*, but via a reconstruction in human understanding and experience. This was a transformation whose weapons were *the humanist arms of imagination, communication, and insight: poetry, literature, theater, philosophy, and polemical tracts* ... The Toussaint Louverture of this cultural revolution was the Martinican poet and statesman Aimé Césaire ... Just as the earlier architects of the Haitian Revolution had applied the standards of the French Enlightenment to the actual conditions of slavery and the plantation, Césaire, along with such writers as Frantz Fanon, René Ménil, and Edouard Glissant, *transformed the tools they appropriated in Paris* in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s ... redirecting those sources to critique and undermine colonial violence and to transform the colonized subjects it had produced. (xii–xiii, emphasis mine)

This description uses very different terminology from the language of seclusion and finitude applied to Haiti’s revolution. Nesbitt places Haiti’s resistance history in a separate space—conceptually inspirational but practically isolated. He evokes Haiti’s bloody, visceral seizing of sovereignty in terms that markedly contrast with the civility and universal humanist intellectualism that characterize the writer-*theorists* of the Antilles.<sup>12</sup>

Léon-François Hoffmann affirms this contrast even more stringently. He makes the following claim in *Le Roman haïtien*:

[i]f the colonial era has left few traumatic traces in [Haiti’s] collective memory, it is because the prowess of its ancestors has effaced the humiliation of dependency, has avoided the complex of the decolonized (such as it prevails these days in a large part of the Third World and, particularly, in the Caribbean). (27–28)

Bernadette Cailler similarly places Haiti in a category *à part*, contending that “whatever may have been the avatars, the tragedies, of Haitian History after independence, these are not at all assimilable to the problems faced by Martinican and Guadeloupean society ... [T]he unique destiny of Haiti demands, from the outset, that we keep these texts at a certain distance” (51). Cailler argues that a line must be drawn between those nations still “administratively attached to France” (53) and those,

she implies, that are properly post-colonial (in the diachronic sense of the term). Cailler goes on to suggest that, unlike the writers of Martinique and Guadeloupe, Haiti's writers have somehow failed to initiate or even to envision a discourse that might propose an alternative to European cultural models. She characterizes Haitian literature as dead-ended in its insularity—without a productive presence in the postcolonial world.

Ultimately, such intra-regional border-marking must be seen as problematic, privileging as it does the relationship between Europe (France, Paris) and its (former) Caribbean colonies while dismissing the parallels that persist in the region beyond the specifics of a given island's post-coloniality. Indeed, even if it could be argued that Haiti's revolution somehow silenced the traumatic echoes of its early colonial past, the fact of the island's nearly twenty-year *re*-colonization by the United States from 1915 to 1934 and veritable recolonizations by the United States and the United Nations in the later twentieth and early twenty-first centuries provides at least some motivation for considering Haiti's socio-political and literary trajectory alongside that of its Caribbean neighbors.<sup>13</sup> Yes, the Haitian Revolution represents a point of exceptionality, but the fact of independence should not project Haiti into an entirely different sphere of consideration. On the contrary, assimilationism and *bovarysme*<sup>14</sup> have marked Haiti's literary and socio-cultural history as indelibly as in the Antillean departments of France. Indeed, historically, Haiti's writing elite has, like that of the French Antilles, had to negotiate its tendency to look aspirationally toward literary and cultural models promulgated in France. Where Léon-François Hoffmann has insisted, for example, that "Haiti's ethnic composition and her political, economic and intellectual development are quite different from those of her neighbours" (*Essays* 8), he also recognizes that "the fetishization and exclusive admiration of the literary production of France marks the Haitian educational system as profoundly as it does that of Martinique (and Guadeloupe)—like the Antilles, Haiti turned to France for cultural and literary models" (13). In *Lettres créoles*, Chamoiseau and Confiant affirm the essential commonalities that unite the pasts, and thus the presents and futures, of Haiti and Martinique, Guadeloupe, and Guyana. They explain:

Despite its accession to independence in 1804, the history of Haiti, on a literary and linguistic level at least, does not differ fundamentally from that of the Lesser Antilles or Guyana. Paradoxically, political and social situations very different from one another, and causes absolutely specific to one or the other case, produce similar effects. (231)

Toumson, for his part, affirms that "Guadeloupean, Martinican,

Guyanese, and Haitian literature evolved in accordance with the same laws, were familiar with the same schools and the same conflicts between antagonistic tendencies” (35).

Despite the comparability of Haiti and the Antillean Departments, however, and despite the remarkable prolificness of Haiti’s writers, some of Haiti’s most important voices have been largely excluded from scholarship of the region. Even those scholars who have noted the disproportionate amount of attention paid to the so-called French Antillean writers remain hesitant to include Haiti in critical considerations of the (at the very least, French postcolonial) Caribbean. Mary Gallagher, for example, having rightly identified a number of problematic realities concerning the hegemony of Martinican literature as regards critical interest in the French-speaking Americas, finds a host of reasons not to include Haiti in her own study. She argues,

The history of Haiti is unique in the Caribbean: it is unimpeachably different in relation not just to French Caribbean history, but to Caribbean history in general. Haiti has been, indeed, and continues to be for every other Caribbean island, although particularly for the French-Caribbean, an over-significant other. Two further factors that distinguish the Haitian literary context are the extremely low levels of literacy in Haiti, and the fact that Haitian writers are largely and for obvious political, cultural, and economic reasons, writers in exile. (7)

While Haiti is perhaps unique in many ways, its insular literacy rates are of little relevance given that the primary readership for work from the entire region is based primarily in North America and Europe. Also, although it is not inaccurate to characterize Haitian writers as, overwhelmingly, “writers in exile,” Frankétienne, Figiolé, and Philoctète, as well as Gary Victor, Evelyne Trouillot, and Marie Chauvet are all among the admittedly few but still very significant novelists to have written from within the island space. Due, then, to such singularizing perceptions of Haiti, there are only a handful of its authors who are consistently evoked in broader discussions of *francophonie*; and it is telling that these are the writers who ascribe to identifiable Franco-European discourses. In effect, the much-discussed author-activists Jacques Roumain, Jacques-Stephen Alexis, and René Depestre have all espoused variants of Marxism,<sup>15</sup> embracing what Kemedjo has dubbed a practice of “literary civicism” (*Négritude* 11) [*civisme littéraire*], and Depestre—vocal defender of a social realist aesthetic he models on the work of French writer Louis Aragon—also proclaims fidelity to Surrealism. Moreover, all three of the above-named writers spent a significant part of their writing lives in exile, in France.

## THE PARTICULAR CASE OF THE SPIRALISTS

“If one theme characterizes modern Haitian literature, it is that of exile,” writes Michael Dash (“Haïti” 46). What to make, then, of these three writers who have so categorically refused to leave Haiti, fighting against the all too accurate contention that “to be Haitian is to be in exile” (Munro, *Exile* 5)? Determined to engage absolutely with the quotidian violence that plagued Haiti during the Duvalier régimes, the Spiralists have spent much of their creative energies figuring out how to survive while writing within and about their country. In *Vœu de voyage et intention romanesque*, by far the most theoretical offering produced by any of the Spiralists, Figolé articulates and exemplifies a not-exile (“not-Paris”) ethos. Opaque and meandering rather than explicatory, lyrical and layered rather than straightforward, this long essay-poem communicates by its very form the perspective put forward in its content—and this perspective is grounded in a specific refutation of practices and tendencies that, as I have argued above, characterize much Antillean literature of the last century. Throughout the essay, Figolé rejects transparency, narratives of progress, formulaic fiction, and adherence to extra-insular traditions, calling instead for “signs, interpretations, suggested visions, intelligent understandings that find their own value far from overly transparent, overly intellectual explanations” (15). He takes issue even with contemporary enthusiasm for the cultural contributions of postcolonial peoples, which he perceives as so much patronizing incomprehension: “Straightaway the rational (the certain knowledge of others) is dazzled by the richness of the irrational. Of what they deem such but which, in fact, is no more than a rational that has not yet been inventoried. Not yet examined” (77).

Figolé’s lack of clarity is strategic, serving ultimately to prevent theorists and literary critics from focusing on certain of the principles he evokes while relegating others to the background. This perspective allows him to extol the particular virtues of the Spiralist perspective, while remaining critical of any tendency toward totalizing literary practices.

But be careful! Be careful, so that the new literature bursting forth in the magnificent explosion of my words does not bring on some painful delivery by limiting itself to a particular schema (a particular ghetto) in which to shut itself up ... so that such a literature, once realized, does not close the door to other songs ... (104–5)

His and other Spiralist works are thus meant to be an exploration and interrogation of reality rather than the vehicle for any predetermined message. It is worth noting, for example, that of all the most significant

twentieth-century literary philosophies of the French-speaking Caribbean—Indigenism, Negritude, *antillanité*, *créolité*—Spiralism alone privileges an aesthetic perspective over an ethnic origin or socio-political agenda in its very name. While this by no means translates into a disinterest in aesthetics on the part of the originators of the above-mentioned movements, or socio-political indifference on the part of the Spiralists, the latter's foundational self-distancing from the Caribo- or ethno-centric is nevertheless significant. In effect, where so many of the most celebrated and widely published writers of the postcolonial world hotly debate the theoretical underpinnings of their creative choices, the Spiralists provide no manifesto, no *fil d'Ariane* to guide the reader-theorist through the labyrinths of their prose. As Fignolé has quite blatantly put it, “We have consistently refused to imprison Spiralism within the frame of a single definition. We leave that to the critics and historians” (Magnier 46). Whether irony, invitation, or both, this attitude presents a very particular challenge to those of us, “critics and historians” by trade, who find ourselves intrigued, fascinated, frustrated by their works. It summons us to embrace the discomfort of engaged but unguided readership—to avoid tethering any of the Spiralists' resolutely Haitian texts to a more comfortable theoretical sub- or paratext.

Maryse Condé, for example, does not put Frankétienne, Fignolé, or Philoctète on her list of self-canonizing francophone Caribbean “rule-makers”—an omission that is likely as much a reflection of the Spiralists' overall exclusion from critical discourse as it is a consequence of their unwillingness to produce any sort of manifesto. According to Condé, it is this refusal to precisely theorize their aesthetic that has kept the Spiralists on the margins. She maintains that the overall absence of critical interest in Spiralism is a direct consequence of this imprecision regarding its founders' ideological constructs, and she attributes Spiralism's “unpopularity” among scholars to the apparent vagueness of its theoretical foundations. The discourse of Spiralism lacks coherence, she insists, leaving the critic bewildered, or without much to say.<sup>16</sup> Similarly evoking the theoretical, Charles Arthur and Michael Dash sum up Spiralism's perceived value “in theory” as opposed to “in practice” in their 1999 anthology of Haitian literature, *Libète*. They maintain that “[w]ithin Haiti the only movement with any literary impact was the *ill-defined* [emphasis mine] doctrine of *spiralisme*, started by Frankétienne” (292). Arthur and Dash's comments echo, in a sense, Léon-François Hoffmann's ostensibly generous assertion in *Histoire littéraire de la francophonie* that “[t]he question is not whether Frankétienne has elaborated

a universally useful system, nor whether this system is coherent or entirely original. What is interesting is that Frankétienne was the first Haitian writer to have sought to create his own aesthetic structure, rather than adopting or adapting one from elsewhere" (215).<sup>17</sup> Though they intend to make rather different points, the above francophonists all suggest that Spiralism's absent or confusing theoretical self-fashioning presents a stumbling block that—whether negotiated or forgiven—risks undermining appreciation of its creative contribution.

It is interesting to consider these impressions of the Spiralists and their works in the light of current debates surrounding the past and present value—one might even say the usefulness—of the literature of the French-speaking world with respect to Franco-European culture. The 44 signatories (among which Condé, but not either of the two living Spiralists) of the recently published manifesto(!) *Pour une littérature-monde en français* contend that non-hexagonal literature has for too long served as the enlivening counterpoint—"a poetic and novelistic effervescence"—to a stale, overly intellectualized French tradition.<sup>18</sup> According to the manifesto, modern and postmodern French letters have become increasingly removed from "the world," resulting in "a literature without any other objective but itself, engaged, as it used to be said, in its own criticism in the very process of its enunciation"—"texts henceforth referring back only to other texts in a game of endless combinations." The manifesto contends, in other words, that French literature has been stifled by excessive theorization. Ironically, though, the impetus for the drafting of this manifesto was the awarding of five major French literary prizes in 2006 to writers from the French-speaking world.<sup>19</sup> "Ironically," of course, because this series of events—the awards followed by the manifesto—so beautifully illustrates the awkward dynamic by which francophone writers reject the normalizing apparatus of French culture and demand recognition by and within its structures.

Again, these are exactly the issues that must be addressed when considering the relative value of theory in the postcolonial context and, more specifically, in assessing the position of the Spiralists in this context. For I am arguing that the absence of systematized theoretical elucidation and self-referentiality in the Spiralists' works has something to do with their veritable absence from regional literary canons. This situation suggests, I believe, a correlation between a refusal of theory and a certain degree of marginalization from within an already marginalized space. It raises the possibility that an unquestioning acceptance—expectation—of theory as paradigm sets problematic boundaries and subtly undercuts the

regional unity—the “transversality” [*transversalité*] (Glissant, *Discours* 230)—so often and explicitly called for by writers and theorists of the postcolonial Americas. Having never produced a substantial body of literature establishing the tenets of the Spiralist aesthetic, Frankétienne, Fignolé, and Philoctète offer very little to counter assertions of insularity, inconsistency, and even irrelevance. I am interested in the response of the “literary institution”<sup>20</sup> to this silence and the extent to which it has determined the relative critical fate of the three authors. As Richard Watts maintains, for example, paratextual writings facilitate the circulation of francophone postcolonial texts in a global, Euro-driven (I mean to refer both to the prefix and the currency) framework marked by post-imperial tensions. I am arguing that by not making extensive paratextual theoretical gestures, the Spiralists effectively sustain those tensions and limit the possibility of a recuperation often disguised as appreciation, sympathy, or understanding. By refusing to provide interpretive tools, the Spiralists have in many respects foregone the accumulation of cultural capital and, consequently, the international (Euro-North American) cachet/distinction/reputation enjoyed by their more “invested” contemporaries. Only some of their writings have been published and/or circulated outside of Haiti and so are costly and difficult to procure. Only two of their works have been translated into English, and that just recently.<sup>21</sup> Though a Parisian house published both of Fignolé’s novels in the late eighties and early nineties, Frankétienne’s works were only picked up for reprinting by French publishers in the late nineties, and not one of Philoctète’s works was printed outside of Haiti until 2003, at which point Actes Sud (posthumously) published an anthology of his poetry.

It would be naïve, of course, or even disingenuous to romanticize the *de facto* silencing that has largely prevented the Spiralists from assuming a more prominent place in a postcolonial literary canon. Philoctète in particular has very explicitly expressed frustration with his invisibility as a writer in a country/context of non-readers.<sup>22</sup> In discussing a then-recent literary project, *Les Cahiers du vendredi*, Philoctète states plainly his desire to broaden the reading/consuming audience as essential to his understanding of himself as a writer. “We want our books published,” he insists. “We want to be known by the public at large, instead of being confined to a small group of friends. With *Les Cahiers du vendredi*, we hope to gain an opening not only on Haiti, but on the world at large” (“Entretien” 623). He continues:

In order for Haitian literature to be really strong, the people must be literate.



What is a book anyway? It is a product, a commercial item. I write in order to be read, in order to sell to the people around me. But if they can't read, my book is worth nothing. It is a commercial product which is going to stay here, insulted by dust. (626)

In a foreword to *Massacre River*, the English translation of *Le Peuple des terres mêlées*, Lyonel Trouillot similarly attributes Philoctète's neglect by the wider world to the unwillingness and/or inability to facilitate his own fame:

Ti René was not an expert seducer bent on insinuating himself into the ranks of the powerful in a quest for fame ... He knew nothing about promotional strategies, the wheeling and dealing that foster great careers. And in those days, suffering from a form of racism or condescension, the international press and the university scholars in the West chose to believe that Haiti was populated exclusively by victims and executioners, by paupers and thuggish Tontons-Macoutes. In the eyes of the West, under the reign of Papa Doc, the best of Haiti was to be sought elsewhere. (14)

The frustrations of literal and metaphorical insularity are most certainly at the root of Philoctète's as well as Frankétienne's and Fignolé's under-recognition. Indeed, though they have remained fully committed to the geographical space of their island, all three writers have actively sought out avenues by which they might reach a greater audience. I would nevertheless submit that the relative marginalization of Spiralism has allowed for a remarkable creative unfettered-ness in the works of the three authors. That is, if Frankétienne, Fignolé, and Philoctète have missed out on the sponsor-like partnerships or partner-like relationships that have been cultivated between certain Antillean writers and their Western critics, they have also avoided any hints of the formulaic fiction that often results from the "academicization" of a postcolonial aesthetic. That is, the Spiralists have managed to avoid the "prescriptive models" (Kemedjio, *Négritude* 11) that seem in many ways to determine the literary output of some of the region's more celebrated, theory-crafting writers.<sup>23</sup> The three authors resist such "helpful" literary conventions as, say, clear narrative beginnings, distinguishable characters, temporal consistency, punctuation, etc.—rendering literal Watts's rhetorical question: "[H]ow would one approach or even learn of the existence of a book that has no title, no cover, and no indication of who should read it and how?" (16). Indeed. The tone of Watts' question characterizes such a literary stance as unthinkably impractical, implicitly belying his later assertion that "'opacity' has become part of the francophone text's appeal" and that "the paratext has abandoned its goal of providing ostensibly transparent access to the text" (20). In reality, only a limited

opacity has been valorized in francophone Caribbean letters—an opacity that more often than not overtly proclaims itself as a political position and undertakes to justify and deconstruct itself—telling diegetically rather than showing mimetically what it is resisting and what it is refusing to do. Those texts anchored in true and profound obscurity—creative writings unbounded by theory and by much of the paratextually and pragmatically requisite—are too often silenced.

Lahens devotes a chapter of her long essay, *L'Exil: Entre l'ancrage et la fuite l'écrivain haïtien* to Figiolé's *Vœu de voyage*, which she dubs a "so unjustly unrecognized little book" (25). Lahens, like the Spiralist author, maintains that the phenomenon of exile is one of the primary constitutive elements of the Haitian literary and psycho-social experience: "A deportee from the outset, then rendered incapable despite himself of 'belonging,' the Haitian writer is often tempted to end, by means of the voyage, the double and painful exile he experiences within his native land" (22). Indeed, the voyage has profoundly determined the evolution of Haitian letters throughout the twentieth century, and the Haitian writer's relationship to elsewhere has been a concern of all three Spiralists. Theirs is a refusal *avant la lettre* of the alienated/-ing psychological phenomenon implicit in Glissant's concept of the Return (*Retour*). In effect, exile for Frankétienne—the condition of "not-Paris" excentricity, if you will—has little to do with a physical situation or geographical position. Rather, he understands exile as a state of mind and being in which the individual/artist—as a result of intimidation, ambition, assimilation, etc.—is less than true to his or her personal ethic and aesthetic.<sup>24</sup> More stridently opposed to the phenomenon of exile, Figiolé equates *le voyage* with desertion, alienation, and self-loathing: "I call this flight illusory," he announces, "Here constantly contests over there. Especially when over there is disdain, pitying to boot, for here ... The fascination for over there is accentuated by the conceded or imposed presence of over there smack in the middle of here" (50–51). Deliberately provocative—"I hear, from here, the enraged cries of those who ... will accuse me of limiting my horizons. So be it" (78–79)—Figiolé in no way backs down from his belief in the value of the voyage refused.

Rather than seek a physical exile that might somehow attenuate their state of isolation within the boundaries of their country, Frankétienne, Figiolé, and Philoctète have always written within and out of the tension between the insular and the global. For them, the fact of physical isolation in Haiti has by no means diminished their capacity to dialogue productively with elsewhere. They belie what Kaussen has pointed to as

the problematic implication in criticism by Gallagher, Dash, and Bongie that only the works of exiled writers succeed in narrating properly the “postmodern and postcolonial,” the “hybrid and shifting identities” of the contemporary Caribbean. The writings of Frankétienne, Fignolé, and Philoctète contest the notion that “the movement of postmodernity and the experience of postcolonial exile have in fact liberated contemporary Haitian writers from the dark past of Haiti’s totalizing militancy, revolutionary nationalism, and isolating modernism” (17). The Spiralists straddle the supposed divide between militant Haitian modernism and cosmopolitan Creole postmodernism, despite their physical positioning within the strikingly closed space of the Haitian Republic. As Frankétienne has specifically argued, their rootedness in Haiti places them at the crux of issues facing the whole of modern society, inasmuch as “Haiti is a point of reference for the world, a magnified image of global unease” (Marty 191). As Frankétienne asserts elsewhere:

I effectively lived a confinement that was the source of existential anguish, an anguish that exploded into my writing. It was during the time that I couldn’t leave Haiti that I accomplished imaginary voyages not only in writing and reading but also in my dreams ... I experienced all possible voyages because confinement was systematic in Haiti. I had this gluttonous desire to possess everything that existed on the planet, to interiorize it, to devour it. (Chemla and Pujol 116)

The sentiments Frankétienne expresses here regarding embodiment of the universal via immersion in the particular indisputably connects with ideas emanating from other areas of the French-speaking Caribbean. I am thinking specifically of Dash’s assertion that, in the face of such isolating phenomena as Antillean departmentalization and Duvalierism, “open insularity, the shifting ground between lived opacity and fated relationality ... characterizes francophone Caribbean writing” (“Postcolonial” 235).<sup>25</sup> Frankétienne’s comments echo Glissant’s declaration that “here, in the island, the encirclement that risked blocking the imagination on the contrary inflames and rushes up on it, chargers from the sea ... Closed in, surrounded, burning to imagine the whole in his image, [man] must open up, see something else, the other” (22). This dialectic of the individual and the universal, of the centripetal and the centrifugal, of the closed and the open, is precisely encapsulated in the form of the spiral—a form that allows such apparent contradictions to remain intact, functionally unresolved, largely untheorized. It underlies the Spiralists’ confidence that insularity does not limit the reach of their imagination. Spiralism’s “incoherence” is no accident, then. Rather, it reflects an unwillingness to be determined by the temptations or the exigencies of a

codified theoretical position. Having lived their confinement in the geographical space of Duvalier's Haiti as an opportunity for openness on a creative level, the Spiralists allow the interaction between physical internment and creative freedom to permeate all of their fiction and to ground a non-theory-based conception of themselves as postcolonial artists.

## NOTES

1 *Discours* 427.

2 As Valerie Kaussen rightly notes, "Guadeloupean and Martinican writers have access to a French publishing industry to which Haitian and even French Canadian publishing cannot compare in terms of global distribution and promotion" (20).

3 Cf. Lorde's essay "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," in *Sister Outsider*.

4 Guyana is another regional French Department and has a political status vis-à-vis France that is identical to that of Martinique and Guadeloupe.

5 Indeed, we must recognize this vocalness as, in large part, a function of the desire to self-define—to avoid the fate that generally awaits those who (allow themselves to) remain the object of discourse for Europeans. A related example: according to Simon Njami, African creativity has long remained silent in terms of self-commentary. It is because of this silence, this "refusal to lay itself bare," that the West took up the task of interpreting, or rather *mis*interpreting Africa's art. Njami writes: "This millennial misunderstanding came to a climax with the attempt to decipher the world of artistic creation through a single perspective: the history of (Western) art. Due to its silence, African creativity was sent into an obscure, ill-defined limbo. From the start of colonization—ever since the African Middle Ages in fact—pure, authentic, identifiable indigenous creativity ceased to exist ... Faced with the creators' constant silence, the productions were catalogued and labeled according to this or that person's interpretations, and stored away in European ethnological museums" (16).

6 "Édouard Glissant has often argued that there may be individual Martinican writers but there is no Martinican literature and no literary audience" (Dash, "Introduction" 310). In a 1984 interview, Glissant asserts, "I don't believe that West Indian literature exists yet since literature supposes an action and a reaction between a public and an audience. I repeat that we West Indian writers, we are writing forewords to tomorrow's literature" (Degras and Magnier 14).

7 For a thorough and very fair examination of Le Brun's position as expressed in *Pour Aimé Césaire* and *Statue cou-coupé* see Chris Bongie, *Islands and Exiles* 342–47.

8 Maeve McCusker posits a similar argument in her assessment of the *créolité* movement: "This circulation via the metropolis undercuts the explicitly anti-hegemonic rhetoric of the *créolité* movement, which is recuperated, as a commodity, by the centre against which it positions itself—a mainstreaming of the margins which is of course symptomatic of the postcolonial artist more generally" (118).

9 Nesbitt's very astute assessment of Césaire's "insider" status bears quoting at greater length: "Césaire ... became both a guiding voice of French Caribbean culture and an active, innovative, and ideologically autonomous presence on the Parisian intellectual scene ... [H]e forged for himself a role structurally homologous to that of the Sartrean total intellectual in which Césaire accumulated intellectual and polit-

ical capital by positioning himself as the archetypal black poet-statesman. His proximity to and familiarity with the existentialist movement and the functioning of that intellectual milieu (former *normalien*, consecration by Breton, growing fame in Francophone literary circles, Parisian presence as both an intellectual published in *Les Temps modernes* and *Présence africaine* and a deputy) allowed him successfully to fulfill this role” (*Voicing Memory*, 121).

10 Indeed, Dash is among the few scholars who make a point to look at literary Haiti as a persistently integral and dialogic entity within the American region. The majority of critical interventions tend to focus on the Revolution and its aftermath—Sibylle Fischer’s *Modernity Disavowed* and Nick Nesbitt’s *Universal Emancipation*, two exceptional in-depth analyses of Haiti’s revolution and its resonance in a globally modern context, as well as the special issues of *Yale French Studies*, *The Haiti Issue: 1804 and 19th Century French Studies*, and of *Research in African Literatures*, *Haiti, 1804-2004: Literature Culture and Art*, are examples of this phenomenon—despite the fact that Haiti’s writers themselves have very rarely made the Revolution the subject of their fiction.

11 Arguably a less dramatic act, worthy of noting here is Edmond Laforest’s symbolically resonant suicide in 1915. The well-known Haitian poet is said to have serenely tied an *Encyclopédie Larousse* around his neck before jumping off a bridge into a river and drowning to death. This act might be read as a particularly clear affirmation of “not-Paris.”

12 It might be argued that Frantz Fanon bridges somewhat the discursive gap that distinguishes France’s “enlightened” and “civilized” Caribbean territories from the perennially violent Haitian state—the implicit borders “that separate the developed and the undeveloped, the ‘civilized’ and ‘savage’” (Kaussen 206). I refer to the affinities between Fanon’s valorization of revolutionary violence and the ethical perspective of the Spiralists in Part III of this study.

13 Kaussen makes this point beautifully, maintaining that “the significance of Haiti’s challenge to the modern colonial order continues to be evident two centuries after 1804. The *cordon sanitaire* around Haiti is still in place, and we need only to look at the dream-work of literature and film about *vodou* and zombies, at racist discourses, rumors of AIDS, and the world perception of Haiti as the America’s ‘little Africa,’ to recognize the challenge that Haiti continues to present to the contemporary world order and to the excesses of global capitalism (globalization)” (6).

14 This is a term first used by Haitian ethnologist Jean Price-Mars to describe and condemn the Haitian elite’s alienated aspiration to French cultural standards and values. Jacques Corzani comments on Haiti’s post-revolutionary assimilative tendencies as well in his 1978 *La Littérature des Antilles-Guyane françaises*: “Haiti, despite its independence, languished in a rather sterile contemplation of France and its culture. Far from favoring any sort of rupture, the economic and social difficulties of the young State encouraged the cultivated bourgeoisie to remain intoxicated by French culture throughout the nineteenth century” (cited by Munro in “Can’t Stand Up” 4–5).

15 Roumain founded the Haitian Communist Party (PCH), of which Alexis was a member, in 1934; Depestre was a student revolutionary in Haiti, involved in the overthrow of Elie Lescot’s government in 1946, an anti-colonial militant in Paris, and a communist intellectual in Guevara’s Cuba. Valerie Kaussen provides very helpful reflections on the appeal of Third International Communism for these post-American Occupation Haitian writers in Chapter 3 of *Migrant Revolutions*.

16 Comments extracted from personal interviews with Maryse Condé.

17 It bears noting that neither Arthur and Dash nor Hoffmann make mention of Figiolé and Philoctète.

18 Francophone scholar Sandy Petrey writes, for example: “Although diagnosticians have often seen French studies as weak and growing weaker, therefore, at least one component of the field has robust vital signs bright with promise. Francophone inquiry is on the rise, in terms of student as well as faculty interest, and it would be asinine for those devoted to other components of our profession not to welcome it with enthusiastic support. The broad array included under the Francophone rubric has infused new life into student interest and new paradigms into scholarly profiles. Its progress has been invigorating for the field as a whole” (134).

19 The Prix Goncourt and Prix du roman de l’Académie Française were awarded to American author Jonathan Little; the Prix Goncourt des Lycéens was awarded to Camerounian writer Léonaora Miano; Congolese writer Alain Mabanckou won the Prix Renaudot; and the Prix Femina went to Canadian Nancy Huston.

20 Here I reference Richard Watts, who opens his study with the following citation from Yanick Lahens’ *L’Exil: Entre l’ancrage et la fuite l’écrivain haïtien*: “For we are aware that more and more it is the literary institution (teaching, research, criticism, publishing) that determines creation and not the other way around” (62).

21 Frankétienne’s Creole theater piece *Pèlin-Tèt (The Noose)* was translated in 1997, though it has yet to be published in its entirety, and Philoctète’s *Le Peuple des terre mêlées* was published as *Massacre River* in 2005.

22 Philippe Bernard comments on this frustrating reality in the introduction to his study of twentieth-century Haitian literature: “The country counts eight million inhabitants and when the ‘administrative services’ of the country announce proudly that ten percent of the population is Francophone, one must raise an eyebrow. The official numbers—three or four percent—seem much closer to reality, now in 2002. Let us add that publishers don’t exist as such in Haiti” (*Rêve* 10). Léon-François Hoffmann provides a helpful analysis—older by two decades—of the latter phenomenon: “The mechanisms of fabrication and circuits of distribution for the book in Haiti still remain rudimentary. There exist barely any publishing houses in the modern sense of the term. The novelist is forced to rely on a printer who more often than not only has access to the most primitive equipment. Every book is published at the expense of the author, with a hundred or so copies printed on paper of mediocre quality. Its distribution depends on the not always particularly impressive initiative of the bookstores, and on the personal efforts of the author ... Outside the country, there are but a scant few specialized shops in France, Canada, and the United States that agree to stock Haitian works” (*Roman haïtien* 43–44).

23 An example of this might be the veritable obsession in postcolonial literature with providing corrected versions of regional history, noted by Graham Huggan among others. The latter writes in “Prizing ‘Otherness’”: “[T]here is still a residual conservatism playing about the Booker’s edges: a conservatism brought out in approaches to the prizewinning novels’ themes. One such theme, which some critics have regarded as a gauge of the Booker’s ‘postcoloniality,’ is revisionist history. More than half of the prizewinning novels to date investigate aspects of—primarily colonial—history, or present a ‘counter-memory’ [cf. Foucault, *Language, Counter-memory, Practice* 23] to the official historical record” (418–19). While, as I suggest in Part III of this study, the Spiralists are themselves concerned with Haitian history, their narratives cannot be said to engage in “revising” or “countering” other narratives of the past.

24 Indeed, Frankétienne is decidedly less condemning than Fignolé as regards Haitian writers who have chosen or been forced into exile, only ever insisting on the importance of remaining in Haiti to his own development as an artist: “I do not deny the effects of exile on the life and destiny of any individual, especially when he is an artist or a writer ... But I do not consider exile as a valid criterion for appreciating

and judging aesthetic quality. To live in exile does not mean detachment from the native land; similarly, the fact of staying in the country must not be viewed as the unquestionable proof of an attachment to the homeland and a will to settle there forever. The problem is far more complex” (“Interview” 390).

25 In this, Dash very implicitly affirms the underlying political circumstances that link fundamentally the three Caribbean islands marked by French colonization: “Such a perspective represents, from the 1950s on, an entirely new path for writing for Martinique, Guadeloupe, and Haiti. Indeed, at a time when these places were increasingly isolated from the world around them, because of Departmentalization and Duvalierism, their literature became more enmeshed in the poetics of hemispheric errancy” (“Caraïbe” 103).

## II

# Shifty/Shifting Characters

*One of the failings of our intellectuals is that we have always utilized the tools or the methodologies of others—of those who have never really understood us. It's a faulty, illogical approach—to use the instruments, the tools of someone who looks at me askance and says to himself: "I'm going to understand the Haitian people." That explains the gap that has always existed between the intelligentsia—the Haitian intellectuals—and the Haitian masses. They don't understand us, they have never understood us. They look at us as "abnormal," as sick people of the Caribbean, as schizophrenics, as crazy people. They look at us as people who enjoy living in misery.*  
—Frankétienne<sup>1</sup>

One of the central concerns that has consistently marked the literature of the French-speaking Caribbean is, of course, that of accurately conveying the physical and emotional reality of the postcolonial individual. Gayatri Spivak, in her seminal essay "Can the Subaltern Speak," reflects on the problematic disparity between the necessarily elitist—albeit sympathetic—discourse of the postcolonial writing subject and the supposed mutism of the object of this discourse. Addressing more specifically the Caribbean situation, Maryse Condé questions the troublingly narrow configurations of the individual and collective in the works of "canonical" male writers of the French-speaking Americas in "Order, Disorder, Freedom." Similarly regionally focused, Edouard Glissant considers the possibilities offered by opacity in representing postcolonial communities, and evokes in particular his own fraught efforts to write "the novel of the We" (*Discours* 267). He and others also pose the question of how to negotiate the African dimension of Afro-Caribbean identity within an overwhelmingly racist and racialized New World context. Destined, it seems often, to appropriate, challenge, and rework discourses of subjecthood presented by imperialist European writers and theorists, postcolonial intellectuals have long struggled with the issue of representing the individual from an original and, for the most part, counterdiscursive perspective. Historically, the most celebrated writers of the region have tended to present readers with whole and sympathetic characters who, although often troubled if not outright traumatized,



ultimately show themselves capable of sustaining coherent and even progressive dialogue about themselves and their condition—or allow an omniscient narrator to do so in their stead. These are intact and exemplary characters—commendable or cautionary—to whom the reader is able to “attach” with relative ease.

Leaving to a separate discussion the question of whether or not such configurative strategies satisfyingly meet the challenges of representation mentioned above, I argue in the following three chapters that Frankétienne, Fignolé, and Philoctète largely write away from such tendencies. I posit that the singular manner in which the Spiralist authors construct the characters of their narratives offers particularly compelling representations of the circumstances of individual and collective existence in the Caribbean—representations that convincingly correspond to realities at once specifically Haitian and more generally postcolonial and postmodern. I begin with a look at Frankétienne’s aggressive and sustained destabilization of his own narrative authority in *Mûr à crever* and *Ultravocal*, noting the extent to which these first Spiralist works establish the template for later works by all three authors. From there, I consider *Les Affres d’un défi*, a narrative that rehabilitates the Haitian zombie on both a textual and metatextual level. I conclude this first section with a look at *Les Possédés de la pleine lune*, *Aube Tranquille*, and *Le Peuple des terres mêlées*, narratives in which phenomena of doubling, fracturing, and schizophrenia are presented as states of being that correspond most faithfully to contemporary reality at once in Haiti and trans/internationally.

Eliminating tales of prevailing heroes uniting troubled communities, and nuancing significantly schema of tormented individuals achieving personal enlightenment, the Spiralist authors undermine the very notion of the protagonist in their writings. They challenge the legitimacy of spectacular heroism or individual transcendent wholeness and instead emphasize the often schizophrenic inextricability of Self and Other(s). They provide honest articulations of the perils of being and offer practical examples of non-individuated self-expression. Questions of cultural authenticity and identity construction, cornerstones of Indigenist, Negritude, Antillanist, and Creolist rhetoric are never exhaustively formulated. The figure of the charismatic, messianic savior is absent, as are the resultant grand narratives that risk reducing the collective to a state of dependent and alienated hero worship. Indeed, the Spiralists suggest that any idealized portrayals of the Haitian individual hero and his or her relationship to the community suppose the existence of unified,

unfettered beings capable of self-affirmation and coherent political action. The three authors thus distance themselves from the “myth or desire for social, cultural, and psychic integration to compensate for the fragmentation and provisionality of the collective Being” (Benítez-Rojo 189), and argue implicitly that the overwhelming political absurdity faced by Haiti’s citizens renders such depictions far from representative of the average Haitian’s personal or social reality.<sup>2</sup>

Though the assertion of the essential incompleteness of Being is narrativized differently by each of the three Spiralist authors, a number of common configurative threads run through their writings. All of their characters are marked by a certain impermeability—a desired Glissantian opacity, even—and while specific individuals are named and developed as characters, a fundamental ambiguity often prevents the reader from defining the principal players with any degree of certainty. Identities in the Spiralists’ works shift arbitrarily, ethical positions are blurred, filial ties are confused at best, and the majority of relationships show themselves to be deeply unstable. Discouraging the labeling of clear-cut heroes or absolute victims, the Spiralists maintain the uncomfortable reality of their characters’ incoherent and often unsympathetic selves—a decidedly chancy strategy for seducing the reader. Virtually all one can know of these characters is their role in the events of the narrative at hand and, with few exceptions, any notion of their past or future can be gleaned only from the example of their present reality—the “few coils of the spiral” (Frankétienne, *Mûr à crever* 90) that the author has managed to grasp briefly. In the rare instances in which genealogies are provided, they serve mainly to destabilize or to undermine identity.<sup>3</sup> Long-suffering zombies, allegorical wanderers, century-hopping, institutionalized former slaves, and headless young housewives, the Spiralist characters seem to exist without reference, fragmented and unpredictable. Like musical passages in textual symphonies, they literally and figuratively bounce off, echo, double, and reflect one another. They are signposts, harbingers, and rest stops—so many parallel or contradictory building blocks that contribute as much to the form as to the content of a given text.

Each of the works discussed in this section proposes a mimetic representation of individuals and/or communities fractured by violence and, consequently, struggling with the seeming impossibility of sustained solidarity. Each illustrates how socio-historical circumstances of injustice and dysfunction directly impact and determine the individual and the collective psyche. The Spiralists acknowledge the physical and psycho-

logical barriers to revolutionary action—at once external (violence, disenfranchisement, limiting “-isms”) and internal(ized) (guilt, fear, neurosis). They make a concerted effort to present Caribbean communities—both subaltern and socially varied—without exoticizing or patronizing their individual members. More than merely paying lip service to the task of finding non-othering ways to represent silenced or discounted peoples, the Spiralists dare to present broken characters that do not necessarily ever become whole or exemplary; they dare to cede their own narrative authority to those who are regularly denied voice or spoken for; they risk writing the “We” despite the inevitable contradictions and disturbing inconsistencies of the communities and individuals that circulate in their works. Indeed, their characters by no means point to any sort of “happy hybridity” (Dash, “Postcolonial” 235) underlying New World postcolonial reality; nor, though, are they expressions of some uniquely Haitian pessimism. By completely, if differently, investing in the formal and conceptual possibilities offered by the spiral, Frankétienne, Fignolé, and Philoctète evoke the unresolved tensions that make up all communities—tensions between life and death, movement and paralysis, freedom and internment, among others. Positing the whole of human existence as a series of spiralic iterations, their works explicitly reject narratives of progress and evolution, featuring instead lives interrupted, relived, or renewed, and constructing the whole of reality as a constant negotiation of seemingly oppositional forces. The result is an aesthetic rooted in a distinctly Haitian worldview yet wholly representative of a broader postcolonial and (post)modern “condition.”

## NOTES

1 “Identité.”

2 Edouard Glissant’s third novel, *Malemort* (1975), similarly presents broken and multiplied characters as “realist” portrayals of the Caribbean individual. It is important to note that this text, I think rightly, is generally singled out by theorists as unusual or as a turning point with respect to Glissant’s other novels—the early *La Lézarde* and *Le Quatrième siècle*, certainly, but also the later *La Case du commandeur* and *Mahogany* (cf. André’s *Caraïbales* [163–64], Burton’s *Roman marron* [85], Hallward’s *Absolutely Postcolonial* [87], Ormerod’s *Introduction* [37], Rochmann’s *Esclave fugitif* [247], et al.). Often referred to as Glissant’s most pessimistic and impenetrable novel—labels regularly assigned to the Spiralists’ fiction—*Malemort* embraces, I believe, a Spiralist ethic-aesthetic from which Glissant subsequently retreats.

3 I cannot help but think of the paratextual information provided at the conclusion of several of Glissant’s novels: the chronology provided at the conclusion of *Le Quatrième siècle*; the inclusion of dates alongside the chapter titles in the table of

contents of *Malemort*; the family tree presented as an appendix to *La Case du commandeur*; the chronology included in *Mahagony*. Whether these additions were Glissant's decision or that of his editor, such date-based appendices are meant to help the reader establish linear bearings in each of the narratives.

## Beings Without Borders

### *Mûr à crever* and *Ultravocal*

*To live in the Caribbean is essentially to manage one's anxiety.*  
—Jean-Claude Fignolé<sup>1</sup>

Frankétienne's *Mûr à crever* is in many respects the most accessible—the most traditional, it might be argued—of all the Spiralist prose works. With an articulation of the Spiralist perspective woven into the very fabric of the narration, the novel offers at once the most explicit delineation of the Spiralist aesthetic and, by that very fact, the most atypical illustration of the creative practices it describes. The basic elements of the story are straightforward and uncomplicated, and the narrative trajectory of a central character is presented with relative coherence. In this, *Mûr à crever* would seem to depart from the chaotic fictional universes I have described above. Despite its ostensible conventionality, however, this 1968 novel provides an initial example of real creative possibilities for narrativizing a Spiralist aesthetic—the first hints of the configurative strategies that appear more dramatically in Frankétienne's subsequent writings as well as in the works of Fignolé and Philoctète. Frankétienne himself regarded *Mûr à crever* as something of a template for his future works—a sort of pre-text that would serve as the point of departure from which to introduce his provocative aesthetic.<sup>2</sup> He explains as much in a 1992 interview:

As it described the journey, both real and fictional, of a character searching for his double, *Mûr à crever* was also an attempt at renewing the novel genre. The novel is an entanglement of structures, situations, connections, interrupted by a succession of unexpected breaches—a writing technique. This process is somewhat reminiscent of the so-called “Brechtian distancing” used in the theater in order to awaken the audience, from time to time, and to trigger its critical reflection vis-à-vis reality. (“Interview” 388)

*Mûr à crever* recounts the misadventures of the young Haitian Raynard, an unemployed, disenfranchised everyman of the postcolony who suffers all the requisite existential and material challenges and humiliations presented by an overwhelmingly corrupt, racist, and classist society. Over

the course of the narrative, Raynand finds himself rejected by his bourgeois girlfriend and her family, obliged to immigrate to the Bahamas, deported from same and relegated to the status of “boat-person,” cheated by an unscrupulous American businessman, too impoverished to afford the medicine that would cure his dying mother’s tuberculosis, imprisoned by an army of foreign invaders while attending a political rally, and, finally, shot to death during his escape from prison. In the midst of all of this, somewhere between being beaten up by his former girlfriend’s new fiancé and being beaten by the police, Raynand meets a man who becomes his best friend, the socially conscious would-be writer Paulin. Educated and politically committed, Paulin takes on the task of awakening Raynand to the systematic nature of the injustices that determine his existence. In a series of very staged, master-student type exchanges, Paulin initiates a reconditioning of Raynand’s mindset and enables him to envision a more liberated future. He ultimately gives Raynand the highly symbolic responsibility of finding a title for the novel he is writing—a masterwork that he claims will revolutionize literature as a genre.

Paulin’s character, although allotted a supporting role with respect to the events of the narrative, ultimately proves most revealing vis-à-vis Frankétienne’s broader literary intentions. Throughout *Mûr à crever*, Paulin pronounces phrases and formulas that are, for all intents and purposes, identical to those articulated by Frankétienne in interviews given during the period of the work’s conception and publication. Author and fictional character follow the same impulses, are consumed by the same visions, and seek out the same sensations. Toward the midpoint of the story, in *Mûr à crever*’s longest chapter, the reader is even provided with a fairly exhaustive theoretical discussion of *spiralisme*, as conceived and articulated by Paulin. It is here that Paulin lays out his plan to write a Spiralist work. Like Frankétienne, Fignolé, and Philoctète, Paulin is convinced that literature represents an increasingly outdated medium in a technologically advancing world. He claims that he will break with worn-out literary conventions by writing a non-linear text in which the polysemic potential and the associative value of the word are exploited to the fullest. The creative program that Paulin hopes to promulgate and that, incidentally, he calls Spiralism, is to be determined by a profoundly non-conformist poetic and a refusal of the notion that life can be captured and represented by means of a straight line or vector. Paulin insists that it is solely in the spiral that all the movements of life might be considered. Convinced (like his creator) that the form of the spiral perfectly embodies the simultaneously advancing and repeating movement of

human existence, Paulin proposes his literary model as the only written aesthetic that can possibly hope to bridge the gap between Word and Act. According to Paulin, “the Spiralist language, imbued with mobility, capable by its functionality of suggesting an ambience, of marking the temperature, offers a satisfying solution” (94). Paulin is not interested, then, in telling a story from beginning to end, nor does he intend to use his writing to spell out a specific political stance. Rather, his unique goal is to gain access to the deepest regions of his own psyche, from which he believes he will be able to identify and narrativize that which unites him with the rest of humanity. He is convinced of the necessity of embracing the Césairean impulse—of risking an “an incursion into his interior volcano in order to grasp, burned by lava, even the simplest word” (89). Paulin is confident that this auto-interrogation—this direct expression of his innermost self (as opposed to a crafted description or explanation of that self)—will enable him to find the courage and the motivation to take concrete steps toward changing the world around him. Clearly these notions echo the explicitly and repeatedly evoked motivation for Frankétienne’s literary representations of Being. In effect, by configuring Paulin as a politically engaged intellectual struggling to articulate a “Spiralist” aesthetic and to write a novel of which the title, we learn eventually, will be *Mûr à crever*, Frankétienne encourages his reader to view Paulin’s discourse as the fictional expression of the greater aesthetic philosophy underlying the content of the narrative.

The implied linking of Frankétienne-Author and his character Paulin can be looked at in light of the connection between Frankétienne and a second, ostensibly discrete character: the first-person narrator. This narrator never explicitly identifies himself as writer of the story recounted in the novel, yet Frankétienne in many ways encourages the reader to see in him another authorial avatar. As with Paulin, this narrator “speaks Spiralism”:

Each day, I employ the dialect of mad cyclones. I speak the madness of contrary winds.  
 Each evening, I use the patois of furious rains. I speak the fury of overflowing waters.  
 Each night, I speak to the Caribbean islands the language of hysterical tempests. I speak the hysteria of the sea in heat.  
 Dialect of cyclones. Patois of rains. Language of tempests. Unfolding of life in a spiral. (7)

Neither dispassionate nor omnipresent, this highly “subjectified” narrator becomes a progressively more agitated voice who, after the opening pages, refers only obliquely, if at all, to the actual events of what

seems to have been set up as the “principal” narrative, increasingly invested as he is in the stream-of-consciousness telling of his own, very personal story. There are tales of boyhood mischief-making and difficult lessons learned, bittersweet memories of a lonely peasant grandmother, awakenings to social consciousness, and numerous other accounts of such seminal moments in a life. This “I”—clearly a sensitive, politically engaged intellectual—is so forthcoming, so comprehensive in his solipsism that the reader would be hard-pressed not to catch more than a little bit of Frankétienne’s own essence there.

To confuse things even further—that is, to conflate identities on yet another level—the reader is encouraged to form a certain connection between this same I-narrator and the character of Paulin. There are a number of points in the novel where the latter’s discourse echoes, repeats, and affirms that of the former. Take, for example, the following declaration extracted from the first-person narrator’s second intervention:

I’m suffocating. I write down everything that comes into my head. The important thing for me is the exorcism. The liberation of something. Of someone. Of myself perhaps. Deliverance. Catharsis. I’m suffocating. I don’t see any cellar window. And I push against the walls of my asphyxiation with the battering ram of words ... I’m tired. Now I knock on closed doors. I fidget impatiently. I cry out. I call out. I scream. Will my cry of alarm succeed in reaching its goal? (17)

Now compare the above with this later passage, extracted from a scene in which Paulin explains his literary motivations to Raynand:

That which obsesses me the most would be to manage to get out of this bunker that imprisons each of us. To translate myself by deciphering the hieroglyphics that exasperate me. Succeed in triggering something in the reader’s thought. (91)

Paulin’s declaration amounts to little more than a rephrasing of the first-person narrator’s statements—statements that, as we have seen, replicate the discourse of Frankétienne himself in his stated desire “to awaken the audience, from time to time, and to trigger its critical reflection vis-à-vis reality.” The relatively straightforward *Mûr à crever* is thus infused with a narrative echo-effect whereby the authorial voice and those of Paulin and the first-person narrator overlap increasingly indissociably.

This blurring of the boundaries between Paulin and Frankétienne, Frankétienne and the I-narrator, the I-narrator and Paulin, far from forming a closed circle, continues to spin out, opening up spirally to include Raynand as well. During the moments leading up to his death, Raynand, in turn, assumes a voice that echoes the “Spiralist” inflections of the I-narrator. As he becomes increasingly aware of both his individual



suffering and his link to the collective, he, too, adopts a position of profound, if troubled belonging to a totality:

He feels the beating pulse of the planet. The distended heart of the sea. He detects the nausea of volcanoes. The tormented circulation of earthquakes. The faraway fall of raindrops. The silent undulating of knots of light. The limp progression of subterranean waters. The spiralic deployment of marine waves. The lively scraping of the wind. The painful coughing fits of cyclones. The perfumes of the stars, mixed indistinctly with the odors of plants, make his head spin. Permanent dizziness. His voice, a range of registers, filters the feeble music of the moon, the piercing song of comets, the deep tones of the sun. (152)

In the final pages of the novel, Raynard explicitly calls into question the heretofore presumed separateness of his and Paulin's identity. As he expires in the arms of a fellow escapee, Raynard attempts to come to grips with the permeability of the frontier separating him from Paulin.

—Who is Paulin?  
 —My double ... The one I've been looking for ... I've never found him ... I've walked ... I've run ... My whole life ... My double has always been just ahead of me.  
 —Is he a friend, this double?  
 —He's just me perhaps ... Me at a distance ... Me in the conditional ... (180)

Thus whereas throughout the novel Paulin provides insight into the Spiralist philosophy, functioning somewhat transparently as the fictional "spokesperson" for Frankétienne, both his unity and his authority end up fundamentally compromised—at once by this merging with Raynard and by the fact that he abruptly and completely disappears well before the narrative's conclusion. Moreover, considered alongside the language that connects Frankétienne to Paulin, and the parallels of intention linking Paulin and the I-narrator, this final fusing of Paulin's and Raynard's identities effectively integrates Raynard into the fictive and meta-fictive triumvirate—author/I-narrator/narrated character—at the heart of *Mûr à crever*.<sup>3</sup>

The I-narrator already quite explicitly refers to this conflation, in fact, at the very beginning of the work, calling attention to the intrinsic schizophrenia of the Author as a creator whose fictional characters are ultimately extensions of himself:

I speak with Raynard's voice, with Paulin's voice, with my own. Raynard and Paulin are but one and the same character. Me, I'm their voice, at times weak, at times strong, but always in existence. Always present. The broken voice of the Third World. The voice suffocated by immense shadows. Raynard, weary, looks for himself in Paulin, in the image of the one who fights to transform repugnant realities. And in the interval, one voice remains audible: Raynard's, Paulin's, my own. (10)

The result of this tripartite identity-confusion is the creation of pluralized narrative entities, none of whom are configured as whole or consistent in his self. Rather, they are overlapping, unreliable beings whose identities are doubly and triply refracted as bits and pieces of one another. Frankétienne thus obliges the reader to actively engage in the process of interpretation, which is of course very much a process of creation. Ceding this responsibility to his reader, Frankétienne subtly refuses to serve as centralizing author-ity. In this, his approach to the characters of *Mûr à crever* recalls Martin Munro's assessment of the "identity games" played by Haitian writer Dany Laferrière. Considering Laferrière's *J'écris*, Munro writes: "[T]he fine line that separates author from autobiographical referent itself dissolves and an indeterminate space opens up in which identity is even more fluid, a fact indicated in the multiple significations of the first-person subject pronoun" (*Exile* 184). Removing the boundaries between creator and created, or rather conceiving of the latter as an aspect or iteration of the former, Frankétienne emphasizes the univocal nature of Being. He is interested in "the fractured I and the dissolved self, and in the correlation of the fractured I with the dissolved self" (Deleuze, *Difference* 259). He suggests that he, as Author, is but one of the many possible incarnated vessels through which a non-specific essence—a "voice," as he puts it—might pass.

The Deleuzian dimensions of Frankétienne's configurative strategy correspond to very specific, very practical concerns regarding writing and elite being in Haiti. His deprivileging of the identifiable, self-conscious individual is a precise response to the question of how to most satisfyingly represent the postcolonial subject in a manner that avoids typical hierarchies dividing elite from subaltern. That is, Frankétienne's decentered subject implicitly proposes a means of integrating the author into the "We" represented in the text, thus offering the foundations of a realizable literary ideal. Merging author and character, *Mûr à crever* tacitly proposes a first step toward limiting the privileged authority of the elite author. It essentially links the writing subject—links his essence, that is—to (that of) the non-elite individual about and often for whom he writes. Further, there is a postcolonial Haitian literary tradition vis-à-vis which Frankétienne might be regarded as a particularly extreme creative iteration—a tradition specifically evoked by Fignolé, in fact. The latter writes, "Roumain, Alexis, Lespès, Franckétienne [*sic*]—they contemplate the relationship between the individual and the collective. The individual never conceiving of himself as separate from the collective but as an inte-

gral part of the collective. Invigorating it and being invigorated by it” (*Vœu de voyage* 83). Figiolé continues, “Also, the coming together, the integration of the individual into the Collective is not a fact of simple momentum. It is acknowledgment. Of oneself in others. Of others in oneself. For one and the same destiny. Greater than acknowledgment, I see solidarity” (84). Frankétienne takes this abstract, social coming-together to a more profound psychological and emotional level. He and the characters of his fiction become increasingly indistinguishable from one another, equally bound up in the narrative’s tragedy and drama.

The quasi-schizophrenic destabilizing of identities that determines narrative voice in *Mûr à crever* happens as well on the more particular, experiential level of the individual character Raynand. Not yet the full-blown schizoid of Figiolé and Philoctète’s novels, discussed below, Raynand’s fragmentation as an individual is primarily metaphorical. It reveals itself in a series of disjunctions of which his ultimate fusing with Paulin is in fact the culminating instance. Early in the novel, for example, during an encounter with his girlfriend’s father, the fault lines in Raynand’s psyche are already exposed. Raynand arrives at Solange’s imposing family home where, fully intimidated, he is escorted into their perfectly bourgeois sitting room:

Raynand took in the room with a circular glance around him. He settled himself into an overstuffed chair, directly facing a rectangular mirror hung on the wall. Like that he’ll be able to look at himself from time to time. To monitor his posture. To keep an eye on his gestures ... He looked himself over in the mirror. I’m not too bad with my broad forehead and my thick eyebrows. But I’d be better looking with a little tuft of hair. It seems like my left eye is smaller than my right. My nose is wide, flattened at the base, with gaping nostrils—like an ox. My God! Might I be a bit ugly? Might I have an unpleasant appearance? Solange’s parents seem so well-off. The most elegant house in the neighborhood ... A lovely sitting room. A television set. A stereo. (19–20)

Facing this mirror, one of several to appear—at once passive and condemning—throughout the narrative, Raynand becomes differently aware of himself. The mirror reflects back to Raynand his image in the eyes of the world: his object-self in the midst of other, more stylish objects among which he knows he does not belong. He becomes uncomfortably conscious of his self as a social entity, valid only in its/his perceived value within a profoundly corrupt collective. In breaking down his physical “I” into its constituent parts in the mirror, and then contextualizing that “I” within the alienating frame of Solange’s parlor, Raynand actually moves further away from true self-reflection and so becomes vulnerable to the determining gaze of the hypocritical and rapacious individuals that

surround him. And the consequences are dramatic. From the very first pleasantries exchanged with Solange's father, Raynand begins to feel the effects of this alienation and realizes that he has unwittingly engaged himself—his *self*—in a veritable battle, “[a] cockfight armed with wax spurs” (21). Instinctively, he is aware that only a certain version of who he is will be deemed acceptable, worthy. So he invents an elaborate story about his current situation and employment prospects, monitoring the “combat’s” progression with strategic glances in the mirror. In the end, Solange’s father seems duly impressed, but the effort leaves Raynand exhausted and disgusted with himself. He exits the battlefield victorious but decidedly ready to crack.

Raynand then had the certitude of knowing he’d won the match by overwhelming his adversary with a panoply of counterfeit currency and lies. He felt a vague discomfort, a sort of shame. He was deflated in his own esteem ... He began to sob and cried like a baby, without ever finding the opportunity or the courage to tell anyone how he’d just discovered, through a painful experience, that his brain was sick and his heart wasn’t doing much better. (23, 25)

Raynand’s spiritual and emotional incoherence, his broken psychological state, is our first hint at the effects of the quotidian violence done also to the physical person of the individual in Haiti; and from this exchange through to the narrative’s conclusion the novel offers myriad descriptions of said. One of the most powerful scenes in *Mûr à crever* comes at the end of a chapter that recounts the deportation of several hundred Haitian men and women, including Raynand, from the Bahamas back to Haiti. The bulk of the chapter presents a chorus of incomplete selves. The fragmented collective portrayed here offers one despairing lamentation after the next, forming “a strange symphony of desolation” (55). Snatches of stories related by unnamed, unidentified individuals present slightly different accounts of the same experiences of prejudice, disenfranchisement, abuse, and humiliation. These are the voices of the living dead, “[a]mbulating mummies. Individuals reduced to children. Zombies kept in line by the blows of a cudgel. Yes, exactly, zombies we’ve all become. Zombies!” (57). At the chapter’s conclusion, Raynand witnesses the death of four of these desperate voyagers who, having chosen to throw themselves overboard rather than face repatriation, are ripped apart and devoured by sharks:

pieces of arms, legs, flesh ripped apart, stomachs gaping wide open ... A horrific grinding up of jaws, teeth, and fangs. A glistening stew ... Raynand, eyes widened, fingers tensed around some rigging, holds his breath. Dizziness. He turns his head, he can make out the imprecise forms of the island of Haiti in the distance ... (61)

And this is but one of several scenes played out in the “strange dramatic opera” (61) of the Haitian quotidian: at other points in the narrative, a child dies from neglect, an elderly peasant succumbs to tuberculosis, local bums perish in post-cyclone floodwaters, a young man is killed trying to cross the border into the Dominican Republic. Although the details may vary, a common thread links these tragedies: they all reflect a general state indifference to the plight of the Haitian nation. This phenomenon, expertly analyzed in the Duvalierist context by Michel-Rolph Trouillot, as mentioned in the preceding chapter, is not at all exclusive to the Haitian republic. It is a socio-political reality that afflicts many if not most countries of the developing world, particularly in the Caribbean, Latin America, and sub-Saharan Africa. Frankétienne’s evocation of the insufficiencies of indigenous, neo-colonial governments with respect to the needs of their non-elite subjects should then be understood as an equating of Haiti’s ills with those of the broader postcolonial world.

Beyond such event-specific portrayals of the physical toll that the Haitian real takes on Haitian bodies, the narrative offers a host of bodies-in-pieces that populate the oniric realm as well. The first-person narrator relates, for example, a nightmare that offers a most terrifying picture of human suffering in Haiti. The passage warrants quoting at length:

I was walking along a narrow street, accompanied by strange creatures. Monstrous. Unfinished. Issued from the factory of some demon of forgery ... They were missing, respectively, one or another of their organs. Their points of distinction. A range of malformations. Faces pocked with holes. Missing an eyeball. Bodies without heads. Legless. They talked incessantly and yet seemed not to understand one another. Exercise in automatic language. Dadaist Babel ...

—We live in the mire. From morning till night we drain the mass graves looking for the organs we’re missing. It’s just a waste of effort ... It’s preferable, crippled companions, to look for the guilty one and to punish him. He’s here. Hidden among us.

—Here he is, this intruder! The one who’s never spoken. He’s perfectly safe and sound ... He’s not missing any organs. Let’s get a hold of him and distribute his organs among the disabled. His ears. His eyes. His nose. His brain. His heart.

—Yes, let’s divide up his organs ...

And all these pieces of humanity came toward me, rushed at me, tied me up with intestines. I wanted to scream. I realized that I was mute and that my tongue was missing. So I tried to explain to them that I too was like them, that I was missing an organ, that I had been deprived of speech. (137–39)<sup>4</sup>

This portrait of an alienated, self-cannibalizing community of mutilated and silenced individuals is the template for the configuration of characters in many of the Spiralist works that follow *Mûr à crever*. Incomplete

beings—physically degraded by hunger, violence, and illness, psychically fragmented by poverty, illiteracy, or shame—circulate throughout the Spiralists’ writings, taking the form of zombies, schizophrenics, and uncanny multiples. These beings are, for the most part, trapped in the nightmares they inhabit and so spend much of their time desperately seeking opportunities for escape, for movement.

Movement, in both a very literal and a metaphorical sense, is perhaps Frankétienne’s central concern when it comes to his portrayals of the individual and community in his writings. As the spiral is based wholly on the play of contrary forces, Frankétienne’s literary craftings of “real” life constantly interrogate the movement, or lack thereof, that conditions human existence—and, as such, his reflections are as applicable in Haiti as extra-insularly. *Mûr à crever* posits, for example, the idea of psycho-social fragmentation—alienation—as a primary motivation for action. At the heart of the narrative is a quest—Raynard’s quest for an unalienated identity and an eventual evolution of the self. As the first-person narrator argues early on,

[f]undamentally, life is tension. Toward something. Towards someone. Towards oneself. Towards the point of maturity where the old and the new are unbound. Death and birth. And everything comes together in the search for one’s double. A search that might even be confused with the satisfaction of a compulsion, of a desire ... My double is always just ahead of me. (7–8)

It is an assertion that prefigures Raynard’s final words and that goes a long way toward explaining the action/non-action of the narrative. Indeed, the understanding of human existence as a perpetual journey fuelled by self-interrogation lies at the foundations of Frankétienne’s configurative choices as a writer and points to his non-Haitian-specific vision of the Spiralist aesthetic:

Cultural identity is not to be found closed up in some secret box that one would merely have to open and say “aha, here’s identity, here’s the Haitian man, here’s the Belgian, here’s the Frenchman, here’s the German, here’s the American ... ” using some well-established criteria. Identity is a quest, a construction. It’s about constructing a being with each instant, be it on an individual, a communal, a social, or a human scale. It is a quest that never ends. (“Identité”)

The entirety of *Mûr à crever* might be said to describe such a quest—to chronicle Raynard’s gradual coming to consciousness of himself through the pursuit of his double, Paulin. Having recognized in his friend the realization of an insufficiently developed, muted part of his self, Raynard ultimately seeks to “achieve” Paulin and to become an agent in his own destiny by finding a title for the latter’s novel.

Indeed, prior to recognizing his “potential for” Paulin, Raynand effects a sort of constant false movement. Day in and day out, in the desperation and tragedy of his quotidian, he walks aimlessly through the streets, “having become a pair of legs in motion” (11, 32). He walks incessantly, pushing on to the point of complete exhaustion, imagining that this physical movement will somehow translate itself into a real change in his circumstances:

Raynand seemed condemned to repeat the same gestures, to hit his forehead against the crenated walls of quotidian disappointments. Illusions. Dissatisfactions. What’s more, he still hoped to be able to grasp the knot from which movement would unfold. There, that’s the secret. The great found-object he’s been pursuing. Seize movement by the collar. And create the event! From the morning on, he walks without stopping. His sole and unique apparent liberty. Even though he often considers his meandering a mere illusion. A sort of open prison. Circling pointlessly. An absurd environment. Since he can’t do anything but walk. He has no choice. (112–13)

Raynand’s promenades, evoked refrain-like throughout *Mûr à crever*, gradually move beyond pointless circling to become increasingly spiralic. Raynand (and the reader) come to understand that if there is no aim to his constant walking it is because the destination is the journey itself, the daily recommencement—not from scratch exactly, but in some small way different from the day before; it is a nuanced repetition that frustrates, certainly, but that also promises some slight yet critical change. Hope loops back on despair as Raynand’s persistent movement provides a counterpoint to the paralysis that daily threatens to overwhelm him.

These contrary forces of movement and paralysis are maintained in a state of tension until the moment when Raynand’s physical movement ends and a sort of psychological transformation—a more spectacular movement forward—indeed occurs. That is, toward *Mûr à crever*’s conclusion, the rather constricted spiral of Raynand’s reality begins to open up, so to speak, hurling him further outward towards a more productive psychic advancement. It is here that we return to the notion of the identity quest mentioned earlier, as Raynand becomes aware of his potential for self-realization through collaboration with Paulin on his Spiralist novel. Finding a title for the novel provides Raynand with the surge of enthusiasm and the inspiration he needs in order to begin actively seeking self-definition—to give up his blind promenades and overcome the limitations of his daily life. Importantly, it is at the very moment of this realization that Raynand loses contact with Paulin. He seeks him out for days, to no avail, expanding, though, with the fuel of true passion pushing him forward. When Raynand finally does see Paulin it is only

from a distance. He is kept physically separated from his friend by an immense crowd of people that has gathered to listen to Paulin speak at a political demonstration. In the middle of the latter's highly provocative speech, the rally is interrupted by a swarm of monstrous foreign beasts. Raynand sees Paulin viciously beaten just as he himself is taken into custody. This is the last he (and the reader) sees of Paulin. As suddenly as he appeared in Raynand's life, he is gone.

Paulin's disappearance from the narrative by no means slows down Raynand's progress, however. On the contrary, it is once Raynand finds himself incarcerated—only after this final “sighting” of Paulin—that his transformation reaches its most dramatic point. Alone in his prison cell, Raynand begins a voyage into his “interior volcano”—a voyage that proves more liberating and more significant than any of his experiences while physically “free”:

Little by little, his captivity allows him to discover possibilities that until then he hadn't known he possessed. He begins to know himself better and better. Recognizes himself. Birth of self for self that situates a man in relation to the outside world, the subject in relation to the object. A meticulous prospecting through the unexplored mazes of his existence. With bitterness, he uncovers never-utilized resources within himself. Riches tucked away in profound excavations ... Now a captive, I am born to the infinite liberty of life, and I feel capable of all things without distinction. Raynand thinks for a long time and tells himself that behind the bars there's a small open window that allows for a better view of oneself. (175)

At once regretful of the time he's spent as a paralyzed sub-being and proud of the immense potential he has discovered in himself, Raynand imagines, for the first time, the possibility of taking action—the possibility of shedding the immobility, invisibility, and mutism that for so long had defined him. In a spiralic descent into himself, Raynand begins to conceive of escaping both the metaphorical prison of his past existence and the actual physical prison that now obstructs his participation in the world. Raynand achieves this measure of true freedom in an ostensibly immobilizing context, and it is only in the moments preceding his death that this potential for self-discovery is manifested.

\* \* \*

Where Frankétienne views *Mûr à crever* as somewhat of a preparatory text, he considers *Ultravocal* to be “the major work of Spiralism” (Chemla and Pujol 114). Strategies and concepts he first presents in 1968 are fully exploited in this 1972 text: reliance on a fractured, uncertain narrative authority; the notion of personal liberation as contingent on



the quest for a motivational, disappearing Other-Self; the configuration of the human condition as a negotiation of various spiralic tensions, etc. Like *Mûr à crever*, *Ultravocal* opens with a lyrical evocation of the Spiralist project and an introduction of the major players—“Vatel, condemned to wandering. Mac Abre, the incarnation of evil. The poet, prisoner of his delirium. And, above all, you, reader, accomplice to the terrible game of writing—you whose participation conditions the existence of the book” (front cover). This two-page preface, signed outright by Frankétienne, warns us that we are in the presence of—we are a part of (!)—a plural text, unstable and multivalent. And so it is clear from the very outset that identities in *Ultravocal* will be fragmented and unreliable. The allegorical context in which the narrative unfolds encourages us to read this fractured configuration of characters as reflective of Frankétienne’s overall perspective on Being. Again as in *Mûr à crever*, we witness a certain dissolution of the authorial self into the imprecise characters of the fiction. Who or what, indeed, are the beings that circulate in this ultra world? Aside from a cryptic description of Mac Abre that by no means does justice to the immense evil of his nature—“Impertinent lips. And a nasty look in his eyes” (184)—the characters of this spiralic text are scarcely painted, present without physical description, given no clarifying history. They are, as Anastasil Makambo notes, deliberately

“flat characters” ... From one end of the novel to the other, the poet is always that delirious being whose words make up the only weapons with which to fight evil; Vatel, for his part, remains the eternal pursuer of Mac Abre who, having little strength, takes recourse in various writings; as for Mac Abre, he is forever caught up in his murderous madness. (18)

Fixed at the center of the action/narration there is an “I”—but the essence of this narrative position seems to be constantly up for grabs. That is, the “I” oscillates constantly between any one of four distinct entities—Vatel, Mac Abre, the diegetic meta-narrator, the poet—at times even within the space of a single paragraph.

Mac Abre is arguably the most clearly defined of the various beings at play in *Ultravocal*. Introduced not until about a third of the way through the narration, Mac Abre is nevertheless the motive force behind the movement of the story. In the present of *Ultravocal*, Mac Abre is en route to Mégaflore, where he will assume the job of head-chopper, usurer, and vendor of “packages of cursed dreams” (184). Along the way, he indulges in gratuitous acts of cruelty and sadism. As he passes through various villages, he leaves devastated forests, poisoned lakes, and the bloodied cadavers of people and animals in his wake. He attacks and rapes count-

less anonymous women he meets in his travels, either killing them outright once he's had his way with them or impregnating them with parasitic monsters. He dedicates himself to a violent "depersonalization—worse, even—to a general and complete reification of human being on this island of Mégaflöre, sarcastic metaphor for Haiti" (Bernard, *Rêve* 221 n. 25). A cruel and sadistic American Maldoror, Mac Abre "belongs also to the great cataclysmic forces that disrupt the universe: tempest, cyclone, earthquakes" (Ducasse 33). He is a "doctor of inescapable evil" (*Ultravocal* 83), spreading evil for evil's sake, and has played this role since the dawn of time. All tragedy and conflict, from the Spanish Inquisition to the atomic bomb, are ultimately attributed to this epic personage: during the Second World War "Mac Abre played a prominent role in the Nazi torture chambers" (193–94) and took the opportunity to invent or refine a number of particularly despicable techniques of human physical abasement. A black man, he served as general overseer on sugar plantations during the colonial era, and took great pleasure in the suffering of the slaves he brutalized—"his own brothers, those of his race" (114). He is credited with having devised methods of torture during the Inquisition that are still in use to this day (142), and his giant penis is described as a veritable weapon of mass destruction used time and again in various imperial wars. The Americans, for example, employ his "monumental engine" (126) against the North Vietnamese,

having recognized, after analysis, that Mac Abre's urine has a high concentration of defoliating agents and ... that Mac Abre can provide in a single day several hectoliters of urine containing an acidic element capable not only of taking out enemy armaments, but also of destroying life, in whatever form, with a single blast and within a radius of ten kilometers. (128)

Mac Abre is also an incarnation of the most diabolical Third-World dictators, traitorous to his own people, happily manipulated by larger empires, and invested with an exaggerated and brutal virility: "Mac Abre adores those somber periods of history in which madness sets up house with fear. The grinding machine has no need of proof. Arbitrary arrests. Absurd interrogations. Crimes fabricated with complete impunity. Absolute chaos" (112). Agent and embodiment of humanity's capacity for violence, oppression, and hatred, Mac Abre is more global phenomenon than individual character; "[h]e adopts personalities on the whim of his moods ... a veritable Proteus, of a thousand ever-changing shapes" (Makambo 15). Indeed, the fact of his vast malevolence pushes against the boundaries of a Haitian-specific pessimism to reflect more broadly on the workings of injustice and oppression throughout the "civilized"

modern world. Thus while Mac Abre's actions clearly recall the horrific excesses of many of the political leaders that figure in Haiti's post-independence past, they are equally evocative of abuses of absolute power on an extra-insular and transhistorical level. As such, with this character, Frankétienne refuses the perception of life for the individual in Haiti as singularly dreadful, and so reduces the distance between Haitian realities and those of the wider world.

The individuals who somehow manage to survive Mac Abre's horrifying rampages are, for the most part, left too psychologically traumatized or physically broken to consider fighting back—or even to speak his crimes out loud. There is, however, one person who seems not to fear Mac Abre—one person who actively seeks him out, in fact, hoping to intercept him before he arrives in Mégaflöre. This character is Vatel, a decidedly more human than Homeric figure who remains optimistically committed to his self-assigned quest for “a freedom he alone dares to imagine” (Bernard, *Rêve* 229). Vatel chases after Mac Abre, and wearily bears witness to the myriad horrific effects of the latter's evil presence on the communities and landscapes he encounters. Making his appearance in the narrative-spiral quite a bit later than Mac Abre, Vatel dedicates himself to this pursuit but never quite manages to “catch up,” remaining always just a step or two behind his nemesis. The term “nemesis” actually overstates things somewhat, given the fact that Mac Abre seems not to even be aware of Vatel's existence. In the end, no Melvillean showdown ever comes to pass. Rather, Vatel resigns himself to the constant near-misses that mark his journey—“And so he walked away, telling himself that one day he'd end up meeting him somewhere face to face” (136); “Once again, Vatel pursued him in vain” (165). Though he constantly affirms his desire to find Mac Abre, Vatel never spells out what he plans to do if he should ever catch up to him and, considering Mac Abre's vast power, it's unlikely he'd be able to do much of anything even if their paths were to cross.<sup>5</sup> Ultimately, the pursuit is, in and of itself, the objective.

In more ways than one, then, Vatel bears a resemblance to Frankétienne's original questing protagonist, *Mûr à crever's* Raynand. Like Raynand, and as his name suggests, Vatel most frequently appears in motion. He walks: “Vatel never stopped walking” (194); “He prepared himself to begin the quotidian combat on the asphalt of the streets” (197); “Vatel doesn't even know for how long he's been walking” (201). His incessant peregrinations, though seemingly no more than a mere function of inertia, are in fact motivated by his desire to seize

some inarticulable and fleeting meaning—a meaning that goes beyond Mac Abre’s immediate menace even: “Vatel continued to walk in the rain while mulling over secret thoughts” (137); “Vatel never stopped walking ... Prisoner of madness and wandering, he strolled about day and night looking for a shadow that, from time to time, changed shape” (194); “The darkness closed in on he who walks toward that which never seems visible. Fleeing of shadows” (255). Absent the discovery of this meaning, the act of physical displacement—while painfully frustrating—offers Vatel at least some semblance of purpose, an alternative to paralysis and self-destruction. Moreover, and again as with Raynand, part of Vatel’s movement is bound up in the idea of a potential text or texts. Every so often Vatel comes across some form or another of writing—scraps of newspaper, torn out book pages, bits of apparent journal entries, and other incomplete texts within the text. Each encounter with these hints of writing plunges Vatel into deep reflection, as he feels compelled to decipher them—to read them into a coherent narrative: “It had something to do with reconstituting that which had been published in the newspaper, inserting the missing elements” (124–25); “Vatel buried himself in reading a mutilated text ... Vatel was sweating, forcing himself to reconstitute the fragmented text” (144). These exercises in interpretation are as unsatisfying, though, as his efforts to find Mac Abre. Only ever able to make out the odd phoneme or suggestive half-word, Vatel is consistently frustrated by the ultimate ambiguity of these unreadable documents—texts he suspects might help him better understand his own existence: “Vatel stopped abruptly at the bottom of the page. He began to think about the words of a book that seemed to translate so well his own state of mind” (168); and later,

Vatel began to reflect, to meditate, tormented by the impossible desire to read the whole article. He got up, his throat tight, his body trapped in the interior of a cube, his chest compressed. Under the effect of a malaise, he began his painful promenade once again, his feet mired in a thick layer of blackish mud. (177)

But in the end, and in this unlike Raynand, Vatel does not arrive at any sort of redemptive liberating moment. There is no final tragedy and attendant catharsis for him. He merely drops out of the narrative, without fanfare. In fact, it is only in finishing *Ultravocal* that the reader even realizes that Vatel has disappeared entirely. Having been introduced as already in motion—“Vatel crossed a field of corn” (116), his story ends (or does not) in the same manner—“Vatel walks, thinking about the hollow-cheeked girl dying of hunger” (287). He is neither satisfied, sacrificed, nor celebrated. And so, he goes—“va tel.” The reader ultimately

realizes, then, that Vatel has only ever been on a wild goose chase—that Vatel is himself, in fact, a wild goose chase. Without past or future, and only sketchily configured in the present of the narration, he is a false narrative hook, offered late in the game as the reader’s subconsciously desired hero. But neither heroic nor even particularly sympathetic, Vatel ultimately serves to disabuse the reader of the very idea of a whole and complete central figure to whom to attach. His presence/non-presence destabilizes readerly expectations of a main character, drawing attention instead to the whirlwind universe in which he circulates alongside so many other individuals, animals, monsters, etc. More prop than protagonist, Vatel is not, in any traditional sense, essential to the progression of the narrative.

Thus without any proper hero to speak of, *Ultravocal* places a diffracted and disjointed first person at the center of the story, and parsing out this voice into its constituent elements is part of the work Frankétienne assigns his reader. This “I” acts and reacts throughout the narrative, having been given absolute license to vent. At once victim, witness, and narrator, much as in *Mûr à crever*, this “I” explores with passionate incoherence the multiple dimensions of his own spiralic tale. The I-narrator is an anonymous walker-observer, traveling through what appears to be the same wasteland as Vatel and Mac Abre. He is embarked on a quest for self-discovery or, at the very least, self-examination—yet another character in motion. His story is in part autobiographical, involving trips down memory lane, evocations of happier times, remembrances of lost family and friends—so many springboards for movement forward in the terrifying universe of the present. Accompanied on his journey by two silent companions, his long-suffering dog and his mule, the “I” finds himself constantly assailed by the various constituents of a disconcerting bestiary—a collection of “chattering, lying, hysterical, selfish, criminal, and greedy animals” (287). He is tormented primarily by a fantastic array of over-sexed, masturbatory, mutilated, schizophrenic, sleepwalking, amnesiac, strung-out monkeys:

The drug-addicted monkey, noisy on the hard ground, traces with his spine the oval route that opens and closes on the voluptuous movements of his penis-snake as it turns blue in his mouth. He then bends himself in the other direction in order to lick his back and anus. A perfect loop, no matter which way he bends. He defecates while talking to himself. (14)

Present throughout the text alongside a host of equally troubling creatures, these monkeys, “artisans of ancient wars,” embody the manifold parasitic forces that prey on individuals trapped in the dystopia of contemporary Haiti (262). These and a host of fantastic monsters circu-

lating in *Ultravocal* ultimately recall the various supernatural creatures that populate the Haitian folkloric universe and so connect the narrative to a context that exists beyond the specifics of Frankétienne's outrageous imaginary.<sup>6</sup>

In his efforts to negotiate and survive the various horrors that surround him, the "I" susses out an important connection between his distracted, unproductive wanderings and his fraught relationship with the mirror: "I walked night and day, subjugated by the aberrations of the ghosts in the mirror. I walked so much that I became an evil spirit of the road, an inhabitant of nowhere, reflection of a mechanical shadow" (343). In effect, he comes to understand that his encounters with the mirror can only end in stasis, unless they inspire some form of measurable change. That is, the implicit complacency of gazing into the mirror must eventually provoke an act of some sort. The "I" recognizes that without real movement there can be no creation, no spiral: "In the end, it is still myself that I meet in my quests. However, one can't spend one's whole life in tête-à-tête with oneself. When the mirror exhausts us, we shatter it in order to release our fantasies and our chimeras" (16). Or put otherwise,

I'm always the one that, in my rage, I recognize behind the crying mirror. If I manage to hear a voice, it's still mine, without a doubt. And so I kiss my image, my companion in solitude, passing my hand over the salt of my face. Sterile symmetry of all surfaces with a talent for flat imitating, for plagiary, for monotonous shimmering, oh my ancient and sad silent cinema. Moreover, blind is the eye for which all that is beyond what it can see remains inaccessible. It is the shattering point that the poet seeks. Real birth, creation lies immobile in the opaque beyond of the broken mirror. And I patiently reconstruct myself on the panicky surfaces. (76)

The "I"'s coming to consciousness with respect to the mirror calls to mind Frankétienne's assertion, noted above, that individual identity is in constant flux and must, therefore, be actively constructed—that "the *quest* implies a *search*, implies creation." (Chemla and Pujol 115, emphasis mine). It is this quest that is at the heart of both *Ultravocal* and *Mûr à crever*. The two narratives depict the struggle to determine the nature of one's Being and of one's being in the world as sufficiently "heroic" and subversively engaged in a context where the dignity of the individual is so relentlessly repressed.

## NOTES

1 “Poétique.”

2 “There is a clear difference between a novel and a spiral, even if there has been some hesitation in determining how to designate the texts. I believe that I could have called all of my works after *Mûr à crever* ‘spirals’” (Chemla and Pujol 115).

3 This configuration of characters in *Mûr à crever* is reminiscent of the conflated characters in Marie Vieux Chauvet’s *Folie* as described by M. Laroche: “Between the novel and theater, the narrator slips away, plays hide-and-seek with the reader since he might just as easily appear as take refuge behind stage directions. In the end, we aren’t really even certain that, under the I of the narrator, there isn’t hidden a We or even a He that would all refer back to the same character, depending on whether this character were playing the role of narrator, director, or actor” (*Double scène* 47–48).

4 The “monstrous” creatures of Raynand’s nightmare necessarily call to mind Lacan’s undead partial object and Slavoj Žižek’s zombie, on the one hand, and Deleuze and Guattari’s “body without organs” on the other. Indeed, the beings described by Frankétienne certainly seem to correspond with the “thoroughly different,” “neither human nor inhuman” (*Parallax View* 22) consuming forces of absolute drive posited by the abovementioned theorists, and to evoke the attendant anxieties produced by an aggressive Other’s desire: “Anxiety, correlative to confronting the Void that forms the core of the subject; horror as the experience of disgusting life at its purest, ‘undead’ life” (227). It is also tempting to read the organless status of these creatures as literal reflections of the Anti-Œdipal liberated subject—undifferentiated space of free-flowing intensities. But looking more closely, it becomes clear that Frankétienne’s Haitian vision of psycho-social anxiety diverges significantly from Lacan and Žižek’s conception of beings marked by desire for ever-elusive partial objects as well as from Deleuze and Guattari’s counter to any futile strivings toward organized corporeal orientation. That is, the creatures described by Frankétienne are victims of actual, physical violence. They have lost pieces of themselves to external forces of brutality and desperately seek to restore the physical integrity of their bodies. Their desire is not acephalic; it must be recognized as a specific desire for wholeness in a context that denies them this dignity.

5 Here Bernard proposes what is ultimately a psychoanalytic reading of Vatel’s trajectory in *Ultravocal*, analyzing his ever-deferred battle with Mac Abre—a certain allegory for the unrealized confrontation of Duvalier by the Haitian people—as an Œdipal battle that remains anchored in the subconscious: “[T]his Œdipus never leaves the dream to establish solid footing in reality; the would-be killer of the father remains snuggled into Uncle Freud’s couch, and so is François Duvalier permitted to die tranquilly in his cozy bed. And in the most perfect serenity” (Bernard, *Rêve* 225). In addition to referencing the Œdipus myth, Bernard further notes the extent to which Vatel’s story might recall the legend of the Minotaur-slaying, labyrinth-wandering Theseus and, of course, that of Ulysses, ultimate resistor of temptation—“For it is indeed Frankétienne who has himself laid out the plans for the oniric labyrinth ... and the crucial thread for escaping it is consciousness—all drugs, including religion, have been created for the sole purpose of bogging down the weak in resignation” (*Rêve* 226).

6 Joan Dayan offers a convincing analysis of such menacing beings in *Haiti, History and the Gods*, pointing to the historical realities underlying their integration into Haitian popular consciousness: “The relics and scraps of bodies, variously called ‘ebony wood,’ ‘pieces of the Indies,’ ‘heads of cattle,’ buried indiscriminately in the savannah and fields, returned as zombi spirits, baka, or lougawou, condemned to

wander the earth in the form of cats, dogs, pigs, or cows. What links these evil spirits is the capacity for transformation into things that are not human ... These 'monsters' are the surfeit or remains of an institution that turned humans into things, beasts, or mongrels. In this regenerative, reinterpreted, and vengeful history, dislocated bodies return to find their place. What whites called 'superstition' and 'fetishism' turned out to be something more akin to the journeys of bodies that relocalize themselves as spirits and consumers, taking up space, greedy for goods, services, and attention" (258).



## Zombies Become Warriors

### *Les Affres d'un défi*

*How inevitable are the oscillations from hero to detritus, from power to vulnerability, from awe to ridicule: a convertibility that vodou would keep working, viable, and necessary.*

—Joan Dayan<sup>1</sup>

In a geo-social context in which there has long existed a marked distance between intellectual and popular culture, the writer of the (French-speaking) Americas has had to take particular care in negotiating the necessarily elitist world of letters. Whether through Creole terminology and proverbs woven into written texts, or extended imaginings on the lives of unsung Caribbean heroes, many of the region's most prominent writers make use of folk elements as springboards for their literary endeavors. Such borrowings from popular culture, when looked to for more than a source of colorful content, provide the foundations of these works, shaping them both formally and thematically. In the particular case of Haiti, the zombie represents one of the most useful figures to emerge from the folkloric tradition. Functioning literally and allegorically in several Haitian novels of the mid to late twentieth century, the zombie offers a valuable critical tool with which to access Haiti's literature from a decidedly local perspective. Frankétienne's reliance on this figure as the central metaphor around which coil and uncoil the various elements of *Les Affres d'un défi* firmly links his Spiralist aesthetic to that of the broader Haitian community. Indeed, the tensions between immobility and movement so crucial to his configuration of subjecthood in *Mûr à crever* and *Ultravocal*, are very much linked to the author's concern with the phenomena of silencing and mutism endemic to Haitian subaltern existence since 1804, and are integrally connected to the figure of the zombie at the core of his third prose fiction work.

The zombie's presence in the Haitian literary context is tied inextricably to the particulars of Haiti's history and culture as they evolved over the course of the twentieth century. As has been well commented on by theorists, the United States' occupation of Haiti from 1915 to 1934 and

the corresponding rise of Indigenism inspired a renewed interest in and appreciation for Haiti's traditional culture. Placing particular emphasis on the African roots of the peasantry's folk beliefs and practices as a valid source of creative inspiration, Indigenism encouraged a literary investment in the popular imagination—an imagination profoundly connected to the vodou faith. Indigenism further called for a renouncing of the assimilationist tendencies exhibited by Haiti's bourgeois intellectual and socio-economic elite. The works of fiction and theory produced during this period thus share both a specific political agenda and a clear aesthetic perspective. As theorist Rafaël Lucas points out,

[t]he combination of *indigenism*, *Marxism*, and *marvelous realism* ... constitute[s] a textual space that is conceived according to the following axes of intentionality: exemplary literature, predominance of Promethean heroes, militant project oriented toward the transformation of society, expectant tellurism, a writing of wonder, love of Haiti's land, and the mystique of a better future. ("Aesthetics" 61)

It was in this climate of racial and cultural pride that Indigenist intellectual and ethnologist François "Papa Doc" Duvalier rose to power, perverting Haiti's popular culture to his own ends and ultimately establishing himself as the vodou-empowered embodiment of the state. Indeed, over the course of François's and his son Jean-Claude "Baby Doc" Duvalier's consecutive dictatorships, Haiti's citizens suffered brutal political, social, and psychological oppression at the hands of their own leaders—both political and spiritual. The "'Duvalierization' of vodou" (Murphy 14) proved a highly effective foundation for the implementation and maintenance of totalitarian authority. Witnesses to, and all too often targets of, the violence threatening to overwhelm the nation, Haiti's writers were motivated to significantly alter literary representations of their increasingly unstable island. For many, the zombie became the ideal character through which to communicate this reality. Régis Antoine qualifies the zombie as "subject on the underside of the marvelous" ("Réalisme merveilleux", 67), the antithesis of characters marked by "the idea of happiness and the will to live fully" (67–68) in accordance with ideas of collective liberation. Antoine asserts that with Duvalier's political ascent, descriptions of life in Haiti begin to depend highly on the motif of the puddle—dirty, stagnant, and decidedly un-marvelous—rather than on social realist celebrations of the national spirit and of Haiti's *réel merveilleux*. He thus understands the zombie as polar opposite of the romanticized hero portrayed in the Indigenist novel and of the noble peasant extolled in Indigenist theoretical writings. Yet while Antoine is right to point out this general movement away from inspira-

tionally heroic characters, such an assessment needs to be nuanced, as it remains attached to the strictly ethnographic—as opposed to certain literarily configured—portrayals of the zombie. That is, the literary zombie can be appreciated perhaps less as what both Antoine and Lucas perceive as “the archetypal figure of failure” (Lucas, “Aesthetics” 65) and converse of the traditional Indigenist protagonist, and more so as Manuel, or El Gaucho, or even Hilarius Hilarion’s problematized avatar. Indeed, while it is certainly true that the zombie refuses the notion of the ready-made hero as some sort of whole and transcendent figure destined to lead the masses to revolution, it must also be acknowledged that the hero always remains dormant in the zombie, whence the creature’s inherent ambivalence and, ultimately, its usefulness in numerous works of Haitian prose fiction, including Frankétienne’s *Les Affres d’un défi*.<sup>2</sup>

Indeed, the rehabilitation of vodou initiated by the Indigenist movement, and then affirmed under the Duvalier régime, created an atmosphere in which the zombie became particularly useful to Haitian writers. Despite Duvalier’s perversion of vodou for his own purposes, the religion has long been linked to popular resistance in Haiti. Attributed a prominent role as major catalyst for the Haitian Revolution, vodou “has been a potent force for organizing the disenfranchised majority of Haitian society, and if it has not always opposed tyranny, it has always remained a critical force against external authority, particularly when that authority has come from imperial powers” (Murphy 14). Integrated into this most essential Haitian belief system, the zombie offered a fitting vehicle for intellectuals interested in affirming their commitment to Haiti’s popular culture as well as an ideal metaphor through which to condemn Haiti’s social and political ills. The zombie thus proved highly exploitable as a literary device and, perhaps more significantly, proposed a distinctly Haitian contribution to the world of francophone literature. Figure of exploitation *par excellence* and product of a vodou worldview, the zombie appears, then, in the works of numerous Haitian authors writing during and after the Duvaliers’ body-and-soul-fracturing dictatorships. Indeed, the creature has often served as an aesthetic premise for the expression of a specifically Haitian philosophical perspective. Functioning in the nation’s literature “as the most powerful emblem of apathy, anonymity, and loss” (Dayan, *Rainbow* 37), the concept of zombification effectively places the Marxist theory of alienation—victimization at the hands of an exploitative external agent—in a specifically Haitian context. Indeed, as Laroche has phrased it, “What is victimization, if not a zombification?” (“Lutte”).

Not a specific myth with an originary victim-protagonist, the concept of zombification is a situational phenomenon that has served metaphorically to illustrate the various forms of institutionalized oppression suffered by the Haitian population throughout its colonial and post-colonial history. The creature's victimhood, mutism, social disenfranchisement, and infinite capacity for suffering clearly make of it a fitting metaphor for the postcolonial Haitian in particular and the alienated individual in general. The zombies that people Haitian literature would seem to embody Georges Bataille's concept of the heterogeneous, which he defines as "the numerous elements or social forms that *homogenous* society is powerless to assimilate" (Bataille 142, cited in Bruns 706). "Uncontainable within an order of things" (Bruns 704), "exterior with respect to the human order that it helps to establish" (Bruns 706), the heterogeneous being is the negative mirror of the hero—the tangible entity that enables us to mark the boundaries of what is (ideally) human (Being).

While it is certainly possible to read the figure of the zombie through various Franco-European lenses, taking into account the figure's post-modernist resonance as a binary-refusing trope of perpetual *différance* and fundamentally exteriorized subject, the zombie is first and foremost an expression of Haitianness.<sup>3</sup> According to Haitian vodou mythology, the zombie is a being without essence—lobotomized, depersonalized, and reduced through black magic to a state of absolute impotence. Not at all the crazed, bloodthirsty monster of Hollywood fame, compelled to hunt down humans and feast on their brains, the zombie in Haiti is a victim—deserving of pity more than fear. Without any recollection of its past or hope for the future, the zombie exists only in the present of its exploitation. It represents the lowest being on the social scale: a thingified non-person reduced to its productive capacity. A partially resuscitated corpse that has been extracted from the tomb by an evil sorcerer (a *bokor* or *houngan*) and then maintained indefinitely, as anthropologist Alfred Métraux explains, "in that misty zone which divides life from death," the zombie

moves, eats, hears what is said to him, even speaks, but he has no memory and no knowledge of his condition. The *zombie* is a beast of burden that his master exploits without mercy, making him work in the fields, weighing him down with labour, whipping him freely and feeding him on meager, tasteless food. (282)

It is crucial to note, however, that the zombie exists, by definition, in a state that as closely resembles the movement of life as it does the immobility of death. Indeed, the zombie remains completely obedient to his

master only as long as it is denied salted food. If the zombie ingests even a single grain of salt, it is brought out of this state of lethargy and is immediately transformed into a *bois-nouveau* [new wood], suddenly awake and aware of its situation. As such, while the zombie's subjugation is profound, it is not necessarily definitive. Rather, the zombie is a creature within whom coexist an utter powerlessness and an enduring chance for rebirth. It incarnates a condition of perpetual becoming. That is, while Frankétienne certainly evokes the proximity of the zombified and the "properly" human, he also emphasizes the latent sensate being that resides in the zombie and thus implicitly posits a "way out" of zombification. Both alive and dead, neither alive nor dead, the zombie always retains the possibility, albeit slim, of reclaiming his or her essence, and in this sense serves at once as a reflection of Haiti's extreme misery and of its inextinguishable potential. It can be argued that much of Haitian reality is expressed in this tension—the latent presence of an element of hope in every situation of despair.

Exemplar of the marvelous real (or its underside, as Régis Antoine would have it), the zombie embodies the fluidity of the boundaries between living and dead, material and spiritual, natural and supernatural, etc.—what Frankétienne has labeled "pluridimensionality" or "multipolarity."<sup>4</sup> The zombie's essential ambivalence—quite literally, the instability of its essence—points to its condition as, in fact, a version of the quest that, for Frankétienne, defines human existence: the quest of the individual for some missing or obscured but essential part of himself.

The zombie ... inscribes within itself a radical quest: In effect, oppositional object in the phase preceding its zombification, the zombie—who does not entirely become an object from the moment of its apparent death and who thus remains a partial subject since it is still living—has itself henceforth as object. Thus its resistance or its opposition to its zombification expresses itself henceforth in its quest for itself, through the use of the salt that it seeks to procure. (Chemla, "Entrée")

The zombie is a creature whose being is fundamentally rooted in a paradigm-subverting dialectic. In problematizing a distinction as fundamental as that which separates life from death, the zombie necessarily undermines all other structuring binaries of the worlds it traverses. This latter aspect of the zombie myth is of particular interest in the Spiralist context, as it is what makes the figure's employ so inherently subversive. A *de facto* antihero, the zombie exposes the limits of any rationalist metaphysical order and fully embraces a destabilizing uncertainty. Physically present but absent of soul, inspiring of pity yet devoid of emotion, effec-

tively subjugated but smoldering with the potential for rebellion, the zombie personifies the state of centrifugal-centripetal tension that characterizes the spiral.

The metaphorical potential of the living dead is developed to the maximum in *Les Affres d'un défi*.<sup>5</sup> The negotiation of the zombie's fractured physical and spiritual being dominates the thematic and, as we shall later investigate, the stylistic choices made by Frankétienne in this work. The premises of the story and basic narrative thread are fairly straightforward. The citizens of Bois-Neuf live in total submission to the evil vodou sorcerer Saintil and his henchman Zofer. Clodonis, a young student whose educated "impudence" threatens Saintil's power, has been turned into a zombie by the sorcerer and made to work alongside other zombies in rice fields stolen from the people of the village. In so "zombifying" Clodonis, Saintil effectively issues a warning to any and all who would oppose him, and so solidifies his control over Bois Neuf. Saintil's daughter, Sultana, falls in love with Clodonis, however, and wakes him from his zombified state by giving him salt. Clodonis in turn distributes salt to the other zombies, who then awaken and cry out for vengeance. Inspired by Clodonis's call for collective action, the villagers, too, are roused from their state of submissiveness and ally themselves with the *bois nouveaux* (both the expression used to designate reanimated zombies and, of course, the appropriate term for the citizens of Bois Neuf). Unified and powerful, this newly revitalized community—led by former zombies—destroys Saintil and begins for the first time to look toward the future with hope.

The fairly simple story of Clodonis's zombification and rebirth represents in fact only one layer of the chaotic narrative whirlwind depicted in *Les Affres d'un défi*. Though this plot line provides the most perceptible markers of a beginning, middle, and end, there are numerous other significant intrigues presented throughout the novel, and the metaphor of zombification is decidedly the work's organizing theme. That is, in addition to Clodonis and the other villagers whom Saintil has literally poisoned and reanimated as an undifferentiated slave-chorus of the undead, *Les Affres d'un défi* also features a host of figuratively zombified individuals. Not unlike the boat-people of *Mûr à crever* described above, these latter characters, identified in *Les Affres d'un défi* only as "We," share common experiences of exploitation. And every page of the text—virtually every other paragraph or strophe—tells their first-person-plural story. Indeed, while Clodonis is perhaps the most visible protagonist, he falls short of fulfilling the role of "hero" or even of central

character in *Les Affres d'un défi*. Appearing for the first time in the second third of the story, his portrait is only ever superficially painted and his pre-zombie past is barely referenced. Even his reanimation and ultimate victory over Saintil are rendered somewhat less heroic by the fact that, technically, his rebirth and salvation are not the fruit of his own agency. In the end, *Les Affres d'un défi* presents no particular protagonist. The novel boasts no solitary hero or truly “main” character because Frankétienne never invites his reader very far below the surface of any one individual. Named characters are only very briefly described and remain without personal histories outside the immediate context of the story. The narrative instead focuses overwhelmingly on multiple zombie-like characters, evoking in great detail the devastating effects of their subjugation.

Given the overarching presence(-absence) of the living dead in *Les Affres d'un défi*, it is unsurprising that the narrative is marked by the absence of individualist configurations of heroic characters. Further exemplifying the phenomenon of the double introduced in *Mûr à crever*, the characters of *Les Affres d'un défi* are primarily determined by the physically and/or psychologically paired relationships in which they find themselves trapped. These coupled characters, while ostensibly oppositional, are in fact complementary figures—fundamentally twinned. As Patrick Chamoiseau and Raphaël Confiant point out in their historical overview of Franco-Caribbean literature, *Lettres créoles*, “[t]he question of twinship is ... one of the major elements that allows for the deciphering of a properly Haitian semiotics” (177). Accorded a privileged status in the vodou universe, twins are at the very foundations of the Haitian popular understanding of human existence, and Frankétienne’s structural reliance on such relationships connects his configurative choices to the vodou cult of the Divine Twins, or *marassa*. In addition to this allusion to Haitian spiritual realities, the play of doubles in the narrative also enables Frankétienne to subvert more traditional notions of the “hero” as a unique, clearly demarcated central figure. Indeed, the couples of *Les Affres d'un défi* are characterized by a rigidity and mutual dependency that contributes to a reduced emphasis on individual identity. Chamoiseau and Confiant argue convincingly that the “twinned” nature of these relationships ultimately serves to blur the frontier of the Good-Evil binary:

Aunt Louisina and Gaston, Jédéyon and Rita, Jérôm and Alibé ... situate themselves within a semantic universe in which twinhood plays a major role, organizing human interactions and at the same time prohibiting the notion of the heroic savior. Each character is at once himself and other than himself,

torturer and victim, guilty and innocent. Salvation, if salvation there is, can only come from the erasure of that evil element that every individual carries within. (177)

Of the multiple pairings presented, the two sets of characters that best exemplify this sort of mutually dependent association comprise Gédéon and his servant Rita, and best friends Jérôme and Alibé. The couple formed by Rita and Gédéon is particularly striking in its constrictedness. Rita is a *restavek*<sup>6</sup> who is more or less enslaved to Gédéon, her elderly patron. Her life consists of executing an unending list of menial chores in Gédéon's home, while responding to his most humiliating insults and demands without the slightest complaint. Frankétienne summarizes her existence as follows:

Once at the market, she hurries to make her purchases, so as to quickly return to Gédéon's old house. Take up the interminable ordeal. Climb up and down the stairs several times a day. Cook. Serve the food and water. Sweep the courtyard. Clean the rooms. Wash clothes. Iron the linens. Dust the furniture. Wax the parquet. Roast the coffee beans. Swallow streams of insults. Wilt in a corner. Little Rita's existence comes down to climbing a latter that is missing several rungs. Her life, a dreadful greasy pole. (38)

Several pages later, the quasi-immobilizing monotony of Rita's existence is reiterated in terms reminiscent of those used to describe Raynard's depressingly futile wanderings in *Mûr à crever*: "In the meantime, endlessly climbing up and tumbling down the shaky staircase to give medicine to the sick, grumpy old man, Rita, the little servant girl, strangely recalls a mechanical doll, a theater puppet" (111). The contrast between Gédéon's unkind nature and Rita's long-suffering saintliness establishes an oppressor-victim dichotomy that in fact proves as miserable for the one character as for the other, subtly perturbing notions of guilt and innocence. For as much as Rita is victimized by her godfather's tyranny, she is also his sole companion and caretaker, and thus maintains a certain control over him. Abandoned to old age by his wife and children, terminally ill, and despised by his neighbors, Gédéon depends entirely on Rita for his survival and is clearly frustrated by and even suspicious of her ostensible pliability. He is aware, for example, of the way in which Rita subtly detracts from her unconditional obedience with her insistence on calling him "tonton" ["dear uncle"], a moniker that absolutely enrages him. The "Plait-il, tonton" ["as you like, dear uncle"] or "Oui, tonton" ["yes, dear uncle"] that constitute her only responses to her godfather's demands thus take on a quality of persistent mockery. This subtle rebellion is reinforced by the fact that Rita every once in a while ends these dialogues with a "Oui, monsieur Gédéon," suggesting



that what he perceives as her “nasty habit of calling [him] dear uncle” (33) is indeed designed to torment him.

The humiliating depersonalization that characterizes Rita’s quotidian is echoed in the situation of another metaphorically zombified character: the traumatized young student, Jérôme. Ever since having been brutally tortured by Saintil and Zofer, Jérôme lives a life determined entirely by his fear. Each day before dawn, he cloisters himself in a small, elevated coop from which he refuses to emerge until after dark. He spends his days shut up in a prison of his own making, too terrified of Saintil and Zofer to participate in the world outside his rat-infested quarters: “Concern with cautiousness. Paralyzing fear. Jérôme incrusts himself in a painful and shameful clandestinity” (90). Like Rita, he is tormented by, yet reconciled to, the limitations that define his quotidian, and Frankétienne uses almost identical language to describe his condition:

Jérôme’s existence comes down to a strange ordeal. Obligation to wake up before dawn. Climb up the ladder before sunrise. Spend the day curled up in a corner of the barn. In the evening, climb down the ladder after night-fall. The trial of the ladder proves worse than any punishment. The torments of hell. Exhaustion. At times, on the verge of tears, Jérôme can hardly remember the events of his own life; he doesn’t even understand how or why he first began twisting his legs around the rungs of the ladder. Always the same agony unfolding according to the binary rhythm of climbing up and climbing down. (43–44)

Unlike Raynard’s enlightening incarceration in *Mûr à crever*, Jérôme’s confinement is stifling. And while he alone is physically restricted by his fears, his dependence on Alibé to set the ladder, to bring him food, and to keep him company necessarily limits his friend’s existence as well. Far from suffering his and Jérôme’s fear-based ritual as some sort of burden, however, Alibé recognizes that he himself has a stake in his friend’s phobic obsession. Alibé shares Jérôme’s anguish and fear, and he is fully conscious of the narrowness of the margin that separates him from his profoundly troubled best friend. When Jérôme attempts to apologize for embroiling him in this tragically absurd situation, Alibé explains,

Hush, friend. I understand you, old brother. This day or the next, we must help one another. Fate has made it so. And that’s just fine. You don’t have to explain what you’re feeling to me. I understand you perfectly. We are two stones lying in the same place, under the same sun, in the same all-consuming fire. (44)

Jérôme’s voluntary imprisonment is thus not only comprehensible for Alibé, but also provides him with a bizarre sense of reassurance. Like Rita—“tireless beast of burden” (91)—and Gédéon, the two men are trapped by a paralyzing repetitiveness that they seem incapable of chal-

lenging, much less of rejecting. And so the zombification of these four characters, though metaphorical, is extreme. Their relationships are characterized by rigidity, constraint, and dependency. Alienated and powerless, each of these individuals has been dehumanized inasmuch as—like the zombie—s/he seems to have abandoned any hope of modifying his or her existence or of escaping his or her wretched condition. Gédéon and Jérôme in particular recall the sort of character Frankétienne first described in *Ultravocal*:

From disbelief, he wouldn't dare look through the curtains at the window. Devoid of all curiosity, he would rush to close the doors of his home and would no longer be capable of distinguishing reality from myth. And so, refusing to ever again venture outside, he would begin to die in the most atrocious solitude and pain, among the shadows of the cave, for lack of a single gesture. (28)

The specific, character-based examples of physical and metaphorical zombification considered above are set against the novel's chaotic backdrop of zombifying abuses recounted by a terrified, unidentified "We" mentioned above. In long passages filled with images of extreme, almost delirious carnage, this first-person-plural narrator describes the various forms of repression that fracture the community of Bois Neuf. For Saintil is both what he is—an exploitative *houngan*—and an allegorical stand-in for the dictator Duvalier. He is, then, a doubly operational character, serving to expose abuses of power by Haitian spiritual and cultural leaders through a corrupted practice of vodou, and to denounce the political totalitarianism of the *vaudouisant* Duvalier régime. The seemingly infinite unnamed targets of Saintil's cruelty that roam the textual landscape of *Les Affres d'un défi* are, then, victims of a "zombifying epidemic" that pervades all levels of psychological and social existence (196). The physically fractured bodies of the zombies are strewn about:

Pieces of cut-off fingers / Flesh devoured bite by bite / Ground-up bones / Dislocated wrists / Dislocated jaws / Dislocated shoulders / Bottoms crushed by the blows of sticks / Chests caved in / Thoraxes taken apart / Guttled abdomens / Strips of intestines suspended on the branches of chandelier-trees / Patches of human skin stretched inside-out on fences / Legs and thighs ripped out, snagged on barbed wire / Blood clots staining piles of stones / Here and there, cadavers stretched out on the ground. (76)

Recalling the mutilated figures that populate the oniric realm of *Mûr à crever*, the bodies-in-pieces described throughout *Les Affres d'un défi* again bring to mind the "heterogeneous" Bataille's boundary-fixing scapegoats<sup>7</sup>; they are so many corpses that ultimately—ironically—confirm just how good it is to be alive. Julia Kristeva makes this point with particular eloquence:

Refuse and corpses *show me* what I permanently thrust aside in order to live. These bodily fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death. There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being. My body extricates itself, as being alive, from that border. Such wastes drop so that I might live, until, from loss to loss, nothing remains in me and my entire body falls beyond the limit—*cadere*, cadaver. (3)

Kristeva's comments go a long way toward explaining what appears to be Frankétienne's quasi obsession with the body, its parts, its "deconstructibility," its capacity for suffering and survival in *Les Affres d'un défi*: "They have struck and beaten us. Our bodies are covered in welts, riddled with horrifying scars ... Our memories are filled with the stink of open wounds ... Our innards bleeding with pain, we are completely out of breath" (73). Indeed, the literal zombies controlled by Saintil are only the most extreme examples of what is ultimately an entire community of broken beings. For in addition to Saintil and Zofer's violent physical subjugation of their zombie slaves, the reader encounters a whole gamut of symbolic zombifications, including censorship, starvation, illiteracy, and dispossession. The atmosphere of absolute repression created by the *houngan* Saintil's tyranny aims to extinguish the very notion of self-expression in all its forms. Physically limited and psychologically demoralized, the "We" is a community perpetually at risk of zombification: "The passivity of the zombies overwhelms us; their apathy is contagious; a heavy silence glides over the hellish swamps. We've accepted everything, swallowed everything, approved everything ... Using caution in the terrible game of silence, we play dead so as not to be snatched up by the grinding machine" (60). In these and similar passages—"Take care that the zombies' sickness doesn't seep into our lives" (111); "Take care that the zombies' sickness doesn't rub off on our children!" (177)—the reader is reminded of the constant threat of near-permanent victimhood that defines the zombie's existence. Thus while the "We" at times dares imagine that the forces of evil are neither limitless nor all-powerful, the members of this first-person narrative chorus often sacrifice social solidarity in favor of self-preservation, and therefore refrain from initiating acts of overt defiance. Numerous passages describe moments where the group seems inclined to take action but desists for lack of confidence in its own strength. For example,

The light blinded the assassin staked out in the heart of the woods. Without saying a word, our eyes opened wide, we took the opportunity to withdraw quietly to safety. It is never recommended to interrupt the slumber of famished predators, insatiable eaters, and enemies of war if one is not yet

feeling up to fighting the evil—nor to speak loudly and comprehensibly if one's arms are slow to follow the flight of one's thoughts. (56)

Rather than seize the opportunity to confront, as a group, the momentarily blinded assassin, the terrified “We” sneaks away. The first-person narrator thus confirms the collective's reliance on an overall strategy of avoidance as the most effective means of ensuring its survival: “No one dares to raise his voice. The survivors, immobilized by fear, pretend not to hear the cries for help of the dying” (192–93). In the end, then, ambiguity remains. The characters of *Les Affres d'un défi*—the relatively one-dimensional, paired individuals, the ill-defined “We”—are steeped in an ethical ambivalence. Opaque and un-heroic, this multitude of fragmented beings, though certainly to be pitied, is at least in part complicit in its own suffering—“We have accepted everything, swallowed everything, endorsed everything” (60). Frankétienne suggests that its unwillingness to seize opportunities for resistance, to risk challenging the longstanding order of things, is at once the cause and the effect of its zombification.

Such depictions of cowardice and complicity are counterbalanced by no less weighty indications of subversive if not revolutionary intent—alternatives to submission—on the part of the “We.” Calls to resist zombification can be heard—if faintly—throughout *Les Affres d'un défi*: “So as not to be tempted to restore ties with homebound passivity, let us break down our chairs, demolish our beds” (49). The narrative is in fact peppered with subtle indications that subversion might eventually be possible: “If our projects and our dreams threaten to fall apart, if our courage abates, we will have to learn to swim in the black silence of abysses. We will come up for air further ahead” (58); “Perfidy of our enemies who have played a panoply of trump cards to emasculate our children. We laughed to ourselves about it; we laughed about it in the deepest part of ourselves knowing that they would only ever manage to rape wax dolls standing in for our daughters, without ever realizing the subterfuge” (162); “Our arms, knotted in vigorous bundles, form a stepstool for our children and our grandchildren, a shield against the audacity of hawks ... There's no way we'll abandon the combat, or veil our conscience” (69). Such instances of minor but non-negligible resistance are paralleled by the simple fact of the narrative's multiple allusions to the punishments Zofer metes out to the zombies. That is, by punishing the zombies—for looking him in the eye, for speaking without being summoned to do so—Zofer tacitly recognizes that the zombies' humanity has not been entirely suppressed. The fact that these depersonalized

beings must be actively and aggressively kept in line by their oppressors subtly affirms the non-absoluteness of their subjugation.

It is critical to note that the phenomenon of zombification is not merely a descriptive tool that Frankétienne uses to qualify distanced objects of discourse or to condemn an alienated and “othered” subaltern social group. On the contrary, Frankétienne has made use of the zombie to highlight the literary viability of the much-maligned vodou faith and to represent the psycho-social obstacles to survival in an often traumatic postcolonial world. In fact, Frankétienne has himself linked the zombie figure to that of the maroon, maintaining that the theme of zombification in *Les Affres d'un défi* implicitly, if contrastingly, references those Haitians who never abandoned the struggle for liberty and self-determination. He explains,

*Dézafi* is a novel about zombies, the Haitian people have been characterized as zombies. Of course, that's debatable, because that could give the impression that there was never any struggle. No, the Haitian people never gave up. In addition to the popular masses, many militants have consistently continued the struggle. Because to say that there was zombification is to say that everyone submitted, which is something I do not believe to be true ... [T]here are more than a few people of the masses who lost their lives as a result of simply being denounced, despite their innocence. There are those who fought back and who perished because they fought back, because they refused to back down. Do not forget what I said earlier: *marronnage* is a dimension of life in Haiti, of the behavior of the Haitian, and that is linked to the basic functioning of our culture, particularly as regards vodou, which has always been clandestine. (Jonassaint, *Romans* 275)

Moreover, as Maximilien Laroche very convincingly asserts, the zombie's predicament can be said to describe that of the author himself: “The novelist who gives us zombies is himself one, as he struggles to find—within the very heart of his condition—the tools of his liberation” (*Double scène* 22). Figolé, for his part, contends that Frankétienne's configuration of the zombie in *Les Affres d'un défi* paints a portrait of solidarity between individual and collective: “Klodonis, extinguished consciousness suddenly burst forth (such an emergence is an irruption) into living consciousness, makes the liberation of the other zombies the condition of his own liberation” (*Vœu de voyage* 85). This perspective also echoes Laroche's argument that the Haitian protagonist is necessarily an anti-hero insofar as his narrative trajectory most often amounts to a process of degradation that requires the personal failure of the hero for the good of the community through an exemplary rebirth:

The hero is anti-hero and ... from a mythical perspective, he is the one who consciously enters into a process of personal zombification. The state of zombiehood, of living-dead, of agent-patient, is a state of paralysis, of immo-

bilization. The hero accepts this in order to dynamize it, he makes himself an agent by accepting to the utmost his condition as victim so as to live his death through to his resurrection ... The anti-ideological function of the hero thus consists of transforming an individual regression toward death into a collective passage toward life. The hero in the Haitian tale makes himself into a zombie in order to give the liberating salt to others. And it is in accepting his condition as a victim, in making others recognize it that he then denounces that condition, and by that alone attacks the victimhood of which he, along with his community, is the object ... For [his] rebirth is actually that of the community—of his collective I—and not that of his individual I. (“Lutte”)

In some ways, then, Frankétienne’s Clodonis is not so unlike any of the other more conventionally heroic protagonists of the region’s literature, like Roumain’s Manuel, Depestre’s Henri Postel, Glissant’s Mathieu Béluse, or even Chamoiseau’s Pipi.<sup>8</sup> I would argue only that Frankétienne’s “non”-heroes—Raynand, Vatel, Clodonis—display no initial exceptionalism that would suggest an intentionally self-sacrificial embracing of zombiehood.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, the solidarity Laroche describes, this intimate melding of individual and collective destinies, is certainly a feature of Frankétienne’s works and speaks to the potential that is always latent in the figure of the zombie. Neither the protagonist of the puddle nor one of so many “signature figures of absolute negativity” (Antoine, “Réalisme merveilleux” 69), there is nothing absolute about the zombie’s condition. The creature is a reflection of the dualism that underlies man’s conception of himself—as body and soul, consciousness and subconscious, mortal and immortal. It is indeed “the mental integration of the autonomy of the ‘double’ that constitutes the essential element of the zombie myth” (Saint-Gérard 16). This doubled nature enables the zombie to embody tension and irresolution, and to thereby exist outside of any “oppositional paradigm”<sup>10</sup> that might tempt writers of the (Haitian) real.

## NOTES

1 *Rainbow* 28.

2 There are also, of course, examples of Haitian prose fiction in which the zombie primarily reflects phenomena of negativity and alienation and so corresponds to dystopic (urban) social realities: Anthony Phelps’s *Moins l’infini*, Stanly Péan’s *Zombi blues*, Emile Ollivier’s *La discorde aux cent voix*, Lyonel Trouillot’s *Thérèse en mille morceaux*, and Gérard Etienne’s *Le Nègre crucifié* are all examples of said. Frankétienne, Depestre, Alexis, and others, however, take advantage in their fiction of the zombie’s dualistic nature. Cf. Glover “Exploiting the Undead” in *Journal of Haitian Studies* 11.2 (Fall 2005).

3 Here again Frankétienne’s undead being at once connects to and must be distin-

guished from the Lacanian/Zižekian “non-human” being referenced in Chapter 1 (note 4) above. Like the theorists’ terrifying Others, the Haitian zombie provides a negative mirror of what is or should be the human self.

4 Frankétienne asserts: “Haiti is a country that at once exists and does not exist. There are no impenetrable frontiers between dream and reality in our culture. That which we see in dreams is as real as that which we observe with our eyes open in the middle of the day, at noon. This comes, at least in part, from vodou, that world at once mythical and real, heavy, quotidian—at once close and far away. No impenetrable frontiers between Whites and Blacks either. A Negro is just a man, a human being. White Negro, black Negro, these are human beings. We fall then into the multipolarity—into the ‘pluridimensionality’—of a total culture. This ‘pluridimensionality’ is the opposite of the binary vision that one finds generally in the West. That which is day cannot be night, according to the Western perspective. That which is white cannot be black. That which is false cannot be true. We have named that thinking ‘rationality,’ ‘reason.’ However, without rejecting reason, we are intuitive. We are equipped with invisible antennae that allow us to seize both near and far at the same time. It is this multipolarity that aligns us with the structure of the starfish. Nothing is entirely true or entirely false. There are nuances between day and night, between white and black; nuances between yes and no. It is this fundamental richness that characterizes Haitian culture” (Frankétienne, “Identité”).

5 In 1975, Frankétienne published the incredibly successful *Dézafi*, the first novel-length work of prose fiction ever written entirely in Haitian Creole. *Les Affres d’un défi* is Frankétienne’s re-writing (not translation) of *Dézafi* in French.

6 *Restavek* (from the French *rester avec*, “to stay with”): the *restavek* system is a phenomenon in Haiti according to which rural parents unable to support their children send them to relatives or strangers living in more urban areas where, in principle, they receive food, housing, and schooling in exchange for light housework. In reality, *restaveks* are often more or less enslaved to their “hosts.” The phenomenon has been widely denounced as a form of modern-day slavery.

7 “[The heterogeneous] consists of everything rejected by homogeneous society as waste or as superior transcendent value. Included are the waste products of the human body and certain analogous matter (trash, vermin, etc.); the parts of the body; persons, words, or acts having a suggestive erotic value; the various unconscious processes such as dreams or neuroses; the numerous elements or social forms that homogeneous society is powerless to assimilate: mobs, the warrior, aristocratic and impoverished classes, different types of violent individuals or at least those who refuse the rule (madmen, leaders, poets)’ (Bataille 142). Heterogeneity is whatever is decomposable: filth, excrement, the great unwashed; whatever contaminates or defiles: the abject or the sick; whatever is untouchable or unspeakable, like the homology of mouth and anus; above all, whatever one must not eat” (Bruns 706–7).

8 I am referring here, of course, to the central characters of *Les Gouverneurs de la rosée*, *Le Mât de Cocagne*, *La Lézarde* (et al.), and *La Chronique des sept misères*, respectively. Jean Jonassaint explicitly situates *Les Affres d’un défi* within a regional modernist tradition, arguing that the novel represents “an homage to two great Haitian novelists, Jacques-Stephen Alexis—from whom Frankétienne borrows the chronotope of the *deserted courtyard in the night* from *Compère Général Soleil* (1957)—and Jacques Roumain, making allusion to the pseudo-idyllic ending of *Les Gouverneurs de la rosée* (1944) in the final paragraphs of his tale of the liberation of the zombies” (On Frankétienne” 115–6)

9 Rachel Douglas very convincingly argues that the circumstances within which Frankétienne initially developed his writing practice had much to do with his unwillingness to configure unambiguously heroic characters in his fiction: “Frankétienne

is extremely wary of the dangers to which the espousal of a particular political position can lead in the right-wing *noiriste* ideology of the Duvalier dictatorship. He has seen, for example, that aspects of Jacques Roumain's politically engaged Marxist work have been appropriated and deployed for the *noiristes'* political formulations of Haitian identity ... This is why he rejects all messianic endings, most common in the work of Roumain, where positive heroes are presented as imitable examples for the community, and by extension the reader, to follow ... Thus, the liberating process of dezombification is not envisaged as a clearly socialist revolution" (47).

10 In a section titled "Hors du paradigme d'opposition" ["Outside the oppositional paradigm"], Antoine concludes that those works that escape either an idealized or, conversely, a degraded portrait of the Haitian real are few and far between. He does mention, however, Depestre's *Hadriana dans tous mes rêves* as an example of such a work, stating: "René Depestre hasn't tossed out the marvelous real with the bath water of Revolution ; his marvelous realism is not inverted, but shrunken" (*Rayonnants* 72). He goes on to note the importance of the zombie's latent potential for rebirth and re-action in the limited case of Hadriana, "false dead woman ... mobilizer of forces" (72). In other words, Antoine implicitly recognizes the extent to which the literary figure of the zombie might enable an escape from binary models.



## Productive Schizophrenia

### *Les Possédés de la pleine lune, Aube Tranquille and Le Peuple des terres mêlées*

*Because our deepest Self escapes us, the demands of History have created in the Caribbean region a schizophrenic personality that at once suffers and rejoices in creation ... Celebrating ourselves as beings to be divided. Divided beings. Different. Installed in difference, without any real chance of establishing coherence (temptation and difficulty characteristic of schizophrenics) ...*  
—Jean-Claude Figolé<sup>1</sup>

Where Frankétienne makes use of the zombie, both literal and metaphorical, to emphasize the fundamentally dual and often conflicted essence of his characters, Jean-Claude Figolé and René Philoctète might be said to have embraced schizophrenia as a principal configurative point of departure. Though perhaps less directly issued from Haiti's popular culture, the schizophrenia presented in the Spiralists' works strikes individuals who exist and struggle with/in a contextual space that is decidedly Haitian. At the same time, however, Figolé and Philoctète explore the potential of the Haitian folkloric universe to provide insight into non-Haitian-specific problematics. Expanding on the model created by Frankétienne's first prose works, Figolé and Philoctète offer characters whose personal sufferings echo those of the Haitian nation and, to some extent, of the (post)modern world as a whole. Their characters' schizophrenic responses to the tragedies in their lives are portrayed as much more than mere pessimistic neuroses. Rather, their schizoid behaviors very often provide opportunities for self-interrogation and even self-preservation. The two authors thus seem to imply that madness can actually make sense in a "psychotic" socio-cultural context.<sup>2</sup> The implicit slipperiness of their characters makes quicksand of the stories into which they are inserted, creating a narrative instability that effectively obliges the reader's engagement with the texts other than by way of a more traditional attachment to or identification with sympathetic protagonists.

Published eight years after *Les Affres d'un défi*, the very first pages of Figolé's *Les Possédés de la pleine lune* are devoted to the depiction of

a traditional *veillée*.<sup>3</sup> This opening scene provides a description of the specific physical components of the occasion, detailing the roles assigned to the members of either sex. While the men drink rum, play cards, and tell stories—“stories of the living” (7)—the women, *les pleureuses* [the lamenters], dedicate themselves to the task of mourning alongside the widow. The reader is plunged directly into this very typical experience of the Haitian collective such that, from the outset, “a creolized folkloric backdrop is established” (Antoine, *Rayonnants* 61). Both the principal storyline and the narrative structure of *Possédés* are established in these initial five pages, and both are visibly marked by Fignolé’s self-proclaimed preoccupation with the Haitian folkloric imagination. This opening *veillée* is cloaked in mystery, as there are two corpses to be buried. The one is identified as that of Agénor, a local fisherman whom the citizens of Les Abricots consider a strange and secretive individual. Alive, Agénor was completely isolated from the rest of the town, and his existence had always been one of absolute marginalization: “The men of the village said he was bizarre. Some even insinuated that he was crazy. They had judged him as different so as to better oppose that difference with a collective attitude that undoubtedly harbored some fear, envy, and jealousy, if not hatred” (8). Already the subject of unfounded gossip and general suspicion while alive, Agénor becomes even more mysterious in death. The men gathered in his home to participate in the *veillée* have come less to honor the passing of a friend than in the hopes of satisfying their curiosity about a self-excluding and excluded member of the community.

The indifferent lack of respect exhibited by the men is paralleled by the exaggerated lamentations of their wives and daughters. Although the women’s presence at the *veillée* ostensibly reflects their support of and solidarity with Agénor’s widow Saintmilia, the text immediately qualifies this supposed unity by revealing its less noble motivations: “They bartered, for the duration of the wake at least, their own distress for hers, thus exorcizing through tears the tribulations of their own existence. A way of confirming a tacit pact with life: better death come for a neighbor than for oneself” (7). As is confirmed repeatedly in Frankétienne’s *Les Affres d’un défi*, the “tribulations” that mark the collective quotidian often prevent that community from achieving or even attempting the cohesion that would be necessary for productive solidarity. Thus rather than turn to the other women of Les Abricots for solace, Saintmilia retreats into madness, isolating herself even further than during her husband’s lifetime, and implicitly permitting the collective to indulge in what one character describes as the “diabolical habit of tarnishing repu-

tations by giving free reign to our fantasies” (42). The very fact that *Possédés* opens with a wake—a social ritual unconfined to the space of Haiti—so places broader questions of individual subjecthood at the center of the narrative and links Figiolé’s Haitian tale to the wider world. Commenting, for example, on Irish writer James Joyce’s novel *Finnegans Wake*, Georges Bataille uses language that echoes Figiolé’s description to explain the collective psychology of a wake:

It is the death of an *other*, but in such instances, the death of the other is always the image of one’s own death. Only under one condition could anyone so rejoice; with the presumed agreement of the dead man—who is an other —, the dead man that the drinker in his turn will become shall have no other meaning than his predecessor. (Bataille and Strauss 24)

In other words, the neighbor’s death offers a provisional reprieve from thoughts of one’s own anxiously anticipated demise. Ironically, then, it is through an ostensibly communal gathering that the narrative first hints at the deeply fractured nature of the collective.

The premise of the novel reposes on a foundational ambiguity, as Agénor’s death proves as peculiar and mystifying as his life. There is, to begin with, the question of that other cadaver at the *veillée*, the unidentified dead man that Agénor, himself mortally wounded, apparently carried home from his nightly fishing excursion. The nameless stranger is Agénor’s mystical twin. He perfectly resembles the fisherman, right down to the death-wound in his side and the single eye placed in the middle of his forehead:

The two men were there, joined together by blood, united in the coffin by one and the same fatality. Both of them were one-eyed. The same nasty wound pierced their sides. They had the same serene beauty in death, which had frozen their resemblance. Their faces and bodies were interchangeable ... Their faces, turned toward one another, wore the imprint of a tragedy that accentuated their resemblance, which became more and more striking as the night progressed. (9)

Yet no one from Les Abricots has ever seen this stranger before, and no one is able to explain his connection to Agénor. Sò Gêne, a local storeowner and the last person to have seen the fisherman alive, aside from the tragically speechless Saintmilia, tells a confused tale. She claims that Agénor visited her boutique at dawn on the morning of his death and offered to sell her an enormous fish he had killed with a harpoon to the side. Several hours later, she recognized this “fish” as the dead stranger lying in Agénor’s courtyard. Sò Gêne’s account is, of course, less than helpful in clarifying the circumstances surrounding Agénor and his mysterious twin’s death, thus “the most outlandish hypotheses were

constructed ... around the unknown man” (10). As the narrative progresses, the reader is given bits and pieces of information regarding Agénor’s relationship to his doppelgänger. It would seem that during the course of a fishing expedition, on a night illuminated by the full moon, Agénor came across a man-sized, one-eyed *savale*.<sup>4</sup> He succeeded in harpooning the giant fish through its right eye, but it somehow managed to escape him. Some moments afterward, Agénor heard a beautiful voice crying out “Miyán! Miyán!” and was compelled to dive into the river in pursuit of it. While attempting to discover the source of this enchanting voice, he was touched on the right temple by the tail of the *savale*, the same fish he had already wounded with his harpoon. Then later that morning, while drinking rum at Sò Gêne’s boutique after this encounter, Agénor’s right temple suddenly began to throb and swell, causing his right eye to burst and provoking a strange fusion of his eyebrows and eyelids: “Once [his] eyelids had fused together, a bloodied, one-eyed fish wriggled about in the empty socket of [his] right eye” (48). Convinced that the touch of the *savale*’s tail had provoked this transformation into a Cyclops, Agénor subsequently became consumed by a desire for vengeance, and thereafter devoted his existence to destroying the fish he blamed for his fantastic infirmity. His death and that of the *savale* are the outcome of a final confrontation in which Agénor strikes the fish with his spear and then himself bleeds to death from an identical wound.

Agénor’s quest for the *savale* serves, then, as the organizing storyline of *Les Possédés de la pleine lune*, establishing the notion of the double as a primary thematic element of the tale. More so even than in *Les Affres d’un défi*, the phenomenon of the *marassa* proves critical to the crafting of a distinctly Caribbean fiction and places a vodou frame around the whole of the narrative.<sup>5</sup> As Maya Deren, author of *Divine Horsemen: the Living Gods of Haiti*, explains, “[t]he worship of Marassa, the Divine Twins, is a celebration of man’s twinned nature: half matter, half meta-physical; half mortal, half immortal; half human, half divine. The concept of the Marassa contains, first, the notion of the segmentation of some original cosmic totality” (38). Beyond this general allusion, Fignolé foregrounds an even more specific element of vodou mythology—the Ghede family of gods—as the basis for Agénor’s experience. Deren is again helpful to understanding this narrative choice:

Ghede, loa of life and death, is the corpse of the first man, who, in his original twinned nature, can be thought of as a cosmic totality segmented by the horizontal axis of the mirror divide into identical twins. Ghede is, importantly, the god who stands at the center of all roads that lead to Guinée (Africa) and is known for his contempt for European-based cultures. (38)

In so alluding to this particular figure from the Haitian vodou universe, Figiolé tacitly positions an Afrocentric thematic element at the foundations of his tale. Moreover, he incorporates the mythology of the dead into the world of the living, thus blurring boundaries between the real and the marvelous in accordance with a Creole folk tradition.

At the same time that this central narrative evokes a specifically Afro-Caribbean tradition, however, *Possédés* plays with the more general question of literary metamorphosis, a textual phenomenon that, as theorist Kai Mikonnen explains, fundamentally “tests the limits of a ‘character’ and thus of representing a subject in writing”—that “problematizes the boundaries between the subject and its other or between language and nonlanguage,” and that “challenges the limits of conception.” It is a phenomenon that interrogates “the subject’s relationship to the world and to others as well as the subject’s knowledge of itself and the world” (309). While the above commentary on metamorphosis in literature specifically references European authors, it nevertheless proves quite useful in examining the subjecthood of Figiolé’s strange fisherman. At once himself and transformed into an animal other, Figiolé’s character exists in a permanent state of imprecision and flux that necessarily challenges more traditional conceptions of the protagonist. Agénor’s ambiguous link to the giant fish serves to emphasize his uncomfortable relationship with the world and people of Les Abricots. In this, his predicament offers an expression of what Deleuze and Guattari have classified as the condition of “becoming-animal,” “a deterritorialization in which a subject no longer occupies a realm of stability and identity” (Bruns 703). Profoundly affected by his animal other-self, Agénor is marked by a fundamental instability—by an indeterminate essence. In effect, it remains unclear whether the *savale* actually exists as an independent entity or rather represents a schizophrenic manifestation of Agénor’s disturbed psyche, an ambiguity that recalls the Raynard-Paulin couple featured in *Mûr à crever*. Here, too, the quest for a double is primarily a quest for self-realization. It inspires and animates Agénor, giving purpose and definition to his existence. But unlike Raynard’s pursuit of Paulin, his quest seems more self-destructive than instructive, more entrapping than liberating. Mocked and humiliated by the other citizens of Les Abricots, Agénor believes that destroying the *savale* will earn him the respect of the collective and make up for the loss of his eye. In other words, he imagines that through the conquering of the non-linguistic, non-human, animal version of himself he might eventually be integrated into the community as a hero:

- Ever since, each night of the full moon, Agénor, more hateful than ever, vengeance in his heart and murder in his hand, goes off to fish at Pomboucha.  
 —With the hope of entering into the ultimate battle with the *savale* to prove to the village ...  
 —To prove what, exactly, Agé?  
 —My own truth. (82)

Motivated by misguided bravado and wounded pride, Agénor's pursuit of his double effectively becomes a negative force in his life. Agénor's obsession leaves him trapped in an existence dictated by his stifling relationship with the *savale*. He lives "on the underside of the day," sleeping by day and fishing by night in the hopes of encountering the moon-loving fish, thus cutting himself off from any but the most rudimentary interaction with his fellow citizens (79). As the days, weeks, and months pass without any sign of the *savale*, Agénor even begins to doubt his own sanity. Frustrated and hate-filled, his quest seems to be more isolating and fragmenting than completing or fulfilling. Lacking any potentially enlightening quality, it resembles the limited and zombifying relationships described in *Les Affres d'un défi*.

In the end, it is only in death that Agénor is united with his double. And this is a decidedly ambivalent conclusion: his vengeance is accomplished, but costs him his life; he does not live to discover that Saintmilia is pregnant with his child (Salomon), nor does he ever see himself vindicated in the eyes of the other villagers. Is his victory over the *savale* then a hollow one? Or, as Bataille (via Hegel) would have it, might this have been a noble and necessary journey toward the achievement of a more complete self?—"[T]he animal dies. But the death of the animal is the becoming of consciousness" (Bataille and Strauss 9). Bataille's discussion of the human relationship to death in fact sheds some real light on Fignolé's narrative, at once affirming the potential value of Agénor's combat with the *savale* and revealing its ultimate futility. Bataille explains:

In theory, it is his natural, animal being whose death reveals Man to himself, but the revelation never takes place. For when the animal being supporting him dies, the human being himself ceases to be. In order for Man to reveal himself ultimately to himself, he would have to die, but he would have to do it while living—watching himself ceasing to be. In other words, death itself would have to become (self-)consciousness at the very moment that it annihilates the conscious being. (Bataille and Strauss 19)

Bataille's scenario precisely describes the dual phenomena of illumination and self-destruction that conclude Fignolé's tale of a man's death struggle with his fish twin. In fact, Agénor's own narration of his encounter with the *savale* evokes with uncanny similarity the "doubling

effect”—the untenable, impossible state of tension—that Bataille posits as the necessary condition for a productive experience of death:

Soon, I was no longer Agénor. From a distance, although I felt white hot, I found myself getting colder, recomposing myself, changing into a *savale* that was another Agénor, completely nude in the *completion of his self*. I understood then that I had just gone through my life without reaching death. I was floating in a sort of dream, knowing that I was a man but seeing myself as a fish. (45, emphasis mine)

Just as within the vodou frame, when looked at through a Bataillan lens, the central narrative of *Les Possédés de la pleine lune* seems to propose a not-entirely-pessimistic configuration of the mortality of the human subject. Using the metaphor of metamorphosis, Fignolé suggests that death might present the ultimate opportunity to embrace human life—that this simultaneous giving and taking away might even define humanness: liberation of the subject in its confrontation with mortality—again, Bataille: “[T]he life of Spirit is not that life which is frightened of death, and spares itself destruction, but that life which assumes death and lives with it. Spirit attains its truth only by finding itself in absolute dismemberment” (Bataille and Strauss 14). Agénor’s story finds a further parallel in Philippe Forest’s commentary on character configuration in the writings of Jorge Luis Borges: “With Borges, the individual never seems to have any worse enemy than himself. His liberty requires his own death” (41).<sup>6</sup> Forest/Borges, too, evoke the notion that the subject’s freedom is achieved only in the pursuit of—or in fully accepting the inevitability of—death and de-individualization, re-absorption into the totality of undifferentiated Nature. Indeed, the whole of the conflict between Agénor and his nemesis might be comprehended as a dramatization of “the historic struggle where Man constitutes himself as ‘Subject’ or as ‘abstract I’ of the ‘Understanding,’ as a separated and named being” (Bataille and Strauss 17). In other words, Fignolé organically illustrates the “unrepresentability” of the individual Subject-hero. His unmistakably folkloric script resonates beyond a strictly Haitian context to intersect considerably with other, extra-insular perspectives, all of which rely on the notion of unresolved tension—a tension that is implicit in the figure of the spiral.

Agénor’s quest for the *savale* serves, then, as a shifting focal point out of which radiate bits and pieces of other quests, of other paralyzing fracturings. Indeed, the collapse of the self implicit in Agénor’s destructive relationship with his twin is underscored by the presence of other fragmented individuals in the novel. The most significant of these parallel narratives is the story of Violetta and the *savale*, a tale that is inextric-

cably intertwined with that of the fisherman, as the beautiful young woman is the *savale*'s lover and mother of his child. It is revealed that every month, on the night of the full moon, Violetta goes to Pomboucha stream to rendezvous with the great fish. Once there, she performs an elaborate ritual while singing out his name: "Miyán! Miyán!" Hers is, of course, the voice that bewitches Agénor on the night he loses his eye. As with Agénor, Violetta's existence is profoundly altered by her relationship to the *savale*—"offering of herself to the irrational, to the madness that, nevertheless, remained her entire reason for being, her prize of happiness in an existence otherwise without appeal" (24)—particularly in that it leads to her profound isolation from the other villagers: "She withdrew into herself, the nights of the full moon, cut off from the world, separated from everyone, even from her family, alone with a despair that linked her to nothing more than a fish in a farmyard of fresh water, a stream-bound love" (25). Inevitably, Violetta's bizarre incantations, her mysterious moonlit rites and the birth of her fatherless daughter make her the subject of malicious gossip in Les Abricots. And like the similarly isolated Agénor, she transcends her alienation by devoting herself to her union with the *savale*. Violetta begins to live as if in a trance, more or less disconnected from the world outside of herself and Miyán! Miyán!, her fish lover. Aware that the other inhabitants of the village regard her as a madwoman and even a witch, she accepts loneliness as the necessary consequence of being "the woman blessed by love" (120, 140). The enchanted man-fish becomes Violetta's all-consuming passion, the object of desire through which she believes she will attain self-realization. Indeed, her description of her relationship to Miyán! Miyán! distinctly echoes the language used by Agénor to describe his first encounter with the *savale*:

Having matured over the course of a single season in the double ordeal of deflowering and maternity ... my flesh experienced anticipation and desire not as torments but as *the need for completion*. And I become complete in *what I do*. Every night of the full moon I go to meet up with love. (120, emphasis mine)

As with Agénor, Violetta's quest is ultimately fulfilled—she achieves her "*accomplissement*"—at the moment of the *savale*'s death. At last in perfect communion with Miyán! Miyán!, she literally bleeds from the wound inflicted upon the *savale* by Agénor's harpoon. And while Violetta, unlike the fisherman, does not die an immediate physical death from this wound, the realization of her quest nonetheless finalizes her estrangement from the rest of society. Having made Miyán! Miyán! the essential measure of her existence, she has no sense of her place in the



world without him. She explains to her daughter, Rosita: “Resolved from the beginning, I enter at this very instant into the time of universal detachment ... I enter into the world of men, relieved of my scarf of naïveté, clothed in indifference and coldness, shielded against pity” (207). Violetta resigns herself to her tragedy, letting die all the hope and all the promise that fuelled her quest, and rejecting the possibility of constructing a satisfying independent identity.

Though less directly connected to the plot lines involving the enchanted *savale*, other characters in *Les Possédés de la pleine lune* are similarly marked by a profound fragmentation. There is, for example, the literally, physically shattered Raoul Luilhomme [Him-the-Man], whose brokenness reflects, obliquely yet distinctly, the impact of alienating socio-political forces on individual identity. Tellingly, this character is first alluded to during the scene in which are described the events leading up to the loss of Agénor’s eye. The mention is brief and enigmatic: “Agénor believed he saw the sergeant-major-general-president swaggering along the beach where three quarters of Raoul, the son of Mrs. Luilhomme, were fermenting in a box, while the other quarter, manure spread out on the sand, made the crabs’ dreams come true” (48). Raoul is mentioned again several paragraphs later, and still no further explanation for his fracturing is provided: “Les Abricots, single file, along a thousand meters, combed the beach looking for that quarter of Raoul, his three other quarters, placidly reposing in the diarrheic humus” (50). It is not until some pages later that the text provides a more complete explanation of Raoul’s fragmentation, yet even this account is colored by a fundamental absurdity that at once tempers and accentuates its socio-political import.

Having been stricken with a devastating case of diarrhea, Raoul had gone down to the beach to relieve his bowels. The sound of him passing gas drew the attention of Bois-Sec, “Chief of the Incoherent Committee for the Preponderance of Wooden Heads” (59), who then arrested him on charges of high treason against “the interior safety of well-stuffed purses and wallets” and of “conspiring to overturn the universal order of things spread out over time” (59). In the pages that follow, the reader is given access to the confused thoughts of the innocent if slightly dimwitted Raoul as he is interrogated and tortured by the *bête à sept têtes* [seven-headed beast], Fignolé’s very thinly veiled metaphor for Duvalier’s monstrously absurd régime. Unable to comprehend the nature of the crimes he is accused of having committed, Raoul’s only response to his inquisitors is that no accomplices or co-conspirators assisted him

in the relieving of his bowels: "I was alone ... I am perfectly capable of taking care of my own basic needs" (61), he insists. Realizing that he is expected to confess to something, Raoul admits to having solicited local prostitutes. This admission of guilt seems at first to appease his tormentors, but once they realize that this is all he intends to confess, they become enraged at what they perceive as his insolence, and so resume their vicious and ultimately fatal beating. Such instances of utter misunderstanding lend a farcical quality to the extreme brutality described in the scene, effectively communicating the ridiculousness of a socio-political reality that quite literally breaks the individual into pieces.

Aware that there is nothing he can do to escape being physically battered by this irrationally violent government beast, Raoul takes refuge in his memories, hoping at least to maintain a unified psychological identity: "Memories flooded in, vague, scrambled. He tried to get a hold of them. To thereby catch hold of earlier parts of himself, reestablish his equilibrium. *Achieve an identity!*" (60, emphasis mine). This effort is only partially successful, however, because the officials manage to lock three quarters of Raoul in a box, leaving only one defiant quarter to enjoy some degree of freedom. The remainder of the narrative is thus peppered with clipped references to the fragmented Raoul such as, "The three quarters of Raoul try to escape to catch up with the other part" (97) and, "Raoul, his three quarters mutilated and one quarter escaped but lost, rots here and there, between the sky and the water" (113), and again, "His quarter buried in the sand, his three quarters locked up who knows where, and his whole self scattered about" (156). And as with Agénor, whose isolating quest for self-actualization takes on a fantastic or legendary quality in the collective consciousness, Raoul's tragedy is also appropriated by the popular imagination. As one inhabitant of Les Abricots remarks, "Raoul, one quarter sand and three quarters boxed up in cement, had thus spoken the truth before scattering his whole being in our memories" (192). His physical fragmentation ultimately becomes symbolic of all that is degraded and broken in Les Abricots, and his tragic fate is consistently alluded to in conjunction with other, unrelated moments of violence, destruction, and madness. When, toward the novel's close, the three quarters of Raoul are at last reunited with the one missing quarter, it becomes clear that the damage cannot be undone. The reconstructed version of Raoul is no more than an "outrageous forgery"—a cheap novelty item to be sold to American tourists (211). His identity is irrevocably fractured and his function as a metaphor for the socio-politically alienated Haitian individual is

confirmed.

A final example of a fragmented individual in *Les Possédés de la pleine lune*, in this case on a psychological level, is the demoralized and schizophrenic Louiortesse, a character who travels zombie-like through the narrative. Formerly one of Saintmilia's suitors, he has returned to Les Abricots from Jérémie, where he spent years in exile after having been badly beaten by Agénor. Horribly disfigured in the fight, Louiortesse wears a mask in his own likeness and lurks in the shadows, spying on Agénor and Saintmilia and dreaming of revenge. While the circumstances of Louiortesse's exile and isolation appear relatively clear, the configuration of this character is marked by a persistent ambiguity. Louiortesse is repeatedly described as no more than a pair of cruel, hate-filled eyes and a twisted grimace. His disembodied presence, haunting and sinister, is at once terrifying and repulsive to the inhabitants of Les Abricots. At various points in the narrative, Louiortesse is conflated with the *bête à sept têtes* and with the zombies that traverse the swamps at night. He claims that Death itself sits on his shoulder, taunting him and whispering advice into his ear. Put otherwise, he hears voices that tell him what to do. The implied schizophrenia and general mystery that seem to make up this character's identity are most clearly evoked in the last pages of the novel, where it is suggested that a hospitalized Louiortesse may actually have dreamed up the entirety of the events of *Les Possédés de la pleine lune*:

Those cruelly staring eyes have been raving for years on the pallet of a psychiatric hospital at Beudette. This patient is nothing more than a pair of eyes, the doctor explains complacently, his name is Louiortesse, a classic example of fixation, his subconscious remains jammed by a supposed memory that evokes a whole store of resentments in him, he believes firmly that, in a distant past, he spent every night strolling about a village ... (a village in which he has never set foot and that he knows of only by word of mouth), terrifying the inhabitants whose paths he also crossed during the day ... mimicking their walk, taking on their voices and their pity so as to complain, inventing dialogues of a striking sincerity, recreating what would have been his former life with an excess of incredible details, pursuing the love of his hatred, he supposedly committed a murder, in a fugue state, each night of the full moon, he persuades himself that he has assassinated, out of jealousy, a certain Agénor, and that Death, perverse counselor, guided his hand in a simulacrum of a game from which he retains a drop of blood in his mouth, that night, his eyes recount, Agénor—shoved about and struck in the side—stumbled, wedged the bundle of dead wood onto his shoulders and, staggering, pursued his route ... (210)

In the end, then, the psychological instability of this individual character undermines the stability of the entire tale. Figolé effectively brings the reader into his whirlwind of a narrative, only to yank the rug out from

underneath the entire structure through the last-minute revelation of Louiortesse's profound unreliability. *Possédés* is thereby reframed and reoriented in its final moments, reminding the reader never to assume the absolute authority of the text. More on this below.

\* \* \*

Figolé's second novel, *Aube Tranquille*, at once confirms the "existence" and undermines the identities of certain of the characters presented in *Les Possédés de la pleine lune*. The fragmentation of individual identities, of the community, and of the narrative itself is taken even further, however. Indeed, *Aube Tranquille* examines an intricate web of characters, often inextricable from one another, that traverse constructs of race, gender, class, and even era. Looked at next to the relatively limited segment of the Haitian population featured in *Les Possédés de la pleine lune*, this second tale significantly broadens the character spectrum. At the same time, however, the reappearance of Saintmilia and her son Salomon provides an ostensible continuity between the two narratives. And while Agénor is not an actual character in *Aube Tranquille*, his name is evoked on the first page of the text and subsequently reappears at least three additional times in connection with both Saintmilia and Salomon. Inasmuch as these latter characters are established as central figures in *Aube Tranquille*, the reader who has already encountered them in *Les Possédés de la pleine lune* might be tempted to seek a certain clarification or elucidation of their characters in the various references to their "extra-textual past." However, the references to "Agénor-the-murderer" (7), to "a certain fish, Miyan! Miyan!" and to "a virgin named Violetta" (126) remain obscure and inconsistent, actually undermining efforts to make sense of Saintmilia's history and of Salomon's parentage.

Indeed, for the informed reader—or rather, for the reader who believes himself or herself to be informed—allusions to these ambiguously recurring characters in *Aube Tranquille* are necessarily invested with an added significance by virtue of the fact that they re-present and challenge certain of the events recounted in the first narrative. At two separate moments in the narration, *Aube Tranquille* revisits, for example, the mystery of Agénor's violent death. When first mentioned, Agénor's pursuit of the *savale* and even his connection to Saintmilia are called into question. Their story is posited as one of the "lopsided stories of the past ... [that] black folk ... tell each other on moonlit nights" (126) and is essentially

relegated to the realm of legendry. At a later point, however, the relationship between Saintmilia and Agénor is confirmed as having indeed existed in the reality of and surrounding the narrative(s). In this instance, however, their story is problematized differently: the text proposes a heretofore unmentioned explanation for Agénor's death—an explanation that effectively alters any prior understanding of Saintmilia vis-à-vis her configuration in *Les Possédés de la pleine lune*:

[T]hat woman [Saintmilia] is not crazy, I know her, a dangerous criminal, she assassinated her husband in a jealous rage ... her duplicity is unrivaled, she buried her fantasies in a double coffin ... she gave the whole village a look at her double face of madness and despair, I surprised her, right at daybreak, she was washing the harpoon she used for the crime in the first waves of the first morning ...

—Saintmilia, what did you do?

—Agénor ... on nights of the full moon, cheats on me in the swamps of Nan-Jouissant with Violetta, she arrives, he goes to her, she sings, he drinks in the strange night of her voice Miyan! Miyan! unbearable ... (190–91)

Described in *Les Possédés de la pleine lune* as a loving, self-sacrificing wife, overwhelmed by the death of her beloved husband, Saintmilia's character is quite significantly reconfigured in *Aube Tranquille*. Throughout this work, and most clearly in the passage cited above, Saintmilia is depicted as a bitter and deceitful individual, a woman consumed by jealousy and capable even of murder. The relationships between characters in *Les Possédés de la pleine lune* and *Aube Tranquille* thus reflect a spiralic quality perhaps even more marked than in Frankétienne's works. The manner in which characters overlap and repeat one another, both in the context of a single narrative and between the two texts, precisely reflects the phenomena of accumulation and repetition essential to the spiral form.

Much as in Frankétienne's *Les Affres d'un défi*, the configuration of the principal actors in *Aube Tranquille* is largely a function of the entrapping relationships that bind these characters to one another. As Yves Chemla has rightly observed, "all [characters] seek desperately to establish relationships with each other, but these relationships never manage to be realized, to find any sense. In fact, the characters look for each other, desire each other but, for the most part, their relationships are extinguished by jealousy or hatred" ("Entrée"). Saintmilia's presence in the narrative, for example, and her depiction as a calculating and vengeful woman, is established primarily in the context of her relationship to sœur Thérèse, the ostensible heroine of the story—"that madwoman is neither humble nor old nor unhappy, she certainly isn't crazy, my intuition persists in screaming out that truth" (11–12). Although sœur Thérèse's

framing narrative situates the story in modern-day Haiti, where she has come to work as a missionary in the convent in which Saintmilia is interned, the reader learns early on that both women have centuries-old ties to the island. The naïve and virginal *sœur* Thérèse, whose real name is Sonja Schpeerbach Biemme de Valembun Lebrun, is the descendant of late eighteenth-century Swiss planter Wolf von Schpeerbach and his Breton wife, Sonja Biemme de Valembun Lebrun. Saintmilia and her son Salomon were slaves owned by this couple. The reader learns that the original Sonja, *sœur* Thérèse's great-great-great-great-grandmother, was a bloodthirsty and sadistic woman, given to acts of unimaginable cruelty. Exceptionally beautiful, spoiled, and impossible to satisfy, she surpassed male slave-owners in torturing and humiliating her human property, obliging her slaves to abase themselves for her pleasure and punishing the slightest perceived resistance with extreme brutality. We are meant to understand that Saintmilia's psychological transformation into a vengeful schizophrenic is due at least in part to her having observed Sonja's absurd, body-fracturing violence. For indeed, the slave woman and her mistress lived out a tragic drama that led ultimately to Salomon's horrible death at Sonja's hands, and to Sonja's subsequent execution by Saintmilia—a drama that occurred over two hundred years prior to the events narrated by *sœur* Thérèse. Yet despite the fact that Sonja Biemme's murder of Salomon took place well before *sœur* Thérèse's lifetime, Saintmilia holds the young missionary accountable for the atrocities committed by her namesake, as if adhering to the Nietzschean notion of "eternal return," whereby one can only ever play the same role.<sup>7</sup> *Sœur* Thérèse thus finds herself in the schizophrenic position of at once doing penance for and avenging her ancestor, a task that the embittered Saintmilia has apparently been resurrected to thwart.

On the first page of the text, *sœur* Thérèse articulates the ancient tension and hostility that exist between her and Saintmilia:

[Saintmilia] holds out her hand in a gesture of friendliness, I won't be fooled by her airs and graces, for we have already consumed—over all this time that she's been lying in wait for me—our reservoirs of patience and indulgence, rancors, provocations, insinuations, fits of persecution, aggressions, and—inopportune—the excuse of her madness ... constructing a coherent system out of divagations woven from her memories and so adroitly structured that they reveal the machinations of a lucid mind, bent on destroying me, on plunging me even further into the irrationality of the centuries. (7–8)

Fully aware of the historical ties that bind them—"faithful to the rendezvous of our history, she waits for me, rigid in the permanence of sorrow and hatred" (155)—and of the crimes for which Saintmilia

believes her responsible, sœur Thérèse/Sonja explores, and at times even admits to, the accusations made by her time-traveling, self-proclaimed nemesis. In so doing, she tacitly accepts the fragmentation of her own identity, allowing Saintmilia's real or feigned madness to complicate and confuse her understanding of herself.

In a later passage, in which sœur Thérèse attempts to deny the impact that Saintmilia's condemnation has had on her, an unidentified narrator abruptly seizes control of the narration and directly contradicts her claims, emphasizing the instability that plagues her:

[Sœur Thérèse] liquidates with a single word all responsibility and all guilt, doubtful of her own actions, despite everything—slightly remorseful at having allowed herself to have thus been trapped by the deranged eyes of the madwoman; she looks at herself as at once guilty and innocent, *divided, tugged at, torn apart, above all uncertain, persisting in seeing herself in the image of another* herself destroyed by history but put back together in all these stories told by the madness of Saintmilia ... (103, emphasis mine)

Convinced of the need to affirm her individual identity yet overwhelmed by the weight and the profundity of the similarities that link her to the original Sonja (“from one first name to the other I look for the difference”), sœur Thérèse constantly questions her own value and her own responsibility, vacillating between confession and denial (15). At several points in the narrative, she acknowledges the crimes committed in the past and implores Saintmilia to in turn recognize the distance that separates her from her sadistic ancestor. But for Saintmilia, all the evils of the world are embodied “in a single contemptible term ... Sonja!” (11). Saintmilia refuses to accept sœur Thérèse's independent existence, conflating the two Sonjas in a fundamental doubling effect, or *dédoublement*.

Figolé's doubled configuration of the Sonjas and portrayal of the putatively schizophrenic Saintmilia as at once distinct and overlapping characters proposes, on the one hand, a general commentary on the challenges of postcolonial and postmodern identity formation and, in addition, serves to establish a vodou frame around the whole of the narrative. More specifically, the Sonja Biemmes allude unambiguously to the various iterations of the *lwa* [vodou deity] Erzulie. Likened to the Virgin Mary, Erzulie is the goddess of love, romance, art, and sexuality, and is represented as an extremely beautiful white or fair-skinned mixed-race woman. One of the most significant gods of the vodou pantheon, Erzulie—like many of the principal *lwas*—presents in several aspects. As Erzulie Freda, she can be either flirtatious and playful or jealous and spoiled; she considers all men her exclusive property and expects to be

pampered and adored, responding with anger or petulance if ever her desires are unmet. As Erzulie Dantor, she is fierce and warrior-like. Protector of children and of women (especially lesbian women), she is often depicted carrying a baby and brandishing a knife. When incarnated as Great Erzulie, yet another iteration, she is simply a woman in tears, overcome by profound sorrow.

Erzulie is the only *lwa* to manifest according to the double traits of at once a young and an old woman. For there is Mistress Erzulie, young, beautiful, voluptuous, frivolous, and also unfaithful. There is Great Erzulie (Grandmother Erzulie), old, wise, and serene ... Mistress Erzulie, dispenser of pleasures, has as a counterpoint Erzulie jé wouj (Red-Eyed Erzulie), the jealous and vindictive one. In so doubling themselves along an axis of Good and Evil, the vodou spirits show themselves to be somewhat reversible. But they are extensible as well. That is the case with Erzulie, at least, given that she appears as the double face of the good and the evil goddess, but also as that of the young (Mistress Erzulie) and the old (Great Erzulie). The apparent paradox of the quadruple figure of Erzulie, or of any other *lwa*, can be explained by the fact that the *Lwas* are figures of resistance and aggression. And this resistance can take either an offensive or a defensive form, negative or positive, then, and can orient itself toward the past or the future. (Laroche, *Double scène* 166–67)

There can be no question but that Figiolé's configuration of the Sonjas is meant to evoke just such a fundamentally Haitian worldview: a perspective in which wholeness of being is neither expected nor necessarily desired—in which “negative” and “positive” conflate, making blame especially difficult to assign and denying the reader easy distinctions between “good” and “bad” characters. The fact that Saintmilia, archenemy of and opposing force to the Sonjas,<sup>8</sup> also expresses characteristics evocative of Erzulie further supports the idea that categories of hero and villain—in vodou as in Figiolé's narrative—are non-absolute. The various iterations of Erzulie, as manifested through Figiolé's three central female characters, thus offer an insular foundation for the phenomenon of fractured individual identity at the heart of the narrative.

The *dédoublement* of the Sonjas effectively becomes *détriplement* when it is revealed that Sonja is also the name of a beautiful Senegalese flight attendant who pays a great deal of attention to sœur Thérèse during her trans-Atlantic trip to Port-au-Prince. And while it is not suggested that this third Sonja represents yet another incarnation of sœur Thérèse/Sonja Biemme, an additional point of ambiguity is nevertheless introduced into the narrative. This use of a single first name to designate three ostensibly unique characters is a direct expression of the schizophrenia that dominates the entirety of the narrative. Constructed as an



inherently unstable etiquette, the name Sonja is essentially devoid of specificity and so represents a distinct challenge for the reader. For in assigning the identical name to multiple characters, a certain shifting of identities is necessarily implied. With every mention of the name Sonja, the reader must sort out which of the Sonjas the text refers to at that particular moment, and must think twice—thrice even—before re-investing in the story.

The ambiguity created by the three faces of Sonja posits a fundamental identity instability in *Aube Tranquille*. This instability pervades every aspect of the text and allows the phenomena of overlapping and conflation to color the relationships between less prominent characters as well. The reader learns, for example, that while at the convent, sœur Thérèse was involved in a passionate affair with the emotionally abusive and unfaithful sœur Hyacinthe, a relationship that is mirrored by the inappropriately intimate interaction between sœur Thérèse and Sonja, the black flight attendant. On several occasions, sœur Thérèse confuses the flight attendant with sœur Hyacinthe, addressing the former by the latter's name. She projects the desire she feels for her old lover onto the doubly forbidden (because female *and* black) flight attendant. This fantasy-based identity slippage occurs nearly every time sœur Thérèse looks at Sonja:

[Sonja] walks off, aerial, supremely elegant in her suit, white smile, white gloves, sky blue cap, disdainful of the passengers' admiration, we recognized one another, the flame of our forbidden love lighting up our eyes, heavy joys in an alcove, sharing an existence, identically overcome by swoons, twin spasms, sœur Hyacinthe, you make my head spin, ah! climax! ecstasy and death! ... she leaves, indefinable, enigmatic, happy in her own skin, my lovely stewardess, her amused expression. (23)

The text reinforces this conflation in the paragraphs that follow by effecting a shift from the current space and time of the Air France flight to images of sœur Thérèse's life immediately prior to this voyage. This scene is then directly followed by a *scène de jalousie* between sœur Thérèse and sœur Hyacinthe in the convent. Although spatio-temporally incongruous, the consistent confusion of sœur Hyacinthe and the flight attendant Sonja qualifies the insertion of such a scene as a continuation rather than an interruption of the narrative. This same technique is also used throughout the text to conflate the identity and discourse of Wolf's slave and former wet nurse, Saintmilia, with those of his lover, the wise and world-weary courtesan Cécile. It also underlies, of course, the constant confusion of sœur Thérèse and her ancestor, Sonja Biemme de Valembrun Lebrun discussed above.

An additional significant conflated pairing links the characters of Wolf and Salomon. Nursed simultaneously by Saintmilia (Wolf's mother having died in childbirth), the two men were raised together as "brothers," though their relationship is, of course, actually that of a master and his slave. Bound by a past of shared boyhood adventure and filial love for Saintmilia that Wolf characterizes as "a fraternity that our childhood created but that life divided" (45), the two men express an unabashed mutual affection that is at once transcendent of and particularly vulnerable to the slave society that determines the parameters of their existence. At the same time that either one would lay down his life for the other, their status of free and unfree being is *de facto* untenable. Indeed, Wolf's every other interaction with the blacks in his charge expresses the most brutal and vicious elements of the black-white power relations in the colonies. Conflicted by the multiple roles he feels forced to adapt in the impossible world he inhabits, Wolf experiences a splitting of his self that recalls the schizophrenia of his great-great-great-great-granddaughter. "[E]verything is confused in me," he laments,

I wonder who I am, colonel, Swiss citizen naturalized French, plantation owner, that makes three identities, amounts to three personalities that are too often in conflict with one another as much about the fundamentals as the details of life, I spend my time trying to figure myself out, when I think that I'm also ha! Sonja's husband I become complicated, turned around, if I chose my roles, my wife chose me and that has completely upset my life. (43–44)

This "confusion" is largely a function of Wolf's reluctance to fully acknowledge the extent to which his wife's shameless sadism is a true reflection of his own being. Only in rare moments (of lucidity?) does he recognize his hypocrisy and thereby integrate his true self: "[E]very part of me buried in my conscience or inscribed in my future," he reveals to Cécile, "is merely a possibility that the escape of a Negro man or the beating of a Negro woman can compromise by erasing any certitude" (44).

The fragile and unsustainable nature of Wolf's relationship with Salomon is, ironically, made evident by the element that links them most intimately: Sonja. For while Sonja is Wolf's bride—object of his adoration and, to a certain extent, his property—she despises him thoroughly and takes every opportunity to humiliate and reject him. More significantly, Sonja desires Salomon—her property through Wolf—and is torn between her hunger to seduce him and her hatred for his race, embodying the spiralic interplay of centrifugal attraction and centripetal repulsion that determine all relationships, Fignolé implies, in colonial Saint-

Domingue. This unrequited *ménage à trois* gestures intertextually to Victor Hugo's *Bug-Jargal*, a novel that also relies on the configuration of doubled-cum-conflated characters and similarly places "interracial mimetic rivalries ... and the specter of racial indifferentiation they entail" (Bongie, *Islands* 235) against the backdrop of a crumbling Manichean slave order and impending revolution. Bongie's reading of the relationship between the white, French, morally ambivalent d'Auverney and the noble black slave Bug-Jargal, both of whom are in love with d'Auverney's fiancée Marie, makes plain the thematic connection between Hugo's novel and *Aube Tranquille*. As Bongie explains, "[Hugo] invites us to read, in René Girard's terms, the desire of these two men, and colonial desire *tout court*, as inseparable from a mimetic rivalry in which ostensibly distinct individuals reveal themselves to be little more than monstrously indistinct doubles of one another" (234–35). Sonja's feelings for and relationship to the "legitimate" Wolf and the "forbidden" Salomon effectively become the barometer of the two men's intrinsic similarity and absolute difference, and the complicated tangle of emotions that bind the three together provides another example of fraught (because) colonial relationships.

\* \* \*

René Philoctète similarly creates characters whose identities are unstable and dependent, fragmented and relational in *Le Peuple des terres mêlées*. The story takes place in the border region of the Dominican Republic, in the town of Elias Piña, situated on the eastern side of the frontier separating the Dominican Republic from Haiti. The inhabitants of this region—the eponymous "people of the blended lands" ["*peuple des terres mêlées*"]—are invested with all the ambivalence, fracturing, and confusion inherent in the arbitrary geographic boundary that ostensibly separates Haitians from Dominicans. The absurdity of this physical division among cohabiting peoples is thrown into relief by the current of socio-political unrest underlying the narrative. The story takes place against the backdrop of the dictator Rafaël Trujillo's 1937 massacre of Haitians living in the Dominican Republic.<sup>9</sup> The notion of individual and collective identity, particularly as it relates to individual and collective destiny, thus provides the narrative's central thematic element.

As has been the case in the works of Frankétienne and Fignolé, identifying the "main characters" in Philoctète's narrative is not an easy task. The characters who figure most prominently in the story, relatively

speaking, of course, are the couple formed by Pedro Brito, a Dominican factory worker, and his Haitian wife, Adèle Benjamin, both of whom (it seems) ultimately become victims of the massacre. Of all the hero-like figures that appear in the Spiralist works discussed thus far, Philoctète's Pedro Brito is the one who most resembles a more traditional protagonist. Strong, handsome, and single-minded of purpose, Pedro has definite affinities with Manuel, central character of Jacques Roumain's *Gouverneurs de la rosée*, with Alexis's El Caucho of *L'Espace d'un cillement*, and even with Glissant's would-be revolutionary Mathieu Béluse.<sup>10</sup> He is a young Dominican factory worker who openly denounces Trujillo's tyrannical politics and who is (perhaps!) killed by government soldiers for inciting his fellow workers to protest Trujillo's dictatorship in general and the targeting of Haitians in particular. More significantly, Pedro is invested with the ability to conceive of a future in which a united Haitian-Dominican collective would assume responsibility for its own socio-political welfare. He articulates this objective at the very outset of the narrative.

People from here and people from over there who are, when all is said and done, people of the same land ... We must regroup, close ranks, speak to each other, understand each other so that mass can be said over one people, with the blessing of bread for the same mouths, the chance at love for the same hearts. We will gather together our two peoples for grazing, for blessing, sharing, for the assembling of minds, the direct action of our arms. This land carries us, we must defend it. (21–22)<sup>11</sup>

There are in effect several instances in which Pedro is singled out as “exceptional” vis-à-vis other members of the community. He himself affirms this singularity, stating at one point, “I Pedro Brito, I refuse to enlist myself” (26). The provocative manner in which he proclaims his own name along with his categorical refusal to join the masses would seem to link him to the abovementioned heroic protagonists of other regional texts. However, unlike Glissant's “exceptional” characters, or even Manuel or El Caucho for that matter, Pedro has a fairly limited presence in the narrative. Dozens of pages pass without him being mentioned at all, and he is assigned no personal or family history. It certainly cannot be said, then, that *Le Peuple des terres mêlées* is “about” Pedro or that the narrative tells his story. Rather, Pedro's character is configured almost exclusively as the illustration of a particular moment in Haitian history—as the primary conduit through which the reader is granted access to a series of events that concern the greater community. This is not to imply, however, that Pedro serves as a mouthpiece for Philoctète's political agenda. On the contrary, he is but one element of a larger social

tableau, and his voice quite often goes unheard over the din of the collective in its daily struggles for survival. In effect, Pedro is more of a peephole than a puppet: like a window, his character opens on to the action of the story, and then remains discreetly in the background.

Pedro's wife, Adèle, is even less fully developed and so, in her incompleteness, represents perhaps the more "typical" Spiralist character. Nicknamed "Douce Folie," literally "Sweet Madness," Adèle is a somewhat fragile being who suffers from an unspecified ailment for which she regularly takes sedatives. Psychologically fragmented by her slight mental illness, she is quite literally not all there. Adèle's voice has a disjointed, stream-of-consciousness narrative quality that reflects the overall instability and imprecision of her character. She abruptly appropriates and relinquishes control when telling her own story. The mounting tension in Elias Piña during the days preceding the massacre further fractures her psyche, rendering her even less transparent and suggesting to the reader that the pieces of this character are not necessarily to be put (back) together. The following passage offers a clear example of Adèle's emotional disintegration:

Adèle hurriedly exits the bedroom. "Neighbor, tell me! Where is my head? My little-Haitian-girl-from-Belladère head. My head where the fires of dawn intersect. My head without a head. My head that is an inconvenient-head. From lack of happiness, Boring!" ... Adèle is overcome by an extreme fatigue. A sort of letting-go of her limbs. Her right leg rolls in the dust ... [her] left leg starts to hop around ... Adèle's left arm gets caught on something. She can't say what it is. But she has the feeling that her left arm is tangled up in barbed wire. (47-48)

Adèle's figurative fracturing seemingly becomes quite literal when, a mere quarter of the way through the story, she is murdered by don Agustin, Trujillo's machete-wielding henchman, and is decapitated, actually losing her head. Although she remains a presence in the narrative, she becomes a profoundly fragmented character on both a physical and psychological level; and while she attempts on several occasions to rejoin her head to her body, she never quite succeeds. Indeed, long after her ostensible decapitation, Adèle's pursuit of her fugitive head is described in all its absurdity:

Adèle may very well have wanted to recapture her head, to place it on her neck, to hammer it into her neck, to nail, cement, fasten it to her neck, but her head capers about, leaps over the enclosure of candelabras, makes it out to the white street ... Adèle may very well have wanted to grab hold of her head, screw it into her neck, solder it, she may very well have put on her crocodile skin sandals in order to hypnotize her head, captivate it, tame it, she may very well have sung sweet love songs to recapture her head, but her head tumbles, topples over, founders, goes into a bar and downs a shot,

coughs. (108, 110)

Adèle's fragmentation and her efforts to literally and figuratively "get a hold of herself" are evoked yet again:

Adèle may very well have wanted to recapture her head, to set it on her body, to attach it, she very well may have lit the lamp of the Virgin Mary to pray, to make an offering, she very well may have rekindled the odor of benzoin and basil to soften, to request, but her head flees. Gets lost ... Adèle may very well have run after it, appealed to it, but her head gloats, orgasms, purses its lips ... (131)

Headless, Adèle behaves even more erratically than ever. Vacillating unpredictably between pious calm and shameless eroticism, between lighthearted playfulness and violent anger, Adèle's head scampers crazily throughout the town as Pedro looks on, mysteriously paralyzed and unable to help his "schizophrenic little animal" (115). By the story's conclusion, it is suggested that Adèle is alive but has experienced what appears to be some sort of psychotic episode brought on by the trauma of the events she has witnessed, a scenario somewhat reminiscent of the ambivalence surrounding Louiortesse in *Les Possédés de la pleine lune*. In the last reference to the young woman's fragmented person, the text reads: "Adèle may very well have wanted to take back her head, but her *mind* slips away, flees" (138, emphasis mine). It is subtly implied, then, that the loss of Adèle's head might never have been a physical decapitation at the hands of the monster don Agustin, but rather a metaphorical portrayal of emotional and psychological disequilibrium. Thus when Pedro says to her toward the story's close, "Don't lose your head" (143), the underlying meaning is at once literal and figurative.

This split between mind (head) and body is paralleled by the very particular paired configuration of two additional characters: Rafaël Leonidas Trujillo y Molina and don Perez Agustin de Cortoba. In effect, Trujillo is the brains, as it were, behind the massacre of Haitians whereas don Agustin serves as the agent of its execution in Elias Piña. The narrative develops each of the men in accordance with his narrowly defined role. Trujillo, for example, is characterized primarily by his absurd, long-time obsession with "la Citadelle Henry," an enormous castle-fortress built in Haiti by King Henry Christophe in the early part of the nineteenth century. The text reveals to the reader that Trujillo has been fixated on the idea of possessing this fortress—a testament to Haiti's spirit of resistance and potential for grandeur—ever since his earliest childhood, and that his hatred for the Haitians is, above all, the product of his all-consuming jealousy. The narrative suggests that Trujillo's deep-

seated resentment, coupled with his racist belief in the ethnic superiority of Dominicans over Haitians, represents the principal motivation behind the massacre. Indeed, the slogan “We are the whites of this land” (51), introduced and promulgated by Trujillo, is identified as the guiding principle behind his cruel politics.

While Trujillo’s character is defined by his disturbing psychological make-up, don Agustín is characterized almost exclusively by his physicality. He is “an armed man with a short fuse” (17). Lazy and sweaty with an enormous potbelly, he is portrayed throughout the text either chopping off the heads of innocent Haitians in *Elias Piña*, indulging in masturbatory fantasies of his Haitian concubine *Emmanuela*, who has fled to the other side of the border, or enjoying both simultaneously with a smile that gives away his “state of blissful idiocy” (58). Where Trujillo entertains various imaginings about the great future of the Dominican Republic, the appropriation of the entire island of Hispaniola, and the ethnic cleansing of his people, don Agustín fantasizes about having sex with *Emmanuela* and killing Haitians (it is worth noting that his role as “representative of the forces of order” (37) is to fragment the Haitian cane-workers into so many “headless bodies” (105). The most striking example of don Agustín’s beast-like corporality follows, significantly, Trujillo’s decision to eliminate freedom of the press:

Don Agustín loses his breath. Yellowish saliva dribbles from his mouth. Don Agustín hiccups, goes on the attack again ... The machete cuts, severs, tears to pieces, divides up, pierces, decapitates. Intestines jump around at don Agustín’s feet. A pulsating liver sticks to the skin of his stomach. The machete accelerates its rhythm. The air piles up, a cornered pig. Take that, and that!, the machete amputates, butchers. Don Agustín sings, cries out, bellows, don Agustín lets loose a battle-scream. Twisted nerves envelope his shins. And the machete slams, growls. Take that, and that!, dissects, dismembers ... Don Agustín sweats, stomps, runs here and there, charges, retreats, somersaults. Each time he strikes, *Emmanuela*’s legs—long, slender—encircle, grip, squeeze, purge his immense, beige body. And the machete skips about, takes a tumble. The machete pirouettes. Take that, and that!, whittles down, mows down, mutilates, cuts up. A bladder explodes ... Don Agustín meows. Don Agustín drools. Don *Perez Agustín de Cortoba y Blanco* chats. A vagina contracted with pain foams at the mouth. Don Agustín shakes, dazed, heart beating in his chest, *Emmanuela*’s legs grazing his sides ... Don Agustín sweats profusely, *Emmanuela*’s legs—long, slender—moving up and down, lifting him up, rocking him, setting his rhythm. (39–40)

Trujillo, the obsessive maniacal tyrant, is the disembodied intellect behind the carnal, unthinking brute that is don Agustín. The two characters are effectively configured as mutually dependent fragments of the

concept of Third-World dictatorship.

In addition to these relatively “central” characters, a vast—almost excessive—number of characters are named or summarily introduced throughout the narrative. That is, the story is abruptly interrupted on several occasions by brief anecdotes concerning previously unmentioned individuals. Generally referred to only one time, these individuals are by no means integrated into the narrative, but seem rather to function as sources of corroboration for the tales of indiscriminate violence related in the context of the “main” story. It is their status as victims—as casualties of the repressive government’s war on its own people—that justifies their presence in the text. Any background information that might establish these individuals as truly distinct characters is omitted, however. They function instead as so many particles in the spiralic maelstrom described in *Peuple*. For example, the omniscient narrator’s ominous claim that “[o]ne does not attack the machine with impunity” (10), is immediately followed by a list naming over a dozen men, women, and children who, because they did just that, have met violent deaths or were “disappeared” by Trujillo’s governmental forces. And in another instance, as Pedro reflects on whether or not to keep Adèle with him in the Dominican Republic despite the increasing menace of Trujillo’s soldiers, the names of several other bi-national couples faced with the identical problem are listed in rapid succession: “Pablo Nunez may very well have sent away Antonine, his woman from Belladère ... Célio Marquez may very well have sent away Sanite, his woman, to Maribaroux ... And Señora Victoria, whose husband Monnuma St-Hilaire passed over the border near Capotille last night!” (20–21). And in yet another context, the narrator explains that Haitian lives depend on the ability to correctly pronounce the Spanish word for parsley, “*perejil*.” Immediately following this declaration, the text provides an extensive list of Dominicans who have desperately tried to teach their Haitian friends to articulate the word properly:

This word had never before known such notoriety nor such a wealth of emotion. Fefa Rodriguez de Dajabon affixed it to the lips of Pierre Charmant de Vallières. Cesar Gomez de Jimani nestled it between the breasts of Rose Antoine de Boucan-bois. Bewteen two glasses of Bermudez rum, Julian Nunez y Jimenez gargled, weighed, and groped it for the benefit of his friend Serge Laplanche, schoolteacher in Cerca-la-Source. (92)

In each such instance, individuals are named and their actions within the context of the particular circumstances are described, yet nothing is revealed about them outside of this frame. Here, indeed, we find *mise en scène* the notion of the community-individual theorized by Glissant.



Much like the collective chorus in Frankétienne's *Les Affres d'un défi*, these characters are presented without singularity. They are the quasi-anonymous reflections of the betrayal of organic creolization that Philoctète's narrative decries.

\* \* \*

In each of the six of the novels explored above, Frankétienne, Fignolé, and Philoctète meet the challenge of representing the underrepresented by avoiding hierarchy, categorization, and the assignment of relative value in their works. They avoid elitist dismissal and patronizing hypervalorization of the subaltern subjects of their fiction, and they posit no set criteria for identity formation. Their characters are, for the most part, fragmented, under-developed, or morally ambiguous creatures. They are discomfiting and uncomfortable—opposites of the reader-desired “heroic body,” inasmuch as the latter is “under control and capable of struggle and achievement” (Bruns 707). Unlike more traditional narrative constructions, in which characters and their doubles—whether contrasting or complementary—are present, neatly configured, and perfectly accessible, the Spiralists offer fractured beings that circulate in a world where “[e]very reality supposes and is susceptible to transforming itself into its opposite,” where “[e]xtremes contemplate one another and become conflated” (Forest 82). Not only are there few clear-cut heroes or absolute victims in the Spiralists' works, but a good number of their (non-)hero-protagonists show up late or do not even bother to stick around to the conclusion of their own narratives, exhibiting an unreliability that resonates within both a postcolonial Afro-Caribbean and a postmodern European context. The Spiralists thus poke fun at what Munro refers to as the schema of the “traumatically disoriented individual caught in the modernist dramas of exile-induced uncertainty and identity chaos,” and they play with the at-times clichéd evocations of “nostalgia for a lost sense of rootedness, certainty, and truth” (*Exile* 178–79).<sup>12</sup> And while all of the Spiralists' characters may exhibit similar degrees of confusion and alienation, they are by no means identifiable as participants in a commonly defined struggle. The Spiralists thereby resist suggesting that the popular community has discovered some collective self, or even that said community has fully articulated such a notion as its most immediate objective. The Spiralist “We” remains non-politicized and undefined, offering no ideals around which to rally.<sup>13</sup>

The consistent absence of sympathetic characters to “grasp on to”

represents a significant risk on the part of these authors, in that a certain distance is inevitably created between the reader and the text. Denying easy intimacy between author and reader—and between reader and character—Frankétienne, Fignolé, and Philoctète refuse the conventions of transparent subjectivity. Rather than seduce the reader by offering opportunities for passive voyeurism, their characters demand that the reader work—that s/he respect the impenetrability of the beings presented in the story at hand. This attitude toward the configuration of the subject is, of course, not far removed from the aesthetic of the New Novel and other postmodernist European literary philosophies, as I have noted throughout.<sup>12</sup> I am thinking, for example, of Natalie Sarraute and Robbe-Grillet's attitude of "suspicion" toward the conventional novelistic representation of the individual; of Barthes's concept of the demanding, "readerly text"; and of the Deleuzian assertion, evoked by Munro, that "[t]he act of dismantling identity, of taking it to pieces, and, crucially, not attempting to rebuild it, but becoming an experiment in 'organless' living is ... implicitly a *creative* act ... [a] discovery rather than *rediscovery* of identity" (*Exile* 138). Indeed, the Spiralists' aesthetic practice very much rejoins Deleuze's claims regarding the failure of representation and the primacy of processes of becoming, and thus it similarly undermines the notion of coherent subjecthood.

The Spiralist characters are beings in a perpetual state of de- and re-creation; they are dismembered and displaced, disembodied bodies, decidedly unrecoverable by the social order. They are—often quite literally—bodies without organs. In this, the beings in these narratives certainly appear to correspond to the subversive schizo-hero heralded by Deleuze and Guattari, to Kristeva's useful cadavers, and to Bataille's pariahs escaped from the chains of social homogeny. At the same time, however, these characters should not—indeed, cannot—be entirely recuperated by overly enthusiastic, postmodern theoretical agendas; nor should they be packaged into utopian visions of postcolonial hybridization. The Spiralist characters are not "full of gaiety, ecstasy, and dance" (Deleuze and Guattari, *Thousand Plateaus* 150); they do not revel in their brokenness. The characters of the Spiralists' narratives consistently withstand the very worst of society's brutality; they endure and they resist to the extent that even death is no absolute. They are at once reminders of the body's finitude and testaments to the soul's resolve.

## NOTES

1 “Poétique.”

2 The celebration of the fractured-cum-multiplied self in the novels discussed below is more akin to the representation-defying, proto-revolutionary schizophrenic of *Anti-Edipus*—“The schizo is not a revolutionary, but the schizophrenic process ... is the potential for revolution” (Deleuze and Guattari 341)—than to the defective, psycho-pathological being evoked in the clinical psychiatric context. For Deleuze, madness is “a rupture, an eruption, a break-through which smashes the continuity of a personality and takes it on a kind of trip through ‘more reality,’ at once intense and terrifying, following lines of flight that engulf nature and history, organism and spirit” (“Schizophrenia” 27). That said, neither Figolé nor Philoctète might be accused of in any way idealizing madness, a charge that has been leveled at Deleuze and Guattari. The Spiralist authors’ schizophrenic characters, while productively subversive to a certain extent, suffer greatly their emotional and physical brokenness.

3 *veillée*: Term for a traditional wake.

4 *Savale*: Creole term for the tarpon, a large-headed coastal fish with broad silver scales.

5 Literary scholar and anthropologist Vèvè Clark makes explicit the link between the marassa ethic and the Spiralist aesthetic (though she only mentions Frankétienne in her comments), stating that “the marasa [sic] sign, like others produced in agrarian societies,” proposes liberation from the constraints of Hegelian binarism and so “has another, more ‘spiralist’ agenda in mind” (12).

6 Here Borges intersects with Bataille right down to the choice of language: “According to Hegel, the ‘spiritual’ or ‘dialectical’ being is ‘necessarily *temporal* and finite.’ This means that death alone assures the existence of a ‘spiritual’ or ‘dialectical being, in the Hegelian sense. If the animal which constitutes man’s natural being did not die, and—what is more—if death did not dwell in him as the source of his anguish—and all the more so in that he seeks it out, desire it and sometimes freely chooses it—there would be no man or liberty, no history or individual” (Bataille and Strauss 12).

7 Part III, Chapter 4 of this study includes a discussion of this aberrant temporality.

8 Chemla, too, notes Saintmilia’s appartenance to the Haitian folkloric spiritual universe: “What Saintmilia possesses is a relationship to the pantheon of the *lwas* of Haitian vodou. Through them, her conflict with *sœur* Thérèse takes on a mythic and cosmogonic dimension ... ” (“Entrée” 7).

9 In October of 1937, in a bid to seize control of the entire island of Hispaniola, the Afro-phobic, anti-Haitian Trujillo ordered the massacre of Haitian laborers living, primarily, in the border region of the Dominican Republic, an event known as the “Dominican Vespers” or the “Parsley Massacre.” Over the course of two days, between 20,000 and 30,000 unarmed Haitian men, women, and children were slaughtered by soldiers using machetes; many were killed as they attempted to flee across the border into Haiti. Trujillo’s soldiers were meant to distinguish between Haitian “foreigners” and native Dominicans by holding up a sprig of parsley and asking “What is this?” Those able to correctly pronounce the Spanish word for parsley—“*perejil*”—were assumed to be Dominican and so spared death.

10 Pedro can best be situated in the lineage of the *viejo* character—the migrant male laborer—first narrativized by Maurice Casseus in his 1935 novel *Viejo*. As Valerie Kaussen points out in her extremely nuanced reading of Casseus’s narrative and the Haitian modernist novels it inspired, the *viejo* is a staple figure of the Haitian

revolutionary ethos: “After traveling to the sugar plantations that concentrate world capital and Caribbean migrant labor, Roumain’s and Alexis’s protagonists return to their homes to remind the local peasants of their own connection to a world context, not merely as producers, but as global actors” (Kausen 107).

11 The extent to which Pedro’s pronouncement echoes dialogue from Alexis’s *Compère Général Soleil* is striking: “They spoke a language in which Haitian Creole mixed with Dominican speech. Certain songs and certain dances were practically the same as in Haiti. The two nations were sisters ... Something was connected here—through work, through songs, through common joys and sufferings—that would end up creating a single heart and soul for the two people chained to the same servitude” (262).

12 Munro makes these comments in relation to Dany Laferrière’s stylistic choices.

13 This refusal to write narratives that imply communal political consciousness perhaps explains Kausen’s omission of the Spiralist authors from her study, mentioned in note 8 of my preface.

14 The New Novel is the sole established movement with which the Spiralists have claimed direct affiliation, though they are careful to emphasize their points of divergence from this European aesthetic. Frankétienne states in an interview that Spiralism was developed “in the light of the technical acquisitions of the New Novel and of the TEL QUEL group, all the while taking into account the principal threads of a national reality” (Raymond Philoctète 17). In many ways the philosophical heirs of Jacques-Stephen Alexis, the Spiralists remained wary of what they perceived as the implicit socio-political neutrality of the New Novel perspective.

### III

## Space-Time of the Spiral

*Nowhere has geography better aligned itself with history. The tragic dissemination of the land wishfully calls for the dramatic dispersal of men. Coming from where? Arrived where? Washed up on shore! The first migrations defy childhood memories.*

—Jean-Claude Figiolé<sup>1</sup>

*We struggle to recompose we don't even know what history broken into pieces. Our stories jump around in time, our various landscapes overlap, our words get mixed up and combat each other, our heads are too empty or too full.*

—Edouard Glissant<sup>2</sup>

How might non-indigenous, post-slavery, irrevocably traumatized, and broken individuals and communities such as those described by the Spiralists possibly hope to take possession of the island landscape and to escape the tragic history to which this landscape has borne witness? This is a question that has implicitly and explicitly determined the treatment of time and space in Caribbean literature since the very beginning of the nineteenth century, and such concerns as the “repossession” of history and the landscape have since become veritable catchphrases in literature and theory of the (French-speaking) Americas. Césaire’s and Brathwaite’s reliance on an historical and geographical linkage between Africa and the Caribbean and their passionate evocations of the Middle Passage, Walcott’s and Fanon’s call to resist divisive investigations of the historical misdeeds of whites and the sufferings of blacks, Glissant’s quest for tangible moorings in the histories (as opposed to the History) and landscapes of the New World, and Chamoiseau’s and Confiant’s efforts to find literary inspiration in the absence of an epic past or proud sense of place are only some examples of the levels at which Caribbean intellectuals have engaged themselves in explorations of regional history and space in the formulation of their philosophical and aesthetic perspectives.

The interrelatedness of temporal and spatial elements as the impetus for theoretical reflection and narrative drama is, of course, by no means unique to Caribbean or New World aesthetic traditions. As Mikhail Bakhtin has famously explained in his reflections on the chronotope,<sup>3</sup> the literary presentation of time and space reflects the most basic compo-

nents of any given society. The chronotope provides, Bakhtin asserts, “an optic for reading texts as x-rays of the forces at work in the culture system from which they spring” (425–26). In the particular context of the Americas, narrative configurations of time and space have been consistently marked by an emphasis on the idea of ontological insufficiency or lack—the notion that history is painful because ruptured and discontinuous, the landscape hostile because stolen and exploited. Postcolonial Caribbean writers have generally sought to counter this traumatic experience of time and space by identifying and assigning relative value to discrete events and places, tracing genealogies and investing specific sites with carefully constructed symbolic resonance. Writers of fiction and theory alike have proposed approaches to understanding, representing, and renegotiating the often-fraught relationships between identity, the physical environment, and the past. Whether it be the brutal reality of the plantation, the externally and arbitrarily determined borders between nations, or the disheartening conditions of the postcolony, the New World landscape functions as poignant witness to the events and non-events of the region’s history, while time is posited as a function of the specific metaphysical and literal space(s) of the Americas.

Weaving together alternative versions of history and affirming a rootedness in the landscape—imagining and building connections—has indeed been a priority for many writers of the region anxious to take full literal and metaphorical possession of their respective nations. For the three Spiralist authors, however, alienated environments and historical lacunae—decided disconnections—serve as the epicenters of the vertiginous spatio-temporal spirals of their prose. Offering convoluted, opaque, and uncertain descriptions of history and the landscape, Frankétienne, Figolé, and Philoctète avoid oppositional discourse and dramatically destabilize any spatio-temporal points of reference in their narratives. In their unsparing portraits of (Haitian) reality, they acknowledge the extent to which rupture, discontinuity, and exploitation determine the relationship among people, place, and time. As such, each author crafts representations of the postcolonial Caribbean that convincingly narrativize its “hybrid” and “unstable” (Dash, *Edouard Glissant* 3) nature.<sup>4</sup> They do so, however, in ways that go beyond the mere pessimism or despair of which they and other Haitian writers are often accused. Returning to but considering differently each of the works discussed in the previous section, I examine in the chapters that follow the Spiralists’ quite singular narrative renderings of time and space: the devastatingly consequential boundaries erected within the space of the island in

Frankétienne's *Mûr à crever* and Figiolé's *Les Possédés de la pleine lune*; the deconstruction and interrogation of recognizable events in Haitian history proposed in Figiolé's *Aube Tranquille* and Philoctète's *Le Peuple des terres mêlées*; and the disturbingly un-demarcated spatio-temporality of Frankétienne's *Les Affres d'un défi* and *Ultravocal*, in which both the specificity of Haitian reality and broader phenomena of the contemporary world are conveyed.

Whereas, for example, dystopic imagery often predominates in their representations of the space of Haiti, the landscapes presented by the Spiralists are dynamic and unfixed—placed always in productive dialogue with one another. The spaces of the Spiralists' narratives are dialecticized, alternately immobilizing and liberating, degraded and filled with potential, real and marvelous. They reflect the sustained ambivalence and ambiguity of the zombie. Rather than codify the island space and assign relative value to its various components, then, Frankétienne, Figiolé, and Philoctète celebrate juxtapositions of the incongruous and consistently avoid hierarchical categorization. The multiple binaries that often provide spatial orientation in New World postcolonial literature—forested hills vs. flatlands, urban centers vs. rural communities, restrictive/ed island space vs. outward-opened expanse of the sea, etc.—are largely absent from their works. The three authors present instead diversified textual universes in which any space can be invested either positively or negatively depending on the state of the community, the individual, or the environment at any given moment. Space in their novels is presented in all its violence and confusion rather than intellectualized or coded. To the extent to which issues of rootedness, possession, and territoriality are so central in Haiti and throughout the Americas, the Spiralists effectively communicate the “elusive space of the nation” (Dash, “Haïti” 47), as regards the literal, geographical frontiers of the Haitian republic and the space produced by collective ideas of nationhood.

The works discussed here resist temporal stability as well. They are narratives that move backward and forward in time, generally collapsing past, present, and future realities into a single frame—urgent and immediate—and avoiding definitive accounts of time's progression. Having emerged from the terrifying present of Duvalier's suffocated island, Frankétienne, Figiolé, and Philoctète refuse any “rehabilitating mythification”<sup>5</sup> of the revolutionary Haitian past, and so make plain the extent to which history repeats itself in Haiti and throughout the Caribbean. The painful irony of Haiti's ambivalent post-revolutionary socio-polit-

ical circumstances is expressed obliquely in the works of the three authors through the haunting spiralic repetition of unresolved, putatively past episodes in the present. These subtly altered reiterations of moments in time broaden and deepen the present, inextricably embedding the past and the future within it. The present of these narratives is, then, not merely transitional or connective. It is an experience of repeatedly revisited and revised moments whose “reality” is perpetually unfixed. Each of Frankétienne, Fignolé, and Philoctète’s novels emphasizes the fundamental arbitrariness of narrating a real that cannot be closed or concluded, thereby articulating the phenomenon Benítez-Rojo describes as “living history synchronically” (203). Using the spiral to present multiple points of entry into or versions of specific events, the three authors revel in the chaos and the fissures of history without attempting to construct coherent, complete, or stable narrations of the past. Their works alternate between and conflate the apocalyptic and the personal tragic, such that the reader perceives events without hierarchizing them—without any one version supplanting any other as truth or fact. Traumatic memory, fantasy, and “official” narratives are proposed as equally (un)reliable means of accessing New World (hi)stories.

Anchored in the marvelous real (in the Alexian sense of the term) and its inverse, the unbounded vortexes offered by Frankétienne, Fignolé’s troubling leaps through space and time, and Philoctète’s configurations of inbetween-ness all express the impossibility of mastering space or of relying on a concrete, event-based, grand narrative of the past—despite the tempting fact of Haiti’s originary ethos-event. While certain of their novels make reference to particular moments in history and describe particular landscapes, the Spiralists’ works are nonetheless rife with destabilizing elements that contrast with any ostensible chronotopic specificity. Narrativizing the effect of individual and collective alienation on the human perception and experience of time and space, these works allow for reflections on the points of intersection between psychology and society. They account for the severe spatio-temporal limitations imposed on the individual in the context of a totalitarian state, and implicitly suggest ways in which literally confined beings might identify opportunities for metaphorical escape. In tales that resonate significantly with Bhabha’s reflections on the “unhomely,” the three authors consistently examine the relationship of “the traumatic ambivalences of a personal, psychic history to the wider disjunctions of political existence” (Bhabha, *Location* 6). Their works invite analysis of the various boundaries—geographical, social, and political—that determine individual and



collective experiences of space and time, illustrating the consequences and the joys of becoming unbound.

## NOTES

1 “Poétique.”

2 *Case 126*.

3 This is in fact a concept Bakhtin borrows from Einstein to express the inextricability of time and space in literature.

4 It is true, of course, that all places might be qualified, at least in part, as hybrid and unstable. Indeed, these terms have largely become commonplaces of postcolonial jargon, over-utilized without sufficient reflection as to their implications. Nevertheless, I do believe that these are notions that have particular relevance when applied to the exceedingly multivalent Caribbean—that the hybridity and instability of these postcolonial island nations distinguish them from the self-assured historical narratives and territorial anchoring of more “rooted” states (in Europe, Asia, and Africa, for example).

5 In a discussion of “the paradox of the Haitian people’s fascination with the Dessalinean model” (“Postcolonial” 103), Cilas Kemedjio argues that the revolution has often served to stunt social and political activism in Haiti. He explains: “The charismatic reference risks passing alongside the present: the act of rehabilitating mythification risks becoming a spectacle for shutting oneself up un the inoperative romanticism of the past” (“Postcolonial” 105). Zora Neale Hurston has similarly, if more bitterly, evoked Haitian political leaders that exploit Haiti’s revolutionary past as a means of diverting attention from problematic present-day realities. She argues that “[i]n addition to the self seekers who continually resorted to violence to improve their condition—they always called themselves patriots—Haiti has suffered from another internal enemy. Another brand of patriot. Out of office, he continually did everything possible to chock the wheels of government. In office himself, he spent his time waving the flag and orating on Haiti’s past glory. The bones of L’Ouverture, Christophe and Dessalines were rattled for the poor peasants’ breakfast, dinner and supper, never mentioning the fact that the constructive efforts of these three great men were blocked by just such ‘patriots’ as the present day patriots” (74–75). In *Nouveau regard sur le duvaliérisme*, Jacquelin Despeignes decries this phenomenon as it presents during the Duvalier regime: “Thanks to ‘past-looking-ness,’ the Republic escapes the realities of the present. The past reconstructs the present on the abstract and the mythical through a pointed refusal of history” (21). Finally, there is Martin Munro’s assessment of the disconnect between Haiti’s epic past and its rather grim present reality: “Haiti may have liberated itself in a glorious romantic vein, but it has never managed the more mundane, prosaic business of establishing true political, social, and economic freedom” (*Exile 2*).

## Haiti Unbound?

### *Mûr à crever* and *Les Possédés de la pleine lune*

*The spiral has precisely that power that enables it to inscribe in the text at once a decisive articulation of the history of a particular being and the non-history of a nation.*  
—Yves Chemla<sup>1</sup>

*Spatial practices in fact secretly structure the determining conditions of social life.*  
—Michel de Certeau<sup>2</sup>

Although, again, more straightforward in many ways than others of the Spiralist prose works, Frankétienne's *Mûr à crever* proposes striking destabilizations of time and space. The text functions primarily through the maintenance of certain tensions (between the public and the private; among the real, the remembered, and the imagined; among the insular, the regional, and the global; etc.), and so problematizes spatial boundaries and undermines chronological progression. On the one hand, *Mûr à crever* is very precisely situated in time and space: multiple references to the war in Vietnam suffice to establish the time of the present and set the tone for Frankétienne's critique of US imperialism; the city of Port-au-Prince is named, and its geography presented in almost excessive detail. Yet while the prevalence of specific spatio-temporal markers establishes a realist frame for *Mûr à crever*, the narrative's present-oriented backdrop is consistently disrupted by the first person narrator's recounting of his childhood memories—seminal moments from a presumably distant past. The porousness of the boundaries separating the various narrative "positions" in *Mûr à crever* thus sets the stage for a corresponding spatio-temporal unpredictability and obliges the reader to engage with the narrative from various and at times seemingly unrelated points of view. Looping constantly from Raynard's and Paulin's stagnant and claustrophobic urban present to the first person narrator's immersion in the space-time of a nostalgic rural past, *Mûr à crever* tells a series of "little" stories that, in their combination, aspire to tell a world.

Raynard's trajectory, for example, is one such "little" story, a fact that he himself acknowledges at several points in the narrative, telling himself,

for example, that “[h]e isn’t needed anywhere. He passes unnoticed. The world functions just as well without him” (143). Lacking both purpose and opportunity, Raynand is a being in perpetual but largely futile motion. He walks in order to maintain an illusion of progress, but is increasingly unable to delude himself into believing that (his) movement will necessarily bring about change.

Raynand begins to walk very early in the morning. The last star is swallowed up. The streetsweepers sweep the streets, clean the gutters, wash out the sewers, pick up the trash in metallic wheelbarrows. All this in his presence. Every day. Every morning ... Raynand notices and participates in the tiniest palpitations of the landscape and participates in all the stirrings of the day. Each time he believed that something strange was going to happen; that the earth would flip over ... The balance would be forever broken ... The planet would tip over ... Houses would collapse ... All beings and things would fly away and scatter, inhaled by swirling winds ... He believed, each time he left his house, that an extraordinary explosion would blow up the world. But nothing unusual ever happened. Nothing ever came along to change the order of things. Each day monotonously followed the next. (112)

We have discussed in a previous chapter the significance of Raynand’s wanderings as regards the development of his character. Here, though, I would like to contextualize them with respect to the configuration of time and space in the narrative. In the above reformulation of Césaire’s flat and degraded village exposed by the early morning light to the disheartened gaze of an alienated observer,<sup>3</sup> Frankétienne crafts a spatio-temporal frame that confirms the emotional and psychological stagnation of life in Port-au-Prince. At the same time, however, the fact of Raynand’s constant movement—futile though it may be—keeps time from standing altogether still. The “in-betweenness” of the streets he roams is dynamic; it inherently implies transition and, at the very least, offers the potential for transformation. Thus the slight glimmer of optimism Raynand manages to summon at the start of each day, despite the dismal evidence of his immediate past, provides an opening into a spiral that subtly but persistently refuses the temporal fixity of the circle.

By the same token, the circuitousness of Raynand’s peregrinations largely shapes the unfolding of the narrative in space, calling to mind Michel de Certeau’s well-known reflections on pedestrian voyages through the urban environment. As de Certeau would have it, the walker actually defines the space of the City. The walker spatializes.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, Raynand actually animates the urban spaces through which he moves, at once questing and aimless, inflecting the presumably banal public domain with tensions and anxieties born of his own specific circumstances. From the outset, Raynand’s private dramas make the ordinary

threatening and unfamiliar, the streets dangerous and forbidding. This phenomenon is dramatically depicted in one of the narrative's opening scenes. Convinced he is being followed during a nighttime promenade, Raynand becomes panicked and begins racing through the streets and alleys of Port-au-Prince. As he flees his invisible and perhaps even non-existent pursuers, the names of the streets, neighborhoods, monuments, and buildings he traverses are precisely noted:

He crosses Alexandre Pétiion Place, facing the Cathedral. Then, unable to hold back his body, he breaks into a run, to Bonne-foi Street. He heads toward Jean-Jacques Dessalines Boulevard, in the direction of Saint-Joseph's Gate, where he hopes to run into some nocturnal insomniacs ... If only I can make it to the Gate where there are people about. Safety. Oh agile foot of my turbulent childhood! ... Fleet foot of the good old largo of long ago, run faster! ... Oh agile feet of my adolescence! Fly without stopping to take a breath! Sports competitions ... Old fields of my high school years. Vincent Stadium. Sylvio Cator Stadium ... Make it to the Gate. If only I can manage to arrive before them. Safe and sound ... Oh, to live to see the sun shine on my country tomorrow, on the hills, on the rooftops, on the streets ... Tripping over a bit of broken concrete, he falls down at the intersection of Jean-Jacques Dessalines Boulevard and Fronts-Forts Street. (12–13)

In this passage, the spaces of Port-au-Prince are reconstructed as a function of the danger they present, the refuge they offer, or the nostalgia they inspire in Raynand. Forced to negotiate an overall context in which arbitrary and unspecific powers “govern” public and private existence, and facing a specific situation of extreme distress in the public space, Raynand personalizes the outside. He makes an effort to maintain at least some self-determined connection to the “unhomely” world of his daily life. This narrative configuration of Raynand's relationship to Port-au-Prince resonates significantly with de Certeau's contention that, in (historical and geographical) circumstances determined by what he refers to as “an alien reason” (language that more than satisfyingly describes Duvalier's governance), “proper names carve out pockets of hidden and familiar meanings. They ‘make sense’ ... they are the impetus of movements, like vocations and calls that turn or divert an itinerary by giving it a meaning (or a direction) (*sens*) that was previously unforeseen ... they change [these places] into passages” (104). In Raynand's case, there is a marked urgency to the diversion of itineraries and creation of “passages” in the urban setting. Here and elsewhere in the narrative, Raynand is torn between emotional attachment to Port-au-Prince and necessary vigilance as he navigates its hazards and snares.

Raynand's (mis)adventures call attention, in particular, to the local instances of spatial partitioning that determine access to the various

neighborhoods of Port-au-Prince. *Mûr à crever* is, indeed, greatly preoccupied by limits and demarcation—the divisions in space born of and maintained by societal imperatives. Most notably, the narrative makes much of the inaccessibility and hostility of Solange’s home and, by extension, of the whole of her bourgeois milieu. Characterized by Solange as a prison—“No, you must not come. At my house, I live as if in jail” (16)—and a battlefield—“[t]he living room immediately turned into a veritable arena” (21), her home is a dangerous and forbidden place. It is a space that Raynard can only enter through ruse, in which he can only remain by doing psychological damage to himself, and from which he ends up excluded by the threat of physical violence. Raynard’s individual experience of this particular place confirms the fact that Port-au-Prince is a strictly regulated, socially codified space with clearly delineated internal borders. The dangers of this urban space are evoked in a manner that is best described as spiralic. In narrativizing this space, Frankétienne departs from a realist representational foundation—to which he returns at intervals—but relies primarily on the accumulation of unbounded associative images taken from a decidedly oniric realm. Rather than portray shantytowns and slums, Frankétienne paints a portrait of a monstrous urban space, tentacular and diseased—“shattered city of corruption, plague, pustules and scrofula” (Khalfa and Game 43).<sup>5</sup> For the most part, Frankétienne’s fragmenting descriptions of the city differ from the bird’s-eye view on urban metropolises from which de Certeau generally departs, but there are nevertheless several points of intersection between the latter’s analyses of “pedestrian processes” (103) and my own reading of Frankétienne’s portrayal of Raynard’s walks. Raynard’s movement throughout the city actualizes that which is possible and that which is forbidden. Again, from a Certellian perspective, Raynard’s meandering challenges the “spatial order” by the fact of its improvisatory nature. “Walking,” argues de Certeau, “affirms, suspects, tries out, transgresses, respects, etc., the trajectories it ‘speaks’” (98). Thus when threatened by Solange’s new lover to “stop hanging around Solange ... [a]round her house” (38), Raynard recharacterizes this interdiction in the spatial terms by which his own existence is defined: “What—so no one is free? Since when does one not have the right to walk around, to meander [*flâner*]?” (39).

By repeatedly evoking Raynard’s walks and the dangers and frustrations associated with them, Frankétienne focuses on the innumerable ways in which the individual suffers the space-time of the postcolony and the extent to which s/he is so often prevented from actually participating

in the spaces s/he traverses. In this, Frankétienne's narrative situates itself squarely within a Haitian literary tradition initiated—as N'Zengou-Tayo has convincingly argued in “Imaginary Cities”—by Jacques-Stephen Alexis's *Compère Général Soleil*.<sup>6</sup> Alexis's 1955 novel effectively established the model for configurations of the urban space in Caribbean literature as vehicle for the denunciation of social inequalities, and is certainly a precedent for Frankétienne's choice of the narrative device of the *flâneur* as the most effective means by which to present Port-au-Prince to the reader. Indeed, as with *Compère Général Soleil* and other post-Occupation narratives, *Mûr à crever* makes an explicit connection between the untenable indignities of subaltern existence in Port-au-Prince and the lamentable phenomenon of migration. Thus while Raynard's pitiful wanderings are meant to reflect the limitations and failures of his particular existence, they serve also as a site from which Frankétienne represents the immediate social realities of Haiti's capital city and the broader extra-insular phenomena—class hierarchy, arbitrary violence, absence of governmental accountability—that impact peoples of the contemporary Americas. Frankétienne's configuration of this chronotope of the city and its streets highlights the synecdochal value of Raynard's frustrated trajectories. Here, too, de Certeau's perspective is helpful. He writes:

To walk is to lack a place. It is the indefinite process of being absent and in search of a proper. The moving about that the city multiplies and concentrates makes the city itself an immense social experience of lacking a place—an experience that is, to be sure, broken up into countless tiny deportations (displacements and walks), compensated for by the relationships and intersections of these exoduses that intertwine and create an urban fabric ... a universe of rented spaces haunted by a nowhere or by dreamed-of places. (103)

Again, of course, de Certeau's perspective reflects ostensibly on a “first world,” metropolitan context. Nevertheless, his evocations of questing and deportation, of hauntings and longing for elsewhere certainly resonate with the spatio-temporal preoccupations of Frankétienne's narrative. Indeed, the spatialized constraints placed on Raynard's love life and on the limited liberty he seeks through his daily promenades are so many intra-insular iterations of a strictly bordered wider world. That is, the class boundaries and social violence that circumscribe and finally undo Solange and Raynard's relationship echo the inter-regional frontiers that block transnationalism and define the spatial parameters of Caribbean-American reality.

For example, as in much of Haitian fiction, and as becomes most

marked in *Le Peuple des terres mêlées*, the border separating Haiti and the Dominican Republic represents a particularly dramatic example of a bounded Caribbean space. For reasons explored exhaustively in my below analysis of Philoctète's narrative, the border region is a particularly intriguing space for the Spiralists inasmuch as it exemplifies the tension between segregation and Relation at play throughout the begudgingly creolizing Americas.<sup>7</sup> In Raynand's case, this geo-political border is briefly referenced as the site of a past familial tragedy:

His brother, dead for three years, struck down by a bullet at close range. He was trying to cross the border so that he could become a cane cutter in the Dominican Republic. The sentinel had yelled for him to halt. And a shot was fired that had in no way changed the course of history. Nor the flow of the rivers. The sun continued to rise in the East, to set in the West. Nothing had changed. All that happened was that the next day, he'd had the overwhelming certitude that his brother was dead. Laid out, right near the border. (113)

The unremarkable and unremarked execution of Raynand's brother foreshadows, with a difference, Raynand's own death while attempting self-liberation. Moreover, given that his brother's unsuccessful border crossing is the expression of a desperate desire for elsewhere, it also recalls Raynand's humiliating failed migration to the Bahamas. Like his brother's murder, Raynand's deportation is depicted as a relatively banal occurrence, similarly evocative of individual tragedies that scarcely "register" yet reflect profound collective New World traumas. Having been transferred, along with hundreds of other broken would-be immigrants, from a Bahamian prison to the prison of a freighter headed back to Haiti, Raynand experiences firsthand the disillusionment of immigration and the inflexibility of the borders that have been traced around Haiti—around his life. As the ship sets sail in the night, "the lights of Nassau fade little by little" (54), but the voyagers seem scarcely to have time to tell one another their sad stories before they find themselves looking upon "the shadowy contours of Haiti, indolent on the horizon" (61). Between the two disappointing islands, the Caribbean sea—"the oceanic majesty ... [t]he splendor of nature"—provides an ironic backdrop: "Inalterable. Indifferent. As if it had never implicated itself in the sufferings of men" (60). This delicate allusion to the sea as witness to involuntary crossings past is sustained by the descriptions of the Haitian deportees aboard the ship, "[p]iled on top of one another like so much cargo" (54). The suicide of the four deportees who throw themselves overboard, choosing death over disembarkment, echoes yet another highly charged Middle Passage scenario. Finally, once ashore, the

deported Haitians are shown to be even further reminiscent of Haiti's earliest forced migrants: "From the port to the interior of the city, they march past, two by two. Heads lowered. Attached to one another" (82). Through these tangentially related instances of despairing (attempted) displacement, the one intra-insularly and the other inter-regionally, Frankétienne establishes a subtle spiralic continuity between the (Afro-)American past and Raynard's present circumstances. They are situations that poignantly exemplify Munro's assertion that history "links the present-day deracinated Haitian to the status and experience of the slave" in a "still unresolved collective experience of deracination" (*Exile* 4–5).

Given this context, one in which cultural, economic, and geographical constraints converge to limit the individual's experience of space, other practices of self-initiated exile come into play in *Mûr à crever*. Specifically, the narrative evokes more than one example of sacrifices and moral compromises made by various members of Raynard's entourage seeking to escape the strictures of Haitian reality. There is his acquaintance Roland, a young man who, for the price of a ticket to New York and a visa, allows himself to be "bought" by the family of a pregnant woman deserted by her baby's father, although he likely intends to abandon his bride upon receipt of his recompense. In another instance, during the course of a bourgeois wedding reception, Raynard and Paulin overhear a woman brag about her son, who is effecting his military service in the United States. When asked whether she worries about the possibility of his being sent to fight in Vietnam, she responds without missing a beat:

"That's certainly possible. Anyway, he doesn't plan on coming back to Haiti. In fact, I encouraged him to make that decision. The important thing is for him to have a base there. That brings certain advantages. He'll be able to open up the great industrial cities to all of us. In just a short while, the whole family will have set up shop in New York. I couldn't ask for more. Here, life has become im-poss-sible." (143)

Seemingly unconcerned with the risks to her son on which her dream of exile depends, this woman is portrayed as representative of a selfish and alienated bourgeois class—itsself unwilling to remain in the country it has sold, as Paulin suggests, to the Americans. Paulin seizes, in fact, on the woman's brief comments as a springboard from which to further Raynard's political edification:

"Favored during the American Occupation, their power having since waned, they remain nostalgic for the Yankees. Because the white man can never return to rule here, they go over there to renew their love story of yesteryear



... These people, filled with complexes, blinded by color prejudice, are only too happy to see their daughters marry some cowboy from Texas. They see it as a blessing, manna from heaven. They all flee Haiti, which in their belligerence and bad temper they liken to some bush country.” (143–44)

Thus the scene passes from the evocation of a bourgeois woman’s banally unreflective alienation to a broader commentary on the politics of global space and the lamentable socio-cultural phenomena it both reflects and produces. Once again, then, Raynand’s “little” life spirals out to include concerns that link past to future in a troublingly bordered trans-American space. It seems, indeed, that in every aspect of his existence Raynand finds confirmation of the fact that, for the Haitian, borders—be they frontiers of class, culture, or geography—are ever-present and everywhere; they are tricky and generally maintained by force. His experiences both within and outside of Port-au-Prince ultimately serve as a reminder that, as tempting as it may be to look at the Caribbean as an open and fluid place, “with neither a boundary nor a centre” (Dash, *Other America* 29), close attention must nevertheless be paid to those aspects of New World social and physical geographies that have been rendered (often violently) impermeable. For the state-less Haitians living and working in the border-region of the Dominican Republic, who are perfectly expendable, imminently deportable; for the waves of Haitian boat-people—political and economic refugees turned away from the shores of Jamaica, the Bahamas, Florida; for the educated Haitian elites who seek migration by way of marriage or military commitment on foreign soil—for Haitians, centers and margins are inescapable realities.

It is at least in part as a reaction to his disgust at the woman’s despicable remarks and vis-à-vis the wedding celebration as a whole that Raynand really begins to rethink the role he has been playing in his own life up until then. He becomes increasingly convinced that the physical limitations of his reality need not determine the metaphysical limitations of his being. In passages that prefigure his character’s accomplishment of self-liberation from within the confines of his jail cell, Frankétienne emphasizes a dialectic whereby withdrawal from the boundaried social world allows for extension into the unbound psycho-creative space:

Global seizure of space and time. [Raynand’s] present ceases to limit itself to the imperceptible thread of flight, widening instead into a gigantic luminescent band bordered by the limitless frontiers of the past and the future. (152)

Occurring not long before the conclusion of *Mûr à crever*, this scene of catharsis does much to situate Raynand explicitly within the Spiralist space-time of the multi-tiered narrative. In so breaking psychologically

with specificity and embracing immeasurability and limitlessness, Raynard's reality unmistakably connects, if not merges, with the expansive chronotope proposed in the narrative's first pages:

Rivers. Tempests. Lightning. Mountains. Trees. Lights. Rains. Wild oceans.  
 Carry me away in the frenzied marrow of your joints. Carry me away! For  
 it won't take much for me to speak aloud the sap that circulates in the  
 marrow of cosmic joints.  
 Dialect of cyclones. Patois of the rains. Language of storms. I speak the  
 unfolding of life in a spiral. (8)

Raynard's experience clearly echoes the sort of cosmic reach welcomed—indeed, called for—here by the demiurgically inclined I-narrator. Tellingly, his outward expansion to the dimensions of the universe immediately precedes his discovery of a title for Paulin's book, the Act that recontextualizes his entire existence. Raynard's sudden awareness of his unboundedness in space and time thus provides a direct counter to the triviality of his quotidian, adding resonance and breadth to his unexceptional being.

The I-narrator, too, but with greater self-awareness, links personal to global to cosmic space and time in relating his own story. From the beginning of *Mûr à crever* through to its conclusion, this first person narrator interrupts the "principal" narrative with punctual reminiscences of scenes from his own childhood. Neither directly linked to Raynard's story, nor even to one another, these discrete episodes are so many of those "coils of the spiral" (90) that make up a human life. They are filtered through an adult memory that seeks to establish lessons learned in the past as explanations for the present and foundations for the future. The consequences of Haiti's involvement in the Second World War as seen through the eyes of a six-year-old, a poor peasant grandmother dead of neglect and heartbreak far from a family that has migrated to the city, a nine-year-old's witnessing of the fall of Lescot's dictatorship and sudden understanding of the concept of revolution—these, Frankétienne suggests, are the stories that exist in the shadow of History. These alternate realities, so to speak, begin with and return to evocations of a politicized global time and space—projecting forward from a reference to "the invading American army in Vietnam ... The Third World, ridiculed and despised. The threat of imperialist powers ... The people who cannot read, and know nothing of satellites and rockets" (18), and looping back at the narrative's conclusion with a call to continue struggles initiated by anti-imperialist American heroes: "Caonabo, Anacaona, Boukman, Dessalines, Charlemagne Péralte ... Your descendants are walking the streets of Chicago, of Los Angeles, of Boston, of Miami, of

New York, of Montreal, of Paris. Come back and have a look at your Vietnamese children gathering bloodied palm fronds under a shower of bombs and napalm” (173). A strangely and tenuously optimistic spatio-temporal collapse is thus proposed in this final first-person intervention—optimistic in Frankétienne’s choice of terms that link the greatness of revolutionaries past to the small acts of daily heroism enacted by those “walking the streets of ...”

It is this implied openness to quotidian possibility that ultimately links the conclusion of Raynand’s story to that of the first-person narrator. Specifically, Raynand’s prison break is both a literal and a metaphorical act: it is an affirmation of the fact that social codifications and restrictions of space are not eternal. Certain spaces, maintained violently and/or unjustly, contain within them the contradictions that will ultimately bring about their de(con)struction. Raynand’s simple assertion of his right to refuse internment in an indefensible (in the two senses of the term as famously used by Césaire in his *Discourse on Colonialism*—that is, incapable of being maintained as valid and incapable of being protected against physical attack) place confirms that all space is insecure and precarious, neither closed nor static—that it can be appropriated, for better or for worse, through human intervention. This recognition of the ultimate dynamism of space in time is essential to the preservation of hope.

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In *Les Possédés de la pleine lune*, Figolé plays with readerly expectations regarding the spatio-temporal foundations of his narrative in ways similar to those employed by Frankétienne in *Mûr à crever*. Like Frankétienne’s work, *Possédés* is concerned with issues of openness and confinement, of paralysis and liberation, on the particular level of Agénor’s quest and with respect to the collective quest of the villagers to rebuild themselves and Les Abricots—psychologically and physically—in the face of the seven-headed beast and in the wake of unrelenting natural disasters. With the phenomena of political and environmental devastation as backdrop, *Possédés* offers a series of “little” stories that communicate the broad challenges—social, geographical, historical—faced by contemporary rural Haitians. On the one hand, Figolé situates the tale specifically in time and space: the events of the narrative unfold in the small fishing community of Les Abricots during the mid-1950s. Almost immediately, and throughout the story, however, this clear-cut

space-time is undermined by a number of mitigating spatio-temporal factors—factors that, unlike in *Mûr à crever*, belong unambiguously to the realm of the marvelous real. Specifically, the fact of *Possédés*'s unreliable narrators and protagonists along with the pervasiveness of folklore, vodou, and the oniric perturb the tale's ostensibly straightforward frame, thus rooting in the chronological and spatial undirected-ness central to the Spiralist aesthetic.

The psychological instability and, therefore, unreliability of the narrative's protagonists most certainly has an impact on the configuration of time and space in *Possédés*: Agénor's and Violetta's obsessive quests leave them confused and inconsistent, Saintmilia has succumbed by the story's conclusion to full-blown madness, and, of course, there is the possibility that Louiortesse has imagined the entire tale while in the throes of some sort of psychotic break. Indeed, just as Raynand increasingly isolates himself with respect to his community in Port-au-Prince as he undergoes a process of cosmic expansion, the central characters of *Possédés* withdraw from the boundaried, overregulated social world of Les Abricots and are incorporated into an unbound psycho-creative space. Moreover, the destabilizing effect of these characters on space and time in the narrative is heightened by the decidedly shaky narrative context out of which the story emerges—or, rather (in the interest of emphasizing the folkloric over the literary dimension of the work), by the uncertain storytelling context out of which the narrative emerges. After the presentation of the opening scene, which in fact proleptically relates the story's conclusion, another introduction is offered:

Cric! Crac! So begins Grandmother's nocturnal ritual: enchanting her granddaughters Jacqueline, Guerdie, Greta, Francita, my starry eyes beyond the paths that lead to sleep. She embroiders her fairytales, her constellations of stories and songs, mounting her great steed of words. Invents herself. Drunk on her own incantatory power, she arrives at the confluence where, having left the real, she becomes one with the tender paths of memory ... (12–13)

This (re)commencement delicately undermines the narrative's opening spatio-temporal frame. The phrase "Cric! Crac!" implies a folktale, and what follows in the above passage identifies this folktale as one of many, recounted long ago by the grandmother of the first-person narrator, a "good little girl" (13), now all grown up. Its insertion here, just before the narrative picks up the "beginning" of Agénor's story, introduces the possibility that the present of Agénor's, Saintmilia's, Violetta's, and Louiortesse's lives might actually be situated in the space-time of memory—of memory once-removed, even—that of the narrator's nostalgic evocation of her grandmother's own nostalgic reminiscences.

Further, given Grandmother's propensity to "embroider," the reader can only wonder whether this narrative of vengeful fishermen, besotted virgins, and magical fish is a memory of "real" events, a (tall) tale, or some combination of the two.

It is, of course, no accident that Fignolé implicates the character of a grandmother in framing his tale. The grandmother is an archetypal figure in the Afro-Caribbean context. She is the guardian of collective culture and responsible for orally transmitting this culture to younger generations (of women), often in the absence of mothers lost to repercussions of the violence (death, desertion, madness) that historically and temporarily has so broadly marked women's experiences in/of the Americas. As Mary Gallagher very compellingly asserts, grandmothers have a particular value as concerns history and memory in the Caribbean—" [T]heir ancestral aura compensates, perhaps, for the deficit of 'New World' memory and for the disruption of direct transmission from one generation to the (very) next" (102). While Fignolé clearly relies on such perceptions of the grandmother's centrality to an oral, folk cultural tradition (discussed at length in my Chapter 9 below), he emphasizes the fractured nature of the history Grandmother transmits. Indeed, throughout the narrative, the first-person voice of the granddaughter interrupts or embellishes the story of the goings-on in *Les Abricots* with what in essence are reminders of Grandmother's digressive and individualist storytelling practice. She alerts the reader to Grandmother's blurring of "fact" and "fiction," while suggesting that this might in fact be a very desirable way to access the past.

A good little girl, open to the joys and palpitations of childhood, I listen ... I am simply open, unaware of barriers and limits. I live the space of words as only children can live what they love. And also, as only children can do, I do not stay put in time. I flee ... I listen to grandmother, having sunk into her dreams, amusing myself with her tales ... Voyaging with her beyond the ordinary, I often forget myself along the way, worrying that I might be the plaything—not of her fairytales—but of my own fantasy. (13)

The opposite of Glissant's ordering, answer-seeking Mathieu Béluse, this woman-child is content to measure the space and time of her own childhood using the fragments offered by Grandmother's memories. She embraces the imprecision and ambiguity of the marvelous, subtly encouraging the reader to do so as well.

Aside from the folkloric frame that (dis)orients the space-time of narration in *Possédés*, the situation of this multilayered narrative within the geographic space of a remote Haitian village further sets the stage for expressions of the marvelous. *Les Abricots* is established, from the outset,

as a place where the boundaries between the lived, the imagined, the sensed, and the suffered are entirely permeable. Its peculiar qualities, it is suggested, are at least in part a reflection of the region's legendary linkage to a pre-Columbian (hence pre-Cartesian) cultural past:

Local tradition would have it that the Les Abricots is the paradise of the Indians. Their souls came to while away the dazzling hours biting into sweet and succulent fruits in the shadow of the apricot trees. Lonmon [Woods] is the only place in the country where a forest of apricot trees still grows. Perhaps, entrenched there, a last patch of Indian souls, impermeable to the worries and hassles of existence, decided to take the time to laugh at the expense of the living. (15)

Geographically situated at the far western tip of Haiti on a bay surrounded by deforested hills, Les Abricots constitutes a closed and isolated world unto itself. Sociologist Fridolin Saint-Louis characterizes it as the sole region of Haiti still tangibly linked to the island's indigenous past. Apparently unaware of Fignolé's two fictional tributes to the extraordinary history and culture of Les Abricots, Saint-Louis contends that the village has effectively disappeared from Haiti's national consciousness, claiming that "*Abricots* is a gaping hole in the collective memory of the entire country. Political leaders, intellectuals, scientists, ordinary citizens are barely aware of its existence" (19). Because of this relative seclusion, the inhabitants of the village live according to their own set of metaphysical realities. As Violetta acknowledges at one point, "Our land is a strange land. A land of spells and hexes" (141). It is a place where "the imaginary has conquered reality" (113)—where, for example, a palm tree bearing a strange resemblance to male genitalia endows one member of the community with a daunting "member" of his own, "[t]wo meters, thirty centimeters long" (95), or where a lovestruck river reverses its course in order to go back to kiss its source (107). Given this, the events that surround Agénor's death, while not quite prosaic, are certainly less extraordinary than they might be in another context. Agénor himself understands that his "truth" ("sa vérité") is in fact ultimately "a phantasmagoria: an unreal spectacle in an unreal existence in the eyes of an unreal village" (85). Indeed, as much as the men and women of Les Abricots ridicule Agénor for pursuing his "preposterous" notion of a one-eyed, man-sized moonfish, they fully embrace (and fear) a whole host of other fantastic night creatures that inhabit the various spaces of the village. The swamps where Agénor fishes are said, for example, to be the domain of the shape-shifter Ernest—"shark by day, owl by night" (43); the unassuming villager Sò Râ is widely believed to have made use of her supernatural powers to escape the ruins of her home, collapsed

under the weight of a mudslide—“Sò Râ was a night owl, placed at the very top of the hierarchy of shape-shifters ... Ally of the spirits of the night, she also had the gift of metamorphosis” (149); and the unfortunate Imanor is known to have been “zombified” by evil “forces in service to the empire of the night” (193). Such occurrences are par for the course in a (textual) universe so thoroughly infused with the marvelous.

Of the many spatio-temporal peculiarities that shape human existence in *Les Abricots*, perhaps most dramatic is the atmosphere created by the presence and performance of the eponymous full moon. At once a temporal marker and the expression of a local collective psychology, the full moon metonymically evokes a mysterious and unpredictable natural world that consistently, deliberately, and subjectively implicates itself in human affairs. Throughout Figiolé’s narrative, and in the folkloric context in general, the moon’s organic power is linked to morally charged human(istic) phenomena—that of madness and metamorphosis, among others. Of course, both Agénor and Violetta engage in their respective monthly rituals on nights illuminated by the full moon, as it is the moon that brings to life the elusive *savale*, object of their desire. In addition, though, to the moon’s importance to these particular stories, it takes on a significant role in the lives of the other inhabitants of *Les Abricots*. Figiolé plays with universal perceptions of the moon and its biological impact on the existence of all living beings—perceptions that generally amount to anthropocentric interpretations of various scientific events. In a particularly striking and comical passage, the moon itself mocks folk characterizations of its mystical powers:

“People already think the worst of me: stunned, drunk, unfaithful. They blame me for so much bad behavior! If there are worms in the mangoes, it’s the moon’s fault! Suffering from a hernia, I peed on the mango trees. If the lottery is derailed and some number, despite all predictions to the contrary, ends up winning, that’s also the moon’s fault! I had a headache and as a result the calculations were done wrong. If the banana trees bear scrawny fruit, once again the moon’s fault! I had indigestion at the moment of transplantation.” ... the moon tricked Agénor. She put his head in a tourniquet, ditched him right there, left him completely taken aback ... The moon, drunk on rum and anis liqueur, lingered, brazen, shameless and naked in her fullness, dancing the witches’ conga ... She twirled around, the moon did, with joy. She pirouetted right before the astounded eyes of the witches, forgetting that she was full—knocked up.

—“By all the devils of the empire of *zobops*, what if the moon falls and miscarries?”

—“That would be the worst possible disaster for all of us. Within a radius of thirteen leagues, all cows, mares, and pregnant women would miscarry, too. Our stock of children would dry up. Malediction!” (19–20)

Playful and capricious, Figiolé’s moon is both literally and figuratively

“a character”—a narrative being with its own dramas, adventures, and eccentricities. That its love affairs, bad moods, hangovers, and whatever else have consequences for the natural world in *Les Abricots* is more or less beside the point, as far as the moon is concerned.

The connection between the cycles of the moon and such banal empirical occurrences as the movement of the tides, for example, translates in *Possédés* into the narration of an intimate and personal connection between the moon and the various water spirits that inhabit *Les Abricots*. In fact, it turns out that Grandmother (whether in her incarnation as Violetta or as one of Violetta’s descendants) is a *simbi*—a vodou water spirit—and so provides the link between the moon and the earth. This itself is an implicit reference to the fabled connection between the cycles of the moon and women’s menstrual cycles (the latter biological reality also serving as a temporal marker and rich symbol within collective folkloric imaginations) common to multiple ethno-cultural contexts, and a means by which Figolé affirms the anchoring of his narrative in a specifically Haitian vodou universe. Grandmother’s cyclical communion with the moon and her role as “woman of the earth, wife of the waters” (140) establish her and her female lineage as ambassadors to a personified natural world. Grandmother takes it upon herself, for example, to protect the citizens of *Les Abricots* from the sun’s thoughtlessly destructive ways. She maintains the rhythm of the seasons, rainy and dry, alternately strong-arming, tricking, and seducing the sun into temporarily, cyclically relinquishing its control over *Les Abricots*: “[L]ife began again—smoothly and without a hitch. She danced to new life ... Grandmother’s spiritedness was contagious. Who could have resisted the passion that surged in the swell of her hips—hips in which the desires of the world had been submerged? The sun entered into the dance” (143).

Grandmother and her daughters are not the only characters to be connected directly to spatial and temporal happenings in the (super)natural world. Agénor, too, is fundamentally linked to the sun, moon, and tides, and acts at times in tandem with and at times in opposition to the changeable “grandmother” and her various iterations/avatars. Specifically, during his transformation into a Cyclops, Agénor gets the impression that the sun is making fun of his predicament and so, in anger, plucks it out of the sky and puts it in his pocket, casting the whole of *Les Abricots* into semi-darkness and disrupting the natural flow of time: “Time stopped. By capturing the sun and keeping it in his pocket, Agé had disturbed the cycle of days and nights” (51). Making his personal



tragedy into a collective experience of despair, Agénor plunges the village into a sort of spatio-temporal imbalance. He furthermore sets off a series of supernatural events that ultimately link the space-time of this small Haitian community to more widely regional and transnational realities. The immediate consequence of Agénor's confiscation of the sun, for example, triggers a persistent and pervasive rain shower that slowly, progressively demoralizes the community and eats away at the landscape, leaving barrenness and desolation where growth and abundance should be:

It rained incessantly. An icy drizzle that, far from fertilizing the earth, gnawed at it, denuding the trees. Eventually the trees just stood there, their astonished skeletons set against a blanket of gray sky ... Corrosive salts seeped out of the sky, heavy, monotonous, inexorable, completely unsettling the villagers. (51)

This unremitting, damaging rain is, then, decidedly un-natural. It literally de-natures, not only stripping the trees of their leaves, but also stripping the inhabitants of their hair and their self-esteem. Rooting firmly in the marvelous, Fignolé thus depicts the phenomena of deforestation and acid rain—globally experienced consequences of environmental carelessness and industrial pollution—from a perspective that makes sense within the specific context of the Haitian rural imagination.

The ceaseless rain is, it turns out, but one element of a triumvirate of natural disasters that govern the villagers' experience of time and space. "Worn down by the acid rain, calcified by the drought, swept away by three cyclones, drained of color by the seven-headed beast" (96–97), the village seems always to be on the losing end of a war with nature. Evoked repeatedly throughout the narrative, these demoralizing natural phenomena have so marked the collective consciousness of Les Abricots that they become the foundation of the village's conception of itself and of its history. Personified by the character-concept of the seven-headed beast, these environmental tribulations are shown to be inextricable from the political horrors that afflict Les Abricots.

A monster of the apocalypse—covered with misshapen feathers on the right side, brand new, lustrous fur on the left, claws on its hands and horns on its feet, seven heads set on a giraffe's neck, each one with twelve eyes and twelve ears distributed on the beach and in the mangroves, at the top of the coconut trees, on Byroth Hill, in the stream and in the sea, investigating all the crevices of the landscape in order to drive out the sighs, the faint signs of life, the emotions, the feelings, the tiniest acts and gestures of the village reduced henceforth to silence—had emerged from Coin-d'Anse Cave, terrifying and gigantic. It spread its shadow over all of Les Abricots. Darkness settled in people's hearts and minds. The earth entered into hell. (55)

Figinolé's beast is all-pervading and omniscient. It dominates and determines the landscape of Les Abricots and the psychology of its inhabitants, thereby implicitly establishing the essential connection between the two. This grotesque creature is Figinolé's marvelous amalgam of the climactic and the socio-political obstacles to Haiti's successful physical and psychic development. With its multiple eyes and ears, its presence in every possible social space, the seven-headed beast incarnates the spatial practices of totalitarianism. Through violence and terror, it asserts itself as a total space—as the absolute governing body that totalizes space, and so to whom everything is visible, from whom nothing can be hidden. As one villager explains to another, “Les Abricots was ruined. No one could speak, drink, eat, or walk without being accused of outrage against the Supremacy of the Terror” (58). Following immediately upon these comments comes the scene describing Raoul's arrest and torture for the crimes of “invasion of the district territory” and “illicit disembarkation on the beach” (59). Raoul is punished, in other words, for transgressing the arbitrarily determined boundaries established by the beast, and for failing to recognize that, in the totalitarian context, even the individual's physiological space is the state's—the beast's—business. He is a victim of what Achille Mbembe has identified as the violent irrationality of the postcolony. Mbembe writes, “the postcolony is characterized by a distinctive style of political improvisation, by a tendency to excess and lack of proportion.” It is, he continues, “a political machine that, once in place, constitutes a distinctive regime of violence” (3). Figinolé's configuration of the beast and the unreasonableness of the punishments it metes out to the inhabitants of Les Abricots present a fantastic example of the atmosphere of endless interdiction Mbembe describes.

Spatial restriction in the village is formalized at one point by Rouby, “adulterous child of the most libertine of the seven heads” (68), who sets aside an immense grazing field for his mule, and forbids entry to any of the villagers by putting up a seemingly infinite number of signs that read:

No entry  
 either by word or by laughter  
 into the stockpiles of love  
 no living  
 and buying playthings  
 to cradle the innocence of children  
 No ... (68–69)

Rouby's restricted zone in fact encloses the entirety of Les Abricots. Every crossroads, every doorway, even the open sky bear signs prohibiting access—and this complete restrictedness takes its toll on the collective morale:

Rouby diverted all the streets, paths, and roads. At every intersection he placed a poster: "No entry." We headed right. After just a few steps, we'd bump into a sign: "No entry." We turned back toward the left. "No entry." ... the seven-headed beast and ... its stooge Rouby ... left us only one way out: death ... The population resigned itself. Rather than die, it gave up, hunched its back, and got down on all fours to graze the coarse grass ... (69–70)

This absolute control over the space of Les Abricots is paralleled by the beast's illimitable temporal reach. With one side of all seven heads described as that of an extremely old man and the other that of a child, the beast establishes its presence in both the past and the future. It is self-regenerating and thus limitless in time: "[G]uileless owner of the day and of the night ... it enters into its own time, extensible time, the terrifying time of perpetuity" (188). Eternal, imprisoning (literally and metaphorically), and uncompromisingly faithful to its own impenetrable "logic," Fignolé's beast is a model of the over-bureaucratized, irrational post-colonial dictator-state.

It is no wonder, then, that the beast's stifling hold on Les Abricots seems to extend beyond the physical and socio-political aspects of life in the village to the point where it is perceived by the population to be responsible for the various natural disasters that befall the community. When, for example, a major drought hits Les Abricots, the beast is to blame: "Hidden away in the sky, [the beast] watched for the slightest hint of clouds and fog. It crept amongst them and filled them up with its fiery breath" (138). Further, three of the region's most devastating cyclones—Hazel, Cleo, and Flora—are portrayed as instances of the deliberate maliciousness of a natural world acting in collusion with the beast. Hurricane Hazel, which left over a thousand dead in Haiti in 1954, is portrayed as clear evidence of the beast's omnipotence with respect to every aspect of life in Les Abricots.

The racket and the hooting, by common accord, maneuvered by a seven-headed demon that twirled wildly at the centre of the village, started up their act again at regular intervals, amplifying their fury, uprooting trees and houses ... Somehow the screaming wind and its imprecations weren't enough. After a short-lived calm, the sea, a simple spectator until that point, swelled up. She drew up its waves in anger and madness, feeding their ferocity with a deafening rumble. She had been holding them back till then. Suddenly, she let the whole pack of them go on us ... Nature had gone crazy. (148–49, 150)

The villagers manage to survive the hurricane by ceding their space to the cyclone and barricading themselves in the village church. When they emerge, they find their physical environment all but destroyed:

Hurricane Hazel had upset the order of things, diverted the rivers, reshaped the contour of the hills. It had upended life ... Hazel left the earth, already anemic, bloodless and naked. Burnt to ashes two or three years earlier by a murderous sun, washed out down to the bone, its carcass exposed veins that no longer drained blood to fortify and revive it. The earth didn't have the strength to make itself a new skin with healthy fat underneath. The earth was ruined. (151–52)

Their crops have been wiped out, their houses obliterated, and famine and epidemics loom on the horizon. They are knee-deep in the “puddle,” to cite Antoine, of a natural world that, according to Rafaël Lucas, reflects the “aesthetics of cruelty” underlying most post-Duvalier Haitian literature. The sun, the wind, the rain—indeed, all the forces of nature seem to have been co-opted by the “idiotic and absurd sadism” with which the beast manipulates Les Abricots. The inhabitants of the village suffer, in effect, the underside of the marvelous.

Faced with the hostility of the island space, many of the villagers follow the only path to freedom—to survival—they can imagine: they leave. But of course this solution is not really one. In Figolé's eyes, it is a morally dead-ended and unsatisfying non-choice. “One can only live well where one has become attached, where one has grown roots. It is up to us to enrich our space with life rather than waiting for life to enrich it,” admonishes an unidentified narrator (109). Just as in *Mûr à crever*, *Possédés* evokes the profound psycho-social consequences of displacement on individuals in exile and on the communities they leave behind.

They fled their present, incapable, though, of imagining their future, of dreaming up what they'd be elsewhere. Some of them put on new clothes ... We knew full well what that was about, though: those new shirts and pants, clothes without a past ... Virgin clothes! Necessarily. Otherwise, with what ransom would these men have paid for their betrayal, taking with them, in the memory of their rags, the once-fertile blood of Les Abricots? ... They left, deserting their past with a secret suffering that no sense of hope would ever attenuate. (152)

Figolé emphasizes here the inevitable disillusionment with “elsewhere” he describes in *Vœu de voyage*, discussed in my introductory chapter, and links the migrants' desperation-fueled change of space to patrimonial loss—to disloyalty (flight, betrayal, desertion), even, with respect to the past. At the same time, however, his depiction of the fate of those who remain in Les Abricots after Hazel's devastation seems even less promising than that of those who succumb to migration.

Les Abricots, as if anesthetized, vegetates in a numbing misery. The days pass without compelling us to do anything, nibbling away at the time we have left to live without us paying any attention. Left to ourselves, in the depths of a helplessness that no longer has a name because it has turned into

an edifying resignation, we do not know the weight of the day nor that of the hours. Time is irrelevant to us. (152–53)

Experiencing alienation within and without the insular space, then, the inhabitants of Les Abricots are so demoralized as to have lost all sense of time. Past, present, and future belong to the beast and its minions.

It became absolutely impossible to calculate the months and the years in those regions where its ruthless breath had raged. People everywhere got used to preferring that life be calculated as the time of our submission and of our abasement. As the time of the beast. (73)

Worse even than the physical degradation of the landscape or the atmosphere of claustrophobia that hovers over Les Abricots is the absence of continuity—the villagers' overwhelming un-rootedness.

On the face of it, then, *Les Possédés de la pleine lune* most certainly seems to present a pessimistic picture of time and space in this quite wretched Haitian village. I want to submit here, however, that Fignolé in fact hints at a fragile path toward possibility embedded in the ostensibly rigid space-time of his narrative universe.

We have no sense of the passing of time. Tomorrow gets mixed up with today, while yesterday is never a memory. We exist on the margins of time. Nothing is urgent, so nothing matters. God is good. The rest is of no importance ... life, death, freedom, honor, dignity. The breath of the seven heads stuck atop a giraffe's neck, twelve eyes and twelve ears each, has scattered all consciousness that we could possibly have of ourselves and of others. It has left us zombified ... (73–74)

On the one hand, the fear and inertia that so mark the space of the present preclude the inhabitants of Les Abricots from connecting to the past or envisioning a future, and seem to doom them to wait passively for the courage to initiate that elusive, liberating action. However, the mention of zombification, here and elsewhere in the narrative—"Les Abricots, zombified, woke from its panic and its nightmare" (150)—is significant, inasmuch as it reminds the reader of the not-quite-absolute nature of the despair that otherwise dominates the story. The zombie, although indefinitely suspended in a purgatory-like present and bound to a space controlled by a more powerful other, is perpetually "possibly-freed" by the fact of its fundamental duality: freed to plug back in—damaged perhaps, but reborn—to the space and time from which it was extracted. This slight hope, which, I have argued above, is implicit in the very definition of the zombie and the space-time it inhabits might be considered in conjunction with a secondary, very specific suggestion of latent potential evoked in *Possédés*. It is hinted at most strongly during a scene that features Violetta's father, Diéjuste:

Diéjuste rinsed his mouth in his first glass of rum ... He felt his muscles, regenerated, ready for the quotidian hand-to-hand combat with existence. This year, the first rains had washed out the earth, swept away the seeds. I had to ... whittle away at my resources, already so slim. And times are only going to get tougher. Enough to make a man think God has cursed us Negroes born to suffer, and that the *lwas* have abandoned us. Sufficient unto the day is the suffering thereof, says the proverb. For us, each day has more than its share of suffering. Between one harvest lost and the other half-ruined by rats or by drought, by storms or by locusts, we languish. (32)

It is the merest hint, but the tone is unmistakable. The passive evocation of God and the *lwas*, the dispassionate description of privation, dispossession, and struggle as the particular lot of black peoples, the bleak anticipation of future misery to be endured—these are all echoes of Jacques Roumain’s *Gouverneurs de la rosée*. Indeed, Diéjuste’s monologue could very easily have been extracted from the first chapter of Roumain’s novel, which reads in part as follows:

So many poor creatures call continually upon the Lord that it makes a big bothersome noise. When the Lord hears it, he yells, “What the hell’s all that?” and stops up his ears. Yes, he does, leaving man to shift for himself. Thus thought Bienaimé ... as he smoked his pipe, his chair propped up against a calabash tree ... “Yes,” he said, “a black man’s really bad off ... The Lord created heaven and earth, didn’t he? ... Well, the earth’s bad off, suffering. So the Lord created suffering.” Short triumphant puffs and a long whistling jet of saliva ... Behind the house a round hill, whose skimpy bushes hugged the earth, resembled the head of a Negro girl with hair like grains of pepper. Farther away against the sky, another mountain jutted, traversed by shining gullies where erosion had undressed long strata of rock and bled the earth to the bone. (23–24)

While the tonal undercurrent of the above passages is clearly far from uplifting, it is in the very fact of this linkage between the two works that hopefulness resides. That is, *Gouverneurs* is a future-looking narrative—a tale of redemption and rebirth. Roumain’s little rural Haitian village eventually overcomes the spatio-temporal obstacles that prevent it from flourishing. Consummate tale of the primacy of the human spirit over the indifference and cruelty of the natural and political New World, the characters of *Gouverneurs* ultimately make peace with nature and subvert the pernicious corruption of the state. They slay their beasts. Insofar as *Possédés* echoes certain atmospheric qualities of Roumain’s novel, it retains also the suggestion of a similarly transcendent, if bitter-sweet, future. Indeed, this allusive quality allows for the possibility at least of an optimistic interpretation of *Possédés*’s concluding refrain: “[O]ur story is not finished” (214, 215). By referencing, however subtly,

what is ultimately a narrative of promise, Fignolé provides a spot of hope that Les Abricots might eventually enter into a space-time of freedom.

## NOTES

1 “Iconographie.”

2 *The Practice of Everyday Life* 96.

3 E.g.: “[T]his town, completely flattened ... inert ... indocile to its fate, mute ... incapable of growing with the juice of this earth ... in breach of fauna and flora” (*Cahier* 8–9).

4 “Pedestrian movements ... are not localized; it is rather they that spatialize” (97–98).

5 Philippe Bernard takes note of a particularly dystopic passage in which Raynand encounters “an obese, chubby-cheeked woman [who] shifts the crotch of her panty. Pisses a powerful stream of urine” (201) as an allegorical representation of a feminized, “monstrously” maternal Haiti (235). I would add that the Césairean intertext here, which sends us back to the moment in *Cahier d’un retour au pays natal* where the poet refers to “the suddenly grave animality of a peasant woman, urinating upright, legs spread apart, stiffened” (10), translates Frankétienne’s intended movement outside of the space of his island toward the broader Americas.

6 “With Alexis’[s] first novel, *Compère Général Soleil* (1955),” writes N’zengou-Tayo, “we find the textual model for urban fiction, setting the tone for all literary representations of the city to come. Based on the sharp contrast between areas of the city, the book highlights social inequality in terms of access to shelter and urban amenities ... This novel defines for the first time the link between rural migration and urban expansion, and a denunciation of the migration of the Haitian working class” (381).

7 Evoking the perspective of historian Arif Dirlik, Valerie Kausen notes that “the emphasis on hybridity in postcolonial criticism and theory has tended to elide the realities of continuing institutions of inequality that persist in the ‘contact zones’ [Arif Dirlik, *After the Revolution* (90)] of the world economy” (79). The Haitian-Dominican border would of course be a clear example of such a contact(-cum-conflict) zone.

## Present-ing the Past

### *Aube Tranquille* and *Le Peuple des terres mêlées*

*But who in this New World does not have a horror of the past, whether his ancestor was torturer or victim? Who, in the depth of conscience, is not silently screaming for pardon or for revenge? The pulse of New World history is the racing pulse beat of fear ...*  
—Derek Walcott<sup>1</sup>

*The present of postcoloniality can be formulated as a moment of going beyond through a return to the present. Interstitiality can be understood as a temporal paradox in which looking to the future necessarily entails a return. The present, the past, and the future do not keep to their proper places, whether in continuum or rupture, but haunt each other, making for what Bhabha calls “the ‘unhomel’ condition of the modern world.”*  
—Jeannie Suk<sup>2</sup>

Unfinished stories—unfinished business—are the very foundations upon which Jean-Claude Fignolé’s *Aube Tranquille* is constructed. From the very beginning of the novel, we understand that this is a narrative in which time will not be keeping to its proper place. We realize within the first few phrases that this is a tale of haunting, of vengeful ghosts consumed by centuries-old grudges. We learn that the drama will play out in a series of specific, overlapping spaces and moments—at once conflated and opposed. In *Aube Tranquille*, Fignolé takes as his point of departure the (Bakhtinian) notion that time and space are not mere background but rather are shaped by the events that take place within them. Indeed, if there is anywhere that human action is determined by its context, it is (pre-)revolutionary colonial Saint Domingue. Fignolé’s novel explores the persistence of the para-revolutionary moment by juxtaposing and integrating a present narrative with events that have taken place as many as five hundred years prior. In this, *Aube Tranquille* presents a striking narration of the Walcottian anxiety regarding a past that aggressively inserts itself into the lived present, an active force in that present rather than a phenomenon that one has the luxury of contemplating from a position of remove. The whole of the narrative is, then,



destabilized by the constant emergence of an insistently, even violently, present past—a past that demands to be reckoned with, revisited, and even relived in order to even begin to conceive of a future. Offering no intratextual reflections on the significance of the past in the present, Fignolé simply makes manifest the essential presence of the past, thereby situating his narrative somewhere in between what Chris Bongie describes as first- and second-level works of modernism. That is, he draws attention to the impossibility of unproblematically narrating history, yet does so without “excessively foregrounding” these narrative conditions (Bongie, *Islands* 167).<sup>3</sup> In Fignolé’s textual universe, there is no rupture or discontinuity: the past is contiguous with the present and is not recollected and told but rather lived and embodied. The narrative enacts what Gallagher describes as a “phenomenological view of memory”; an understanding of time and history as a “temporal flow that simultaneously and continuously empties and fills the present” (84).

There is a framing present narrative that situates sœur Thérèse at the mission in twentieth-century Haiti. This present is itself (dis)organized achronologically: while the narrative opens with several scenes that take place in this clearly delineated present space, these scenes are followed immediately by scenes that unfold in the airplane transporting sœur Thérèse across the Atlantic from Europe to Haiti. The scenes in the airplane, it must be noted, are not inserted as flashbacks with respect to the opening scenes. Rather, they are configured as equally present moments in the time-space of the narrative. Their simultaneity to the events related initially necessarily effects a temporal change-up, implicitly obliging the reader to understand those moments first presented as “present” as, in fact, belonging to a relative future. To confuse matters further, it is in the time and space of the airplane that several additional spatio-temporal layers are introduced. With respect to the “contemporary” narrative—that of sœur Thérèse’s ostensible present—the conflation of the beautiful flight attendant Sonja with sœur Hyacinthe, sœur Thérèse’s lover and catechism instructor, brings on the more traditionally analeptic insertion of scenes that occur in the Breton convent where sœur Thérèse was interned prior to boarding the plane to come to Haiti. Once on board the plane, sœur Thérèse begins listening to the cassette tape on which her mother has recorded the transcription of her great-great-great-great-grandfather Wolf von Schpeerbach’s memoirs. As soon as this cassette begins playing, the entire narrative is re-situated within eighteenth-century Haiti, changing narrators from sœur Thérèse to Wolf and establishing this new space-time—his space-time—as the *de*

*facto* present. Finally, out of this present, that of pre-revolutionary plantation society, the remaining spatio-temporal sites of the novel-spiral are present-ed. Like his narrating descendant, Wolf refuses to be orderly in telling his story. In recounting the narrative of his and Sonja's early days, for example, Wolf tells their story "backward"—he begins with the sex scene—"I had accompanied her home from the ball" (30)—and only later relates the story of their first meeting, earlier that evening: "I met Sonja at the Marine Ball ... we began building our story that very evening" (32). Cause and effect, action and consequence, departures and arrivals are rarely presented sequentially. Instead, Wolf's account leaps backward and forward in time, refuses to stay still in space. His narrative digresses, even, from the present and immediate past of his own story to wander through the space-time of fifteenth-century Europe, in pursuit perhaps of the "why" of Sonja's violent madness. From the outset, then, *Aube Tranquille* refuses "traditional" approaches to narrating and reading the past—it contradicts absolutely "the method by which we are taught the past, the progress from motive to event" that, according to Derek Walcott, is regrettably "the same by which we read narrative fiction" (37).

While these additional spatio-temporal contexts are presented for the most part in relation to the two most present narrative threads, they are in every instance brought into the principal narratives seamlessly, without any contextualizing, organizing, or explicatory textual markers to indicate that the narrative has entered the space-time of a removed and remembered past. By constantly shifting the parameters of the present in his narrative, Fignolé implicitly demands that the reader recognize the absolute relativity and even unhelpful arbitrariness of a linear conception of time or a bordered conception of space. His point is best and most significantly emphasized by his very choice of an airplane as structuring chronotope for *Aube Tranquille*. At once stationary and in high-speed motion, suspended in mid-air and between time zones, the airplane provides the ideal matrix within which to defy narrative boundaries of time and space. In combining the unstable space-time of the airplane in flight with the tricky temporality of the cassette, Fignolé provides a chronotopic configuration that, from the outset, situates all aspects of his narrative in a deliberately unruly and perpetually disjointed present—a present that is not only thick with and haunted by past events, but that is almost completely permeable with respect to that past. The plane that transports *sœur* Thérèse across the Atlantic—from her present to her past and vice-versa, from Europe to the Americas and vice-versa—

serves as the site from which sœur Thérèse experiences the phenomenon of “present-ness”<sup>4</sup>:

[I]n the space of a moment, life stops, time takes on a particular resonance, as if it were broken, a crack somewhere in us, the feeling of nothingness between two dreams of life, the moment before and the moment after, we’ve broken free of a present that will never reattach the past to the future and so join together the long chain of duration. (*Aube Tranquille* 74)

Because, as discussed above, sœur Thérèse is (at least) two Sonjas, she can in fact “be” at once in the space-time of the airplane and that of eighteenth-century Haiti, and she navigates these two chronotopes with the confusion of the schizophrenic: “my eyes welling up, I follow after the passing hours, the disjointed instants” (15); “I dive into myself, obsessive quest for a misplaced past” (51).

It is during this voyage that sœur Thérèse first makes the troubling connections between her ostensibly altruistic role as a twentieth-century missionary and past instances of contact between Africans and Europeans in the contexts of slavery and colonialism. By no means a transcendent perch from which she can hover, literally “above it all,” the airplane functions as the springboard from which sœur Thérèse confronts the parallel intentions of Christianity and imperialism—to conquer in the name of “civilization”:

[T]he aisle between the seats begins to look like the Champs-Élysées, my flight attendant in step with her batallions of high-heeled organists, the spahis, the royal guard, the foreign legion, the Negro kings, Papa Doc, Baby Doc, Papa Bok, Big Dada ... everywhere I turn I see Negroes to be whipped, to be crucified, thieves, aggressors of women alone in the shadowy alleyways of Paris, to be broken on the wheel, slowly, rapists of nuns in the Congo and still to be saved. (17)

Sonja, the black flight attendant and object of her desire, stirs up at once passion and guilt in sœur Thérèse. Always in flight, this Sonja embodies a geographic Pan-Africanism that aggressively recalls the historic ties that bind Africa, Europe, and the Americas: “[H]er subtle arrogance taunts me and tells me in a thousand different ways: the sky is my kingdom, the ancient kingdom of Segou, the city of a hundred walls that I rebuild tirelessly between the clouds, with three continents as its borders” (41).

In addition to evoking a series of metaphorical journeys through time and space, sœur Thérèse’s crossing of the Atlantic is a spiralic echo of her ancestors’ honeymoon voyage to Haiti, recounted analeptically within the context of Wolf’s memoir (the flock of sparrows that follows just behind Wolf and Sonja’s ship has even made its way into the airspace surrounding sœur Thérèse’s plane, thus insisting on the connection). And

both voyages are situated along a trajectory of Atlantic crossings that ultimately points to the symbolically charged vessels that Paul Gilroy so thoroughly deconstructs in *The Black Atlantic*.<sup>5</sup> Asian-Americanist Jigna Desai makes the connection explicit:

Airplanes, like Gilroy's ships, evoke not only the displacement of migration but also the possibility of return to places and territories of origin ... Airplanes are clearly associated with mobility ... Unlike the slave ship, they are ambivalent and ambiguous vessels ... planes are the setting of suspended time and space, of a displacement from the normative identifications between territory and history for characters ... planes evoke mobility (space) but also memory and history (time). (120)

Figolé thus makes use of the airplane to highlight the necessary integration of a transatlantic perspective into any approach to Haiti—as much its historical as its contemporary reality—and illustrates precisely Gilroy's conclusions regarding transnational identity formation in the modern world. The airplane is, in effect, an exemplary space of Glissant's *Tout-monde*, and Figolé employs this chronotope to remind us that “our ever more interdependent world economy” (Bongie, *Islands* 8) has firm roots in the commercial interests that initially linked Europe to the Americas by way of Africa. Sœur Thérèse makes the point clearly: “[O]ur lives have made of an airplane the meeting point of the races high above a continent” (51). Rather than focus on the more “typical” topos of the slave ship, Figolé chooses to narrativize one of the less discussed crossings that mark the founding of imperial American slave societies, offering a look at the displacement and disillusionment of white colonists out of which much of the exploitation of and violence toward forcibly displaced Africans emerged. Indeed, Wolf remarks upon Sonja Biemme's nostalgia for Europe and apprehension as regards Haiti/the Americas in the course of this first voyage. Aboard the ship that transports the newlyweds from Brittany to Saint Domingue, Sonja behaves increasingly erratically as the distance grows between her European reality and her fantasies of the islands:

[I]n a few moments she will drift toward the thin ray of sunlight that inserts itself between the door and the frame ... her way of seizing, of capturing in the reflections of light tiny little pieces of the European sun, which never ceases to nourish her fantasies, her frustrations, and her fears of being devoured by the great beanpole of the islands, hotter, more searing, more brilliant, and naughtier ... than all the suns of Europe combined. (100)

These anxieties go a long way toward explaining her behavior once in Haiti. By the same token, Figolé's substitution of the white woman sœur Thérèse's revisiting of an ancient Haitian past for the more frequently narrativized journey of Blacks in the Americas to a longed for and imag-

ined African homeland plays with another of the tropes identified by Gilroy—that of the “redemptive return”<sup>6</sup> (4).

An almost excessive number of temporal and spatial markers are presented in the initial paragraphs of *Aube Tranquille*, establishing the details of the narrative’s contemporary Haitian chronotope. Positioned, narratively speaking, before the passages that describe sœur Thérèse’s plane trip to Haiti, these scenes announce the fundamental spatio-temporal parameters underlying the entirety of the novel. The tale begins with the repeated image of a high window opening at daybreak—“the morning, when I open the window” (7); “every morning, once the window has been opened” (10). As configured in Fignolé’s tale, this window does not open onto innocence or possibility. Rather, it is positioned in the wall of a convent, in Haiti, and it opens onto a scene of bitterness, conflict, and animosity. Instead of offering the promise of a new day, this opened window anchors the present moment and its potential—its future—in a dark history. The window is a portal. It is a gateway through which the past and the present (which is, of course, the past’s future and the future’s past) are made to acknowledge and confront one another. Each morning, the young white missionary sœur Thérèse looks through this window and meets the accusing gaze of one of the wards of the mission, Saintmilia, whose raised fist and condemning stare hold her prisoner to a distant past: “[E]very morning, as soon as the window has been opened, she brandishes her fist in the sole gesture that is her truth, the foundation of her existence, the justification of her hatred, the day hesitates to enter my room as if afraid to chase away my night” (11). Interned as if in an asylum, Saintmilia is said to be a madwoman, but sœur Thérèse insists that this is in fact a “lie come from another age, defined by the turbulence of hundred-year-old dawns” (7). According to sœur Thérèse, Saintmilia is feigning insanity, the better to avenge “a sin committed in another time, in another place, a long filiation of crimes” (9), and seeks only “to plunge [her, sœur Thérèse] even further into the madness of the centuries” (8). Having decided that “vengeance will be hers in the tenth generation” (10), Saintmilia has orchestrated this meeting with sœur Thérèse in order to make it so.

Enraged and frustrated by Saintmilia’s relentlessly renewed condemnation, sœur Thérèse commences striking the old woman. But this violence only succeeds in catapulting her back through time even more viscerally, via the troubling sense memory of masters whipping their slaves—“an ancient memory, images of flesh lacerated by the claws of the lash ... I keep hitting, rage colors the day with red traces, covering

up the memories that come to me like the cruelest part of a life long ago swallowed up” (8). So transported, sœur Thérèse is forced to accept an implication in Saintmilia’s story that cannot be erased by the mere passage of time. She is forced to admit that her very presence in Haiti—in this mission, at this window—is motivated by a journey that is at once a running away and a quest, both in space—“flee the atmosphere of the [Breton] convent” (9), and in time—“flee a past made up of screams, of injustices” (9). She seeks to escape Europe and to be embraced by Haiti, but soon realizes that the guilt she has inherited is unboundaried in time and space. She cannot escape her “confused and cruel family history” (146). There can be no running away because Europe is in Haiti and Haiti in Europe; the centuries are conflated, indiscrete. Sœur Thérèse comes to understand, then, that by choosing to come to Haiti she has in fact accepted an obligation “in the name of the family to expiate eight centuries of crimes” (10).

Channeling a “fury repressed for two centuries” (7), Saintmilia announces with each new day her intention to settle an ancient score—to recall “sufferings as old as her country” (7). The two hundred years that mark the age of her country and of her fury necessarily evoke a very particular moment in world history, the birth of the Haitian republic through the event of the revolution in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. It is a moment, Fignolé suggests, that continues to resound—to enact itself, even—in time and space through the myriad past and present confrontations between black and white, between “Old” and “New” World. Saintmilia’s refusal to let go of the past—her daily reminder to sœur Thérèse of a struggle that has yet to be resolved—is a thus a further technique of spatio-temporal collapse. It is made implicitly and explicitly clear that Saintmilia’s raised fist is a time-traveling call-to-arms. Sœur Thérèse does not fail to grasp its significance and is troubled by it in ways that go beyond the two-hundred-year-old sins for which she has been summoned to Haiti to atone:

Saintmilia! Saintmilia! ... she brandishes her fist, her arm stiffened, raised in the direction of the sun, a rallying cry, ah! those victorious Blacks standing up there on the podium at the Olympic Games in Mexico,<sup>7</sup> wielding their vengeance, combination of fury and hatred, apocalypse of violence and terror, to erase five centuries of humiliation, to deny hell, to reduce history, to eliminate me, leaving me Sonja Biemme to atone for the past, worse, to relive it upside down, the future immersed in the present, the dream undoes the ages, gets carried away, the diffuse past, all frontiers abolished, stories contract and are renewed in the most insane lies, I come back from a voyage through space while she returns from a long voyage in time, each of us enters our own dimension. (48)

Drawing the parallel between Saintmilia's defiant gesture and the Black Power salute so symbolic of Afro-American struggles since the end of slavery and colonialism, *sœur Thérèse* acknowledges the resonance of their encounter. She reluctantly recognizes a spatio-temporal synchrony that disallows any possibility of moving beyond past conflicts. Indeed, because history has been left unresolved, so to speak, *sœur Thérèse's* window opens onto a centuries-old battleground—a battleground upon which Europe, Africa, and the Americas have never ceased to collide. Saintmilia's gesture effectively situates Haiti at the very center of the history and landscape of the modern world. This window and this morning repeat throughout the narrative and in each iteration expose the world with Césairean drama to the judgment of first light.

This judgment is also, of course, that of a mother who has lost her son to the extraordinary brutality of New World slavery: “[Y]our heart aflame you open the window, [*sœur Thérèse*,] like every morning at this time, the astonished day revives my ancient fears” (170);

[Y]ou open the window, the day rushes in like a wave ... your specter stands there, rendered transparent by the blue magic of the light, emerges from the abyss of the centuries ... each night my eyes enslave beneath their lids a past that refuses to die, thick forests of memories. (171)

Possessed by, or a reincarnated version of, her two-hundred-year-old self, Saintmilia continues to live and to experience her painful past. Her every contact with *sœur Thérèse* calls up her son's murder and reawakens her bottomless anguish. She has present-ed herself, therefore, with the objective of restoring *sœur Thérèse's* memory and so obliging the young nun to shoulder at least some of the burden of their shared history. And she has succeeded in doing just that. In line with Locke's precept, cited by Bhabha, concerning identity and history, that is, the notion that one's identity is as dense as one's past is long,<sup>8</sup> Saintmilia obliges *sœur Thérèse* to deepen her conception of her self by attaching her fundamentally to an ancestral past—by making that past an inescapable part of her present. As much as she would like to, then, *sœur Thérèse* cannot remain comfortably amnesiac to the sins of her fathers—or mothers, as it were. Saintmilia denies her the mask of time: “[S]he [*Saintmilia*] has clearly recognized me, I know that now ... faithful to the rendezvous of our history, she waits for me ... I have made you wait a long while, but why have you arranged our rendezvous at the very site of our memory?” (155).

These are the foundations of Fignolé's subtle “twist” on the almost clichéd notion of forgotten history in postcolonial fiction. Indeed, as Martin Munro succinctly affirms, “The need to rediscover memory, and

to reinvent history, be it personal or collective, is a constant preoccupation of Caribbean authors” (*Exile* 70). Generally speaking, though, this retrieval of the past is a project initiated by an Afro-author, or a fictional spokesperson for that author, for the benefit of an imagined alienated elite Afro-reader and/or dispossessed black characters in the narrative. To the extent to which much postcolonial Caribbean fiction is ultimately destined for a Euro-North American (white) readership,<sup>9</sup> one might argue that the majority of these writers also demand white acknowledgment of black significance to the American past. I would suggest, however, that Fignolé’s project is singular with respect to this phenomenon inasmuch as it explicitly narrates this necessary reckoning for white characters *within* the text itself. The black characters of *Aube Tranquille*, for their part, have no problem remembering and vocalizing their situation, their contribution, and their suffering in history. They know where they come from and what they are owed. Theirs is not a problem of surrendering to amnesia.<sup>10</sup> They have forgotten nothing. They are overwhelmed, even, by what they cannot forget: “[Saintmilia] unwinds the overflow of her history, so very many histories hanging by the thread of her memory” (156). Thus rather than lamenting the oft-explored trope of blacks traumatically and tragically unable to remember (their historical significance), Fignolé stages the unacceptability of whites deliberately trying to forget (their historical culpability).

Sœur Thérèse’s reluctant acknowledgment/recollection of a past of which she is largely ashamed in fact sets the stage for and parallels her self-narrating ancestor’s hypocritical relationship to the realities of his own past. As we have seen earlier in this study, Wolf’s rememberings of his childhood are romantic and idealized. His evocation of the time-space of his memories with Salomon correspond not at all with the horrifying realities of black-white relations on the eve of the revolution:

—I was a happy child  
 —the world around you was plunged in misery  
 —I knew it when I began to suffer  
 —you began to suffer when you knew it, isn’t that what you meant to say?  
 —perhaps! perhaps!  
 —so you’re kidding yourself and lying to yourself, that isn’t the best way to resolve your interior conflicts, Wolf, you always knew, don’t be hypocritical ... as a child you played with Salomon in the woods, you chased him all the way into his hut ... but did he ever drag his bare feet into your little boy’s bedroom?  
 —I never asked myself that question  
 —because it would have made you feel guilty and ruined that vision of innocence in which you cloaked yourself while seeking a haven, as you say, in the memory of your childhood (79)



The space and time of Wolf's memory are illusions sustained by blindness and forgetting—by cultivated unawareness of the true landscape of colonial Saint Domingue. Yet whereas *sœur Thérèse* is set straight by her engagement with Saintmilia, Wolf, too, must contend with a foil to his blissful ignorance: the zombie slave Toukouma.

Toukouma's story is that of the horrific violence of slavery and is a direct counterpoint to Wolf's fantasy of the past. At the age of twelve, when Wolf was still a boy, Toukouma, a slave in his family's household, was viciously raped, beaten, and rendered infertile by Bonbon, a neighboring plantation owner. Since then, "every year, on the anniversary of the rape, her stomach swells, just ask her, she'll invariably answer you: I'm pregnant with Bonbon's death" (111). Wolf only hears this story, however, as an adult, at the very moment that he learns of the massacre of Bonbon and his entire family at the hands of a horde of zombies led by this same Toukouma. He is so forced to recognize the link not only between Toukouma's tragic past and Bonbon's violent end in the present, but also between that past, that present, and what will be the necessarily violent future of all Whites in Saint Domingue: "Toukouma avenged herself, it was her right, the justice of the colonists cannot argue with that, I see the apocalypse coming, in the name of the collective responsibility of the Whites, the Negroes will sooner or later have the right to avenge themselves, and woe is us on that day" (111). Toukouma's band of insurgent slaves are, in effect, the frontrunners of the greater revolutionary events to come—"serious events are looming on the horizon, which will be the end" (43); "the hour of vengeance rings out, announcing the age of their freedom" (48)—and so it is significant that her drama provides the direct contradiction to Wolf's preferred memories of his Haitian past and reveals to him an inevitable future.

Indeed, prior to Toukouma's vengeful killing spree, Wolf persists in imagining his family's plantation as a peaceful and harmonious place, morally and geographically removed from the tension and violence that mark the rest of Saint Domingue: "I am anxious to escape this atmosphere of conflict," he admits while in Port-au-Prince, "and to get back to my home, to the tranquil dawns [*aubes tranquilles*] that bathe my plantation in a serene light, the great peace of violet dusks over Lonmon woods" (150). Wolf's vision of the plantation is static and limited; there is no conflict because a single narrative—a historically sanctioned narrative of white male privilege—determines all that transpires there, along with the record of all that transpires there. His perception does not—

indeed, cannot—take into account the plantation’s troublesome plurality. Wolf is incapable of recognizing that

from the plantation out, there is nothing monolithic but rather a proliferation of different places. Different voices can be heard, from different points of view, with diverse internal logics, and all participating in a concert that the cry from the hold of the slave ship, vacillating over the abyss, inaugurated long ago. (Chamoiseau and Confiant 170)

Figolé’s collapsing of Haiti’s pre-revolutionary past into its sorrowful present through the re-present-ing of race and gender relations across the centuries emphasizes the spiralic nature of the island and region’s history. This history is largely determined by what Benítez-Rojo describes as the “implacable repetition of the economic and social dynamics inherent in the plantation system” (203), a system in which “the past was linked with the future through differences of a circular nature, like the steps of a spiral staircase” (204). Indeed, if any chronotope can be said to recall the dynamism of the spiral form, it is that of the plantation, space that allows for a multilayered exploration of the “dimension and thickness of memory”<sup>11</sup> (Chemla, “Entrée”). The plantation is the site where the same story happens over and over again, with slight variations, for as long as the system of imperialist capitalist exploitation it facilitates and by which it is facilitated remains in place. According to Chemla, the chronotope of the plantation figures in Figolé’s narrative as the backdrop against which Figolé narrates the known horrors and the exotic fantasies produced out of this peculiar space.

It is ultimately in the context of the massacre and subsequent pursuit of Toukouma’s army with Salomon in tow that Wolf at last begins to realize the untenability of his nostalgic remembering. As he and Salomon fight a losing battle against the indestructible zombies, and bear witness to the gruesome slaughter of Wolf’s friends all around them, Wolf experiences a dramatic temporal collapse: “[T]he future erupts into the present, somber, frightening, do we have a future? It is totally inscribed in the present and we already know what it is, the good times are finished, Whites no longer decide matters of good and evil, of life and death in Saint-Domingue” (114). It is in the aftermath of the combat, after surveying the scene of blood and death, his world changed permanently—“such carnage, the shattering of my illusions, the destruction of a precarious balance” (117)—that Wolf flashes back and forth between the horrors of the present he is living and the narrative of the past he has scripted and believed in up until then. He reluctantly interrogates and eventually abandons his so limited vision of the space-time of his past. Nevertheless, even in the process of coming to this consciousness, he

paints a utopian portrait of his lost childhood, calling upon a series of unreflective clichés of life in the tropics as frame for his idyllic existence alongside his slave/friend:

[D]ips in the waters of Petite-Anse, stampedes to the sugar refinery and beyond, Dangluse way-up, Sanglant, magic tree at the confluence of the stream and of Fanel Spring, Marcorel and its wounded fields, red spots on the sides of barren hills, Pavrette and the audacity of its great path plunging directly into the widest basin of the Seringue, happy landscapes like so many happy scars in one's memory, unlimited horizons, a call, an aspiration toward freedom, to escape ourselves, we were free, in the truth and in the communion of nature, to be Wolf and Salomon, not knowing if he was white, if I was black ... that knowledge, what hatred could ever snatch it away from us? ...

—Salomon, we were wrong to ever leave our childhood (120–21)

Wolf has finally begun to comprehend the dangerous naïveté of his version of the past—something Salomon has long understood. Though genuinely loyal to his master/friend, Salomon could never have afforded to be taken by such sentimentalities. As he explains clearly to Wolf, “each day, there is the blood of my brothers between us” (129). For Salomon, history is written in that blood. He is fully aware—and his fate proves him right—that he is not at all protected by a fraternity constrained within the absurd realities of a broader slave context. And so it is unsurprising that Wolf's inability to recognize this—to ever fully escape the distorted space of his soft-focus memory—leads to, or at the very least allows for, Salomon's death-sacrifice. For it is only in witnessing Salomon's murder at his wife's hands that Wolf is able to come to terms with the limits of his desired history—to “finally experience the intimacy of the present” (208). The trauma of this capital event inspires him “in his memoir to reveal the true colors of the plantation economy, place of fierce exploitation whence slaves escape through the figurative return to Guinea, i.e. death and zombification, or, at times, through carnivalesque mockery” (Chemla, “Entrée”).

Toukouma's aim with respect to Wolf is ultimately this recalibration of his memory/memoir. Her actions are intended to challenge the selfish tranquility of his plantation sunrises—to establish the causal link between his past, present, and future. Saintmilia has confronted *sœur Thérèse* with a similar objective. Where *sœur Thérèse* announces, “I stave off the past, I atone for history” (141), Saintmilia insists “one cannot rewrite history that easily” (214). Saintmilia makes it clear that atonement can only occur through remembrance and acknowledgment. This alone is the condition for openness to the future. For as long as her story is denied, she will continue to live it. Painfully. Thus while her invoking

of the past in the present is, I believe, meant primarily to disallow white erasure—specifically, sœur Thérèse’s disavowal—of the circumstances that produced the Haitian and New World present, it is clear that this reckoning takes a psychic toll on Saintmilia herself. She suffers greatly this “past that refuses to die”; and the very fact of her return to and haunting of sœur Thérèse/Sonja might certainly be read as “the psychic condition of trauma: repeated and obsessive return to the past”<sup>12</sup> (Kaussen 208). Considered from such a perspective, it is certainly no coincidence that her confrontation with sœur Thérèse plays out within a space that recalls a mental asylum—a space that houses the sufferings of her anguished beings. Saintmilia’s traumatic memories and the chaos they produce are contained within the space of the mission, leaving the latter largely unbound by ordering spatio-temporal principles. The immediacy of the past, its “present-ness” on sensory, cognitive, emotional, and even physical levels,<sup>13</sup> can be explained at least in part by Saintmilia’s recovery of her feelings of despair and terror as witness to her beloved son’s execution, just as Toukouma’s persistent physiological response to the nightmare of her rape confirms the inseparability of past and present within the space of (traumatic) memory.

The world was, of course, an excessively traumatic place for the slave woman. It was a traumatic place for Saintmilia. Her internment in the mission—her “present” situation in time and space—is a testament to what is ultimately her deeply unhomed condition. Indeed, the chronotopic frame of the European mission in the Afro-world of Haiti is evocative of the colonial relationship between “Old” and “New” Worlds that underlies Saintmilia’s and sœur Thérèse’s tragic history as individuals obliged to negotiate the “ghostlike status of survivors (both tortured and torturer)” (Kaussen 199). Given this, *Aube Tranquille* necessarily occupies the space of the unhomely, as it has been so compellingly articulated by Homi Bhabha: that “‘in-between’ space that innovates and interrupts the performance of the present”; a “‘past-present’ [that] becomes part of the necessity, not the nostalgia, of living” (*Location* 10). Saintmilia’s tale—and the narrative space from which she lives and relates it—perfectly exemplifies “the traumatic ambivalences of a personal, psychic history to the wider disjunctions of political existence” (11). The very premises of the narrative evoke Freud’s conception (via Schelling) of the *unheimlich* as “the name for everything that ought to have remained ... secret and hidden but has come to light,” and Hannah Arendt on the public and private realms: “[T]he distinction between things that should be hidden and things that should be shown” (cited in

Bhabha, *Location* 14–15). In the “interstitial intimacy” of this mission, experiential boundaries between Saintmilia and sœur Thérèse are blurred; the public/politic is inserted into a private/domestic (feminine) space and Saintmilia is “free” to speak the unspeakable, to reveal secrets that have long been repressed as a result of her profound distress. Saintmilia’s personal reality thus violently intersects with and sheds light on over two hundred years of New and Old World history.

In the end, Saintmilia’s aim is not merely revenge. Nor is it, as sœur Thérèse believes, “to resuscitate her defunct world” (7). It is to put this world—her past—to rest through recognition and remembrance, and in so doing effect an historic return. The narrative’s conclusion confirms this. In the final paragraphs of *Aube Tranquille*, time loses all sense of propriety and brings together in the uncanny and now exploded space of the mission all of the narrative’s major players—sœur Thérèse, the (other) two Sonjas, Wolf, Saintmilia. Most importantly, the aggrieved and wrongly loved Salomon makes an appearance, and in so doing transforms his mother’s apocalyptic rage into the possibility of healing and forgiveness:

[A]ll the odors of sins, of thefts, of rapes, of crimes, of assassinations, hung from the neck of the centuries, rammed down the throat of history, all the odors flash, explode, Saintmilia’s final joy, as if the sun had burst, Salomon emerges from his night, the past is immediately transformed into notes of pure light, silence rings out, complete, frightening, astonished by such audacity life stands still, the whole world ceases to exist ...

—Salomon, our story is over, the time has passed when the cycles of my madness were those of history

and then, brought up from the deepest heart of the earth, an echo to her voice, a concert of joy, harmony of hopes buried for centuries in all the wells of sorrow, flowing in to the space of freedom, reconciled with the dream and the miracle, dancing in Toukouma’s head and in those of the leaders of the army of shadows, spinning, swelling up, piercing the sky with a tall column of cries and songs en route toward the Orient, at last, yes, at last the direction indicated by stars leading to our memory, continent of brush and savannah, of forests and deserts, of lakes and flowers, landscapes of tranquil dawn that are life and where the sun rises

in the beginning there was Africa (217)

This evocation of Africa, final word of the narrative, should not be confused with the misguided longing for Return (capital “R”) against which Glissant and the Creolists caution. It is no abstract, forced attachment to a distant and inappropriate past place. Rather, it is posited as a constituent part of Saintmilia’s (and Haiti’s) actual (as in current or present) identity—an identity that precedes her encounter with the first Sonja Biemme:

[I]n her vertebra the memories of the torture of the ship's hold, chained to a destiny that she would have preferred different, having crossed through hell from Dahomey to Saint-Domingue, she ruminated on her sufferings, seated facing the sun, her eyes, still filled with a dream of brush and savannah, refracted the burn of the new world, a birth she'll remember ... across similar trails to those of the flat earth of her native Dahomey, she entered into a what was nevertheless an entirely different universe, ordered ... her body changed ... her story changed. (138–40).

Having forced acknowledgment of the realities of a New World history, Saintmilia's spirit is set free to travel even further the paths of memory. Her spirit's return to the "tranquil dawn" of her Africa is, then, a Haitian vodou return, and so escapes the outmoded and widely denounced Pan-Africanist trope. It is the same phenomenon that explains the transformation and escape of Mackandal from the burning stake, that nourishes the legend of Bwa Kayiman, and that is supported earlier in the narrative in a description of the Mackanda sect, a band of *vodouisants* who "give to their revendications and to their projects the macabre beauty of a dream, they promise a return to Africa to those Negroes who die for the emancipation of the race, all forms of refusal of enslavement, suicide, self-mutilation, marooning all authorize the voyage" (38). Saintmilia's evocation of Africa in the final phrase of the novel-spiral thus attaches to a specifically revolutionary, New World, Afro-Haitian phenomenon.<sup>14</sup>

Chris Bongie poses a series of poignant questions concerning the awkwardly postcolonial status of Haiti and the difficulty of its representation given the failure of the revolution to complete itself and fulfill its legacy. Bongie asks, not entirely rhetorically,

How can one exist in this paradoxical time that is simultaneously pre- and post-revolutionary? How can one live in a world where the 'defining moment' that should have separated the colonial from the post-colonial is nowhere to be found, where the ultimate stage of a quest for national identity, and where, as a result, one finds oneself living in what, from the standpoint of conventional history, can only appear as an intolerable contradiction, a troubling absence, an impossible mixture? (*Islands*, 205)

*Aube Tranquille* seems largely preoccupied by similar interrogations, occupying a sort of "in-between" time positioned "squarely 'between our stormy past and our dolorous future' (Glissant, *Mahagony* 23), parenthetical in a place of memory where we can forget neither: the *post/colonial* present"<sup>15</sup> (186). Figolé's Haiti holds all of its memories close, such that the past is imminent, living, thoroughly immediate, both in time and in space. With no *madeleine* or other Proustian marker to provoke analepsis or other temporal conflation, the narrative refuses to

assign priority to any one moment or period in time and space. Figiolé directly incorporates phenomena of absolute temporal collapse rather than discussing or explicating the ways in which insular and regional history leave traces in the present. He resists the temptations of order, thus allowing for the unhierarchized and simultaneous presentation of disjunctive chronotopes. Disparate moments in time and in space are made contiguous in the narrative through the implementation of the spiral.

Figiolé does not set out to provide continuity or “generate foundations”<sup>16</sup> where none previously existed; he does not pretend to “clarify the dark ‘night’ of the past” or to “unravel the events”<sup>17</sup> that led from past to present, from there to here. On the contrary, *Aube Tranquille* revels in rupture, complexifies facts, and questions perceived truths. Instead of “carving up” the so-called “facts” of history in the interest of constructing a coherent narrative, Figiolé approaches a “truly total history”—a formless presentation of Haiti on the eve of the revolution that acknowledges the appropriateness of chaos to the recuperation and narration of these stories.<sup>18</sup> Undermining the traditional schema according to which an organic, somehow more honest, lived memory, expressed orally, emanates from the oppressed, generally Afro subject (its binary complement being, of course, the self-serving, manipulated version of History written by whites and unchallenged by assimilated or alienated postcolonial elites), Figiolé’s narrative reveals the past without privileging or deprivileging the storytelling role along racial lines. It counters “the limitations of the Manichean emotional range imposed by the outrage of slavery” (Gallagher 50) but does not accept Fanon’s or Walcott’s desired “moving beyond” either. Like that of the tortured revolutionary writers described by Derek Walcott, Figiolé’s “vision of man is elemental, a being inhabited by presences, not a creature chained to his past” (37). This distinction between being inhabited by presences and chained to one’s past is subtle but important. It is the difference, perhaps, between reflecting, for example, with bitterness or nostalgia on a past perceived as distant and inaccessible in which remembrance would primarily be the Freudian acknowledgment of lack or recollection of loss,<sup>19</sup> and recognizing one’s permeation by or infusion with the past as an eternally present reality. My articulation of this distinction in Figiolé’s text rejoins, to a certain degree, Pierre Nora’s binary conception of history and memory. I would argue, however, that Figiolé’s text resists the somewhat hyper-valorizing attribution of memory (“an always current phenomenon, a connection lived out in the eternal present”) to

a fading collective consciousness best exemplified by “the so-called primitive or archaic societies” (cited in Bongie, *Islands* 166) and opposed to written History. Figiolé moves beyond such counterdiscursive, post-modern, and postcolonial “bottom-up” tellings of history from the perspective of an unheroic protagonist (one of history’s conquered and therefore generally silenced), emphasizing instead the multiple, confused, and often inconsistent voices that in their (dis)harmony best represent a particular place, at a particular time. He does not replace one narrative authority with another, no matter how subaltern. He maintains instead the chaos of “contradictory positions,”<sup>20</sup> showing his understanding of the fact that “maturity is the assimilation of the features of every ancestor” (Walcott 36). He reserves authorial judgment and opens the floor for the postcolonial subject to listen to and even dialogue with—rather than move away from—the “inhuman voices”<sup>21</sup> of the ancestors. Only then, Figiolé suggests, might true tranquility have the slightest chance of being attained.

\* \* \*

René Philoctète’s *Le Peuple des terres mêlées* also engages with a recognizable but widely disavowed event in (New) World history, that of the mass murder of Haitians living and working in the border region of the Dominican Republic during the reign of military dictator Rafaël Trujillo. As has already been noted, Philoctète’s narrative takes place in Elías Piña, a tiny village situated along the Massacre River, natural frontier between the eastern and western parts of the island, and national border that separates Haiti from the Dominican Republic. Yet while the spatio-temporal parameters that frame the narrative are highly specific, they serve ultimately to highlight Philoctète’s overwhelmingly subversive treatment of space and, primarily, time throughout the narrative. From the novel-spiral’s first chapter through to its conclusion, the precision of the massacre’s situation in time and space is challenged by Philoctète’s non-linear, achronological, and blurred configurations of the moments and the places surrounding the actual event. In exploring the confused and chaotic motives for and reality of this brutal episode in New World history, Philoctète ultimately uncovers troubling continuity beneath the tragic ruptures and lacunae of Caribbean time and space.

More so, perhaps, than any other of the Spiralists’ works of prose fiction, *Le Peuple des terres mêlées* communicates the spiralic nature of history in the New World. The first chapter of the novel posits a number



of precise spatial and temporal parameters: “since five o’clock in the morning,” “the crystal of a Caribbean noon,” “Elías Piña, a small Dominican town near the Haitian border” (9). The time is present and the place is actual, of this the reader is confident. Within the space of a few paragraphs, however, and seemingly apropos of nothing, a brief dialogue is introduced in which unidentified interlocutors pose a series of oblique but urgent inquiries pertaining to a distant, pre-Columbian past.

“Neighbor! Tell us the story of the arrow with which the Cacique Caonabo took Fort la Nativité”—“The stone has returned the sky”—“And in what season does the Yaqui blaze its fires in La Vega?”—“The fires are dying of their own brightness.”—“Tell us the song the Caribs sang before setting off down the paths of war.”—“That song has flown away.”—“Neighbor! The warriors’ flame still dances in our eyes!”—“That was the time of men, and that time has passed.” (11)

The reader cannot help but pause at this abrupt and disjunctive insertion of an exchange that hints at an unspeakable or refused other space-time. The attentive reader will recognize snatches of a romantic(ized?) history of the initial cultural contact between the native inhabitants of Hispaniola-Ayiti-Santo-Domingo-Haiti and the Spanish conqueror-explorers led by Christopher Columbus. The story that is hinted at—but that goes untold—is that of the cacique Caonabo: Fort la Nativité is the name of the first Spanish fort on “Hispaniola”—the first European building on New World soil. Constructed from the wreckage of the grounded Santa Maria with the help of friendly coastal natives, Fort la Nativité was manned by 39 sailors left behind to wait for Columbus to return from Spain. During Columbus’s year-long absence, the fort was attacked and all of the settlers killed, presumably by Carib natives from the interior—the la Vega province—in retaliation for the Europeans’ mistreatment of native women and pillaging of native food supplies. Upon Columbus’s return, the Spaniards penetrated into the mountainous interior of the island—the warrior chief Caonabo’s domain—in search of gold, and entered into several armed conflicts with native armies led by Caonabo. These battles finally ended with the proffering of a faux-truce by the Spanish and the capture of Caonabo, who had allowed himself to be bestowed with the gift of “bracelets” from the king of Spain. Once handcuffed, Caonabo was imprisoned and deported to Spain. He died en route. The silenced story of the cacique Caonabo not only evokes, then, the general phenomenon of resistance to European betrayal, dispossession, and brutalization by its “others,” but references as well a specific instance of such resistance that uncannily prefigures the treacherous

capture and exile of Toussaint L'Ouverture by Napoleon's army in 1802.

At the very outset of *Le Peuple des terres mêlées*, carefully selected symbolic events and places from the island's (pre-)Columbian past are thus brought into the space of the present as situationally linked both to a more recent revolutionary past and to contemporary reality. This early evocation of the very first moments and sites of battle in the name of European imperialism provides insight into the "why" of the Haitian-Dominican conflict out of which the 1937 massacre was conceived and enacted. Indeed, the narrative reaches back to a time-space of transition from the pre-colonial to the colonial, of which the violence and inhumanity are in fact precursors to cultural and territorial disputes between European imperial powers and, most recently, between their post-imperial former colonies. At the center of these recurring conflicts is the issue of borders. As Doris Garraway notes in *The Libertine Colony*, "By the 1640s, the French and the Caribs were thus living in a border zone, a space marked by boundaries between ethnic or national groups. These borders had emerged out of a history of violence, massacre, and peacemaking whereby Europeans established permanent colonies in the Caribbean" (58). As time passed, these arbitrary, violently created frontiers were cemented, such that any transgressions continued to justify horrific racial, ethnic, imperialist, and nationalist violence throughout history. It is noteworthy, for example, that the Massacre River actually takes its name from the slaughter of 30 French buccaneers trying to cross what was, at the time, the border between French and Spanish territory in 1728. The fact of this earlier massacre necessarily contextualizes Trujillo's butchery of Haitians as the postcolonial iteration of an ever-repeating historical model—a prolongation of the spiral of New World history in which borders and their unsanctioned crossings are at the heart of most conflicts. As Figolé writes, echoing Césaire:

History is erected on tensions, creating a dynamic of contradiction that, weighing on the destiny of the Islands, botched the encounter between the races. And between peoples. Engaged for five centuries in a permanent confrontation with itself (ethnic conflicts having overshadowed class struggle), History incessantly challenges the desire for that same turbulence which, disposing these peoples in the arc of a circle, imposed a definitive fate on them ... ("Poétique" 2)

Issues of border crossing are certainly at the center of Philoctète's narrative. As its title implies, the border-region—these blended lands—provides the dominant chronotope of the novel. Neither One (Dominican) nor the Other (Haitian), this border region is something entirely new and original to itself. It is a space that, like Haiti as a whole,

must be understood as at once marginal and central in time and space—literally and metaphorically. Indeed, the Haitian-Dominican border is marked by the peculiarity of borders in general, those disconcerting “interstitial zones that paradoxically divide and unite” (Bongie, *Islands* 210). Borders are central—as in essential—to maintaining the integrity of that which they contain, yet they are necessarily situated at the extremities of the space they circumscribe. In this context, the border region is constantly threatened—always a threat. It is “an ‘other space,’ which exists outside identifiable, named, mapped places, real yet unreal because of its transitory, unlegitimized nature” (Munro, *Exile* 54). Permeable, pregnable (I mean to reference with this term in this context the “*sang-mêlés*”—or mixed-blood people—born of Haitian-Dominican romantic couplings), the border troubles the comfort (zones) of nation-state identity and challenges the nostalgic drive-desire for the One. It functions to demarcate and to (de)limit, but is constantly disputed—a testament to its arbitrariness.

A dividing line in the non-space between two countries, “of which (incidentally) only the accidents and interests of colonization had made two nations” (Philoctète 27–28), the border “region” that separates Haiti from the Dominican Republic is a particularly deplorable iteration of the arbitrary divisions established and maintained throughout the Americas—so many legacies of a colonial past that persists into contemporary regional reality. It is itself unboundaried, yet individuals in either country have been forced by the circumstances of history to negotiate it as if it were finite and defined in space. These are the ambiguities and complexities Philoctète addresses in his narrative. Despite the promise of integration and unity implied by his chosen title, Philoctète reveals the elusiveness of true transnational hybridity and examines closely the origins and enactments of horrifying violence with which border-crossing is often contested. Philoctète effects his examination by contrasting anecdotal evocations of the harmony of the border community with descriptions of the unnatural lengths to which Trujillo—avatar of the neo-colonial state—must go to impose division and introduce discord among the people who inhabit the region along the Massacre River. In a scene that has Pedro walking at dawn through Dominican canebrakes, with Haiti visible in the distance, bathed in the same rosy morning light, Philoctète evokes the immediacy of the connection of the border people to the earth and the history in which both Haiti and the Dominican Republic are rooted:

Beautiful, beautiful, beautiful, these lands! Both of them together. One high,

the other low, with their underground sortileges: the Zemís' gold, the sweat of those wrenched from Africa. The Cacique Caonabo knew Anacaona, the *samba* ... In a few hours I will meet with *los compañeros*. Machetes will cut the cane ... The muscles of two peoples will work together to bring forth the goodness of the Dominican earth ... The land here bears my footsteps, which can surely be heard on the other side. In the other land, my land! The caciques visited the cacique, and their fires burned brightly for a long time, from coast to coast ... A frank and royal early morning sky spans the two lands, the low one here, the high one over there, strangely serene! ... Standing tall, gazing toward the light, Pedro watches the Haitian earth turn rosy in the distance, astonished that the land should be so lovely, wondering at his birth in such a marvel, as both lands are, indeed, marvels. (19–20)

Referencing the deities and heroes of the pre-Columbian past and the Middle Passage, Pedro's musings evoke centuries of shared cultural history as well as contemporary socio-economic integration. His words point to the unity fostered by the cultivation of sugarcane—a phenomenon created by the global market that, from a Marxist perspective, privileges class allegiance over that of color and/or nation and, further, that alludes to the common recent history of Haiti and the Dominican Republic as slave colonies. Most importantly, though, Pedro expresses a feeling of organic solidarity sustained by profound appreciation for the physical landscape and its generous offerings to those who inhabit it.

Such reveling in and reverence for the island as a beautiful and nourishing physical space is affirmed elsewhere in the narrative with, for example, the story of the pair of best friends, a Haitian and a Dominican, who “cultivate their gardens together without worrying whether the corn ripens in Haitian territory or the potatoes flourish in the Dominican Republic ... [who] are thrilled at the mere sight of the green buds unfurling, at the feeling of the fruits of their labors cradled in their hands” (98)—or that of two children, a Haitian and a Dominican, who hop back and forth across the border as they play and who, having fallen asleep “side by side,” are discovered the next morning (in the middle of the massacre) under a lemon tree that has “burst completely into bloom” (95). These twin tropes of rootedness and utopian subaltern solidarity directly link *Le Peuple des terres mêlées* to Jacques-Stephen Alexis's *Gouverneurs de la rosée*. One might say that *Peuple* is a transnationalizing riff on *Gouverneurs*. That is, where Alexis's novel recounts a self-destructive enmity between related clans based in a violent disagreement far-removed from the present needs and realities of the community, Philoctète's narrative explores the self-destructive enmity between related peoples based in equally distant historical antagonism. Both texts are concerned with the tragic foolishness of individuals and communities

acting against their own interest in the name of unexamined, inherited conflict. And in both works, the land calls for reconciliations refused by the pettiness of men.

In *Le Peuple des terres mêlées*, the spatial logic of contiguous geography—“We people from here and from over there who are, in the end, people of a single land” (21–22)—and the temporal logic of common colonial origins are overridden by grudges passed down from Europe. Philoctète exposes the territorial boundary separating the naturally affinitive island peoples as the product of imperialist greed and dictatorial psychosis. He presents the massacre as the consequence of, on the one hand, a perverted historical narrative scripted by self-interested elite powerbrokers, and, on the other, a product of the madman Trujillo’s fanatical obsession with the symbolically charged space of the Citadel:

The Dominican political vanguard, in the name of the Treaty of Aranjuez signed by France and Spain in 1777, repeatedly laid claim to Haitian territory along the border. Courses in schools and universities exalted the spirit of Dominican nationalism and dreams of conquest. Musical groups composed works around this same theme. Religion evangelized with the same goal. It was the only topic of conversation. The media kept everyone focused on this single goal. Meanwhile, it was this attitude that led to almost chronic dispute along the border between the Republic of Haiti and the Dominican Republic. For the young Trujillo, Haiti became, a priori, an adversary. And the Citadel, his phantasm. (24)

Like Fort la Nativité, the Citadel is a (literally and figuratively) monumental symbol of “othered” resistance to the imperialist designs of European nation-states, a metonymic signifier of independent Haiti. It is an empowering site of memory for the Haitian people and an implicit affront to a leader who—having seized power by force—lacks a legitimate commemorative site of his own. Trujillo’s fixation on the Citadel thus reflects his commemorative impulse—his conviction that a people can be defined by the “sites of memory”<sup>22</sup> in which it is invested. Indeed, the “real-life” Trujillo was notorious for the statues, monuments, ceremonies, and slogans he constructed to sustain his authoritarian rule. In Philoctète’s narrative, the Dominican dictator recognizes that these sites—community-affirming symbols of a nationally defined heritage—need not be organic to the collective they are meant to define. They can be created from whole cloth and imposed by means of violence and fear. Or they can be taken. As such, Philoctète’s Trujillo has no desire to destroy the Citadel. Rather, he wants to re-site it—to possess and displace it and thereby to transform it into a commemoration of himself and of the nation he believes he incarnates: “He wanted to have the Citadel on his good Dominican soil ... He wanted it in his body, in his nights, in his

love affairs. He wanted it so badly and suffered cruelly at not possessing it” (69–70); and later, “The Caudillo was simply unable to accept that that thing near-the-sky—so tremendous —was not Dominican” (86).

In delving into his twisted fantasies about the Citadel, the narrative explores the extent to which Trujillo relied upon aggressive manipulations of the collective memory—and of the various sites in which that memory is housed—as a means of determining national identity in the Dominican Republic—of cementing the borders of the state. Philoctète’s imagination of Trujillo’s irrational desire for the Citadel makes explicit the connection between memorial sites and perceptions of collective being. The dictator’s infamous practices of self-commemoration make plain the vulnerability of spatio-temporal sites and the memories with which they are invested to the vagaries of politics and power. In its emphasis on Trujillo’s mythmaking operations and subsequent silencings of inconvenient truths, *Le Peuple des terres mêlées* affirms Glissantian assertions regarding the insufficiency of conventional history to narrate episodes in postcolonial time and space like that of the Dominican Vespers—episodes that concern peoples “whose collective memory has been repeatedly erased by the brutality of colonialism and the manipulations of official ideologies” (Garraway 19).

The Caudillo’s personalization of his desire for the Citadel mirrors the extent to which state politics invade the private lives of the people of the border. Indeed, the events that form the backdrop of *Le Peuple des terres mêlées* are rendered even more horrific by the fact of their unhomey intrusion (to return to Bhabha here) into the intimate space of the various victims, whose “little lives”—love affairs, friendships, hopes and dreams—are consistently presented as so much collateral damage of the “big event” that is the Dominican Vespers. It is for this reason that one of the more prominent sites featured in the narrative is Pedro and Adèle’s house and courtyard. This private, domestic, feminized space—where Pedro and Adèle make love, where Adèle hangs Pedro’s clothes to dry, where Adèle lights candles for her patron saint—is threatened and ultimately penetrated by the public, political, masculinized space of Trujillo/don Agustin’s brutality. For, indeed, as Bhabha has pointed out, “The recesses of the domestic space become sites for history’s most intricate invasions. In that displacement, the borders between home and world become confused; and, uncannily, the private and the public become part of each other, forcing upon us a vision that is as divided as it is disorienting” (*Location* 9). He continues, “[I]t is precisely in these banalities that the unhomey stirs, as the violence of a racialized society

falls most enduringly on the details of life" (21). Adèle suffers quite acutely this traumatic experience of the "world-in-her-home," "her-home-in-the-world":<sup>23</sup> "Adèle did not sleep last night ... Her eyes did not shine in the comfort of the bedroom. Adèle inhaled the odor of slaughter. Her veins ran cold ... Death has never seemed more tangible. It has set up shop in our life, it's like an advertisement" (15–16). The figurative assault on their conjugal space becomes entirely literal, if surreal, toward the novel's close. In what is one of the narrative's eeriest scenes, Pedro returns to Elías Piña on the day of the massacre to find that his and Adèle's house has completely vanished. Looking around, he discovers don Agustin walking through the town on his hands, with two machetes for shoes, surrounded by the foundations of all the village's houses. He finds a world quite literally turned upside-down: "It's as if the village, with its buildings and inhabitants, had fallen over backward" (133). What he does not find is his house. Though he can remember its every detail, down to its muslin curtains and the constantly running faucet, he can no longer locate it. Pedro stands utterly bewildered in the middle of the street, conjuring up the various physical elements of his house and reflecting on the nature of a world in which a man's home can simply disappear, when suddenly it reappears—or emerges, rather, from beneath a swarm of massacre survivors who had been clinging to it and to all the other houses of the town:

The house has just been liberated from the conglomeration of men-women-children ... All the houses of Elías Piña had been besieged, invaded, encrusted by thousands of people who had come from all directions, so that for a while the village had resembled a gigantic spotted insect, buzzing and whirring. Now that the refugees have dispersed, the village shows the sun its unmade bed, the stains of its nightmare. (138)

This disturbing passage dramatically encapsulates the notion of the outside world converging on and altering an environment meant to provide a haven for the individual. "Housed" within an historical moment in which spaces do not hold their value or fulfill their designated intentions, the villagers' homes have become unnatural, monstrous. They are unhomey, in the fullest sense of the word.

It is no coincidence that, in presenting this image of Pedro's and the other houses overrun, abandoned, and exposed, Philoctète uses the word "refugee" to describe the Haitians who, until that moment, had been at home right where they were. "Refugee" is a loaded term that refers, of course, to a very particular sort of border-crosser: a victimized and endangered person; a surplus person—unwanted, unwelcome; a person involuntarily existing in a state of transition. In so designating the people

of the border region, Philoctète engages critically with the postcolonial theoretical trope of the “borderless world” and corresponding celebratory attitude toward hybridity and creolization. His narrative reminds the reader that while phenomena of frontier-crossing—nomadism, migration, immigration, transnationalism, etc.—are increasingly presented as desirable inevitabilities that only the hopelessly retrograde fail to admit, the *tout-monde* actually remains quite elusive—a very much begrudged reality at best. As much as the fostering of “in-between spaces” might “provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood—singular or communal—that initiate new signs of identity and innovative sites of collaboration and contestation” (Bhabha, *Location* 2), the reality for many of those forced to settle in these unsettling spaces is far less inspired (or inspirational) than (we) theorists of literature tend to put forward. *Le Peuple des terres mêlées* nuances the tendency of a “triumphalist postcolonialism” to extol the philosophical virtue of “carefree nomadism”<sup>24</sup> (Dash, “Postcolonial” 236) and “new internationalism” (Bhabha, *Location* 6) without sufficiently noting the very often painful costs of border transgression. Philoctète’s narrative highlights precisely the impact that the at once paired and antithetical practices of global capitalism and racist, ethnocentric, and/or nationalist xenophobia have on those unremarkable individuals and communities so “freakishly displaced” by the “trauma of history and the conflict of nations”<sup>25</sup> (Bhabha, “World” 449).

The unhomeliness of existence within the space-time of an irrational totalitarian authority<sup>26</sup> installs the ominous and the constrained at the heart of the ordinary. Philoctète narrates the absurdity and the terror of such an existence by entirely refusing spatial precision and temporal consistency. The befuddled space-time of *Le Peuple des terres mêlées* mimetically communicates the unrepresentability of the massacre and the inestimable dimensions of its impact on victims and survivors. Indeed, despite the fact that Trujillo’s genocidal campaign can be precisely situated in time and space, the persistent presence of the marvelous in the narrative along with Philoctète’s reliance on the troubled space-time of traumatic/traumatized memory significantly undermines the stability of “Dominican Republic, October 2–3, 1937.” Having posited the relentless assault on memory and identity perpetrated by Trujillo’s regime, the text proposes a frenzied dramatization of the sensual, the fantastic, and the tragic underlying and surrounding the violence of that episode in Caribbean history. Philoctète thus makes use of the space he has allotted himself in his fiction as an opportunity to counter, however subtly, the



memories of violence and vengeance that continue to fuel the spiral of conflict between the Haitian and Dominican peoples. Following neither logical nor chronological order and deviating frequently from descriptions of the actual massacre in order to follow the ruminations of one or the other character, he makes room for the histories of the individuals who got hit with this History. The reader is, then, constantly de-situated with respect to the 48 hours during which s/he knows, historically, the slaughter of Haitians took place. Time spirals without any definitive advancement. The various meandering detours into the individual memories of specific characters and the pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial history of the island and the two nations that share it effectively collapse time and anchor the narrative in a present that is full rather than fleeting. These digressions bleed into, interrupt, and inform the “reality” of the event, offering so many additional perspectives on the motivations for, foreshadowings of, and reactions to the massacre. The chaotic manner of their presentation implicitly communicates the fundamental incomprehensibility of Trujillo’s “Operation Haitian Heads.”

The narrative concludes as indefinitely as it has unfolded. One of the final chapters switches inexplicably to the future and future anterior verb tense, referring in a bizarre prolepsis to events that have already been described as events that will happen and that will have happened under Trujillo’s dictatorship:

Years later ... [Trujillo] will found the *Cabezas Haitianas* Committee, whose executive director in Elías Piña will be Agustín de Cortoba. Racism will become the outlet for the phantasm ... Trujillo’s anger will have cut off about fifty thousand Haitian heads; his hatred will have deflowered five to six thousand little girls; his ferocity will have sent ten thousand inhabitants of the border townships clean out of their minds. Ten thousand heads lost. Heads gone with the wind. (140–41)

Immediately following this recapitulating prefiguration, the formerly(?) headless Adèle burns down her house. She and Pedro then flee Elías Piña and cross the frontier into Haiti. With the massacre only uncertainly behind them, they began to adapt to their terrifyingly precarious psychosocial and spatio-temporal state: “These undead are trapped in the liminality of survival, alive but unable to shake the deaths that they have experienced” (Kaussen 197). And so, optimistically, Pedro and Adèle smilingly consider their new neighbors (who are, in fact, really their displaced old neighbors) and this new place (which is, in fact, really the same place from a different angle): “The refugees take the measure of the land with their gaze ... They count the roofs that will spring up: a school for liberty, a hospital for compassion, unions for labor, a church for love.

And they know they have a world to build” (147). Philoctète’s mixed-up configuration of time in this mixed-up place of the border thus maintains a tension between the optimism of deliverance and resettlement and the distressing possibility that tragedy—on a large scale—is always yet to come. Philoctète’s narrative configuration of the time and space of the massacre implies, then, that the event has not necessarily passed—is not past. Rather, such events “repeat with a difference the cycles of history that have touched to varying degrees all the Caribbean region” (Munro, *Exile* 55). This repetition with a difference—this altered sameness—is, of course, the spiral.

## NOTES

1 *Twilight* 39.

2 *Postcolonial Paradoxes* 4.

3 “What we might call first-level works of modernism ... are attempts ... at making the Black Southern or Afro-Caribbean tradition speak its originary truth, without excessively foregrounding the conditions of narration that make this speech possible. Faulkner’s *Absalom! Absalom!* and Glissant’s resolutely Faulknerian *Quatrième siècle*, while continuing to pursue the ‘fundamental trace’ of the past, most often situate themselves at a second, more self-reflexive level that insistently draws our attention to the vertiginous narrative operation by means of which this past becomes a secondary, although by no means inessential ... consideration in such novels; the past proves obscure, a ‘night’ to be endlessly and perhaps erroneously traced by characters who are as much narrators as actors.”

4 “‘presentness’: the sense of time as it is lived, the relation of that time to the past, and the value of the imminent future to which it is always oriented ... [P]resentness is never a complete structure in which everything has its place; it is ‘never whole,’ always messy, and that messiness is essential to its identity” (Bahktin 423). In his “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” Walter Benjamin introduces the concept of *Jetztzeit*—or “now-time”—which similarly insists on the absolute fullness of present time with the past.

5 Gilroy writes: “I have settled on the image of ships in motion across the spaces between Europe, America, Africa, and the Caribbean as a central organising symbol for this enterprise and as my starting point” (4). Gilroy goes on to analyze the centrality of ships in, for example, Martin Delany’s *Blake* and W.E.B. Dubois’s *The Souls of Black Folk*.

6 “Ships immediately focus attention on the middle passage, on the various projects for redemptive return to an African homeland ... ”

7 The reference here is to the 1968 Olympic games in Mexico City during which, upon winning the gold and bronze medals, respectively, for the 200-meter dash, Afro-American sprinters Tommie Smith and John Carlos staged a protest against racism in the United States by bowing their heads and raising a fist on the podium during the singing of the national anthem.

8 “John Locke’s famous criteria for the continuity of consciousness could quite legitimately be read in the symbolic register of resemblance and analogy. For the sameness of a rational being requires a consciousness of the past which is crucial to

the argument—‘as far as this consciousness can be extended *backwards* to any past action or thought, so far reaches the identity of that person’—and is precisely the unifying third dimension. The agency of *depth* brings together in an analogical relation (dismissive of the differences that construct temporality and signification) ‘that same consciousness uniting those distant actions into the same person, whatever substances contributed to their production.’” (Bhabha, *Location* 48) [Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. London: Fontana, 1969: 212–13.]

9 This is a phenomenon I discuss at length in my introductory chapter.

10 “In time the slave surrendered to amnesia. That amnesia is the true history of the New World” (Walcott 39).

11 The entirety of Chemla’s commentary reads as follows: “Each of these characters can even in this sense appear as the emblematic bearer of an argumentative discourse on slavery, a discourse presented as confused, blurred, and tenebrous, on whichever side we place ourselves. Each argument is taken up several times, developed, amplified, or presented in an allusive manner on each page. This strategy brings a remarkable density to the text, which, while it does not come across as an historical or realist novel, so unearths the dimension and thickness of memory. The evocation of historical figures, like Voltaire, Toussaint-Louverture, Bonaparte, Chateaubriand, Monnerville, de Gaulle, Sékou Touré, Duvalier, etc. ... reinforces this dimension: through his characters as well as through the *lwas*, Fignolé stages a conflict that is at once historical, ideological, and metaphysical for which the backdrop is the plantation system, point of departure for all capitalist economies.”

12 Kaussen’s reflections on trauma refer specifically to Edwidge Danticat’s *The Dew Breaker*. That these comments resonate so thoroughly in readings of *Aube Tranquille* and, as I later argue, *Le Peuple des terres mêlées* again suggests that the Spiralists might have been implicated very productively in the discussion initiated by *Migrant Revolutions*.

13 The basic criteria for Post-traumatic Stress Syndrome are as follows: “(1) the person experienced, witnessed or was confronted with an event or events that involved actual or threatened death or serious injury, or a threat to the physical integrity of self or others,’ and ‘(2) the person’s experience involved intense fear, helplessness, or horror.’ ... ‘The second component of traumatic memory is that the memory is experienced as if the event and one’s responses to it—sensory, cognitive, emotional and physiological—were happening all over again’” (van der Kolk, Hopper, and Osterman 11).

14 Other references to Africa in the narrative similarly avoid stagnating representations of a mythical Africa. Aside from the fact that the very modern flight attendant is Senegalese, there are a number of remarks made regarding contemporary African political realities, such as the evocation of Sékou Touré: “Mister Touré chased the missionaries out of Guinea, calling us colonialists” (108).

15 These comments are in fact extracted from Chris Bongie’s reflections on Edouard Glissant’s *Mahogany*, a text Bongie qualifies as Glissant’s first properly postmodern novel for reasons that are more than applicable to Fignolé’s novel-spiral.

16 “The desire for integration is generated out of a lack of foundations, and this desire, in turn, attempts to generate those foundations (in such forms as ‘Africa,’ ‘the maroon,’ ‘the creole storyteller’) ... ” (Bongie, *Islands* 158).

17 Bongie makes these comments with respect to the relationship of the characters Mathieu and papa Longoué to the past in Glissant’s *Le Quatrième siècle* (*Islands* 147).

18 “Historical facts are no more *given* than any other. It is the historian, or the agent of history, who constitutes them by abstraction and as though under the threat of an infinite regress. What is true of the constitution of historical facts is no less so

of their selection. From this point of view, the historian and the agent of history carve them up, for a truly total history would confront them with chaos" (Lévi-Strauss 257).

19 Alessandra Benedicty offers some insightful reflections on vodou-inflected understandings of memory—via (the metaphor of) possession—with respect to Frankétienne's *Affres*. She writes: "The corporeal aspect of possession enables both an individual and a community to determine a concrete expression of memory ... Memory as loss is an introspective experience. To attempt to recall the past through an accurate representation of that past is to realize that such recollection is impossible ... In a sense, memory as an intellectual process is not about remembering; rather, it is about learning to accept that one has forgotten ... In short, memory is not the recollection of the past; rather, it is the recognition that an accurate representation of the past is an eternal impossibility. In a sense, memory is the process by which a subject becomes aware of his or her amnesiac state" (120–21).

20 The expression is Bongie's: "But what Benítez-Rojo is saying ... is that this ongoing process of supplementation can *also*, and more fruitfully, be seen as paving the way for the creation of a common cultural ground in which apparently contradictory positions are conjoined in an unlikely manner without ever being resolved into the sort of synthetic unity that the continued absence of a 'collective Being' monogamously ... demands of us" (*Islands* 159).

21 Fanon writes: "The Negro man is not. Any more than the white man. Both must turn their backs on the inhuman voices which were those of their respective ancestors in order that authentic communication be possible" (231).

22 "Those commemorations were the space Trujillo claimed for himself in which to construct the national identity of the Dominican Republic, his own attempt to shape the country's collective memory and identity" (Johnson 75).

23 I am paraphrasing Bhabha here: "The home does not remain the domain of domestic life, nor does the world simply become its social or historical counterpart. The unhomely is the shock of recognition of the world-in-the-home, the home in the world" ("World" 445).

24 Cf. also Deleuze and Guattari's promotion of the schizophrenic/nomadic ideal of postmodernity in *Anti-Œdipus*.

25 The full text of Bhabha's comments reads: "Where the transmission of 'national' traditions was once the major theme of a world literature, perhaps we can now suggest that transnational histories of migrants, the colonized, or political refugees—these border and frontier conditions—may be the terrains of world literature. The center of such a study would neither be the 'sovereignty' of national cultures nor the 'universalism' of human culture but a focus on those 'freak displacements' ... that have been caused within cultural lives of postcolonial societies. If these were considered to be the paradigm cases of a world literature based on the trauma of history and the conflict of nations, then Walter Benjamin's homeless novelist would be the representative figure of an unhomely world literature".

26 It is not unsurprising, then, that Philoctète makes allusions to the simultaneous rise of fascism in Hitler's Europe at several points in the narrative (130–31, 157, 169).

## Haiti in the Whirl/World

### *Les Affres d'un défi* and *Ultravocal*

*The Caribbean could be seen as well as a loosely-bounded figure combining straight lines and curves, let's say, a spiral galaxy tending outward—to the universe—that bends and folds over its own history, its own inwardness.*  
—Antonio Benítez-Rojo<sup>1</sup>

*We have a conception of time in a spiral that corresponds neither to the linear time of Westerners nor to the circular time of Precolumbians or Asian philosophers, but that is a sort of combination of the two, that is, a circular movement, but always with an escape from that circularity towards something else—that is what constitutes the spiral.*  
—Edouard Glissant<sup>2</sup>

Though as rich with descriptive elements as the at least nominally spatio-temporally framed narratives discussed in the previous chapter, Frankétienne's *Les Affres d'un défi* is, for the most part, almost entirely unreferential with respect to the configuration of time and space. The highly allegorical Bois-Neuf provides the backdrop for the stories of the named characters, and scattered references are made to Port-au-Prince as well. The great majority of the narrative spaces are, however, unidentified and unbound. They appear as a series of individual tableaux, without continuity but contextually aligned, and so mimetically display the profound dispossession and unrootedness that have historically plagued New World post-slavery communities. In its spatio-temporal incoherence, *Les Affres d'un défi* evokes a physical situation in space that both reflects and determines the psychological conditions of the region's inhabitants. In this, Frankétienne's narrative precisely echoes Figiolé's contentions regarding the geographical reality of the Caribbean and its direct connection to the schizophrenia—the psychic fracturing—of those who inhabit it. Figiolé writes, "We sought in vain some centralizing point around which to assemble space. To deny the void. In whichever direction we look, the Caribbean is fragments. Of sweat and blood" ("Poétique"). Along with excrement, semen, bile, and decompositional seepage, sweat and blood are in fact the most pervasive spatial elements of *Les Affres d'un défi*. Products of violence done to man and nature, the

presence of these fluids provides the underlying association among the various discrete constructions of space in the narrative. They are the building blocks of the deranged dystopia—the “[m]elancholy landscape with its cadaverous odor and exhalation of sperm” (121)—in which the “We” struggles to survive. The majority of the spaces of *Les Affres d’un défi* confront the reader with images of scatological excess, decomposition, sterility, and, indeed, bloodshed. Some examples: “Overnight, the mutilated flesh gangrenes, swarms with worms, attracts flies. Starving dogs nose about, rummage around in the piles of refuse” (39); or, “Earthworms ravage our fields. Ravenous beasts feed on mud, lick the greenish pus of decomposing cadavers, excavate the pits of rotting navels, suck on the spittle of the dead” (175). These scenes are sensorially offensive and even nauseating: “All around us, an immense pool of diarrhea in which flabby, bewigged buttocks, confused phalluses, and clusters of inflamed scrota wade about” (130). Dying and mutilated flesh, piles of excrement, and vile parasites are made to accumulate limitlessly in the spaces Frankétienne creates, establishing an atmosphere of extreme and inescapable corruption. These images appear abruptly and at random throughout the narrative, unframed and uncontextualized.

In addition to the omnipresent but unattributable spaces of carnage and decay—the “flux of putrid air, plaques of mange, and cancerous rot” (194)—that repeat and spread across the narrative, and much as in *Mûr à crever* and *Les Possédés de la pleine lune*, *Les Affres d’un défi* laments the perceived malice of the natural world in particular. From the unforgiving Caribbean sun—“The sun pours vitriol over the open wounds on our backs, tattoos our bodies with its acidic bites, bombards us with its fires of war” (72)—to the “impetuous” “savagery” of the seasonal hurricanes—“Each year, from the beginning of August through the end of October, impetuous hurricanes race powerfully toward us, hurtling down mountains, pounce on Port-au-Prince with all their savagery. Screams of the wind. Bursts of rain. Enraged gurgling of the sea” (8); “The hurricanes have devastated our fields, laid waste to our cottages, leaving in their wake brutal death and tremendous desolation” (97)—nature is consistently depicted as spiteful and arbitrarily punishing. Then also, on the flip side of these portrayals of aggressive forces of nature, there are Frankétienne’s depictions of victimized and passive environments—“Lamentable spectacle of a landscape spiked with cacti, thistle, brambles. Sterile vegetation of mesquite bushes. Sisal plantations sprawl out like so many immense cemeteries filled with threatening arrows and crosses” (27). Spaces that should be teeming with life are completely

ravaged and barren, or are in the process of becoming so—"Rotting wood. Leaves lose their color. Flowers wilt on the branches. Mangoes turn sour. The roots of the trees dry out" (63). This natural world is a wasteland.<sup>3</sup>

The examples of such negatively charged spaces are multiple and need not be cited exhaustively here. Moreover, a good amount of critical work has been done on the "inverse marvelous" portrayal of space in *Affres* and in other works of prose fiction written during and after the Duvalier regimes.<sup>4</sup> Looking beyond, then, the myriad and vast dystopic spaces Frankétienne presents, I would like to consider an additional spatial motif that runs throughout *Les Affres d'un défi*. Indeed, the opening words introduce the first of several specific spaces of absolute confinement presented in the story: "A tangle of tree branches at the very back of an old courtyard, rarely frequented by human beings" (1). Cut off entirely from the sun by the interlacing branches, this unfrequented and unwelcoming space is fossilized by the absence of light and life. The image recurs, refrain-like, four times within the space of the next 20 pages, a haunting presence that sets the tone for the remainder of the narrative. Moreover, this closed courtyard contains within it an even more desolate space, that of a run-down, seemingly abandoned old house: "Enveloped in thick darkness, it is never lit up. No light whatsoever. Not even the faintest gleam of a gridape lamp. During the day, at night—at all times the doors and windows remain tightly shut" (9). This is, of course, the house in which Gédéon is interned, "[c]losed within the obscurity of his bedroom ... rocked by the muffled sounds of his lonely-old-man dreams" (139). Physically infirm and socially outcast, Gédéon lives as a veritable prisoner in the miserable space of his own home. He spends his days "getting drunk on rum in the old house where the doors and windows are always shut" (133). A bitter misanthrope his entire life, he has never been integrated into the society of men (we will return later to the significance of this self-seclusion), and thus the physical isolation of his surroundings reflects his profound social marginalization. He is condemned to spend his last days alone, "[c]onfined to his old house, his body in shambles" (111).

Differently motivated but similarly confined, Jérôme, too, is imprisoned within a home that is not one: "Curled up all day long in a corner of a little coop, Jérôme looks incessantly out through the slats between the panels. What an existence! A life worse than being in a coffin" (26). Jérôme's cramped dwelling is a last recourse; it is safe, but not a haven. Isolated not only from the violence and dangers of the outside world, but

also from its light, Jérôme's hovel is another manifestation of the miserable spaces presented in *Les Affres d'un défi*. That the vermin-infested solitude it offers is actually preferable to the world outside its walls effectively communicates the depths of horror this outside world represents. Well aware of what he has chosen to give up, but seeing no way to escape this impasse, Jérôme accepts the wretched immutability of his physical and social situation. As he laments to Alibé, "I'll never get out of here. I'll likely end up kicking the bucket in this furnace, without ever having had the opportunity to breathe in the outside air" (116). Though resigned to the fact that his internment will very likely be a life sentence, he keeps "his eye riveted to a crack in the wall" (40), hoping—if not quite believing—that the world outside the confines of his jail-refuge might eventually convince him to let himself out.

Jérôme's purgatorial existence is but a specific narrative instance of the broader state of tension—of suffocating clausturation coupled with imagined escape—that hangs over *Les Affres d'un défi*. Again recalling the configuration of space in both *Mûr à crever* and *Les Possédés de la pleine lune*, *Les Affres d'un défi* evokes the confined and limiting spaces of totalitarianism—a world of "[h]igh walls, girders, scaffolds, and barbed wire in a décor set up for barbarity and fear" (60). Frankétienne's Bois-Neuf is a place in which movements and even thoughts are restricted by all-pervading and anonymous agents of repression: "Everywhere, underlings carry out their work as spy torpedo-boats; they are so numerous around us that to live has become a daily exercise in sword-fighting and bullet-dodging" (10); "Chains, iron shackles, millstones, and yokes keep us from moving while the machine severs us at the knees or thighs" (177). In this oppressive context, evolution in time and movement in space are strictly circumscribed, and any attempt to challenge the existing order is severely punished. These dreadful physical-cum-existential conditions of relentless suffering are then made all the more horrifying by the fact that their sources seem to be at once ubiquitous and indiscernible. The violence seems to have neither beginning nor root—it feels all-encompassing and infinite. The exception to this overwhelming non-specificity is, of course, the presence of the *houngan* Saintil, who provides a highly localized source of terror in Bois Neuf. The physical reality of Saintil's plantations concretizes the blur and whirl of violence that saturates the narrative. His confiscation of all the rice fields in the village has enabled him to build a far-reaching and terrifying dominion that is perhaps the most horrific of all the frightful environments presented in the narrative:<sup>5</sup>



Mysterious creatures populate his vast domain; piles of cadavers are accumulated in the courtyard of his dwelling; blossoms of brain matter are strewn across his bed; under the *peristyle* of the temple lie the corpses of children that have been buried alive; necklaces of skulls adorn his *houmfort*; his rice fields swarm with thousands of zombies; bunches of human intestines, coated with grease, hang from the fence of his plantation. (61)

While this excessively graphic evidence of the *houngan's* capacity for evil is impressive, it is not in fact the most horrific aspect of his power. The greatest suffering Saintil inflicts on the zombies he has enslaved is neither the unending labor nor the physical violence to which he subjects them. Rather, it is the sense of temporal stagnation. That is, his totalitarian possession of space is paralleled by the imposing of an endless and miserable present. He makes this point clearly when addressing the zombies:

“You are locked up, penned in here on my lands ... the dead never come back to life; the order of things remains immutable, irreversible. Nothing, absolutely nothing will ever change for you ... You have embarked on an eternal voyage. Never again will you set eyes on the landscapes of your past. Every day, every night, in every season, at all times, you will hear only my voice. My power is boundless and eternal.” (4–5)

With this declaration, Saintil effectively declares the futility of hope—the antithesis of the spiral: repetition without a difference. The sickening space of his plantation is thus made all the more horrific by the possibility that it is forever. Time defines and qualifies space here, and time in *Les Affres d'un défi* is deeply problematic. The narrative offers absolutely no temporal diversity, the only marked passage of time being that of the narration. Although the ostensibly principal storyline has a relatively clear beginning, middle, and end—the zombification of Clodonis and the ultimate liberation of Bois Neuf from Saintil's tyranny—all other aspects of the narrative take place in a veritable temporal vacuum. In their brief analysis of *Dézafi* in *Lettres créoles*, Chamoiseau and Confiant suggest that the configuration of time in Frankétienne's narrative is a direct effect of the zombie's centrality. They propose: “Frankétienne's characters seem to exist outside of time, perhaps because zombification suppresses temporal points of reference” (176), and situate *Affres* within “a sort of mythological time at the heart of which everything has always existed as it is and seems fixed there for all eternity” (177). This absence of temporal progression or of a sense of anything beyond the most immediate past (if even that) is primarily a function of the over-arching presence of the zombies, beings who “know nothing of their past, and are concerned neither with their present nor their future” (*Affres* 69). Utterly suspended in time, the zombie inher-

ently defies the conception of life as a forward-moving, event-based, chronological progression from birth to death. It is perhaps the only metaphor that comes close to capturing the experience of absolute spatial uprooting and historical erasure—and the slight hope of renewal (the same but profoundly different)—at the root of the New World Afro-experience. Figiolé, in his reflections on *Les Affres d'un défi*, for example, reads the zombie's situation from a temporal perspective that is not far removed from Edouard Glissant's description of the transplanted African's exceptionally dire psycho-social and "de-historical" situation.<sup>6</sup> Figiolé writes: "Zombification, absolute alienation, rupture with a previous existence, also establishes the negation of an entire past of alienations ... Without the slightest possibility of connection to the past. Nor openness to the future. Grappling only with the present" (*Vœu de voyage* 23).

This unmitigated and unrelenting present affects not only Saintil's zombie slaves, but also the villagers, who are obliged, for example, to mark the passage of time by placing stakes in the ground and who struggle desperately to remember or to imagine before or beyond this unfortunate present. They are in need, one might say, of that future-oriented past Glissant has long been intent on prophesizing. Unable to determine "right-side up from upside down in this mutilated landscape" (15), the collective seems often to be at a complete loss as to how to situate itself in time. The We-narrator asks, in desperation: "Is it a question of discovering ancient truths, of holding on to certain fragments of the present moment, or of exposing the elusive future as it timidly draws near" (15–16)? The entirety of the narrative spirals around this state of imbalance produced by the desire to take action at a time and in a place where to act is necessarily to suffer—and so where to suffer is, in fact, to be alive.

The not-wholly constrained, still-able-to-suffer figure of the zombie embodies that uncomfortable imbalance. It also, as I have argued above, embodies a certain promise—a potential that nuances the apparent absoluteness of the misery it represents. The zombie's ambivalence in fact allows Frankétienne to go beyond representations of insular despair and the temptation of exile. Taking the zombie as his point of departure, he contemplates instead the notion of an insular journey—of a collective, internal journey, with all of its frustrations and surprising opportunities. Considered in this light, those elements and moments of *Les Affres d'un défi* that manage to preserve hope are revealed, such that for almost every description of degradation, perversion, or decay, an avenue or an appeal for movement might be identified. Some of the most striking passages of

the text are those in which this idea of human transcendence of physical constraints is embedded in descriptions of truly abject spatial circumstances:

Without stopping, we continue our trek along difficult paths. A bird takes flight; it lends us its wings. The wind blows; we hold on tight to its free-rolling wheels ... Across thick undergrowth, we struggle to advance, covered in rags, our bodies slashed by thorns. Weakened by our bleeding wounds, we limp slightly. Tortured by hunger, broken with pain, we continue our trek. (48)

Or, in another instance:

The journey is overflowing with pitfalls ... We stagger down darkened pathways. Tripping over tree stumps, slipping on the edges of stones, we hurt ourselves and bleed incessantly. We skin ourselves as we graze the walls, giving back to the stones the blood of silence. We fall face down in the mud, fully splayed out. Refusing inertia, we stand back up and keep hobbling along. Across a space dusty with doubt, we continue the journey of birds' wings that smell of volcanoes. (123)

Although the booby traps have been set, the walls erected, and all the beauty seemingly sucked out of the world, the "We" keeps on, defying the immobilizing and demoralizing circumstances that incessantly punish and humiliate it. Thus while the *Les Affres d'un défi* is indeed rife with pessimistic landscapes, it is suggested that these devastated and devastating spaces can be countered by the enduring force of collective agency.

A heap of nails, broken bottles, and sharpened stones cut the feet of the determined walkers and fighters ... [I]n the deepest part of ourselves, a pack of ideas and dreams stamp their feet in the acceleration of our steps, increasing tenfold our fervor, we the master-walkers. (30)

At the heart of Frankétienne's narrative is, then, the suggestion that such a journey must first be acknowledged and accepted as a physical and psychological ordeal, a necessary experience of suffering—"In order to set ourselves on the trails of the future, we will have to walk barefoot on embers, turn dangerous corners, traverse vast zones of misfortune" (43). Indeed, it is the very recovery of a sense of time and of place that is at stake, a fact of which Frankétienne's nearly broken "We" is fully aware:

Resolutely, we beat the drums of the thunderstorm with all our might. Stunned by the unexpected shock, an intense fire blazes at our heels that pushes us to go even more quickly. Vertiginous acceleration in the effort to recover lost time. We announce the fall of all barriers under the heels of the light. Laboring along rough and rocky trails, we do not back down before any obstacles. No weariness will succeed in hampering our fervor. (29)

Importantly, it is not a question in any of these instances of the exilic or migratory journey rejected by Fignolé in *Vœu de voyage*. It is, again, an

insular—even interior—voyage, at times merely movement for movement's sake: "Rather than sleeping, we would do better to try walking/The virile joy of action transcends the sweet inertia of sleep" (11). Given this, we can appreciate the fact that if Gédéon or Jérôme have chosen to succumb to their fears—to respond to the dangers (real and perceived) outside the walls of their home-prisons with self-confinement—these are, indeed, their choices. In other words, although the world Frankétienne relates is legitimately terrifying, it is not without alternatives to internment and forgetting.

The constant struggle between movement and stagnation, a spatio-temporal iteration of the life/death tension maintained in the figure of the zombie, is also encapsulated by one of the most persistent refrains of the novel: "on which foot do we enter the dance." The "dance" is evoked where resistance seems possible, and not knowing which foot to raise first can be understood as that which prevents the struggle from being initiated. Variations on the phrase appear throughout *Les Affres d'un défi*, at times in the form of a question and at others a declaration. The narrator asks, for example: "But if it is a question for us of participating fully, on which foot should we be dancing?" then later explains, "For the moment, we try very hard to determine with which foot to enter the dance" (72), and again, "If we still remain undecided, it's that we are truly trying to determine with which foot to enter the dance" (100), or "We have adopted all possible stances: we have sat down, stood up again, laid down, crouched down, curled up. No one has yet told us with which foot to enter the dance ... Chin in hand, we watch sadly as the days pass by" (7). There are at least a dozen such instances in which the We-narrator mentions a frustrated desire to enter into the dance, noting each time the collective's reluctance to assume responsibility for its future.

The metaphor of raising a foot to enter the dance functions also on a more literal level, one that affirms the vodou context in which the entirety of *Les Affres d'un défi*, and its socio-political commentary, is situated. The refrain points directly to folk reality as the primary contextual frame for the narrative, evoking the initiating performative element in vodou ceremony:

The vodou initiate bordering on possession seeks to be transformed; the dancers who rise to take their place on the dance floor want the same thing. They accomplish this metamorphosis, initiates and dancers, through a similar movement in three phases. First, a walking phase; then a second phase—which is that of the break or the hesitation, but is more fundamentally that of an about-face, a change in direction; and then a third phase of renewed movement—that is, of walking in a new direction. (Laroche, *Double scène* 86)

The allusion to vodou proposed by the repetition of “on which foot do we enter the dance” subtly reminds the reader of the possibilities for resistance implicit in the peasant and popular practice of folk religion, and so provides an overall contextual counterpoint to the specific (non-)acts of cowardice and passivity described in the narrative. Moreover, the We-narrated passages also put forward the idea that the act of “entering the dance” might be possible thanks, ironically, to the very misery and degradation in which the “We” has for so long been forced to wallow. “Born into filth and misery,” explains our narrator, “worked over by destitution, grappling with the quotidian experience of pain, what more could we possibly fear?” (160–61). In effect, while descriptions of horror may appear to overwhelm *Les Affres d’un défi*, the narrator nonetheless seems able to envision an awakening:

Let us open our eyes / Let us pluck out the hardened feathers weighing down  
our wings / Let us remove the fetid scabs from our toes / Let us extirpate the  
ticks and the crabs hindering our steps among the stones. In the end we’ll  
figure out on which foot to dance. (61)

Inasmuch as to move is to assert the fact of change in both time and space, Frankétienne provides a persistent trace of optimism in a narrative universe that at first appears entirely hopeless.

Reading past, or perhaps more thoroughly underneath, the initial impression made by Frankétienne’s overtly negative configuration of time and space, one comes to realize the extent to which *Les Affres d’un défi* resists a fatalistic pessimism by its inclusion of numerous promising spaces and imaginings of a more joyful future. Inserted between, and thus juxtaposed with, what seem to be never-ending evocations of pollutedness and degradation, are brief but persistent flashes of harmony and hope—the occasional “burst of brightness” (34). We find, for example, images of a complicit and even seductive natural world; the sun that elsewhere in the narrative desiccates and oppresses a parched people and landscape is also configured by the narrator as “our ally, our partner” (34). Corresponding with the subtle, slight outward expansion of the spiral, landscapes immersed in debris and carnage are reevaluated by the narrator as so many *tabulae rasae* out of which nature might be renewed and a brighter future be fashioned—a future in which “trees, flowers, leaves, rivers, animals, men, all living things change their appearance, gleam with freshness and light, becoming more and more beautiful” (53). One of the more consistent metaphors used to vehicle this counterbalancing sense of possibility is that of birds in flight, an image that appears repeatedly, including in the passages cited above—though always slightly

altered—throughout the narrative. Birds function in *Affres* as heralds of an unspecified “elsewhere” as yet unknown to men. The reader encounters, for example, the following brief references to the birds’ freedom in space: “[a] flock of birds flies off to unknown places” (152), and soon afterward, “[a] flock of birds takes off all at once, never to return” (159), and still again, “[b]irds with the heads of women whirl all around us and serve as beacons within the space of the journey” (166). In addition, during some of the passages that describe the most despicable destruction and annihilation, the bird metaphor is inserted to balance out the horrors of the tableau presented. Following, for example, a passage that describes the brutal massacre of members of the community in their own homes, the image of a bird serves to encourage the “We” not to lose hope: “[A] nightingale sings somewhere; the sun will rise, we tell ourselves” (195). Assuming a variety of formulations, the basic foundations of this leitmotif are consistent: birds offer the “We” a tangible manifestation of unexplored possibilities in a space and time outside of their often miserable present.

The positivity associated with birds is buttressed by the presence of oniric landscapes in the narrative, insofar as these landscapes also allow for the imagining of an existence in time and space that escapes the unhappy aspects of the universe described in *Les Affres d’un défi*. Dream spaces represent a zone where revolt is conceived of and seems realizable. The narrator explains, “The habit of fighting in our dreams lights up the embers within us. Over the course of the night, our memory scatters and fades. Little by little, our anger dies down, is destroyed. But the fire isn’t out. Hope smolders in the ashes” (40). Even though these dreams of revolution rarely survive the sleep state, the very fact of their having been conjured helps the “We” to endure and withstand its quotidian tribulations. The narrative posits this “[o]niric persistence” (40) as a counter to the confinement to which the human spirit is subjected in *Les Affres d’un défi*. Invulnerable to the misery and injustice of the other spaces in the narrative, the oniric realm not only provides the closest approximation of a safe-haven, but also represents a reserve of courage to which individuals can have recourse in moments of desperation: “In our dreams, we are frothing with rage. Upon waking, prepared to take on every battle, we hunt relentlessly” (160). It is in the oniric space that a program of resistance and tenacity ferments.

That to survive in the world presented in *Les Affres d’un défi* entails struggle makes sense, of course, in the context of a narrative whose organizing spatial metaphor is a gallodrome, or fighting cock arena, site of the

vicious *dézafis* that appear throughout and are eponymous to the original, Creole version of the text. This walled-in space where “the air thins; and the atmosphere becomes stifling” (172) is mentioned more than 50 times over the course of the narration. While the excessive referencing of this particular space necessarily situates Frankétienne’s narrative within an unmistakably insular cultural context, the gallodrome is also posited as a universal space—a metaphor for the existential brutality suffered by all individuals trapped in situations of injustice, independent of national affiliation. As Rafaël Lucas affirms, “This image develops naturally in a geopolitical ecosystem marked by bloody battles for power, infant mortality, cyclones, droughts, epidemics, in formal economy, and emigration for survival” (45). Indeed, on the final page of the narrative, immediately after the *bois nouveaux* have killed Saintil in the arena where he had long been fixing the cockfights by entering a different breed of fowl into the ring, the gallodrome is explicitly put forward as a functional metaphor for universal human experiences of physical and psychological frustration in time and space:

There will always be a *dézafi* somewhere. Life itself is a colossal *dézafi*. In order to chase away paralyzing sleepiness, lethargy, and death, we must *at all times and in all places* learn to live for the distribution of salt. Many other zombies cower in destitution and unconsciousness at the base of mountains, in the interior of the plains, and even in the towns. Let us go wake them with salt. In order to guarantee safe passage to the dawn, let us be tireless distributors of salt. For wherever there is a single human being in chains, starving, or humiliated, all of humanity is dragged through the mud. (227, emphasis mine)

This omnipresent element of island reality, while foremost a metaphor for the confined and violent space of Duvalier’s Haiti, is nevertheless proposed—like the zombie—as meaningful in an extra-insular capacity as well. This dualistic intent has drawn some criticism. Raphaël Confiant, for example, suggests that Frankétienne fails in the French version of his text to convincingly account for the particular space-time of the Caribbean. Confiant contends that Frankétienne’s having translated the narrative from Creole to French is itself proof of this fundamental defect:

Its French translation by the author himself, under the title *Les Affres d’un défi* shows irrefutably that this text could easily evoke any situation of zombification anywhere in the world. Could apply to any country ... Escapist solution, then, for a Creolophone author who feigns not to notice the red earth of the hills or the sadness of the coconut trees in the evening mist. (Ludwig 174)

Confiant argues that in *Dézafi* (and, subsequently, in *Les Affres d’un défi*), Frankétienne avoids the problem of transcribing an “authentic”

Caribbean reality by universalizing and atemporalizing his tale. Thus while Confiant initially analyzes *Les Affres d'un défi* as an allegory of zombification in which time necessarily does not exist, as noted above, he ultimately does not recognize the implicit rootedness of such a narrative choice. He claims instead that “Frankétienne does not succeed in making literature correspond to the temporality of the written” (177).

I would argue, on the contrary, that it is precisely this temporal and spatial imprecision that communicates with the greatest “authenticity” the reality of the environment in which the characters of *Les Affres d'un défi* are submerged. Martin Munro highlights the important philosophical premises underlying these choices in Frankétienne’s work as a whole:

One of the radical aspects of Frankétienne’s vision of Haiti is therefore that the nation is not so different to the rest of the world, that contemporary Haiti is but one manifestation of a common, longstanding human “disease” created by the repression of thought. Frankétienne thus implicitly challenges notions of Haitian exceptionalism, and also of race as determinant of human behavior. Even if he is called the “most Haitian” of all Haitian writers [Jonassaint, “Frankétienne”] Frankétienne’s vision is perhaps the most radically universal in Haitian writing, and even if he has steadfastly remained in Haiti, his work resonates far beyond Haiti’s borders and translates Haitian experiences into far broader intellectual and social contexts than those imposed by indigenism and *noirisme*. (*Exile* 89)

What Munro has so compellingly expressed is the singular value of a literary practice that deftly maintains a tension between the insular and global. If Frankétienne has chosen in *Les Affres d'un défi* to highlight the space of the gallodrome and to frame the space-time of the narrative in accordance with the duality and instability of the zombie, this reflects his effort to root in the specificity of Haiti and to gesture significantly to the world outside his national space. Frankétienne’s aim is to integrate rather than exceptionalize his country, again calling to mind the fact that Spiralism privileges the formal over the identitarian and/or geographical in its very name. This is a deliberate proclamation of its openness to the global. What Confiant condemns as escapism is in fact a testament to Frankétienne’s capacity to see the world in his island, his island in the world.

\* \* \*

If there is any work in Frankétienne’s corpus that one might “accuse” of non-specificity it could really only be *Ultravocal*. Although Port-au-Prince is specifically, if obliquely, referenced, so are Vietnam, ancient Troy, and Crete. This novel for all intents and purposes skips the nation



to confront the world. That is, the narrative moves perpetually beyond the specifics of the insular to directly evoke the universal. *Ultravocal* does not offer the coherent event-based frames of reference that provide at least some sort of spatio-temporal context for *Aube Tranquille* or *Le Peuple des terres mêlées*; and it does not operate within the specific contemporary Haitian spatial frame of *Mûr à crever* or *Les Possédés de la pleine lune*. The space-time of *Ultravocal* is more disorderly and unpredictable even than the violently chaotic portrayal of Haiti put forward in *Les Affres d'un défi*. There is no *marronnage* into the depths of a primordial forest in the novel, no recovery of the past, no rooting or remembrance. There is no coming to Caribbeanness, or Creoleness, or even Haitianness. There is no detailed description of urban or rural despair, no dream of exile or disillusioning experience of migration. In *Ultravocal*, Frankétienne abandons realist parameters of here and there, of now and then, while crafting a tale that is somehow thick with geography and history. The text is dense and replete with spatial and temporal indicators, yet the diversity and incoherence of these markers prevent them from actually serving as narrative information.

*Ultravocal* evokes the expansiveness of the epic without its nationalist substance or purpose. Although vast spaces of immense proportions are described and the overall frame is ultimately a quest, there is no sense in the narrative of change or progression, no real movement forward and no conclusion. In this, Frankétienne's text seems in some ways to reflect the unproductiveness and non-viability Glissant laments as regards the Creole folktale.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, the space of *Ultravocal* is "emphatically empty," the narrative offers "a pattern of succeeding spaces through which one journeys" and in which the "importance of walking is amazing" (Glissant, *Discours* 242). The degradation and claustrophobia of the environment is noted, regretted even, but never challenged in any tangible way. Certain allegorically configured sites are referenced in *Ultravocal*—Mégaflore, Vilasacq, le Désert sans bout (Megaflora, Looted-Ville, the Endless Desert)—but for the most part these are distanced or uncontextualized with respect to any clear geographical or even narrative frame.<sup>8</sup> On a temporal level, also, Frankétienne's text corresponds with Glissantian characterizations of the folktale. Glissant writes: "The fragmented nature of the Caribbean folktale is such that no chronology can emerge, that time cannot be conceived as a basic dimension of human experience ... [T]he tale does not hallow cultural accretion and does not activate it" (*Discours* 190).

On the surface of it, then, *Ultravocal* might certainly be so character-

ized. Without order or boundary, the narrative proposes a whirlwind of disjointed moments, eschewing the notion of a beginning, middle, or end in either time or space. The tone is one of absolute urgency and, as such, descriptions of the universe it presents are episodic, immediate, irregular, and abrupt. Frankétienne does not build anything here; he does not counter or enlighten with respect to problematic external discourses of Caribbean time and space. In this, he seems not to heed Glissant's call for the intellectual to provide a dispossessed collective with a productive and sustaining "prophetic vision of the past." Nor does he suggest points of connection with a landscape ready to be embraced. Rather, time and space in *Ultravocal* are presented as functions, on the one hand, of the chaos and destruction created by Mac Abre and, on the other, of the exigencies of Vatel's quest. "Wherever Mac Abre passes," the narrative affirms, "evil precedes, accompanies, and follows him. On one side, undergrowth, cacti, thorns. On the other, mud, slimy reptiles, dark, stagnant waters, the stillness of pits" (280). Given Mac Abre's ubiquitousness, the spatial imagery throughout *Ultravocal* is overwhelmingly dystopic—"a landscape infested by rats, slugs, roaches, flies" (91), an "[o]cean of mad cadavers / intoxication of rot" (321). Nearly all the spaces of the narrative indirectly reflect or have directly suffered Mac Abre's destructiveness and so are marked by decomposition, crawling with real and fantastic vermin. Suffocating and without exit, they are presented in a series of isolated episodes, timeless and indefinite.

Indeed, Mac Abre's extended reach through time and across space is perhaps the most disturbing aspect of his character: "Mac Abre's first public appearance dates back more than twenty centuries. In those times, the Empire of Looted-Ville enjoyed unbridled expansion. It had annexed all parts of the world, extending its sovereignty over straits, mountains and islands, to the point where it earned the title Endless Empire" (156).<sup>9</sup> Vatel's only means of negotiating this so profoundly subjugated space is to remain constantly in motion—constantly traveling toward Mégaflore without ever taking the time to reflect on or alter the spaces through which he moves. Given this stagnant present and devastated landscape, there is no opportunity in *Ultravocal* for the construction or even the envisaging of a coherent discourse of spatio-temporal liberation. The non-sympathetic nature of Vatel as hero eliminates the possibility of the truly tragic and prevents an immediate connection with the time and space evoked by his narrative being. In this, the work certainly appears to diverge from an agenda of engagement with the landscape and history as it has been articulated by writer-intellectuals of the French-speaking Caribbean

—from the Haitian Indigenists to the Creolists in Martinique; and again, *Ultravocal* seems at first particularly insufficient in the light of a Glissantian project of regional rootedness and contributory creolization.

However, on what I believe is a more significant level, Frankétienne's narrative puts forward a perspective on time and space that not only parallels but in fact fully invests in a poetics of relation and subversive opacity, the principal tenets of Glissant's aesthetic philosophy. The extent to which *Ultravocal* both exemplifies Glissant's own articulations of how the Caribbean needs be understood and represented, and echoes the majority of critical analyses of Glissant's treatment of time and space is striking. Specifically, Glissant calls in the late 1970s and early 1980s for a mimetic representation of the physical landscape and of regional temporality that is anticipated and fully realized by Frankétienne's 1972 text. Indeed, instead of succumbing to the "longing for history" (*Discours* 79) that Glissant cautions against in *Le Discours antillais*, Frankétienne's text directly expresses the "profound discontinuity" (Hall 226–27) that, Glissant argues, is ultimately the only real historical continuity of the Americas. Frankétienne's *Ultravocal* is the embodiment of rupture; it is opaque to the point of impenetrability yet communicates clearly the atmosphere of stultification and persistent, if muted, hopefulness that has marked Haitian reality since independence. Tellingly, Michael Dash, one of Glissant's most important critics, has in more than one context established such philosophical-cum-aesthetic parallels between Glissant and Frankétienne. In his essay concerning the evolution of "modern" (post-American occupation) Haitian literature, Dash sums up his assessment of the current state of Haitian letters as follows:

In the teeming universe evoked by these writers, the clearing is no longer possible, nor is the space in which a common territory might be established. The text becomes more and more precarious, like the vertiginous world that projects itself directly into the fiction of the novelist. In this contemporary literature, the native land reveals itself to be irreducibly opaque, which is a far cry from the symbolism of the tree that stabilizes the ancestral space. In uprooting the tree and the space of the speakable, these diasporic writers rejoin the Spiralist perspective of Frankétienne, the most important writer to have remained in Haiti, and shift themselves toward the aesthetic of the fold and the folding over elaborated in Edouard Glissant's theories of Relation and opacity. ("Haïti" 51)

Thus Dash concludes his essay with a *rapprochement* of Glissant and Frankétienne based on what is ultimately a mimetic impulse—a collapsing of the distance between World and Text expressed through a problematizing of representations of space. Earlier in this same essay, Dash singles out *Ultravocal* among Frankétienne's corpus as exemplary

in this respect: “[I]n the Spiralist universe of Frankétienne, there is neither horizon nor perspective ... The native land reveals itself to be elusive and nightmarish in his texts. In *Ultravocal* we are presented with a critical contestation of nostalgia for the tree and its symbolic coherence” (“Haiti” 49). In effect, the broken-down spaces and temporal disorientation of Frankétienne’s narrative suggest that the only possibility for representation is immediate, that is, without mediation. Frankétienne’s representational strategy in *Ultravocal* is to mimetically evoke his own frustrations vis-à-vis a lived reality in which the relationship between cause and effect seems to have come undone, in which one only has the right to an unmoored present, because the past has been so adulterated and misrepresented. This recalls, of course, Glissant’s twin declarations in that “every way of speaking is a land” and that “every man is created to speak the truth of his land” (cited in Hallward, “Edouard Glissant” 66).

Frankétienne’s narrative is also usefully considered in the light of political philosopher and Haitianist scholar Peter Hallward’s reflections on Deleuzian aesthetics:

“[P]erceptions and actions cease to be linked together, and spaces are neither co-ordinated nor filled” but simply scattered in an errant distribution that generates the very dimensions that they occupy. Events no longer relate to the person who instigates them or responds to them but consist of “immobilisings, petrifications and repetitions” ... Actors become the victims of the events that befall them. Deliberation is replaced by chance, purpose is consumed by fate, journeys dissolve into aimless wanderings. Rather than integrated through action and narrative, the cinema of pure time images assembles dispersive situations characterized by the absence of plot and “deliberately weak links.” The association of images becomes “elliptical,” “irrational” and “direct,” without “intermediaries” ... Stimuli no longer provoke reactions so much as summon up terrifying visions or dreams. (Hallward, *Out of This World* 115)

In this paraphrastic accounting of Deleuze’s *Cinema I* and *II*, Hallward—uncoincidentally a rigorous theorist of Glissant’s critical and fictional work—describes the configuration of time and space using a number of terms that are uncannily applicable to *Ultravocal*’s textual universe. Hallward’s comments highlight, in fact, the mimetic maintenance of opacity to which Glissant aspires (if he does not, as I argue elsewhere, always adhere), and that is a key element of Frankétienne’s Spiralism. Another of Hallward’s critical writings—specific reflections, in this instance, on Glissant’s philosophical evolution—suggests an intriguing and potentially productive perspective from which to consider Glissant and Frankétienne comparatively. In *Absolutely Postcolonial* Hallward

argues that there is a distinction between the pre- and post-*Discours* Glissant. From his initial interrogations of post-imperial injustice in the particular space of the French-speaking Caribbean, and principally in Martinique, Glissant sets out in his later writings of the *Tout-monde* (the “Everything-World”) to establish Martinique’s “incorporation, into the univocity of a new world order” (68). Glissant’s early nation-state-based formulation of Relation among particularized peoples is, in his later articulation of the *Tout-monde*, transformed into a poetics that, for all intents and purposes, skips the nation. Glissant’s theory and practice become post-national and im-mediate, initiating a “poetics of the *tourbillon*” (again, the “whirlwind”—that is, the spiral!) (74) that quite distances itself from his original “unambiguous affirmation of place” (“Edouard Glissant” 441). Chris Bongie, too, in his analysis of what he qualifies as Glissant’s pessimistic and “post/pessimistic” (*Islands* 161) later fiction acknowledges the philosophical shift in Glissant’s thought:

The poet of the tout-monde (im)patiently accumulates visions that are rooted in the local but open to the world, in an uninterrupted process of ‘mise en relation’ ... that is synonymous with what Glissant terms ‘errant’ thinking, which ‘conceives (of) totality, but willingly renounces the pretension of summoning or possessing it’. (*Islands* 353–54)

That Bongie qualifies this more recent work as initially pessimistic and ultimately resigned is in itself telling.<sup>10</sup> It suggests yet another point of intersection vis-à-vis the Spiralists, whose writing is so often marginalized as excessively pessimistic (and in this almost limitingly Haitian).<sup>11</sup> What I am suggesting here, by looking at these critical considerations of Glissant, is that the position of unfixed being—at once of and opaque to the *Tout-monde*—that Glissant develops in his more recently articulated aesthetic perspective has long been a part of Frankétienne’s and the Spiralists’ approach to Relation and creation. Where in 1969 Glissant expresses an unwavering faith in the importance of independent, territory-based national identity construction—“the land must have throbbed at least once in its total freedom in order for the poem, which has signified the land, to install itself forever in its truth” (*Intention* 144)—the Spiralists, like all Haitian writers, are all too aware that this freedom does not necessarily hold; they understand that independence can be an insufficient foundational truth. Indeed, Frankétienne long ago bypassed the nationalist fantasy and has since denied the creative necessity or even longing for any post-revolutionary anchoring in a coherent Haitian space-time. Having lived the disillusionment of Haiti’s political sovereignty—a national(ist) project that never really bore fruit, Frankétienne nourishes the universal.

Just what, then, are the universal truths so violently (ultra-)voiced by Frankétienne? What, where, when is the space-time of *Ultravocal*? Absent hierarchy and specificity, exaggerated and accumulative, hazy and unfamiliar, Frankétienne's narrative effectively "suggests an ambiance" that "[s]ucceeds in making the reader feel climactic and spatio-temporal variations" (*Mûr à crever* 118) rather than providing explanations thereof. Indeed, most essential to Frankétienne's narrative is the emotional response it generates in the reader. No one space or object of the décor is invested with particular significance. Rather, the accumulation of images succeeds in conveying a general impression of barrenness and destruction. Here, indeed, we find ourselves on the underside of the marvelous real, in the Alexian sense of the term.<sup>12</sup> This is a universe in which excess, amplification, and the fantastic combine to create a vision-experience of a terrifying and perverted landscape. As the narrator laments bitterly toward the very beginning of the text, there are

so many walking cadavers on the surface of the globe that one can no longer distinguish between the living and the dead, and the universe—which should be trembling with love and life—has, in the end, been transformed little by little into a moldiness that reeks of nightmares, horror, rot. (29)

These "walking cadavers," these beings suspended between life and death whose very presence impacts the spaces through which they move are, of course, zombies; and the tension between the zombie's physical mobility and its psychological and mental immobility is temporally and spatially reflected in *Ultravocal*'s lack of temporal variation and overall atmosphere of claustrophobia. The creature's condition of near-total constraint is echoed by the closed and restrictive physical world described in the narrative, the "petrified landscapes" (112) where "all is paralyzed and suffocated" (304). The first-person narrator, along with all others described in *Ultravocal*, are almost entirely overwhelmed by these dystopian realities: "We continue to live poorly within a cube. Our head tucked between our knees. A weight that holds us back. Heaviness and disintegration all at the same time" (273). Unable to turn in any direction without encountering "steel-tipped bars" or "tightened chains" (28), and imprisoned indefinitely in the limited and limiting space of this "locked up island" (333), both Vatel and the collective constantly risk zombification.

These physical realities unobtrusively denounce, of course, the "absence of social possibilities and political prospects" (Antoine, *Rayonnants* 30) that limit the individual's existence in Haiti (and elsewhere). In that respect then, yes, it is true that *Ultravocal* evokes the pessimistic and

exceedingly violent world that Cailler, for example, finds so despairing that its “progressive integration into that ‘novel of the Americas,’ concept that so marks Glissant’s project” (52), would seem impossible. Nevertheless, there is in *Ultravocal*—as in all the other Spiralist narratives to greater and lesser degrees—a sustained openness to a different/better (future) reality. While the narrative is undeniably marked by a certain negativity, we must not overlook the fact that the text offers numerous avenues of hope. Much like *Les Affres d’un défi*, *Ultravocal* insists that free will always plays a role in the individual and collective negotiation of space and history. Several passages reproach those who choose or accept their own confinement: “[O]ut of selfishness and fear, we live hidden away in our stifling dwellings” (95); and again (in a passage that returns in *Les Affres d’un défi*), “[E]ver since the glass shards, cacti, and brambles invaded our paths and since our fields have been transformed into deserts, all of us, we live badly. Without doing anything about it. In our helplessness, all we do is hope that the days go by quickly” (113). Although the narrator acknowledges these instances of self-limitation, the text is nonetheless rooted in a pronounced optimism: “Even the tiniest opening can eventually become a window or doorway. Depending on the eye. Depending on the will. Depending on the hand. The essential thing is to knock on the walls of the grotto, even if it seems to have no way out” (296). Here, as in *Affres*, the point is clear: the closed can be opened and the future imagined by force of human will. Moreover, if the world counters human potential with brutality and violence, the interior voyage always remains an option—the best option, even: “By taking alternate routes, I reach my interior planets ... [W]e savor the inexhaustible pleasures of a dream, always future, submerged in planetary waters” (309). This call for immersion in a productive and liberating space of self-examination—“Scale the ramparts / go to the very depths of one’s self / dislodge the crucial image / get out of one’s self / discover one’s self” (325)—affirms a movement in time and space that cannot be fettered by the boundaries between nations, between State and Nation. Like the “imaginary voyages” that take the author Frankétienne beyond the space and time of Duvalier’s Haiti, the interior journeys evoked in *Ultravocal* propose a purposeful universalizing of the insular. They confirm Frankétienne’s essential connection to regional preoccupations and patterns of thought—a connection that is all the more remarkable for the author’s physical isolation within the space of totalitarian Haiti, the space from which he tells the truth(s) of his land.

\* \* \*

In their celebration of the de-specified, spiralic infinite, all three of the Spiralists offer an implicit challenge to the “nation-friendly” position proclaimed by Hallward. They move aggressively toward the infinite, having witnessed firsthand the perils of the politically specific in the aftermath of Haiti’s foundered post-revolutionary nationalist project. At the same time, however, the three authors propose resolutely materialist accounts of the Haitian real; they present narratives that take up the particular historical and contemporary struggles of Haiti’s people and so pointedly avoid the privileging of the virtual over the actual denounced by the radical political perspective of Hallward, Badiou, and Žižek, among others. I would argue, then, that Frankétienne, Figolé, and Philoctète in fact mediate between nation and Relation, remaining “specific to” but not “specified by” Haitian reality—“specific to” their context “but not determined by it” (Hallward, *Absolutely* 49). The destabilizing manner in which they (un)coordinate their narratives in time and in space “allows for the situated articulation of genuinely universalisable principles” (xii) and the formulation of a postcolonial ethic that will not be seduced by “the serene spectacle of syncretic transformation and hybrid intermingling” (xiv). While the three authors recognize global reality as chaos and seek to integrate their narratives into this chaos-world, they do so not at the cost of dis-integration vis-à-vis a position of committed identification with Haiti. History, then, in no way constrains creation for the Spiralists; their physical positioning within the largely inflexible borders of their third of an island in the Caribbean in no way limits the universal ambition of their prose. On the contrary, in their perception of their national community and cultural and political contributions as boundlessly present on an extra-insular level, the three Spiralist authors see themselves “greater, greater with all the greatness of the world!” (Glissant, *Tout-monde* 124).

## NOTES

1 *Repeating Island* 36.

2 “Chaos-monde” 123.

3 Rafaël Lucas similarly notes this portrayal of thwarted expectations with respect to the relationships between man and nature in Frankétienne’s work: “The very idea of ‘the natural’ has been emptied of its connotation of familiar and reassuring normalcy ... All connections with nature have been booby trapped ... In Frankétienne’s work, the entirety of the ‘natural’ environment becomes lethal, collab-



orating with archaic and repressive socio-political structures in a great work of dehumanization ... ” (“Frankétienne” 42).

4 Cf. Antoine, “Le réalisme merveilleux dans la flaque,” and Lucas, “Aesthetics of Degradation.”

5 Saintil’s dispossession of the peasants resonates specifically with the tragic failure of Haiti’s first sovereign leaders to recognize land redistribution to the peasantry as imperative to a truly liberated republic. The forced plantation labor systems implemented by Toussaint and later Christophe, though perceived by both leaders as crucial to Haiti’s economic viability, were very much betrayals of the young nation’s revolutionary ideals. Cf. Trouillot’s *Haiti: State Against Nation* (50)

6 Cf. *Faulkner Mississippi* 267, for an elaboration of Glissant’s concept of “digenesis”; and *Caribbean Discourse* 14–16 on the phenomenon of ethno-cultural and historical erasure implicit in the forced “transplantation” of slave populations.

7 In *Absolutely Postcolonial*, Hallward also notes Glissant’s lack of interest—or faith—in the folktale as a productive, extra-insular cultural contribution: “Glissant is generally dismissive of *Détour*, folklore and Creole as little more than obstacles to be overcome in the constitution of a *national* consciousness ... the specificity he celebrates is never ‘popular’ or ‘lived’ but always filtered through a *written*, mastered relation to the particular” (71).

8 The only “epic space” of *Ultravocal* to be more fully investigated is l’Île des Grues (the Island of the Cranes/Tarts), where Vatel is briefly distracted from his purposed journey to Mégaflore by a pseudo-hippie community whose sexually liberated female members (the *grugrues*) drug and seduce him. His successful resistance of these New World sirens is the only blatantly heroic episode Frankétienne accords Vatel.

9 Makambo has also commented on Mac Abre’s spatio-temporal limitlessness: “[H]e is like an empty vessel that traverses time and space ... imposing himself as a transhistorical and transspatial being who, like a chameleon, takes on the color of the spatio-temporal context in which he finds himself” (15).

10 Bongie furthers this analysis of what he argues in *Islands and Exiles* is Glissant’s evolution away from “the modernist project that generated his work from the early 1960s and 1970s” (*Friends and Enemies* 329) by “turning a critical eye” in his later research to what he qualifies as “late Glissant’s outright rejection of conflictual politics and his obsessive insistence on the restorative virtues of a cultural poetics of Relation” (330).

11 Antoine characterizes Haitian literature as, for the most part, “a literature of terror and mourning”; Cailler calls it “so entirely tragic” (52); and Lucas labels it, on a formal level, an “aesthetics of degradation.”

12 For essayist and novelist Jacques Stephen Alexis, marvelous realism was to be understood as a phenomenon whereby the unexpected and the unusual become seamlessly integrated aspects of the real. Product of a particularly Haitian cultural creativity, the marvelous real accords primacy to imagination, mystery, and fantasy. Implicit in this concept are such concepts as naïveté, empiricism, mysticism, onirism, and quotidian experiences of the miraculous. In an essay entitled “Le réalisme merveilleux dans la flaque” [“Marvelous Realism in the Puddle”], Régis Antoine suggests that the work of the Spiralists, among other writers, is in many ways “the legacy of the marvelous realism of the 1950s, but inverted in its leitmotifs and its writing practice” (64). In other words, the lush, flowering natural world of Alexis’s texts is replaced by dysphoric, barren environments, and the “voluptuous women and robust men” (65) give way to zombies and other monstrous characters.

## IV

# Showing vs. Telling

*It is a question of arriving at an open totality of expression that would be nourished by both the oral and the written, but that wouldn't merely be the addition of the oral and the written, whether one is coming from the perspective of the oral or one promotes the cause of the written ... And more than ever, the Creole writer, seated before his sheet of paper, notices to what extent, on that opaque path situated between the oral and the written, he must abandon a good part of his reason, not in order to become irrational but in order to become clairvoyant, inventor of languages, herald of another world. What I mean is, he must become Poet.*

—Patrick Chamoiseau<sup>1</sup>

The postcolonial Caribbean writer lives, broadly speaking, a veritable drama of self-expression. His or her relationship to the wor(l)d is determined by a host of complex and significant tensions and contradictions—between the oral and the written, between the intellectual elite and the popular majority, between discourse and the cry, etc. Some of these tensions are, of course, part of the challenges to writing that individuals of any cultural background might face, particularly those writers who have similarly experienced colonialization and/or imperialist occupation. Indeed, often implicit in the process of writing is a refusal—or at least an interrogation—of preexisting monolithic and proscriptive discourses. Nevertheless, the theoretical preoccupation of the Caribbean writer with identifying and rejecting—or at least reinterpreting—the structural and stylistic exigencies of European literature suggests that the stakes are particularly high. In many ways uncertain of their indigenous heritage, literary and other, these writers necessarily resist becoming trapped within “a (de)limited intellectual, moral, and cultural territory” (Toumson 46). Product of a traditionally oral and historically “silent”/silenced culture, the Caribbean writer is compelled to develop a written voice—and often a discourse on language—that expresses his or her subversive intent. Indeed, the geographically and historically anchored truths that preoccupy Frankétienne, Fignolé, and Philoctète demand a certain singularity in their telling. I examine, in the next three chapters, at once the way that language use is presented through the char-

acters of the various texts, the ways in which the authors themselves utilize language in the writing of these works, and, finally, the perspective on self-expression—be it scribal or verbal—that is presented discursively in each of the Spiralists' works. Each of the following chapters focuses on the relationship to language manifested by one of the three Spiralists, examining each author's particular integration of the spiral form into his prose and noting also the points of connection with the works of the other two authors.

While the formal strategies employed by each of the authors are distinct, all three Spiralists manifest a decided commitment to making language exemplify the subject of its discourse. Their agenda is not mimesis, in the sense of a(n intended) comprehensive imitation of "reality," but their writings certainly push against the narrative mode of the diegetic. For the Spiralists, language not only tells a story, it is a story; it is an event to be experienced, unmediated—ideally—by authorial intervention. Striving for a Barthesian "zero degree" of writing that adheres stylistically to the reality out of which the text emerges and in which the text is embedded, the Spiralists enact through language. The works are formally faithful to their content and so impress directly on the reader's consciousness, producing visceral feelings of confusion, sensory overload, and even anxiety before the text. Indeed, the notions of movement, vertigo, and chaos with which the spiral form is associated figure crucially in the stylistic strategies at work in the Spiralists' fiction. Their stories feel breathless and out of control, destined to continue infinitely, though remaining somehow attached to precisely identifiable narrative markers. Interested as much in displaying the word as in using it as a vehicle through which to convey meaning, the Spiralists write texts that are replete with interrogatives, unresolved contradictions, and lexical innovations. Their works demand the reader's participation in the decoding of the text and the construction of truth(s), refusing to assume sole responsibility for rendering coherent that which, in reality, is profoundly fragmented and discontinuous.

One of the most critical questions that underlies the writings of all three of the Spiralist authors is that of how to write the unspeakable—often the unimaginable—events of Haitian history and contemporary reality. What language can adequately express the terrifying absurdity of Duvalier's state violence, the (sur)reality of colonial slavery, or the genocidal madness of the Dominican Vespers? How does a writer write nonsense—narrate, that is, realities that are without sense? Frankétienne, Fignolé, and Philoctète each engage differently with these questions, but

all three propose an aesthetic practice that embodies the paradoxes, tensions, contradictions, and terrors of the world(s) they describe. This is perhaps the fundamental stylistic tenet to which all three of the Spiralist authors adhere: specifically, a dedication to the aesthetic enactment of the socio-political realities they present in their works. The Spiralists have renounced, from their very first prose writings, any compulsion to transform doubts into certainties. Their writings are simultaneously interrogative and declarative; they seem to shake their heads in rhetorical disbelief in the face of the despicable. Unable to make sense of/in these worlds they relate, the three authors allow the unanswered and the incomplete to remain unmitigated at the foundations of their works. They seem to have accepted the fact that there can be no answers—no explanations or full grasping of the historical and contemporary absurdities that form the reality of their island and/in the world. They focus their energies, then, on crafting a language that plays with its own insufficiency.

The notion of a linguistic embracing of uncertainty and incompleteness indeed marks each and every one of the open-ended spirals produced by Frankétienne, Fignolé, and Philoctète. The absence of whole and heroic protagonists and the surfeit of confused and broken beings produce stammerings and echolalic rantings; the temporal and spatial discontinuity of their stories further subvert the referential coherence of the word. Indeed, the language of zombies, madwomen, and otherwise traumatized individuals serves as the language of the Spiralist narrative as a whole. There is profound contiguity between the communicative capacity of these fictional characters circulating within textual universes marked by conflict and unpredictability and the discursive choices made by the creators of these universes. That is, to the extent to which the beings in the Spiralists' narratives are constantly challenged by the unstable and often brutal circumstances that govern self-expression in Haiti, the Spiralists themselves produce discourse that mimetically communicates volatility and even savagery. It is a discourse without fixed direction or transparent resolution. It wanders and it wonders aloud.

This “out loud” errancy provides an essential oralized dimension to the Spiralists' prose that operates both explicitly and implicitly. Their narratives include a number of specific markers of the oral: Creole expressions, songs, riddles, proverbs, and dialogic exchange are present in each of the works discussed below. The folkloric is affirmed by the inclusion of “chummily” complicitous narrators, refrain-like passages, and elements of the marvelous. On what is perhaps an even more fundamental

level, however, the oral provides the overall discursive frame for these narratives. The scribal staging of accumulation and the associative possibilities of the word incorporate the fullness and unselectivity of the oral into the Spiralists' texts. Whatever the message in a given work, it can be valued also (if not primarily) as an "experience of language" whose "internal poetry" (Fardin, "*Ultravocal*" 7) depends on the non-diegetic communication of the atmospheric and the intuitive. Indeed, these narratives are at once readable and perceivable. Rather easily rerouted from an initial point ("spatial" or thematic), the Spiralists' writings are marked by multidirectionality. They start and restart, unexpectedly emphasizing and pursuing alternate or additional plotlines. These repetitions and altered recountings of particular episodes draw attention to the subjectivity of storytelling and the skill of the teller.

The Spiralist authors show themselves to be as subject to the complexities and challenges of self-expression as the characters they portray in their novels. Unconcerned with presenting what language use in the post-colonial Caribbean context should or could be, Frankétienne, Figiolé, and Philoctète provide direct expressions of what they believe language is, and of the creative possibilities it can afford the writer or individual. As unafraid of the frenzied and often nonsensical written manifestations of the cry as they are of the blank spaces of silence abruptly inserted throughout their narratives, the Spiralists' authorial voices fuse almost seamlessly with those of the anonymous narrators and individual characters of their stories. Rare are the instances in which a specific or explicit discourse on language is presented, and never do the Spiralists attempt to spell out a program for the construction of an "authentic" language. For each of the three writers, it is the relinquishing of narrative control that produces the most successful fictional representation of the collective voice. For only then might this voice freely stutter onto the page, repeating, contradicting, and affirming itself without hierarchy or predetermined objective. Frankétienne, Figiolé, and Philoctète accept the fact that this voice represents an undifferentiated ensemble of particular voices, alternately confused, petty, fanciful, mean-spirited, poetic, inconsistent, etc. Individual or collective, written or oral, discourse or cry, in the end, all manifestations of language are shown, then, to be as slippery, as variable, and as expansive as all others.

## NOTE

1 "Que faire" in Ludwig 158.

## The Stylistics of Possession

### *Frankétienne*

*From the very beginning ... the cry imposed its very particular syntax on the slave. For the Antillean, the word is, first and foremost, sound. Noise is speech. Clamor is discourse. This must be understood.*  
—Edouard Glissant<sup>1</sup>

Of the three Spiralists, Frankétienne has been perhaps the most overt in his attention to the specifically formal challenges to writing in and from a geographical space where the distance between the written and the real is so remarkable. Author of the world's first full-length novel in Haitian Creole, resolute refuser of exile, math teacher, and community leader, Frankétienne's actions reveal a commitment to the insular collective that inspires his literary production. At the same time, however, the sesquipedalian acrobatics of his prose fiction certainly appear, at first (and second and third) glance, to be at odds with any sort of populist intent. Frankétienne is aware of this apparent contradiction. In fact, he ultimately goes so far as to name it: "schizophonia," officially introducing the term in the title of his 1993 spiral, *L'Oiseau schizophone*. Though this title appears some years after the publication of the three works discussed here, there is no question that the concepts it describes are present from Frankétienne's first writings. Yves Chemla defines schizophonia as

the attitude or position of the artist ... who realizes little by little that the sounds s/he hears and that s/he produces are the only ones capable of evoking the chaos and the pollution that affect the world (as well as language itself) by means of neologism, lexical invention, rhymes and echoes, alliterations and encounters between sounds and images. (Chemla, "Iconographie")

Schizophonia, in other words, is an offering of the unmediated representation of a reality too absurd or too traumatic to narrate—a reality to which existing formulations of the word are insufficient.

In this, Frankétienne's schizophonic prose intersects with the Glissantian notion of forced or counter poetics elucidated in *Le Discours antillais*—a traumatic situation in which "an expressive need confronts the inexpressible"; "the awareness of an opposition between an idiom

one employs and a language one needs” (402–3). Unlike Glissant’s conception of this tension and its manifestations, however, schizophonia is productive, sufficient, and subversive. It describes the multiple ruptures—the schizoid splits in language as speech or sound—that exist between the producer of the Word and the worlds into which that Word figures; it traces the move from the world of the text that an author creates-releases, to that of the political being who is the potential (non-)reader. It offers an unboundaried, non-ideological space of potential engagement—a *tabula rasa* on which a writer might offer her or his words, and simply leave the reader to hear and interpret them as s/he will. This is not some sort of postmodernist gesture to relinquish political responsibility in favor of creative freedom. Quite the contrary; Frankétienne’s perspective and the texts it produces are, in fact, testaments to the inextricability of the political and the creative. His philosophy parallels extra-insular discourses of aesthetic engagement from Barthes to Glissant while relying on the specifically Haitian world-views reflected in vodou and, of course, in Spiralism.

Beginning with *Mûr à crever*, Frankétienne establishes an unwavering commitment to the unmediated presentation of language. In this ante-Spiralist work, Frankétienne introduces the dramatic stylistic choice that underlies the entirety of his fictional corpus. Specifically, he relies on the narrative cry (*le cri*) as an opportunity for cathartic expression. The cry provides, in fact, the formal and philosophical frame of *Mûr à crever*. From the outset, the first-person narrator gives himself over to the liberating capacity of the cry. While acknowledging the fundamental tragedy and frustration of human existence, he remains convinced that resistance to the destructive forces that threaten to overwhelm him can be effected through the explosion of his own voice. Evoking first the full-throated howl of dogs in the moonlight, he goes on to describe his own transformation into a “storm of words, bursting the hypocrisy of clouds and the insincerity of silence” (16). A counter to falseness, the cry will serve, he announces, as an effective channel for individual opposition. It is, in and of itself, an action as opposed to a plan of action, and the very fact of its utterance indicates refusal. In the passage immediately following this initial declaration, the narrator confirms the value of the cry in that crucial passage, cited above, that establishes his contiguity with Paulin.

By dint of speaking, I have become nothing more than a howling mouth. I don’t worry anymore about what I’m writing. I simply write. Because I have to. Because I’m suffocating. I’ll write anything. Anyhow. People can call it what they want: novel, essay, poem, autobiography, testimony, story, simple exercise, or nothing at all. Personally, I don’t even know ... I’m suffocating.

I write down everything that comes into my head. The important thing for me is the exorcism. The liberation of something. Of someone. Of myself perhaps. Deliverance. Catharsis. I'm suffocating. I don't see any cellar window. And I push against the walls of my asphyxiation with the battering ram of words ... I'm tired. Now I knock on closed doors. I fidget impatiently. I cry out. I call out. I scream. (9)

The narrator's self-identification as giant, screaming mouth in the above passage encapsulates the variety of functions the cry goes on to assume within the context of the larger narrative. The narrator evokes the healing power of the cry with respect to the individual, as well as its modest ambition to inspire—or at least to provoke—the collective. Indeed, as the passage implies, the cry is at once expressive and declarative. It commands attention and thereby makes a potentially productive connection. We might note also that the passage prepares the reader, by its form and content, for the stylistic unconventionality of *Mûr à crever*, anticipating the narrative's multigenre structure by indulging in its own unusual writing practice. Composed of a series of abrupt and disjointed sentence fragments that repeat one or two central ideas, the passage gives the impression of uncensored expression, conveying a sense of urgency and candor, even, that implicitly and explicitly suggests a certain distancing with regard to the literary. The cry is defined by immediacy; thus it contextualizes the impulsiveness and at times disconcerting incoherence and cultivated senselessness that underlie all of Frankétienne's prose fiction.

The above passage further shows an important semantic slide—a subtle shift that unpedagogically posits Frankétienne's distinct perspective on the oral and the written. That is, in moving from the first to the second sentence it suggests an equivalence of speaking and writing (*dire* and *écrire*) and tacitly refutes the conception of these terms as dichotomous or as existing in any sort of hierarchical relationship with respect to one another. It implies that the written word need not necessarily be placed at odds with the spoken. In this respect, these first phrases of this first work of Spiralist prose fiction put forward a perspective that departs from, for example, Glissant's call to move beyond the cry in the interest of forging a proper narrative of New World reality—his well-known exhortation to the Caribbean collective to “let go of the cry, generate the Word” (*Discours* 28). Frankétienne's perspective refuses such an oppositional formulation and the suggestion of dialectical movement forward it contains—the same progressive model, in fact, that leads Glissant (and the Creolist writers, and Sartre) to call for the transcendence of Césaire's Negritude. Michael Dash effectively, if inadvertently, evokes this philo-



sophical divergence between Frankétienne and Glissant's perspective on the cry in his assessment of Glissant's attitude toward Saint-John Perse and Césaire's poetics. Dash writes, citing Glissant (who implicates, let it be noted, the figure of the spiral):

[Glissant] describes Césaire's poetry as a "cri de conscience" [cry of consciousness], as an important *phase* in Caribbean self-affirmation. "In the language of our time, the *Notebook of a return to my native land* is a 'moment': the flaming reversal of a consciousness, the raising to everyone of the new will of a few. It is also a cry: plunging into the dark spirals of the earth."<sup>2</sup> For Glissant, however, the need exists to transcend this "cri," the Rimbalidian explosiveness of Césaire's sensibility, and "muer le cri en parole devant la mer" ("to transform the shriek into language before the sea") ... Glissant is drawn away from this *fulgurance*, the systematic derangement of the senses ... (*Edouard Glissant* 31, emphasis mine)

Both the writer and the critic posit Césaire's poetics of the lightning strike (*fulgurance*) as something initial, a spark, a precursor to more substantive discourse. Both suggest a certain insufficiency of the cry. To the contrary of this perspective, Frankétienne—in *Mûr à crever* and elsewhere, as we shall see—conceives of the cry as absolutely sufficient to a contemporary Caribbean discourse. The "systematic derangement of the senses" is absolutely central to his Spiralist aesthetic; it is something that Frankétienne strives for, as it serves both an evacuative and a provocative function. Further, to the extent to which, as Glissant acknowledges, Antillo-Caribbean expressive culture is oral at its origins, Frankétienne's reliance on the cry reflects his intention to make that orality integral to his textual practice.<sup>3</sup>

The polarizing conception of the relationship between the oral and the written is often reinforced by the assertion of a corresponding dichotomy between movement and stillness. Again, it is Dash who points out the articulation of this conflict in Glissant's aesthetic philosophy—the latter's assertion that "[t]he written assumes non-movement" and "[t]he oral, conversely, is inseparable from the stirrings of the body" (*Discours* 404). In a passage that somewhat conflates his own perspective with that of Glissant, Dash writes,

[Glissant] is aware of the relationship between orality and corporeality. Frenzied movement, stridency, wild gesticulating are inevitable reactions against the numbed silence of the past; but writing is about immobility and reflection. The dilemma of the Caribbean writer is how to stay true to the body and its poetics while immobilizing the body in order to write. (Dash, "Writing" 610)

Looking again at the excerpt from *Mûr à crever*, we see that Frankétienne's I-narrator seems not to appreciate this ostensible exis-

tential and practical quandary. His evocation of a howling mouth inserts the corporal—the oral—directly into reflections on the production of the written. This mouth provides the necessary *cri* of *é-cri-ture*, suggesting that the nearly homophonous *j'écris* and *je crie* (“I write,” “I cry”) might in fact be nearly synonymous as well.

In addition to the first-person narrator's stated, suggested, and enacted embracing of the cry as a viable discursive mode, Frankétienne's alienated protagonist, Raynand, similarly takes recourse in the cry when faced with the artifice and hypocrisy of certain forms of discourse. I am thinking, for example, of two specific scenes I invoke in my discussion of character configuration in *Mûr à crever*: Raynand's linguistic battle royale with Solange's father and the drunken counter-toast he pronounces at his friend's wedding. In the first instance, Raynand's desperation to leave a favorable impression on the father of his bourgeois girlfriend pushes him to engage in a traumatizing conversational combat during which he constructs the painfully meaningless narrative of a false self:

The two men continued their conversation, touching on this and that, going through all the current topics. It was a veritable duel of information in which, out of smugness, the most difficult words, employed the least frequently, newspaper columns, film titles, actors' names, all massacred common sense, injured innocent reason ... The sitting room was transformed into a veritable arena in which these gladiators challenged each other in the hot air of hollow statements. (21)

Although he comes out of this verbal jousting victorious, Raynand is disgusted and distraught by his experience. When he finally leaves/escapes Solange's house he immediately goes looking for a way to undo some of the violence he's done to himself. His only thought is “[t]o tell the truth. Get rid of the straightjacket of lies weighing on his shoulders. To scrape off the mud of imposture” (24). He flees to the home of a childhood friend where several of his neighbors are gathered and, without uttering a word, explodes into a prolonged and violent fit of out-of-control laughter. After several minutes of this, his laughter gives way to an equally violent sobbing:

He wanted to laugh hysterically. To laugh to the point of exhaustion, until his breath gave out. To scream. To howl. To explode. To burst into a thousand little pieces of flesh. To become a splash of blood, a flattened mass, crushed under the tracks of a tank ... No one could interpret this prolonged laugh, interspersed with giggles. A few minutes later, the laugh changed strangely into an alternating series of short sighs and guttural shuddering ... (23–24, 25)

Raynand's need to reconnect with something authentic—to say some-

thing true—takes the form of a wordless expression of despair. It is an immediate and instinctual bodily purging of the toxic psychological residue left by his confrontation-conversation with Solange's father. Raynand again has recourse to this sort of explosively physical response on the occasion of the bourgeois wedding reception he attends with Paulin. The bride's godfather pronounces a long-winded, "falsely eloquent"<sup>4</sup> toast in which he urges the falsely united newlyweds to value the spiritual over the material and to recognize their duties toward society, evoking the "eminent sociologist Frédéric Le Play" and the "Christian humanism as defined by Saint Augustin, in his remarkable work, 'The City of God'" (140–41). Overwhelmed by the hypocrisy of the toast and the self-serving, mercenary milieu out of which it emerged, Raynand bursts into a drunken tirade. He denounces the sham intellectualism and social indifference of the attendees, shouting invectives in a "singular hiccup" (148).

Both the exchange with Solange's father and the tediously hypocritical wedding speech offer examples of the sort of "verbal delirium"<sup>5</sup> Glissant analyzes in *Le Discours antillais*; both reflect the masking of profound impotence with alienated rhetorical excess. And in both instances Raynand responds with what might at first seem to be an equally, if differently, delirious orality. As scream, as riotous laughter, as uncontrollable wailing, as bilious diatribe—his cry is reactive and punctual. It constructs no clearly articulated liberationist agenda. Yet Raynand's visceral and unplanned seizing of voice has a productive value nonetheless; it offers him a sense of absolute, if impermanent, physical and emotional relief/release. Indeed, it is this very expressive impulse that ultimately enables Raynand to break free of the paralyzing routine of his directionless promenades:

And Raynand, irritated by his endless, aimless walks, becomes a mouth that speaks incessantly. Suffering flesh becomes verb through my voice ... Never again the muzzle! Raynand speaks. Walks. He doesn't speak merely with his mouth. His entire body describes the triumphant space of the forbidden word. Ostracism or communion in the suffocation of the verb. He walks. (129)

This image of a rambling, babbling perambulator making his way through the streets of Port-au-Prince perhaps recalls the psychotic individuals described by Glissant's theory of delirium—" [T]hose wanderers who at the crossroads grind up the tragic of our uprootings. Their arms slash through the air; their cries take root in the heat of time. They are drunk on their own speed" (*Discours* 624). I would argue, however, that Frankétienne has a less pessimistic perspective on such manifestations of

“delirium”; he is less inclined to view this behavior as dead-ended. He suggests, rather, that these unfettered verbal expressions are acts of (re-)engagement and, therefore, have value in an immobilizing social context. Spontaneous and intense, Raynand’s outbursts—his metaphorical cries—are dramatic and impulsive first steps; they are “real” comings to language and, it is implied, to selfhood. By indulging in the purgative function of the cry Raynand effects a necessary transgression of the psycho-political limits that undermine his efforts at social engagement.

\* \* \*

The cry—the declarative—becomes Frankétienne’s principal expressive mode in both *Ultravocal* and *Les Affres d’un défi*. In each of these works, this organic convergence of the spoken and the written is affirmed in passages where writing echoes the cry—is the cry—passages in which the first person and other voices indulge in unrestrained verbal torrents that serve less to communicate semantic intent than to intimate states of being. Language is an event in both works; the word is often an anthem. The two novel-spirals plunge the reader directly into a frenzied and almost physically draining linguistic landscape; they attack the senses and provoke rather than inform. *Ultravocal*, in particular, essentially amounts to a 415-page cry. As is indicated by the opening sentence (fragment), “To explode everywhere at once” (9), the narrative presents an explosion of the word onto the page—an accumulation of echoes and phrasal riffs that are juxtaposed to form more of a quilt than a story. Language truly takes center stage in this novel-spiral and draws the reader into the “absolute vertigo” (297)—the “uncontrolled spiral” (411)—of the textual universe it creates. Indeed, the question of creation—in the sense of production and invention—is essential here. Frankétienne’s aesthetic choices in *Ultravocal* reflect his intention to produce language by starting, figuratively speaking, from scratch. His is the language of invention Derek Walcott describes as necessary for the American poet, inasmuch as the latter, though *de facto* elite, can be situated along a cultural continuum that begins with the slave:

What would deliver him from servitude was the forging of a language that went beyond mimicry, a dialect which had the force of revelation as it invented names for things ... this, not merely the debt of history, was his proper claim to the New World. For him the metaphor was not a symbol but conversation, and because every poet begins with such ignorance, in the anguish that every noun will be freshly, resonantly named, because a new melodic inflection meant a new mode, there was no better beginning. It did not matter how rhetorical, how dramatically heightened the language was

if its tone was true, whether its subject was the rise and fall of a Haitian king or a small-island fisherman, and the only way to re-create this language was to share in the torture of its articulation. This did not mean the jettisoning of ‘culture’ but, by the writer’s making creative use of his schizophrenia, an electric fusion of the old and the new.” (Walcott 15–16)

The notion of tortured, even schizophrenic invention as the prerequisites to a certain creative liberation resonates dramatically in a reading of *Ultravocal*. As the I-narrator pledges in his incarnation as the poet, “A speck of dust on the tip of my finger, a single word on my lips, and I recreate the universe” (414) or, less loftily, “On the written page I eagerly and feverishly gather the excrements of imagination, emerging from a slumber so long, I blush to speak of it” (81). This process of recreation is, indeed, the poet’s acknowledgment of schizophrenia and his willingness to reveal this incoherence on the page—to expose the limits of his author-ity. It is a process that, while perhaps freeing, is not without risk or suffering for the poet—“I am born and reborn every day, alchemized into gestures, words, anguish” (411). As he clearly articulates, the first step is “[t]o touch the very bottom of the pit. But the challenge is, while enveloped in the darkness, to be able to climb back up, escaping the deadly tentacles and whips” (367). It is a process, in other words, of confronting one’s demons, looking into the abyss—“the dangers of the pit” (272)—and bringing out, unfiltered, the language found there. This language, *Ultravocal* attests, will not necessarily be tasteful or pleasant. On the contrary, it implies a base viscerality—“[r]ing, anus, womb, mouth, mucous membranes, glands, esophagus, stomach, intestines, brain, broth of parasites” (272). It will not only be a struggle to articulate, but also will often produce a broken and uncomfortable discourse. Thus the narrative is overwhelmed by moments of arduous beginnings:

Speech reclaims its rights, and the simplest words, for too long stuck at the bottom of our throats, escape painfully, as if they’d lost the capacity to rise up into the air. Bottles broken noisily against the horns of the totem. Cradle bread source firefly incubator haymaking hand stream of water fruit love green song salt plant joy free open window mouth azure. Words that we closed up in a cage made of iron, gâiac wood, and bitter earth [*terrâcre*]. Sick words, bogged down by lava and drool far from the route of the wind. Words hardening in a corner during the waking nightmare [*caucharmeil*] that must now relearn to skip in order to find again the path toward the light. (23)

The passage evokes at once a constrictive environment and an energizing impulse, a stylistic tension that is maintained throughout the narrative. Indeed, while the world and words of *Ultravocal* are often threatening and violent, there is an equally significant linguistic playfulness at work

in the text. Frankétienne consistently revels in the sheer form, weight, and enchantment of the written word, indulging in spirited linguistic games and lyrical surprises in which his delighting in language offers a counterpoint to the less than delightful content he presents. In a mischievous manipulation of Charles Perrault's tale of Bluebeard, for example, Frankétienne includes the following passage (of which the stylistic import functions only in the original French):

*Sœuranne*  
 ma *sœuranne*  
 Depuis des *années*  
 Je ne vois que *poussière*  
 À l'horizon *suranné*  
 Quête *aride* sans *pouvoir* y renoncer  
 Visage *aux rides* à *félure* de  *Pierre*  
 Au bout du chemin jadis *sacré*  
 Les *travaux* *horaires*  
 Des *sabots* *blasphématoires*.  
 Mes antiques *espoirs* *massacrés* à l'ardeur du *sexe solaire*,  
 En émeute toute la *chair* de l'*été*, ô *choir* *impitoyable* *table* de ma *mémoire*.<sup>6</sup>  
 (56, emphasis mine)

In addition to the lightheartedness engendered by the evocation of the fable, the many instances of assonance and alliteration draw attention to the form rather than the content—to the word rather than its meaning. The relative haphazardness of the echoes and rhymes brings the reader's ear forward and backward, around and around the passage in a spiralic tracing of Frankétienne's poetic flight of fancy. A similar process is at work in the below passage:

Table lit d'*ours*. Désenlacement *du* chiffre huit. Zéro redevenu. Jeu *subtil*. Lambeaux de *souvenirs*. Le tic-tac *du* balancier enfonce ses *clous* au cerveau. Un menuisier fend des planches *pour* la danse *funèbre*. *Fougue*. *Fou*quement la *foudre*. J'avale *une* cruche d'eau à l'entrée de la grotte exercice obligatoire d'initiation *trou* dedans la descente dans la nuit sans *bouclier* ma *démence* *couche-toi* plomb *brumeux* d'*où* l'on entend les vagissements violence et *brûlure* *couteau* *fou* crâne fendu le *rougeoiement* *du* sang au *crépuscule* j'invoque mon christ je lui offre *une* *coupe* d'or la chair partagée ombre *couverte* à l'émergence des îles et je relie des *bouts* de mots par *où* l'on *retourne* à la vie *soudaine* *nuque* de l'onde *une* *croûte* aux dents l'enjambement de la montagne *accroupie* aux flancs *du* ciel des corps de vent guerre *flûte* commence au lit la *mésaventure* de la fausse vierge *courbe* au dos la corde au *cou* la corne brisée ô complice *nature* je m'accroche à la *roue* de *course* en aveugle combat zaka la colère *tout* *autour* de la sphère *roule* l'os dans le glissement *furtif* *où* s'efflèche la *lumière* contre les mauvaises pierres *houle* et *roule* je creuse mes mystères foinquement *lacigouave*. Entre deux hoquets, *réminiscence* *ou* hantise, je *hurle*.  
 Au *secours* folie ma *douleur* mes *amours* d'antan  
 Je *chavire* avec l'âme de mon chien!<sup>7</sup> (200–1, emphasis mine)

An undisguised celebration of the sonorous quality of the word, the internal coherence of this passage is based entirely on the persistent assonance of the [u] and, to a lesser degree, the [y] vowel sounds. Clearly, the reader would be hard-pressed to determine Frankétienne's semantic intent in these lines or, for that matter, to identify the "relevance" of the ideas expressed to the narrative as a whole. And so clearly Frankétienne is not concerned here, or in any of the many other such passages—"Nous ne savions pas qu'il était si facile de se *leurrer*. Nos *meurtrissures* demeurent aussi vraies, aussi profondes que nos espoirs. Comment gagner le pari des fleurs?" (32); "loi du talion / foi de lwa-lion / roi-rat au vent" (63) etc., etc.—with communicating a particular, predetermined idea or objective. He offers, rather, a present, urgent, and direct connection between reader and text—an immediate/un-mediated experience of language.

Whether dark and tortured, playful or questioning, the language of *Ultravocal* is consistent only in its deliberate inconsistency. The inevitable hermeticism produced by this instability situates Frankétienne's text as a radical example of the literature called for by other writers of the post-colonial New World. In describing the subversive value of Frankétienne's literary praxis, for example, Michael Dash explicitly affirms the philosophical points of convergence with Césaire's aesthetic. He writes, "'Spiralisme' launched by Frank Étienne in 1968 meant the promotion of an 'écriture' in Haiti that rejected didacticism, prescriptiveness and the conventions of realism ... In a static and sterile totalitarian world, Étienne longed for an aesthetic of movement, of infinite possibility which was another manifestation of the Césairean ideal" ("World" 127). Here, Dash attributes Frankétienne's subversive formal approach to the political constraints on artistic expression in Duvalier's Haiti. While this is most certainly true in part, it should be noted that Frankétienne's writings have actually become increasingly hermetic and frenetic since the overthrow of Duvalier *fi*ls in 1986. Independent, then, of the stifling totalitarian politics of dictatorship, it is, to return to my comments above, the pursuit of a narrative "*fulgurance*"—what Dash dubs the "Césairean ideal"—that most accurately accounts for Frankétienne's stylistic choices.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, Frankétienne's prose recalls also Alexis's novelistic practice in the latter's pre-Duvalierian<sup>9</sup> texts, a baroque sensibility that Dash describes as a "frenzied accumulation of verbs and adjectives" that "creates visually striking prose poems in his narratives" (*Littérature* 194); an effort to "convey the primal force and the disorienting timelessness of the Haitian landscape" (198).

It is ultimately the drive toward unmediated representation that is most

crucial to Frankétienne's aesthetic. This is a drive that is by no means exclusive, of course, to the Haitian context. It is an expression of the zero degree of writing sought out by Barthes, who, for example, lauds Céline for his commitment to a literature in which "writing isn't in the service of a particular thought, like some successfully achieved realist décor, that would be juxtaposed with the depiction of a social underclass"—a literature that "truly represents the writer's plunge into the sticky opacity of the condition he describes" (Barthes 71). Frankétienne's style recalls also the notion of "creative univocity" put forward by Deleuze. In parallel to the implications of immanence in the context of time and space, Deleuze's perspective is wholly applicable to the stylistic aspects of Frankétienne's aesthetic as well. The Deleuzian principle, according to which "the purpose of art is not to represent the world, still less to cultivate or enrich our appreciation of the world, but to create new and self-sufficient compositions of sensation, compositions that will draw those who experience them directly into the material vitality of the cosmos itself" (Hallward, *Out of This World* 105), perfectly describes the intended immediacy of Frankétienne's writing—a writing that aims, indeed, to "estrangle or desacralise its representational ambitions, so as to bring out those aspects of language—the way it sounds, stammers, leaps ... that allows it directly to convey the vitality of sensation and experience" (108). How better to understand passages such as the following?

Un instant, je domine mon angoisse. Je me tais. Je demande qu'on fasse autant, pour mieux écouter la furie de la mer et du vent. Mon île. Ma planète. Grimace et grincement. Main toute colère. Tambours et peaux de bêtes. Zoophone goulou goulou goulou talkie-walkie maladie transmise en temps de guerre la bouteille lyrique à bouche bavarde l'urine vomie par rancœur troupeau de quouah quouah quouah impossibilité d'éviter toutes les salissures charriées par les vents et les eaux encore un combat mortel livré contre la race des moustiques et des mouches corps surchargés de bijoux les esclaves marchent au sacrifice rien qu'un geste pour basculer au fond du gouffre vroum ziu vroum ziu vroum ziu le souffle se perd et les vœux prennent du temps à réaliser c'est pourquoi les bourdonnements nous iritent ailes affolés brassant le vide un instant de plus on accède à la honte irréparable la colle forte pendant le récit l'intervention des bêtes confondue avec les bruits agaçants répercutés dans les voutes et les articulations d'un corps menacé d'effondrement le bluff des coups de pubis de l'impuissant rabotant l'entourage du nombril la digestion la fermentation les miasmes la contestation des braguettes l'éjaculation dans les trous à fond perdu quelle musique désagréable gratte gratte gratte tchap tchap tchap nappe de pourritures alentour la démangeaison les veines épreuves le rot le pet le baillement ouah ouah ouah l'agacement l'histoire des bulles de savon schuite brouette schuite aïe boîte brouette schuite brouette saintes passions la défécation la copulation le vomissement l'éternuement les exclamations hetchoum hetchoum hetchoum boîte brouette brouette hoc hoc hoc hetchoum brouette hetchoum



boîte gratte gratte gratte floupe floc floupe floc tchouc tchouc tchouc aïe  
 zolius boum bang boum bang boum zouave houille gong les stocks de  
 bombes thermonucléaires la défenestration des étoiles! (*Ultravocal* 285–86)

My question is rhetorical, of course. There are certainly other lenses through which to read and appreciate the incoherent spectacularizations of language strewn throughout *Ultravocal*—lenses that emerge from a local theoretical context. Specifically, there is Frankétienne’s call for the reader to enter into and be possessed by the text. As my pointed evocation of possession is intended to suggest, *Ultravocal* may be examined through the lens of a vodou aesthetic. In a rigorous discussion of vodou as foundational artistic and ethical system in Haiti, Alessandra Benedicty convincingly argues that “vodou art” is too often mistakenly evaluated through a European postmodern lens that fails to recognize the existence of the more than sufficient analytical frame provided by vodou itself. The tendency of scholars, Benedicty argues, is generally to explain away the indeterminacy of vodou art objects by looking for “intellectual truths” (27) or the suggestion of cultural solutions. Yet vodou is motivated by a *de facto* open-ended and even dissimulative ethics, and thus, Benedicty maintains, any interpretive work is meant to be done by the *vodouisant* in the moment of contact with the object in question. She notes that “[i]n the Vodou/Haitian aesthetic system, the *objet d’art* nurtures ambivalence and demands that the reader or the spectator interpret and thus participate in the production of an artistic text’s meaning” (9–10). In other words, meaning is produced in and through a sort of metaphorical possession—an opening up and letting go in the presence of the art object.

Such a stance before the text implies the phenomena of unmediated, unexplicated representation (through the *vêvê*<sup>10</sup>) and obligatory participation (through possession). Where there are *vêvê*—drawn/written signs—there is the possibility of possession; and where there is the possibility of possession, there is instability of identity and receptivity to a disembodied spirit/meaning invoked non-specifically and residing temporarily in a given being/text/word. *Ultravocal* thus presents itself as a collaborative effort. It adopts a decidedly writerly position, in the Barthesian sense of the term. It scatters signs about a precise narrative space and calls upon an audience to interpret them. In this, again, it makes an effort to de-privilege author-ity and to demand the engagement of an interlocutor. Such a perspective confirms Frankétienne’s unwillingness to rely on a stable and omniscient narrator, and enables the I-narrator—despite a self-identification as “I, poet of the highest spheres” (12) and as one of those “who excel at times in stimulating consciousness” (89)—

to resist the infamous trap of Césaire's fantasized but unrealized attempt to speak, god-like, for a "We" of which he is at best an atypical part. Indeed, as a result of the instability of Being and beings in *Ultravocal*, the I-narrator/poet avoids "the *je*'s emphatically singular and troublingly 'demiurgic' position in the text [that] obviously does not correspond with the voiceless plurality for which he would speak" (Bongie, *Islands* 43). That is, for whatever his lofty inclinations, the I as/or poet has no more than a tenuous hold on narrative authority. He takes on no "ordering or ordaining role" (Dash, "Writing" 609), but in fact sows disorder and exposes fissures. And while he exhibits certain demiurgic tendencies, he is no "solemn patriarch" (610). He is an inconsistent and multilayered being who accepts the responsibilities that come with his talents. He seeks "to remove the mask of reality in order to allow the sound of things to create an image devoid of distortion. In order to assure that no deforming prism imposes itself between the colors of life and our eyes" (Laroche, *Littérature* 113).

Indeed, *Ultravocal* is fully invested in presenting "the sound of things"; it is a text that functions best, even, when spoken, declared, declaimed. It is, after all, supremely ("ultra") vocal. This implicit showcasing of the oral not only suggests a non-elite intention,<sup>11</sup> but also reflects the vodou conception of language as a force that, by its very utterance, holds a conjuring, life-creating power—an always transformative potential to pass "[f]rom the word as thought to the word as act" (*Ultravocal* 313). We must understand, then, that where the I-poet claims to be among those "blessed with the power to create, to maintain, or to destroy life" (89), he makes such proclamations within a vodou context—a context in which the word "can act to engender all things"; in which "words uttered in incantations by the houngan both suspend and create life" (Dayan, *Haiti* 49). Such faith in the power of the word is the source of an implicit optimism in *Ultravocal*. The narrative expresses a conviction that the very act of speaking can de-zombify the individual and mobilize the collective:

Today I inaugurate the poetic season with the new language of the high priests, not inscribed in sacred texts, but addressed to all audiences, to all the peoples of the universe. Language of prey and also of seeds, of vegetation; we can only hope for the flowing of water in zones where there is drought, for hoeing, the pulling up of weeds, the sowing of seeds, for irrigation, for the emancipatory orgy, the exterminating of insects, draining, fertilizing, chasing away the rats during the harvest and, again, for cleaning out and dredging the swollen river and canals. And the word inhabits the heart ... (22)

Determined to put his creative abilities in the service of a revolutionary

ideal, the “I” is consistent in his preoccupation with the world- and mind-altering possibilities offered by creative engagement: “Glory to all those who with their cries weave the fires of dawn! The poet dreams of taking part” (79). He at once expresses great pride in his exceptional status and recognizes the obligations that come with such privilege: “There are those, in the land of men, who excel sometimes at stirring up consciences. They are the artists, the poets, and the philosophers. Gifted with the power to create, to continue, or to abolish life, they horrify the terrible race of gods” (89). In terms reminiscent of those used by *Mûr à crever*’s Paulin, this I-poet explains that he is bound to his craft by a combination of organic necessity—“Unable to forget or to sleep in peace, I write like a prisoner” (49)—and civic responsibility—“It is the dearest wish of the poet that it become possible for us to dance in the middle of the street, arms wide open” (129–30). He is confident that the Word, in his hands, can be a powerful and productive Act, capable of transforming solitude into solidarity: “The power to lessen the distance between faces riddled with pain comes from the magic of the poet, at once solitary being and witness. Who ever claimed that language is merely an archaic weapon?” (284). It is from this perspective that the I-poet engages with the “We”—a “We” he characterizes as “[a]n infinity of human beings, snatched by hostile forces ... having become like stones fallen into the depths of a hole from which one can never crawl out” (184). While at times, in frustration, he condemns these silent and silenced victims as so many “voiceless stones” (214), he ultimately identifies with the members of this tormented community and, as such, is able to understand and sympathize with their paralysis. By consistently positing a “We” as opposed to a “They,” Frankétienne offers a possible response to the quandary of being—as a writer—both within and without the community whose story he tells.<sup>12</sup> And while he admits to his own limitations—“[his] inability to act” (47)—the I-poet is determined to help the “We” break free of “the mutism that grips us” (28). This, in fact, is the struggle at the heart of the narrative (not Vatel’s pursuit of Mac Abre). Indeed, if *Ultravocal* is “about” anyone or anything in particular it is this: the process of coming to language; the quest for a voice—written or spoken—with which to craft a productive individual identity and participate in a collective struggle.

The poet’s intention to embrace a new and powerful language to which all might have access is not only announced explicitly, but also implicitly communicated in the passage cited above by the juxtaposition of such cerebral notions as the “poetic season” and the “new language” with

practical conditions of quotidian survival. Aesthetic inspiration and an agricultural real function in tandem, such that the “ambiguous relationship between literature and bread”—or, again, “the exact moment when a single word can be worth more than a field of wheat” (*Ultravocal* 38–39)—actually become envisageable, without Frankétienne having to resort to superficial constructions of the folk.<sup>13</sup> That said, the voice—the style—with which the “I” of *Ultravocal* produces the narrative recalls that of the Creole storyteller, as described by Chamoiseau and Confiant in *Lettres créoles*. They explain: “[The storyteller’s] narration is whirling, rapid, sometimes even hypnotic, broken into long humoristic, erotic, esoteric digressions. He wraps his sentences in the sound effects of ruptures and onomatopoeias—of incessant dialogue with his listeners” (59). They continue, “To hear an old Creole storyteller is often, for minutes on end, to topple over into the incomprehensible” (61). As “the artist of the cry” (35), the storyteller transforms the primal scream of the maroon, they argue, into more and less recognizable bits of language. In all of these respects we can certainly make the connection between the Creole folktale and the underlying aesthetic of *Ultravocal*. The theatrical, spectacular quality; the aimless, improvisatory feel and non-linear unfolding; the interpellations of the reader/listener all connect Frankétienne’s text to this originary by-product of plantation culture. Yet Frankétienne interprets (t)his role far less literally than do Chamoiseau and Confiant. That is, he at no point explicitly adopts the persona of the storyteller, nor does he make of this figure a character in his narrative (positioning himself or another character as note-taker/witness). Rather, he simply embodies the storyteller by conflating him with or translating him into the figure of the poet.

One might then read Frankétienne’s aesthetic as the configuration of a language whose uncompromising opacity gestures toward the destabilizing power of the “original” Creole utterance—or cry—within the ambivalent linguistic context of the plantation described by Glissant:

A basic element is thus introduced within the Creole phrase: speed. Not speed so much as sudden collision. Perhaps also the continuous unfolding that makes the sentence into a single, indivisible word. If the volume of sound thus transmits the meaning of the word, the suddenness or the interweaving of the sounds often organizes the meaning of the speech. Here again, there is specificity of use: the white masters ... do not have access ... to this “dysfunctional” usage of language ... [T]he meaning of the phrase is, to a certain extent, concealed by this accelerated non-sense in which sounds just bounce along. But this non-sense carries the true meaning, which escapes the ear of the master. Creole is, at its origins, like a sort of pact; secret in the very public-ness of its cry. (*Discours* 407)

In the case of Frankétienne's writing, language certainly performs without informing; and its unanswered interrogations, ruptures, and unresolved contradictions produce a French that is literally illegible—unreadable—by the privileged and empowered global literate (“masters” of all nations and colors). It thus promotes a Rancierean ethos that refuses the ostensible inequality of those who possess and those who do possess knowledge. It is a language fabricated by Frankétienne—a language that has never before been uttered. It refuses the satisfaction of decoding or understanding, allowing only for an experiential contact with the text that relies on the embracing of language as “still primarily ... a sound to be understood rather than as a symbol of meaning” (Deren 225). It pulls the rug out from underneath those who have an expectation of transparency and comprehension. As Figolé affirms, Frankétienne's writing style presents “[o]nly signs, interpretations, suggested visions, intelligent understandings that are sufficient to themselves without any need for overly precise, overly knowledgeable explanations—a reality that shatters the comfort, the tranquility of the Known, the conventions of the Quotidian” (*Vœu de voyage* 15). In this manner, Frankétienne takes a step towards democratizing the written, rendering his literature as uncomfortable for the North American theorist as the written word is always for the non-reading subaltern.

\* \* \*

Frankétienne's third novel-spiral, *Les Affres d'un défi*, is arguably an extended exploration of this tension between the written and the oral, the elite and the folk, both in the circumstances of its conception and in its execution. As I have noted above, there exists an initial, if not to say “original,” iteration of *Les Affres d'un défi*. While *Affres* is not a simple translation of *Dézafi*, it is certainly inspired by this first text and, as such, the circumstances of the latter work's production provide a useful context in which to consider the French rewriting. The first novel ever to have been written entirely in Haitian Creole, *Dézafi* represents a *de facto* challenge to dismissals of the literary viability of Haiti's popular idiom—of the latter's capacity to sustain narrative or express abstract ideas. The very fact of writing this Creole text implicitly reveals, moreover, Frankétienne's frustration with the inaccessibility of his literary/literate endeavors vis-à-vis the majority non-reading Haitian collective to which he is so attached and in which he is so determinedly embedded. But of course while *Dézafi* offers an extraordinary refutation of the notion that

Creole is somehow aesthetically insufficient, it is still a literary—a written—text, and so contained (if not to say “trapped”) within the parameters of elite—if atypical—discourse. Indeed, given the fact of the relative inaccessibility of the written to the vast majority of the Haitian underclass—the fact that Haiti remains a country in which the rate of illiteracy hovers around 50 percent<sup>14</sup>—one might feel compelled to question how Frankétienne reconciles his avowed popular intent with the production of a work whose complexity renders it nearly impenetrable to even the perfectly literate.

The problem of popular disenfranchisement with respect to literacy and literature is in fact central to *Les Affres d'un défi*. That is, the absence of expressive vehicles for subaltern discourse is looked at from multiple perspectives throughout. The unfortunate Rita provides a striking example of Frankétienne's engagement with such issues. To begin with, Rita is, by virtue of her social class, a silent and silenced being. The “Yes, dear Uncle” that constitutes the only form of verbal expression she is permitted or permits herself as a servant, her unflinching submission to Gédéon's insults, orders, and abusive tirades, shouted and spewed without provocation, confirm the near-absolute suppression of her voice. The stifling of Rita's access to self-expression is not only a consequence of Gédéon's cruelty, but also stems, if less directly so, from her inability to read and the sense of inadequacy she feels as a result. In a manifestation of profound sympathy for Rita's situation, Frankétienne explores the emotional and psychological impact of illiteracy in a particularly moving passage:

Rita watches kids her age playing in the middle of the road. Desperate longing. Her heartbeat accelerates. Suddenly bursting from the depths of her consciousness, the image and voice of Gédéon surface. Reprimands. Insults. Stiffening of her spirit. Fear. Bitterness. Grief. She holds back her tears with difficulty. Sometimes Rita looks at the placards, the signs that abound in the streets. Not knowing how to read, she doesn't understand. She doesn't understand anything. The letters of the alphabet, like so many flies, ants, mosquitos, dragonflies, gnats, mayflies, butterflies, snakes, lizards, hummingbirds, stalks of sugarcane, palm fronds, feathers intertwine in a sparkling dance that Rita never manages to interpret. Yet every time she looks at these sorts of signs, she shivers from head to toe, transported to a faraway place, to the frontiers of the unknown. Then she collapses, plunges into the depths of the sea, where she encounters the Mistress-of-the-Waters. O beautiful Siren! Lift me onto your back.

The ignorant illiterate cannot enter into my kingdom ...

I'm thirsty for enlightenment. I beg you, O Siren, to bring me to your kingdom of light. Take my hand, I beg of you, beautiful Siren!

Learn how to draw *vêvê*. Learn how to write. Then I'll lift you onto my back. I'll bring you to my golden palace of light. (37–38)

Rita's experience of illiteracy is thus communicated from the inside out, as it were. That is, rather than offer elite narrative reflections on the social injustice underlying illiteracy, Frankétienne presents subaltern intellectual dispossession in the language of Haitian folk reality. The passage evokes components of the real (insects, plants, animals) and of the marvelous (vodou, water spirits) that are constitutive of Haiti's popular culture and to which Rita can immediately relate. Moreover, the way physical markers of the written appear to the illiterate Rita parallels, or at least suggests, how Frankétienne's texts might appear to his literate reader. In this passage and in the wider literary project, then, Frankétienne acknowledges the uncomfortable position of incomprehension while affirming the potential experiential value of the text as, ultimately, an art-object. This emphasis on the visual aspect of language—on words as emotion-inspiring or god-summoning objects rather than transparent vehicles for signification—proposes a means of fully experiencing the written while preserving its opacity.

*Les Affres d'un défi* relies heavily on the visual presentation of the word as part of an overall performance of language. The formal singularity of the novel-spiral is apparent from a mere glance through the text. The reader is struck immediately by the typographical diversity—the vacillation between italicized, bold, and standard fonts by which the text is arbitrarily divided into “scenes” of varying length. The italicized passages suggest lyricism, those in bold seem to scream. The passages in standard typeface promise relative narrative calm, and the abundant blank spaces offer brief moments of visual reprieve from the frenzy of the ensemble. The impact of these variations in typeface is intensified by the very distribution of words on the page. Sentences are arranged haphazardly—in dense blocks without punctuation or in mini-stanzas, with phrases separated word to word by a series of solidi (/). Paragraphs range from the length of a single sentence to several pages. The overall effect is the production of a sort of literary collage—a textual puzzle that calls for the reader to assemble and disassemble the packets of text as s/he sees fit.

This implicit call for the reader's engagement in the production of meaning presupposes a certain resistance on the part of the text and entails the reader's eventual coming to terms with what the story simply will not tell. The non-native reader in particular must forego his or her expectations of transparency, faced with a narrative so integrally rooted in a specifically Haitian reality. Aside from the metaphors of the zombie and the cockfighting ring that constitute the very foundations of the

narrative, there are countless proverbial and pseudo-proverbial expressions distributed throughout *Les Affres d'un défi* that, while intuitively graspable by the Haitian reader, remain more or less opaque to the foreign or non-Creolophone reader. As Marie-Michèle Amédée Volcy quite helpfully articulates in her exceptional analysis of Frankétienne's use of proverbs in *Dézafi*, the non-Haitian reader is largely at a loss when it comes to recognizing and deciphering the multiple "proverbial elements that reappear like leitmotifs and punctuate the entire text with stylistic signals, calling to the [Haitian] reader and bringing him to interpret the tale on a deeper level than its apparent content" (115). Though less prevalent than in the Creole text, the proverbial has a marked presence in *Les Affres d'un défi* as well—a presence that even the uninitiated francophone reader cannot help but notice. Indeed, the francophone reader will likely recognize these textual moments by their aphoristic structure,<sup>15</sup> but this awareness comes with a suspicion that there exists an indigenous resonance to which s/he does not have access. The nagging feeling produced by these enigmatic bits of text serves ultimately to make the reader conscious of the extent to which the text presents him or her with its impenetrability.

Perhaps more significant, though, than the opacity created by the narrative's "Haitianness" are the peculiarities produced within the language vis-à-vis its "normal" function—the agrammaticalities, neologisms, and unresolved stylistic-semantic tensions that are present throughout the novel-spiral. *Les Affres d'un défi* is spattered, for example, with nominal phrases—abrupt bits of sentences that seem to be constantly crashing into and overlapping with one another, neutral and static enunciations that offer so many waves of meaning breaking on the reader's consciousness:

Twisting of the ankle/ Disarticulation of the hips/ Nothing but detours and straddling for the intertwining and the encounter/ Unimaginable violence/ Avalanche of stones/ Barking of dogs/ Hurricane of birds' feet/ Eyes gouged out/ Combs bloodied/ Tramlings/ Dislocation of the shoulders/ Base of bottles cracked into latticework massacring the thighs and buttocks/ (20–21)

On a formal level, such passages communicate a phlegmatic and almost indifferent tone, yet their content is disconcertingly violent. Non-narrative and uncontextualized in time and space, these raw non-sentences leave the reader with the impression of leaning over into an abyss wherein words circulate without order—a sort of disorienting matrix in which meaning is secondary to the simple fact of language. Such narrative instances speak also to the overall tension evoked by the form of the spiral. Again, *Les Affres d'un défi* presents numerous passages that, while



composed exclusively of verb phrases, manage to remain profoundly stationary. The following passage appears in the first pages of the text:

Sleep in the hope that the light will drain away our nocturnal anxieties. Awaken far from dreams unblocked, the body rendered leprous in its solitude. Look at the immensity of unsurveyed deserts. Wander across the furnishings of desires. Shake heaven and earth until the bleeding of stars and stones. Stuff ourselves with food. Lick with appetite. Palpate with prudence. Blow on the burning pieces. Fall/Unfall. Flee as quickly as possible. Starve for days on end. Speak constantly. Go nuts. Have one's tongue weighed down or cut up into a thousand pieces. Be sated. Have one's guts knotted in pain. Feel desperately thirsty. Primp oneself like a peacock. Go to bed in a bad mood. Get up euphorically. Laugh heartily. Walk about naked or covered in rags. Lose oneself in crazy love affairs. Get caught up in death. But who among us is really alive? Honestly, who? (1–2)

While the unbridled accumulation of verbs creates an effect of constant and hurried movement, the incantatory quality of the passage is paralyzingly redundant. The monotonous rhythm of this series of infinitives effectively fixes the text in an immobilizing uniformity. Ceaselessly looping back on itself, the passage succeeds in conveying a sense of the collective's feelings of paralysis and frustration far better than would an explicit description or explanation. The rhetorical questions that conclude the passage reiterate the point, implying that to live—to “really live”—demands more than wishful thinking or unmeditated action. This is a point that is made explicitly elsewhere in the narrative in passages that diegetically convey this tension between immobility and movement—situations in which the first-person narrator admits, “we find ourselves in motion without actually moving anywhere” (7). At the same time, of course, these moments of Verb-al excess also tap into Frankétienne's aesthetics of the expansive. Considered, for example, from a Deleuzian perspective, Frankétienne's intermittent infinitive syntagms reflect a pure formal display, unrooted in any fixed geographical or signifying context. Deleuze writes, in *Logic of Sense*: “The Verb is the univocity of language, in the form of an undetermined infinitive, without person, without present, without any diversity of voice. It is poetry itself. As it expresses in language all events in one, the infinitive verb expresses the event of language” (185). Indeed, through his at once stultifying and arresting word pile-ups, Frankétienne asks his reader to take note of the poetry in his prose—to live language as an event, if only during the impatient, perhaps even frustrated second or two it takes for a pair of eyes to move across the page. Indeed, inasmuch as these scriptural events manage to suspend, or merely slow down the movement of the reader's gaze, the poetic and its tensions are invoked. They are

instances of what Gallagher, in another context, has described as

the suspension of the linear or prosaic fragmentation of speech (and therefore consciousness) in time, trying, through rhythm, metre, assonance, rhyme, enjambment, or, later, the space of the page, to keep open the possibility of a discrepancy between the semantic and the syntactic lines, and thus to resist passage, to hold back, to construct the structures of a duration. (Gallagher 43)

Frankétienne's poetic intention manifests also in the persistent recurrence of a wide range of phrases or fragments throughout the narrative. In addition to the abovementioned "A tangle of tree branches at the very back of an old courtyard, rarely frequented by human beings," and "on which foot to enter into the dance," *Les Affres d'un défi* features at least a dozen other such refrains. Like the curves of the spiral, these textual fragments are presented slightly differently with each repetition. More than leitmotifs, these morsels establish a sort of anchoring litany at the heart of the narration, and set the stage for such accelerated refrains as in the below passage where the monotone chant of the zombies is transcribed:

Swarmings in the swamp mud ahn-hahn avocado season ahn-hahn mango season ahn-hahn maize season ahn-hahn millet season ahn-hahn sugarcane season ahn-hahn lassoing season ahn-hahn dead-season ahn-hahn bodies stretched out on a bed of barbed wire ahn-hahn banknotes for ass-wiping ahn-hahn eclitorizing buggery ahn-hahn the quavering of voices at dawn ahn-hahn rain mud dust ahn-hahn the cycle of hunger ahn-hahn the ordeal and its meanderings ahn-hahn the ordeal and its vertigo ahn-hahn the ordeal of waiting ahn-hahn chained up chests the heart empties ahn-hahn mothers clutch their bellies scattering solitude tears and let the time of the lacigoave continue so that our children forget neither the legend of the dead nor the pain of the living marked by grieving ahn-hahn ahn-hahn ahn-hahn. (179)

Devoid of almost all punctuation and a traditional grammatical infrastructure, passages such as these plunge the reader directly into a symphonic whirlwind of images and sounds, elevating the text to an orchestral level. Repeated, with a difference, several times over the course of the narrative, this Spiralist choir's zombie song marries frenzied and violent imagery with an almost serene enumerative quality, once again confirming the essential tension underlying Frankétienne's textual universe. Syntactically linear but narratively static, all of the passages cited above in fact echo the dialectic of immobility and movement implicit in the zombie metaphor. As Chamoiseau and Confiant comment in their reflections on *Dézafi*,

[Z]ombification is depicted by the mere narrative technique of the author. It is the mode of construction of the text, the tormented alternation of isotopies, the repetition of the same stylistic conceits that creates the atmos-

phere of depersonalization and zombification ... It isn't what's signified in the text that is the key, but rather its signifier ... Or, more precisely, the signified in *Dézafi* is implicit in its formal structure. (180–81)

This “more precisely” is crucial to appreciating Frankétienne’s French text as well. For it is the key to understanding the author’s practice of showing and telling his approach to the written—in *Les Affres d’un défi* and elsewhere. As has been discussed above, zombification takes on many forms; it is a stand-in for any and all forms of sustained constraint to individual liberty. That is, in addition to the sort of literal, soul-stealing subjugation perpetrated by Saintil and Zofer, there is an entire range of symbolic zombifications at work in the novel-spiral, including (but hardly limited to) illiteracy, starvation, unemployment, censorship, and dispossession. But perhaps the most persistent form of repression and disempowerment to which the “We” is subjected concerns—just as in *Ultravocal* and, less explicitly, in *Mûr à crever*—the possibility of assuming a voice, both individual and collective, to the extent to which to lament one’s condition, protest an injustice, or in any other way challenge the status quo are all instances of self-expression (writing, the cry, writing the cry) that might provoke the wrath of the powers-that-be for whom “the most serious crime is indeed that of speech!” (Saint-Gérard 72).<sup>16</sup> Indeed, we are well aware of why both Clodonis and Jérôme are in the situations they are in.

There is, in effect, a sustained discourse at the heart of *Les Affres d’un défi* concerning the consequences of speech. Throughout the text, the unidentified first-person-plural narrator describes sufferings imposed on those who dare to speak up or out—“They have ripped out, cut, savagely mutilated indiscreet tongues. Deep in our throats stopped up by fear, the blockage of words” (57)—and the text is peppered with such phrases as “we stay quiet” (7), “we have learned silence” (107), and “we eat the essential parts of our words” (156)—statements that emphasize the self-censoring tactics adopted by the community. These allusions to ideas formulated but never expressed—to words physically prevented from being articulated—are raised repeatedly in *Les Affres d’un défi*, heightening the oppressiveness of the universe it describes. There are in fact countless variations on this reference to obligatorily suppressed discourse. Early in the text, for example, “Cuts on the tongue. Unarticulated cries deep in the throat” (19) and then, some pages later, “The forbidden words build up deep in the throat” (61). Again and again, it is made clear that the consequences of expressing oneself freely are dramatic and devastatingly physical: “To prevent us from speaking, they

plan to inject a poison whose effect would be to make our tongues heavy” (113), and, “The flames of poison burn indiscreet tongues,” and again, “They locked our mouths shut, after having knotted our tongues” (164). Given this, it is unsurprising that the zombie’s awakening at the novel’s conclusion is a sustained and inspiring cry of liberation. I would not presume to better describe the significance of this optimism-filled rebirth to language than Jean-Claude Figolé has done in his description of *Dézafi* in *Vœu de voyage*:

In this respect, the abortive enterprise of Manuel and Hilarion leads to Klodonis in the eruption of a cry of consciousness. Deliverance for the zombies is an explosion of language. They cry out their brand new freedom to the point of excessive clamor. Their throats swell with all the cries that had been held back and that, pitifully, escaped from their mouths in ahnhahns of approval. Their freedom celebrates itself in a resounding clamor so that all can hear. And from that freedom emerges, for the first time, the unity of language. Which is, without a doubt, the mark of a new poetics. That of successful liberation. The silence of the zombies reveals my own silence. Doubly. Silence imposed by the life of my land. Silence imposed by a foreign language. So foreign that I had to prove that the language of my land could also lay claim to the domain of the written. (87–88)

## NOTES

1 *Discours* 406.

2 Glissant, “Aimé Césaire” 45.

3 Rachel Douglas argues against reading an oral dimension into Frankétienne’s writings, maintaining that because of his fundamental belief in the “urgent necessity” of literacy for all Haitians, he “never refers to orality in his work, nor does he celebrate oral culture” (18). Douglas is quite right to point out Frankétienne’s refusal of potentially dangerous folklorizations of the oral *à la* “Papa Doc” Duvalier, and to note his divergence from works that explicitly “celebrate orality, in the manner of, say, *Le Quatrième siècle* and *Texaco*” (96). It is difficult to deny, however, the extent to which Frankétienne very pointedly relies on a particular stylistic orality in his prose, as he summons the reader in *Ultravocal*: “If you are skeptical / just apply your ear to the page you’re reading / and hear my voice” (277).

4 “The guttural and trembling voice of the orating godfather fills the hall with a false eloquence. Moldy discourse. The smell of mothballs” (180).

5 Glissant’s theory of alienation describes an “attempted resolution of the contradictions, never resolved, between that which one is and that which one believes oneself to be” (*Discours* 628–29). Although explicitly anchored in the Martinican context, this theory certainly parallels, if not borrows from, Haitian anthropologist Jean Price-Mars’s application of the concept of *bovarysme*—the escapist assimilationist fantasies of Haiti’s elite class.

6 “Sister Anne  
my sister Anne  
For years now  
I see nothing but dust

On the outdated horizon  
 Arid quest that I've no chance of abandoning  
 Wrinkled face, cracked as a stone  
 At the end of the once-sacred road  
 The hourly travails  
 of the blasphematory hoofs  
 My ancient hopes massacred by the ardor of the solar sex,  
 All the flesh of summer uprisen, oh pitiless choir fable of my memory."

7 "Table bear's bed. Untying of the number eight. Zero rebecome. Subtle game. Shreds of memories. The tick-tock of the pendulum drives its nails into the brain. A carpenter splits the planks for the funeral dance. Ardor. Lightenly the lightning. I swallow a pitcher of water at the opening of the cave obligatory exercise of initiation hole inside the descent into the night without a shield my dementia lie down hazy lead out of which one hears the wails violence and burning crazy knife split open cranium the reddish glow of blood at dusk I invoke my christ I offer him a cup of gold shared flesh covered shadow at the emergence of islands and I link the ends of words by which one returns suddenly to life nape of the wave a crust on the teeth the straddling of the mountain crouched at the flanks of the sky bodies of wind war flute in bed begins the misadventure of the false virgin curve in the back rope around the neck the broken horn oh complicit nature I hang onto the racing wheel in blind combat zaka anger all around the sphere the bone crumbles in a furtive slide where the light makes signs against the evil stones swell and roll I disdainfully dig out my lacigouave mysteries. Between two hiccups, reminiscence or haunting, I scream.

"Help me madness my misery my loves of yesteryear  
 "I capsiz with the soul of my dog!"

8 It is certainly telling, as Jean Khalfa and Jérôme Game put forward in their discussion of *Le Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*, that Aimé Césaire's revolutionary poetics suggest a "spiral motion" crafted via "processes of increasing intensities" (44). Noting the structural affinities between the spiral and the volcano, the authors point out Césaire's evocation of volcanoes ready to explode as linked to a universalist, life-affirming cry—"an imperious assertion of life" (47).

9 *Compère Général Soleil* (1955), *Les Arbres musiciens* (1957), *L'Espace d'un cillement* (1959); although only Alexis's first novel was published before Duvalier's election in 1957, the latter two precede his seizing and consolidation of absolute power.

10 The *vêvê* is a religious symbol that represents and calls for the *lwa* (deities) during vodou rituals. Maximilien Laroche details their performative function as follows: "One notes that distances are abolished as much as possible. Distance between the sign and the referent or object, distance between the narrator and the narrated being, distance, finally between speaker and interlocutor ... The *vêvê* ... is a practical speech element, efficient and thereby collective, communal, implying the identification of he who speaks, writes, draws and he in whose name this is done; uniting, moreover, by the performance of this transaction the identities of he who speaks and he who is called out to ... The dynamic writings seem to address merely the eye, but really they allow one to see and to feel by the forms, moments, gestures, and actions they demand" (*Double scène* 106).

11 Chamoiseau and Confiant laud Frankétienne's concerted efforts to maintain the oral dimension of the work he is compelled to write down: "Frankétienne goes deep into the most magmatic elements of language; and because his people does not yet know how to read, because his mother tongue, Creole, is still in limbo with respect to the written, he etches his words onto records and cassettes, with his own voice ... in order to go directly to the most extreme modernity" (*Lettres créoles* 181–82).

12 This perspective is reminiscent of Barbadian poet Kamau Brathwaite's efforts to subsume the poet's personal experience in a larger epic formulation. He practices an aesthetic of "the self without ego, without I, without arrogance" in order to express an awareness and understanding of community, of cultural wholeness, of the place of the individual within the tribe (33–34).

13 Frankétienne's words here call to mind similar sentiments expressed by Frantz Fanon, who proclaims in *Les Damnés de la terre*, "The people ... adopt global perspectives from the outset. Land and bread: what must be done in order to procure land and bread?" (39). Such assertions connect directly, of course, to Haiti's revolutionary origins, as for Fanon "it is clear that in colonized countries only the peasants are revolutionary. They have nothing to lose and everything to gain" (46). Indeed, returning once again to the figure of the zombie discussed in Part II of this study, it is not a far leap from Fanon's degraded but still struggling colonized peasants to the living-dead of Frankétienne's *Affres*, to Fignolé's revolutionary band of zombies in *Aube Tranquille*, or even to the possibly massacred, undead Pedro and Adèle. It is, then, I would argue, largely through the narrativization of this liminal creature from Haitian folklore that each of the Spiralists more or less insistently manipulates and cosmopolitanizes the modernist thematics implicit in revolutionary discourse.

14 A clear and unbiased assessment of Haiti's linguistic ambivalence can be found in the country study conducted by the United States Library of Congress, <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/frd/cs/htoc.html>, "The Language Question: French and Creole" (under chapter 7, "Haiti: The Society and its Environment") (accessed 1 May 2010).

15 "Borrowing from Greimas," explains Volcy, "we can say that the proverb is a closed binary structure, complete unto itself—phrase, independent proposition, with or without verb in the indicatif or imperative present form, ahistorical or pan-historical time of eternal truths—that reflects, in accordance with the canon of classical art, antithesis or symmetry" (117).

16 Saint-Gérard makes this comment with respect to the misuse of power by vodou priests, and the collusion between these spiritual leaders and political figures to distract and thus disempower Haiti's citizens. The entirety of his statement reads as follows: "[Z]ombification sanctions all crimes against society, more specifically those secret manipulations of vodou society, and it just so happens that the most serious crime is indeed that of speech! Outside of myth and the imaginary, the political works its way in through the interstices of vodou to rationalize the eccentricities of a nearly two-hundred year-old, retrograde dictatorship. Functioning as a safety valve, vodou thus canalizes social discontent via the pseudo-rivalries of individuals deprived of their basic right to speech. That is why the vodou priests want to pervert the vodou religion, to make it into an institution that would regulate so-called anti-social activity by fabricating zombies, 'robots without will' who would then be used as slaves" (72).

## Framing the Folk

### *Figolé*

*The fantastic ... is the inverse side of reason's orthodoxy. It reveals reason and reality to be arbitrary, shifting constructs, and thereby scrutinizes the category of the "real." Contradictions surface and are held antinomically in the fantastic text, as reason is made to confront all that it traditionally refuses to encounter. The structure of the fantastic narrative is one founded upon contradictions.*

—Rosemary Jackson<sup>1</sup>

The stylistic choices Figolé makes in his prose fiction works might certainly be considered a direct response to the traumatic silencing he evokes in his description of Frankétienne's fiction. Similarly to Frankétienne, Figolé addresses the perceived opposition of the spoken and the written word, and his narratives reflect a decided discomfort with, or at the very least an implicit challenge to, the privilege and privileging of the scribal. Both *Les Possédés de la pleine lune* and *Aube Tranquille* take up this issue of the ostensibly fundamental linkage between writing and silence through the almost excessive orality of the textual worlds they narrate. In both works, the strands of multiple narratives are woven together by a host of often frenetically verbal participants in the various dramas being played out in their pages. Challenging his readers' expectations for coherent revelations from a centralized narrative authority, Figolé more and less directly references a folk tradition in ways that destabilize parameters of literature and productively engage with conventions of orality.

*Les Possédés de la pleine lune* explicitly calls upon the Caribbean/Haitian folk tradition throughout the narrative. The explicitly oral is directly put forward in the transcription of Agénor's courtship tale—the fable of two breasts taught the meaning of existence by the mouth of an ardent suitor, in the inclusion of verse after verse of Violetta's never-ending love song to the *savale*, or in the insertion of Brother Paul's apocalyptic couplets into the story. Elsewhere, passages that in a more strictly ordered, literary context would be considered “digressions” take up significant portions of the narrative—instances in which some small thing “distracts” from the “main” story and leads to a teasing out of a

tangentially related element thereof. In recounting the basic events of the loss of his eye, for example, Agénor indulges in a fairly lengthy narrative riff regarding the noise made by the fusing of his eyelids:

Pushing them irresistibly toward one another, [the pouch of water that had invaded the entire right part of his face] fused [his eyelids] together with an explosive noise that could be heard beyond the seas in the great city of Camaguey on the island of Cuba, hastily, a sergeant-major-general-president named Batista flew out of bed, without his underpants, taking on faith a voluptuous mistress, a priestess of Haitian origin, servant of the *lwa* of Guinea, that the revolution had broken out in the region of Santiago, so I've heard, the sergeant-major ran in one direction, the general-president in the other, experiencing for the first time in their gutless lives the terror of being captured, thrown into a fetid hole, nibbled on by rats and by dampness, of having their fingernails ripped out, their feet burned, their balls crushed between two planks, exposed to public condemnation, they ran in one direction, they ran in the other and I never knew in which country they finally ended up. Agénor believed he saw the sergeant-major-general-president parading along the beach where Raoul ... was fermenting, with his three quarters in a box while his one quarter, so much manure spread in the sand, nourished the fantasies of crabs ... One lovely morning, Agé changed his mind. The eye, old man among old men, had actually left for Cuba or for Santo Domingo to oversee the sugarcane harvest in the squalid bateys. Used to finding his way around the pestilential swamps, the eye would easily tolerate, wherever else in the world, the worst conditions of existence. *Haitiano maldito!* (47–49)

Agénor's dramatic characterization of the explosive sound produced by his loss of an eye turns into a colorful snowball of a description that moves far beyond any initial informative intent with respect to the primary intrigue. What should be noted here, however, is that despite the ludic and preposterous tone, this seemingly frivolous passage touches upon critical elements of transnational Caribbean social realities. The mention of the dictator Batista, of the various tortures to which political prisoners—like Raoul—are subjected, and of the horrific abuse of human rights in the canefields of the Dominican Republic are treated lightly, yes, but are presented in great detail nonetheless. Figiolé's attention to such contemporary Haitian struggles exemplifies, I would argue, his commitment to an oral perspective, in which discourses of subversion are camouflaged by the playful stylistics of a folk aesthetic. Figiolé's denunciation of totalitarianism through his portrayal of the wholly fantastic seven-headed beast, his tragicomic portrayal of Raoul's brutal murder at the hands of government officials, and his recounting of the repressive events precipitated by the impossible fertility of Sò Gène's mule cannot simply be classified as so many instances of narrative subterfuge dictated by the constrained circumstances of literary production. For *Les Possédés*



*de la pleine lune* was published well after the fall of the Duvalier dynasty. Rather, Fignolé offers these scenarios in his fiction to exemplify the ways in which the folk contends with the political—how non-literate creativity addresses “the concrete qualities of the here and now, and ... the practicalities and problems faced daily in the village or small-community context” (Abrahams xix).

Perhaps even more explicitly oral than such playfully subversive digressive moments is the fact that the central narrative of Agénor’s violent relationship and Violetta’s love affair with an enchanted fish is in fact a spiralic iteration of a popular Creole folktale, “Tezin Nan Dlo.” The tale itself exists in several variants, as do all oral tales, making Fignolé’s literary treatment of the story perfectly “legitimate” from the perspective of a folk ethic. In the well-known story, a beautiful young girl falls in love with a magical man-fish who lives in the river where she collects water for her family. She goes once a day to the riverbed, where she summons her lover with a song: “Tezin nan dlo, bon zami mwen, Tezin nan dlo ... ” When her father discovers their relationship, as a result of her spying brother’s betrayal, he kills the fish and serves him to the family for dinner. The young girl realizes what her father has done without actually witnessing the murder, as three drops of blood appear on her breast at the time of her beloved’s death. She weeps inconsolably, so much so that the ground turns to mud at her feet. She slowly sinks down into the earth, singing through her tears, until she is swallowed up entirely, never to be seen by her family again. It is said that on the nights of the full moon, her love song can be heard along the banks of the river. Fignolé appropriates and reconfigures bits and pieces of this story—he traces a few coils of its spiral—to create the multiple narratives of *Possédés*. If the basic frame is there, the players are slightly altered—with Agénor playing the role of the murderous father and the entirety of Les Abricots that of the meddling brother. Much as in *Les Affres d’un défi*, then, the “basic narrative thread” of Fignolé’s work is perturbed by the presence of overlapping stories that never quite relinquish narrative precedence to the ostensibly principal plotline, a configurative choice that, Fignolé affirms, is also part of a Haitian storytelling ethos. He explains in an interview:

Specifically Haitian elements enter into the technique of the story ... The technique consists of taking a story (the vengeance of Agénor in my book) and of unfolding other stories (the love story of Agénor and Saintmilia, of Violetta and the fish, etc.) around this story. All of these stories mix together, contradicting and recontracting each other. (Magnier 46)

Fignolé thus fractures the original tale, expanding it from the drama of

a single family to implicate a wider community and its struggles. By so departing from the traditional parameters of the tale, Figiolé clearly illustrates the potential fecundity of the Creole folk—the oral—within the sphere of the francophone written. He offers a means by which to dynamize the folktale—to overcome its “inadequacies” and to “extend the tale into narrative fiction” without “falling into the trap of reductionist universal humanism” (Laroche, “Literature” 344). In other words, *Possédés* exemplifies the generative capacity of the folktale, proposing a possibility for engagement beyond the (self-)limitations of the oral tale lamented by Glissant. The overlapping, intertwining elements of the multiple stories told in *Les Possédés de la pleine lune* ultimately paint a picture that references both the folk universe of Haiti’s rural population and the equally colorful Christ narrative of Judeo-Christian theology. On the one hand, Figiolé is clearly inspired by the Creole folktale outlined above. On the other, his narrative unquestionably makes allusions to Christ and the Passion story: like the apostles, Agénor is a fisherman, and the *savale* plays on the fact that Jesus is symbolized as a fish; there is the evocation of one or the other’s (Agénor or the *savale*, it is never clear) stumbling walk toward death, encumbered by the burden on his back (referred to at one point a “bundle of dead wood” [210]); there is the ridicule Agénor faces from a community that has more or less cast him out; there is the stab wound to his side; there is Violetta’s and Saintmilia’s conflating of the attributes of Mary Magdalene and the Virgin Mary, and Louiortesse’s Judas-like role in the narrative, etc. The connections to both mythmaking sources—Western Christianity and Haitian popular culture—are of course imperfect. However, Figiolé clearly draws on key elements from each tradition such that a productive tension is maintained between an inward-facing, specifically Haitian and an outward-reaching Western cultural context.

Overarching the specific content of the stories being told in *Possédés* is the basic positioning of this written narrative within the context of the oral. This oral frame is explicitly announced by Figiolé’s insertion of the phrase “Cric! Crac!” at the beginning of the narrative and, elsewhere, the well-known call-and-response opening to any Haitian storytelling ritual. Through the deployment of this highly evocative syntagm, Figiolé unambiguously positions his written text in the nocturnal oral world of the storyteller, a world that necessarily presents a certain opacity to the non-Haitian, literate reader. From the outset, then, Figiolé situates his text in a context that is intrinsically subversive vis-à-vis a scribal narrative order. Indeed, he effectively announces that disorder—

“enchantment,” “constellations of stories and songs” (*Possédés* 12)—will provide the foundations of this story. Figolé’s emphasis on or centralizing of the storyteller and, through this figure, the Caribbean oral universe as a whole, is a project taken on by other regional writers, of course. With *Au temps de l’Antan* (1988), for example, self-proclaimed Creolist Patrick Chamoiseau announces his objective, in his prefatory instructions to the reader, to fully investigate an aesthetics of orality within the frame of his literary text—to mobilize the strategic stylistics of the oral folktale while advancing precise scriptural objectives. He adopts this mediate position through the concerted channeling of the figure of the Creole storyteller. Chamoiseau, like his co-manifestants Confiant and Bernabé, identifies the storyteller as the insufficiently acknowledged link between a scribal present and oral past in the Caribbean.

For the Creolists, the present-day Caribbean writer is a direct descendant of this plantation narrator and therefore must endeavor to integrate the storyteller and his practice into contemporary prose fiction. It is in this spirit that Chamoiseau overtly places the storyteller front and center of so many of his novels. Figolé similarly acknowledges the centrality of this figure of orality to a Caribbean storytelling tradition in *Possédés*, but situates his own narrative stance between that of those postmodern, postcolonial writers “who deliberately eschew a single, coherent, and omniscient narrator in favor of multiple, sometimes dissonant voices” and the “psychological and contextual coherence” (Seifert 214) of the storyteller as configured by Chamoiseau and others. More specifically, the explicit storytelling role in *Possédés* is occupied by a character “named” Grandmother, female avatar of the male storyteller so prized by the Creolists. Equally resonant within a Caribbean folk tradition, from Simon Schwarz-Bart and Ina Césaire to Dany Laferrière, the uber-maternal figure of the grandmother inherently evokes the persistence of the oral alongside and within a literate world. Unlike the Creolist storyteller, rendered all but obsolete by the dismantling of the plantation social economy, the grandmother carries out her cultural “responsibilities” in any and all social, political, and economic climates. She and the writer thus exist in a relationship of iteration rather than filiation. Figolé makes of her his storytelling partner, his correspondent, his narrative peer. In addition, he communicates her timelessness and ubiquity by crafting her as a decidedly polyphonic being. One of a refracted clan of moon-and-water-women, Grandmother in *Possédés* takes on several identities—that of Violetta, of Rosita, and of Guerdie—one of Rosita’s

granddaughters. When too tired or too moved to continue a particular story, Grandmother temporarily passes along the word to one of her daughters, Aimable or Catherine. Telling the story thus becomes an extended-family affair.

Beyond the sporadic references to Grandmother, the overall phenomenon of narrative ambivalence in *Possédés* establishes the oral underpinnings of the novel-spiral. Maximilien Laroche's analysis of the narrative stance taken by the traditional Creole storyteller resonates helpfully with Fignolé's formal strategies in *Possédés*. Laroche notes that the "functions of the narrator are subverted in the Creole tale because the narrator can disappear, step aside, pick up his task or seem to abandon it, allowing the tale to be transformed into theater. For as soon as the narrator disappears, the characters take up all the space" (*Double scène* 42). In effect, Fignolé's characters—their voices—consistently "take up all the space" of the narrative, complementing, contradicting, and conflating with one another such that no single narrative voice is ever privileged over that of the collective. That is, Fignolé fully embraces the idea of the text as a relational event by staging polyphony—cacophony, even—throughout *Possédés*. Gravediggers, shopkeepers, washerwomen, cranky old men, among other barely identified narrating beings intervene throughout *Possédés*, and no single perspective is confirmed as more accurate than any other. Moreover, no quotation marks or other textual indicators help to organize the direct discourse—to separate it from the free indirect discourse of the more developed characters or from the ostensibly omniscient commentary of the third-person narrator. *Possédés* thus reflects an im-mediate investment in the non-hierarchical plurality of discourse—unstructured, untheorized, simply enacted.

Without intellectually drawing attention to this aesthetic approach, or indulging in any sort of avant-garde postmodernist posturing, Fignolé implements stylistic choices that are inherently Haitian and decidedly Spiralist. We need not look, then, to Bakhtin or the New Novelists to appreciate Fignolé's practice (of dialogism, polyglossia, heteroglossia, etc., etc.). Like the storyteller, Fignolé "facilitates a reappropriation of the folktale by the collectivity that, from the outset, provided its theme" (Laroche, *Double scène* 61). By placing diverse narrations of the same events on the lips of a multiplicity of characters, he embeds spiralic repetition-with-a-difference at the very heart of his narrative. Specific textual moments occur and recur in an altered form that reflects the no more or less authoritative perspective of any one of the multiple narrative beings. Agénor's death and Saintmilia's subsequent withdrawal from the world

result in a speculative and open-ended tale—a tale that avoids absolutes and is presented exclusively as a product of the popular imagination. No all-knowing extradiegetic authority ever imposes order on the narrative or edits the versions of events offered by the various characters involved.

This communal contribution to the narrative of *Possédés*, it should be noted, reflects not only Fig nolé’s commitment to polyphony, but also his readiness to include various other forms of popular expression in his literary text. Specifically, *Possédés* also incorporates the polyphonic production of rumor throughout the narrative, and so can be usefully examined in the light of Gayatri Spivak’s reflections with respect to rumor’s subversive value. As Spivak articulates in “Deconstructing Historiography,” rumor “belongs to every ‘reader’ or ‘transmitter.’ No one is its origin or source. This rumor is not error but primordially (originally) errant, always in circulation with no assignable source. This illegitimacy makes it accessible to insurgency” (Spivak, *Spivak Reader* 224). Whereas Spivak evokes this insurgent potential first in the context of subaltern anti-colonial activity, her subsequent application of these notions to “the revolutionary nonpossessive possibilities in the structure of writing in general” (226) is most valuable in reflecting on Fig nolé’s novel. For it is writing and the book—*his* writing, *his* book!—that Fig nolé subverts, both in the very formal dimensions of his text and, often simultaneously, by plainly voicing the unreliability of his narrative. The below passage, in which a chorus of villagers suddenly but seamlessly seize narrative control as they ponder the circumstances of Agénor’s death, illustrates all of the phenomena discussed above:

Agénor didn’t have any friends in Les Abricots. Has anyone known of any enemy brave enough to confront him head-on, even at night? Yes! The seven-headed beast. Agénor always boasted that he’d chased it away! I wouldn’t be surprised if it came back to avenge itself. Possible, Ti-Georges, but the village would have heard the violent noise of the beast and its breath would have swept away the houses. That’s true. But don’t forget! Agénor always brought up the fact that the monster’s eighty-four eyes regularly followed him during his nocturnal journeys. Hogwash, Andriess! Why was he always the only one to ever see them? Agénor was just bragging. Maybe the deed was done by Louiortesse. What? Edgard! Go on! That piece of garbage! I just don’t see how. I do! Ti Georges, vengeance increased his strength tenfold. Do you really think he had any left whatsoever after the thrashing Agénor gave him? And the coffee-drinkers burst into laughter upon calling to mind that memory. They asked questions. Their answers fused together in laughter and rum. Each one of them might have been a certainty. Not one of them was the truth. (9–10)

The sketchily identified interlocutors, the unexplained switching between voices, the constant posing of questions and out-of-hand rejection of

potential responses, the unabashed subjectivity, the gossipy tone, and the overall levity and unconcern with certainty unambiguously combine to undermine the possibility of a stable narrative truth. Such passages appear on nearly every page of *Possédés*, from the first to the last. They are interspersed with the equally destabilizing combinations of free indirect discourse and dialogue that mark the narration of Agénor, Saintmilia, and Louiortesse. Agénor's tendency to over-indulge in rum and his anguish faced with his ostracism by the community of Les Abricots leave his mental state fragile at best, and his obsession with the *savale* impacts Saintmilia's grasp of reality as well. The two are somehow constantly in dialogue with one another, both directly and obliquely, though Agénor is nearly always fishing in the swamps while Saintmilia remains cloistered at their home. Their conversations, which are completely unbound by the exigencies of time or space, amount to incessant disagreements about the veracity of Agénor's experiences with his fish nemesis, which of course obliges the reader to question the "reality" of Agénor's adventures as well. Indeed, Agénor tells and retells the story of his transformation into a Cyclops to Saintmilia and to anyone else who will listen, but his tale only becomes more, not less, confusing with each repetition. Saintmilia, virtually abandoned by her husband and isolated from the rest of Les Abricots, talks constantly to herself. She calls up memories of past happiness, traveling back and forth in time in the hopes of figuring out at exactly what moment her life was derailed. Her out-loud musings consist mainly of lamentations and more or less rhetorical questions posed to the universe. Thus at the narrative's conclusion, traumatized by Agénor's death, Saintmilia is no longer able to utter anything other than direct phonic expressions of her grief and her supposed madness. Louiortesse, too, proves a questionable narrator at best. Mentally unbalanced since the humiliation of his beating by Agénor, he mutters nonsensically from the margins of the narrative and of Les Abricots, and makes the reader privy to his dialogues, actual or imagined, with Death. The veracity of his confused mutterings is generally undermined by the fact that they conclude more often than not with the phrase, "it was all only a game."

The constant assumption and relinquishing of narrative control by these and others of *Possédés*'s speakers culminates in the novel's frenzied denouement, which directly follows the final iteration of Agénor's assassination of Miyan! Miyan!. Composed of a series of pages-long sentences in which all the central characters of the novel are implicated and conflated, the narration becomes increasingly incoherent, multiplying

and confounding identity and voice. These concluding pages intensify the dialogism of the narrative as a whole. They present a barely comprehensible whirlwind of arbitrarily shifting interlocutors that makes no attempt to arrive at any clear conclusion. Quite the contrary, in fact. Sentences are begun by Agénor and finished by Violetta. Rosita pronounces a disjointed monologue filled with obscure references to Louiortesse, to Raoul, and to various political and folkloric figures. Saintmilia carries on an emotional conversation with her unborn son, Salomon, in which she inexplicably confuses him with the dying *savale*. A conversation between the murdered Raoul and his mother on her deathbed is abruptly inserted. And, of course, it is in these final pages that the possibility that a schizophrenic Louiortesse has conjured up the event of *Possédés* from his bed in a psychiatric ward is introduced as, perhaps, the “true” narrative frame. In the end, then, no reliable source emerges to stabilize the story or stories of *Les Possédés de la pleine lune*. Exceedingly dialogic from start to finish, the narrative makes every effort to democratize the Word. Indeed, Figiolé gives the impression of having ceded his scribal ascendancy to—or of having been overwhelmed by—the expressive demands of the narrated/narrating community in his text. While the reader cannot, of course, escape the fact that Figiolé is ultimately the one to bring the ensemble of these voices to our consciousness, this author-ity is undermined without pomp or circumstance, without discussion or explanation, by the very stylistic workings of the narrative.<sup>2</sup>

In *Orality and Literacy: the Technologizing of the Word*, Walter Ong makes a strict distinction between the visual and the oral—between the written and the spoken. The former he qualifies as dissecting and clarifying, discrete and conclusive. According to Ong, the written text presents itself as a finality. “Print,” Ong explains,

encourages a sense of closure, a sense that what is found in a text has been finalized, has reached a state of completion ... By isolating thought on a written surface, detached from any interlocutor, making utterance in this sense autonomous and indifferent to attack, writing presents utterance and thought as uninvolved with all else, but it goes farther in suggesting self-containment. (132)

As a printed, inanimate object, the book is at once passive and absolutely declarative, according to Ong. It cannot really be undone. The very fact of its book-ness, with its seemingly objective, finite composition, gives it the appearance of total authority. As Ong explains, “There is no way directly to refute a text. After absolutely total and devastating refutation, it says exactly the same things as before. This is one reason why ‘the book

says' is popularly tantamount to 'it is true'" (79). In contrast to this ostensible unassailability of the written text, oral expression, Ong argues, is unifying and harmonizing, simultaneous and thick:

Sight isolates, sound incorporates. Whereas sight situates the observer outside what he views, at a distance, sound pours into the hearer ... Vision comes to a human being from one direction at a time: to look at a room or a landscape, I must move my eyes around from one part to another. When I hear, however, I gather sound simultaneously from every direction at once: I am at the center of my auditory world, which envelops me, establishing me at a kind of core of sensation and existence ... You can immerse yourself in hearing, in sound. There is no way to immerse yourself similarly in sight. By contrast with vision, the dissecting sense, sound is thus a unifying sense. A typical visual ideal is clarity and distinctness, a taking apart ... The auditory ideal, by contrast, is harmony, a putting together. (72)

The fundamentally oppositional frame within which written and oral communication are inscribed is very much a part of a francophone Caribbean intellectual and cultural perspective as well. Ralph Ludwig's edited volume *Écrire la parole de nuit* is predicated on "the cleavage between the world of the oral and the world of the written" (14), "between French scripturality and Creole orality" (15). Ludwig argues that the two expressive modes exist in a relationship of "confrontation" (15) that underlies all literary production in the region. In this same volume, Edouard Glissant similarly places the written and the oral in contradiction to one another, lamenting that with the replacement of the conditions of oral expression with those of the scriptural, a more generous perspective on humanity is lost. Glissant argues that with the advent of writing, existence becomes understood and defined "not by opening up, turning things over, reworking things, but with acuity, not only of perception, but also of expression. And that acuity passes through writing. This is one of the conquests of the written" (113). "Cleavage," "confrontation," "conquest"—the perception of an embattled oral tradition overcome by an oppressive written culture dominates postcolonial literary theory.

*Possédés* in many ways challenges this divide, providing an example of a profoundly oralized written text and soliciting a specific positioning on the part of the reader. Although Figiolé's narrative is unquestionably a written document, it is self-interrogating and immersive. It transmits the orality of the universe it writes, allowing the reader to appreciate the cacophony of *Les Abricots*, and fully embracing the fallibility of the book-object as a vehicle for absolute truth. *Les Possédés de la pleine lune* offers no sense of finality or closure; it is neither self-contained nor irrefutable. Relying entirely on the decentralized and polyphonic musings



of a community marked by gossip, madness, fantasy, and humor, Figiolé's novel-spiral seeks rather than asserts itself. It creates and maintains a state of open-endedness and tension. The narrative's final words confirm its resistance to the monologic and the specific:

Saintmilia! Saintmilia! ... To the very end. Through you, without you even knowing it, all of our stories of women hurt by love, hurt in love, continue. They continue. (215)

Inasmuch as the story and stories recounted in *Possédés* do not end, the reader is subtly called upon to participate in an imagining of the narrative's continued spiralic unfolding. The story demands reassessment—an “opening up,” “turning over,” and “reworking” of all its constituent parts—but promises no resolution. Figiolé's interlocutor/reader “listens in” on the multivoiced self-expression of a community that truly seems to enjoy hearing itself talk without concern for arriving at any sort of conquering, univocal truth.

\* \* \*

Though *Aube Tranquille* is as fractured and multivocal as *Les Possédés de la pleine lune*, it by no means proposes the same carefree orality of Figiolé's first novel-spiral. Rather, there is a very particular sort of polyphony at work in *Aube Tranquille*—a multivoiced narrative structure that can be productively considered through the lens of Celia Britton's reflections on the concept of “relayed language” (164). Britton offers an excellent and extremely helpful explanation of this practice in the context of Glissant's 1987 novel, *Mahogany*, drawing attention to its potentially subversive import:

Relayed language is a strategy of diversity that operates within discourse generally but especially as a principal of narrative; it resists the oppressively singular authority of what Mikhail Bakhtin calls the “monologic text,” putting in its place a plural text made up of a number of different contributions or versions, in which no one person has control of the whole story ... Relayed language implies ... that language is passed around a number of subjects and also that there are “relays” intervening between subject and language. (164)

While this description certainly connects to the polyphonic narration of *Possédés*, the specific issues of control, instability, and passing around are particularly useful to a reading of *Aube Tranquille*. In this second prose work, which itself might be considered a relay of *Possédés*, the fluid, organic multivocality of the earlier text has been transformed into a series of violent seizures and resentful relinquishings of voice—an agree-

gate of combative interventions. Just as in *Les Possédés de la pleine lune*, the schizophrenia implicit in the configuration of the “principal characters” of *Aube Tranquille* permeates the text at the level of the narration, causing, yet again, a distinct fracturing and destabilization of the narrative voice. From the first to the last page, *Aube Tranquille* makes use of the polyphonic narrative style introduced in *Possédés*, pushing the technique even further in this second work. The tale-within-a-tale manner of structuring the novel should ostensibly posit sœur Thérèse’s present story as the organizing frame, allowing her to benefit from a certain degree of objectivity and hindsight with respect to her ancestor’s account. But this is not at all the case. On the contrary, narrative authority is constantly problematized in *Aube Tranquille*. Absolutely no hierarchy is established and no particular prominence is given to sœur Thérèse’s narration. Not only is her story punctuated by and even juxtaposed with the events related on the cassette, but her chronologically “actual” existence becomes at times almost ancillary to the events related by Wolf. Rarely does sœur Thérèse indulge in any sustained commentary or distanced reflection on the situations described by her ancestor. Nor can it be said that sœur Thérèse’s story serves solely as a base from which to access Wolf and Sonja’s tragic drama. Rather, the two narratives are seamlessly and at times disturbingly interwoven.

In effect, these two independent and equally “principal” first-person narrators alternately, and arbitrarily, assume control of the storytelling function. A particularly striking example of this phenomenon appears within ten pages of the novel’s beginning. The text passes from a description of Sonja Biemme narrated by Wolf (“I don’t have time to be indignant, with her fervent, impulsive temper, Sonja became desperately enraged at the slightest contradiction” [14]), to a brief comment by Sonja Biemme de Valembroun Lebrun (“a medallion encrusted with precious stones depicts me lying on a hammock, indolent and lascivious, with my foot resting on the back of a prostrate Negro woman: to Sonja for her twentieth birthday, May 24, 1775” [15]) to a “riff” on this comment by sœur Thérèse in which she recognizes the remarkable similarity between herself and her great-great-grandmother (“encased within a gold and diamond frame, forever fixed in a medallion, May 24, 1775” [15]), and back, inexplicably, to Wolf (“she should not have been a woman, yet in the world we lived in she was my woman” [15]). In the course of two paragraphs, the identity of the first-person narrator shifts between the three characters, moving twice back and forth along the spiralic temporality of the narrative, and it is only through the most careful reading

that the reader is able to determine who is speaking to or of whom and when. This challenge to monolingualism is fashioned in quite a singular manner in *Aube Tranquille* with respect, even, to the Glissantian example of relay that inspires Britton's analysis. Britton notes, for example, that in *Mahagony* "the narrators hand over to each other" (Britton 166); there is a moral and stylistic consciousness—self-consciousness—a generosity, even, to the relaying of language in Glissant's novel. Indeed, *Mahagony*'s multiple narrators are committed to offering accurate and respectful representations of the lives they recount; they acknowledge their own narrative inadequacies and graciously pass the baton, as it were, when at a loss for (the right) words. The same might be said of Patrick Chamoiseau's relayed narration in the exceedingly polyphonic *Chronique des sept misères* and *Solibo Magnifique*. Though less reflective and self-aware perhaps than the diverse narrators of Glissant's text, the characters of Chamoiseau's novels nevertheless give a similar impression of collaborating to produce truth.

The characters of *Aube Tranquille*, on the other hand, represent no such collective folk chorus struggling together to make sense of an event. The multiple witness-actor-narrators in this work (think they) are absolutely nothing alike. They form no community and contradict one another with every utterance. They have no intention of entering into any sort of conversation. Rather, these narrating voices are consistently pitted against one another. Each voice seeks to impose itself absolutely, monologically; not to be heard in addition to, but to the exclusion of other contradictory voices. The whole of the novel is in fact narrated, almost without exception, in dialogue—be it spoken aloud or merely thought. Every voice is an "I" who vies with every other "I" for narrative authority with the intensity of a life and death conflict. The unreliability of *Aube Tranquille* as narrative is, then, in a sense argued from within—by the characters themselves. That is, each individual voice seeks actively to discredit and undermine the narrative of all others. In the course of a single paragraph, the word passes at once seamlessly and abruptly from the mouth of an eighteenth-century courtesan to that of a twentieth-century nun, from a Breton aristocratic plantation mistress to an African flight attendant. Given the distances—geographical, temporal, social—that separate the various narrators from one another, the "message" in such passages is refracted, transforming into something entirely different in the end from what the initiating narrator intended it to be. The non-hierarchical presentation of such incompatible contributions effectively undermines any narrative perspective that proposes itself as truth,

obliging the reader to constantly re-situate herself or himself with respect to all of the conflicting and equally (in)credible versions of events.

The battles for discursive power that overwhelm *Aube Tranquille* reflect, of course, a far greater fight—one that inherently implicates gender, class, and racial divisions spanning centuries and continents. Indeed, the extreme social disparities among the narrators—a white male planter, a doubled white female aristocrat, and a black (slave) woman—create a frame in which the generally/historically muted characters struggle against the presumed “monologic authority” (Britton 165) of the oppressive Other who generally/historically assumes narrative control. Considered thusly, the competitive voicings of the various characters have decidedly high stakes: as a black woman, Saintmilia must vehemently reject the exculpatory narrative that the privileged, white *sœur* Thérèse/Sonja Biemme puts forward; as a white woman in colonial Saint Domingue, Sonja Biemme must refuse the exculpatory narrative that Wolf means to construct in his memoirs. The battles between these characters turn, then, around questions of history, posterity, and truth as they impact on individual destinies. That is, they indicate the various characters’ understanding of the fact that s/he who controls storytelling ultimately establishes the moral order underlying and framing the narrative, and thus determines how and if s/he is remembered by History.

The vicious exchanges between *sœur* Thérèse and Saintmilia are presented, therefore, as fierce combats rather than conversations or even mere disputes. The two women repeatedly face off, often in front of the mission’s Mother Superior, to present their competing claims—at times as plaintiff (Saintmilia) and counter-claiming defendant (*sœur* Thérèse), at times as bickering children. In whichever of these partnered roles, they interact with pettiness, intransigence, and acrimony. For *sœur* Thérèse, the historical account of her family’s presence in Haiti is on the line, while for Saintmilia, it is a question of combating her family’s erasure from history’s recollection. Despite the gravity of the underlying battle, however, the two women’s verbal jousts often boil down to shouting matches of “Liar! Liar!” The confrontational nature of their narrative positions is made plain from their first encounter. Saintmilia initiates the battle:

—mother Thérèse doesn’t love us, the cruel laughter in her eyes shows her hatred to be as old as my suffering

—liar!

—I dare you to say that you didn’t steal my name! time has escaped from the cave where you boarded up our words ... I am the blood of the word, you have starved me (8)

At the center of most of these altercations is *sœur Thérèse's* struggle to resist the accusation underlying Saintmilia's claim against her: notably, that she is, in fact, Sonja Biemme and, therefore, must assume responsibility for all of the latter's horrific acts. In order to deny this premise, *sœur Thérèse* devotes herself to proving that the extent of Saintmilia's traumatic experiences makes her an unreliable narrator, incapable of separating any objective truth from her angry personal fiction. Conversely, Saintmilia's goal is to make *sœur Thérèse* so agitated that she reveals her true nature. In every one of their encounters, then, either *sœur Thérèse* or Saintmilia relates her version of the story, while her adversary—outraged and fuming—heckles from the sidelines:

—stop it, Saintmilia; stop fueling the misunderstandings between us  
 —another one of your fabrications meant to confuse me, *sœur Thérèse* (103)

—*sœur Thérèse* ... you spiteful thing  
 —I'm no more spiteful than you, slandering me all day long, deforming the facts ... another one of your crazy stories, why do the Negroes enjoy listening to you so much? (161)

—you're lying, *sœur Thérèse*  
 —insolent one, interrupting me  
 —impudent one, twisting the truth (163)

—let us pray, Lord, for Saintmilia's lost soul  
 —don't think you'll fool me with your gracious airs ...  
 —was I the one who stabbed your son? I wasn't even born  
 —that lie is the worst of them all (214)

Even more fundamental than are each of their efforts to have the last word and to prove the unreliability of the other's narrative is their more fundamental battle over Saintmilia's right to assume a voice in the first place. Specifically, Saintmilia is intent on releasing all "boarded up" words—on exploding a silence that *sœur Thérèse* seeks to maintain. When Saintmilia announces, "our story is not finished" (102), a phrase first articulated as a despairing refrain in the concluding chaos of *Possédés*, *sœur Thérèse* understands that these words are intended as a threat.

—that woman [Saintmilia] is not crazy, she leaves her silence behind to enter into her truth ... with a dramatic gesture of the hand, I sweep away Saintmilia's ridiculous stories, she immediately puts them back together, in their tensions, claiming to be the stories of my family, they invade my space, ravage my silence (191–92)

Too unstable or simply unable to refute all of Saintmilia's accusations, *sœur Thérèse* laments the fact that this black woman, whom she perceives as her racial and social inferior, dares to speak at all. She experiences

Saintmilia's refusal to be silent as a quasi-physical attack on the monologic authority of her narrative of the past. As desperate as she is to distinguish herself from her ancestral avatar, *sœur Thérèse* is nevertheless so perturbed as to insist that her and Saintmilia's dubious shared history be muted altogether. Saintmilia, of course, will have no such thing. This is the subject of one of their most heated disputes—a furious confrontation in which the intensity and urgency of the two women's discourse are conveyed by the total absence of distinction between their narrative positions:

you speak while all the others stay quiet, but of course, because since your return I have broken the pact of silence, my memory clears a way through the paths of hatred and I say misery be upon you, you're threatening me, Saintmilia? *sœur Thérèse*, I am called *Ti Mèmè N'kedi*, stop caricaturing my name, you rebel while all the others obey at the lift of a finger, certainly, I've been free for two centuries, I've been learning to curse you, not to submit to you (170–71)

Here as elsewhere, *sœur Thérèse* and Saintmilia fight to out-talk one another, producing a chopped up narration that places the reader somewhat helplessly in the middle of a debate whose interlocutors—themselves deeply conflicted and even confused—have become too consumed with animosity to present a balanced case.

These same phenomena are at work in the verbal combats between Wolf and Sonja Biemme; issues of self-representation and the contingent squelching of the Other's voice are as fundamental as in the relationship between *sœur Thérèse* and Saintmilia. There is a communicative impasse at the heart of their marriage, created by Wolf's double standards, Sonja's sadistic madness, and the lies they consistently tell one another in the process of narrating/constructing themselves. Indeed, each has lied to the other regarding the thing that matters most and that is critical to establishing the "truth" of the narrative as a whole. That is, neither one nor the other has been honest about his or her history with Blacks and implication in various aspects of the slave trade. Because these lies are so fundamental, to both their sense of family and of self, Wolf and Sonja find themselves trapped in a relationship of profound enmity that demands the literal and discursive death of one for the survival of the other. Social and racial equals as concerns speech, however, their dialogic struggles remain always somewhat camouflaged and dissimulated by the behavioral codes of planter society, present from the very beginnings of their courtship:

—what are you thinking of? ...

—I'm thinking of this happiness that has graced us from above

—don't take up our clichés, is there no expression in the islands to describe unexpected joys?

—perhaps, but not being French and living in the islands only for the past ten years, I haven't entirely mastered the subtleties of the language, particularly since it is somewhat altered there (31)

The significance of this foundational lie (Wolf was born and raised in Saint Domingue) adds a somewhat sinister weight to the banal insincerity of the discourse of seduction by which it is immediately followed.

—Wolf, do you love me?

—should I reply with some cliché from France?

—as long as it means yes

—then I shall answer with the most marvelous of commonplaces, I adore you (32)

This inconsequential exchange, in which Wolf affects linguistic naïveté as a means of hiding the fact that he has always lived in the colony, is a first indicator of the falsity that in fact defines the whole of his character; it reflects the troubling break between the innocence he professes and the immorality his actions reveal. It is, then, in response to the truths she perceives rather than the (self-)deception Wolf speaks that Sonja indulges in her own duplicity, making Wolf believe that she has never encountered and knows nothing about Blacks or slavery. Only the spectacle of Wolf's complete bafflement faced with her cruel treatment of his slaves inspires her to acknowledge that she and her family have a long and troubled history of trading in Africans (she admits at the narrative's dénouement that she and her brother have been illegally trading slaves together in Haiti right under his nose):

I avenge myself of your lies ... you're angry with me, I know it, for having upset [your] tranquility, for having broken with hypocrisy ... I lied to you, one lie deserves another, isn't that right? (63)

The tranquility that Sonja evokes references in fact the unspoken credo by which, the reader has come to realize, Wolf navigates his conflicted existence as a planter in Haiti; it is a tranquility based on his refusal or incapacity to speak in a way that reflects the reality of who he is. Disgusted by what she considers his weakness, Sonja turns silence into a weapon. If Wolf will not speak the truth of his character, she refuses to speak altogether. Instead, she fills the silence between them with ferocious accusations and reproaches. The above words of shameless admission, for example, are "spoken" in the context of what is ostensibly a silent exchange between a bedridden Sonja and a guilt ridden Wolf. The latter sits at his wife's bedside, utterly perplexed by this woman who, he realizes, he does not know at all, and (silently?) begging her to

accept the platitudes of romance—"Sonja, I loved your beauty" (64)—as sufficient truth. Unmoved by such "clichés from France," Sonja refuses to acknowledge Wolf's presence, relying instead on "these words that were seeping out of my false sleep, breaking our pact of silence" (64).

Her technique is effective. Wolf suffers intensely the terms of Sonja's unspoken condemnation, understanding that her refusal to play at love in the hell of Haitian slave society amounts to a veritable assault on his narrative. Sonja is, of course, well aware of the force of her counterdiscourse, and revels in her power to subvert a story that would cast her as paragon of feminine virtue and uncomplaining discretion: "[H]e's probably trying to find something to say ... inventing explanations and excuses to hold me blameless, not because he believes I'm innocent, but because he's trying to preserve the image he has of me" (158). Refusing the repressive narrative by which Wolf seeks to colonize her self, Sonja declares her intention to fight/narrate back: "[T]o break him at last, to make him recognize me for what I am, as I want him to see me" (158). Sonja's "disconcerting mutism" and unfathomable acts ultimately push Wolf to divulge his true preoccupations, if not to her, then, ultimately, to the reader:

—speak, say something, I can't bear your silence any longer, have I lost your love?

I used the one word I shouldn't have ... the words washed right over her, pathetically useless ...

—I need you, Sonja!

the effort of the lie actually hurt, I don't need her if I want to survive ... confined in our double silence, we are present for the end of a dream, for the prefiguration of our own death (84–85)

Though Wolf still insists on speaking of love and other inanities to Sonja, he ultimately admits the real motivations behind his appeals to his wife. The dream he references above is that of a stable and infinitely profitable colony sustained by the acquiescent servitude of grateful black laborers. Wolf recognizes in Sonja's rejection of him the untenability of (t)his narrative of life in Haiti; he understands that the dissolution of his marriage is a harbinger of the colony's inevitable implosion. This root tension is confirmed by the word games played among Wolf, Sonja, and Salomon in their efforts to negotiate the latter's troubling status as unfree brother(-in-law) and object of affection/desire. A brief exchange between Sonja and Salomon reveals much about the limits of language in the illogical and totalitarian world that is slavery. Sonja leads:

—you've changed the subject, you haven't answered my question

—it's still the same subject, if you asked me a question it is for you to find an answer



—you’re becoming insolent, I’m too good to you, I’ll talk to Wolf about this  
and have him whip you  
—on that day I’ll thank him, for he will have put us both in our place  
—what do you mean by that?  
—nothing more than what you’ve heard (174)

As this passage illustrates, to garner meaning in the colonial context—as in the narrative that is *Aube Tranquille*—requires a vigilant decoding and deciphering of language. In a world where, on the one hand, speech is suppressed in the interest of pseudo-aristocratic decorum and, on the other, words are “swallowed back down for fear of the whip and of torture” (104), language is often far less than enlightening.

Yves Chemla considers this question of E/enlightenment in his rigorous analysis of *Aube Tranquille*. Chemla proposes an onomastic inquiry into Figiolé’s title, considering it with respect to the historical context of the narrative. He reflects specifically on the notion of “enlightenment” that is implied, he posits, by the titular evocation of dawn:

[The title] can at once evoke and invoke the memory of the beginning of time, the promise of renewal and anticipation in the moments of first light, of the rising of the sun, General Sun. It is with the light that one sees clearly, of course, and all words that translate the phenomenon of comprehension and intelligence derive from the metaphoric usage of terms that characterize light or sight. After all, wasn’t the century of the 1789 revolution known as the Enlightenment? (Chemla “Entrée”)

In linking the novel-spiral’s title to the singular historical moment during which the majority of the drama unfolds, Chemla touches on the profound irony of the world being described—an irony that the title gestures to in its implicit allusion to (en)light(enment) and peace. Indeed, “tranquil dawn” signals, in its inaccuracy with respect to the dark and troubled days related in the narrative, the extent to which opacity—and not enlightenment—determine the characters’ narration of themselves and their Others; it signals the extent to which the world they circulate in is itself opaque and unenlightened. The obstacles of race, gender, class, and history that prevent the various characters from communicating with one another inevitably limit the reader’s access to the narrative as well, and the title obliquely hints at this communicative opacity between text and reader. That is, its reference to the dawn in this Afro-Caribbean context necessarily calls to mind Césaire’s celebrated refrain in *Le Cahier d’un retour au pays natal*—“in the wee hours of the morning.” Through the intertextual implication of Césaire’s prose poem—subversive narrative act *par excellence* and foundational text of a Negritude ethic-aesthetic initiated by the black revolution on the cusp of which *Aube Tranquille* is situated—Figiolé subtly announces the intended

counterdiscursive foundations of his own work. He forewarns the reader that, like Césaire's language-forging, convention-busting scream, *Aube Tranquille* will perturb expectations of comprehension, in the Glissantian sense of the term.<sup>3</sup>

The reader can only expect, then, to find himself or herself perpetually unmoored by language in *Aube Tranquille*. S/he must accept from the outset that only partial truths will be told, that there will be no "help" from a stabilizing authorial avatar, and that even the familiar stylistic set-up of the story-within-a-story will not hold. In effect, no particular privilege is accorded *sœur Thérèse's* contemporary narration, and rarely does she take advantage of—or manage to maintain—her removed perspective vis-à-vis ostensibly past events. Indeed, the temporal collapse and corresponding intersubjective relay between *sœur Thérèse* and *Sonja Biemme* at the (non-)foundations of the narrative deny the benefits of hindsight or even the impression of objectivity; and such unstable configurations of identity and history mean, of course, that all bets are off as far as narrational coherence is concerned. The novel-spiral's structural simultaneity along with the near total absence of periods give the narration a breathless, uncensored, and even vulnerable quality. Given the misunderstanding and dishonesty of the "I"s with respect to one another, what is said rarely corresponds with what is done, and what is claimed is always less valuable than what is intimated. This explains perhaps why the various characters are so fixated on those utterances that are in fact deeds—such unambiguous "speech acts" as vengeance, malediction, and pardon. Ultimately, these are the discursive elements that fuel the entirety of *Aube Tranquille*: *sœur Thérèse* declares her intention to at once avenge her family and to be pardoned by *Saintmilia*; *Saintmilia* is intent on avenging the murder of her son and cursing *sœur Thérèse/Sonja*; *Sonja* devotes herself to avenging her family's humiliation and thwarting the ancestral curse on the *Biemmes*; *Wolf* desperately seeks absolution wherever he can get it—from his wife, his mistress, even the slaves he violates. In the end, the inherent contradictions among these overlapping and contradictory efforts to make language mean something in the face of an antagonistic Other result in failure on all fronts.

*Aube Tranquille* provides no standard of measure by which to hierarchize the fear, lust, and madness-based assertions of its narrators; and so, absent any such certitude, it is only in the interstices between the spoken and the intended, the heard and the understood, that whatever truth there is to the narrative can be located. *Wolf's* hypocrisy, *Sonja's* and *Saintmilia's* psychosis, and *sœur Thérèse's* ambivalence produce a

state of narrative fallibility that is differently unsettling than is the polyphonic flux of *Possédés*. While *Aube Tranquille* similarly calls for the reader's active engagement in order to make some sort of "sense" of the story being told, it melds the phenomena of orality with post/modern narrative techniques to produce a demanding and hybrid work of historical fiction. Fignolé's novel exposes the processes by which the messy stories of the past are voiced or muffled, imposed or repressed. As the reader passes from insult-hurling exchange to barely comprehensible double-talk to century-shifting shouting match, s/he can only just manage to cobble together a story out of *Aube Tranquille*'s multivocal mash-up. In the resulting fractured fiction, Fignolé comes closer than any other Haitian writer to proposing a language with which to narrate Haiti's revolution, this seemingly "unspeakable" (that is, both terrifying and inexpressible) event in American history that has been so often, and so thoroughly disavowed.<sup>4</sup>

## NOTES

1 *Fantasy* 21.

2 As Anne Marty has written in a review of *Possédés*: "For the first time, a novel treats the rural universe in an entirely new fashion, insofar as the peasants are no longer subjects for analysis or observation but rather participate equally with the narrator-author in taking charge of their own imaginary destiny, becoming conscious of the story: interior monologue, direct expression of their dreams, emergence of a collective consciousness" (155).

3 "The question posed is the following: in the magnificent perspective of Western cultures organized around the notion of transparency, that is to say the notion of comprehension—'com-prehend'—I take with me, I comprehend a being or an idea or a culture, is there not also that other notion, that of taking, of taking control of?" (Glissant, "Le chaos-monde" 126).

4 Cf. Fischer, *Modernity Disavowed*.

## Schizophonic Solutions

### *Philoctète*

*In my opinion, any expression of culture—a myth, a song, a dance, a painting, a poem—is a kind of impersonal message, at once vague and truncated; an obscure and previous desire that was already moving around here and there and can never be interpreted entirely by the performer or read completely by a reader; every effort by the one or the other to fill this essential gap will fail to lead him toward a goal, but will issue into lateral movements, spiralings, steps that go forward but also backward ...*

—Benítez-Rojo<sup>1</sup>

With absolute specificity, fearlessness, and humor, Philoctète ventures to write the unspeakable (that is, disgusting and unbelievable) hours of the Dominican Vespers. The events of these two days—so known and so denied, so unfathomable and yet so emblematic of a contemporary, worldwide ethical failure with respect to blackness and difference—are mired in trauma and shame. Stunned silence might well seem an appropriate response. How, though, to write the fiction of such real horror? Whose story to tell? In what language? Philoctète seems to find some answers in the schizophonic offerings of the spiral. In *Le Peuple des terres mêlées*, he looks at terror’s impact on self-expression, and at the ways in which language is implicated in and articulates that terror. His narrative reads as a personal chronicling of this at once intimate and collective experience of state violence. Although the story is related from the perspective of a third-person narrator, this narrating voice might be that of a survivor—shell-shocked but determined. Indeed, the narrator of *Le Peuple des terres mêlées* takes advantage of the ambiguity of the French third-person-singular pronouns “on” and “personne” to maintain a position at once implicated in and removed from the drama s/he recounts; his/her attitude oscillates between confidential and clinical. This insider-outsider posture of less-than-total omniscience is established in the novel-spiral’s first sentence: “Since five in the morning, a bird (to be honest, no one really knows what) turns in the sky above Elias Piña, a tiny village on the Dominican border” (9). The narrator then goes on to describe the reactions of the villagers according to age group (“The chil-

dren believe ... The teenagers would like ... The elderly, men and women ... ”), and leaves it at that. The “no one really knows what” thus sets the tone for what follows, letting the reader know from the start that this narrator’s perspective is either limited or deliberately unforthcoming. Whichever the case, it is clear from the beginning that the tale will not simply be told—will not be told simply.

The narrator offers little by way of opinion or judgment and seems to adopt the stance of witness-recorder. Even when recounting acts of the most disturbing brutality s/he generally expresses little more than mild disbelief. The tone of the telling is, above all, constative—excessively so, even. Returning to the introduction of the mysterious bird, four simple declarative sentences, the latter three of which each constitute a separate paragraph in and of themselves, are disseminated in the opening pages of the narrative like a terse spiralic refrain: “The bird is mute,” we are first informed. Several paragraphs later we learn, “The bird has no blood.” Again, after some rather disturbing information is related regarding the death or “disappearing” of those who in some way confronted the putative bird, the narrator states simply, “The bird is sorcery” (10), and, to conclude, “The bird is blind” (11). Referred to in the pages that follow as “the machine,” “the beast,” and “the thing,” this seemingly unidentifiable flying object soars indifferently above the disturbing phenomena it provokes in Elias Piña—the mass suicide by hanging of a family of six, the fact that the village women begin urinating blood. It exerts a hypnotic effect on the inhabitants of the town and, to a degree, on the reader as well. Indeed, the almost rhythmic repeated evocation of its detached presence functions both narratively and meta-narratively. The reader, like the townspeople, directly understands the extent to which the bird-beast-machine, a fairly obvious metaphor for the banal evil of the Trujillato as a whole, ominously prefigures the violence to come.

The narrator’s dispassionate account of the bird’s appearance and the manner in which s/he subsequently relates its deleterious impact on Elias Piña announce the principle stylistic practice Philoctète employs throughout *Le Peuple des terres mêlées*. That is, rather than narrate by way of linear descriptions, Philoctète relies on the spiralic accumulation of repeated fragments to convey atmosphere, piling on adjectives in his presentation of everything from the most banal to the most horrific elements of the story. Guitar strings, for example, are not merely “twisted,” they also “grate,” “whistle,” and “get tangled up” (11); watching the bird circle overhead, animals do not simply eat, “The oxen,

the asses, the dogs, the cats, feed, bite, graze, scratch ... The oxen, the asses, the dogs the cats chew" (22); the noise made by Trujillo's soldiers wakes up not only the forest, but also "the springs, the paths, the fires, the birds, the flowers" (50); and don Agustin is responsible for chopping off not one or two or even a hundred, but five thousand different types of Haitian heads:

flat, round, bald, square, pointed, large, low, small, shameful, confused, high, smushed, empty, guilty, innocent, evil, stubborn, light, dirty, faithful, cowardly, frivolous, courageous, stacked, crazy, comical, sympathetic, strange, hot, well-formed, hard, filled-up, morose-looking, smackable, whippable, slappable, deathly, enigmatic, birdlike, ditzzy, disagreeable, featherbrained, willful, headstrong, heads that ponder, that act, that think only of themselves, that are cool-headed, who have a head for that, who've been knocked on their head, who have their head on straight, and who knows what else! (104)

Whatever the content, absolutely every noun, every verb, every narrative element in *Le Peuple des terres mêlées* has this potential to explode outward while remaining contained centrifugally within a spiral of relatedness—either grammatical or semantic. From the description of local flora, to the narration of the acrobatics performed by Adèle's head and delicious carnage enacted by don Agustin's machete with a mind of its own, the majority of the descriptive passages begin with a single word or syntagm and either expound upon or unravel this kernel through a series of structurally identical modifiers or variants. Each word functions as a small prism that holds the potential to refract infinitely and so "implies the full breadth of language, the entire horizon of meaning ... in a perpetual system of referral" (Forest 99).

The stylistic strategies at work in *Le Peuple des terres mêlées* can be productively examined in the light of Glissant's reflections on Haitian painting and the connection between the oral and the pictorial. Glissant affirms that the "painted sign is the contemporary of the oral" (461) in that it relies on the simple practice of accumulation to signify the marvelous without mediation. "Haitian pictorial discourse," writes Glissant, "thus proceeds via the accumulation of elements. I recognize to what extent it excels at depicting crowds, pilings up, profusion ... Accumulation is the jubilant ostentation of totality" (462). "There is," he continues, "an art of repetition that is specific to the oral text and the so-called 'naïve' painted sign" (464). While Glissant's brief analysis extracts writing from an oral-pictorial equation, arguing that "Haitian literature in French has had much more difficulty translating the marvelous so immediately rendered in painting" (463), I would argue

that Philoctète's narrative, like the painted works Glissant describes, "accumulates massively" (462) and thereby communicates the bustling, chaotic atmosphere of unrestricted communal space. The phenomena of redundancy, repetition, and refrain, while of course inherent to oral communication, are fundamental to the workings of the spiral as well. Indeed, every bit of language in *Le Peuple des terres mêlées* is a potential spiral, its polysemic value ripe for exploration, exploitation, divagation. Philoctète means to make very clear this organic affiliation between the formal project that is his Spiralist aesthetic and the indigenous discursive practices of the Haitian community. To this end, he includes interventions from figures of the Haitian oral tradition—the local "Auntie" or the "old folk poet" whose spontaneously spun tales similarly proceed via the unreeling of repeated nominative, verbal, or adjectival phrases. Thus Philoctète's practice of syntactic or connotative accrual injects a readily identifiable oralized dimension into the narrative and suggests the author's essential commitment to the oral foundations of the community he depicts. To read *Le Peuple des terres mêlées* is to come close to the feeling of standing in the middle of a public square, a roadside café, or a marketplace in Haiti (or elsewhere in the Caribbean, for that matter) surrounded by the quotidian noises of life loudly lived. The sudden "Hey! Neighbor!"s that punctuate the narrative jostle the reader out of passivity and oblige him/her to contend with the whirlwind of textual elements constantly vying for attention. Philoctète seeks to evoke for the reader the auditory resonance, if not the actual sound, of the world he describes. Indeed, there is a markedly rhythmic quality to his prose—a visible musicality that impels the reader to verbalize the words on the page. Philoctète's writing is indulgent and sonorific. It wants to be spoken aloud. Its extravagant, almost wasteful refusal to economize or triage encourages the reader to savor the presence rather than the significance of the word on the page. Indeed, the multiple isotopic passages of *Le Peuple des terres mêlées* aim to provide direct sensory experiences and so to establish alternative paths to connection between reader and text.

Certain passages seek, for example, to impress through repetition a particular smell directly on the reader's consciousness, as with the odor of Pedro's work clothes that soothes Adèle during the menacing calm preceding the storm of the massacre:

Adèle [scrubs] her husband's overalls. An aroma of labor delightfully overwhelms the young woman ... Adele rinses Pedro's overalls in the basin of fresh water. The aroma of labor makes her sneeze ... Adele leaves the fence, goes and sits down at the edge of the basin where her husband's overalls

soak up water. Her husband, gone since dawn. Lost in the dawn. The aroma of labor emanating from the overalls pleasantly troubles Adèle ... Adele energetically shakes out the overalls. Her face is sprayed with clear water. The aroma of labor intoxicates her. (30, 33–34)

This evocation of Pedro's comforting odor runs refrain-like through several paragraphs, during the course of which Adèle becomes aware of the forebodingly deserted streets outside her yard. The spirally iterated image-smell of the overalls is in fact interwoven with a series of disturbing counter-images that appear throughout these same pages—recurrent foreshadowings of the approaching slaughter. Adèle notices bit by bit, for example, that the blacksmith, the butcher, the grocer, the notary, and the doctor have not opened their doors for business; bit by bit, she takes note of the neighbor's dog, who over the course of several pages barks, then moans, then gasps, then drops dead in the middle of the street and immediately begins to decompose; she loops back, over and over, to the malicious children who torment one another in the road in front of her house—"[T]he children amuse themselves throwing dust into each other's eyes. Like grown-ups trying to boast to one another ['se jeter la poudre aux yeux'] ... The children play up their insouciance. Or their wickedness. Who knows! Throwing dust into each other's eyes. That seems grown-up ... [S]ome children continue to throw dust into each other's eyes" (30, 32–33). These reappearing narrative fragments steadily build tension, spiraling around the more sinister "main event" toward which they hint.

Throughout *Le Peuple des terres mêlées*, Philoctète maintains such tension between his own playful use of language and the true danger discourse can represent in the hands of a repressive state. The linguistic excess that marks every aspect of Philoctète's narrative has particular implications in the totalitarian context. Trujillo's entourage, for example, includes

forty-eight gold pom-pommed division generals on frisky steeds, fifty-three silver pom-pommed brigadier generals on white steeds, three hundred and four colonels with embroidered helmets on Spanish stallions, eight hundred grenadiers and infantry on muleback with automatic rifles and burnished copper cylinder heads, two hundred and thirteen shooters with boxes for ammunition and harnesses in gold braid atop bay mares, five hundred foot soldiers, laced up in heavy brown linen overcoats, five hundred and twelve foot infantry, blue and purple, with beaver kepis, goatskin and velvet, without laces, seven hundred and two artillerymen dressed in blue wool and dragging mini-cannons along behind them. (50)

We have already noted the vast breadth of the types of heads don Agustin has hacked off. Indeed, the excess of language in *Le Peuple des terres*



*mêlées* directly communicates the excesses of the dictator, a powerful but illegitimate figure obliged in the absence of popular consecration to over-compensate with visual and verbal display. Philoctète's narrative draws attention to language as manipulable object, showing and telling the arbitrary ways that the word can be fetishized and perverted to suit the discursive needs of the powers-that-be. In this, the novel-spiral embraces an aspect of the schizophrasia at work in Frankétienne's writings, "that idea that there exists an affinity between chaos and the void, between the too-full and the too-empty ... language in a context of chaos and ideological emptiness" (Chemla "Iconographie"). Philoctète's imagination of the manner in which Trujillo devises his infamous expression of state-sanctioned racism—"¡*Blancos de la tierra!*"—makes explicit the extent to which language can be completely divested of any so-called objective meaning and turned quite literally into non-sense. Trujillo ultimately overcomes his "Citadel sickness" (129) by creating a meaningless declaration of racial-cum-national identity: "A myth! If he couldn't have the Citadel. A myth! ... ¡*Blancos de la tierra!* 'It will be just as good as the Citadel,' he mused dreamily. 'A myth for a phantasm!'" (51–52). Well aware that a false truth is only as believable as the extent of its dissemination, Trujillo not only invents the nonsensical catchphrase but immediately sets to physically inscribing it on the consciousness of the nation:

Printers, engravers, illustrators, lithographers (even the streetwalkers—for the sake of aesthetics!) were summoned on the spot. They worked on stone, on lead, on night, on day, on paper, on cardboard. Once that was done, the Air Force's two bi-planes blanketed the country with sketches, stamps, "*blancos de la tierra*" leaflets. The promotion of the myth had begun. (51–52)

Philoctète references this particular campaign of aggressive sloganeering as but one of many instances of the self-serving, hollow, and ultimately dangerous language games underlying the massacre of Haitians.

Philoctète's narrative offers example after example of such manipulations—of insanely destructive political acts rendered almost mundane within the context of the totalitarian discursive environment constructed by Trujillo. Among the most notable of these is the series of shockingly unemotional government-sponsored radio announcements that appear throughout the novel-spiral. Each of these announcements reports matter-of-factly on the progress of "Operation Haitian Heads"—detailing the age and gender of recent victims, the rate and number of decapitations per province—and then enthusiastically concludes with advertisements for Coca-Cola, razor blades, or nail polish remover. Here, then, we have a dramatic parody of the processes of desensitization and

alienation of the Antillean community described by Glissant: “[a populace] whose lived experience is constantly defamiliarized by the globalizing consumer culture to which it increasingly aspires” (Garraway 19). Indeed, the careless juxtaposition of the mass murder with ads for soft drinks and toiletries contributes to the atmosphere of unease that runs throughout Philoctète’s narrative. On the one hand, the bizarre disconnect between these advertisements and the news reports they bookend is so extreme as to be almost comical. But, of course, the bits of information emanating from this dubious source are further evidence of the discursive corruption in Trujillo’s state. As the local bus driver points out, most of what the people (think they) know about themselves and about their Caribbean (br)Others amounts to stereotypes and commonplaces—“received ideas, diffused, in fact, by the media, especially the radio” (103). Though such clichés seem harmless in the abstract—so many ingredients in “the incredible Caribbean cocktail” (104), as unreflective and unchallenged labels, they ultimately open the door to other, more deadly (though no less ludicrous) markers of separation.

It makes perfect sense, of course, that Philoctète should focus so entirely on language in *Le Peuple des terres mêlées*, given that the massacre of Haitians actually had a password—an “impasse”-word, more precisely. Outrageous and incredible as it may seem, Trujillo’s genocidal plan hinged on a word—a nothing word, a word whose triviality was inversely proportional to the life-or-death significance it was made to bear. That such an insane proposition was ever allowed to stand, the narrative implies, means that language as a whole is questionable—to be questioned. It is arbitrary and entirely, even dangerously, subjective:

Just as they have death notices, words have birth certificates. We have paired joy with laughter, awakening with the sun; bells with the azure, work with the power of the hands. We have united, over the course of our great linguistic age, light with intelligence, youth with generosity, harvest with hope, revolution with change ... [W]e have words that express the needs [of man]: bread for his hunger, culture for understanding, poetry for beauty; words that translate his feelings: duty to the country, worship of God, taste for the aesthetic. Just as we have created words that convey his treacheries: betrayal, rape, tyranny, envy, hatred, lie! ... And against the people of the border region, Rafaël Leonidas Trujillo suggested “perejil!” (102)

“Perejil.” Parsley. A collection of letters, a sequence of phonemes capable of provoking a machete. The ludicrousness of this situation is the point around which the overarching spiral of *Le Peuple des terres mêlées* turns, as Philoctète dedicates much of the narrative to trying to figure out this devastating word. He takes it apart letter by letter, sounds it out, turns

it around, examines it from every angle as if hoping somehow to discover the clue to its power. Indeed, the word is strewn throughout the novel-spiral: it is barked by Trujillo's soldiers as they make their way through the border towns; it is shouted or babbled by uncomprehending children, both Haitian and Dominican; it is whispered by panicked Haitians hoping to master its pronunciation before it is too late.

A particularly prominent example of this desperation is the recurring scene in which a young Haitian woman, seated next to Pedro on the *guagua* as it heads toward Elias Piña, practices her articulation of the word: "A young woman says fervently to herself: 'Perejil!' The r trampled on the l. The young woman cries softly. The discreet scent of roses emanates from her with each shiver of her shoulders" (64);

It's the hand of the hand of the young woman whose broken voice again repeats: "Perejil!" The l drank up the i. The e kicked the r. The word has gone awry. The young woman coughs. A faint scent of roses falls down and is crushed. The passenger coughs again. The word is on the point of committing an outright murder, without any accomplice. (73)

The very fact of the woman's struggles with the word in this particular site is symbolic: given that the *guagua* shuttles Dominicans and Haitians back and forth across the border, its passengers move with equal fluidity between Spanish and French. Thus the true unity of the broader geo-social context, in which "more than a hundred and twenty thousand men blended in their languages, their games, their dress, their behaviors, their environment" (40) have made a seamlessly integrated Spanish and French the regional *lingua franca*, inherently belies the language-based division the state seeks to impose. Indeed, Trujillo's attempt to create discord produces an ironic uniting effect among the two people, in that it inspires Dominicans to help Haitian neighbors with the word: "Dominicans of both lands teach Haitians of both lands how to perfectly pronounce 'perejil'" (92). Yet despite the profound organic intermingling of the two peoples, despite the fact that even Trujillo's regime is unable to make any real distinction between them (a problem the government ultimately acknowledges when the state radio confesses that a few Dominicans were accidentally slaughtered), Pedro's companion on the bus cannot be saved: "[T]he young black woman bends forward. The word has killed her" (91). Obviously, though, it is not the word at all that has killed the young Haitian woman, just as the word is not responsible for the death of any of the Haitians that fall victim to don Agustín/Trujillo's violence, including Adèle, whose death parallels that of the woman on the bus: "'perejil,' Adèle stammers. The l has fled into her uvula. The e has trampled on the i. The i freezes. The p runs into the r, suffocates it" (53). Adèle proves unable to speak the word

to don Agustin's satisfaction and so loses her head.

If Philoctète returns repeatedly to this dissection of the word-object "perejil" in *Le Peuple des terres mêlées*, it is not, of course, because he imagines that the word itself contains the bigotry or lunacy that sanctions don Agustin's violence. Rather, he takes a scalpel and a microscope to Trujillo's fetish-word in order to show just how entirely and absurdly empty a vessel it is—something Adèle, in her gentle madness, understands quite clearly:

That word will kill you, Adèle. Learn it well.  
You should really say: "Men, in their folly, will kill you, Adèle." ... Hand me the sedative, please, Pedro. (85)

This is the fundamental distinction Philoctète makes in this story of individual, communal, national, regional, and global tragedy. Unprotested by the Haitian government, by Dominican citizens, by the world—"[N]o Red Cross in the world made any entreaties ... No other global, philanthropic, humanist organization did so either" (85–86). In the vacuum created by worldwide indifference and silence, Trujillo's word was able to circulate unchecked. It made an aggressive claim to truth and went unchallenged. By not demanding accountability, the people of Elias Piña and of the wider world effectively offered their complicity: "We hang on the hooks of words ... No one reproaches anyone else. We become one. We stuff ourselves with banalities. From discourse to applause we make ourselves complete, perfect ourselves" (26). Philoctète writes, then, a discourse on human responsibility to and in language through the form and content of his novel-spiral. His own narrative strategies in *Le Peuple des terres mêlées* showcase the object-ness of language and hence its vulnerability as something that can be played with—tonally and connotatively enriched or manipulated, elevated or exploited. A collection of interlocking, overlapping spiralic repetitions, his style exemplifies the possibility of maintaining—of never resolving—tensions between what and how the word says. In the absence of absolutes, Philoctète suggests, individual and collective interlocutors have an obligation to police its usage, to be vigilant and always engaged. For all his stylistic playfulness, for all the unambiguous delight that language holds for him, René Philoctète is very serious about words.

#### NOTE

1 *Repeating Island* 74.

# V

## Conclusions

### No Lack of Language

*This time, I will not perish from a lack of language. Of a language that is mine and that my people understand.*  
—Jean-Claude Figolé<sup>1</sup>

As I have noted throughout this study, the Spiralist authors are, by virtue of the very fact of their writings, members of Haiti's tiny elite. As such, they have had to face the implicit dilemma of how to represent without speaking for or condescending to the subaltern beings they narrate—individuals and communities who, because they function rarely as subjects of discourse, quite often remain silent, caricaturized, or ignored. Gayatri Spivak, along with many other postcolonial theorists, has thoroughly discussed this predicament.<sup>2</sup> Spivak rejects the notion of the liberal intellectual as champion of the alienated and oppressed masses. At the same time, however, she recognizes that the extremely marginalized are ill-equipped to speak for themselves and are ultimately condemned to be represented by others. She suggests that the only possible solution to this seeming paradox is for the intellectual to engage solely in the formulation of “constructive questions, corrective doubts” (*In Other Worlds* 258). The elite writer must, in other words, find a way to narrate realities to which s/he can have no more than limited psycho-social access. This quandary is not unique to the Spiralists, of course. The problem of the writer's distance from his or her indigenous audience is a reality of most postcolonial societies, given that all literary movements necessarily originate from within an educated, and in that respect elite, social class. As Hoffmann succinctly affirms, “By the simple fact of knowing how to read and write, the Haitian novelist is privileged, a member of the elite that controls political and intellectual life in Haiti” (45). Given the lamentable levels of literacy in Haiti, the fortunate status that enables the individual writer to attempt a writing of the underrepresented into existence ironically sets her apart from the majority of his or her compatriots.

Of course, one might very reasonably argue that that no writer is behooved to confine her or his artistic production to the limitations of a national audience—to be aesthetically constrained by deplorable social circumstances. To postulate such conditions would mean effectively that the Haitian author would have little justification for putting pen to paper at all. Indeed, one might even go so far as to claim, *à la* Deleuze and Guattari, that “if the writer is in the margins or completely outside of his or her fragile community, this situation allows the writer all the more the possibility to express another possible community and to forge the means for another consciousness and another sensibility” (*Kafka* 31–32). This being said, by their physical rootedness and stated investment in the local and the popular, Frankétienne, Figiolé, and Philoctète, have invited interrogation of the fact that their deliberate and sustained hermeticism renders their works exceptionally challenging to even the most sophisticated readers. There is little chance, indeed, that their highly esoteric prose works would be accessible to the vast majority of the Haitian population. This question of the distance between elite writing subjects and the subaltern individuals and communities that circulate as narrative objects of discourse is, then, particularly troublesome as regards the Spiralists’ works. Yet while one might be tempted to fault the Spiralists for not having produced a language that their people understand, to paraphrase Figiolé, cited above, the fact is that the impenetrability of their works is no more frustrating to the non-reading Creolophone fisherman, marketwoman, canecutter, or *restavek* than would be a three-word sentence written in Haitian Creole. That is, to the non-literate individual, the written text—whatever its formal choices—is inaccessible as an object of communication. Therefore, to the extent to which the Spiralists have decided or been compelled, as artists, to write prose fiction, the complexity of their writing style is frustrating only to those who (believe they) can read. Like Jean Price-Mars, the writers of *Légitime défense*, Aimé Césaire, Edouard Glissant, the Creolists, and countless other of their regional antecedents and peers, the three Spiralists are fully cognizant of the inevitable make-up of their potential reading public. If they create works that resist transparency, demand participation, and thwart traditional practices of reading, they do so with a full understanding of exactly who is being challenged by their prose. The Spiralists’ narratives level the playing field, so to speak, destabilizing and unmooring the ostensibly—even complacently—literate; they upset the implicit pairing of literacy and mastery.

In this trouble-making attitude toward the written, Frankétienne,

Figolé, and Philoctète resolutely participate in strategies of narrative writing that connect at once with a regional postcolonial and a global postmodern aesthetic. The distinctly oralized texture of the Spiralists' prose generally values the syntactic over the semantic, the atmospheric over the "factual." In the process of telling their stories, the Spiralists deconstruct and rebuild words and phrases such that the essentially arbitrary nature of language is revealed (how many times can one say "elbow" or "butcher"—or "parsley," for that matter—before the word literally stops making/producing sense?). Their narratives take on a truly aural importance. In this, the three authors embrace their positioning on what Laroche has called "the doubled stage of representation," a productively purgatorial space of the simultaneously oral and scriptural where "the text, in creating itself, produces its reader" (*Double scène* 26). This new reader, born and raised alongside the novels s/he encounters, must be willing to experience without necessarily understanding, to enjoy the opportunities presented by uncertainty, and to accept the responsibilities that come with the privilege of literacy. These responsibilities are both creative and ethical. They make the reader complicit in the production of the written and refuse his or her passivity in the face of an unquestioned, omniscient author-ity. This dialogic relationship between reader and text hints more than a little bit, of course, at the participatory nature of oral storytelling. Moreover, it is a call for obligatory engagement that resonates meaningfully in the particular context of Haiti's history of state-sanctioned repression as well as with respect to the phenomenon of "doctor politics"<sup>3</sup> so lamentably common in postcolonial societies in general.

The implication of the reader in the processes of creation links the writings of the three Spiralists to a Barthesian—thus literate and literary Franco-European—objective as well. Indeed, in *S/Z* Barthes calls for investment in "writerly" texts: works of literature that aim "to make the reader no longer a consumer, but producer of the text" (4); works that refuse "the pitiless divorce which the literary institution maintains between the producer of the text and its user, between its owner and its consumer, between its author and its reader" (4). Barthes frames his discussion in terms that evoke politics and the economy, denouncing what he dubs "classic" texts as so many dangerous fictions, and condemning their passively receiving readers as socially irresponsible and unengaged. The parallels between this perspective and that of the Haitian Spiralists are remarkable. Much like Barthes's ideal(ized) text, the works of Frankétienne, Figolé, and Philoctète offer a "plurality of entrances,

the opening of networks, the infinity of languages” and seek to avoid hierarchies established by “some singular system” (5). “Reversible” and “multivalent” (6), their novel-spirals indeed make the reading process a veritable “labor of language” (11); and, as with the writerly text, one certainly “would have a hard time finding [them] in a bookstore” (5). Of course, as Barthes admits, the truly writerly text cannot actually be. It eludes its would-be audience in a Derridean play of perpetual *différance* and wholly defies the work of the theorist. It is not my intention here, then, to suggest that the Spiralists have somehow managed to write this Barthesian ideal. I do maintain, however, that their spiralic prose works aspire to sustain infinite plurality and to refute absolute truths.

These efforts, as I have explored in my readings of the Spiralists’ works, implicate every constituent element of the three writers’ scribal practice. The zombies, alter egos, time-travelers, and schizophrenics that populate their narratives are irredeemably fragmented and multiple. Impossible to grasp fully—by the reader and by the texts that (do not) contain them—these characters at once suffer and are empowered by their marginality. They are neither unambiguous heroes nor absolute victims. Often, it is not even clear whether they are actually even protagonists. Refusing to stand still and be judged, these unsettled and irregular beings ultimately subvert the author-ity of the (necessarily elite) writing subject and assert the unrepresentability of being in general and of the subaltern being in particular. The fact of their mutability and brokenness directly reflects the troubled landscapes and ambivalent histories through which they move. Indeed, to the extent to which fragmentation and discontinuity characterize regional reality, the people, places, and moments presented in the Spiralists’ narratives offer unmitigated representations of this reality. Their novels do not indulge in the “Orphic impulse ... to unify the fragments, to ‘remember’ the lost body, to fill the void ... to confer meaning on an elusive and complex reality” (Dash, “World” 115). They make no attempt to deny, compensate for, or escape the discomfort of the unknown.

It is through the metaphor of the spiral that Frankétienne, Fignolé, and Philoctète are able to maintain these tensions in their narratives. While instances of trauma, violence, and alienation appear throughout their works, present also are examples of rehabilitation, renewal, and dezombification. Focused, above all, on the immediate and the experiential, the three authors embrace those fragments of reality they are able to capture, and thus incorporate the episodic and the unstable into the very foundations of their works. The spiralic whirlwinds they present seize and



integrate everything in their path, without distinction, judgment, or hierarchy. Conclusions are rarely drawn, and no directive discourse is constructed. Questions are constantly posed, yet answers are neither provided nor sought. Although the resulting narratives little resemble the writings of their regional peers, the spiral form itself nevertheless links their literary practice to other New World perspectives. Chamoiseau has called upon the Caribbean writer to create a new language, (un)situated at the intersection of the oral and the written. Glissant insists on “the necessity for a chaos-writing for this time in which being is entirely chaotic,” a “form of expression [that] follows the same blueprint as the individual” (*Soleil* 15). Indeed, in a brief footnote to his introduction to *Edouard Glissant*, Michael Dash writes, “Glissant’s interest in dynamic and open-ended systems of thought has an interesting parallel in the movement called *Spiralisme*” (184). These and other such evocations of cyclicity, invention, boundless chaos, and unmediated language as integral to a developing postcolonial ethic-aesthetic show clearly the extent to which Spiralism addresses, and even provides possible solutions to, the preoccupations of the wider Caribbean—and this despite the relatively isolated circumstances of its initial formulation.

Though I have made a point in these concluding remarks, as well as throughout this study, to note the ways in which the aesthetic philosophy of the Spiralists connects with that of other significant writer-intellectuals of the (French-speaking) Caribbean, I’d like to believe that I have done more here than merely advocate for the inclusion of the three Spiralist authors in an already existing canon. Admittedly, yes, there is something of the pragmatic to my intervention. I would certainly like to see the works of Frankétienne, Figolé, and Philoctète more consistently reprinted, circulated, translated, and taught. More significantly perhaps, though, by highlighting Spiralism’s originality and the extent to which it engages with regional concerns—social and aesthetic—I hope to have drawn attention to the critical role we (must) play as theorists of the postcolonial New World in avoiding the creation of new centers and margins in a region itself so persistently perceived as marginal to a metropolitan center. As I have argued in my introduction, the literary institution that makes possible the circulation of aesthetic commodities produced in the postcolonial Americas through the networks of capital in Europe and the United States has fostered an evolutionary and even oppositional “tradition” in the French-speaking Caribbean—a “theoretical tropism” (Gallagher 22) that has effectively peripheralized the Spiralists and other writers who, for whatever reasons, have not seen fit to support their

creative writings with self-reflexive or promotional discourses of being and writing. In effect, the spiral narratives produced by Frankétienne, Jean-Claude Figiolé, and René Philoctète are not counterdiscursive. They operate, rather, from a non-contestatory position of vigorous difference that announces no conclusive truths. These texts implicitly demand, then, that we return to our most fundamental responsibilities as theorists—that we “make meaning from the analysis of a set of discourses in their relation to one another” (Garraway 17) rather than relying upon the theoretical articulations of the writers with whom we engage. The Spiralists’ prose fiction implicitly calls for increased scholarly vigilance with respect to the relative canonical fixity of the French-speaking Caribbean literary universe as a whole. Their under-representation in current scholarship is a tacit reminder that we must attentively resist our tendencies to accept existing canons within this Caribbean space meant always to be dynamic in the whirl/world.

## NOTES

1 *Vœu de voyage* 91.

2 Cilas Kemedjio has convincingly asserted: “Rural people ... are mocked in comic television or theater programs, which poke fun at their lack of comfort or familiarity with urban settings, or they are revered in folkloric dances when people dress up in what was once their daily garb of bright blue denim dresses or pants and red scarves or madrases. Still, they are like the Maroons in their own country, excluded from any national decision-making process, remaining symbols more than anything else of the bread basket of a country that increasingly looks for its bread abroad” (“Postcolonial” 99).

3 “[A] mode of political leadership ... democratically based but autocratic in style” (Burton 258). For a thorough description of this phenomenon, see the entirety of Burton’s commentary (258–59).

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