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Autobiographical Voices

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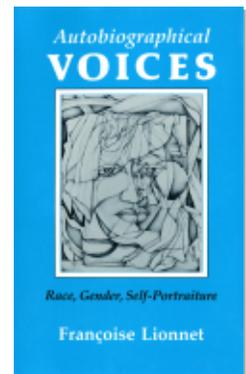
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Conclusion

The social revolution . . . cannot draw its poetry from the past, but only from the future. It cannot begin with itself before it has stripped off all superstition in regard to the past.

Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*

This investigation began with the image of a suicidal Francophone male writer on his last bridge and ended on the utopian vision of a female writer who uses her native island as a Nietzschean “bridge” to a different future. To offer any kind of “conclusive” resolution to this book would only trivialize issues and questions that are fundamentally political but can only be addressed within an aesthetic framework, because, as Fredric Jameson has noted, aesthetics addresses individual experience and does not try to conceptualize the real in an abstract way.¹

My analysis has been primarily concerned with the politics of racial, sexual, and national identity. But these questions are so complex that I can only hope to have set forth some of the boundaries within which further explorations of *métissage* as a creative aesthetic practice and an analytical tool might be continued. I am thus following in the steps of two Caribbean writers—Edouard Glissant and Nancy Morejón—who advocate multiplicity and diversity as radical critiques of totality. Glissant, in particular, has outlined the task of the postcolonial intellectual: it is to give shape to a nonessentialist aesthetics tied to the emergence of occluded oral cultures, to the articulation of a reality that emphasizes relational patterns over autonomous ones, interconnectedness over independence, isomorphic analogies over unifying totalities, opacity over transparency; in short, it is to elaborate the “aesthetics of a non-universalizing form of Diversity [esthétique . . . du Divers non universalisant].”² Such an aesthetics is potentially emancipatory because it creates a space where the mimetic illusions of Western representational systems are

¹See Fredric Jameson, “Cognitive Mapping,” in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), pp. 347–57.

²Edouard Glissant, *Le Discours antillais* (Paris: Seuil, 1981), p. 465, my translation.

deconstructed. In that space, which is neither *ou-topia* nor *eu-topia*, differences are not sublimated and the ethnocentric self does not establish itself by selectively defining an "other" to be assimilated and subjugated. Rather, specificities are valorized and allowed to come into play, engendering a new mechanics of relational patterns, a new collective identity that does not invoke an "authentic" origin but forms the basis for a *project*: the transformation of polarities into multifarious units sharing a common goal. The creative tensions at work in the social body that accepts and values difference and diversity are analogous to the ones I have shown to exist in the narratives of the male and female writers studied in this book. *Métissage* and intertextuality are thus brought into implicit conjunction and constitute different ways of talking about the same thing on a personal, racial, cultural, or textual level.

If Humbert's novel seems to create images of utopia, it is because her insights are so at odds with the cultural realities of larger nation-states where the abstract myth of the melting pot did succeed in reducing cultural differences to the level of folkloric representations; today those differences are slowly being reencoded as the rich and valuable traditions they always were. (Such is the case in both the United States and in France, where regional minorities as well as new immigrants are struggling to voice their specificities.) Writers from Mauritius and the Caribbean islands who are engaged in creating new images of the future do stress the positive value of "utopian" inscriptions. Recently, two critics argue that "the Mauritian society of tomorrow will be able to give birth to human bridges [des hommes-ponts] who might very well become the real interpreters of the North-South dialogue. Being a microcosm of the world, Mauritius will no doubt be the living proof that understanding among the peoples of the world may not be just a utopian prospect."³ I think that both Glissant and Morejón could subscribe to these statements, which might be applied to certain Caribbean realities as well. And Maryse Condé might concur that her vision of that "vast horizon which the Antilleans of tomorrow will have to discover" is convergent with Humbert's imaginary reality.⁴

³See Paul Turcotte and Claude Brabant, "Île Maurice: Nuvo sime," *Peuples Noirs/Peuples Africains* 31 (Jan./Feb. 1983), 106, my translation.

⁴Maryse Condé, "Propos sur l'identité culturelle," in *Négritude: Traditions et développement*, ed. Guy Michaud (Paris: Editions Complexe/Presses Universitaires de France, 1978), p. 84, my translation.

How then is it possible to conclude? Indeed, what is the critic to do when caught between suicide and utopia? In a book titled *L'Utopie ou la mort* ("Utopia or death") thinker René Dumont argues that utopian thinking is perhaps the only way out of the impasse created by the neocolonialist strangulation of nations and peoples, whose slow but sure death has become nothing but a spectacle for a Western public opinion anesthetized by the visual medium of television. In *L'Afrique étranglée*, Dumont and Marie-France Motin say that the West must learn to "listen," "se mettre à l'écoute," in order to avoid the totalizing approaches of theoretical problem solving.⁵ As for Frantz Fanon, he titles the last chapter of *Black Skin, White Masks*: "By Way of Conclusion." I would like to borrow his approach and offer, by way of conclusion, a few final remarks concerning the reading itinerary I adopted in this book.

Having focused on the languages writers use to translate the creative tensions of their plural realities, I have deployed a variety of reading strategies. Each chapter has attempted to analyze a particular work—or group of related works in the case of Angelou—and has scrutinized the organizing patterns that generate the polysemic meanings of the texts. Some contemporary critical theory has unfortunately been an appropriation, always arrogant, of literary texts through abstract theoretical concepts that did not always do justice to the contextually problematic nature of writing and reading, meaning and meaningfulness, dialogue and exchange. What I hope to have accomplished in this book is twofold: close attention to the language of the texts discussed but also concern for the ways in which this language embodies and reflects the social, historical, and political dynamics of the larger cultural realms that surround it and give it value and power.

My approach implies, in particular, a critique of early forms of negritude as well as a refusal of the "ghettoization" of women writers within a particular tradition of feminine styles, be it *écriture féminine* or any other essentialist approach to "Woman" as a category which might transcend historical or cultural differences. I adhere, however, to what I would call a "feminist practice of reading," understood as a resistance to reductionist theories or to the territorializing of texts by critics who remain deaf to the "confusion of

⁵René Dumont, *L'Utopie ou la mort* (Paris: Seuil, 1974); René Dumont and Marie-France Motin, *L'Afrique étranglée* (Paris: Seuil, 1980), p. 279.

tongues" by which these texts are inhabited. I have tried to show how a careful understanding of textual structures and verbal patterns can guide our interpretive strategies and enrich our experience of this diverse body of literature.

The works of Hurston, Angelou, Cardinal, and Humbert can help us imagine a future that integrates positive images of the past while encouraging critical and nonsectarian participation in the conflicts of the present. By contrast, Condé shows the impasses of unresolved historical conflicts. By reinterpreting Augustine's *Confessions* and Nietzsche's *Ecce Homo* in light of the autobiographical performance of these five contemporary women writers, who variously transform, adapt, or subvert their cultural and literary heritages, I hope to have shown that any reductive reading of the past or of women's writing needlessly limits our options and obscures the real links between past repressions and present morasses, links that must be recognized and articulated before they can be successfully severed.

Since it is not possible to escape from the voice of tradition (any more than one can hope ever to be "free" from one's upbringing), the Nietzschean question of transvaluation of values becomes an urgent one. Indeed, what we can learn from autobiographical writings is a new way of listening for the relational voice of the self, the self in us "of woman born," which becomes progressively alienated in language when culture, ethnicity, and historical contradictions inscribe their identifying codes on our bodies. Decoding these inscriptions could be called a form of "autoethnography," as Hurston's sophisticated approach proves. This amounts to a genuine way of perceiving difference while emphasizing similarities in the processes of cultural encoding from which none of us can escape.

There are many other writers whose works could be illuminated by this concept of textual *mé-tissage* of styles. The novels of Simone Schwarz-Bart, Assia Djebar, and Abdelwahab Medded might lend themselves to such an approach. Many Quebecois writers—belonging to the nation Pierre Vallières has called the "nègres blancs d'Amérique"—could also be included in such a study, as could South Africans Bessie Head and Nadine Gordimer. Once we understand the emancipatory value of *métissage* as concept and practice, the possibilities become endless.