Deciphering Race
Callanan, Laura

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Chapter 1

Toussaint and the Staging of Political Aesthetics in Harriet Martineau’s The Hour and the Man (1841)

Harriet Martineau’s 1841 novel, The Hour and the Man, presents a fictional biography of Toussaint L’Ouverture, leader of the rebel slaves during the 1790s St. Domingo Revolution. Martineau uses the St. Domingo Revolution, a powerful signifier during the first half of the nineteenth century, as a vehicle to argue her abolitionist views and to rescue Toussaint from what she felt was an unfair damnation of him in most biographies of the man and accounts of the revolution. She attempts to romanticize the figure of Toussaint, echoing Rousseau’s Noble Savage and Aphra Behn’s Oronooko, transforming him into the harbinger of a new, egalitarian world. To accomplish this revision, Martineau emphasizes Toussaint’s dedication to Western learning and superior critical and interpretive skills, traits problematically symbolized by his frequent allusions to classic Western texts. However, interpretation plays a more significant role in the novel than that of distinctive character traits of the African hero. The arrangement of many scenes aestheticizes the process of interpretation for the reader, turning the reader into both an interpreter and an observer of interpretation within an overt staging of critical reflection. This narrative strategy suggests the importance of critical discernment for an understanding of the dynamics of racial representation, because understanding racial categories is a loaded moment of interpretation. Characters in this novel “read” race as skin color, class, and abilities.

In a crucial scene midway through the novel, Martineau employs a variety of narrative strategies to facilitate the textual enactment of racial decipherment. Toussaint’s son and his drawing teacher engage in an extended interpretation, parody, and disempowerment of the French colonial power
structure through caricatures and performances of the primary colonial authorities on the island, a process reminiscent of the Signifyin(g) practices of the African American literary tradition. This spirited moment is the culmination of a series of discrete dialogues on love, race, politics, architecture, and class, all of which take place at the overtly aestheticized site of a ruined mansion, and all of which contribute to and enrich the parody. By first establishing the context in which the novel appeared, and then explicating the language of this crucial scene, this chapter will argue that the resolution of this scene serves to complicate issues of race, nation, and political allegiance by throwing into question the process of racial interpretation itself.

**Negotiating History**

Martineau’s decision to write the historical romance, *The Hour and the Man*, speaks as much to her dedication to a particular ethics of storytelling as it does to her commitment to abolitionism. She became interested in writing about Toussaint and the revolution while reading a *Quarterly Review* article on St. Domingo. A friend encouraged her to drop the idea, however, so she put it aside for a time. When she revisited the project, she debated writing about Toussaint or about a crime story she read of in a police report. She decided not to write the criminal story, explaining, “The reason why I never did is that, as I have grown older, I have seen more and more the importance of dwelling on things honest, lovely, hopeful and bright, rather than on the dark and fouler passions and most mournful weaknesses of human nature. Therefore it was that I reverted to Toussiant [sic], rather than to the moral victim who was the hero of the police–court story” (*Autobiography*, 112). She chose Toussaint as a heroic figure that would enliven her readers through his admirable nature and actions. In a pointed reflection in her diary on the choice of Toussaint as a valuable topic, Martineau wrote, “it admits of romance, it furnishes me with a story, it will do a world of good to the slave question, it is heroic in its character” (quoted in Thomas, 93), thus tying together the formal, ethical, thematic, and political motivations for her project.

A commitment to historical accuracy underpins the author’s determination to have her work contribute to individual and cultural betterment. In her *Autobiography*, she takes the time to note the need for integrity, “especially in historical writing,—in which I could have no comfort but by directing my readers to my authorities, in all matters of any importance”
(Autobiography, 414). To that end, Martineau, in the spirit of a generous researcher, presents in an Appendix to The Hour and the Man her sources of information on the topic, and her motivations for writing the novel:

From the time when my attention was first fixed on this hero, I have been struck with the inconsistencies contained in all reports of his character which ascribe to him cruelty and hypocrisy; and, after a long and careful comparison of such views with his words and deeds, with the evidence obtainable from St. Domingo, and with the temper of his times in France, I have arrived at the conclusion that his character was, in sober truth, such as I have endeavoured to represent it in the foregoing work. (248)

Her project could be generally described as historically revisionist, motivated in large part by the ways she felt that Toussaint had been textually misrepresented. Because of her dedication to abolition and to a rigorous and accessible intellectualism, Martineau undertook the project of representing Toussaint, hero of the largest and most successful of the slave rebellions, to British and American audiences in the context of post-Emancipation Britain.

The powerful images that Haiti and the St. Domingo Revolution evoked in the minds of mid-Victorian readers meant that Martineau needed to shape events in order to win and keep her readers’ support for her revisionist biography. Seymour Drescher, in Capitalism and Antislavery, argues that “[t]he St. Domingue revolution of 1791 was, of course, the greatest and most successful example of slave resistance in history” (97). Functioning as the specter of many white citizens’ fears about black uprisings, the revolution was, ironically, also used by abolitionists to argue for racial equality. Looking briefly at the role Haiti played in the debate over Emancipation, and, more broadly, in the management of the West Indian islands, we get a sense of the ways in which Martineau positioned her text as an overwhelmingly positive vision of slave potential and humanitarian ideals that were ultimately thwarted by the machinations of nations more concerned with imperial and economic benefit than with realizing ethical and egalitarian goals. Written at the beginning of the “Hungry Forties,” at a time when abolitionists were turning their attention to the project of dismantling American slavery, Martineau celebrates the success of the St. Domingo Revolution, while at the same time noting the destructive and oppressive nature of much imperial policy.

The danger Haitian independence posed for other slave-holding islands, and the power the Haitian example held as an argument for racial
equality, were central issues in the British battle over Emancipation that grew in force in the 1820s. In 1823, British abolitionists turned from the issue of the slave trade to their new goal of gradual emancipation:

The campaign against British colonial slavery was launched in response to the realisation that, contrary to activists' hopes, the abolition of the British slave trade had not led to improvements in the treatment of slaves or to progress towards their emancipation in the British West Indies. A new national society was formed: the Society for the Mitigation and Gradual Abolition of Slavery Throughout the British Dominions, known popularly as the Anti-Slavery Society. It campaigned initially for the amelioration and eventual abolition of slavery, and then from 1830–31, in conjunction with the Agency Committee, for immediate and entire emancipation. (Midgley, 43)

In the resulting Parliamentary debates, as we will see, Haiti served both the pro- and anti-Emancipation causes. Thomas Fowell Buxton, arguing for the necessity of gradual emancipation, identified the significance of a Jamaican slave seeing his or her free neighbors across the water: “He sees another island, on which every labourer is free; in which eight hundred thousand Blacks, men, women, and children, exercise all the rights, and enjoy all the blessings—and they are innumerable and incalculable—which freedom gives. (“Substance,” 9)

Buxton used the specter of interference from Haiti as a warning that the government needed to take emancipation seriously in order to avoid conflict with the enslaved Africans on the islands. He argued that although the present rulers of Haiti pledged noninvolvement, the future might not be so safe: “But, who will venture to secure us against the ambition of their successors?” (“Substance,” 9).

Conversely, St. Domingo was also invoked as a positive sign of racial equality. Responding to the statements of Mr. C. Ellis on the dangers of insurrection, the commentary by the Society for the Mitigation and Gradual Abolition of Slavery Throughout the British Dominions argued that St. Domingo was a testament to the civilized potential of African people:

Notwithstanding the atrocities, and the years of sanguinary conflict, not only with the French but with each other, which marked the revolution in that island, and universal desolation which these occasioned; we find, after a lapse of thirty years, that the Haytians have not reverted to the habits of
savages, but, on the contrary, that they are improving in the arts of civilized life; we find them protected by equal laws, engaged in the pursuits of peaceful industry, adhering to the profession at least of Christianity, and competently discharging every duty attaching to them as citizens and members of a well-regulated community. (“Substance,” 146)

In his “Appeal,” William Wilberforce notes that “testimony as to the progress of the Negro children, in common school learning, has been given by all the masters who have instructed them in the island of Hayti” (48). The ability of Haitians to win, to establish, and to develop their own system of government and administration thus functioned as a vision of the potential equality of the races in a state of freedom. Because black people are equal—and will always work toward a state of freedom—the only way to avoid the bloodshed of rebellion, this argument suggests, is gradual emancipation.

In Society in America (1837), Martineau herself uses the example of Haiti when discussing the ignorance of the southern slave owners. Martineau suggests that some knowledge of Haitian emancipation would help these slave owners understand the potential of the black race: “If they would do themselves and their slaves the justice of inquiring with precision what is the state of Hayti; what has taken place in the West Indies; what the emancipation really was there; what its effects actually are; they would obtain a clearer view of their own prospects” (2:119–20). The emergence of Haiti, then, is both instructive and terrifying, an example of what could happen within the unreformed dynamic of the slave owning system, and of the positive potential of emancipation.

However, the pressures of negotiating this complex signifying terrain surrounding St. Domingo seems to have led Martineau to violate her commitment to historical accuracy regarding British involvement in the revolution. The British entered the St. Domingo conflict for two reasons: the danger the rebellion posed for the security of Jamaica, and the news that the French planters wanted to join England to avoid the implementation of full citizenship for the free people of color on the island. France was at war in Europe with the First Coalition (Austria, Prussia, Spain, Holland, and England), and England saw its chance to achieve control of the Caribbean islands (Ott, 76–77). For a significant time, the historical Toussaint fought in a multilayered conflict in which the alliances among those involved in the fighting—mulattos, free blacks, slaves, French, British—frequently shifted.4 By the time England finally pulled out of the conflict in 1798, the “campaign had cost over ten million pounds and perhaps as many as 100,000
casualties” (Ott, 93). Between 1793 and 1798, the English had been a significant economic and military factor in the conflict. And, as C.L.R. James notes, in the months following the withdrawal of troops, the British constructed themselves “as the authors of ‘the happy revolution,’ and rejoicing at the freedom of a people, to enslave whom they had just lost 100,000 men” (James, 227).

Martineau, however, reduces the British presence to two brief scenes: the first is in the opening chapter, when the narrator provides a quick overview of the initial conflict between the mulattos and the whites. This event took place on the island after the French National Assembly decree of March 15, 1791 that gave the rights of full citizenship to free people of color. In her description of planters’ reactions to this decree, Martineau notes that some “proposed to one another to offer their colony and their allegiance to England” (Hour, 1:4). The second significant mention lies in the predictions made by Madame Ogé, mother of the famous mulatto leader killed by whites in the opening conflict. She tells a group of women about Bonaparte’s imminent betrayal of the mulattos and blacks on the island: “It will soon be generally known that the preliminaries of peace between France and England are signed: and I happen to know two things more;—that Bonaparte has agreed to maintain negro slavery in Martinique, Guadalupe, and Cayenne; and that—(pray, listen, young lady)—he declares to the English that he can do what he pleases in St. Domingo” (Hour, 2:234). Both of these passages allude to the presence of the English in the conflict, but nowhere in the narrative is there a direct description of Toussaint or his men actually killing British soldiers. Martineau explicitly refers to French soldiers, and white soldiers, but not to identifiably British soldiers.

Additionally, after Martineau dramatizes Toussaint’s rescue of General Laveaux (1:chap. 9), a French General captured by the mulattos, the narrative jumps a significant seven years. The lost seven years in the text would seem to fall between 1791 and 1798, the block of years that roughly corresponds to the years of most intense British involvement. That Martineau should obscure the historical record is not a problem in a work of fiction. But in light of her strong belief in historical accuracy, the omission of overt British involvement suggests the author’s wish to downplay the British campaign against the slave rebellion on St. Domingo for her 1840s post-Emancipation English readers. This decision perhaps helped garner the sympathy of her readers for her revision of Toussaint as abolitionist hero, and it evaded directly representing England’s previous involvement in the West Indian slavery system. Thus she perhaps calmed
her readers’ anxieties and feelings of responsibility about this complex historical event while assuring them of her account’s accuracy. And at least for one reviewer writing for the Athenaeum, her negotiation was a success: “Miss Martineau, considering her special purpose, has chosen her subject judiciously, and treated it well, because she has treated it historically” (958). Instead of offering a sentimental portrayal of the evils of slavery, this reviewer argues that, ironically, the effectiveness of her story is in its factual presentation.

**Rhetorical Abolitionism**

Although Martineau saw her novel as participating in the project of abolitionist reform to which she dedicated much of her life, and for which she appears to have qualified her promise of historical accuracy, the novel generally veers away from the conventional tone and emphases of female abolitionist writing. The decision to dramatize the events not only of the St. Domingo Revolution, but also of a heroic black male leader, differentiates Martineau from many other female abolitionists writing during the early to mid-nineteenth century. However, Martineau’s narrative does not altogether neglect traditional abolitionist themes. As Clare Midgley argues in her discussion of female abolitionist discourse, “Women focused on three main aspects of female suffering: flogging, ‘moral degradation’ and separation of mothers from children” (97). Of these three concerns, Martineau incorporated most clearly the last one, within the mysterious story of the death of the slave Thérèse’s child, a strange moment that is worth examining more closely.

Throughout the novel, moments of indeterminacy productively problematize aesthetic and ideological structures that underpin racist thinking, thus complicating easy binaries and conventional understandings of race. The text actively involves the reader in this process. The subplot of Thérèse’s child is a vivid example of this narrative strategy. At the beginning of the rebellion, Toussaint leads a group of people out of the most dangerous area and toward safety. Thérèse—a slave and mistress of a decidedly racist white man named Papalier—carries with her a baby, which is understood to be her master’s child. When troops pass nearby the baby cries, but someone snatches the baby from her and the crying stops. She never sees the baby again, and she never knows who took it, but the text strongly suggests that it is Papalier (Hour, 1:79–82). This strange scene, like several other moments in Martineau’s text, is left completely unresolved.
Toward the end of the novel, Thérèse—now Madame Dessalines, wife of the most brutal of the black generals—watches at Papalier’s deathbed, and we expect closure in the form of a confession or an unburdening. Toussaint sends her to watch at the bedside for just this reason, but the expected disclosure never occurs (Hour, 3:134–44). Although we assume that Thérèse’s baby was smothered to death, we never actually see the act of violence. Martineau consistently shies away from portraying violence in both this subplot and the novel as a whole, perhaps suggesting an authorial anxiety about representing the details of war, rape, and miscegenation. The text is closer to an intellectualized military novel describing strategies for battle and for creating a new state. Although the baby’s mysterious death suggests a momentary alignment with the emphases of a female abolitionist tradition, connections with these traditional themes remain generally undeveloped. The unresolved ending of the subplot perhaps indicates a moment of ambivalence in the face of both the realities of rape and of miscegenation, an open-endedness that we will see more elaborately in the novel’s direct engagement with racial politics.

Martineau most clearly departs from the female abolitionist tradition by allowing her hero and his followers to maintain prominence in the novel’s actions and to retain revolutionary agency. Midgley argues that female abolitionists conventionally lessened black agency and portrayed themselves as saviors: “black agency in undermining slavery is devalued and, under the auspices of the Anti-Slavery Society, freedom is granted as the gift of white philanthropists who leave class relations undisturbed” (90). The popularity of this plot, Midgley argues, explains why the later Uncle Tom’s Cabin (1852) was so successful: “For this role to be maintained, black nobility had to be represented by white abolitionists as characterised by passive suffering rather than active resistance” (148). Martineau seems deliberately to avoid this type of narrative. Although several of Toussaint’s generals and advisors are white, white characters are seldom agents for black people’s freedom or military success. The novel consistently presents the revolution as an action undertaken by mulattoes and black slaves, who are later led by Toussaint, in response to white treachery. The revolution allows the slaves to win the freedom that is due to them as human beings.

Reviews of the novel suggest that the credibility of the black hero was a problem for some readers, thus suggesting that the autonomy granted to the novel’s protagonist perhaps challenged preconceived ideas about black agency. The review in the Athenaeum, for example, argues that Toussaint is a completely unrealistic figure: “Now, not only is such a man beyond the
possibilities of her hero’s early condition—for he was a born slave... but also he is above nature and humanity—the mere creature of the imagination. Her hero, moreover, has the African’s physiognomy, but the European’s tongue” (959). In a more culturally self-conscious reading, the Westminster Review suggests that Martineau’s representation of Toussaint was instructive rather than ridiculous: “Negro heroes, and black statesmen and generals, sound strangely to the ear in this quarter of the world, and fearfully so across the Atlantic. Our realized idea of a negro is a black footman; the Americans, [sic] that of a corrupted slave. St Domingo has proved that heroism and statesmanship are not confined to one colour; and we are obliged to Miss Martineau for exhibiting this fact” (235). In contrast to the Athenaeum reviewer’s racist perspective, this anonymous reviewer describes the novel as illuminating of black character. However, both reviews misunderstand Martineau’s generic project and its relationship to the rendering of the slave leader. Martineau labels the novel a “historical romance,” and the romantic aspect speaks to the issue of idealized characterization. In Northrop Frye’s discussion of the genre, he states that “the essential difference between novel and romance lies in the conception of characterization. The romancer does not attempt to create ‘real people’ so much as stylized figures which expand into psychological archetypes” (304). Although it is true that those slaves who found themselves in the relatively privileged position of house-servants and other non-field-workers, sometimes, as C.L.R James notes, were “able to profit by the cultural advantages of the system they [were] attacking” (19), Martineau’s rendering of her hero has all the earmarks of a romanticized and relatively non-realistic ideal. Toussaint is Martineau’s version of a romantic hero, an idealized emblem of the potential heroic stature of the black man, and a testament to the striving for freedom made by all members of the human community.

The choice of the romance genre makes possible a characterization potentially more politically efficacious: “Certain elements of character are released in the romance which make it naturally a more revolutionary form than the novel” (Frye, 304–5). Martineau takes the historical events of the revolution—as well as the conventional understanding of Toussaint—and creates her version of the intellectualized black hero as religious, charismatic, manly, rational, and well read as possible for his situation. A devout Catholic who must decide among allegiances to faith, country, or color, Toussaint is a model of strong piety. There are remarkably few physical descriptions of him. He is described as heroic, charismatic, and a great military leader. At one point Afra, a mulatto girl, and
Euphrosyne, a Creole white girl, are attracted to him, blushing as they speak to him in a hall: “He would have passed them with a smile: but he saw that Afra was urging Euphrosyne to speak, and that the blushing Euphrosyne dared not do so” (Hour, 2:37). Thus we assume that he is an attractive man as portrayed in the novel, although James identifies the actual man as a relatively unattractive, yet charismatic, figure: “[d]espite his awkwardness of build and ugliness of feature he managed in the end to make a strong impression upon all with whom he came in contact” (251). But his actual features are left remarkably undefined in Martineau’s text, and the reader assumes that his skin is a dark color only because he is the leader of the blacks, rather than of the mulattos. It is his faith and education that define him, and the reader must imagine the physical attributes of the man according to his or her reading of Toussaint’s admirable actions, intelligence, and religious belief.

Martineau’s depiction of Toussaint as Europeanized and attractive positions her against a Western narrative tradition that denigrates African appearance in order to justify a system of slavery. As David Brion Davis argues in The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture, distinguishing marks were necessary in the system of Western slavery in order to justify and naturalize a system that, in Classical times, was more socially based and at least somewhat less rigidly deterministic (Stepan, xi). Eric Williams suggests that characterizations of African looks as inferior have everything to do with the need to justify labor exploitation: “The features of the man, his hair, color, and dentifrice, his ‘subhuman’ characteristics so widely pleaded, were only the later rationalizations to justify a simple economic fact: that the colonies needed labor and resorted to Negro labor because it was cheapest and best” (Williams, 20). For Martineau to create a physically and ethically attractive African hero was to fly in the face of a tradition that consistently denigrated African physiognomy as a way to justify a system of exploitation.

But Martineau’s critique goes beyond positively aestheticizing Toussaint’s dark skin color. The novel continually interrogates general assumptions about skin color. Rather than simply exchange one term for another (for example, Toussaint is as intelligent as a white man), or one culture for another (for example, Haiti is as sophisticated as France), the text blends and complicates simple binaries, thus revealing the illusion of rationality where none actually exists. This process amounts to a deconstruction of racial aesthetics. Although the subject of skin color appears repeatedly throughout the novel, direct engagement with this issue occurs only in two conversations between the Creole girl, Euphrosyne, and her
grandfather, a former slave owner with a reputation for cruelty. Although dismissed by at least one reviewer because the subplot “conduces little to the interest of the story” (Westminster Review, 236), the discussions between Euphrosyne and her grandfather are central to the novel’s engagement with the issue of skin color. In the first of two conversations about this issue, Euphrosyne and her grandfather discuss her friendship with a mulatto girl, Afra, who is the daughter of a high government official in Toussaint’s administration. Her grandfather suggests, “It is time you made friends of your own complexion, child; and into the convent you go—this very day.” Euphrosyne objects: “Oh, grandpapa, you don’t mean that those nuns are of my complexion! Poor pale creatures! I would not for the world look like them. . . . How sorry you would be, grandpapa, when you asked for me next winter, to see all those yellow-faced women pass before you.” Her grandfather appreciates the humor of her argument, but then reflects to himself, “that there was certainly more colour there than was common in the West Indies; but that it must fade, in or out of the convent, by the time she was twenty; and she had better be in a place where she was safe” (2:10–11).

This exchange suggests the novel’s deliberate alignment of skin color, social position, violence, and religious life. The grandfather understands social distinctions and wants to use the systems in place to ensure his granddaughter’s position and safety. Euphrosyne counters his argument by going outside of the established categories for skin color, and calls the nuns “yellow-skinned,” moving beyond the light and dark distinction by expanding the categories. She employs this strategy again in a later exchange with her grandfather, in which he replies,

“Do not speak of colour, child. What expressions you pick up from Afra, and such people! It is our distinction that we have no colour,—that we are white.”

“That is the distinction of the nuns, I know; but I hoped it was not mine yet. I do not forget how you pinch my cheeks sometimes, and talk about roses.” (2:117)

When coupled with her attractiveness as a character, Euphrosyne’s resistance to incorporating the stifling categories of color disrupts those lines of demarcation within Martineau’s text. In these two scenes, the novel surpasses the idea of simply taking the rebel side in a debate about the St. Domingo Revolution. Instead, categories of skin color that are tied to the conflict are themselves attacked and made ridiculous by a simple acknowledgment of the numerous colors evident in skin that is called “white,” as
The ability to understand more complex delineations of skin color ties in with the expressed need throughout the novel for individuals to be widely read and critically engaged. Martineau’s text overlaps most strongly with traditional abolitionist themes in its emphasis on the importance of education. A component of emancipation continually emphasized by British female abolitionists, in addition to relief and missionary issues, was education (Midgley, 53–55). The issue of education—and reading in particular—is central to an understanding of Martineau’s novel. Education does not simply encourage slave self-determination, however. In fact, at the beginning of the novel, Toussaint’s reading encourages him to be passive and accepting, as evidenced in this exchange with his young son:

“What is it? what is it about?” said the boy, who had heard many a story out of books from his father.

“What is it? Let us see. I think you know letters enough to spell it out for yourself. Come and try.”

The child knew the letter E, and, with a good deal of help, made out, at last, Epictetus.

“What is that?” asked the boy.

“Epictetus was a negro,” said Génifrède, complacently.

“Not a negro,” said her father, smiling. “He was a slave; but he was white.”

“Is that the reason you read that book so much more than any other?”

“Partly; but partly because I like what is in it.”

“What is in it—any stories?” asked Denis.

“It is all about bearing and forbearing. It has taught me many things which you will have to learn by and by.” (1:11)

The role of education in Toussaint’s life expands as the novel progresses. The daughter’s question as to whether the identity of the author as white makes the text more valuable to her father, and his answer of “[p]artly,” suggests the novel’s problematic alignment of wisdom with Western white culture. Reading is more than the consumption of books to Toussaint; it is the source of valuable instruction as he negotiates his circumstances. In one sense, he uses texts to help him endure his burden as a slave, a state he detaches from color in the above passage. In another instance, reading gives him the ability to critically understand his situation, and to negotiate
among his allegiances to master, nation, God, and race. Throughout the novel he interprets events, edicts, proclamations, messages, and actions in order to determine the correct course of action for both himself and the newly emerging Haitian nation.

Martineau manages anxieties in her readers about the revolutionary potential of educated slaves by suggesting that education breeds loyalty and compassion. In a crucial scene, several members of Toussaint’s family and the racist Papalier prepare to flee because of the uprising. Toussaint’s children retrieve a few volumes from the library of the master’s house. Papalier argues in response to the children’s actions that the uprisings are a result of teaching slaves how to read. At the same time, Toussaint has just found a way to save his master, Bayou, getting him onto a ship for America. Isaac, Toussaint’s son, asks Papalier if his slaves read: “‘No, indeed! not one of them,’” he replies. “‘Why do they not take care of you, as father did of M. Bayou?’” Isaac asks (1:68). The question remains unanswered, yet another of the novel’s open-ended moments that throw discernment of the scene’s moral message back on the reader. This exchange suggests that learning to read does not lead slaves to revolt or find ways to betray their enslavers. Rather, the scene argues that reading helps the slaves be merciful toward those who have held them in captivity. Martineau’s depiction supports the idea that educating slaves cultivates compassion between slave and master, an idea that flew in the face of traditional ideas on the subject.

Many antislavery texts and slave narratives directly connect learning to read with a slave’s ability to gain freedom. Most famously, in Frederick Douglass’s *Narrative* (1845), one of his enslavers, Mr. Auld, reacts dramatically to his wife’s decision to teach Douglass how to read:

“If you give a nigger an inch, he will take an ell. A nigger should know nothing but to obey his master—to do as he is told to do. Learning would spoil the best nigger in the world. Now,” said he, “if you teach that nigger (speaking of myself) how to read, there would be no keeping him. It would forever unfit him to be a slave. He would at once become unmanageable, and of no value to his master. As to himself, it could do him no good, but a great deal of harm. It would make him discontented and unhappy.”

(Douglass 274–75, original italics)

Education apparently makes the slave more difficult to control, because it helps to generate the critical and imaginative skills necessary for the slave to begin conceiving of another way of being. This critical awareness results
in discontentment and the desire to move beyond the limitations of enslavement. Douglass himself realized that the ability to read was necessary for freedom: “I now understood what had been to me a most perplexing difficulty—to wit, the white man’s power to enslave the black man. It was a grand achievement, and I prized it highly. From that moment, I understood the pathway from slavery to freedom. It was just what I wanted, and I got it at a time when I the [sic] least expected it” (275).

Douglass goes on to devote virtually the entire seventh chapter to describing the specifics of how he learned to read. As Henry Louis Gates, Jr. argues in his introduction to The Classic Slave Narratives, “The direct relation between reading and writing on one hand, and legal freedom on the other, was evident to both the slave narrators and to their reviewers” (xii). Thus education, it would seem from these passages, has the power to undermine the entire system of slavery. Education of the planter and the slave will bring both out of a state of ignorance, encouraging the slave to seek freedom and the enslaver to reject the use of slave labor.

Some argue that Martineau supported education in her work as a way to teach submissiveness, especially for the working class. Toussaint’s reading of books to find the strength to bear his enslavement would seem to support this idea. Betty Fladeland disagrees with this characterization, however, and suggests that Martineau’s goal was to encourage self-reliance:

> Education became the cornerstone of Martineau’s philosophy. Often her stands on the Poor Laws and factory legislation were downright hard-hearted and antagonistic to unemployed and exploited workers alike, and her insistence on patience, courage and the helpfulness of middle-class leadership strike one as but modified versions of pie-in-the-sky. But one must examine the purpose which underlay her idea of education. It was not to teach submissiveness and resignation. Quite the contrary, her aim was to enlighten the working classes on basic economic and political issues so that they could intelligently discuss and then act to help solve their own problems, and so fulfill their role in the good society while retaining their self-respect. (77–78)

Martineau’s belief in the need for an educated working class, however, does not necessarily translate into a belief that education would be beneficial for slaves. And she certainly did not address her anti-slavery writings to slaves, but instead to reform-minded white people. But the continual emphasis on reading throughout The Hour and the Man makes it difficult to believe that her philosophy of education—the key to attaining the ability to be
socially and economically self-reliant—did not transfer to her vision of the future for African people."

Aestheticizing Racial Politics

However, in *The Hour and the Man*, the activity of reading surpasses the role of crucial tool in the black struggle for freedom. The dynamics of interpretation become more radically intrinsic to the narrative structure, thus providing a critique of mid-Victorian conceptions of race and slavery at the rhetorical level, to add to the more overtly thematic challenges. We saw this narrative strategy at work in the dialogue between Euphrosyne and her grandfather regarding categories of skin color. Interpretive structures become visible in the novel’s presentation of multiple perspectives, as well as in the shifts that take place among those perspectives. As Wolfgang Iser argues in *The Act of Reading* (1978), "Every articulate reading moment entails a switch of perspective, and this constitutes an inseparable combination of differentiated perspectives, foreshortened memories, present modifications, and future expectations" (116). Several times in Martineau’s novel, a scene’s dramatic structure mimics the activity of interpretation. We are given the narration of events, the narration of partial motivations, the narration of partial results, and—perhaps most dramatically—the narration of indeterminate moments such as the unexplained disappearance of Thérèse’s baby. The process of reading these scenes takes place not only in the reader’s mind, but also in the action of the novel itself through the manipulation of these multiple perspectives within a patently stylized—what I am calling an aestheticized—setting. The multilayered nature of Martineau’s use of interpretive dynamics emphasizes the crucial role they play in racial representation and understanding.

In a particularly compelling example of this narrative strategy, we follow a scene that weaves together an array of dialogues that all take place at the site of a decaying mansion called “L’Étoile.” By examining how the chapter builds to the concluding conversation, it is possible to see how the dialogic interaction among multiple perspectives, cultural discourses, and historical facts combine to focus attention on the interpretive process and disrupt simple Manichean understandings of race and color. Following a chapter in which the reader is privy to the dynamics of the new political state put in place by Toussaint during the seven-year jump in the narrative, the L’Ouverture clan travels to L’Étoile on the way to the family estate at
Pongaudin. The first striking aspect of this chapter is the family’s apparently easy transition from slavery to governmental leadership. When in the city, Margot, Toussaint’s wife, now travels in European carriages; their children have tutors and a Spanish artist named Azua to teach them drawing; and the women travel on horseback with attendants holding umbrellas over them while they proceed along the road.

The ruined mansion functions as a patently aestheticized site that acts as both a location for and a symbol of the decipherment of racial representation in the novel. All the issues intrinsic to the presentation of this revolution come together for one moment in the description of the house. As the family, attendants, and guests arrive at their destination, we receive this description of the scene:

The courtyard through which they passed was strewed with ruins [. . . .] The whole was shaded, almost as with an awning, by the shrubs which grew from the cornices, and among the rafters which had remained where the roof once was. Ropes of creepers hung down the walls [. . . .] The marble steps and entrance hall were kept clear of weeds and dirt, and had a strange air of splendour in the midst of the desolation. The gilding of the balustrades of the hall was tarnished; and it had no furniture but the tatters of some portraits, whose frame and substance had been nearly devoured by ants; but it was weathertight and clean. (1:275–76)

In this gothic scene of ruin and grandeur, the newly majestic L’Ouverture clan enters for a visit with the caretakers of the place. This ruin site is the first of several we will encounter in the texts under consideration in this study. In my discussion of James Grant’s *First Love and Last Love* in the final chapter, I will address the question of the significance of ruins directly. For now, suffice it to say that this scene contributes to the erosion of easy binaries in this novel by making the line between nature and domesticity somewhat permeable. Christopher Woodward argues in his study *In Ruins*, “No ruin can be suggestive to the visitor’s imagination, I believe, unless its dialogue with the forces of Nature is visibly alive and dynamic” (73). The energy of this site derives from its permeable boundaries between not only the inside and outside of the original structure, but also between the revolution’s differing factions embodied both in the contents of the mansion and in its visitors.

As the description of L’Etoile moves in to discern the details of the house’s interior, the representation becomes a point of intersection among the island’s different cultures:
The kitchen corner was partitioned off from the sitting room by a splendid folding screen of Oriental workmanship, exhibiting birds-of-paradise, and the blue rivers and gilt pagodas of China. The other partitions were the work of Bellair’s own hands, woven of bamboo and long grass, dyed with the vegetable dyes, with whose mysteries he was, like a true African, acquainted. The dinner table was a marble slab, which still remained cramped to the wall, as when it had been covered with plate or with ladies’ work boxes. . . . A harp, with its strings broken, and its gilding tarnished, stood in one corner: and musical instruments of Congo origin hung against the wall. It was altogether a curious medley of European and African civilisation, brought together amidst the ruins of a West Indian revolution.

(1:277)

As a visual metaphor of the revolution, this house acts as a canvas for the representation of an array of objects suggesting both colonial destruction and potential. All of the social signifiers of the ongoing cultural conflict on the island stand here, in anticipation of an architectural rebirth. Destruction of the original building has taken place, and the markers of the new rising culture are inserted into the scene. The site presents a polyphony of racial and national symbols, framed to encourage the reader to interpret it as a vision of the new hybrid Haitian culture that is Toussaint’s goal. But the house still retains a sense of sadness and ruin, representing the continued conflict and unresolved negotiation of cultures taking place on the island.

The visual hybridity of the decaying mansion is mirrored in the ideological proliferation represented by various dialogues that take place in different locations on the grounds. After the opening introduction to the mansion, a series of independent discussions take place over various parts of the estate that evoke major issues involved in Martineau’s representation of the revolution. At the meeting between the caretakers of the estate and Madame L’Ouverture, the visual blending of cultural signifiers joins with a linguistic blending of history and naming. The caretakers of the estate, in lieu of the absent white owners, are two friends of Toussaint and his wife. Charles Bellair, described as “a Congo chief, kidnapped in his youth, and brought into St. Domingo slavery” (1:274), has remained at the estate rather than return to Africa or fight with Toussaint. After greeting Margot, he brings her to his wife:

“Minerve!” cried Madame, on seeing her.

“Deesha is her name,” said Bellair, smiling.
“Oh, you call her by her native name! Would we all knew our African names, as you know hers! Deesha!” (1:275)

In this exchange, the issue of accurate naming becomes central. Over the course of the novel, Toussaint takes on many names. “L’Ouverture,” translated as “the opening,” is a name bestowed on him first by the French commissary Polverel, and then by his followers. He is also called “First of the Blacks,” the “Black Spartacus,” the “Black Napoleon,” and, in a more derogatory moment, the “Ape.” Here, in this scene at L’Etoile, we see the rejection of the slave names, which for Bellair’s wife is a rejection of Minerva—the preferred daughter of Zeus in mythology—in favor of original African names. The caretakers’ rejection of Western culture in the form of names remains complex, however, because of their decision not to leave the site of cultural interaction and return to Africa, but to engage with the process of social reformation and make it their own.

The narrative then branches out to describe several different discussions taking place in various locations on the estate, each of which broadens consideration of the various ideological challenges inherent in the revolution. Taking a walk around the grounds, Génifrède, Toussaint’s daughter, and Moyse, her cousin, discuss their relationship and the war between the races. Génifrède believes in her father’s conciliatory attitude toward the whites, whereas Moyse is an avowed hater of whites. The two young people are in love and blend a discourse of courting with attention to the complexity of political and racial negotiations involved in the revolution. Denis, Toussaint’s youngest son, appears in the midst of their conversation, revealing that he has been eavesdropping. So here we have a conversation that takes place regarding three key issues in the text—race, politics, and romance—and at the same time the conversation is overheard by another character who models the reader’s attempt to interpret the scene’s multiple resonances.

The arrival of Denis brings the issue of class position more prominently into the scene. Denis wants to play with a farmer’s son, but Génifrède and Moyse feel Denis is of too high a social standing to be playing with the boy. Denis disagrees: “Denis had never cared for his rank, except when riding by his father’s side on review days; and now he liked it less than ever” (1:288). Génifrède then sends Denis to retrieve her sketchpad. The young boy returns with it and his own drawing of Moyse and Génifrède “as he had found them, gathering fruits and flowers” (1:291). Thus, not only has Denis watched and listened to the young lovers unobserved, but he has also made a sketch of the scene to surprise them.
Watching, listening, recording, and discussing intermingle here as the variety of interpretive and aesthetic practices continues to proliferate, and the issues requiring critical and interpretive skills multiply. At another location, Toussaint and the African caretakers of L’Etoile trade stories of African pasts and connections to African royalty. By the end of their conversation, “they were perpetually falling unconsciously into the use of their negro language” (1:292). Bringing together African pasts and family histories in a blend of the French and African languages, this conversation represents the cultural reality of the first generation slaves on the island. The narrative reminds us of the historical and familial realities from which these people were taken when they were brought to the island to be slaves.

The text then circles back to address the signifying power of architecture for the revolutionary project by returning and more fully elaborating the discussion of the symbolic power of L’Etoile begun in the scene’s opening description. Dialogues, participants, and aesthetic media multiply as the scene continues. Vincent—one of Toussaint’s generals with loyalties to France and limited trustworthiness—wanders off from the storytelling and begins a discussion with Loisir, who sketches the house. The architect Loisir has been added to the expedition to design the restoration of L’Etoile as General Christophe’s new house. Vincent and Loisir discuss architectural integrity. Vincent, who is black, tells the architect, who is white, that he need not be so attentive to accuracy; the blacks will believe anything he says is European and in good taste. Loisir replies, “‘[B]ut Christophe’s mansion is to stand for an age,—to stand as the first evidence, in the department of the arts, of the elevation of your race’” (1:294). The house will represent the nature of the new government, and thus it must convey the most regal of messages. The architect understands the significance of the house as a text, and the importance of retaining control over its representational power. Loisir further complicates the earlier presentation of L’Etoile by reflecting on the politics of its future architectural design.

All of these issues converge in a longer conversation at the end of the scene, when the participants meet to discuss the reliability of French allegiance. The main focus of the discussion is the attitude of the French and Napoleon toward Toussaint and the people of color on the island. As a result of the earlier dialogues within the chapter, however, the subjects of love, war, race, class, art, politics, and representation also enter the scene, metaphorically signified by each of the participants. Aimée, another of Toussaint’s daughters and a French loyalist, believes Napoleon respects them. Génifrède, her sister, distrusts the French and argues for their duplicity. Moyse, their cousin, argues that the whites in Paris are turning
Napoleon against the island by suggesting that Toussaint’s ambition is a threat. And Vincent, the untrustworthy soldier, proclaims his loyalty to both Toussaint and Napoleon. In a compelling climax to the discussion, Génifrède and Moyse usher out the list of commissaries sent by France to the colony, and dwell at length on their limitations and foibles. During this discussion, Denis, Toussaint’s young son, mimics each of the commissaries as they are described, and Azua, the artist, sits back watching and listening to the discussion, rendering the various interpretations in sketches. Thus, as we read the conversation and synthesize and interpret the characterizations, Denis performs the descriptions and Azua records them in drawings along with us.

The climax of the scene throws attempts to attain synthesis of the dialogues into virtual indeterminacy. During the larger conversation, a monkey in the tree over Aimée’s head watches the group during the discussion, thus adding yet another perspective to the scene. Moyse first notices him: “If they had taken that monkey which is looking down at your drawing, Aimée, and seven of its brethren, and installed them at Cap, they would have done us all the good the commissaries have done, and far less mischief” (1:298–99). Then the group returns to their discussion of the failed French commissaries, much to the annoyance of Aimée, who remains faithful to what she perceives as French benevolence. After everyone else had seen Azua’s caricatures and laughed at the drawings, they are passed to Aimée: “When the paper came back to her, she looked up into the tree under which she sat. The staring monkey was still there. She made a vigorous spring to hand up the caricature, which the creature caught. As it sat demurely on a branch, holding the paper as if reading it, while one of its companions as gravely looked over its shoulder, there was more laughter than ever” (1:302). Aimée then declares that “this is the only worthy fate of a piece of mockery of people wiser than ourselves, and no less kind. The negroes have hitherto been thought, at least, grateful. It seems that this is a mistake. For my part, however, I leave it to the monkeys to ridicule the French” (1:302). This moment represents the climax to a gradually intensifying narrative progression in which a backdrop of cultural chaos and partial reformation nurtures the development of a series of dialogues, culminating in a discussion of trustworthiness, and ending in this intriguing scene of mock-reading.

I suggest that this figure of the monkey becomes a site of mock aesthetic appreciation and analysis representing several intersecting ideas about race, nationality, politics, and interpretation, and that ultimately the figure stands for the instability of meaning within each of these categories.
In Western racial discourse, monkeys inhabit a space between human and animal. In a description of the slave quarters at one particular plantation in her travels in America, Martineau herself uses this symbol to convey the most abhorrent conditions in which the slaves live: “We visited the negro quarter; a part of the estate which filled me with disgust, wherever I went. It is something between a haunt of monkeys and a dwelling place of human beings” (Society in America, 1:302). The slave lives in a border territory between monkey and human. Without actually calling the slaves monkeys, Martineau uses the racist association to critique the living conditions in which African people are forced to live. Africans are not naturally animals, she suggests, but pushed toward animal identity by horrendous environmental factors.

By passing Azua’s caricatures of central French colonial authorities to the monkeys, Aimée metonymically activates this human/animal threshold, suggesting that a reading of French political motivations as antagonistic to the liberation struggle is inaccurate and unworthy of serious consideration by sophisticated readers. Her identity as loyal French African subject functions to separate the monkey from African subjectivity, and align it with a representation of a critically unsophisticated interpreter. This boundary function ties in with what Anne McClintock argues is the threshold defining nature of the monkey figure: “Monkeys, in particular, were deployed to legitimize social boundaries as edicts of nature” (McClintock, 216). Aimée uses the trope of the monkey to reflect back to the group what she perceives as their ignorant and uncivilized “readings” of French political motivations. National and racial identities intersect.

Aimée’s position resonates with Toussaint’s problematic belief throughout the novel that black people need to embrace Western learning. Toussaint declares that “the civilisation of the whites is the greatest educational advantage we could enjoy. Yes, […] and the more we despise it, the more we prove that we need it” (2:85). And in his conversation with Génifrède, Moyse remarks of Toussaint that “he says they are masters of an intellectual kingdom from which we have been shut out, and they alone can let us in” (1:283–84). By handing the picture to the monkeys, Aimée, who believes wholeheartedly in her father’s plan and attitudes toward the whites, symbolically suggests the absurdity of an interpretation of French political actions as antagonistic to Africans. Distrusting the French is thus likened to a regressive embrace of ignorance, represented by the monkeys. Progress is the ability to embrace the educational heritage of Western culture, represented here as literacy and the ability to interpret in a complex manner, without turning away from one’s own culture. However, the fact that Toussaint
will eventually die in a French prison ironically turns Aimée’s judgment back on itself, suggesting her inability to correctly assess the political climate and creating a problematic and racist alignment between herself and the monkey that undermines the authority of her interpretation.

But the moment also suggests the interpretive disruption carried out by the Signifyin(g) Monkey figure of the African American literary tradition. Gates argues that this staple trickster figure “dwells at the margins of discourse, ever punning, ever troping, ever embodying the ambiguities of language” (52). It is the “black trope of tropes” (51) that disrupts, revises, and problematizes the signifying properties of language. Although the monkeys in the tree overhead in Martineau’s novel do little but mimic the action of reading without seemingly being able to interpret the text, Denis and Azua have both represented and parodied colonial structures of authority, producing the text transferred to the monkeys. Aimée’s transfer of the mimicry, interpretation and performance of each of the commissaries, embodied in the drawing, to the monkeys, metonymically and aesthetically connects the monkeys to the process of interpretive disruption. Denis and Azua engage in Signifyin(g), and when Aimée transfers the text up to the animal in the tree, she transfers it to a symbol of the rebellious reading strategy she so desperately wants to disempower, thus inadvertently referencing the actions of linguistic and political revision and parody, and undermining the authority of the interpretation she supports by illustrating the rhetorical nature of interpretation itself.

Inconclusive Conclusion

The end of the novel is a point of instability in Martineau’s valorization of Toussaint’s superior interpretive skills, however. Toussaint misreads the intentions of a French general, and invites him to come to the rebel stronghold. He is captured and taken to France, where he is eventually imprisoned and dies. The revolution continues under the leadership of two very different men: Christophe, a follower of Toussaint’s belief in the need for constructive relationships between the races; and Dessalines, who with his wife is known throughout the novel as bent on the destruction of the white population. Martineau does not fictionalize these transitions, however. After the French take Toussaint off the island, the plot never returns there, and so we never see the events of the rest of the revolution. A review in the Westminster Review expresses dissatisfaction with this decision: “It is no small compliment to the author that we feel dissatisfied by the conclusion.
of her book. We wish to know what success attended the endeavours of Toussaint's generals in completing his work” (236). We only see Toussaint communicating with his generals in his own mind, asking them to continue following his orders and philosophies.

What we learn by indirect references to Thérèse’s future life as “beloved Empress” is that Dessalines becomes the new Emperor, a figure who throughout the novel has questioned the optimistic way in which Toussaint encouraged trust of the white race (Hour, 3:179). This historical fact renders suspect Toussaint’s philosophy, and suggests that the most successful way to defeat colonial oppression is to encourage racial separatism. True to her rejection of the need to dramatize any of the violence of the revolution, Martineau’s novel does not present the bloody events that follow Toussaint’s capture. What does it mean that the reader, once fully immersed in the events on St. Domingo, is never returned to them? It suggests that Martineau believed that Toussaint’s dedication to the principle of Christian forgiveness enabled the revolution to succeed. Ultimately, however, the treacherous nature of white behavior made true racial dialogue impossible.

In 1855 an optimistic Martineau wrote that “the old practice of Man holding Man as property is nearly exploded among civilised nations; and the analogous barbarism of Man holding the surface of the globe as property cannot long survive. The idea of this being a barbarism is now fairly formed, admitted, and established among some of the best minds of the time; and the result is, as in all such cases, ultimately secure” (Autobiography, 456).

Systems of property, imperialism, and slavery overlap for Martineau, and the unmasking of one would lead, she was confident, to the demise of the others. Education, and the resulting ability to engage critically with one’s environment and society, can dismantle these destructive structures, this novel seems to suggest. Martineau’s fiction illustrates the belief that education can forge bonds among people of different cultures, and this premise shines through in her biographical presentation of Toussaint L’Ouverture. The author’s dedication to intellectualism permeates the narrative, from her research on Toussaint and the events of the St. Domingo Revolution, to the activity of interpretation itself functioning as a structural paradigm. Unfortunately, her vision of an ever-broadening egalitarianism would remain unrealized, as future representations of race took on the burden of English dissatisfaction with post-Emancipation colonial realities, and an increasing valorization of radically racist scientific lines of inquiry. It is to this material that we now turn.