Prophetic Visions of the Past

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The Maroon and the General

In the preface to *Monsieur Toussaint*, a play first published in 1961 and then republished in a shorter “version scénique” in 1978, Edouard Glissant states:

The present work is linked to what I would call . . . *a prophetic vision of the past*. For those whose history has been reduced by others to darkness and despair, the recovery of the near and distant past is imperative. To renew acquaintance with one's history, obscured or obliterated by others, is to relish fully the present, for the experience of the present, stripped of its roots in time, yields only hollow delights. This is a poetic endeavor. Of course this attempt seems incomprehensible, indeed useless, if not harmful, to those who, far from feeling an absence of history, may on the contrary feel that they are laboring under the tyrannical burden of their past. Struggling with, and in, history is our common lot. Thus, often from opposing sides, the literary work strives to diminish the same basic insecurity of being. (*Monsieur*, 15–16)

Interestingly Glissant does not try to solve or attenuate the keen tension, contradiction even, that the two views of history that he invokes imply. Is the Caribbean world that he describes and addresses in his play suffering
from too much history, or too little? The exploration of history (particularly its silenced voices and perspectives) is liberating and enables the present to imagine a better future while attempting to avoid the mistakes of the past—thus the “prophetic vision of the past,” to which I will return below. On the other hand, history is a prison, a nightmare with no awakening in sight for those who have been internally and externally, psychologically and socially, overdetermined by centuries of colonial domination and by the legacies of slavery and racism.

Glissant’s preface confronts us with the tensions and anxieties that underlie what Walter Mignolo calls the colonial difference, or “difference articulated by the coloniality of power” (“The Geopolitics,” 236; see also Local Histories), which also imply the ontological claims of the “coloniality of being” as described by Maldonado-Torres. The logic of coloniality attempts to naturalize (through essentialist and racialized categories and imaginaries) the positions and identities of those who have endured historical structures of violent domination. Within that colonial logic, even attempts at liberation may not be able to release the colonized from that perceived ontological lack that Glissant quite accurately refers to as a “basic insecurity of being.” Here we could quote Frantz Fanon’s famous statement from Black Skin, White Masks, when he states: “When people like me, they tell me it is in spite of my color. When they dislike me, they point out that it is not because of my color. Either way, I am locked into the infernal circle” (116). Color, in Fanon’s quote, operates like Glissant’s “history,” for colonial history is indeed a racialized essentialist history that will not release its prisoners. That history cannot (and indeed, should not) be ignored, but it attempts to foreclose resistance by defining the colonized as its objects, never as subjects, even when they resist. Thus, colonial subjects constantly face the double bind that Glissant describes: the need to confront inherited historical categories and demonstrate agency, but also the claustrophobia of being always already defined by those categories, even in their oppositional roles as challengers of it.

Not surprisingly, Derek Walcott has declared, in “The Muse of History,” that it is precisely history that condemns artists from the Americas to uncreative vengefulness, and he figuratively opts for the creative blank slate of an Adamic aesthetics. Evidently, we need not take Walcott at face value: what is significant in his gesture of denunciation is the acknowledgment of the historical double bind that Glissant foregrounds in his introduction to Monsieur Toussaint. In fact, Walcott’s work is nothing if not an exploration of the many dimensions of Caribbean history, framed precisely by his condemna-
tion of the objectified position in which that history has placed its Carib-
bean subjects.

The ambivalent relation to history that Glissant’s preface presents is rei-
forced by the stage directions in his play. The action takes place in Toussaint
Louverture’s prison in the Jura Mountains and in Toussaint’s memory of
the events in Haiti; the directions indicate that “there is no clearly indi-
cated frontier between the world of the prison in France and the lands of the
Caribbean island” (21). The Caribbean, in the play, is a prison whose inmates
struggle for their freedom; and the prison, which throughout the play is vis-
ited by loas (Vodou gods) and the dead, is precariously Caribbeanized. On
a stage that metaphorically stands for Caribbean history, the spaces of free-
dom are always just a few actor’s steps away from renewed, metamorphosed
oppression (a sad reality of Haitian history), and the spaces of oppression
(Toussaint’s prison) are populated by half realized possibilities—ghosts—
that point the way to possible inroads toward liberation.

In terms of its plot, Monsieur Toussaint is deceptively simple. The play
takes place in Toussaint Louverture’s jail in the Jura Mountains. There, as
he waits for the French authorities to dispose of him, and as he uselessly
attempts to send messages to Napoleon in which he insists on his loyalty to
the principles of the French Republic, Toussaint remembers the events of
the revolution, from the moment he joins the troops of Biassou, through his
raise to leadership and the difficult decisions he has to make as a military
chief, to his fall as he is increasingly isolated from his people and his gen-
erals, to the final betrayal that leads to his capture and deportation. Tous-
saint’s cell is visited by Vodou gods and dead spirits who work, in many
ways, as embodiments of his troubled conscience. Mackandal and Macaïa,
in particular, represent the rebellious spirit of the maroons, always willing
to fight to death for freedom. They feel betrayed by Toussaint’s approach to
the Revolutionary War, which always made sure that ties to France were not
permanently severed, attempted to maintain the plantation system so that
Saint Domingue could retain its place in the world sugar economy, and tried
to maintain law and order even if it meant imposing them violently. The
tension between the maroon libertarian impulse and Toussaint’s reasonable
planning for the future makes for much of the drama in the play. The story
ends with Toussaint’s death; the only person by his side is Manuel, a young
soldier from Piedmont who, in spite of the distance between their historical
positions, has come to develop some sort of respect, perhaps affection, for
the ailing black general. (Towards the end of the play, Toussaint acknowl-
edges his link to that humble soldier who feels compassion for him and who
also comes from a marginal region of Napoleon’s empire: “Your land speaks, your land sings, Manuel. I can hear it in your voice” ([114–15]).

In his preface to the play, Glissant explicitly acknowledges that C. L. R. James’s *Black Jacobins* and Césaire’s *Toussaint Louverture* are the main sources for his view of the Haitian leader. And indeed, the play could be regarded as a dramatization of James’s and Césaire’s books on Toussaint. One may particularly see Glissant’s indebtedness to James in the way the play describes Toussaint’s gradual alienation from the people who follow him: an alienation that is due to his inability or unwillingness to explain the vision that guides his actions. That vision leads to unfair actions like that execution of his nephew Moyse for his radicalism (a key event in both the play and James’s book), even though Moyse was, according to James, more attuned to the desires of the Haitian people. Toussaint’s character flaws in Glissant’s play can be best explained in terms of James’s memorable contrast of Toussaint to Dessalines “Toussaint’s error sprang from the very qualities that made him what he was . . . If Dessalines could see so clearly and simply, it was because the ties that bound this uneducated soldier to French civilization were of the slenderest. He saw what was under his nose so well because he saw no further. Toussaint’s failure was the failure of enlightenment, not of darkness” (288).

From Césaire, Glissant takes the tragic twist of Toussaint’s realization that his presence has become an obstacle to the revolutionary process; thus, he intentionally removes himself from the scene. James’s book already highlighted the tragic dimensions of Toussaint’s predicament, but Césaire’s historical essay (published the same year as Glissant’s play) adds to the pathos by suggesting that Toussaint decides to open the way to those who can take the revolution to its ultimate consequences. Thus, historiography mimics literature as Césaire in his essay draws a Toussaint in the image of his own “Rebel” character from *And the Dogs Were Silent* (1946). Glissant’s play subtly suggests a similar rationale for Toussaint’s willingness to accept General Leclerc’s treacherous invitation to a rendezvous, even against the pleas of his friends.

Where Glissant departs from James and Césaire is in the fact that, for the two older writers, Toussaint’s position, in spite of its limitations, is clearly the most appropriate one, precisely because it is the most “enlightened” one. While James and Césaire indulge the “tragic” dimensions of Toussaint’s dilemma, and both have to face the fact Toussaint indecisiveness opens the way to Dessalines, neither gives much symbolic weight to the other black leaders and positions surrounding Toussaint. Glissant, on the other hand,
clearly constructs his play around the conflict between equally legitimate positions, at least a priori, before the revolution is won. On the one hand, there is Toussaint’s need to insure that order, progress and commerce will survive the abolition of slavery (and independence, if that thought ever crossed his mind). On the other hand, we have the libertarian maroon impulse (to which Glissant adds the figure of Dessalines), which wants to break off all chains and links to slavery and colonial domination, even if it means relying on a local, subsistence basis. Toussaint is opposed to slavery but wants Saint Domingue to remain part of global networks of commerce and cooperation; the maroons see those global networks as already colonial, already exploitative of the labor and lives of former slaves. They have no reason to believe that the regime that enslaved them will want their international success once they violently liberate themselves from slavery. In the play, Glissant alternatively gives legitimate arguments to both Toussaint and his maroon objectors.⁴

Ultimately Glissant’s play directly and indirectly addresses a series of problems that remain important not only for Haiti but also, not surprisingly, for his native Martinique. The critic Jack Corzani, in his multivolume *La littérature des Antilles-Guyane françaises*, provocatively suggests that the Dessalines-Toussaint tension in the play stands for the Glissant-Césaire tensions with regard to Martinique’s future. Césaire followed the moderate path of departmentalization coupled with attempts to preserve some autonomy for the island. In 1959 (that is to say, not long before the publication of *Monsieur Toussaint*) Glissant formed, with Paul Niger, the separatist Front Antillo-Guyanais pour l’Autonomie, as a result of which Charles de Gaulle barred him from leaving France between 1961 and 1965.⁵ Corzani suggests, somewhat dramatically: “Facing Toussaint-Césaire, Glissant places the brutal silhouettes of the maroon slaves and those willing to take things to their ultimate consequences (“jusqu’auboutistes”). He is clearly seduced by Dessalines, that Frantz Fanon of older times, a warrior incarnation of that ideal that Glissant attempts to defend with his pen” (217; my translation). Provided one does not accept it in a reductive way, Corzani’s reading is at least partially plausible given Glissant’s political circumstances at that point of his intellectual career, and it is highly suggestive in the way it links Fanon to previous Caribbean figures like Dessalines.⁶

However, Corzani’s reading must be modified to include the considerable weight Toussaint’s arguments do have in the play. As Corzani ultimately acknowledges, “Dessalines acknowledges his final debt to Toussaint, just as Glissant and Fanon admit their debt to Césaire” (218; my translation). That
acknowledgment of the important links between Glissant and Césaire (in spite of their profound differences) is essential, for it suggests that even during his most radical political period Glissant was never wholly blind to the expediency of Césaire’s political compromises (as opposed to his exalted rhetoric). This gives us a more nuanced perspective on Glissant’s own change of heart later in his career, when he modifies his position on Martinique’s independence not unlike the way Césaire did before him. As Monsieur Toussaint suggests, that change of heart (criticized by some critics as a gradual depolitization of Glissant’s work from the 1990s onward) was already implicit in the 1961 play, with its inability, or unwillingness, to solve the tensions incarnated by Toussaint on the one hand, and Dessalines and the maroons on the other. From there, there is only a step to Glissant’s later more explicit lost of interest in nationalist politics, clearly expressed in a 1998 interview: “it seems to me we are beyond the old quarrels over independence, autonomy or departmentalization” (Couffon, 51; my translation). The later position is rooted in the earlier impasse that the play expresses so effectively. I will return to this topic in the last section of the chapter.

From the above, it seems clear that Haiti works for Glissant (as for the other Caribbean writers we have examined) as a master narrative where key issues and problems of Caribbean history can be vividly observed. Some of those problems include: the fate of newly independent nations after anticolonial struggles (an area in which Haiti works as a cautionary tale and distorting mirror for islands such as Martinique and Puerto Rico, each of which remained linked to its metropolis [see chapter 2]); the persistence and replication of colonial hierarchies among local elites; the tensions between local cultures and traditions and Eurocentric models, including the “marooning” temptation of isolation vis-à-vis the neocolonial demands of global markets; and, self-referentially, with regard to the play’s function as a cultural artifact, the primacy of cultural action when viable political options are not readily available.

Postcoloniality and Its Discontents

The Future (Haiti after Independence)

Near the beginning of the play, Mackandal, now one of the spirits talking to Toussaint in his cell, describes how, years before, he prophesied to his fellow slaves how Toussaint would come and successfully lead them to freedom
from slavery; however, as he talks of future freedom the slaves think that he is talking about the past, “for these slaves could not conceive the future” (26). Mackandal’s poignant observation captures the state of mind of those who have been so utterly crushed by brutal oppression that they have a hard time merely imagining a brighter future. That predicament, the need or desire to imagine a future out of the morass of the present, in fact permeates the whole play, and torments Toussaint more than any other character. It is also a question that plagues all struggles for liberation—nationalistic or otherwise—and it possesses the aggravating quality of not allowing itself to be ignored. The avoidance of the task of imagining a future often invites chaos and random violence, while the compulsion to dwell too obsessively on what the future should look like can lead to paralyzing inaction in the present.

In the play, there are two radically different positions about the future, which are represented by Toussaint and the maroon slave Macaïa. Mama Dio, a Vodou priestess who is now one of the spirits in Toussaint’s cell, pleads with him: “Let your people to get used to the land, be patient, don’t go and put a new yoke around their necks” (50). Mama Dio is referring to Toussaint’s insistence on the need to preserve the large plantations if Saint Domingue is to survive economically. To be sure, there were at the time, in addition to former slaves unwilling to return to a labor regime that was simply too similar to their previous enslaved condition, abolitionist thinkers (like Condorcet) who believed that the island’s economy could be rebuilt on the basis of small plots of land, where the newly freed peasants could grow cane individually and then bring it to state run sugarmills for processing (Dubois, *Avengers*, 192; Dubois, *Haiti*, 47–48; 65–68; 104–112). But Toussaint never gave any serious consideration to that option. Moreover, he seemed disturbingly willing to allow former plantation owners return to control over their old plantations, which would now operate with the former slaves as laborers. And indeed, many of those plantation owners returned to their lands after Toussaint seized control of the colony, figuring they could still make good profit out of a difficult situation. The slaves, understandably, resented and resisted those developments, through historical leaders like Moyse, and the maroon leader Macaïa.7

This tense drama culminates in 1801, when Toussaint announces his constitution and makes proclamations on the labor regime in the island whose authoritarian content display his attempt to gain full control of the situation. He not only proclaims himself Governor for life of the colony, but also imposes severe limitations on the freedom of the former slaves: “Every indi-
vidual will have to serve at his post. The field hands will be confined to their plantations, not allowed to leave without a temporary, special permit . . . Runaways will be put in chains and in this manner sent to work” (74). This (historically accurate) authoritarian dimension of Toussaint’s figure is more sharply highlighted by Glissant than by any of the writers we have examined in this book.

However, it would be a mistake to regard the play as fundamentally a critique of Toussaint Louverture, in spite of the intensity of Macaïa’s, Mama Dio’s, and Mackandal’s denunciations. It is strongly emphasized throughout the story that, in spite of his heavy-handedness, Toussaint has the best interests of the island in mind (as he understands them), and that, like Walcott’s Toussaint, he is concerned about the revolutionary war turning into mindless destruction: “The gun and the hoe; don’t forget the hoe! Find a soldier who can plow, who can reap” (79). The dilemma of how to infuse the struggle with the ideals he envisions without oppressively stifling the common people who constitute the soul and ultimate arbiters of the revolution brings up the old problem of revolutionary leadership, an issue that C. L. R. James regarded as one of the lessons of the Haitian Revolution. James himself, an ardent admirer of Toussaint, acknowledged the disconnection between the visionary leader and his people toward the end of his career (Black Jacobins, 286–288).

From Macaïa’s perspective, the deeper problem is not simply Toussaint’s authoritarianism, but rather that the leader’s vision of the island’s future is irredeemably flawed from the very start. Toussaint is attempting to reinsert Saint Domingue into a productive regime that is inherently exploitative, based on a world market that after squeezing the slaves dry is more than willing to prey on them as salaried workers. And indeed, it must be remembered that, in spite of public declarations of horror at the events in Haiti, the United States and even France were still quite willing to engage in profitable trade with the former colony, provided there was indeed a profit. Toussaint was aware of this:

He understood that, however principled France’s leaders had been in 1794, ultimately the French nation would stick to the principle of emancipation only if Saint-Domingue continued to send the commodities it had produced for the past century across the Atlantic. Freedom was sweet, but it had a cost. France still needed the sweetness of sugar, and the coffee to go with it. (Dubois, Avengers, 192)
In Glissant’s play, Macaïa and the maroon slaves represent the refusal of that new form of enslavement. The confrontations between Toussaint and Macaïa multiply throughout the play, with the maroon slave openly accusing the general of betraying his people (29), of betraying his old leader the rebel Biassou (41), of allowing his obsessive “thinking of tomorrow” stifle the present ardor of rebellious slaves (56), of displaying too much zeal in protecting and restoring the properties of white land-owners (67), of oppressing his own people (76). Mama Dio, the Vodou priestess, also joins the maroons in their accusations. Early in the play she declares that, in spite of Toussaint’s worship of the “white god” (Toussaint was a devout Catholic), the African warrior god Ogoun has always protected him (44–45). However, Mama Dio feels later compelled to state: “Warrior Ogoun has gone far away from you—ever since you began to give commands as governor, and no longer like a brother among brothers” (48). Thus, the maroons’ critique is devastating and, in spite of Toussaint’s justifications and ultimate redemption at the end of the play (when after death he follows Ogoun back across the ocean in order to rejoin Macaïa in the struggle for freedom), the reader is left with the impression that, of the two arguably justifiable positions, Glissant has undoubtedly given the most impassioned arguments to Macaïa.

The problem for Macaïa and the maroons is: what alternatives do they present to Toussaint’s pragmatism? The play focuses on the tension between the maroon’s desire for immediate liberation, a liberation that suffices by itself and does not require further planning or delay, and Toussaint’s insistence that such freedom must be employed toward some predetermined goal. Ultimately, Macaïa insists: “I am a man of the forest. So that means I am anarchistic and sterile. Ah! The time in which I dwell is not the time that takes you forward!” (63). Macaïa’s “anarchism” does not receive further elaboration in the play, but his allusion to two different concepts of time is suggestive: Toussaint’s is “the time that takes you forward,” anchored on notions like progress, development, economic growth, as defined by the interests on an increasingly global capitalism. Macaïa’s anarchistic forest time (“sterile” from the perspective that Toussaint represents) may be linked to the former slaves’ desire to cultivate small plots of land without being tied (or re-enslaved) by the interests of international markets which have their own profit as ultimate motivation.8

As Paul Farmer aptly writes of the early post-independence period: “The new elite insisted that the emerging peasantry produce commodities for an international market, but the peasants—the former slaves—wished to be left alone to grow foodstuffs for themselves and for local markets” (The
Uses, 65). Carolyn Fick, in addition to linking the former slaves’ view of the land to a traditional African outlook, which must have been familiar to many of them, forcefully elaborates:

A personal claim to the land upon which one labored and from which to derive and express one’s individuality was, for the black laborers, a necessary and an essential element in their vision of freedom. For without this concrete economic and social reality, freedom for the ex-slaves was little more than a legal abstraction. To continue to be forced into laboring for others, bound by property relations that afforded few benefits and no real alternatives for themselves, meant that they were not entirely free. (249)

While Haiti’s situation and the circumstances of its independence are certainly unique, these dilemmas are familiar to all newly independent countries. Ultimately, as Farmer indicates, the Haitian elites got their way in their attempts to reintroduce the island into those world markets, and the history of Haitian poverty is deeply linked to a world economy always already dominated by metropolitan interests (including, first and foremost, France, which forced Haiti to pay a millionaire compensation to its former masters), which had no interest whatsoever in Haiti becoming an “equal.” This is not to say that small scale or subsistence agriculture would have led to Haiti’s economic and political success (again, any country needs relations of some sort with its neighbors, and Haiti was born into an extremely hostile international community). But we will never know what might have developed from following that route. The broader question, then and now, is whether one can feasibly imagine models of economic stability and sustainability that are not tied to the dogmas of winner-takes-all capitalist globalization.

The Macaïa-Toussaint conflict is not unique in Haitian history (or in other independence struggles, for that matter), and diverse permutations of similar tensions, with different characters, come to the foreground at different moments. The well-known conflict between Toussaint and Moyse, which we will highlight in the next section, comes to mind. Such conflicts may be related to what Michel-Rolph Trouillot has called the “war within the war” (40) in the Haitian Revolution; in other words, the fact that the war was not simply between Haitians and French, but sometimes, tragically, Haitian against Haitian, depending on diverse power struggles between multifarious groups and leaders. Trouillot highlights the case of colonel Jean-Baptiste Sans Souci, who originally fought under Christophe but refused to follow him and Dessalines when they joined Leclerc (thus betraying Toussaint).
With his skillful guerrilla tactics, Sans Souci created a lot of trouble for Leclerc, and even after Dessalines started his war against the French, Sans Souci refused to join him and Christophe, considering them traitors. When he finally acquiesced to recognize Dessalines’s leadership, Christophe called him for a meeting; when Sans Souci appeared, Christophe’s soldiers killed him.

In Trouillot’s reading, Christophe’s well-known luxurious palace of Sans Souci may reference the king’s enemy in its name: thus, it simultaneously erased the name of the man by making it the name of the palace, and the construction of the palace near the place where Sans Souci was killed became Christophe’s “transformative ritual to absorb his old enemy” (65). Trouillot is particularly interested in how Sans Souci is mostly absent or minimized (other than in a construction like the palace that actually silences his presence) in official accounts of Haitian history as produced by the Haitian elites, such as the history by Beaubrun Ardouin. Such histories, Trouillot argues, minimize “the war within the war” and the abuses of the Haitian elites against the Haitian people, in order to present a heroic, epic portrayal of Haitian history grounded on heroic figures. It is through such operations, I might add, that the coloniality of power intersects with the coloniality of knowledge—perspectives, figures and events from across the divide of the colonial difference are not simply ignored, but rather actively silenced (although rarely in a completely successful manner). From our perspective in this discussion of Glissant’s play, it is most significant that one of Sans Souci’s guerrilla allies against Dessalines and Christophe was, precisely, the historical Macaya (Trouillot, 43).

The Present (Local Elites, Coloniality of Power)

Evidently not all of Haiti’s problems can be attributed to the interests and interventions of foreign powers, although one would be hard-pressed to find one that was not deeply tied to or complicit with those forces. In the play, Toussaint replies to Dessalines, who asks him to choose a successor:

Let’s see, Christophe dreams of nothing but palaces, Clairveaux sees only plumes and gold braid, Belair must devote himself to his young wife, and Dessalines is too fond of wars. For a soldier-farmer, you must admit, there is only Moyse . . . General Moyse is popular, the workers applaud him, he is the one to carry on after me. Send for Moyse! (79)
This particular scene shows the effectiveness of Glissant’s strategy of linking the cell space of Toussaint’s last days to the island space of the revolution. In this instance, as he talks to Dessalines, Toussaint thinks he is in the present of the island, but in fact he is remembering the past from his cell. The answer to his command comes from the spirits in his prison cell: “General Moyse is dead, O Toussaint. You executed him without a hearing” (80). In what C. L. R. James regards as one of Toussaint’s most grievous mistakes, Toussaint executed his adopted nephew Moyse because the latter led the peasants who rebelled against the oppressive labor regime imposed by the black general, and attacked white planters whose privileges Toussaint wanted to preserve (Black Jacobins, 278–79). Thus, in Glissant’s play Toussaint can foresee that most of his possible successors will betray the liberation struggle they are engaged in by creating local elites that preserve the exploitative privileges that the old colonial elite possessed, yet he executes Moyse, the one figure who, at least symbolically, stood up not only against colonialism but also against what Aníbal Quijano calls the coloniality of power.

As we have seen, Quijano’s definition of the “coloniality of power” revolves around a Eurocentric view of essentialist racial differences in which the colonized is not only militarily conquered and economically dominated, but also considered to be inherently (biologically, ontologically) inferior to the colonizer. That Eurocentric essentialism continues to exert its influence after the former colony achieves independence and attempts to establish commercial links and attain “recognition” from its former metropolis, and it also pervades the worldview of local elites that maintain colonial structures and institutions of power and domination under the guise of the new nation.

As Quijano states, “European culture became a seduction; it gave access to power. After all, besides repression, seduction is the main instrument of all power. Cultural Europeization turned into an aspiration. It was a means of participating in colonial power” (qted. in Castro-Gómez, “(Post)coloniality,” 282). How this coloniality of power weaves together local elites and former colonial (or new neocolonial) masters is most tragically illustrated in Mon-sieur Toussaint through the figure of Toussaint himself.

Throughout the play, a marginal but essential subplot involves the efforts of the colonial landowners (represented by the characters Désortils, Blé-nil and Pascal) to destroy Toussaint and his threat to their interests. Their ally is Granville, Toussaint’s white secretary, who betrays him by providing information to the white landowners. However, Granville is critical of their methods—they feel they must annihilate Toussaint, whereas Granville understands that history cannot be undone, and that there is no going back
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to the old regime based on slavery. Granville’s plan is actually more insidious. As he informs his fellow conspirators:

He has only one weakness, gentlemen, through which we can get the better of him. He believes in order and prosperity. The blacks will desert Toussaint if you put your trust in him. Appoint him the lord of the plantations . . . When Toussaint forgets his people, when he is again overcome by his passion for planning and pruning, his people will abandon him and he will be in your hands . . . Only Toussaint Abreda can defeat Toussaint Louverture. (49–50)

The cynicism of Granville’s words is matched by their insight. His keen observation is that the logic of coloniality (here applied to its fundamental economic dimension) does not necessarily depend on formal political or military control of a territory. Metropolitan capital can exert as effective a control, provided the local elite of the (former) colony also benefits from that control. Moreover, control is more effective when that local elite benefits not only in economic terms but also when it is truly immersed in the modern/colonial myth of Europe’s inherent superiority (cultural, racial) to its colonies. Whether the historical Toussaint had ambitions for his own enrichment is open to debate (after all, he did sacrifice much to the struggle for liberty), but the play suggests that he was unable to think of Saint Domingue’s future development outside of the paradigms offered by the colonial metropolis.

It should be clear that when Granville refers to Toussaint’s love of “order and prosperity” as weaknesses that make him easily controllable, he (and Glissant with him) is not talking about those principles “as such,” in the abstract. Of course there may be nothing inherently wrong with them. Rather, through the character of Granville, Glissant is referring to those notions as defined by colonial authorities: order and prosperity as an exploitative regime that benefited white planters by enslaving black workers. Toussaint opposes slavery but is still unable or unwilling to acknowledge that the oppressive character of the plantation system goes well beyond slavery. It is to that side of Toussaint as (perhaps unintentional) purveyor of the logic of coloniality that Granville refers when he suggests that only Toussaint Abreda (the name Toussaint received as a slave) can defeat Toussaint Louverture (his revolutionary name).

In the play, Moyse criticizes the colonial logic of Toussaint’s postslavery economic plans in these terms:
You say, “the people,” I say, “the disadvantaged.” You say “the people” with your republican highmindedness; I see only those who weed, cut, and bundle sugarcane. In sackcloth, sweating, their heads turning giddy under the sun . . . You say “the people,” I shout in reply, “the wretched ones.” (82)

Moyse’s fleshing out of Toussaint’s abstraction, “the people,” implies more than a change of register. It challenges and highlights the erasures in the language of coloniality, particularly when that language draws upon pseudo-universal abstractions. The objection is not to the notion that the former slaves form part of “the people,” but rather to the fact the use of such notions hide the fact that, throughout the many liberal, democratizing upheavals that dominated the Western “Age of Revolution” (as Eric Hobsbawn refers to it), including the American and French revolutions, in order for some in the metropolis to gain access to the privileges (material and otherwise) that come from being “the people,” others were submitted to (or allowed to remain in) subhuman conditions. Moreover (and this may be more pertinent in Macaïa’s critique of Toussaint), once those former subhumans are “granted” the symbolic privilege of becoming part of “the people” (as the French Revolution presumably did by abolishing slavery), that abstract, formal concession in itself can hide the reality of the concrete, material injustices that persist. As part of “the people,” the former slaves should be counting their blessings; as “those who weed, cut, and bundle sugarcane,” they know quite well that their conditions have hardly improved.

A further, important implication of Moyse’s words relates to what the Argentinean philosopher Enrique Dussel calls “the myth of European Modernity” (“Europe”) and Walter Mignolo refers to as the “Modern/Colonial World system” (Local Histories). In opposition to the myth that modernity (whether the scientifically driven industrial modernity or the philosophical-political modernity of the secular democratic Western nations) developed as an exclusively intra-European affair, Dussel insists that European colonial expansion to other parts of the world (led by Spain in the sixteenth century, then followed by other countries after the seventeenth century) was at the center of the development of “modernity:” not necessarily as its cause, but as an integral part of it (see Dussel “Europe”). The discovery and exploitation of the Other in a context of global domination is an intrinsic part of the developments associated with European modernity. What this means is that the colonized, the subaltern, the Other, have never been outside of Europe’s modern project, but part of it as what Dussel calls
its “underside” (*Underside*). When Moyse refuses the abstract language of Eurocentric modernity, and instead focuses on the oppressed masses laboring day in and day out under the scorching sun, he is highlighting that underside of modernity, the concrete details that its rhetoric hides. This does not imply the rejection of any liberating principles that “modernity” might offer (for example, its particular articulation of the notions of liberty, equality, fraternity), but rather the exploration of what those excluded from the myth of modernity might have to say about those, and any other values.

Symbolically, Moyse is not against modernity “as such,” or for modernity as Eurocentrically defined by the logic of coloniality. His is what we might call following Dussel a transmodern perspective. By that term, Dussel refers to the emancipatory irruption of those subjectivities that have been denied by the “modern/colonial” project, and whose purpose is not to naively deny any value to the principles of modernity in the abstract, but to *decolonize* the world created by that modern project, confronting it from an underside that in fact was never not part of it, although it was (paradoxically) an excluded, marginal part (Dussel, “Europe”; see also Dussel, “Transmodernity”).

_The Past (Eurocentric Values vs. Local Traditions/Africa)_

Another issue, closely related to that of the Eurocentric myth of modernity and Haiti’s modern/colonial history, is the tension between allegiance to “European” (French) values and rootedness in African (or Haitian of African origin) customs and traditions. As we have seen, one of the play’s main structuring devices is the extended dialogue Toussaint has with the spirits in his cell. Those spirits are closely related to the cosmos of Vodou beliefs and, as Glissant explains in his preface, “Toussaint’s relations with his deceased companions arise from a tradition, perhaps particular to the Antilles, of casual communication with the dead” (16). It is certainly true that casual communication with the dead is not a prevalent custom in the West that Toussaint tried to espouse, either in its secular scientific strand or in the traditional Catholicism that Toussaint practiced. Thus, the spirits that surround him highlight his seeming disconnection from the traditional beliefs most of the Haitian people held dearly, and it is not surprising that many of those spirits have an adversarial, recriminating relation to Toussaint throughout the play.

In fact, when Toussaint is organizing his army near the beginning of the revolution, he states: “There is no Legba, there is no Ogoun. There is science
and knowledge now. When we march, even the dust will be disciplined” (35). In the French version, a soldier responds that those who die will go back to Guinea to join their brothers, thus highlighting even more sharply the contrast between Toussaint’s worldview and that of many of his followers.” When Mama Dio wants to honor Toussaint, she finds no better praise than stating: “Toussaint worships the white god, but in his heart Ogoun is all powerful” (44).

At a certain level, the tension could be regarded as overly simplistic, given that Haiti, like other Caribbean societies, is a creolized culture that incorporates both European and African elements, as well as many others. However, the issue at hand is not the cultural identity of Haiti in the abstract, but the oppressive hegemony of one cultural worldview (that of European “modernity”) in a colonial context. This aspect of the play highlights its connection to cultural debates closer to Glissant’s own context in the late 1950s and 1960s. For instance, it is in the context of those debates that movements like Césaire’s negritude find their full meaning: they advocate a return of sorts to Africa precisely because it is the African dimension of that colonized population that is being construed as worthless, uncivilized, exotic at best. Regardless of one’s ultimate assessment of it, the cultural project of negritude must be understood in the context of those anticolonial struggles that swept the world after World War II. Glissant always kept his distance from what he regarded as the overgeneralizing aspects of negritude, but even he participated in those “counter-balancing” efforts against a colonial logic that taught blacks to “despise themselves” (Couffon, Visite, 35; my translation).

It is questionable whether Césaire himself saw negritude much differently than Glissant. Regarding the important issue of struggles for liberation, Césaire states, as we saw in chapter 3: “It matters little to me who wrote the text of the Declaration of Human Rights. I don’t care; it exists. The criticisms against its “Western” origin are simplistic. Why would that bother me? One must appropriate that text and know how to interpret it correctly” (Nègre je suis, 69; my translation). Part of interpreting the text “correctly” would be to flesh out what the French were reluctant to accept: that its principles must also apply to all colonized peoples regardless of race.

But again, the battle is not usually to demonstrate that European concepts and formulations are an important or useful part of the Caribbean experience; the struggle is more often to dismantle the myth that only European notions have provided anything of value to that experience. In Monsieur Toussaint, we can see this conflict played out in the two different concepts of the revolution that Toussaint and Macaïa hold. Toussaint attempts to
justify his loyalty to the French Republic by stating that “the Republic began in 1792, and we, who once endured so many kings on our heads, we were born with her!” (Silenieks, *Monsieur Toussaint*, 36). By “we” Toussaint is referring to the revolutionaries, the black Jacobins who took the principles of the French Revolution and, as Césaire suggests, appropriated them and knew how to interpret them, that is to say, pointed out that, to be consistent, those principles entailed the liberation of the slaves.

Macaïa takes Toussaint to task not over the worthiness of the enlightened ideals of universal emancipation, but over the implication that the black slaves needed to be taught how to aspire to freedom. Now Toussaint has not said that, but Macaïa seems quite aware of the logic of the coloniality of power, by which even the slaves’ ability to articulate their own desire for freedom is construed as a gift from the colonizer. Under such logic, even the former slaves who have liberated themselves remain the *others* of rationality and agency, to which they attain precariously through the civilizing efforts of the Europeans, as the colonizers had always declared (thus justifying their colonizing mission: the white man’s burden). To this, Macaïa replies:

> Before the whites even knew the word revolution, we maroons already had the run of the forest. Their dogs could smell us a mile away, in the very midst of a peaceful crowd. Maroons had the smell of freedom. We were building our own republic. . . . Freedom cannot be taught! . . . Freedom has grown in the forest ever since the slave trade began. Come reap it if you wish. (42)

I will not reproduce here the debate over the influence on European “enlightened” ideas and the French Revolution on the revolting slaves, and what shape their rebellions would have taken without those European developments. From the very title of his book, C. L. R. James laid the ground for an appreciation of the influence of those ideas on the slaves, with the important caveat that those slaves were never the submissive or irrational savages that European accounts would present (and thus, blank slates of sorts upon which those ideas were imprinted), but oppressed *subjects* longing for freedom since the very beginning of the slave trade, who were able to identify very valuable tools for their liberation in the concepts of the European Enlightenment. Césaire’s essay on Toussaint also privileges the influence of French revolutionary ideas, while some later historians attempted to balance the picture by privileging the role of illiterate masses in the revolt (Fouchard, Fick, Thornston), or at least the extraordinary complexity of the factors that led to it (Geggus, *Haitian Revolutionary*). Nick Nesbitt also offers valuable
insights in his attempt to clarify that the European Enlightenment itself was not a monolithic tradition, an important fact when trying to ascertain its impact on the Haitian revolutionaries (*Universal Emancipation*).

Naturally no contemporary writer that I am aware of would deny that the slaves’ struggles for freedom did not start with, or needed in order to exist, the ideals of European Enlightenment. This is quite clear from the long history of slave revolts and escaped slave maroons since the conquest of the Americas. By the same token, there is no denying, when one considers the evidence, that the ideals and the rhetoric of European Enlightenment, appearing when they did, played a fundamental role in the way the revolting slaves articulated and gave form to their struggles for freedom.

However, it is equally important to consider the notion that the slaves’ participation in the ideals and events of Enlightenment politics was not something clearly foreseen in the ideals themselves as first articulated by Enlightenment thinkers, or in the initial political upheavals of the “age of revolution.” As historian Laurent Dubois aptly suggests, even after the French Revolution, with its enlightened principles, the abolition would not have occurred as swiftly, if at all, without the slave revolt (*Haiti*, 29).¹⁴ The “appropriation” of enlightened ideas by the slaves represents the irruption of an *other subjectivity* into the scene, which wants to contrast/join its own ideas/desires of freedom to those that had been developed in Europe, and which creates something new out of that encounter, not something already contained but somehow not yet manifested in European discourse. On the other hand, to consider the slaves as simply the absolute Others of those European developments plays into the logic of coloniality. The slaves were always already part of those modern developments, as their marginalized symbolic border and exploited labor. From that perspective, what the slaves bring to the scene are transmodern subjectivities that engage in what Mignolo has called “border thinking;” their desires and projects are not merely something wholly other than the desires and projects of European Enlightenment, but they are not mere passive recipients of what Europe had already figured out without them (and then bestowed upon them).¹⁵ They had been linked to Europe for centuries, and had been part of the modern project since the beginning as its excluded, colonial outer border.¹⁶

In Glissant’s play, at times Toussaint seems to believe that the freedom he has attained he does owe to France (a logical assumption if one believes that France bestows the very idea of freedom on ignorant slaves). In his cell, he pleads with his jailers, protesting that his loyalty to the republic should not be questioned, and that it has guided all his actions (66). Mama Dio
moans and the other spirits in his cell express their disapproval of Toussaint’s submissive attitude. Of course, C. L. R. James would argue that there is no reason to take Toussaint at face value given the daring defiance of his actions up to that point, and that we should regard his seeming submission as still another ploy. That may be the case; however, in Glissant’s play Toussaint comes across as a man who was indeed too devout of the French republic as the true purveyor of emancipating projects. In a scene of tragic pathos, French soldiers remove his uniform and his insignias, since “you have no right, except in your own stupid pride, to the uniform of an officer of the Republic” (Silenieks, Monsieur Toussaint, 81). Toussaint is reduced to complain: “was it necessary to add humiliation to my misfortune?” (ibid., 82). He is paying for his tragic mistake: what France grants, France can easily take away.

Again, it would be incorrect to conclude that Toussaint’s error is in believing in liberty, fraternity, and equality as such. Yet, in his enthusiasm about those values as formulated by revolutionary France, he neglects the fact that those values have been made to coexist with the logic of coloniality. It is not that the values are wrong, or that they are “Western,” but rather that the very humanity of the slaves (and therefore the applicability of those values to them) is still very much in question. In the play—and one might engage in a Jamesian critique of Glissant in order to show that his portrayal of Toussaint is much too lopsided and partial—Toussaint seems too invested in the belief that, in spite of their duplicity and deceit, the French as purveyors of enlightened ideas must play a salutary role in Saint Domingue’s future. To this one must add his concerns about the island’s plantations in the world economy, which he rightly believes would require the cooperation of France and other imperial powers.

In this context, and in spite of Glissant’s dislike of Afrocentric essentialism, it is not surprising that Toussaint’s redemption at the end of the play should come through a reconciliation with the spirits and deities of Vodou. As he is about to die, Mackandal sustains him, praising his epic role in the liberation of his people as he invokes Legba, the opener of the way (121), and Toussaint tells Macaïa he is about to cross the ocean again, an action that replicates, in a liberating key, the slaves’ middle passage. Toussaint dies speaking Creole and invoking Ogoun: “Man lé la libeté pou Sin-Domingue! Ogoun, Ogoun!” (121).

The end of Monsieur Toussaint is not a return to Africa, but rather a return to a Caribbean reconciled with the African dimension of its history. The “Caribbeanness” of the ending is certainly highlighted by Toussaint’s
use of Creole. Throughout his career, and unlike his younger colleagues of the creolité movement, Glissant never favored the use of Creole in his own literary production, preferring the use of a Creole-inflected French. One may question the reasons for his approach, which probably range from aesthetic preferences to the marketing constraints of a Paris-centered publishing world. In the play, the use of Creole by Toussaint at the end and by certain characters (slaves and spirits) throughout the play enhances the significance of Macaïa’s anti-French arguments—those arguments are not being made from an essentialist Afrocentric position, but rather from a creolized, Caribbean reality that fully integrates its African components. The Creole language, developed through the fusion of French and African languages, concretely embodies that creolized reality. In his preface to the 1978 version, Glissant indicates that he resisted the temptation to “creolize” the language of the whole play because the artificiality of that procedure would have been obvious (which is itself a questionable, potentially Eurocentric assessment, except from the practical point of view of performing the play in France). However, he does invite producers and actors to incorporate any such creolizing elements through improvisation if the performing situation allows it.

The play makes sure to include a revealing example from Haiti’s history that demonstrates the precariousness of all essentialisms in the Caribbean. It is well known that Dessalines, a much fiercer leader than Toussaint, not only led his people to independence by fighting the French to the death; there were also massacres of whites after the French had been defeated. However, Dessalines famously spared the Polish and Germans who had refused to carry on Rochambeau’s orders (Monsieur, 111), and he excluded them from the prohibition that his Constitution imposed on white men owning land in Haiti. Dessalines is not interested in attacking an essentialist whiteness whose very nature is defined by the tenets of European colonialism, but rather in loosening the grip of that colonial logic: anyone who joins him in that struggle is an ally, regardless of race.

**Totalité-Monde or Globalization?**

In the previous section, my examination of the problems that Glissant’s representation of Toussaint poses started with concrete, material concerns about possible avenues of subsistence and development in the world economy for postslavery Saint Domingue. Toussaint does not consider the possibility of an independent Haiti, but Dessalines will face similar problems after his
victory, as does every newly independent nation. Toussaint’s error, as portrayed in the play, is his inclination to reinsert the island in global markets that, in their very structural setups, already followed a colonial logic. Are there any other possible models for livelihood, Macaïa and the maroons seem to ask. From there I moved toward questions of cultural legitimacy, to the tension between the primacy of Eurocentric notions and values in a colonial society such as Saint Domingue (notions and values that are internalized by the colonized themselves) and the need to reconnect with African (in this case) dimensions of identity that the colonial logic has condemned to the realm of the animalistic and the subhuman.

The point I want to emphasize here is that although the order of my analysis was arbitrary (I could have started with the cultural and ended with the economic), in recent years several critics have pointed out—sometimes with frustration or downright indignation—that Glissant’s own career as writer and theorist followed a similar path, from more concrete economic/political concerns that find their most coherent expression in 1981’s *Le discours antillais* to more cultural, identitarian (albeit in a postmodern, antiessentialist vein) preoccupations. For critics like Peter Hallward, those developments are parallel to Glissant’s abandonment of his projects for an independent Martinique, and his acceptance of the island’s somewhat permanent political ties to France, in one form or another. Although I will not reproduce the lengthy debate here, I must allude briefly to it because, as we have seen, both concerns, the economic and the cultural, play an important role in a play that was written toward the beginning of Glissant’s career (1961), revised and shortened during a middle period (1978), and then co-translated (and further revised) toward the end of his career (2005).

According to Hallward, Glissant’s work since *Poétique de la relation* (1990) became progressively disengaged from concrete political commitments that found their clearest expression in his support of Martinique’s independence (or at least national autonomy). Hallward accuses Glissant’s thought of moving toward a banal, politically ineffectual, Deleuzean “incorporation into the univocity of a new world order based on nothing other than constant internal metamorphosis, dislocation and exchange” (68). In other words, where before we had concrete political action based on universal principles that coalesce around anticolonial struggles anchored in the need for national independence (Hallward approvingly refers to this position as “neo-Jacobin” nationalism), Glissant’s late emphasis on notions such as “relation,” “tout-monde,” “chaos-monde,” and many others constitutes a celebration of a singular world where each part exists through and in connection with all other
Maroons in the Tout-Monde

parts, and which calls for an acknowledgment of such always-already-there relations as the main act of engagement with it. This “postmodernization” of Glissant’s views is also confirmed, somewhat approvingly first (1998) and then disapprovingly (2008), by Chris Bongie.

Not surprisingly, many critics have attempted to “defend” Glissant, either by pointing out concrete political projects that the Martinican author has been engaged with regardless of how abstract and aestheticized his books have become (see Forsdick, “Late Glissant”; and also Nesbitt’s praise [in spite of his general agreement with Hallward] of Glissant’s proposal to turn Martinique into an “ecological nation” in Voicing Memory), and also by questioning Hallward’s premises, and showing how Glissant’s late positions, whether one agrees with them or not, were developed out of the need to address legitimate political concerns. Thus, Eric Prieto suggests that Glissant’s notion of “Tout-Monde” addresses the apparent dichotomy between the local and the global by invoking a “principle of interrelatedness” that “has the effect of releasing us from the too-abstract/too-specific binary” and whose challenge is “to represent individual events in ways that highlight their participation in this larger, global scheme, to find a language of representation able to capture simultaneously the relatedness and the uniqueness of every individual” (118–19). The task at hand may still be as specific as founding a nation or protecting an endangered forest—but neither can be accomplished in naive or stubborn blindness to the global forces that weight on it and are affected by it.

Similarly Celia Britton argues that Glissant’s late works are not only political (if one allows for a broader definition than Hallward’s) but also that their progressive distance from the nation as solution for political problems is a result of Glissant’s engagement with the concrete conditions of the contemporary world. Thus, Britton suggests, “in a world of multinational economies and US neoimperialism, gaining national independence does not guarantee freedom from oppression; Glissant’s late texts repeatedly argue that the nonlocalized “invisibility” of the multinationals, situated nowhere and everywhere, eludes conventional resistance and requires us to find new ways of opposing them” (“Globalization,” 7). Certainly, one need not agree with Glissant’s diagnosis or approach in order to recognize that his late works constitute an attempt to address global systemic forms of domination that his earlier ones did not always tackle directly, focused as they were on the colonial relation between France and Martinique.

The realities of nonlocalized multinationals and metropolitan neocolonialism return us to the concerns we have explored in Monsieur Toussaint.
After all, many of the tensions that feed the debates on Glissant’s “late style,”
are already included, in one form or another, in his only play. Hallward him-
self acknowledges that the changes that he is criticizing are possibly more
changes of emphasis than an absolute break in Glissant’s work (67); however,
he finds that the change of emphasis is significant enough to allow us to talk
about two distinct periods (at least) in Glissant’s writing. Although I agree
that increasingly dense neologisms of late Glissant do mark a transition in his
work, my suggestion here is that the impasse at the end of Monsieur Toussaint
points to many of the conflicts that the later neologisms will try to bridge, if
not solve.

After all, the end of Monsieur Toussaint, in spite of Toussaint’s redemp-
tion and symbolic return to Haiti, is a failure of sorts, or at least a tragic
denouement. Toussaint has a hard time imagining Saint Domingue outside
of the international circuit of the sugar market, which foreshadows the reali-
ties of globalization. Macaïa and the maroons might have represented the
beginning of a viable new direction, but they did not have a chance to test
it. Moreover, they are unable to articulate it beyond the romantic exaltation
of libertarian freedom. Those two “failures,” if one might call them that, will
haunt the leaders of the future nation, or at least those whose main concern
is not their own enrichment. The play ends with the inability to name a third
way that might combine and/or surpass Toussaint’s and Macaïa’s concerns.
That impasse points to the need of a language, an imaginary that might
incorporate the local and the global, sovereignty and cooperation, opacity
and relation. And while Monsieur Toussaint is unable to create that imaginary
(not the least because of historical accuracy: Haiti’s history has not been able
to find such a way), it is not surprising that Glissant returned to the play
twice throughout his career (in 1978 to shorten it and in the early 2000s to
co-translate it). In many ways, Glissant’s work (after, but certainly also before,
Le discours antillais) has been an attempt to articulate and productively imag-
ine a fruitful conjunction of what Prieto calls the “interrelatedness” of the
local and the global. That interrelatedness would imply a conjunction of the
imperatives that Toussaint and Macaïa represent and are unable to reconcile
in Monsieur Toussaint.

Glissant’s best known attempt to provisionally name that interrelatedness
that evades both Toussaint and Macaïa is the neologism tout-monde, which
takes its place among many concepts in his oeuvre that work over decades
like variations on a very specific set of concerns and obsessions, from the
confluence of “opacity” and “relation,” to the exploration of the contempo-
rary “chaos-monde,” to the imaginary cartography of a “new region of the
world.” The tout-monde refers both to the reality, and to our awareness of that reality, that the totality of the world is indeed connected and interdependent, so that no group or individual can claim to exist or aspire to succeed without taking into account the rest of the world. This view does not invalidate the realities of specific identities, but it does move identity away from any essentialist grounding toward an awareness that all specificity is the unique and unpredictable result of the coming together of those multiple elements. Any group or individual can still claim a “right to opacity” (*Poétique* 203), because the many factors that make up their identity can never be fully sorted out and reduced to simple, clear-cut “explanations” (indeed, the reductive transparency of such explanations is usually part of the epistemic violence of colonialism, through which the colonizer always pretends to know what the colonized is, and is not). As Glissant lyrically puts it:

> What I call Whole-World [Tout-monde] is the universe as it changes and endures through changing, and, at the same time, the “vision” that we have of it. The Totality-World [totalité-monde] in its physical diversity and in the representations that it inspires in us. We would no longer be able to sing, enounce, or painfully work only from our place, without plunging into the imaginary of this totality. (*Traité*, 176; my translation)

If it is certainly easier to criticize, perhaps even to parody Glissant’s late style, it is in part because his poetic, abstract musings can have a diluting effect on the points he is trying to make, points that become much more intense when incarnated in a tragic historical drama like that of Toussaint.  

However, the pertinence of his points (that is to say, the connection between his late abstractions and important historical and political dramas in the real world) becomes clearer when we read them through the lens of our previous observations on the coloniality of power. That matrix of political inequality became a truly *global* phenomenon with the expansion of modern empires (beginning with Spain in the sixteenth century and culminating with France and England through the twentieth, with the United States frequently operating in a neocolonial economic key, but just as often ready to engage in military interventionism). As we have seen, the coloniality of power operates through an essentialist Anglo-Eurocentric ontology whereby other “races” are regarded as less and/or other than fully human. In order to operate, that matrix requires an imaginary, a series of images, stories, beliefs, myths, and other disciplinary knowledges and practices, which both articulate and spread the coloniality of power not only among, but also within,
individuals. At the existential level, as Maldonado-Torres compellingly argues, one may even refer to a coloniality of being, which excludes from full humanity certain races or human groups. As mentioned before, this matrix continues operating even after the formal ending of colonial domination; in fact, it dominates much of contemporary neoliberal globalization. Thus, for Glissant, that battle at the level of the imaginary is fundamental (to the point that sometimes he may be criticized with good reason for seemingly underestimating the importance of struggles at other levels).

As Glissant states in *Poétique de la relation*: “Most of the nations that gained freedom from colonization have tended to form around the idea of power—the totalitarian drive of a single, unique root—rather than around a fundamental relationship with the Other. Culture’s self-conception was dualistic, pitting citizen against barbarian” (Glissant, *Poetics*, 14). We can see clear links between these words from *Poetics* and the dire realities of the coloniality of power as highlighted in *Monsieur Toussaint*. Toussaint’s authoritarian imposition of the plantation labor regime on his people enacts, at the level of economic production, the “totalitarian drive of the single root” that still dominates the postemancipation Saint Domingue, as it will dominate postindependence Haiti. Needless to say, the European nations that are anchored in the totalitarian certainty of their ontological superiority, and thus saw no contradiction in the enslavement of their inferiors, will not ultimately object (in spite of initial resistance) to a change of regime (salaried workers instead of slaves) as long as they keep receiving the goods to which their superior nature entitles them. Thus, the development of a different, alternative, decolonizing matrix of images and knowledges that will counteract the “totalitarian drive of the single root” (which responds to the coloniality of power, as well as to the coloniality of knowledge and being) is of vital importance for Glissant, even if their practical applications in concrete situations may not always be immediately evident.

Glissant is not naive (although admittedly he seems to be sometimes) about the fact that oppression continues in the “tout-monde,” precisely because the logic of coloniality does not need the mechanisms of classical colonialism to operate. However, an essential part of his project is to shake and demolish the claim to legitimacy that attempts to anchor the coloniality of power, knowledge, and being (see Glissant, *Introduction*, 68 and 77; and also Britton, “Globalization”). He tries to combat the imaginary of coloniality (fundamental to its operation) with an alternative imaginary that consistently diffuses and disseminates all claims to ontological essentialism. Again, a critic might with some justification attack that approach as irredeemably insuffi-
cient, but one could equally argue for the necessity of such a project in any struggle against not only the material realities of colonialism and its legacies but also against the logic of coloniality.

In the links that I am suggesting between *Monsieur Toussaint* and Glissant’s later works, those late, often perplexing neologisms should not be regarded as solutions to the play’s conflicts (as if uttering the word “tout-monde” somehow exorcised its dilemmas), but as extensions of the play’s final impasse—as attempts to turn that impasse into something productive rather than paralyzing. They are attempts, yes, of imagining new ways of articulating notions and concepts (such as identity) that have been fundamental in the long history of colonial relations, but they are not final solutions. They cannot be because, as we have seen in previous chapters, the logic of coloniality locates the colonized in a double bind in which even resistance often puts those who resist in the self-contradicting position of “confirming” their oppressor’s prejudices. Faced with this impasse, this uncertainty as to viable clear political options, the play offers itself, with its “prophetic vision of the past,” as a form of cultural action. Thus, the importance of *Monsieur Toussaint* is not merely in what it says or prescribes but also in what it does, in the way it performs the tensions and contradictions of the colonial condition. Its power for spectators and readers is to enable their reflective participation in the story’s unsolved dilemmas, rather than the expository solution of those dilemmas.

Naturally, action is still required in the real world, action that will necessarily be partial and not take into account important dimensions (ultimately, the totality of the *tout-monde*) of the situation at hand. Glissant does not deny the need for such action—Toussaint must act according to his best judgment, as must Macaïa. But Glissant does seem to believe that there is a salutary and humbling effect with ethical dimensions in acting, first, with the awareness that the “tout-monde” around us (not just our small parcel of it) claims our commitment, and second, with the awareness and the regret that we cannot do full justice to that call. At any given moment Toussaint’s and Macaïa’s actions might be enhanced or limited by their ability or inability to imagine a broader or different totality (for Glissant always composed of a multiplicity of interrelated parts) beyond their immediate concerns. Readers and spectators also learn the same lesson through their participation in the play’s action, and that is one of the effects of Glissant’s “prophetic vision of the past.”

The notion of a “prophetic vision of the past” entails more than the examination of past events from the perspective of the problems of the pres-
ent. It also involves, as Glissant makes clear in the preface to the play, a recovery of dimensions of that past that have been hidden and marginalized by official (read: colonial) versions of history. But even more, the “prophetic” aspect of that view logically implies the impulse to announce a future, and moreover a future in which, as with the prophets of the Old Testament, the iniquities and injustices of the present are duly rectified. Evidently, Glissant is not thinking in literal religious terms, and in many ways it is not surprising that when he again invokes the notion of a prophetic vision of the past in 1996’s Introduction à une poétique du divers (86), it is in the context of a discussion of another concept dear to him, that of the erratic (a term he takes from chaos theory) or unpredictable character of the tout-monde (81–107). For Glissant, this unpredictability is primordially a positive value, because he associates predictability with the tendency to organize the world in well-defined, essentialist compartments that are then naturalized as “the way things are,” which has characterized colonial thinking for centuries. Thus, even the “new” world “discovered” by the Europeans was organized through the use of old categories, and while that does not surprise us in the case of the almost medieval minds of Spanish discoverers, as a modus operandi it did not particularly change with the French and English empires up to the twentieth century. Coloniality always entails a foreclosure of novelty, as knowing is controlling.

Glissant’s notion of unpredictability implies that, regardless of the strength with which the logic of coloniality set in motion and was infused into the history of colonized territories and peoples, such regimes are never tightly closed systems. Coloniality and colonialism cannot control everything, least of all the colonized’s responses and resistances. These occur at multiple levels, including the political (wherein developments like the principles and events of the French revolution can become useful tools in hands of those enslaved by the French) and the cultural (wherein colonial societies, in spite of efforts to distinguish metropolitan “civilization” from native backwardness, become creolized societies to multiple degrees in multifarious ways). Although Glissant does not explicitly emphasize this aspect of unpredictability, one consequence of his concept is the opening of multiple (though often minimal) spaces of freedom in which groups and individuals can act in ways unforeseen by the power structures that constrain them.

Glissant’s “prophetic vision of the past” is paradoxically linked to unpredictability because one of things it does is to introduce imagination into history through literature [or art] in order to illuminate spaces of freedom. Those spaces of freedom, moments when events could have taken a different turn,
are of course only visible to us in the present, but they can inform and inspire that present as it moves toward the future. In returning to a series of foundational events in Caribbean history, the play illuminates roads taken and not taken. What the play does better than much of Glissant’s later theorizing is to highlight that those unpredictable junctures in history are always related to (albeit not totally dependent on) individual and collective choices. And the quality of those choices is deeply influenced (although not determined) by the richness of the imaginary of those who make them.

From this perspective, it makes sense that the play revolves around a series of key moments when certain characters (observed from our present) could have made a different choice. Those moments include Toussaint’s joining the revolution, which happens after overcoming his wife’s objections (26–27); his execution of Moyse (79–81), a moment in which, interestingly, it is Madame Toussaint who intervenes on Moyse’s behalf, reminding Toussaint that it is his decision whether Moyse lives or not, while Toussaint claims (with Sartrean bad faith) that it is Moyse who has sealed his own fate; ultimately, Toussaint’s decision to accept Leclerc’s invitation to meet (again, against Madame Toussaint’s advice), even when he suspects he will be taken prisoner (this last decision is given tragic overtones by Glissant’s acceptance of Césaire’s thesis: Toussaint removes himself from the stage so that the revolution can follow its course under Dessalines and Christophe). In addition to those moments, the long dialogue between Toussaint and Macaïa throughout the play illuminates the unpredictable implications of roads taken and not taken. The point here is not that Toussaint made the wrong choices—maybe he did or he did not—but that at certain key moments he chose, and that those choices were (and always are) greatly affected by the individual’s (or group’s) ability to imagine what totality they are part of. Each choice closes certain possibilities, but also opens numerous unexpected ones. The illumination of those possibilities in the past by the literary imagination opens up the exploration of similar possibilities hidden in the present. From this perspective, Glissant’s later copiousness of neologisms may be found lacking in focus or clarity, but it was not banal or apolitical.

Naturally, those “spaces of freedom” are not absolute, and I am not suggesting them as metaphysical claims to Kantian free will. But Glissant’s prophetic vision of the past works as hermeneutical tool that, in highlighting the myriad possibilities that the present situation can divine with hindsight when examining the past, opens up the multiple futures that could depart from the present, even if we must always opt for only one of those futures. Of
course, the past cannot be changed and the future is unpredictable, and the myriad possibilities open to us in the present are never fully available to us (nobody can act from a full apprehension of the tout-monde). But if we are not absolutely free to decide, we are not absolutely overdetermined by the overwhelming logic of coloniality. It is that overdetermination that Glissant is combating, rather than proposing some unlimited freedom in the abstract. Glissant’s angel of history sees not only ruins behind him, but a multiplicity of roads not taken that imaginatively illuminate the possible presence of many productive untaken roads in the present, even if they are not visible. It is imagination (through literature and art) that makes the invisible partially visible.

This chapter’s inquiry began with the apparent paradox in Glissant’s preface to the play: are the Caribbean peoples deprived of their histories, or trapped by them? The answer that emerges from Monsieur Toussaint is “both,” or more accurately, “neither,” since the issue at hand is not history in the abstract, but a colonial logic that denies some the ability to engage history as subjects. In the Caribbean context, the Haitian revolutionaries constituted a dramatic irruption of those denied subjectivities into realms that refused to acknowledge them, and which indeed made them pay dearly for their daring, up to this day. But once the irruption occurs, other problems to be solved begin, as the tension between Toussaint and Macaïa throughout the play shows. The core of many of those problems is aptly summarized by Glissant in his Introduction a une poétique du divers:

The location from which one emits one’s word, from which one produces the text, from which one emits one’s voice, from which one emits one’s scream, that location is immense. But one can close that location, and lock oneself inside . . . The important thing today is precisely to be able to discuss a poetics of relation that is able to open the location without undoing it, without dissolving it. Do we have the means to do that? Is it something that man, that the human species, that the human being can do? Or should we consider once and for all that in order to preserve the location it is necessary to preserve its exclusiveness? I have not denied that there is a question there. (29–30; my translation)

Glissant does not answer his question in Introduction or in any of his other books, just as Monsieur Toussaint does not solve the impasse between Toussaint and Macaïa. But the question remains fundamental, and Glissant’s whole oeuvre is an attempt to imagine approximations to an answer. That is,
for Glissant, one of Literature’s main gifts to History. What Monsieur Toussaint shows more clearly than most of Glissant’s theoretical works is that, in places like the Caribbean, both the impulse toward preserving the concreteness of one’s location and the impulse toward the openness of relation are crossed by colonial designs that are always ready to take advantage of both impulses. In this, Haiti remains, not only for the Caribbean but also for the rest of the world, both an inspiring story and a cautionary tale. Monsieur Toussaint compellingly explores both sides of that Haitian gift to those who want to reflect upon liberation and its discontents and possibilities.