"This Shipwreck of Fragments"

"This Shipwreck of Fragments": Historical Memory, Imaginary Identities, and Postcolonial Geography in Caribbean Culture and Literature

Edited by

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INTRODUCTION

LI-CHUN HSIAO

> Deprived of their original language, the captured and indentured tribes create their own, accreting and secreting fragments of an old, an epic vocabulary, from Asia and from Africa, but to an ancestral, an ecstatic rhythm that cannot be subdued by slavery or indenture, while nouns are renamed and the given names of places accepted like Felicity village or Choiseul. . . . [This] process of renaming, of finding new metaphors, is the same process that the poet faces every morning of his working day, making his own tools like Crusoe, assembling nouns from necessity, from Felicity, even renaming himself. The striped man is driven back to that self-astonishing, elemental force, his mind. That is the basis of the Antillean experience, this shipwreck of fragments, these echoes, these shards of a huge tribal vocabulary, these partially remembered customs, and they are not decayed but strong.
> — Derek Walcott, *What the Twilight Says*

In the epigraph above Derek Walcott articulates not only the crux of "the Antillean experience," but also what may well be considered a manifesto, or at least, a manifestation, of the poetics of Caribbean *improvisation and hybridity*, two characteristics that have been invoked, celebrated, and elaborated in much of contemporary cultural practices and cultural theory, which extend well beyond the Caribbean—whether conceived as geographical, cultural, or academic delimitations. The Caribbean, as an archipelago often associated with exotic settings and vacation destinations under the rubric of a capitalist globality, has also been touted as a prime example of cultural hybridity in metropolitan discourses, or even a figure for them. James Clifford, for instance, claims that "we are Caribbeans in our urban archipelagoes."[1] In light of, and in response to, such popularized perception of the Caribbean as an epitome of cultural hybridity and improvisation, this project seeks to further examine Caribbean cultural identities along the lines of race, class, nationalism, and

[1] James Clifford. *The predicament of culture: twentieth century ethnography, literature and art* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1988), 173.

history, through our readings of literature and cultural productions rooted in the region. Drawing on a variety of genres of literature and popular music, the present volume includes not only pieces that stress the shaping and reshaping of Afro-Caribbean cultural identities and reaffirm the significance of such hybridizations, but also those that think against the grain and pursue questions that have not received enough critical attentions. This latter task can be seen in our attempt to probe the phenomenon that the Caribbean's image as a tropical getaway in metropolitan popular imaginations tends to eclipse its troubled pasts, traumatic memories, and current (and recurrent) problems which elude the rhetoric of cultural hybridity, presupposing instead a certain non-conflictual diversity or racial equality in the relatively innocuous realm of "culture" (as opposed to that of the political). Although nuanced among themselves on certain issues, the individual chapters together highlight a body of work which is distinct from the bulk of Anglo-American academic productions on the Caribbean, namely, the largely Anglophone postcolonial studies of the Caribbean, since the majority of the textual and cultural materials treated in our inquiries come from either the Hispanic or Francophone Caribbean.

The elemental force Walcott speaks of in the quote above is instantiated and widely acknowledged in Caribbean popular music, among other art forms. In response to V. S. Naipaul's notorious denigration that "nothing has ever been created in the West Indies, and nothing will ever be created," Walcott rebuts by exploiting the inherent ambiguity of the key word, "nothing": "Nothing will always be created in the West Indies, for a long time, because what will come out of there is like nothing one has ever seen before."[2] The invention of steelband music, for example, results from the banning of African drumming and the necessity of improvising from whatever is available at hand—the garbage can cover that evolved with increased sophistications into a trademark instrument over time. As Walcott notes, the "impromptu elements" of the calypso, the Carnival, and steelband music undergirds their patently Caribbean identity—"original and temporarily as inimitable as what they first attempt to copy."[3] The musical elements, as peculiarly improvised and hybridized between a partially remembered African origin and the Antillean here and now, are elaborated in detail and depth in both Kathleen Costello's chapter on the representations of Caribbean popular music in selected novels, and

[2] Derek Walcott. "The Caribbean: Mimicry or Culture?" *Critical perspectives on Derek Walcott*, ed. Robert D. Hamner (Washington, D.C.: Three Continents Press, 1993), 54.
[3] Walcott, "Caribbean," 55.

Mamadou Badiane's chapter on Negrismo poetry and Négritude. To be sure, Caribbean popular music has gained increased visibility and significance in Caribbean studies in recent years, and many attempts have been made to valorize the liberatory potentials of popular music. However, Badiane's and Costello's pieces do not simply harp on the boom of popular music in current Caribbean scholarship. First of all, they both focus on the *literary* representations, appropriations, or instantiations of the musical elements. Furthermore, Costello takes into account what Silvio Torres-Saillant criticizes, in *An Intellectual History of the Caribbean*, as a disproportional privileging of popular music in this "musical turn" of Caribbean studies [4]; Badiane, on the other hand, foregrounds the (re)shapings of Afro-Caribbean identity, affirming the emancipatory implications of black presence in Negrismo poetry, whether by white or mulatto authors, though acknowledging the plausibility of such challenge to racial ideology being thwarted.

Echoing—on the main at least—Torres-Saillant's caveat against the glorification of popular music's role in liberation politics, Costello's chapter traces the roles of race, class, and gendered sexuality (and the intricate interplays of the three categories) in Afro-Caribbean popular music through her readings of three contemporary novels: Guillermo Cabrera Infante's *Tres tristes tigres* (1964), Luis Rafael Sánchez's *La guaracha del Macho Camacho* (1976), and Mayra Santos Febres's *Sirena Selena vestida de pena* (2000). In all the three works examined here, Costello highlights the "tenuous distinction" between celebrating the Caribbean's "African cultural heritage" and "reproducing essentializing attitudes about race, music, and culture" (87). The main black singer character of both *Tres tristes tigres* and *Sirena Selena vestida de pena*, named Estrella and Sirena, respectively, finds herself empowered as well as exploited in varying degrees through their performances of the bolero music. The infatuating power of the *guaracha* music in Sánchez's novel, as Costello points out, has the potential to arouse empathy across race and class and it "literally mobilize[s] the masses in movement" (102) as they spontaneously dance to the *guaracha* upon hearing the star Macho Camacho's recorded song, but it ultimately fails to subvert the dominant ideology and hierarchy primarily because its popularity and pervasiveness are now achieved by means of a highly commercialized popular culture that is embedded in the dominant discourses concerning race, class, and cultural taste (for example, the *guaracha* being featured as the vulgar

[4] Silvio Torres-Saillant. *An intellectual history of the Caribbean* (Basingstoke, Hampshire, England: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 33.

music of the lower class). Nevertheless, Costello does acknowledge popular music's potential to bring forth certain transcendence—albeit a fleeting and fragile one—of race and class through a shared experience of bodily pleasure. For the three novels, as she concludes, "all recognize and problematize in different ways, the importance of popular music's relationship not only to the Caribbean social imaginary but also to the physical body" (109).

Badiane's chapter offers, among other things, a historical account of Negrismo and Négritude poetry, delineating a development or vicissitude of Caribbean identit(ies) that exemplifies the possibilities of resistance (and the emancipation it envisions) going either way—which to a certain extent parallels the "tenuous distinction" Costello identifies between celebrating Afro-Caribbean cultural ingredients and reproducing entrenched racial attitudes and stereotypes. Of all literary genres, poetry is perhaps the closest to music and the most acute to the sounds of the words as well to their meanings. Since the inception of Negrismo movement, its advocates and practitioners, as Badiane observes, have swiftly characterized this new genre with the musical elements of Afro-Caribbean origin, such as rumba and *jitanjáforas* (or senseless words that sound African), two examples elaborated on in his chapter. The poets Badiane discusses here—Luis Palés Matos (1898-1959), Zacarías Tallet (1893-1989), Ramón Guirao (1908- 1949), and Nicolás Guillén (1902-1989)—are Caucasian except for the mulatto Guillén. Collectively, their poems resort to Afro-Cuban or Afro-Caribbean music, rhythm, dance, or even instruments in both the contents and formal compositions of their poems, invoking imaginations of Africa and blacks, particularly the black female body, that could valorize Afro-Caribbean identity in the construction of a new, emerging national identity, yet could just as well reflect, or even reinforce age-old stereotypes and racial ideology. It is interesting to note that the white authors, especially in the case of Palés Matos, employ the Afro-Caribbean musical elements to forge a Creole national identity and assert its cultural as well as political independence from the European mother country (Spain); whereas the Négritude poets Aimé Césaire, Leon-Gontran Damas, and Leopold Senghor were profoundly inspired by the formal innovation of metropolitan surrealism in their collective efforts to celebrate blackness and join a planetary anti-colonial fight. Heeding the socio-historical contexts from which Negrismo poetry arises, Badiane takes a more sympathetic stance toward what some critics consider demeaning treatments of black subjects in Palés Matos's poetry, arguing that it plays "the role of counter-discourse" (123) and represents a certain degree of political advance toward a multicultural and hybrid society in

the once highly racial and hostile environment of Hispanic Caribbean.

In addition to the issue of representing Afro-Caribbean identity, it is important to remind the reader again of certain underlying elements in both Badiane's and Costello's pieces: their emphases on the key presence of music in Caribbean literature, the recognition of the fundamentally hybrid nature of Caribbean culture, and the foregrounding of the body in the literary works or musical forms they examine. The bolero music, like many Cuban musical forms, derives from a hybridization of African and European components. Regardless of its political efficacy and motivations, the Negrismo movement initiated by white authors signals a historical development of cultural hybridity. If Afro-Caribbean music is inextricably bound up with the visceral experience of the body (for the reason that it is the music created by the dispossessed who have nothing and it plays to the rhythm and beat of dance, the movements of the body), then it would appear necessary, as Anthony Bogues suggests, to devote more critical attention to the body. In his response to Silvio Torres-Saillant's critique of the privileged status of popular music in Caribbean studies and Torres-Saillant's subsequent neglect of music's place in the "intellectual" history of the Caribbean, Bogues argues that "the emergence of Caribbean intellectual history allows us to make a visual turn, one in which art and the body become central to our intellectual labors."[5]

Race, History, and Postcolonial Predicament

If there were to be a history of the body in the Caribbean, it would have to take the bodily labor of the slaves as its point of departure. History, of course, could be an unbearable shackle on the Caribbean subject, weighing at once too much and too little, since, as Walcott puts it, "the degradations have already been endured; they have been endured to the point of irrelevancy."[6] What have often been rendered irrelevant, long lost, or deliberately forgotten, in contemporary Caribbean' allegedly postcolonial settings of racial diversity, cultural hybridity and exoticism are the history of colonial slavery and its modern-day legacies, and these

[5] Anthony Bogues. "Writing Caribbean Intellectual History," review of *An intellectual history of the Caribbean*, *Small Axe* 26.2 (2008): 175. Such foregrounding of the body in criticism and historical writings is particularly significant in the Caribbean context, since, as Bogues elaborates, "the dominant forms of power historically did not operate in any liberal mode but functioned as *power in the flesh*, in which the shaping of bodies worked jointly and in tandem with creating subjects." See Bogues, 175; original italics.

[6] Walcott, "Caribbean," 53.

are the principle issues explored in Sheree Henlon's and Li-Chun Hsiao's chapters.

One thinly veiled and scarcely scrutinized legacy of the Caribbean's colonial past that survives or recurs after the cessation of formal colonization is the implicit social hierarchy structured along racial lines in the context of the Caribbean nation. Starting from the concepts/terms of the *ajiaco* and *mestizaje*, Henlon aims to unmask the façade or rhetoric of racial equality, which is couched in the indisputable facts of mixed populations and cultural hybridization, by highlighting Antonio Benitez Rojo's questioning of such misconception of the "race problem" in post-revolutionary Cuba in his short story "La tierra y el cielo" (1968). In contrast to Badiane's evocation of José Martí's emancipationist ideals, which shows his optimism for the materialization of such messages, Henlon' mention of "Martí's vision of a Cuba for all (*con y para todos*)" seems to throw into bold relief the disparity between such ideals and social realities. One can tell that it is an *institutionalized forgetting* of historical memories and current (and recurrent) problems, sanctioned by the nation-state's promotion of the ideology of "racelessness." Henlon's chapter thus begs the thought-provoking question: As visible as racial differences were, why did they come to appear *invisible*, invisible in the sense that the once enslaved race was not even considered part of the new socio-political order premised on equalitarianism? Citing the critic Peter Wade, Henlon's chapter indentifies the Afro-Caribbean's simultaneous inclusion and exclusion vis-à-vis the postcolonial nation, which, according to Wade, "defines for blacks in the nation a particular space where they both appear and disappear."[7] Such a postcolonial predicament for Afro-Caribbeans ties in, though in less than direct ways, with Badiane's and Costello's elaborations on the "tenuous distinction" or sliding between two statuses of Afro-Caribbean-ness: the staging of black cultural elements, in the name of cultural hybridity or racial diversity, might not lead to racial equality or fulfill the liberationist potentials it envisages. In other words, racial visibility might just as well elicit racial invisibility in a constellation of socio-political contexts.

This last point is echoed in Hsiao's chapter in its reflections on the legend of Toussaint L'Ouverture, leader of the Haitian Revolution, the only slave revolt in history that resulted in lasting success and political efficacy. Hsiao argues that the institutionalized forgetting or selected amnesia accompanying the stories of Toussaint and the Haitian Revolution

[7] Peter Wade. *Race and Ethnicity in Latin America* (London: Pluto Press, 1997), 86.

in much of Western memory of colonial slavery dates back to Toussaint's time and persists in our allegedly "postcolonial" present. To remember Toussaint is therefore to confront the traumatic effects of colonial slavery, in its variegated forms, under the aegis of today's capitalist, globalizing world that feeds on the disavowal or liquidation of its memory; it also means to re-examine the West's liberal-democratic fantasy of the pastness of colonialism and its simultaneous rendition of contemporary postcolonial failures as other-worldly spectacle.[8] As is observed in Hsiao's chapter, what seems to be an intriguing similarity in the social and cultural discourses in Euro-America in the Age of Revolution, around late 18th century and early 19th century, is the phenomenon that the curious invisibility of race was accompanied by the proliferation or popularization of the term slavery or slave as trope. It was not unusual to find that "revolutionary pamphlets often cast Americans as slaves of king and parliament, suggesting at times that chattel slavery was but an extreme form of a more pervasive political oppression."[9] In a period when slavery came to signify the antithesis to the most cherished political value of the day—freedom, racial slavery expanded at unprecedented scales around the globe, supporting old regimes and new democracies alike. Yet political theorists and philosophers of the time (Hegel, Locke, Rousseau, Wollstonecraft, etc.) seemed oblivious to such a glaring discrepancy between the founding principles and practices of the emerging body politic. Hegel, for instance, was either deliberately silent on the Haitian Revolution, brought about by slaves themselves, or unwittingly failed to take into account its significance while conceiving of his well-known master-slave dialectic.[10] Furthermore, their writings were sometimes

[8] Barnor Hesse. "Forgotten Like a Bad Dream: Atlantic Slavery and the Ethics of Postcolonial Memory," *Relocating postcolonialism*, ed. David Theo Goldberg and Ato Quayson (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), 158.

[9] Eric Sundquist Jr.. *Empire and slavery in American literature, 1820-1865* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2006), 141.

[10] See Susan Buck-Morss, *Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History* (Pittsburgh: U of Pittsburgh P, 2009); Sibylle Fischer, *Modernity Disavowed: Haiti and the Cultures of Slavery in the Age of Revolution* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2004), 24-33. The first half of Susan Buck-Morss' book was originally published as a journal article titled "Hegel and Haiti," *Critical Inquiry* 26 (Summer 2000): 821-865. The second half can be considered an extension and refinement of the main arguments advanced in the first half, in addition to responses to the discussions and critiques generated by the journal article. Though in a similar vein of thought, Nick Nesbitt, however, argues for the radical potentialities of Hegel's political thought, focusing especially on his Philosophy of Right, which the master-slave dialectic touches on but stops short of pursing. See Nesbitt, "Troping

characterized at once by explicit uses of slavery as a tropological figure *and* their knowing or unwitting forgetting of the "really existing" slaves and racial slavery.

One of the main concerns shared by Henlon's and Hsiao's pieces is the figurations of the Haitian and Haiti, though in nuanced contexts. In Benitez Rojo's "La tierra y el cielo," the Haitian migrant worker functions, as Henlon contends, as a figure for "blackness" that poses a threat to the Cuban nationhood, which, in its boasts of mixed culture and blood, in effect sweeps certain "undesirable" aspects of blackness, including the political subjugation and economic exploitation of blacks, under the rug of "racelessness." Henlon indicates that this figure can be extended to the intra-Caribbean racism or discrimination against Haitians and Haiti (this can also mean Afro-Caribbeans' discrimination against Haitians, besides the whites' or mulattoes' racism toward darker-skinned Caribbeans). Yet apart from the stigma and denigration often associated with the Haitian/Haiti, this metaphor, as Hsiao points out, is an inherently rich and complex one, given the history of the Haitian Revolution and its leaders.[11] As Sibylle Fischer argues, this spatial dimension of intra-Caribbean relationships has to be examined in conjunction with their historical constructions. For instance, the long-standing Dominican anti-Haitianism "obviously involves issues that have no direct link to the events of the Haitian Revolution and its aftermath" and its formation concerns "a history of racism that was certainly not invented in the Dominican Republic."[12] The geographical contiguity of Haiti and the Dominican Republic and the shared history on Hispaniola undoubtedly add even more complexities to the already entangled relationship between the two countries and the people on the island, which goes beyond the issue of race to implicate those of nationality, class, and language, but these other categories can still somehow be figured by race (eg. conceptions of "the Haitian" in racial terms). For many in Santo Domingo / the Dominican Republic, especially the Creole elites, Haiti lurks "as the nightmare of a barbarian future" at "the center of the fantasies that characterize the

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Toussaint, Reading Revolution" *Research in African Literatures* 35.2 (2004): 18-33.

[11] We have only to take into account the racial pride Toussaint arouses in defeating Napoleon's troops, the slave revolts the Haitian Revolution inspired throughout the New World, the impact it exerted on the policies and public opinions of slave-holding societies, and its ensuing disappointing mutations (eg. recurrent coup d'états, corruption, etc.) in the post-Revolutionary eras, which repeat themselves till this day.

[12] Fischer, 146.

Dominican cultural imaginary."[13] It appears to me that, particularly due to its spatial contiguity, Haiti's presence engenders even more traumatic effects, and certain historical memories of Haiti therefore have to be disavowed.

Fragments of Memories in Caribbean Writing

A significant portion of Hsiao's chapter is devoted to his reading, in light of trauma theory, of Edouard Glissant's *Monsieur Toussaint*, which illustrates the views on colonial/postcolonial history of Haiti and the Caribbean that are conveyed in this book. The most striking feature of Glissant's play is its non-linear plot line, with different time frames traversing each other and thus collapsing the distinction between the past and the present, between different locales concomitant with the events. The scenes are divided between the insular space in San Domingo and the prison in Fort Joux, France, where Toussaint appears to be reenacting flashbacks of past events in his mind and communicating at ease with the dead as well as the living who are apparently absent from his cramped cell. Although the formal device of the non-linear plot, the large number of characters, the abrupt shifts of fictional locales (even within the same scene) and the idiosyncratic language (revolutionary rhetoric mixed with vernacular idioms, Creole and aristocratic French) may perplex the reader or the audience, they are not an attempt at "technical sophistication," as Glissant puts it in his preface,[14] which is typical of (Western) modernist / experimentalist art. Rather, these devices to some extent reflect, as Silenieks argues, "the structures and the modes of perception of the Afro-Caribbean mind. Time is not perceived as an irreversible and evanescing flow but rather as *a cyclic return* that assures a permanence partaken by the living and the dead as well as by those not yet born—a feature of many African beliefs."[15] Incidentally, as Henlon points out, the narration in Benitez Rojo's "La tierra y el cielo" makes "no formal distinction between the present (post revolutionary Cuba) and the past (Cuba of the first half of the 1900s), between Pedro Limón's memories or his current reality, nor does it differentiate the speech of one character from the next" (65).

One would wonder if this is indicative of the cyclical conception of time that is prevalent in the Afro-Caribbean tradition, as indicated in the

[13] Fischer, 146.
[14] Edouard Glissant. "Preface to the First Edition," *Monsieur Toussaint*, trans. Joseph G. Foster and Barbara A. Franklin (Washington D. C.: Three Continents Press, 1981), 17.
[15] Silenieks, 13; emphasis mine.

abovementioned comment on Glissant's play. This recourse to the Afro-Caribbean conception of time, of course, is not a simple atavist move to the African origin, either. Mama Dio, symbol of such supernatural communion, appears as no more than one of the shadows of Toussaint who never totally possess him. Moreover, Toussaint's tragedy, like the tragedy of those victimized by colonial slavery, is a modern one. In his impressive book *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment*, David Scott proposes not only to read Toussait's story as tragedy (as many before him have done so) but also to read colonial/postcolonial history in the narrative frame of tragedy,[16] which I think is aptly instantiated in the representations of Toussaint and the Haitian Revolution in Hsiao's chapter. Scott's proposal of a new framework of reading *into* history will entail not merely a change of narrative form, but also a new conception of temporality and re-conceptualization of past, present, and future. The departure from the "narratives of overcoming" and vindication, the interruption of a linear, forward movement in time, and the encircling or reversal of historical happenings that such story-form of tragedy enables—all these appear more relevant to and in line with the colonial/postcolonial stories of the Caribbean explored in this volume, especially those of Toussaint. Equally relevant to the Caribbean experience, on the other hand, is the inclination of the fragmentation of historical memories and their recurrences in the wake of trauma (for discussions on the peculiar temporality of historical trauma, see particularly the section on Glissant in Hsiao's chapter). For the Caribbeans, as the critic Martin Munro says of Edourd Glissant's characters, "the past is lost but omnipresent;" that is, "they have 'forgotten without forgetting'."[17]

The reader might also notice literary instances of fragmentation, or, more generally, defamiliarization in formal devices in both Badiane's and Costello's chapters, though at a smaller scale and not yet brought to the fore. The short verse in some Negrismo poems and *jitanjáforas* (senseless words that sound African) certainly fall within this category. In Costello's reading of the novel *La guaracha del Macho Camacho*, she notes "the lack of a definitive formal structure with chapter divisions or headings," the ubiquity of "repetitive rhymes and nonsense words" in the depiction of the *guaracha* song, and "an almost frenetic barrage of ideas with the thoughts of one character seeming to flow into those of the next, sometimes making

[16] David Scott. *Conscripts of modernity: the tragedy of colonial enlightenment* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2004). See, particularly, "Prologue" and Chapter 4 for Scott's elaborations on the narrative frame of tragedy.

[17] Martin Munro. "Haitian Novels and Novels of Haiti: History, Haitian Writing, and Madison Smartt Bell's *Trilogy*" *Small Axe* 23 (June 2007): 170.

it difficult for the reader to distinguish the perspective of the narrative voice" (97). What do we make of such fragmentation, defamiliarization, and foregrounding of formal elements?

Any definitive answer (and we don't yet have a consensus on this) would risk an over-generalization of particular situations, even if one links the complexities of its racial, ethnic and cultural identities to the fragments of scattered land, dotted across the vast blue of the ocean that form the Caribbean archipelago. In terms of representing Afro-Caribbean history and culture, however, it is tempting to point to the acute sense of dislocation associated with the Middle Passage—the elements of shock, discontinuum, and belated absorption of such disruptive experiences into consciousness, which are characteristic of the experience of trauma, too. Interestingly, Munro points out that the Caribbean authors are largely unable to write of their pasts with historiographical certainty, or in a realistic, chronological way, in sharp contrast to a non-Caribbean writer like Madison Smartt Bell, who has composed a Trilogy of Haiti in recent years.[18] Even C. L. R. James's *The Black Jacobins*, a purportedly historiographical work on Toussaint and the Haitian Revolution, assumes such a noteworthy cross-genre character that it is not easy to categorize it.[19] It seems that even with Scott's attentiveness to genres and sub-genres of narratives, the kind of Caribbean literary and cultural productions we are drawn to have the tendency to defy expectations and categorization. Yet it is clear that what is at stake in the reading Hsiao proposes is not a historicist account that ultimately seeks to subject each bit of historical occurrences in its proper place, but a different approach to history that takes into account the cathexis, the emotional investment or attachments, in whatever shape or form, related to a certain history, especially the traumatic events in history that appear as inherently unintelligible to historical narratives.

How do we conceive of the Caribbean experience that in various ways brought our individual pieces together in a book form? In the context of Hispanic Caribbean, we would like to draw on Benitez Rojo's well-known

[18] Munro, 168.

[19] A number of scholars have pointed out this cross-genre characteristic of James's work. See, for examples, Kara M. Rabbitt, "C. L. R. James's Figuring of Toussaint-Louverture," *C. L. R. James: his intellectual legacies*, ed. Selwyn R. Cudjoe and William E. Cain (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995), 118-135; Paul B. Miller, "Enlightened Hesitations: Black Masses and Tragic Heroes in C. L. R. James's *The Black Jacobins*" *MLN* 116 (2001): 1069-90; Grant Farred, "A Thriving Postcolonialism: Toward an Anti-Postcolonial Discourse" *Nepantla: Views from South* 2.2 (2001): 235.

formulation of the Antillean experience, revolving around the colonial plantation system as "the big bang of the Caribbean universe, whose slow explosion throughout modern history threw out billions and billions of cultural fragments in all directions—fragments of diverse kinds that, in their endless voyage, come together in an instant to form a dance step, a linguistic trope, the line of a poem, and afterward repel each other to re-form and pull apart once more, and so on."[20] Similarly, James identifies the sugar plantation as the founding institution that shaped the peculiar Caribbean experience, which is unique, but at the same time emerges, as Scott argues, as "the paradigmatic instance of the colonial encounter" because the Caribbean, unlike other colonies, "has been shaped almost entirely by that founding experience."[21] It is against the backdrop of this Caribbean vision and such a historical memory—a past that is "lost but omnipresent"—that we, the individual contributors, hailing from both within and beyond the Caribbean, pitched ideas from different angles, from different continents (Africa, Asia, America) to form a joint endeavor which, though probably occasioned by chance encounters of our professional trajectories, can result in some timely reflections.

[20] Antonio Benitez-Rojo. "Three Words toward Creolization," trans. James E. Maraniss, in *Caribbean creolization: reflections on the cultural dynamics of language, literature, and identity*, ed. Kathleen M. Balutansky and Marie-Agnès Sourieau (Gainesville: UP of Florida, 1998), 55.
[21] Scott, 126.

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CHAPTER ONE

REMEMBERING TOUSSAINT, RETHINKING POSTCOLONIAL: THE HAITIAN REVOLUTION AND THE WRITING OF HISTORICAL TRAUMA IN THE CARIBBEAN

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Probably due to the bicentennial of Haiti's independence in 2004, there has been a considerable spate of scholarly writings, popular (political) invocations, and cultural productions about Toussaint and the Haitian Revolution: from the embattled Jean-Bertrand Aristide's evocations of the world's first successful slave revolt on the occasion of the bicentennial of the decisive and victorious Battle of Vertières, rendering himself a Toussaintian figure en route to his forced exile in Africa; to conference panels and journal articles on related topics around that year (for example, the September 2005 issue of *Small Axe* on 'Interpreting the Haitian Revolution and Its Cultural Aftershocks')[1]; to, perhaps most noticeably and recently, the African American actor Dany Glover's project of making

[1] Other notable cases of special issues related to Haiti and the Haitian Revolution are "Haiti, 1804-2004," *Research in African Literatures* 35.2 (2004); "The Haiti Issue: 1804 and Nineteenth-Century French Studies," *Yale French Studies* 107 (2005). Three books which focus on Haitian history, particularly the Haitian Revolution, and remain important works of reference on the topic were all published in 2004—Laurent Dubois's *Avengers of the new world: the story of the Haitian revolution* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004); Sibylle Fischer's *Modernity disavowed: Haiti and the cultures of slavery in the age of revolution* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2004); and David Scott's *Conscripts of modernity: the tragedy of colonial enlightenment* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2004). In addition, David Geggus, a renowned historian and expert on Haiti, published his *Haitian revolutionary studies* in 2002.

a feature movie on Toussaint L'Ouverture, with a cast including Hollywood stars like Don Cheadle, Angela Bassett, Wesley Snipes, etc., and the cultural implications of Glover naming his film company "L'Ouverture"—which literally means the "opening."[2]

Such a phenomenon testifies yet again that the Haitian Revolution is a peculiar chapter in history, because it had been forgotten for a long period of time, yet whenever it is invoked, as it has been time and time again, it stirs peculiar memories (and memorizations) of the historical occurrences and personages with such intensity and interest that one finds the oblivion they suffered in previous times (and, still, their relative obscurity in our time) even more puzzling. What further confounds many are the mixed, even divergent memories, responses, and sentiments the Haitian Revolution and its leaders elicit—not only between the differences between Western writings on this historical event (in the comparatively scant examples available before recent decades) and Haitian or Caribbean accounts, but also the nuances among Caribbean writers' representations. For instance, if one takes for granted a certain unequivocal Caribbean celebration of, or unreserved sympathy for, this epochal event and the historical figures involved, one may have to think twice of Derek Walcott's thought-provoking phrase "the corruption of slaves into tyrants," by which he portrays the rise and fall, the glory and misery, pride and notoriety simultaneously represented by the early leaders of the Haitian Revolution, "those slave-kings, Dessalines and Christophe."[3]The ambivalent reactions, together with the unsettling trans-valuations (or unsettled re-evaluations) implicit in Walcott's description are telling. Indeed, the memory of the Haitian Revolution has aroused as varied or even contradictory sentiments as uplifting optimism, despairing pessimism, disenchanted cynicism, and, more often than not, vacillations among these, which is symptomatic of an agonized state of unresolved or irresolvable conflict that also characterizes a number of Caribbean intellectuals' writings on this historical event, most

[2] See the official website of the company at http://www.louverturefilms.com/ss/home. The film initially had been planned to release in 2007, but has obviously undergone a series of delays. As of July 2009, it is still listed as "in prep or development" on its webpages. The last significant public announcement about this work in progress was that Glover received 18 million US dollars of financial aid from Hugo Chavez, the Venezuelan President, in May 2007. See, for example, the news article in *The Guardian* in the following link: http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2007/may/21/film.venezuela.

[3] Derek Walcott. *What the twilight says* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1998), 11-12.

notably those by Eduard Glissant, C. L. R. James, and Derek Walcott.[4] This chapter will examine these three writers' representations of the Haitian Revolution and the legendary leader Toussaint L'Ouverture in light of trauma theory and reflect on what these reflections on the past(s) might mean to our postcolonial present. I shall explore the ways in which Toussaint and the Haitian Revolution have been imagined and relived as post-revolutionary / post-colonial trauma (in Toussaint's time as well as in ours), conceiving their literary/historiographical (re)productions of this particular history as an endeavor of writing historical trauma in the Caribbean. For, as my readings will illustrate, the discrepancies in their writings (and in most narratives on Toussaint and the Revolution as well) on this subject appear to reinforce the elusiveness or unintelligibility of the historical event in question; meanwhile, the recurrences of such representations further conform to the overwhelming experience of trauma wherein the response to the traumatic event—which the subject often struggles to reconstruct—"occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance" of symptoms in the psychoanalytic sense.[5]

Who is Toussaint?: Colonial Slavery as Trauma

"Who is Toussaint?" This, no doubt, is meant to be more of a rhetorical question. Rather than supplying a biographical account or historical documentation, I'd draw attention to the historical disjunction or discontinuities in historiography through which Toussaint is largely forgotten in the Western memory of colonial slavery—a forgetfulness that is the background against which this question, in its literal sense, has to be asked, especially for those stumbling into the filed of postcolonialism: no, really. . . who is Toussaint?

Perhaps it would be easier to awaken the memory of Toussaint by citing a work of canonical Western literature which treats Toussaint as the subject matter. One of such rare cases can be found in William Wordsworth's "To Toussaint L'Ouverture":

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[4] Paul Breslin characterizes paradox in Walcott's work as "an iconic representation of tensions in West Indian society." "Walcottina paradox," he argues, "is often an extremely effective way of dramatizing rather than sublimating, social conflict . . . a metaphor for an agonized state of unresolved conflict." See Breslin, *Nobody's nation: reading Derek Walcott (*Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2001), 7. As this chapter will make clear, such a characterization, to greater or lesser degrees, also applies to the other Caribbean writings discussed here.

[5] Cathy Caruth. *Unclaimed experience: trauma, narrative, and history* (Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 1996), 11.

> Toussaint, the most unhappy man of men!
> Whether the whistling Rustic tend his plough
> Within thy hearing, or thy head be now
> Pillowed in some deep dungeon's earless den;—
> O miserable chieftain! Yet die not; do thou
> Wear rather in thy bonds a cheerful brow:
> Though fallen thyself, never to rise again,
> Live, and take comfort. Thou hast left behind
> Powers that will work for thee; air, earth, and skies;
> There is not a breathing of the common wind
> That will forget thee; thou hast great allies;
> Thy friends are exultations, agonies,
> And love, and man's unconquerable mind.[6]

Ironically, not only had Toussaint had few allies, but he had been virtually forgotten, most conspicuously in Western colonial and abolitionist discourses,[7] before C. L. R. James's ground-breaking book, *The Black Jacobins*, resuscitated it from obscurity and the brink of obliteration, stirring not only memories but also Third-World revolutions in mid-twentieth century.[8] In his interview with C. L. R. James, Stuart Hall relates this anecdote: "I once met a Haitian intellectual who told the story of how astonished people were in Haiti to discover that *Black Jacobins* was written first by a black man, secondly by a West Indian. Because of course it had come back to them through London, through Paris."[9] Perhaps thanks

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[6] William Wordsworth. *The poems / William Wordsworth*, vol. 1, ed. John O. Hayden (London: Penguin, 1990), 577.

[7] Barnor Hess. "Forgotten Like a Bad Dream: Atlantic Slavery and the Ethics of Postcolonial Memory," in *Relocating postcolonialism*, ed. David Theo Goldberg and Ato Quayson (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), 164.

[8] The first edition of James's *The black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo revolution* was published in London in 1938. Before a new and revised edition was issued in the United States by Vintage in 1963, the book had been out of print and remained largely forgotten for decades. The edition cited here is the "second edition revised," published by Vintage in 1989. To be sure, the memory of Toussaint and the Haitian Revolution has lived on in local folklore, historical accounts, and official documents produced by Haitian historians or fellow Caribbeans, despite the metropolitan neglect, which suffices to ensure the marginalization of this memory. Nonetheless, it was not until after the emergence of James's book, together with the political climate in the last century, that it could have such planetary influence and significance.

[9] Quoted in Grant Farred, "First Stop, Port-au-Prince: Mapping Postcolonial Africa through Toussaint L'Ouverture and His Black Jacobins," in *The politics of culture*

to Toussaint, James's work suffered another round of neglect. For instance, Paul Gilroy, whose ground-breaking conception of the "Black Atlantic" as an alternative to Western modernity charts the trajectories of the lives and works of a few monumental black figures, curiously relegates both James and Toussaint to nearly total oblivion. Though Gilroy acknowledges the importance of James, himself a diasporic intellectual, and deflects it to others' writings on him,[10] his utter omission of Toussaint and the Haitian Revolution is quite perplexing. It is particularly so when one considers how the author attempts to, rightly, recuperate the significance of the memory of slavery and elegantly elevates it to the "slave sublime"[11]; how the Haitian Revolution emerged as the first successful slave revolt in history[12]; or the fact that Toussaint and the slaves, displaced through the Middle Passage and thrown into an unknown modern world, collectively constituted or participated in the prototypical diasporic experience, which Gilroy argues is the defining characteristic of the routed Black Atlantic (and we may add, of 'postcolonial condition').

Why Toussaint and the Haitian Revolution? How do they tie in with the context of our postcolonial inquiry? For the Caribbeans, it is a moment of reaching self-consciousness that coincides with a collective one, since, as James points out, "West Indians first became aware of themselves as a people in the Haitian Revolution."[13] In my view, Toussaint's Haitian Revolution, which has often been considered an imitation of its immediate historical precedent, the French Revolution, best exemplifies the inherent inconsistency / antagonism of the Western model of democracy and presents itself as a thought-provoking case for the potentialities and limits of (post)colonial mimicry, the question of the postcolonial nation, and the convoluted temporality of the postcolonial. It was the first successful, sustained decolonization movement against European colonialism in history, and, in some sense, the first "postcolonial" moment as well. Yet

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in the shadow of the capital, ed. David Lloyd and Lisa Lowe (Durham, NC: Duke, 1997), 227.

[10] See, for example, Paul Gilroy, *The black Atlantic: modernity and double consciousness* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard UP, 1993), xi & 221.

[11] Gilroy, 187-223.

[12] For the emphasis that the Haitian Revolution differs from the numerous slave revolts before it mainly because of its revolutionary ideology and practices, not simply due to its much greater degree of military success over the white colonial powers, see Eugene Genovese, *From rebellion to revolution* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1979), 94.

[13] C. L. R. James. *The black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo revolution*, second edition revised (New York: Vintage 1989), 391.

Toussaint's Haitian Revolution further complicates the temporality of postcoloniality not only in the sense that it predated, and inspired, the mid-twentieth century anticolonial movements, against which certain paradigms of contemporary postcolonial criticism register their antagonism and identify themselves as "postcolonial;" moreover, it also presaged a certain "undead colonialism" after decolonization, mirroring the uncanny recurrence of violence, corruption, and dependency epitomized in the failures of the postcolonial nation-state in our historical juncture. It is, in other words, an instantiation of Edourd Glissant's well-known notion of "the prophetic vision of the past."

This chapter argues that the virtual obliteration of Toussaint's memory in Western discourses and historiography is intertwined with their disavowal of the history of colonial slavery. To rehabilitate the significance of Toussaint, the exploration of which cannot be extricated from the memories of the Haitian Revolution and of colonial slavery, would require that we remember them beyond the reconstructed historical facts, by confronting their various forms of disavowal or displacement, that is, traumatic effects which are mediated through history. Although such "institutional forgetting" of Toussaint, Haitian Revolution, and colonial slavery still persists in our allegedly "postcolonial" present, sometimes in the form of "spectacle," it dates back to Toussaint's time, when the memory should have been still fresh. In revolutionary France, the "colonial question" didn't sit too well with the leadership of the Revolution, regardless of which faction or ideological camp they belong to, since many of the shrewd bourgeois revolutionaries sensed that the colonies, especially Saint Domingue, the richest of all, essentially funded the Revolution. It was the wealth the bourgeoisie accumulated in the highly profitable trade opportunities opened up by colonialist exploitations of cheap labor and fertile lands overseas that gave the bourgeoisie the economic means and political status to challenge the monarchical authorities and the monopoly of trade privileges of the ancien régime. Of all forms and relationships of exploitation, slavery was the most blatant, brutal, vicious, and weighed the heaviest on the human conscience, if it was ever awakened. Until the formal abolition of slavery proclaimed in 1794 (which was so precarious and provisional that it was soon followed by Bonaparte's eventual restoration of slavery in 1802), the issue of slavery underwent what we might call an "institutionalized forgetting" in the post-Bastille bourgeois Republic, and emerged as a constitutive exception for the new socio-political order. For it was at once what made the Revolution possible, economically at least, and what would render the Revolutionary ideals constitutively, irrevocably, and traumatically

unreachable. In the earlier years after the Bastille, "everybody," as James puts it bluntly, "conspired to forget the slaves," except for some lukewarm attempts by the Friends of the Negro.[14]

Quite paradoxically, however, such a forgetting of the question of slavery, whether knowingly or unknowingly, coincided with a proliferation of the term slavery as trope in post-Revolutionary social and literary discourses. Jenson notes that "[a]ppropriation of the term *slavery* to describe other, less drastic, forms of oppression had been popularized during the Revolution," sometimes even to the extent of obliterating the original referent of the word and the troubling connotations it incurs.[15] For example, in George Sand's novel Indiana, the theme of "marriage as a form of slavery by analogy" evolves into "a political mutation," whereby "the term *slavery* virtually sacrifices its meaning to the term marriage."[16] The suffering of the slaves themselves has been relegated to oblivion not only because it is merely a vehicle through which Indiana, the heroine as well as narrator, expresses her own sense of oppression and suffering but also because Indiana apparently forgets and in effect cloaks the fact that she still maintains a master/slave relationship with her own slaves even while bemoaning her fate in front of them. On the political arena, many French deputies would take advantage of the strong emotional appeal of the word esclaves [slaves] to refer to the status of the French people they professed to represent, yet when issues of colonial slavery arose, the term, interestingly, "was sporadically replaced by the euphemism 'unfree persons'."[17]

Such a "forgetting" accompanied by recurring evocation of what's forgotten is characteristic of the experience of trauma. The traumatic event,

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[14] See James, 70. One conspicuous and close parallel of such a facile, convenient neglect and often unnoticed failure to extend the Revolutionary precept of equality to the slaves was the American Revolution. Of the states of this newly-born nation that was premised on the then ground-breaking pronouncements, such as "all men are created equal" in the Declaration of Independence, Vermont was the only one that outlawed slavery in its constitution (in 1777). However, Vermont was "a break-away, not one of the original thirteen colonies, and it was not admitted to Congress until 1791," as pointed out by Robin Blackburn, *The overthrow of colonial slavery, 1776-1848* (London: Verso, 1988), 112. His empirically-based analysis of the exclusion implicit in revolutionary ideology is also a helpful reminder of the limits and the historicity of the age of Revolution, however prophetic and influential it indeed was.

[15] Deborah Jenson. *Trauma and its representations* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins UP, 2001), 198; original italics.

[16] Jenson, 197; original italics.

[17] Jenson, 198.

however, can only return or be invoked in its variegated, symptomatic forms, displaced, transformed, disguised, and rendered unintelligible, expect for the palpable power it holds over the traumatized subject, since trauma cannot be subjected to conscious, voluntary recollection. Remembering trauma, therefore, can never be an act of retrieving or reconstructing the traumatic event because the traumatic event itself is marked by an inherent latency or unintelligibility, hence an irreducible impossibility with regard to the representation of trauma. Remembering trauma, rather, presupposes an inherent forgetting, as Cathy Caruth expounds with reference to Freud's ostensibly ahistorical account of the Moses legend, specifically of the murder of Moses by his people:

> The experience of trauma . . . would thus seem to consist, not in the forgetting of a reality that can hence never be fully known, but in an inherent latency within the experience itself. The historical power of trauma is not just that the experience is repeated after its forgetting, but that it is only in and through its inherent forgetting that it is first experienced at all. And it is this inherent latency of the event that paradoxically explains the peculiar, temporal structure, the belatedness, of the Jews' historical experience: since the murder is not experienced as it occurs, it is fully evident only in connection with another place, and in another time.[18]

In the context of the dominant Revolutionary discourse, what is noteworthy is not only that its blindness toward colonial slavery wouldn't be revealed until after a certain temporal belatedness that involved the constitutive forgetting, but that the Revolutionary project was predicated precisely on the exclusion of the question of slavery, on rendering it unintelligible, incomprehensible, unrepresentable. Such an unintelligibility or foreclosure of the slave in the representations of post-Bastille France resulted in the recurring evocations of the slave as trope and testified to the traumatic nature of the Revolutionary event, since traumatic experience lies in the symptomatic reoccurrences of that which eludes the comprehension of memory yet has an impact on it. One can even argue that it was exactly the invocations of the figure of the slave that mobilized the metropolitan resistance against other, less drastic forms of oppression, even though that didn't immediately lead to the emancipation of all slaves. Revolutionary trauma, therefore, was not only registered diachronically, but also inscribed synchronically, in the very structure of the Revolutionary discourse.

If the Revolutionary trauma of French Romanticism, as Jenson

[18] Caruth, 17.