LOCATING THE DESTITUTE: PLACE IN POSTCOLONIAL FICTION

(V.S. NAIPAUL, PATRICK CHAMOISEAU, AND OCTAVIA BUTLER)

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My dissertation explores the relationship between location and identity in V.S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas*, Patrick Chamoiseau's *Texaco* and Octavia Butler's *Kindred*. Using space as a narrative device and an analytical category, I question the tendency of mainstream postcolonial criticism to exchange the forceful binarism of the anti-colonial struggle for a largely discursive "interstitial" analysis. I focus, instead, on the conceptual possibilities opened for postcolonial theory by the postmodern "spatial turn" and address the symbolic meaning of real spaces through the work of political geographers Edward Soja and David Harvey and their predecessor, a Marxist philosopher, Henri Lefebvre.

The etymological sense of the word "destitution" (to be placed outside) organizes my reading of postcolonial "spatial identities" and serves to question what it means to be made paradoxically exterior within a dominant power structure and alien to oneself. My select authors construct narrative "houses" to reclaim not only actual or imaginary places, but also the very conditions of self-representation. Since the spatial identities thus created weld together the "where" and the "who," I examine the implications of narrative representation itself: what does it mean to resolve the material through the imaginary or, conversely, to treat fiction as material?

I argue for the centrality of literary imagination as the "third" term, which contests the binary structures of political placement (e.g. colonizer/colonized, master/slave, rich/ poor, etc.). In the encounter between narrative place and the realities of socio-political placement, my notion of spatiality refers as much to the

concrete narrative location as to the more political placement of the human subject, or ultimately, what I call "the subject *as* location." I conclude that the work of postcolonial literature has to be read, on the one hand, as reflecting the material conditions of spatially experienced inequalities inherited from the colonial world and, on the other hand, as rising above these material conditions to offer genuine resistance to material reality. Although the content of postcolonial fiction remains inherently spatio-political, its contestations of the political must be seen as claiming—through the narrative—freedom from the dictates of the inherited world order.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Stanka Radović was born in Belgrade, Yugoslavia in 1974. She completed her elementary and high school education in Belgrade as well as the first year of university study in the Department of Comparative Literature at the University of Belgrade. In 1993, Stanka moved to Geneva, Switzerland where she studied at the University of Geneva, with a major in English and two minors, in General Linguistics and Russian. She received her M.A. in English in 2000 with a Master's Thesis entitled "Ekphrasis: Foregrounding the Invisible" under the direction of Professor Wlad Godzich. In 2001, Stanka began her graduate studies at Cornell University in the Department of Comparative Literature where she focused on the representations of space in postcolonial literature and theory.

This work is dedicated to my father, Ranko Radović,

To my mother, Mirjana Popović- Radović,

To my brother, Rajko Radović,

And to the memory of our "little home" on Kneza od Semberije 8 in Belgrade. I

wanted to honor, in my writing, the small place whose immensity resides in its

inhabitants and their stories.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Chapter 1: INTRODUCTION

Should I Stay or Should I Go: The Problem of Postcolonial Location

And one has nothing and nobody, and one travels about the world with a trunk and a case of books and really without curiosity. What sort of a life is it really: without a house, without inherited things, without dogs? If only one had at least one's memories. But who has them?

Rainer Maria Rilke, *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*

1. The space of this dissertation

I examine "space" as a structural narrative device of a literary text and as an analytical category crucial for the productive critique and future re-articulations of the postcolonial theoretical paradigm. Although spatial thinking has a significant history of its own, with its many passionate exponents and as many adamant critics, the perspective I take favors a deliberately eclectic encounter between postmodern and postcolonial reflections on space. I look at the hierarchy of location from these two critical perspectives, which examine the globally driven and locally experienced distribution and contestation of individual and communal locations. My emphasis on the spatial problematic in postcolonial fiction leads me, in this first chapter, to borrow from postmodern critical geographers David Harvey, Edward Soja, and their Marxist predecessor Henri Lefebvre, some conceptual tools important for understanding how spatial relations organize human life and identity in general. I then examine their theories against those of some spatially-oriented postcolonial critics, such as James Clifford, Homi Bhabha, and Edouard Glissant, in order to sketch out one possible approach to the spatial problematic in postcolonial theory. Finally, in the conclusion, I will question these postcolonial critics' fundamentally unsettled and "interstitial" understanding of human identity and culture by using the insights of Peter Hallward

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who critiques the notion of ungrounded (and perpetually-under-construction) human identity, liberated from or simply left without a determined individual, cultural or political location. Hallward's contribution is of particular interest to me for its unrelenting criticism of the abolished political binaries by which the benevolent polyphonic tendencies of postcolonial theory in the end acquiesce to or simply ignore the cruel political inequalities they seek to address. Yet even in Hallward's critique, there is space left for literary imagination as a "third" term, which resists the socio-economic realities but is, nonetheless, acutely responsive to them.

The etymological sense of the word "destitution" (to be placed outside) organizes my reading of postcolonial "spatial identities" and serves to question what it means to be made paradoxically exterior within a dominant power structure and alien to oneself. My authors, V.S. Naipaul, Patrick Chamoiseau, and Octavia Butler, construct narrative "houses" to reclaim not only actual or imaginary places, but also the very conditions of self-representation. By focusing on their select novels, I argue for the centrality of literary imagination as the third term, which, although stranded between binary structures of political placement (e.g. colonizer/colonized, master/slave, rich/poor, etc.) serves to contest them. In the encounter between narrative place and the realities of socio-political placement, my notion of spatiality refers as much to the concrete narrative location as to the more political placement of the human subject, or ultimately what I call "the subject as location." I conclude that the work of postcolonial literature has to be read, on the one hand, as reflecting the material conditions of spatially experienced inequalities inherited from the colonial world, and on the other hand, as rising above these material conditions to offer some form of genuine resistance to the constraints of material reality. Although the content of postcolonial fiction remains inherently spatio-political, its contestations of the political must be seen as claiming—through the narrative—freedom from the dictates

of the inherited world order. As Lefebvre convincingly argues, space always encapsulates the lived reality of social life alongside the image of its utopias.

As a purely literary device, space is unequivocally chosen by the authors I discuss as the organizing principle and structural tool of the novels in question. One dimension of my inquiry thus results from a rigorous close reading of a literary text and derives its topic from the parameters set by the text itself. I ground my approach in a tradition of reading that favors literature *as* literature, not as a tool of social or political analysis. I wish to preserve and defend for the literary text its right to stand for itself, speak on its own terms and foreground its own specific problematic, which is neither illustrative of, nor subservient to, a more general critical theory. It is only fair that a dissertation concerned with location and the right to place should posit as its own point of departure the place of literature as a legitimate and independent location of inquiry. Now, "independent" does not, of course, mean "unrelated." My reflection on the space of literature is necessarily also a reflection on those dimensions of human experience that fuel the literary and make it relevant beyond its immediate sphere of production. Since the three novels I choose to focus on—V.S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas* (1961), Patrick Chamoiseau's *Texaco* (1992), and Octavia Butler's *Kindred* (1979)—can be categorized as works of postcolonial New World fiction, they continually foreground the historical trajectory of colonization and the inequality of global positioning which results from it.

By bringing some aspects of postcolonial criticism, namely its theories of cultural location and diasporic consciousness, into dialogue with postmodern "human geography" and its insistence on reading space as a battlefield of global inequalities, I wish to pursue a line of questioning already sketched out by Benita Parry in "The Postcolonial: Conceptual Category or Chimera?" Concerned with the manner in which much of mainstream postcolonial criticism shies away from the binarism of

open political struggle in favor of an "interstitial" and largely discursive analysis, she

points to the conceptual possibilities opened by a postmodern spatial critique for

rethinking some of the more celebratory versions of postcolonial theory. Parry

reminds us that David Harvey, Edward Soja and Neil Smith have all focused on the

fact that the global integration of space, which began under colonialism and was

completed under imperialism, resulted in the uneven insertion of the colonies into a

world economy. The resulting international division of labor makes it impossible, in

Parry's words, to place metropolis and colony on the same plane of intersitiality: "To

speak, then, of metropolis and colony as inhabiting the same interstitial ground

neglects that this territory was differentially occupied and that it was contested space,

being the site of coercion and resistance, and not of civil negotiation between evenly

placed contenders." (16)[1]

As Parry points out, the detachment of the signifying systems from the material

conditions in which they are made to signify in the first place, leads some postcolonial

theorists away from their most pressing concern, that of addressing global patterns of

uneven development under capitalism as it expresses and redefines itself through

various colonial and imperial projects.[2] This concern with uneven socio-economic

development and its consequent ability to seep into and structure all human relations,

down to the most quotidian ones, might suggest that I privilege the socio-economic

reading of literature and thus blatantly contradict my claim that I intend to look at

literature as such, even as I look at literature in its context. I suggest, in response, that

the material conditions of global inequality find their way into any literary text and are

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[1] Parry, Benita, "The Postcolonial: Conceptual Category or Chimera?". *The Yearbook of English Studies*, Vol. 27, The Politics of Postcolonial Criticism. (1997), pp. 3-21.

[2] Reflecting on Lefebvre's contribution to this analysis of spatial inequality, Harvey writes in *Spaces of Capital*: "While Lefebvre perhaps exaggerates a touch, I think it is worth recalling his remark that capitalism has survived in the twentieth century by one and only one means: 'by occupying space, by producing space' (Lefebvre, 1976)." (376)

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made visible in it, as they are visible elsewhere, beyond literature.[3] Even if the literary

text does not overtly "reflect" such conditions and is rather adverse to the merely

mimetic function of art, as is the case with all three novels I analyze, whatever context

the text springs from will ultimately be legible from that text. It is in this way that I

justify my interest in the condition of socio-economic inequality, which structures

Naipaul's, Chamoiseau's and Butler's novels without, by the same token, making

them reducible to this condition. The independent status of literature is, in my view,

contained and preserved in the literary work's power to take issue with the material

conditions it invokes. What I argue is then twofold: that the work of postcolonial

literature has to be read as a reflection on the material conditions of the

(spatially/physically) experienced inequalities inherited from the colonial world, and

on the other hand, that this same literary work can and must be read as imaginatively

rising beyond these material conditions to offer some form of genuine resistance to the

material real. In this dialectical movement between the two levels of analysis, I situate

the most important contribution of the postcolonial text: it constantly reminds us of its

conditions of production and of the ways in which these conditions can be re-

articulated and challenged.

However, an inquiry into the space of literature and, more precisely, into

postcolonial literary space, does not imply a denial of time or history[4] but aims to

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[3] In reading a conceptual and practical hierarchy from an allegedly "neutral" text, I merely follow
Edward Said's influential move to read the man-made existence of an evaluative concept such as
"Orientalism" from the multitude of texts which, seemingly, neither posit nor contest the hierarchy of
the world. Said writes: "Too often literature and culture are presumed to be politically, even
historically innocent; it has regularly seemed otherwise to me, and certainly my study of Orientalism
has convinced me (and I hope will convince my literary colleagues) that society and literary culture can
only be understood and studied together." (27) See Said, Edward W., *Orientalism*. Vintage Books
Edition, 1979.
[4] As a matter of fact, all three novels that I address in this dissertation are acutely aware of and
concerned with problems of historical representation. Their focus on spatial location serves to produce
a defamiliarizing effect in relation to the known historical facts and narratives. Written history is in all
three cases made tangible and physically present to the protagonists. This device of making history
immediate through spatial configurations requires that we reevaluate our understanding of history:

investigate, instead, the manner in which colonial history makes its spatialized

appearance in a literary text and is made tangible as a situated protagonist of fiction.

To reflect on the purpose of literary spatiality entails, then, an investigation of the

narrative strategies that bring into focus not only the spatial problematic *per se*, but

also the located manifestations of historical discontinuity, political identity and social

stratification so crucial for the postcolonial theoretical project. If postcolonialism is,

above all, a study of "the various cultural effects of colonization" (186),[5] and

colonialism itself the settlement and exploitation of distant territories, the problem of

spatial—and not only historical or cultural—dispossession of the occupied or resettled

places must be, and has been, taken very seriously. The historical and linguistic

emphasis, characteristic of various postcolonial projects, cannot overlook the

intrinsically spatial nature of colonization and its effects. My goal is to look at the

ways in which narrative configurations of postcolonial location allow a renewed

understanding of an already known history and, more particularly, a view of its

detailed, quotidian, even minute, literary embodiments in the novels from the

Francophone and Anglophone trans-Atlantic contexts. This particular interest in the

"small" quotidian manifestation of the political serve the purpose of, on the one hand,

examining the echoes of hierarchical oppression in every aspect of daily life and, on

the other hand, the contestation of that oppression on that same scale. This entire

project thus proceeds under the assumption that the exercise of power as well as its

overthrow consist in a struggle to dominate or liberate, as the case may be, the daily

individual imaginary before any such power can achieve the status of a socio-cultural

rule.

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instead of seeing it as "dead," all three novels present the historical dimension of colonial legacy as
literally *built into* the texture of contemporary postcolonial writing.
[5] Ashcroft, Bill, Griffiths. Gareth and Tiffin, Helen, *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts*. London
and New York: Routlege, 2000.

For Edouard Glissant, the historical relations of dominance, exploitation and displacement, which define colonialism, have been understood precisely in terms of their spatial structures: a "vertical" cultural hierarchy between the colonizer and the colonized is systematically mapped onto the horizontal plane of geography and results in multiple cross-cultural relations, whose promise of encounter is always undermined by the hierarchical origins and exploitative aims of colonial trajectories.[6] Similarly, Homi Bhabha's succinct definition of the postcolonial project focuses on the unequal geo-political ordering of the world, whose enduring hierarchy motivates various forms of cultural representation and contestation:

> Postcolonial criticism bears witness to the unequal and uneven forces of cultural representation involved in the contest for political and social authority within the modern world order. Postcolonial perspectives emerge from the colonial and anticolonialist testimonies of Third World countries and from the testimony of minorities within the geopolitical division of East/West, North/South. (46)[7]

Not only does the postcolonial critic take up the task of questioning the inequality of cultural and economic positions of the powerful and powerless regions of the world, but he also sees himself as "bearing witness" and offering "testimony" about the very experience of such inequality. Emphasizing the implicit spatiality and explicit violence of colonial contact, Bhabha suggests that the culturally and economically oppressed peoples create "cultures of survival," whose meaning and status have to be understood and assessed outside of the usual grid of national preservation because "[...] various contemporary critical theories suggest that we learn our most enduring

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[6] Glissant recognizes the relational effects of colonization, which has not only brought various separate populations of the world into contact, but has also created, for the first time, the view of the world as totality. Nonetheless, his emphasis on intertwined global histories, even as he celebrates their plurality, does not lose sight of the violent origin of colonial contact and the lasting legacies of such violence. Consequently, Glissant's notion of "histories" evokes the splintering of a grounded world view as much as it suggests a richer and more complex awareness of the Other.

[7] Bhabha, Homi K., "Freedom's Basis in the Indeterminate," *October*, Vol. 61, The Identity in Question. (Summer, 1992), pp. 46-57.

lessons for living and thinking from those who have suffered the sentence of history—

subjugation, domination, diaspora, displacement." (47)

Although my own approach implicitly embraces Bhabha's suspicion, if not

outright rejection, of the nationalist model with its promise of wholeness and threat of

exclusion,[8] I see Bhabha's proposition better phrased as a question: if we indeed

"learn our most enduring lessons for living and thinking from those who have suffered

the sentence of history," what kind of lesson is this and how do we value the "lesson"

even as we recognize its price? How can we condemn and contest the practices of

marginalization even as we affirm the value of "the affective experience of social

marginality"? The postcolonial perspective often ends up celebrating cultural and

political crossings, in which the geopolitical binary of the First and Third worlds

supposedly no longer applies. And yet, so much is learned and written from the

"affective experience of social marginality." How can we write and think about this

marginality in such a way that we continue to denounce it instead of turning it into a

treasure chest of our scholarship and forgetting, in the process, that the "affective

experience" necessarily belongs to someone in particular, a living person or people,

who have to be regarded as much more than just vehicles for the "culture of survival."

I focus on the problem of marginal location and minor status produced by imperial

hierarchies to examine the literary manifestations of concrete pain and moral

uncertainty of the marginal spaces represented in the postcolonial novel. The

theoretical celebration of this margin in no way resolves its destitute status. If one

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[8] I do not pursue here the spatiality of national projects because I am interested instead in the marginal status and practices of exclusion, which obtain not only among nation-states on a global scale but also, and just as violently, *within* the sovereign nation-states. The very gesture of defining and creating a nation rests on a principle of selective inclusions and institutionally enforced exclusions. Since my focus falls on the quotidian and personal experience of the margin in a minimally defined local environment (a house, a neighborhood). I leave the problem of national consciousness aside. Instead of a nation, "my" novels foreground a sense or lack of community and communal memory, which are, in my view, distinct from another kind of group consciousness represented by the nation.

task of the postcolonial consists, as Bhabha suggests, in offering testimony about the suffering born of inequality, how can we accept the testimony and not reject the world order which produces such inequality in the first place?

2. Postmodern Spatiality: what shall we do with "geography"?

Beginning with the late 1960s, the manifest hierarchies of the spatial world order prompted postmodern geographers to question a predominantly historical-materialist approach to the relations of power. Their intention was, as Soja points out, to reflect on the privileged place of historical imagination in any epistemology and insist, instead, on the awareness of "how space can be made to hide consequences from us, how relations of power and discipline are inscribed into the apparently innocent spatiality of social life, how human geographies become filled with politics and ideology." (6)[9] Soja's interest in the role of space in determining our historical and political experience calls for "a more flexible and balanced critical theory that re-entwines the making of history with the social production of space and configuration of human geographies." (12) This reconsidered relationship of space to history and of history *in* space allows for the historical imagination to be recomposed in a gesture of "critical spatialization" (12). But what exactly does this spatialization mean?

First of all, the theories of the "spatial turn" are set in opposition to a certain kind of historicism, which offers an exaggerated historical contextualization of social life (15) at the expense of spatial contextualization. Soja defines historicism "as an overdeveloped historical contextualization of social life and social theory that actively

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[9] Soja, Edward W.. *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory.* London, New York: Verso. 1989.

Soja's suggestion that "space can be made to hide consequences from us" finds its further elaboration precisely in the three novels I analyze here (although many other relevant examples can be found, and not only in postcolonial literature). For Naipaul's protagonist, the imaginary possession of individual space is a statement against an inherited communalism, in Chamoiseau's slum, on the contrary, the communal margin contests the order of the administered urban space, while in Butler's novel, it is the spatial experience of time travel that "brings home" the institution of slavery, which is otherwise an almost buried historical fact.

submerges and peripheralizes the geographical and spatial imagination." (15) It will be of some consequence to my entire argument that Soja opposes here the "historical *contextualization*" to the "geographical and spatial *imagination*" (my emphasis), suggesting in the process a deceptive matter-of-factness of history. Such a history has to be complemented by a "spatial imagination," which requires a creative re-articulation of the social. This conceptual move reflects, no doubt, Soja's "inaugural" gesture of calling for a more complex view of space, whose emergence will necessitate some "imagination" in a theoretical world already marked by an explicit preference for history. I am interested in the fact that Soja defines postmodern geography as a form of "imagination," even when it is not entirely clear what he means by this concept. The historicist theoretical trend, whose beginnings Soja situates in the *fin de siècle* theoretical consciousness, erases geographical imagination in favor of a more dominant historical one. The emphasis on the historical interpretation results from a specific understanding of modernization and modernism, conceptualized in the Marxist political economy as the revolutionary transition from feudalism to capitalism. Although there were, as Soja reminds us, some important Marxist reflections on the geographical consequences of the early 20th century modernization, notably in the writings of Lenin, Luxemburg, Bukharin, Trotsky et al. (who focused on the geographically uneven development of the city and countryside, the centre and periphery), *fin de siècle* Marxism continued nonetheless to see the logic of all development as essentially historical (32). The sensitivity to the geographical Marxist thought remains, Soja argues, more present among the French thinkers of the 1960s, particularly Michel Foucault and Henri Lefebvre.[10]

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[10] Soja is, of course, aware that Foucault's contributions to the "human critical geography" must be seen as, at best, ambivalent, "for he buried his precursory spatial turn in brilliant whirls of historical insight. He would no doubt have resisted being called a postmodern geographer, but he was one, *malgré lui*, from *Madness and Civilization* (1961) to his last works on *The History of Sexuality* (1978)." (16) Soja considers Foucault's spatial observations "epochal" and situates them in a couple of Foucault's

Although he emphasizes the importance of Foucault's "heterotopias," it is Henri Lefebvre's prolific and consistently "spatial" work that serves as Soja's point of departure:

> Lefebvre was perhaps the most influential figure shaping the course and character of French Marxist theory and philosophy from the early 1930s to at least the late 1950s. He became, after the 1950s, the leading spatial theoretician in Western Marxism and the most forceful advocate for the reassertion of space in critical social theory. Yet only in the present decade have his remarkable accomplishments begun to be fully recognized and appreciated in the historically centered Marxist culture of the anglophone world. (47)

The argument centers on the tardy recognition of Lefebvre's theoretical importance, which Soja tries to remedy, insisting that the lacuna of spatial analysis belongs more to the Anglophone and much less to the Francophone Marxist thought. Soja's main point, however, has to do with Lefebvre's original contribution to the reading of Marx. He argues that, although Lefebvre explicitly accepted Marx's insistence on the primacy of material life in the production of human consciousness, it was Lefebvre's attachment to French Surrealism and early existentialism that prompted him to refuse the total reduction of conscious thought and action "to a determined aftergloss or mechanical ideation." (48) Instead, Lefebvre took a position against dogmatic reductionism of Marx's approach and argued for a more flexible and "cautiously eclectic" Marxism elaborated in a series of so-called "approximations." These approximations focus on the ways in which capitalist planning of space penetrates into every aspect of daily life and homogenizes spatio-social experience:

> The very survival of capitalism, Lefebvre argued, was built upon the creation of an increasingly embracing, instrumental, and socially mystified spatiality, hidden from critical view under thick veils of illusion and ideology. What distinguished capitalism's gratuitous spatial veil from the spatialities of other modes of production was its particular production and reproduction of geographically uneven development via simultaneous tendencies toward homogenization, fragmentation, and hierarchization [...] (50)

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interviews and lectures. Whether this involuntary ("malgré lui") nature of Foucault's spatiality makes the concept of space more or less central to his work remains, of course, open to further questioning.

Following this line of thinking and the radically changed intellectual climate of the 1960s, David Harvey's seminal *Social Justice and the City* (1973) marked a dramatic shift in direction (Soja 52). This leftward "pathbending" resulted in "the need to rethink the fundamental spatiality of capitalist development on a global scale" precisely because the capitalist world economy was understood to be "presuppositionally spatial" (Soja 55). The outcome is necessarily eclectic and centers on an "unsettled and unsettling geography," which is, in turn, part of the postmodern condition "filled with the simultaneous shock of the old and the new" (Soja 60). It is clear from this argument as well as from its careful sequencing that Soja aims at writing a history of the postmodern "spatial turn," enriched by an acute awareness that spatial thought has to remain alert to the simultaneity of the old and the new, the past and the present.

3.   Lefebvre's "triplicity" of space

In *La production de l'espace* (1974), Henri Lefebvre introduces space as a concept that has had, thus far, a strictly geometrical or classificatory meaning, evoking no more than an empty area ("un milieu vide"), traditionally treated as separate from politics and ideology. Lefebvre, on the contrary, sees space as *produced*. It is therefore not only inherently political but also comparable, as Remi Hess reminds us in his introduction, to any merchandise (*La production*, xi). Aiming to overcome a contradiction between theories of space and spatial practice, Lefebvre describes his work as

> [...] l'effort pour sortir de la confusion en considérant l'espace (social) ainsi que le temps (social) non plus comme des faits de « nature » plus ou moins modifiée, et non pas comme des simples faits de « culture » -- mais comme des **produits**. (Préface, xix, original emphasis)[11]

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[11] Lefebvre, Henri, *La production de l'espace*. (4ème édition) Paris: Anthropos, 2000.

...an effort to overcome confusion by considering (social) space as well as (social) time no longer as facts of a more or less modified "nature" nor as simple facts of "culture," but as **products**. (my translation)

This notion of space-as-product requires, Lefebvre continues in his 1985 preface, a larger sense of production, seen not only as the systematic generation of "things," but also as a global impact of the second upon the first nature. Moreover, space as product retroactively intervenes in the production itself and becomes, in Lefebvre's system, a rather complex "produit-producteur" (product-producer, or productive product) (xx).

Lefebvre's intervention is then announced as a turn towards something crucial but overlooked—a forgotten concept of social space, which must now be remembered. Perhaps unintentionally, Lefebvre's project evokes something of the Freudian "uncanny" by bringing space back to life as an idea that was either repressed, or taken for granted. The scope of the book is rather monumental and suggests a major intervention, a need to fill in the gap of perceived theoretical oblivion. Although Lefebvre's text was first published in 1974, the same kind of urgency is legible in the later writings on space by David Harvey and Edward Soja. The opening pages of *La production de l'espace* suggest the "ghostly" presence (or absence) of spatiality in critical theory. But why is space perceived as forgotten and haunting and how do spatial theories of social life propose to remedy the erasure? Or, more practically, what is gained from looking at space?

Lefebvre notes, on the one hand, the *a priori* and therefore mostly unquestioned existence of space in philosophy and, on the other hand, its constant generalization. He laments the ubiquitous and indiscriminate use of the concept:

> Il est question sans cesse d'espace de ceci et/ou d'espace de cela : espace littéraire, espaces idéologiques, espace du rêve, topiques psychanalytiques, etc. Or, l' «absent » de ces recherches dites fondamentales ou épistémologiques, ce n'est pas seulement « l'homme », c'est aussi l'espace, dont on parle pourtant à chaque page. (9-10)

> We are forever hearing about the space of this and/or the space of that: about literary space, ideological spaces, the space of the dream, psychoanalytic topologies, and so on and so forth. Conspicuous by its absence from supposedly fundamental epistemological studies is not only the idea of "man" but also that of space—the fact that space is mentioned on every page notwithstanding. (3)[12]

Lefebvre is particularly critical of the linguistically oriented structuralist school (in which he places Kristeva, Barthes, Derrida) for its tendency to posit the existence of "mental space" and thus forget the urgent questions posed by the spatial reality of everyday life. This school of thought, whose "growing renown may have something to do with its growing dogmatism, is forever promoting the basic sophistry whereby the philosophico-epistemological notion of space is fetishized and the mental realm comes to envelop the social and physical ones." (5)[13] This dimension of Lefebvre's critique centers on the circular movement, which establishes a particular "theoretical practice," which then produces a "mental space," which in turn becomes the locus of a "theoretical practice."[14] In this constellation, Lefebvre sees, and seeks to contest, the unconscious ideological tendency of the dominant class to presuppose a separation of mental space from social practice and to set itself up as a reference point of "knowledge." (6) His ultimate quarrel is aimed at the reductionist separation between mental space on one side and social spheres on the other. Such separation signals the preeminence of an absolute knowledge of history and of the history of philosophy and

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[12] Lefebvre, Henri, *The Production of Space*. Translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith. Blackwell Publishing, 1991. All subsequent translations of Lefebvre's book will be drawn from this edition.

[13] « Dans cette école devenue de plus en plus dogmatique (le succès aidant) se commet couramment ce sophisme fondamental : l'espace d'origine philosophico-épistémologique se fétichise et le mental enveloppe le social avec le physique. » (*La production* 12)

[14] Lefebvre's critique of structuralist "dogma" seems to be inspired, at least in part, by Marx's passionate attack on the Old and Young Hegelians in *The German Ideology*: "In direct contrast to German philosophy which descends from heaven to earth, here we ascend from earth to heaven. That is to say, we do not set out from what men say, imagine, conceive, nor from men as narrated, thought of, imagined, conceived, in order to arrive at men in the flesh. We set out from real, active men, and on the basis of their real life-process we demonstrate the development of the ideological reflexes and echoes of this life-process. The phantoms formed in the human brain are also, necessarily, sublimates of their material life-process, which is empirically verifiable and bound to material premises." (*The Marx-Engels Reader* 154) In this passage, if we substituted the word "space" for "man" we would probably get a version of Lefebvre's point.

science over ideology and non-knowledge (seen namely as the lived experience). It is ultimately in this critique that Lefebvre's "triplicity" defines itself as a connection and constant motion between the actual, the theorized and the lived dimensions of human existence. Space connects the mental and the cultural, the social and the historical. As a product, space can be decoded from the relations of the subjects who inhabit it while their subjective relations are in turn shaped by the kind of space-product in question.

Yet, two mutually constitutive illusions, argues Lefebvre, shield space from our knowledge: it is perceived as either transparent or obscure. The illusion of transparence belongs to the philosophical ideal and posits "innocent" space that can be illuminated by piercing thought. Another illusion—that of impenetrable opacity— suggests that there is really no link between the concept and the thing which it designates. It is, from this perspective, a complete illusion to consider language as substantial, as designating anything real. The illusion of transparence comes close to the world of philosophers while the second illusion, that of opacity, suggests a form of dogmatic materialism. These two illusions in effect contain and generate one another: the dark symbolism of nature obscures its alleged philosophical transparency, while a transparent history finds itself entangled in the nostalgia for mute physical nature.

Lefebvre's analysis aims at undoing this binary relation between the material-real and the conceptual-imaginary. He thus provides some (although necessarily limited) conceptual tools for my own reading of the common postcolonial binarism between the actual and the literary, between historical materialism and its literary utopias. Instead of an either/or paradigm, Lefebvre argues for the triplicity of space and sees space, more than any other concept, as emphasizing the mutual dependence of the different aspects of human existence. To put it simply, everything human intersects in space and is made perceptible through a set of specific coordinates. Of

course, if space is fundamentally a social product, whatever "nature" remains in it has

the function of a foundational backdrop: every object of nature is valued as a symbol

of some primordial originality. Nature thus obsesses us as source, childhood, and

spontaneity. Its final destiny is to become a negative utopia, which serves as raw

material for the production of social space (40).

Lefebvre's spatial triplicity[15] takes the following shape: 1) spatial practice ("la

pratique spatiale") or space as it is *perceived*: this is the social space of production and

reproduction, 2) representations of space ("les représentations de l'espace") or space

as it is conceptualized and *conceived*: this dimension of space expresses various

relations of power and is dominant in any society, and 3) representational spaces ("les

espaces de représentation"), which refer to the *lived* space with its symbols and

images: this is the space of inhabitants, but also of artists and some

writers/philosophers "who describe and aspire to do no more than describe. This is the

dominated—and hence passively experienced—space which the imagination seeks to

change and appropriate. It overlays physical space, making symbolic use of its

objects." (39)[16] The triple configuration of space is essential for Lefebvre, and will

remain so for his postmodern followers, because it offers itself as a passionate critique

of dual structures and their misleading clarity:

> Triplicité : trois termes et non pas deux. Un rapport à deux termes se réduit à
> une opposition, à un contraste, à une contrariété ; il se définit par un effet
> signifiant : effet d'écho, de répercussion, de miroir. [...] Un tel système
> n'aurait ni matérialité ni résidu ; système parfait, il s'offre comme une

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[15] In *Thirdspace* (1996), Soja renames this constellation "the trialectics of spatiality": "[...] I have used another term, "trialectics," to describe not just a triple dialectic but also a mode of dialectical reasoning that is more inherently spatial than the conventional temporally-defined dialectics of Marx and Hegel. I then use this method to re-describe and help clarify what I think Lefebvre was writing about in the thematic "Plan" of *The Production of Space* fugue: a trialectics of spatiality, of spatial thinking, of the spatial imagination that echoes from Lefebvre's interweaving incantation of three different kinds of spaces: the *perceived* space of materialized Spatial Practice; the *conceived* space he defined as Representations of Space; and the *lived* Spaces of Representation (translated into English as "Representational Spaces")." (10)

[16] « C'est l'espace dominé, donc subi, que tente de modifier et d'approprier l'imagination. Il recouvre l'espace physique en utilisant symboliquement ces objets. » (*La production* 49)

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évidence rationnelle à l'inspection mentale. Le paradigme aurait ce pouvoir magique : métamorphoser l'obscur en transparence, déplacer « l'objet » de l'ombre vers la lumière sans le déformer, du seul fait de sa formulation. En un mot, décrypter. Le savoir se met au service du pouvoir avec une admirable inconscience, en supprimant les résistances, les ombres et leurs «êtres ». (49-50)

A triad: that is, three elements and not two. Relations with two elements boil down to oppositions, contrasts or antagonisms. They are defined by significant effects: echoes, repercussions, mirror effects. [...] Such a system can have neither materiality nor loose ends: it is a 'perfect' system whose rationality is supposed, when subjected to mental scrutiny, to be self-evident. This paradigm apparently has the magic power to turn obscurity into transparency and to move the 'object' out of the shadows into the light merely by articulating it. In short, it is the power to *decrypt*. Thus knowledge (*savoir*), with a remarkable absence of consciousness, put itself in thrall to power, suppressing all resistance, all obscurity, in its very being. (39-40)

Although his point appears to suffer in the English translation, Lefebvre insists on the semblance of meaning or the signifying effect ("un effet signifiant") of a dual structure in which one term or element immediately derives its value from its relational opposition to another term or element. By focusing on the mirror effect within a binary system, Lefebvre is evoking here not only Western philosophical traditions, but also, more conspicuously, de Saussure's linguistic premise that the meaning of one term and its value depend entirely on another differential term within the same system. The ensuing systematic duality, which lies at the core of structuralist thought, has the appeal of clarity and promises transparence. By relying on dual relations, the process of reflection appears capable of deciphering the world without any residual opacity or confusion. But in such a system, Lefebvre insists, it is the body that has been left out or neutralized and can only be recovered in a triangular relation:

Pour comprendre l'espace social en trois moments, qu'on se rapporte au *corps*. D'autant que le rapport à l'espace d'un « sujet » membre d'un groupe ou d'une société, implique son rapport à son propre corps, et réciproquement. La pratique sociale prise globalement suppose un usage du corps : l'emploi des mains, des membres, des organes sensoriels, les gestes du travail et ceux des activités extérieures au travail. (50)

> In seeking to understand the three moments of social space, it may help to consider the body. All the more so inasmuch as the relationship to space of a 'subject' who is a member of a group or society implies his relationship to his own body and vice versa. Considered overall, social practice presupposes the use of the body: the use of the hands, members and sensory organs, and the gestures of work as of activity unrelated to work. (40)

In his insistence on the bodily opacity and the enduring relevance of *lived* spaces in which all human activity (and passivity) can be read, Lefebvre points to one level of interpretation that encourages my own reading of trans-Atlantic postcoloniality: it is the level of the actual daily experience, which, of necessity and despair, finds its re-articulation in the imaginary. In this relation of the lived to the imaginary, there is no room for the binary: one element cannot survive without the other, but neither can one resolve the other. By posing the triplicity of space and spatial sociality, Lefebvre argues for the value of juxtapositions and living contradictions but denies the impulse to synthesize them. As Soja argues in *Thirdspace*, the open logic of "both/and also" instead of "either/or" motivates the entire spatial critique. This "additive" impulse makes postmodern geographers' critique useful to the postcolonial problematic insofar as it recognizes the embattled relation between the actual and imagined as they unfold, inseparably, in a concrete spatial context. It would be easy and obvious to divide the world into legible binary chunks. It is less obvious and more slippery to look at the world as an ever growing set of entangled threads and planes of coexistence, without nonetheless abdicating responsibility for the *kinds* of entanglements and coexistences that we witness or participate in. In such a web, the real and imaginary or, to borrow Lefebvre's language, practice and representation, cannot be isolated one from the other but require some third articulation.

Lefebvre's argument makes the notion of the "real" very difficult to pin down possibly because nothing can be "unreal" when it comes to human spatiality. What in his triple structure of space can be said to be real and what is imaginary? The lived

space, more than any other, carries the burden of reality since it reflects and encompasses the actual relationship between the user and his environment. Yet, it is precisely in the lived experience of space that Lefebvre locates the impulse toward imaginative re-appropriation of space. This recapture of spatial experience constitutes a response to the fact that most forms of spatial practice are otherwise designed for and imposed on their users. To conquer space, one first has to imagine the conquest and then accomplish it.[17]

For Lefebvre, there is ultimately no significant distinction between the lived and the imaginary. Rather, what is lived is always lived through the symbolic and imaginary relations between inhabitants and their space. Moreover, it is in the imaginary that we find the opposition to space dominated by the institutions of power. It follows that the imaginary is by its nature resistant because it refuses the logic of normative coherence in favor of the intimate and affective life:

> Les espaces de représentation, vécus plus que conçus, ne s'astreignent jamais à la cohérence, pas plus qu'à la cohésion. Pénétrés d'imaginaire et de symbolisme, ils ont pour origine l'histoire, d'un peuple et celle de chaque individu appartenant à ce peuple. [...] L'espace de représentation se vit, se parle ; il a un noyau ou centre affectif, l'Ego, le lit, la chambre, le logement ou la maison ; -- la place, l'église, le cimetière. Il contient les lieux de la passion et de l'action, ceux des situations vécues, donc implique immédiatement le temps. De sorte qu'il peut recevoir diverses qualifications : le directionnel, le situationnel, le relationnel, parce qu'il est essentiellement qualitatif, fluide, dynamisé. (52)

> Representational spaces need obey no rules of consistency or cohesiveness. Redolent with imaginary and symbolic elements, they have their source in history—in the history of a people as well as in the history of each individual belonging to that people. [...] Representational space is alive: it speaks. It has an affective kernel or centre: Ego, bed, bedroom, dwelling, house; or: square, church, graveyard. It embraces the loci of passion, of action and of

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[17] This imaginary re-appropriation of concrete spatial experiences and their historical sources will be of great significance in all three novels that I address in this dissertation. All three are concerned with historically denied location, which needs to be re-conquered through narrative practice and practical imagination. What do I mean by that? I mean that the protagonists of all three novels need to address the real by inventing its most fanciful solutions and break their imagined limitations by stepping into the real.

> lived situations, and thus immediately implies time. Consequently, it may be qualified in various ways: it may be directional, situational or relational, because it is essentially qualitative, fluid and dynamic. (41-2)

In his explanation of representational space, Lefebvre makes clear the connection between the details of experiential bodily life (bed, house, square, graveyard) and their historical memory: as soon as we address the affective kernel of the human imaginary, we must also see it as simultaneously individual, relational, historical and geographical. Led to the historical dimension of human life through its spatial manifestations, Lefebvre explains his understanding of the relation between location and its history: "S'il y a production et processus productif d'espace, il y a histoire [...]." (57) (If space is produced, if there is a productive process, then we are dealing with history [...] (46)).

Although one must be rather suspicious of such brief and poignant statements to which there is neither example nor elaboration, I will adopt one version of Lefebvre and his postmodern followers for my own discussion of postcolonial spatial (im)possibilities: historical exploitation of the colonies can be read retroactively from the contemporary realities of the spatial distribution of privilege. From this perspective, the inequality of global relations of power among the so-called nation-states can be reinterpreted through the history of colonial exploitation. In other words, space may hide consequences from us, as Soja has it, but it can also reveal them. Yet this reading of history *from* space is not all. It would be more important, I argue, to return not to historical or geographical abstractions but to the notion of the quotidian bodily experience of both, especially as they are understood and reconstructed in literature. The quotidian human may, in the end, be the only question that preserves an almost a-temporal urgency. That political history and political geography shape and often destroy this banal human seems to me beyond discussion. And if a literary text can bring these quotidian human concerns back into focus, this is its best and most

revolutionary contribution. My reason for looking at the spatial configurations of the postcolonial novels has to do with the potential of the narrative space to zero in on the physical, bodily, and seemingly trivial way in which people live and die, exploited and unaccommodated within the systems of thought and action they may not yet have begun to contest.

4.   The geography of postcolonial history

Colonialism is driven by economic profit derived from the exploitation of territories and trade in human beings. This problem is, obviously, not only ethical, not only historical, but also profoundly geographical: it characterizes the relationship of the colonizer to the colony, of the colony to the metropole and of all the people involved in this "transaction" both to their place of origin and their place of arrival. The focus on postcolonial literature thus implies an examination of not only the historical, but also spatial consequences of slavery and the continuous struggle for the place of one's own, necessarily denied by the slave trade and the institution of slavery. It follows that the domain of the postcolonial focuses, of necessity, on the placement of subjects and subjugation of places, negated through the racially structured exploitation that found one of its systematic applications in the practice of slavery. Postcolonialism deals, among other things, with this negation and attempts to reverse it. As a discourse of socio-economic and conceptual change, it suggests, among other things, that the colonized territory and the enslaved person *are* and *require* some kind of autonomous space, which the violence of conquest has exploited and denied.

When, thanks to the vivid literary imagination of 19th century, the erased places and enslaved peoples return to haunt the Euro-American "house" of progress, the colonizing center perceives them as "Gothic": they keep unsettling the history of enlightened civilization precisely because, as Aimé Césaire observes, "no one colonizes innocently, no one colonizes with impunity either; a nation which colonizes,

a civilization that justifies colonization—and therefore force—is already a sick civilization, a civilization which is morally diseased [...]."[18] (39) Still, even as they "returned" into the narrative to pursue it with doubts about the ultimate value of various civilizing missions, the oppressed did not re-enter on their own terms: the conceptual legacy of colonialism cancelled that possibility by relegating them to the margins of the story, where they still lurk like ghosts. Rarely do we find any literary self-representation of the margin or room for reversing the established narrative positions. The West Indian Mrs. Rochester in *Jane Eyre* frightens us with her eerie laughter while Friday in *Robinson Crusoe* or Queequeg in *Moby-Dick* amuse us with their exotic insight and humorous savagery. In Victor Halperin's film *White Zombie* (1932), the wide-eyed but unseeing crowd of (Haitian) slaves always marches on. Its members are dangerous, mechanical, marginal, always mute and entirely dispensable. As they work in trance-like unison or collectively tumble off of cliffs, there emerges the image of the soulless "mixed race" (half living, half dead): not only are the workers/slaves completely controlled, body and soul, by their master, they are also part of the setting, an indistinct decorative threat, a backdrop against which the "good" and "bad" central characters appear more sharply. In this manner, the (former) slaves are made synonymous with the setting; they are the environment itself, an empty space to be conquered, exploited or "inhabited," yet always mutely receding from us as it leaves room for the foregrounded subject to exhibit its genuinely "human" nature: mostly white, voluble and morally defined.

Discussing the white supremacist tradition, which consistently relegates black people to the realm of the invisible, bell hooks draws attention to the dehumanizing effects of such erased subjectivity: "Reduced to the machinery of bodily physical labor, black people learned to appear before whites as though they were zombies,

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[18] Césaire, Aimé, *Discourse on Colonialism*. New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000.

cultivating the habit of casting the gaze downward so as not to appear uppity. To look

directly was an assertion of subjectivity, equality. Safety resided in the pretense of

invisibility." (168)[19] Such "zombification" of the black servant or worker[20], as well as

the erasure of all people who are "recognized" as Other, relies, as hooks argues, on

this denial of subjectivity—a person's ability to perceive, understand, interpret and

impact the world. Instead, as bell hooks argues, "in a world where evocations of

pluralism and diversity act to obscure differences arbitrarily imposed and maintained

by white racist domination" (166), the best way to ensure the longevity of racist

domination is to celebrate a non-existent plurality based on, but not inclusive of, the

people seen as objects (of observation, research, contempt, concern, admiration, and

what not...).

In *White Zombie*, Haiti itself is such a dehumanized, mechanized mass, a mere

tool in the hands of a cunning master. Conversely, the crowd of zombies merges with

the place itself and becomes the environmental object while the distinct individuated

humanity belongs to the innocent or corrupt Europeans only. Only with 20th century

liberation movements and decolonization does there begin a large-scale questioning of

the practical and discursive consequences of colonial domination. Yet even today,

after postcolonial theory and literature have firmly established their position in almost

all academic curricula in the west, there still lingers an unspoken hierarchical question:

what is the purpose of postcolonial study? Does it open up a space for the erased

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[19] hooks, bell, *Black Looks: Race and Representation*. Boston, MA: South End Press, 1992. In *Kindred*, Octavia Butler makes the same point, using both her protagonist's "immediate" experience of antebellum slavery and her bookish knowledge of the period: "At first, I stared back. Then I looked away, remembering that I was supposed to be a slave. Slaves lowered their eyes respectfully. To stare back was insolent. Or at least, that was what my books said." (66)

[20] For bell hooks, who is focusing on the legacy of slavery in the U.S., the servant is racially defined, but I would suggest that such "zombification" and turning-into-object applies to all workers whose status is perceived as minor, menial, and ultimately replaceable: these are workers who, in some better future times (like now), will simply be replaced by a clever machine.

subjectivities to assert themselves and question the world of erasure, or does it merely create that illusion of diversity, which soothes, but changes nothing?

In an attempt not to look for a hiding place nor to opt for the distraction of diversity, the authors I examine in this dissertation force us to look again and look closely at the legacy of colonial discrimination, its ability to fix socio-economic positions, and its power to generate terror. As the oppressed of all kinds (people of color, underpaid workers, the poor, the stateless, etc.) face the western Medusa, her gaze can only turn its victims into inanimate objects, dehumanized to petrifaction. In response, my aim is to examine the human resistance of the dehumanized, or the subject position of the object.

Keeping in mind this profound and resilient rejection of the Other-as-subject in our midst (and wherever else s/he is), any reflection on postcolonial space and its literary representation becomes a complex matter. It involves not only colonialism and slavery, but also a lasting denial of cultural equivalence or reciprocity,[21] internalized by both the Third-World "outcast" and the First-World "insider." Even the numerical value of these worlds—First to Third—reveals a world seen as a beauty pageant or some other competitive grid, in which top and bottom dominate our sense of cultural positioning. How do postcolonial literary texts address this problem of spatio-social marginality and destitution? I crystallize these questions into a problem of placement—what does the world look like from where you stand, if you are standing at all? The problem of placement creates, demands and then conceals the underlying hierarchy of geographical location and social status: do you situate yourself, or does someone else situate you? I am interested in the extent and limits of human freedom implicit in one's status and stance because what differentiates freedom

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[21] For a fascinating discussion of incommensurability and equivalence in comparative literature see Natalie Melas's *All the Difference in the World: Postcoloniality and the Ends of Comparison*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007.

from imprisonment lies above all in our ability to choose or change our place of "residence"—metaphorically and literally.

5. Travel, migration or displacement?

When, in *Routes*, James Clifford focuses on the durability and significance of multilateral cultural movement, his attempt is "to trace old and new maps and histories of people in transit." (2)[22] Arguing that travel is "a complex and pervasive spectrum of human experience" (3) and is as constitutive of cultural meanings as is the notion of rooted dwelling, Clifford seeks to unsettle the monodirectional nature of traditional travel, the one that depicts the privileged center on its way to visit, conquer, observe or enjoy the deeply rooted pre-civilized margins; the cosmopolitan westerner goes people-watching, as if people were colorful birds. He is curious, compassionate, guilt-ridden, assertive, or reckless, but he is the only actor in the game. The world is his set and stage. The flip side of this story centers on the uprooted migrant who arrives to the prosperous gardens of Europe and threatens to pick its fruits, unauthorized to do so and therefore necessarily parasitical. In this equally reductive picture, the rooted and authentic culture of Europe is threatened by the culturally compromised status of the migrant whose movement beyond the bounds of his country of origin is seen as trespassing. Against these two binary models, Clifford argues for the long-standing history of encounter or "dwelling-in-travel" that challenges the static picture of the inert (zombified) non-Europeans and geographically vivacious Europeans. Critical of the weighted dualism of cultural locations, Clifford argues that "the region called 'Europe' has been constantly remade, and traversed, by influences beyond its borders." (3) According to this re-scripting of cultural hierarchy, Europe is as much a heterogeneous unfinished "region" as any other "region" of the world. To put it

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[22] Clifford, James, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*. Harvard University Press, 1997.

simply, if all birds are migratory, the total bird's eye view of the world belongs to no one in particular.

Although, as Clifford suggests, displacement certainly emerges as "constitutive of cultural meanings," it also necessarily entails its own twin-question of placement, origin, root and uprooting. In other words, what is it that "travel" takes from the notion of place and what does "place" owe to travel? Questioning Clifford's rather exclusive focus on "travel" as his preferred category for understanding contemporary cultural experiences, Caren Kaplan suggests that "displacement" remains a related concept whose relevance cannot be sidestepped:

> Travel is very much a modern concept, signifying both commercial and leisure movement in an era of expanding Western capitalism, while displacement refers us to the more mass migrations that modernity has engendered. While these terms cannot be viewed as opposites, it is also impossible to see them as referencing the same sites and situations. (3)[23]

The fundamental disparity of circumstances ("sites and situations"), which trigger and drive travel and displacement in the contemporary world, deserves a more nuanced attention than Clifford, in his attempt to find a productive "translational term," seems willing to give it. Although "travel" carries, as Clifford himself admits, its burden of "historical taintedness," its translational value lies in its "apparently general application used for comparison in a strategic and contingent way." (39)[24] Strategy and contingency of a critical position or term do not, however, address the very unstrategic and uncontingent reality of social, economic and cultural deprivation. As bell hooks points out: "Travel is not a word that can be easily evoked to talk about the Middle Passage, the Trail of Tears, the landing of Chinese immigrants, the forced relocation of Japanese-Americans, or the plight of the homeless." (173)[25] Tourists travel and travelers have somewhere to return. Displaced peoples do not travel. They

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[23] Kaplan, Caren, *Questions of Travel: Postmodern Discourses of Displacement*. Durham and London: Duke University Press. 1996.
[24] Clifford, *Routes*.
[25] hooks, bel. *Black Looks: Race and Representation*. Boston: South End Press, 1992.

leave not to come back and if they do, the place they left behind no longer coincides with the place of their return. I am suggesting, along with Kaplan, that the very notion of "travel"—with its possibility of a two-way ticket—may be misleading. In reality, no migrant has the luxury of returning and no place awaits unchanged: the return is always an illusion, which precludes a clear vision of both the acquired and lost places. The Russian émigrés have sometimes referred to this experience as "double exposure,"[26] marked by an uneasy overlap between the real and imaginary grounds, an overlap resulting in a rather blurry image of both. As Kaplan points out:

> The prevalence of metaphors of travel and displacement in this body of critical work [contemporary literary and cultural criticism] suggests that the modern era is fascinated by the experience of distance and estrangement, reproducing these notions through articulations of subjectivity and poetics. Yet displacement is not universally available or desirable for many subjects, nor is it evenly experienced. (1)[27]

Several of Kaplan's points are important to my argument: first, displacement, unlike travel, connotes undesirable or involuntary (re)location; second, experiences of displacement are disparate, uneven and often incomparable; finally, "emergence of terms of travel and displacement (as well as their oppositional counterparts, home and location) in contemporary criticism must be linked to the histories of the production of colonial discourses." (1-2) Although Kaplan focuses on the trope of travel in contemporary criticism, she also evokes the reality of massive displacement of people, who have fled their homes to avoid famine, genocide, or incarceration. Kaplan points out that "the numerical majority of people who move in this world do so to work or to survive life-threatening events" and concludes that "immigration should not be universalized as a symbol of displacement." (5)

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[26] See Edward J. Brown's discussion of the Russian exiles in *Russian Literature since the Revolution*, Harvard University Press, 1982, pp. 345-387.
[27] Kaplan, *Questions of Travel*.

As Kaplan is careful to remind us, involuntary displacement must not be transformed into its own symbol. If the reality of its origin and outcome is lost, there can be no serious critique of the historical and economic circumstances which produce displacement. Kaplan's purpose is to oppose the high modernist metaphors of displacement, expressed in singular rather than collective terms, to the displacement caused by dire historical circumstances. Clearly, the "unhousedness" or Nabokov or Beckett does not coincide with the experiences of an illegal alien who works unauthorized and unprotected in some back room, out of sight. And yet, as Kaplan herself realizes, it is not sufficient to counter displacement with location, or to switch the singular experience of a high modernist intellectual into the plural exodus of contemporary refugees, for example. The back and forth movement between two extremes in the end fails to address the very conditions that created such extremity in the first place.

I wish to resist Kaplan's quick move from western individuality to non-western collectivity. Keeping in mind bell hooks's reminder that discrimination begins and ends in the denial of the other's subjectivity, I would argue for keeping alive the psychological, subjective and singular positioning of the destitute, precisely because they are so often represented, to borrow Kaplan's phrase, as "the numerical majority." Still, instead of expressing this numerical majority through the misleading abstraction of a single number of, let's say, 1.5 million,[28] which in the end erases the real

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[28] The neutralizing effect of statistical enumeration can be clearly felt in a text like David Eltis's and David Richardson's "The Achievements of the 'Numbers Game'" in *The Atlantic Slave Trade* (Houghton Mifflin Company, 2002):

> [I]t appears that over three and a half centuries of the transatlantic slave trade, perhaps 15 per cent (or over 1.5 million) of those who embarked at the African coast died during the Atlantic crossing. At the peak of the trade in 1760-1810 losses of slaves on the Atlantic voyage perhaps averaged 6,000-8,000 a year. Clearly, for a large number of those bound for sale in the Americas—the great majority, it should be noted, aged under twenty-five—the route to slavery ended either before leaving the African coast or in mid-ocean. (99-100)

Although this "numbers game" certainly has its importance in establishing and proving historical facts, especially against the will to forget them, what remains questionable is the expressive ability of a number. My point is that when reading together culture and history, or human life and history, the

magnitude of the collective predicament even as it emphasizes its numerical size, one would wish to express these 1.5 million as "one plus one plus one…" In other words, the magnitude of destitution, discrimination or suffering cannot be fully represented by the apparent unicity of a single number (1.5 million), no matter how large. The tragedy of collective suffering resides instead in the one-by-one suffering of those who make up the collective.

In bell hooks's analysis, black people, made destitute by color, can recover and claim their subject position by facing and speaking the terror of whiteness and its connotation of racist supremacy: "It is the telling of our history that enables political self-recovery." (176) As hooks proceeds to tell of her own encounters with the supremacist hierarchy, she does so through a series of personal stories. They thematize the problem of uneven encounters and their concrete impact on those who suffer them. hooks' emphasis, like mine in this dissertation, falls on the power of the small intimate narrative to capture the magnitude of historical destitution. In contrast, the crux of Clifford's argument lies in the notion of contact and interactive movements that constitute culture.

6.   Miniature and the minor person

Judging from the literary examples that I invoke in this dissertation, the story might turn out to be different when observed on a more minute scale. Although "culture" is, as Clifford convincingly argues, a product of restless encounters, the individual experience may not necessarily find itself exalted by movement. In other words, what profits a culture at large may well be experienced as devastating by its

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power of the numerical fact must be strengthened by a careful understanding of what exactly constitutes this number. In the case of the Atlantic slave trade for example, as in any enumeration of victims, numbers have a tangible meaning: they stand for people, but must not replace or erase them. The problem of numerical representation brings into focus one of the concerns of this dissertation: the representation of terror, pain or anxiety runs the obvious risk of substituting the conceptual cipher for the actual thing. The necessary move to represent something may neutralize precisely the thing it wishes to express.

individual members, even if they succeed in eventually transforming their individual pain into a lasting cultural statement.[29] From the abstract notion of "culture"—a tapestry of synchronic and diachronic practices informed by the relationship between people and places—it is important to step down, into the concrete reflection on the manner in which displacement affects individual life. This concreteness of experience is, in my view, best accessed through the literary text, or as bell hooks suggests, through narrative, which offers a miniature reflection on precisely those problems, which "cultural" discourse in its endless renewability seems to veil. To complicate Clifford's travel theory, we may want to remember that no matter how much or how forcefully we wish to assert the ubiquity of movement, there remains to be tackled one dimension of travel, which I'll provisionally call travel-as-displacement, with its deep and painful nostalgia of places irretrievable or never found.[30] This travel-as-displacement may be no more than a necessary reversal of Clifford's "dwelling-in-travel." Its origins, trajectory and final outcome lack the implicit optimism of mobile encounters. We may suggest instead, as V.S. Naipaul does in *A House for Mr.*

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[29] I am thinking here of personal tragedies that are transformed into stunning cultural artifacts: one poignant example would be Tennessee Williams' play *Suddenly, Last Summer* in which his sister's real lobotomy insinuates itself as part of the plot, but also remains a deeply painful experience of the author (addressed directly in his autobiography, *Memoirs*). The abstract "cultural" understanding of the play can never reach into the actual tragedy of the experience, although it feeds on it and enlarges it into a cultural critique of extreme poignancy. There are many examples of the culturally productive personal narrative, which nonetheless derives the power of its broader cultural meaning precisely from its factual autonomy. From a certain perspective, if the artistic rendition of any tragedy is to have meaning at all, one must be able to entertain not merely *the possibility* of its occurrence, but also *the fact* that such tragedies do happen. In the case of my project, the background fact, which serves to root and actualize the fictional content of the narratives, is the Atlantic slave trade on the one hand, and on the other, the enduring economic and social marginalization of the Third World. If it weren't for these historical facts, the narratives that I analyze in this dissertation would lack the critical power not only to represent but also to question and unsettle the world which makes such events first possible and then forgettable.
[30] In *The English Patient*, Michael Ondaatje offers a version of this problem as one of his protagonists explains: "Kip and I are both international bastards—born in one place and choosing to live elsewhere. Fighting to get back to or get away from our homelands all our lives." (176) For Ondaatje's narrative, this international 'bastardship' stands in opposition to and refuses to be subsumed by the "us-and-them" sentiments of the nationalist war-mongers' who choose sides across imaginary borders drawn in the sand. Nevertheless, the impossibility of either getting back or getting away is also represented as a violent breakdown of the sense of place produced by the butchery of war.

Biswas, the failure of encounters in favor of a rooted existence, no matter how fictional. The root is then, for too many people, a dream long deferred,[31] never available, and thus utterly desperate. Mr. Biswas's dream of impossible dwelling is not to be confused with the static safety of the privileged bourgeois who never lost his position nor, at the very least, his sense of entitlement to *a* position. The tragic dimension of spatial hierarchy reveals not only the absence of location—social, geographical—but also the absence of a possibility of location, a fundamental placelessness of those who find themselves excluded from a legible hierarchy of social relations. To what extent this legibility of hierarchy has to do with financial privilege is not even necessary to underscore. It would suffice to say, and one must say it, that the two-way ticket of travel must be purchased and that the placeless in my story fall victim to a movement they cannot afford, either financially or emotionally. The abstract question of cultural contact must then be put into a direct and uncomfortable relation with the concrete privilege or deprivation in a monetarily defined world. Is it a privilege to have a place, or to go places?

Faced with this question of dwelling-in-privilege and travel-in-privilege, I realize that neither forms of privilege really matter in my approach to postcolonial instances of literary placement. Instead, my focus is on the small narrative of daily displacement in which privilege pales before an endless anxiety: having nothing mutates into being nothing so that the economic lack bleeds into all other forms of existence and taints the very possibility of accounting for oneself. In these messy literary accounts, we often find a timid celebration of fiction with its triumphant survivalist approach to being left outside. The resilience of the margin, its inventive potential, the glory of its laughter, its ever-renewed attempts at climbing up are often

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[31] Thanks to Langston Hughes, we know what can happen to such a dream... If not, see Hughes's poem "Harlem (A Dream Deferred)" published in *Montage of a Dream Deferred* (1951).

celebrated lightly. One could even respect the struggling Sisyphus if only his boulder didn't roll back down, which makes me think that there is something wrong with the top. Maybe if the social were not alpine, there would be less tumbling down?

In response to Clifford's "Traveling Cultures" (a lecture delivered at a cultural studies conference in 1990), Homi Bhabha draws attention to "the place of a lack of movement and fixity in a politics of movement and theory of travel." (42) He goes on to elaborate:

> Refugees and exiles are of course a part of this economy of displacement and travel; but also, once they are in a particular place, then almost for their survival they need to fix upon certain symbols. The process of hybridization which goes on can often represent itself by a kind of impossibility of movement and by a kind of survival identified in the holding on to something which actually doesn't allow that circulation and movement to take place. (42)[32]

Bhabha's comment brings our attention back to the intertwined fate of terms such as "travel" and "location" by reminding us that the excess of unsettled living might, of necessity, provoke settled imagination as a response to being forced on the road. It would be easy to go farther and call "reactionary" such fixation on ground symbols because they are, quite often, a fatigued reaction to a denied possibility of cultural and social grounding. I am not arguing, however, that the ground to stand on would be a lost solution to some geopolitical problem of our times and that, prior to the colonial movement or the onslaught of global capitalism, there may have existed some pristine place of firmly rooted culture and identity. Rather, my point is to emphasize the fact that "reaction" in this context has a painful connotation of passive, recipient existence in which the one who dreams up fixity and home has already been made unable to shape the trajectory of his life. If there is any "symbol" to grapple with, it would be the symbol of denied location, which only draws more sharply into focus the fact that homelessness is, for millions of people around the globe, very far from being

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[32] Clifford, James, *Routes.*

symbolic.[33] As Bhabha's comment reveals, it is a feature of the postmodern discussion about placement to assume "hybridization" as a given and to treat any attempt at fixity as a symbolic or ideological reaction. It follows, of course, that for both Clifford and Bhabha, even as they invoke the problem of enforced dislocation implicit in the history of colonial and postcolonial migrancy, "travel" and "hybridization" exist and remain as cultural facts generative of a progressive recognition that all culture is contact and appropriation. In contrast, the very idea of located cultural existence appears to be not only ideologically suspect (responsible, for example, for all kinds of devastating nationalist positions) but also vaguely infantile. The adult cosmopolitan movement of the world traveler is followed from afar and fearfully by the child-like lover of home grounds. The implicit dismissal of the fixated homeboy seems to relegate him to some earlier times when to be of a place was still a possible myth.

Clifford's attempt at complicating the stereotypical binary of Western colonial mobility on the one hand and the "native's" intrinsic rootedness on the other, leads him to tell a story of a "worldly native," Squanto, who greeted the pilgrims in 1620 in Plymouth: he spoke good English! This story persists from Clifford's 1988 *The Predicament of Culture* to his 1997 *Routes* because it is, we are told, a paradigmatic story. With splendid irony, Arnold Krupat points out the "breezy" nature of Clifford's attempt to argue that westerners are not the only travelers. The Squanto story "makes it seem as though Squanto had just decided to take off and see a bit of the Old World rather than having been carried forcibly to England; that he had just had time to unpack before hurrying down to the shore to complicate the Pilgrim's vision of the

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[33] For a sustained (and chilling) discussion of the stark urban expansion and consequent poverty produced by the movement (travel?) of global capital, see Mike Davis's *The Planet of Slums*. Verso, 2006.

New World." (113)[34] "Travel" happens differently for different people, and its meaning is transformed—if not completely subverted—by that breezily forgotten fact of being forced to travel. What resonates so powerfully in Krupat's objection is the phrase "carried forcibly to England": in it is contained all the violence of colonial "encounters."

Although Clifford is keen to "trace old and new maps and histories of people in transit, *variously empowered and compelled*" (2, my emphasis), the way in which compulsive dislocation produces the centrality of location remains secondary in his account. To be fair, there is a gesture towards an alternative reading of cosmopolitanism. There is no reason, Clifford reminds us, to assume that crossings are always liberatory or that an autonomous identity or a national culture is always reactionary: "In most situations, what matters politically is who deploys nationality or transnationality, authenticity or hybridity, against whom, with what relative power and ability to sustain a hegemony." (10)[35]

The emphasis should fall, no doubt, on the notion of "relative power": this relative power of those who migrate or stay at home marks the difference between their relative positions in the world and the outcome of their choices. What remains largely unexplored in this debate is another, and to my mind much more important possibility: that fixity is not a survivalist dream but sometimes a dire need and sometimes a dire imposition. To take again V.S. Naipaul's Mr. Biswas as an example, it is precisely the economic shortage that prevents any kind of fixity and makes him turn, by despair and necessity, to the symbol of housing, a symbol which, in the end, merely outlines its absence. There is no lack of travel for Mr. Biswas; there is just no place for him to stop and stay. For my purposes, it is important to keep open the

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[34] Ibid.
[35] Clifford, *Routes.*

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possibility that "hybridization" and "travel," or hybridization through travel, are just as much a convenient fiction as rooted existence is reputed to be. The two terms are useful only one in relation to another and certainly not in isolation. The optimism of mobility has to be soberly limited by our awareness of the enclosure just as the dire determinism of location has to be opened up to the dialogic encounter of moving cultures.

As I have already suggested, to respond to Clifford's quick motion from the physical and economic confinement to the cultural revival (that results in cultural interconnection), one would have to distinguish—very stubbornly—between the broad cultural discourse and the more situated individual one. Not because the situated-individual has epistemological precedence over the general-collective, but because the single case (of a person or a group of people) can outline much more forcefully the actual outcomes of the tragedy of displacement. It is quite possible, as Clifford argues, that "even the harshest conditions of travel, the most exploitative regimes, *do not entirely quell* resistance or the emergence of diasporic and migrant cultures," (my emphasis) but they may certainly "quell," I would add, a human life, a body, a person, and then many people. It is on this level of the actual person, and not of the cultural totality, that I would wish to insist. The discourse on culture presumes a temporal resilience, a power of a culture to last despite and beyond any imposed limit or interdiction. This is because "culture" is built and carried on by countless people, each passing something on to the next person, generation or place. But the individual human life has no such flexibility, it does not go on beyond limits; if pressed hard, it ends. It is in the name of this essential fragility and finiteness that I wish to focus not on culture but on its individual representative, a mere person, or for my purposes, a protagonist—whether it be just a man, a woman, or a group of people.

7.   Compelled to imagine

The intrinsic plurality of Clifford's traveling cultures finds its expression in a list of plural objects: "Travel, in this view, denotes a range of material, spatial practices that produce knowledges, stories, traditions, comportments, musics, books, diaries, and other cultural expressions." (35) In contrast to this expansive list in which collective or abstract nouns become quantifiable and plural (not one knowledge, but many "knowledges"—although there is a danger here that the neologized plural allows for the singular to come into being where at first it grammatically didn't exist!), the stories I focus on share one fundamental characteristic: they dramatize and pursue, almost doggedly and with no ultimate solution, the problem of being compelled. Instead of the proliferating positions and possibilities, Mr. Biswas in *A House of Mr. Biswas*, the community of Texaco in *Texaco*, and Edana Franklin in *Kindred* battle against the most profound reduction: their lives are boiled down to their social or racial position. Theirs is not a world of multiple openings but of successive closures through which human location becomes no more than a fixed position in the social hierarchy. Paradoxically, the dream of being housed responds to the violent (f)act of being forcibly housed where one doesn't wish to be. Forced into a fixed position, one does not necessarily resort to total unmooring; rather, the "wrong" location is at least imaginatively countered by the image of the "right" location. In the case of Mr. Biswas, the dream house stands in stark opposition to the squalid Hanuman House; in *Texaco*, the beloved slum is cherished against the "salubrious" urban impositions; in *Kindred*, the antebellum slave plantation is fought from the contemporary house of across-racial relationships. As these examples show, the fundamental reductionism of racial discrimination requires that it not be resolved through a general cultural or historical discourse but addressed precisely on its reduced and reductive level so that both the violence of reduction and the smallness of counter-dreams can emerge in their

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full force. The recognition of limits, especially when they are imposed by force, is one of the most fundamental requirements in defining the conditions of possibility and the forms of representation available to the concrete people and places we discuss. Although these limits can have numerous shapes, it makes all the difference in the world how they are established, by whom and what exactly they limit. Confronting such limits, we have to admit—often despite ourselves—that the material and symbolic reduction amount to nothing else but an either/or position. The wealth of choices is not available to a slave, an indentured laborer, a detainee, an illegal immigrant. By listing these "positions" in one sentence, I do not intend to equate them, but I would insist on the fact that they share some fundamental features, which allow me to keep them together in the course of this reflection. What they share is precisely the condition of deprivation, compelled existence and forced limitation—physical, economic and cultural—by which they fall out of the realm of the human right to freedom. Instead, a forced reduction of a human being to a function (a slave, a laborer, a homeless person) allows, in response, merely a dream of a different function and precludes, more often than not, a systematic questioning of binary locations. When Mr. Biswas dreams of owning a house, he succumbs to the fact that his homeless existence will only allow for a dream of home and will in the end fail to address the very problems and relations which create homelessness in the first place and reduce an individual to either a homeless or homefull position in the world. For Mr. Biswas, there is not much to choose from: he is either a mendicant or an owner, exactly like on a slave plantation one can only be a slave owner, overseer or slave. It is, I would argue, of crucial importance to recognize and question the manner in which location, position, rank, and status affect the scope and possibility of a subject. The limits of subject-location do not preclude the necessity of understanding all subjects as having equal rights in principle, but these limits do require us to keep in mind that the

principle of intrinsic equality fails as soon as the location is permanently fixed by forces repressive or ideological.[36]

8.   Against binary oppositions, and against resolving them

If the reduction to binaries characterizes relations of power, and colonialism is precisely one such relation, it would be fair to say that some versions of postcolonial discourse work to counter and resolve this reduction. For example, are not Bhabha's "hybridity" or Clifford's "travel" precisely such attempts to move conceptually beyond the reduction to an "either/or" and open up a possibility of thinking the third term outside of a given hierarchy?[37] At their core, the notions of hybridity, indeterminacy, or fluidity, which arguably characterize much of postcolonial thinking, have the commendable goal of refusing, implicitly, to juggle two options only. Why do they appear unsatisfactory nonetheless? From my perspective—and this is the perspective of the novels I work with—the binary is a reduction that we cannot resolve by ignoring it. While Bhabha offers us an ever-growing complexity of hybrid fluctuations, their appeal is mostly in their utopian promise: we do not really believe in any actual hybridity, we only wish we could. Instead, our daily experience alerts us, over and over again, to the absence of indeterminate acts. Somewhere, somehow, something is always being decided, one way or the other. At least politically, this is the case. Hybridity or travel, and all the fluid terms with which we attempt to refuse the boundaries of unfreedom, fail to engage the problem of imposed fixed location, whether it be physical, geographical or political. Instead, they imagine the world of crossings, and such a world has not happened yet. In all crossings, in all movement,

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[36] For a further discussion of these concepts, derived from Louis Althusser, see my Conclusion.
[37] This is the theoretical move postmodern geographers make in imagining the triplicity of spatial life: the misleadingly clear and practically confining binary has to be broken by a third term, which will crystallize and contest the mere oppositional relation.

there is a location "from" and "to," and the question of the way one moves and, to echo Clifford, with what relative power.

9.   The map of this dissertation

The spatial dimension of my dissertation raises the following question: is it possible, in the context of postcolonial displacement, to build a house within a novel, or to treat the novel as a substitute house? In order to answer this question, I explore the fictional and material dimensions of spaces represented in diasporic postcolonial literature. Starting with the assumption that colonialism, a profit-driven territorial conquest, produces not only a hierarchy of cultures and languages but also a deeply felt and lasting geographic discrimination, I introduce the concept of "destitution" to examine the problematic of spatial exclusion of the individuals and communities represented in V.S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas*, Patrick Chamoiseau's *Texaco* and Octavia Butler's *Kindred*. With the etymological sense of the word "destitution" (to be put away or placed outside) in mind, I raise the question of what it means to be made paradoxically *exterior within* a dominant power structure and consequently alien to oneself. The "destitute" in these novels attempt to repossess their denied location (a house, a self) both materially and narratively. Since the "spatial identities" thus created weld together the "where" and the "who," I proceed to question the implications of narrative representation itself: what does it mean to resolve the material through the imaginary or, conversely, to treat fiction as material?

The symbolic meaning of real spaces, which I address in this first chapter through the work of Soja and Harvey and Lefebvre, continues to permeate the rest of my inquiry. Lefebvre considers space to be legible because it results from and in turn creates a signifying process. This claim allows me to argue, with respect to the New World postcolonial novel, that the use of spatial metaphors in postcolonial fiction necessitates a critical rereading of the imaginary solutions to the real problematic of

spatial existence. By examining Lefebvre's "triplicity" of space and particularly his third term, "spaces of representation," I suggest that the material reality of space is inextricably bound to and dependent upon the symbolic meaning of its inscription. Lefebvre's "third" space and Soja's elaborations of this concept allow me to link, inextricably, imagination to lived experience. In so doing, I offer a critique of the prevalent binarism of postcolonial theory as well as its inadequate escape into the terminologies of "in-betweenness" and "interstitiality." Instead, I focus on the way in which the symbolic space serves radically to question and reconfigure the perceived material structures of hierarchy and discrimination in the postcolonial context. Although the narrative rendition of space cannot resolve the problems of real spatial destitution, it is of crucial importance to examine the recurring spatial metaphors in the postcolonial literary context and their lasting impact on our understanding of location—ideological and material. The narrative reflection on the material inequalities and racialized hierarchies, which characterize the postcolonial world, ultimately draws into focus the literary text's power to take issue with the material conditions it invokes and thus, redefine them.

In Chapter 2, I pursue this dual question of symbolic and material aspects of postcolonial identity by focusing on V.S. Naipaul and his protagonist Mr. Biswas, whose desperate and ultimately unfulfilled dream of building his own house crystallizes the problem of postcolonial space as a contested territory of self-invention. Although Mr. Biswas remains stranded between autonomy and dependence, I focus on his attempts at creative writing and journalism to show how this historically destitute individual strives to resolve his need for physical shelter through the allegedly stabilizing dimensions of writing and inscription. Since Mr. Biswas's sense of self depends on his utopian house, which can exist only in writing, I argue that Naipaul's novel itself should be seen as a site of self-invention and dwelling.

In order to examine an alternative communal dimension of spatial belonging, in Chapter 3, I turn from Naipaul's individual displacement to Chamoiseau's collective place. The "insalubrious" slum of Texaco in Fort-de-France is about to be demolished and its squatters' population dispersed when the slum-leader Marie-Sophie offers to recount the genesis of Texaco to a city official in order to save it. Conceptually indebted to Glissant and indirectly to Deleuze and Guattari, Chamoiseau's act of "storytelling" counters the official history of colonial dislocation with celebratory representations of squatting and rhizomatic growth, which assert the space of unauthorized communities, languages and histories. Paradoxically however, while the margin interrogates the legitimacy of the center, it also depends on it. Tracing the tension between the official and illegitimate space and narrative, I argue that "place" comes into being precisely in the act of storytelling. I conclude that for Chamoiseau, the notion of place owes its existence to the small-scale narrative inscription of communal experience defined as both oppositional to and dependent upon the vast historical narrative of colonialism.

With *Kindred* in Chapter 4, I examine the notion of historical inscription that affects not only a place or a building, but above all—a human body. By revisiting Freud's notion of the "uncanny," I take another look at the link between past experience and its present re-articulation. In Butler's *Kindred* the protagonist travels back in time to slave-holding Maryland to rediscover her "home" and origins. Although this involuntary return leaves her scarred and mutilated in the end, it is also inevitable: the contemporary place and its history must come together to reveal the aspects of their mutual dependence. In this process, the violent markings of slavery remain imprinted on the protagonist's body and create an alternative text of bodily scarring as historical inscription. I argue that the historical violence of slavery thus emerges into an embodied and spatialized form in order to be perceived and dealt with

anew. The spectral reemergence of the past in *Kindred* serves as a reminder that there is no safe inside and dangerous outside and that no such neat dichotomy can resolve or suppress the reality of racial oppression, lived or remembered.

Finally, in the Conclusion, I link the location and identity of the destitute to the notion of ideological interpellation formulated by Louis Althusser. His definition of the subject as produced through the practice of hailing and its ultimate power to fix our place of "residence," lies at the core of my interest in the consequences of a violently assigned location. The limitations of human freedom to choose and formulate identity lead, in the case of the texts I analyze, to an almost desperate struggle for authorship of one's life: the narrators of "my" three novels, Mr. Biswas, Marie-Sophie Laborieux and Edana Franklin, retell the history of colonial subjugation from a miniature perspective of their localized resistance. According to Peter Hallward, the postcolonial in general is characterized by this paradoxical attempt to transcend location in the name of various local specificities. Engaging closely with Hallward's critique, I argue that such transcendence of location aims at narrative freedom from material constraints. My goal is to emphasize the absolute necessity of transcendent imagination in the context of socio-economic and cultural deprivation. The destitute I discuss in this dissertation inhabit a margin, which claims its own centrality, at least in fiction.

Chapter 2: MINIATURE

Destitute Substitute House: V.S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas*

...he whom it would relieve, nor eats nor hungers any more; pardon for those
who died despairing; hope for those who died unhoping; good tidings for those who
died stifled by unrelieved calamities. On errands of life, these letters speed to death.

Herman Melville, "Bartleby the Scrivener"

Quant à nous, nous prenons les documents littéraires comme des réalités de
l'imagination, comme des purs produits de l'imagination. Car pourquoi les actes de
l'imagination ne seraient-ils pas aussi réels que les actes de perception?[1]

Gaston Bachelard, *La poétique de l'espace*

1.   Inside Out

In "Reflections on Exile," Edward Said defines the contemporary moment in

spatial terms, drawing into sharp focus the insoluble problem of displacement and

exile:

> [...] our age—with its modern warfare, imperialism, and the quasi-theological
> ambitions of totalitarian rulers—is indeed the age of the refugee, the displaced
> person, mass immigration.
>
> Against this large, impersonal setting, exile cannot be made to serve
> notions of humanism. On the twentieth-century scale, exile is neither
> aesthetically nor humanistically comprehensible: at most the literature about
> exile objectifies an anguish and a predicament most people rarely experience
> first hand; but to think of the exile informing this literature as beneficially
> humanistic is to banalize its mutilations, the losses it inflicts on those who
> suffer them, the muteness with which it responds to any attempt to understand
> it as "good for us." [...] (174)[2]

Said suggests that the exile is literally mutilated through geographic and cultural

fragmentation and is subject to the "crippling sorrow of estrangement," which results

from physical and cultural displacement. In this chapter, as I rethink the postcolonial

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[1] "I myself consider literary documents as realities of imagination, pure products of the imagination.
And why should the actions of the imagination not be as real as those of perception?" (158)
Bachelard, Gaston, "Miniature." *The Poetics of Space.* Trans. Maria Jolas. Boston, Massachusetts:
Beacon Press, 1994.
[2] Said, Edward, "Reflections on Exile." *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays.* Cambridge, MA:
Harvard University Press, 2000. pp. 173-186.

representations of space through V.S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas*, I focus on this question of displaced and permanently exterior persons from the "miniature" perspective of what Said identifies as their mutilations, losses and subsequent muteness. Taking Said's reminder as my point of departure, I pose the following question: if the processes of global juxtaposition and simultaneity, which also produce violent encounters and forced dislocations, need to be and are represented in literature, then what consequences does this act of representation have for those who will "talk about the unheard" and "improve the lot of the unfortunate and the oppressed" (505)[3]? In other words, if the acute suffering of displacement and alienation may end up being "humanistically incomprehensible," as Said suggests, then what are we to make of the attempts to represent the suffering and violence of dislocation, to oppose discrimination through various forms of representation or, in the case that interests me most, through literature? Does such representation run the risk of banalizing mutilations, or is there a way of salvaging the representational gesture without resorting to easy and comfortable celebrations of uncertainty or in-betweenness that often misguide some forms of contemporary thought? With these questions in mind, I turn to V.S. Naipaul's novel *A House for Mr. Biswas* (1961) in order to trace some problems related to the representation of suffering born of destitution and the strangely muffled critical responses to this problem.

A House for Mr. Biswas is about an Indian Trinidadian man whose deepest dream is to have a house of his own, but never quite succeeds in realizing this dream. The protagonist is depicted primarily in relation to the spatial configurations of his inadequately housed existence. As a consequence, we find that the individual and the space he inhabits are understood as interchangeable. There is an equation between

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[3] Said, Edward, "On Defiance and Taking Positions." *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000. pp. 500-506.

identity and its spatial or architectural setting. Such proximity between self and place suggests that, like many other Caribbean authors, V.S. Naipaul also turns to spatial images to explore the questions of geographical limitation and denied autonomy, which lie at the core of the colonial predicament. The sense of imprisonment, which defines Mr. Biswas's world, connects his failing personal autonomy to the experience of economically driven spatial dispossession. On a broader level, Mr. Biswas's spatio-economic confinement is also directly evocative of the colonial subjugation of territory and exploitation of labor and draws attention to their consequences in the struggle for postcolonial independence.[4] In other words, the recovery of autonomy—both individual and political—depends upon a sustained reflection on the notion of place.

About *A House for Mr. Biswas*, V.S. Naipaul writes: "Of all my books this is the one that is closest to me. It is the most personal, created out of what I saw and felt as a child." (128)[5] Despite the fact that in Naipaul's literary corpus there are very few texts which are not drawn from his life and experience, *A House for Mr. Biswas* is considered to be most explicitly autobiographical. When an author like Naipaul, inclined to refer to himself as "one" rather than "I" (for instance, "One came to England…"[6]), offers such a personal statement, we are bound to pay closer attention. However, as is the case with most autobiographical novels, what exactly *A House for Mr. Biswas* says about its author is never very clear, especially if we take into account V.S. Naipaul's candid but neutral manner of staging himself as the center of his writing.[7] Nonetheless, the immediate and largely accepted passage from lived life to

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[4] Trinidad officially gained independence from Britain in 1962.
[5] "Foreword to *A House for Mr. Biswas.*" *Literary Occasions: Essays.* New York, Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003
[6] *V.S. Naipaul* / LWT [videorecording]. Produced and directed by Hilary Chadwick. Princeton, NJ: Films for the Humanities and Sciences, 2000.
[7] See for example Robert D. Hamner's assessment of Naipaul's autobiographical procedure: "Naipaul is the kind of artist whose personal outlook and experience merge distinctly with everything he writes,

narrative form, or rather a conversion of the outside world[8] into the structure of a novel, of which autobiography remains the most obvious example, allows me to focus on the relationship between interiority (imagination, content/meaning) and external form (body, expression/writing), and this in three stages: with respect to the individual, language and space. On the narrative level, the problem of interiority brings us closer not only to the literal question of space which, by means of a house, Naipaul makes central to his novel, but also to the persistently metaphorical understanding of identity, language and literature in terms of spatial categories. On a broader level, Naipaul's novel mobilizes these questions of inside and outside with respect to the unevenly included or entirely excluded peoples in the global postcolonial world, which informs the novel.

Mr. Biswas's fragile interiority is permanently threatened by the absence of his own space and requires, in turn, the firmly built interior of a house. The house itself is, however, both an interior (a structure shut off from the outside world) and an exterior (a structure external to the strictly conceived notion of psychological interiority). To be held within its confined space is, for Mr. Biswas, a source of both comfort and anxiety. On the one hand, "[…] he knew that as soon as he stepped out of

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whether fiction or nonfiction. The fiction emphasizes through selective dramatization the same reality that is treated with equal skill, but more directly, in his other books and articles." (xv), "Introduction", *Critical Perspectives on V.S. Naipaul*, ed. Robert D. Hamner, Washington, DC: Three Continents Press, 1977.

[8] With respect to autobiography, this claim is problematic: it could also be argued that instead of transforming the outside experience (content) into the closed inner structure of the novel (form), it is really the interiority of experience that finds its outward expression in literature. In the first case, the literary form is a box-like structure that encapsulates the world; in the second case, it is an expression of an interior self towards the world. I think the possibility of such contradictory interpretations of inside and outside only serves to confirm the maddening circularity and inextricability of these concepts. In *Allegories of Reading*, Paul de Man addresses a similar problem of interchangeable uses of the spatial metaphor: "When form is considered to be the external trappings of literary meaning or content, it seems superficial and expendable. The development of intrinsic, formalist criticism in the twentieth century has changed this model: form is now a solipsistic category of self-reflection, and referential meaning is said to be extrinsic. The polarities of inside and outside have been reversed, but they are still the same polarities that are at play: internal meaning has become outside reference, and the outer form has become the intrinsic structure." (4)

the yard he returned to nonentity" (181)[9]; on the other hand, to remain fixed in one

place fills him with dread. An image of a solitary boy glimpsed from the bus window

serves to bring into focus this fear of confinement:

> The sun fell; and in the short dusk they passed a lonely hut set in a clearing far
> back from the road. Smoke came from under the rugged thatched eaves: the
> evening meal was being prepared. And, in the gloom, a boy was leaning
> against the hut, his hands behind him, staring at the road. He wore a vest and
> nothing more. The vest glowed white. In an instant the bus went by, noisy in
> the dark, through bush and level sugarcane fields. Mr. Biswas could not
> remember where the hut stood, but the picture remained: a boy leaning against
> an earth house that had no reason for being there, under the dark falling sky, a
> boy who didn't know where the road, and that bus, went. (182)

This episode testifies to the ambivalence with which Mr. Biswas invests both the

nomadic (the bus) and settled (the hut) spaces. From the shut-in security of the bus, he

looks out on the sugarcane fields in the early dusk and feels comforted by the

predetermined trajectory that the bus ride imposes on him. From his perspective, the

lonely boy is somehow deprived of purpose because the larger world, evoked by the

bus and the road, escape him. The boy's "rugged" home is situated "far back from the

road" and belongs to the marginal world, from which Mr. Biswas comes and tries to

flee. At the same time, the boy's white shirt literally gleams in the dusk, almost as if it

were in itself a source of light against the growing darkness. Focusing on no more

than this description, we would have to acknowledge that there is a kind of powerful

autonomy in the boy's glowing figure, silhouetted against the "falling sky." Behind

him, the smoke comes from the hut as the evening meal is being prepared. Obviously,

there is someone cooking inside, there may be a family, a sense of warmth. Mr.

Biswas's perception of the hut seems filled with wistful longing to be part of the

evening meal by the fire in the lonely night. We know from the earlier passage that,

beyond his hut and yard no matter how dismal they are, he becomes a nonentity.

Although he feels sorry for the solitary boy, we realize that he is himself much

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[9] Naipaul, V.S., *A House for Mr. Biswas.* New York: Vintage International, 2001.

lonelier. In the confined and unsettled space of the bus, he has no access to any meaningful interiority, either spatially or personally. His passing pity for the boy is based on the boy's ignorance of the larger world, an ignorance which in Mr. Biswas's eyes confirms the futility of the boy's existence. And yet, Mr. Biswas seems to recognize himself in the boy's solitude, which uncannily reflects his own. We imagine Mr. Biswas momentarily framed in the bus window, as purposeless and transitory as the boy. They mirror one another, both forgotten by the larger world, ignorant of it, and metaphorically left by the side of the road. The world passes them by while they persist in their loneliness and find "no reason for being there." Yet, it remains unclear in this passage who is inside and who is out—Mr. Biswas or the boy—and whether the shelter is to be found on the road or in the hut. In context, the distant larger world—towards which Mr. Biswas strives only to run away—is some undefined space (wherever the bus is headed) of broad possibilities and even bigger threats, which surrounds Mr. Biswas and hinders the acquisition of the house. It appears, in the end, that Mr. Biswas is alternately imprisoned outside and exiled inside. This structural circularity of the inside and outside, represented by various spatial images in the novel, makes it all the more necessary to situate Mr. Biswas in order to understand Naipaul's vision of the destitute person's crumbling interiority, its alienating effects, and its demand for expression.

 A House for Mr. Biswas is then a novel about the author himself, about the colonial history of Indian laborers in Trinidad and their inadequately settled or spiritually displaced experience, and about a quest for ownership (of oneself, of a house). But it is also a novel about a house that cannot be owned, language that cannot be controlled, writing that cannot be finished, education that does not provide knowledge, individuals that cannot stand alone, and communities that fail to unite.

The novel's language expresses these impossibilities through the persistent, although

often comical, denials and failures. As A.C. Derrick suggests,

> The social condition that Naipaul represents in his novels is shoddy and
> limiting, offering little more than an absurd or ridiculous existence.
> Repeatedly he shows the frustration of energy and ambition. [...] For the
> individual, rebellion or non-acquiescence proves a largely futile exercise.
> (194)[10]

Yet, in Mr. Biswas's case, an expression of failure turns out to be a positive category:

something is expressed. We thus encounter Naipaul's favorite paradox—to be

expressing something which is not there and cannot be created. This affirmation of

negation, as a structural and substantive dimension of the novel, can only leave us

with a question: is it at all possible to formulate failure without having achieved

something; at the very least, that formulation itself? Mr. Biswas's rebellion can be

located in the persistent response, which he continues to offer—in speech, writing,

imagination, and even in the failed housing attempts— despite its ridiculous futility.

In Mr. Biswas's case, the mutilations and losses of the exile, which Said connects with

muteness, cannot be silenced: they are, instead, countered with furious persistence by

his defiant formulation of nothingness. Giving shape to the void is then the

fundamental purpose of both Mr. Biswas's house and of his literary dreams.

Mr. Biswas ends up without a house of his own and yet, a house *for* Mr.

Biswas is ultimately built into the title of the novel. As if to replace the absence at the

heart of this story, it is the novel itself—written in response to the sudden death of

Naipaul's father—which offers itself as a house for its protagonist. In other words, the

book itself shelters Mr. Biswas's life because, as we find out from the very beginning

of the narrative, no other house can or ever will. In making this move, V.S. Naipaul

takes us from the interior of the narrative to the physical object which contains it. The

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[10] Derrick. A.C., "Naipaul's Technique as a Novelist." *Critical Perspectives on V.S. Naipaul.* Robert D.
Hamner, ed. Washington. DC : Three Continents Press, 1977. pp. 194-207.

book is then literally a place of fiction and Mr. Biswas's only house: it presents itself as not just an elusive texture of language, but as a concrete space in which a given story resides. The tragedy of Mr. Biswas's quest is thus literally remedied through the gesture of substitution through writing when everything else fails. How adequate this offering may be, how much a work of fiction can respond to the mutilations and losses of displacement is what I wish to examine in this chapter. My particular interest is in the relationship between the utopian answer of fiction and the spatial image, which serves as a constant reminder of that answer's ultimate failure.

Because of the complex reversals between the inside and outside, between fiction and its materiality, language and its referent, we are left to wonder not only about the relationship between the imagined to the tangible, but of the literal to the metaphorical, individual to the political, singular to the general. In reading *A House for Mr. Biswas*, most critics inevitably waver between looking at the specificity of this novel and substituting this specificity for some broader historical or political question. V.S. Naipaul not only invites us, but really forces us to do so: his protagonist and story are always stranded between the literal and allegorical, but manage to question and even mock this condition. Instead of taking any one binary reading of this novel for granted, I will attempt to show why none can exist in the other's absence. My reading of Mr. Biswas and his house, in the broader context of postcolonial literature, centers on the relationship between the properly "fictional" and arguably "material" dimensions of literature. In which way do the imaginary dimensions of this text find their root in the material and, conversely, how do its purely material concerns continue to be fictionalized?

2.   Destitution without substitute

In his foreword to *A House for Mr. Biswas*, V.S. Naipaul writes of his early experience in London:

> I was in a state of psychological destitution when—having no money, besides—I went to London after leaving Oxford in 1954, to make my way as a writer. Thirty years later, I can easily make present to myself again the anxiety of that time: to have found no talent, to have written no book, to be null and unprotected in the busy world. It is that anxiety—the fear of destitution in all its forms, the vision of the abyss—that lies below the comedy of the present book. (130)

The fear of "destitution in all its forms" is not only Naipaul's personal fear; it also defines—as the bus episode already shows—his protagonist, Mr. Biswas, and announces the concerns of the novel. Mr. Biswas's encounter with the void is continually reiterated and becomes a refrain to his story, which we come to expect and find paradoxically "reassuring"—timeless and settled:

> And always the thought, the fear about the future. The future wasn't the next day or the next week or even the next year, times within his comprehension and therefore without dread. The future he feared could not be thought of in terms of time. It was a blankness, a void like those in dreams, into which, past tomorrow and next week and next year, he was falling. (181)

At first it seems that Mr. Biswas's sense of absolute nothingness can be summed up as the fear of the future, but it actually has little to do with time. It is, instead, a fear related to place, which is paradoxically absent: when he falls, like in dreams, he falls timelessly and forever into emptiness. Devoid of time, this fear is purely physical and spatial: it has no beginning and no end and, in its endless repetition, it suspends Mr. Biswas in the midst of a nightmarish void. At stake is his dread of a body with no coordinates, destitute of any features that would ground it. The etymology of "destitution" is revealing: the word "destitute" comes from Latin *destituere*—to abandon or forsake, composed of the prefix *de*—away (in this case, a marker of separation), and the verb *statuere*—to put or place. In other words, to be destitute is to be put away, placed outside, and thus forsaken. The etymology interests me here because it relates the absence of choice and the fear it generates to the notion of denied and then attributed location. *A House for Mr. Biswas* offers numerous poignant examples of being "null and unprotected in the busy world" and allows us to

understand that, for both the writer and his protagonist, anxiety resides in an acutely felt problem of exteriority and solitude.

When, at one point in the novel, Mr. Biswas arrives to Port of Spain, he is fascinated by the big city:

> He comprehended the city whole; he did not isolate the individual, see the man behind the desk or counter, behind the pushcart or the steering-wheel of the bus; he saw only the activity, felt the call to the senses, and knew that below it all there was an excitement, which was hidden, but waiting to be grasped. (297)

In his initial encounter with the city, Mr. Biswas is aware only of the abstract promise hidden under the surface of the bustling urban center: its capacity to provide safe anonymity and lure the newcomer with unforeseen possibilities. The excitement at the potential wonders of the city is here described as something to be grasped—both in its cognitive and material sense. This double valance of gasping, of making something one's own, reflects the core questions of the novel: as we follow Mr. Biswas's desperate attempts to demarcate his personal space and anchor himself against the void, we are tempted to read the house as a congealed sign of his struggle for self-realization and possession. His desire for ownership is, in effect, a need for self-possession simply projected onto the material world, in which the dream house becomes a sign of an unaccomplished, almost impossible craving for rooted independence. However, Mr. Biswas's first impression of the city is blurred and undifferentiated so that the individual does not yet appear to him separated from an all-encompassing whole. Because he does not yet perceive the isolation of parts—all the minute hinges and articulations of the synchronized urban mechanism—Mr. Biswas is still unable to see himself as separate and alone. Instead, he marvels at the precision of the system in responding to and shaping the needs of an invisible collectivity:

> The organization of the city fascinated Mr. Biswas: the street lamps going on at the same time, the streets swept in the middle of the night, the rubbish

collected by the scavenging carts early in the morning; the furtive, macabre sounds of the nightsoil removers; the newsboys, really men; the bread van, the milk that came, not from cows, but in rum bottles stopped with brown paper. (299)

In his admiration for the colossal urban machine and its perfectly calculated operations, Mr. Biswas does not pause to question his place in this mechanism. The image itself holds his attention and, for a brief moment, the problem of his own position does not yet weigh on him. He can remain anonymous in the crowd without feeling completely unmoored by its flux. The situation, however, quickly changes:

> His mind was hot. And now he saw the city as made up of individuals, each of whom had his place in it. The large buildings around the Savannah were white and blank and silent in the heat. [...] His freedom was over, and it had been false. The past could not be ignored; it was never counterfeit; he carried it within himself. If there was a place for him, it was one that had already been hollowed out by time, by everything he had lived through, however imperfect, makeshift and cheating. (303)

As the city reveals itself to be built of individual destinies, Mr. Biswas's own past becomes palpable to him. Instead of foreseeing the brilliant future in which he alone might carve his position in accordance with his dreams, he now sees his place as already "hollowed out by time": a predetermined site and shape over which he has no control. From this perspective, the entire novel can be understood, as A.C. Derrick suggests, in terms of Mr. Biswas's "quest for form" (201),[11] visible in his attempts to establish some control over his position and movements. Mr. Biswas's place in the city is a gap that continually triggers the same fear of powerless irrelevance. From the very beginning of the novel[12] it is evident that Mr. Biswas's sense of anguish and abysmal solitude come from his disabling dependence on random accidents, in context often referred to as "fate," which are in retrospect endowed with special meaning.

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[11] A.C. Derrick, "Naipaul's technique as a novelist."

[12] Mr. Biswas's destiny seems to announce itself from the first day: he is born "in the wrong way" (15), at midnight, with six fingers and an unlucky sneeze. Everything that happens to him later on is merely a confirmation of this initial doom. Each one of his actions or desires threatens to fulfill the expectations of the position hollowed out at birth.

They mark a place for him already hollowed[13] out by time. The notion of place is thus not only shape-giving, but also historically predetermined and invites only a fantasy of individual freedom. Overall, Mr. Biswas is not the author of his life; he merely lives it as a given. The context exists already; others appear to generate it; Mr. Biswas merely responds. While he observes the bustling city, his euphoria of wholeness (of which he is initially a part) subsides and he becomes aware of his destitution—his fundamental distance from the totality he had, in this passage, initially imagined. Mr. Biswas's recurrent vision of isolation and his dream of wholeness produce and perpetuate his sense of being, in Naipaul's self-descriptive terms, "null and unprotected in the busy world."

The void arises, at the same time, from Mr. Biswas's inability to inscribe his presence onto the world, to leave behind a trace by which he may be remembered. Homelessness is linked, in his case, to an existence where nothing is built and nothing remains.[14] Imagining that the houses he has lived in have their own memory, the kind of memory which he himself is often unable to conjure, he realizes that the spatial void he fears may be the voided spot where he should have been standing:

> Suppose, Mr. Biswas thought in the long room, suppose that at one word I could just disappear from this room, what would remain to speak of me? A few clothes a few books. [...] He had lived in many houses. And how easy it was to think of those houses without him! [...] In none of these places he was being missed because in none of these places had he ever been more than a visitor, an upsetter of routine. Was Bipti [his mother] thinking of him in the back trace? But she herself was a derelict. And, even more remote, that house of mud and grass in the swamplands: probably pulled down now and ploughed up. Beyond that, a void. There was nothing to speak of him. (125)

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[13] "Hollowed" place is to be understood here as both emptied out (of meaning, creativity, future, etc.) and predetermined (already assigned a preexisting meaning and allowing only certain kinds of movement within it).

[14] From this perspective, Mr. Biswas is the diametrical opposite to the postman Cheval, whom I discuss in the introduction. Unlike Cheval, Biswas is incapable of building a monument to his life, no matter how naïve or makeshift. Instead, he wrestles with the fear of futility and complete disappearance.

His birth house in the swamplands is, Mr. Biswas imagines, already erased—"the world carried no witness to Mr. Biswas's birth and early years." (40) After his father's accidental drowning, for which Mr. Biswas is nonetheless blamed, his mother Bipti is left without male protection or income and forced to sell their hut. She becomes, from then on, a pauper living on others' charity. Worse than poverty, however, is the absence of memories, which their homelessness also brings about. But the problem is not so much in remembering as in being remembered. In the above passage, the houses are depicted as places of memory and as traces by which individual life is inscribed onto the world. This inscription serves to transform chaos into order—into a kind of personal cosmos.[15] In the absence of place, owned and marked, everything in Mr. Biswas's experience turns back into the void. Nothing will speak of him. This vision of mute displacement is, of course, different from the one Edward Said talks about, but shares with it the idea that expression becomes necessary precisely because its context is erased.

Already in his foreword to A *House for Mr. Biswas*, Naipaul focuses on anxiety born of destitution. Anxiety and destitution are the setting and material for this novel and, in their continuous interplay, draw our attention to the dependence of individuality on location. If to be destitute is to be put away, outside of some legible and legitimizing structure of relations, then the question remains what kind of existence and self can be built in the state of psychological and material nowhereness. Mr. Biswas's sense of self suffers from the instability of his placement in relation to others and his general *dis*placement with respect to the familial, geographic, historical, and cultural dimensions of existence.

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[15] For a fascinating discussion of cosmos and chaos as two distinct and mutually exclusive types of places, see Edward Casey's *The Fate of Place*.

In Port of Spain, Mr. Biswas experiences two opposite but complementary tendencies: 1) the disappearance into a sweeping, anonymous and unifying multitude of people, where he would be one of many and feel safety in finding affinities, even similarities, with others; 2) separation, differentiation and absolute autonomy of identity defined against the crowd which now becomes a threatening backdrop. This dual positioning of the protagonist—between blending in or standing out, between assimilation and autonomy—becomes particularly clear in his relationship to his wife's ever proliferating family—the matriarchal Tulsi clan. On the one hand, the dream of independence from Tulsi control motivates most of Mr. Biswas's emotions and deeds: he longs to become his own person, separate and clearly distinguishable from any group and its tradition. On the other hand, the separation from the Tulsi crowd brings home all the fear of independence and its isolating potential. Moreover, Mr. Biswas's marriage to Shama and his subsequent dependence on the Tulsis come, like everything else in his life, as a result of a fateful accident: Mr. Biswas's will and desire appear irrelevant, shapeless and ultimately dispensable. When, having intercepted Biswas's innocent love note to Shama, Mrs. Tulsi bullies him into marrying her daughter, he merely agrees to fill the space that is forcibly assigned to him. A similar dual problem, explicitly set up by Mr. Biswas's response to Port of Spain, plagues the definitions of identity itself: does identity designate a possibility of grounded and thus balanced action, which allows connections between fully formed and creatively conscious individuals—in paradoxical terms, authors of their fate; or is it a frightening and unproductive separation of an isolated particle from the rest of its environment? Both of these interpretations, and other possible permutations of such a binary, are always present in the concept itself. I will consider them as mutually constitutive especially when at war with one another.

Finally, the disruptive and unstable duality I have attributed both to Mr.

Biswas's general place in the world (his origins, education, languages, religion, caste,

etc.) and to the concept of autonomous identity, applies to the titular house Mr. Biswas

so desperately seeks to own. The house itself, regardless of whether it is taken to be

material or symbolic, serves at all times a dual function: 1) it situates and shelters, and

2) it encloses and isolates. Paradoxically, Naipaul seems to describe a destitute man

who seeks to resolve his destitution by acquiring a house, which will then mark him as

separate from the frighteningly undifferentiated collectivity. This means that,

ironically, he *wishes* to be "destitute"—literally "put away" by means of wealth. And

then another twist: if he were to acquire the protection of a house and thereby become

an autonomous owner,[16] a socially forsaken (destitute) Mr. Biswas, who dreams of

separating himself from the horrors of the world, would by the same token become a

member of a community—the "proper" community of property, one of those who are

self-possessed and partake of the respectability of status. In other words, and

following the complexity of Naipaul's circular logic,[17] we can conclude that in terms

of both physical and psychological placement, destitute people are—exactly like

property owners—potentially cut away from an imagined collective, organized into a

system of antithetical, but continuous relations. At the same time, they belong—

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[16] In an argument with Shama, angrily refusing to be called "laborer," he demands instead the label of "proprietor" although he merely manages the store, which belongs to Shama's mother (156).
[17] Homi Bhabha critiques Naipaul for precisely this exaggerated view of destitute societies caught in a cycle of repetition: "Naipaul's nervous view of the West Indies has shaped his perspective on postcolonial societies more generally. The withdrawal of the West from the colonies of Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean does not lead to the sovereignty, security, and national progress. Independence merely lifts the curtain to reveal what he once collectively named 'the overcrowded baracoon'— societies destitute of design and determination, caught in the cycle of repetition in which 'the paternalism of colonial rule will have been replaced by the jungle politics of rewards and revenge, the textbook conditions for chaos.'" ("Naipaul's Vernacular Cosmopolitans." *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Washington: Oct. 25, 2001, Vol. 48, Iss. 09). I would argue, however, that the repetition Naipaul traces here is not necessarily, as Bhabha concludes (lamenting Naipaul's "melancholic conservatism"), to be defined as constitutive of the "Third World" alone, but that is has to do more profoundly with the logic of poverty and wealth, destitution and status and other socio-economic binaries of the entire system of global capitalism of which the "Third World" is only a part.

whether they want to or not—to the "community" of wealth or poverty, depending on their status. The only (although crucial) difference is that the poor does not choose, but merely endures separation (in the homeless shelter, for example) while the owner wants and enforces it (in the gated community, for example). Naipaul's point, however, has to do with the very logic of ownership: possession and dispossession rest on the same principle of separation between a coherent inside (the house, the autonomous individual) defined from the perspective of an ambiguous and shifting outside (the collective, the crowd, the raging elements of nature). The threat of exteriority is thus bound to and inadequately resolved though the construction of interiority. Biswas's ever-failing dream of self-possession reflects not only his vexed and clownish status in the Tulsi clan, but shows him as permanently alienated—made exterior—to himself. Naipaul leads us to believe that the impossibility of self-possession arises from an imposed economic and social exteriority. Since Biswas is, in historical terms, already a displaced colonial subject, and is, moreover, deprived of a decent place to live in, he cannot be present to himself but becomes instead his own fiction.[18] The interiority of the desired house seems to promise the interiority of the protagonist and when one fails, so does the other. Mr. Biswas wants to own his house, and thus himself, in practical economic terms that subordinate any psychological interiority to a material claim. In this manner, Naipaul makes it clear that his novel pursues a complex line of conflict between the materiality of fictions and the fictionalized materiality.

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[18] This becomes painfully clear in the way Mr. Biswas writes his always identical and always unfinished short stories. Biswas is a proud protagonist of a narrative that stands in perfect contrast to the reality of his life. Fiction thus becomes a corrective to the bleakness and dissatisfaction of his day to day existence. In other words, Mr. Biswas imagines his "real" unrealized self to reside in these short stories but it is an unreachable self, made distant and external to him by the impact of his reluctantly lived daily life. As a result, the actual self is in Mr. Biswas's case endlessly deferred or rendered void by both the material destitution and the fictional substitution. See page 21 and on.

3.   Substitution of the destitute

Many critics, who discuss A *House for Mr. Biswas*, do so by isolating the house as a symbol and, concordantly, Mr. Biswas as a type. According to R. H. Lee for example, the house is "the primary symbol in the novel, and represents the hero's furthest success in turning the traditional passivity of his religion and society into some purposive activity" (75)[19]. Although Gordon Rohlehr warns, in contrast, against the "danger of regarding Biswas as a figure representative of the Caribbean predicament" (92)[20], he also sees Mr. Biswas as a figure that brings out "bare humanity" beneath one man's history of underprivilege (193)[21]. Mr. Biswas and, by extension, his house constitute both local and universal figures:

> Biswas's nowhereness may be something much more universal. Yet, as we have seen, he is representative enough of our local predicament: a man without a past, an orphan wavering between equally dubious cultural alternatives; winning a sort of independence and returning in humiliation to the people he is still forced to fight; turning anxiety into absurdity by using humour as a weapon and an escape; trying to create an identity from the void, and sometimes unknown to himself, exercising and expressing identity in the very act of searching for it. (92-3)[22]

Rohlehr's observation thus supports my view that *A House for Mr. Biswas* has a liminal quality and mobilizes a number of binary oppositions (local/universal in this case) without resolving them. Yet despite his desire to resist an easy postcolonial typology, Rohlehr along with a number of other critics, succumbs to the tendency of explaining Mr. Biswas's house as primarily symbolic. In his introduction to *Critical Perspectives on V.S. Naipaul*, Robert D. Hamner presents Mr. Biswas as both a

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[19] Lee R.H., "The Novels of V.S. Naipaul." *Critical Perspectives on V.S. Naipaul*, ed. Robert D. Hamner, Washington, DC: Three Continents Press, 1977. pp. 68-83.

[20] Rohlehr, Gordon, "Character and Rebellion in *A House for Mr. Biswas*." *Critical Perspectives on V.S. Naipaul*, ed. Robert D. Hamner, Washington, DC: Three Continents Press, 1977. pp. 84-93.

[21] Rohlehr, Gordon, "The Ironic Approach." *Critical Perspectives on V.S. Naipaul*, ed. Robert D. Hamner, Washington, DC: Three Continents Press, 1977. pp. 178-193.

[22] Rohlehr, Gordon, "Character and Rebellion in *A House for Mr. Biswas*."

particular and universal figure, representative of and isolated from the world in which

it resides:

> The story of Mohun Biswas captures authentic West Indian life, but beyond
> that it transcends provincial boundaries and evokes concepts that are universal
> in their human implications. The novel has been called an epic and its
> protagonist an Everyman. Biswas's desperate fight to gain his own house is
> symbolic of man's need to develop an authentic identity. (xvi-xvii)[23]

The otherwise diverse assessments of *A House for Mr. Biswas* share one common

thread: overtly or covertly, they identify the symbolic nature of Mr. Biswas's house,

which presumably sends us deeper into the complexities of the postcolonial condition,

of which V.S. Naipaul himself is sometimes seen as a skilled reporter and sometimes

as a symptomatic example.[24] Naipaul's self-selected role of an observer who

examines the particular in terms of its broader "universal" meanings[25] has earned him

Homi Bhabha's uneasy critique for being "today's global writer."[26] I say "uneasy"

because no one is quite certain where to place V.S. Naipaul, what words to hold him

responsible for and when to exempt him generously.[27] More specifically, there is

profound discomfort at the undeniable excellence of Naipaul's writing coupled with

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[23] Hamner, Robert D., "Introduction", *Critical Perspectives on V.S. Naipaul.*

[24] In *V.S. Naipaul* (1995), Fawzia Mustafa claims that the controversy, which surrounds Naipaul's narrative choices of belonging to and distancing himself from various cultural and political contexts, involves widely ranging evaluations of both the man and his work, from "objective" and "ahistorical" to "culturally ignorant" and "hysterical." Mustafa attempts to order Naipaul's career into a narrative frame that she sees as itself resembling a nineteenth century "bildungsroman" in which "only certain events having to do with already codified achievements are privileged" (7).

[25] Dagmar Barnow draws attention to the relationship between the particular and universal in Naipaul's fiction: "Understanding is shaped by the when and where, the historicity of the observer. As long as the observer relates to the observed in the context of larger social and political concerns that direct his interest in them, understanding will not be value-neutral. Naipaul has always pointed his focus on the particular in the terms of its broader, 'universal' meanings, and he has been very open about finding some societies and some cultural conventions more conducive to a reasonably good life than others." (Barnow, Dagmar, "Introduction: Cultural plurality and cultural value." *Naipaul's Strangers.* Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2003., p. x)

[26] Bhabha, Homi, "Naipaul's Vernacular Cosmopolitans."

[27] A similarly uneasy and ambivalent position characterizes Edward Said's essay on Naipaul, "Bitter dispatches from the Third World." *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000. pp. 98-104.

his harsh and dismissive stance toward some parts and populations of the world. Naipaul, self-consciously stuck in-between, leaves us similarly stranded.

If the house is often viewed as the central symbol of the narrative and Mr. Biswas as a type, the interpretation of the novel only appears to follow a rather prevalent view of V.S. Naipaul himself: he is himself a type, a "global writer"[28] trapped in his "jaundiced views"[29], seeking refuge in "castrated" easy satire[30]. In short, a self-appointed observer of and reporter on the "Third World," whose universalism is just another disguise of colonial mentality. As Said suggests, Naipaul is a "scavenger in the ruins of postcolonial history"[31]: someone who profits from the vestiges of the colonial world only to side, in the end, with the enemy. These views place Naipaul in a position quite similar to that of his protagonist: he is an outsider on the inside of the postcolonial literary setting and remains, to this day, a fitting incarnation of the inadmissible.

Paradoxically, this inadmissible aspect of Naipaul's writing makes him, in turn, most typical. In her essay "'Man Fitting the Landscape': Nature, Culture and Colonialism," Helen Tiffin for example argues that "for the exile or migrant, 'landscape' consists in the formation or (re)formation of connections with the adopted place" (199), thus suggesting a need to examine the enduring spatial problematic of the Caribbean context:

> In the Caribbean, with the exception of the Caribs and Arawaks, all present-day populations are to some degree in ancestral exile, whether they be descendants of European settlers, Africans kidnapped into slavery, or the Chinese and Indian indentured laborers who followed slavery's abolition in the 1830s. Thus almost all modern West Indian peoples have had to adjust (or are still adjusting) to radical transplantation; and the "landscapes" they thus apprehend are different from, we assume, those of the Caribs or, in fact, those

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[28] Bhabha, Homi, "Naipaul's Vernacular Cosmopolitans."
[29] Panwar, Purabi, "Introduction", *V.S. Naipaul: An Anthology of Recent Criticism*. Ed. Purabi Panwar. Pencraft International, 2003, p. 14.
[30] Lamming, George, *The Pleasures of Exile*. London: Michael Joseph Ltd., 1960, p. 225.
[31] Said, Edward W., "Bitter dispatches from the Third World."

of each other. Unlike indigenous peoples, such relative "newcomers" bring with them the values, cultural memories, knowledge and traditions of their former environments, a prior "natural" history of being-in-the-world that, consciously or unconsciously, explicitly or implicitly, influences (through expectation, comparison, and contrast) their perceptions of the new. Whether the imported population of the West Indian islands (and their descendants) are aware of this or not, the Caribbean landscape is to some degree always perceived in relation to their earlier homescapes; and second, their relations with the land are, to varying degrees, influenced by both the conditions of their translocation and their lived circumstances in the new locale. (199-200)[32]

The focus falls on the notion of "translocation" of the current Caribbean populations even if they no longer have an actual memory of or physical connection to their "earlier homescapes." Paying closer attention to Tiffin's words, we notice that the consciousness of the Caribbean people has no relevance to their supposedly permanent historical dislocation: "whether the imported population of the West Indian islands (and their descendants) are aware of this or not, the Caribbean landscape is to some degree always perceived in relation to their earlier homescapes." Tiffin thus questions, and renders questionable, not only the geographical location, but also the very epistemological status of the Caribbean people. Translocation and its consequences shape the Caribbean mentality whether the people know it or not. The Caribbean populations can thus occupy only a predetermined space, geographical and conceptual, hollowed out by the colonial history and, like Biswas, like Naipaul himself, are persistently understood in terms of what they are not allowed to forget or become.[33] Skipping over Tiffin's problematic disregard for the cognitive dimension of the Caribbean peoples' independence, I would suggest that her analysis begs

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[32] Tiffin, Helen, "'Man Fitting the Landscape': Nature, Culture, and Colonialism." *Caribbean Literature and the Environment: Between Nature and Culture*. Elizabeth M. DeLoughrey, Renée K. Gosson, and George B. Handley (eds.). Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2005. pp. 199-212.

[33] I do not intend to suggest that forgetting or disregarding the imperial history and colonization would be any kind of solution. My only point is that it appears reductive persistently to read people, wherever they may be in the world, as *unwitting* echoes of their past. Much more would have to be done to move beyond the binarism of colonial encounters. Still more importantly, generalizations about what "people" know or do not know about themselves, because they are of necessity inaccurate and only perpetuate some old forms of imperial anthropology, would have to be left respectfully unformulated.

another question: when does a population cease to be typified as "transplanted", "imported" and "translocated" in spite of the importance of its colonial history?[34]

Reflecting on Naipaul's place in this examination of landscape and writing, Tiffin turns, in passing, to *A House for Mr. Biswas,* and argues that this novel offers "a (qualified) 'progression' from an 'unaccommodated' man to an identifiably Trinidadian way of being." (211) Tiffin's focus on the enduring condition of "importedness" in the Caribbean requires this particular counterpoint—some "identifiable Trinidadian way of being" in the specific case of Naipaul's protagonist. Here, the opposition between transplantation and rootedness shapes the argument.[35] Yet Naipaul is also persistently defined by his "jaundiced" historically embattled position between these two poles of rootedness and transplantation: not quite Indian, not quite Trinidadian, and English only through an act of unforgivable assimilation. He is, like many postcolonial or "Third World" writers, examined biographically and, in the process, denied the possibility of movement away from his questionable, yet unavoidable origins. It seems that, having by definition no place (as Tiffin suggests), he can neither live in it nor leave it. Vaguely but persistently, authors like Naipaul are examined for their geographical loyalty. Wiltshire, England? Naipaul's chosen location is itself seen as the symbol of colonial assimilation with its tasteless

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[34] My suspicion of definitional fixity in this case echoes, to some extent, a question Aijaz Ahmad asks of Fredric Jameson: "As we come to the substance of what Jameson 'describes', I find it significant that First and Second Worlds are defined in terms of their production systems (capitalism and socialism, respectively), whereas the third category—the Third World—is defined purely in terms of an 'experience' of externally inserted phenomena. [...] Ideologically, this classification divides the world between those who make history and those who are mere objects of it [...]." (100) Although the context and aims of this debate are different from my purpose here, I find Ahmad's position very useful because it reminds us of and points to some unexamined forms of criticism which, with the best of progressive intentions, end up perpetuating the structure and terms of the exclusionary discourses about the world.

[35] Even a very cursory look at the otherwise very useful "Key Postcolonial Concepts" will reveal a constant focus on such binary oppositions. They are examined with respect to the prevailing imperialist and colonial discourses of the center and margins of the empire, in order to question or undermine such distinctions. However, the repetition of terms seems to, almost inadvertently, create a discursive schema unable to step outside of and beyond the existing binaries. The fixed conceptual apparatus is something I obviously cannot resolve here but wish to keep cautiously in mind throughout this essay.

admiration for the colonial center; or rather, as a sign of the outsider's dream to be let inside.

4. The null Naipaul

This problem of inside and out might be, in the end, a matter of "civili...zayshun." This particular "civili...zayshun" rests on its English language, which one can speak either too badly or too well and, depending on the expectation, accused and found guilty of either one of these accomplishments. V.S. Naipaul, for example, appears to abandon his authentic Indo-Trinidadian self, with its reassuring home-grown accent, in favor of his bland Oxbridge incarnation: when he says "civili...zayshun," he may be failing to rebel against the Empire. No matter what else can be said about this infamous Nobel laureate (he is, in this case, a literary insider to the canon), it is safe and revealing, it seems, to invoke his affected speech. Recently, we not only confirmed that he is "rude" and "arrogant," but will now have written proof that he is, as John Carey says, "an egotist, a domestic tyrant and a sadist to a degree that would be farcical if it were not for the consequent distress suffered over many years by his first wife, Pat."[36] Thanks to *The World Is What It Is*, Naipaul's soon to be released (November 2008) authorized biography by Patrick French, we might finally plunge into the writer's damnable and all-too-expected monstrosity. It brings us back to the weathered contrast between barbarity and "civili...zayshun." Now that Naipaul will (again) be exposed as a closet barbarian (now an outsider to all respectable canons), we can clearly see what horror lies hidden in his chiseled style, British accent and apparent propriety. What can be more thrilling than to shut the doors righteously in the face of an imposter? For some reason, Naipaul's affected accent seems to be one obvious place where his duplicity is supposedly captured. When an Indo-Trinidadian speaks some kind of BBC English, he is obviously a traitor

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[36] See John Carey's review of *The World is What It Is* in *The Sunday Times*, March 30, 2008.

to his cause: he has rejected "his Caribbean roots," as another reviewer is keen to

remind us.[37] Reading about the horrors he inflicted on his first wife, his mistress, and

possibly those scores of prostitutes he apparently frequented over the years, you are

lead to exclaim: "I knew it!," unwittingly replicating the obviousness of all ideological

responses, which Althusser had already described so long ago.[38] To make this portrait

glow with a final touch of condescending sympathy for our diseased Nobel-savage,

Carey explains Naipaul's private crimes as

> *typical* of his undeviating self-concern, which [Patrick] French traces to the
> humiliations of his early life. Descended from destitute Indian labourers sent
> to Trinidad to cut sugar cane, he was made to feel inferior even within his own
> extended family by the failures and mental breakdowns of his beloved father,
> whom he was to commemorate in *A House for Mr. Biswas.* By dint of heroic
> swotting, he won a scholarship and escaped to Oxford. But beneath its
> affability, 1950s Oxford was a maze of invisible barriers that he felt, rightly,
> had been erected to stop people like him succeeding. He tried to gas himself,
> but the coin-in-the-slot meter gave out while he was still conscious. Post-
> Oxford London was even worse. Nobody wanted to employ small, asthmatic
> Indians. He applied for and failed to get 26 jobs, and came close to starvation,
> living on boiled potatoes and handouts from Pat, who was working as a
> schoolteacher. To survive these *setbacks*, as French sees it, he had to cling to a
> belief in his inherent superiority. (my emphasis)

It turns out that coming from a family of destitute laborers, from the colonial Trinidad

to the elite Oxford, attempting to commit suicide and living on the brink of starvation

can be summed up in one word—"setback." There is nothing to add: this light

assessment of another man's tragedies speaks for itself. Some of us deserve to be seen

as suffering; others merely suffer setbacks and come out as savages. Or were they

savage from the start? In any case, according to the various reviews of his writing and

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[37] See Aamer Hussein's review of *The World is What it is* in *The Independent*, April 4, 2008.
[38] "It is indeed a peculiarity of ideology that it imposes (without appearing to do so, since these are 'obviousnesses') obviousness as obviousness, which we cannot fail to recognize and before which we have the inevitable and natural reaction of crying out (aloud or in the 'still small voice of conscience'): 'That's obvious! That's right! That's true!'" (172) Althusser, Louis, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)." *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays.* Trans. Ben Brewster. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971.

person, Naipaul is somehow consistently "typical," although what exactly he represents remains unclear.

Back in "civili...zayshun," in his article entitled "Naipaul's Vernacular Cosmopolitans," Homi Bhabha writes:

> The one occasion on which I glimpsed V.S. Naipaul, in a self-service Indian restaurant beside the British Library, I heard more than saw him. I was weaving my way through crowded tables, uneasily balancing an overflowing plate of curries, lentils, and condiments, when a word wafted past like a great cloud trapped in an airless room.
> "Civili...zayshun," someone said in a polished Oxford voice, a touch maudlin, with the merest trace of a Trinidadian lilt that softens consonants and melts vowels. I tuned around, and it was Naipaul holding forth to a young woman. Of all the stray words that one might accidentally catch from the private conversation of this most elusive and aloof of English writers, none could be more appropriate than this somewhat nostalgic, anxious, call to "civilization."[39]

Although Naipaul is here, again, dangerously summed up in one word, whose most suspect dimension lies in its "maudlin" tone of Oxford polish, Bhabha does not fail to point out the power of language at Naipaul's command: "The power of what Naipaul has called 'the word in isolation' comes from the capacity of the unadorned presence of language to shift a whole cultural landscape, to change the entire meaning of life." On occasion, Naipaul is guilty of "large-scale civilizational arguments," which in the end only deaden his prose and destroy "the resonance of detail and dialogue that is the fingerprint of his remarkable gift." However, when Naipaul's "themes and character unsettle the sober propriety of moral and metropolitan 'centers,' they reveal an unsurpassable spirit of vernacular cosmopolitanism contained in the art of narrative itself..." This is how Bhabha presents the paradoxical relationship between Naipaul's dubious Oxford "voice" on the one hand, and his ability to disrupt the politically correct and proper centers of judgment, on the other. Only Naipaul's stubbornly particular word in isolation captures, according to Bhabha, the possibility of resistance

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[39] See Homi Bhabha's "Naipaul's Vernacular Cosmopolitans."

and change. When it attempts to belong or join in the bustle of the colonial center, it loses its makeshift freedom and ends up occupying—like Biswas in Port of Spain—only its already hollowed out place. It appears, from the literary reviews of Naipaul's biography, that his "proper" place is to be re-evaluated by precisely those centers of judgment he may have been aiming to question. Maybe this is only fair, a mere turn of the wheel of fortune. Otherwise, the move to rank a man's life and locate the source of his (un)acceptability may come too close to schooling of the savage outcast who—failing to learn the lesson—will have to be shunned. It remains unclear today, as it has always been, what precise credentials empower the moral jurors to declare who is in and who is out.

In view of so many unfavorable and mutually re-enforced readings of Naipaul's personality, there is little room left for unpredictable readings of his work itself. Ironically, in the critical commentary on Naipaul, we sense again that "if there was a place for him, it was one that had already been hollowed out by time, by everything he had lived through, however imperfect, makeshift and cheating." Somewhat uncannily, Naipaul has already described the strategies with which he will be read: he depicts the shape-giving void of predetermined meanings that will end up constructing both the celebratory and critical discourses about his fiction. Moreover, in accord with my readings of the inside and outside, the inside of the novel is repeatedly colonized by the external readings of its author while the author is, conversely but rather unsurprisingly, made to echo his own protagonists. In any case, the distinction between fiction and reality, between the novel and the world, is perpetually broken and we are again reminded that this distinction itself may be no more than a convenient convention, which always fails to fulfill its promise of neatness. Yet I do not wish to "defend" Naipaul. Those writers and intellectuals who, like Naipaul, assume that a particular position and experience amount to some

generalizable knowledge of the world are never very likeable. There is, no doubt, some jarring injustice in the learned presumptuousness of such great men, but I would insist that Naipaul often receives undue *ad-hominem* attention primarily because he does not easily fit on either side of critical discourse, whether it be about the universality of human condition or about geographical and cultural specificity of the colonial/postcolonial subject.

5.   Poverty: symbol or allegory?

In his controversial argument about the nature of the "Third World" novel, Fredric Jameson focuses on "national allegories" precisely because:

> [...] the allegorical spirit is profoundly discontinuous, a matter of breaks and heterogeneities, of the multiple polysemia of the dream rather than the homogenous representation of the symbol. Our traditional conception of allegory—based, for instance, on stereotypes of Bunyan—is that of an elaborate set of figures and personifications to be read against some one-to-one table of equivalences: this is, so to speak, a one-dimensional view of this signifying process, which might only be set in motion and complexified were we willing to entertain the more alarming notion that such equivalences are themselves in constant change and transformation at each perpetual present of the text. (73)

Jameson insists that there is a repetitive homogeneity in any symbol and that dynamic transformations of meaning may be lost in the symbolic ready-made. But no matter how "discontinuous" in spirit, allegories too take part in a system of substitutions. There are some problems with this practice of substitution: Jameson's essay itself attests to the difficulty in merely describing "discontinuities," which in the end fail to rid the discourse of its one-dimensional semantic habits. In some cases, and this is, I would argue, Mr. Biswas's case, the substitution itself can be misleading because it obscures the purpose and lightens the weight of *A House for Mr. Biswas*—its fundamental concern with destitution.

There is, understandably, much debate about the impulse to represent debasement and silence of poverty, and it is rare that any attempt at such

representation can overcome the triviality of language in the face of real despair.[40]

One such, possibly unequaled, literary attempt is Melville's "Bartleby the Scrivener" (1853). Melville describes, but does not explain, a mysterious scrivener Bartleby who appears out of nowhere, owns nothing and has no place to go. All attempts to understand Bartleby or bring him into the fold necessarily fail. When in the end Bartleby dies of hunger, we are left, like the misguidedly benevolent narrator, only with a sense of pointless guilt of those who would have wanted to but were unable to respond. The dead letters of sympathy with enlightened words of consolation come, Melville suggests, too late or are lost because there can be no coincidence between the time of representation (writing) and the time of immediacy (suffering). The most important point to remember about Bartleby is that he cannot be made to mean (or symbolize) anything beyond his mere presence: whenever he is asked to engage in a discussion, interaction or self-assessment, he responds: "I would prefer not to." All we have is his refusal to be interpreted and are left with nothing but his mere existence and, finally, his tragic death. In accordance with Said's observation with which I began, Bartleby is neither "aesthetically nor humanistically comprehensible," but remains, instead, a powerful figure of non-substitution, or rather, a literary attempt to create an immovable presence in the text that leaves us only with its own opacity and our guilt-ridden inability to read it. Still, paradoxically, Bartleby is, like Biswas, a literary figure and thus demands interpretation. A similar paradox pertains, I think, to the representation of poverty in *A House for Mr. Biswas*.

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[40] The controversial character of such representation became painfully obvious in the case of the South African photo-journalist Kevin Carter who received a Pulitzer Prize in 1994 for his photograph of an emaciated Sudanese girl stalked by a vulture. The photograph was published in *The New York Times* in 1993 and triggered a heated debate about the role and responsibilities of the observer. Carter remained faithful to his journalistic principle of neither intervening in the scene nor sacrificing his photograph. He understood his task to be that of representation and documentation, not immediate engagement. A few months after receiving the Pulitzer Prize, Carter committed suicide at the age of 33.

Although poverty in fiction or poverty as signifier certainly raises endless questions, it is nonetheless surprising that with respect to *A House for Mr. Biswas* it receives little critical attention. Although many critics point to the centrality of Biswas's wasteland, his focus on escape and his migrant's sense of homelessness and need for home-building, few critics seem explicitly to acknowledge Mr. Biswas's first and foremost problem: the fact that he has no place to live and no money to remedy his homelessness. These two facts shape and limit the narrative of Mr. Biswas's life: they are the inescapable reality that necessitates escape, the backdrop for weakness and mediocrity, the motivation for grotesque defiance, the source of daily humiliation and flights of rebellion. Nothing about Mr. Biswas can be understood without particular attention to those things which he—materially—does not have. A house is one of those things and, instead of immediately substituting this house with a more abstract discourse on diasporic postcolonial history (no matter how important this discourse is), I would like to look at destitution and poverty as such. I start with a simple presupposition: poverty is not a symbol or allegory, it is not polysemic or ambiguous, it may not even be interpretable. In other words, poverty is not a representation of something else, it is the very being of absence, or as Naipaul often asserts, it is an abyss and a fear.

One of Mr. Biswas's moves, under Tulsi patronage, takes him to Green Vale, a plantation estate where he works as sub-overseer/driver and lives in one of the barracks. His reaction to this new position is simple:

> As soon as he saw the barracks Mr. Biswas decided that the time had come for him to build his own house, by whatever means. The barracks gave one room to one family, and sheltered twelve families in one long room divided into twelve. This long room was built of wood and stood on low concrete pillars. The whitewash on the walls had turned to dust, leaving stains like those left on stones by bleaching clothes; and these stains were mildewed and sweated and freckled with grey and green and black. (197)

Yet again, Mr. Biswas is placed in a setting too small, too crowded and too dirty to feel like anyone's home. He is merely sheltered from the weather; the rest is an impossible dream. Naipaul insists here on repulsive details that surprise us with their strange neutrality: "The barrackyard, with its mud, animal droppings and the quick slime one stale puddles, gave him nausea [...]"; "He bathed incessantly. The barracks had no bathroom but at the back there were waterbarrels under the spouts which drained off the water from the roof. However quickly the water was used, there were always larvae of some sort on its surface, jumpy jellylike whiskery things, perfection in their way." (200)

Possibly, it is Naipaul's matter-of-fact narration that obscures the tragic dimension of Mr. Biswas's life. Instead, he persistently laughs at himself and we join in, comfortable in our knowledge that Mr. Biswas's pain is somehow safe because it is not meant to be either melodramatic or edifying. But for those who remember Preston Sturges' brilliant dramatic comedy *Sullivan's Travels* (1941), Naipaul's use of witty dialogue and merciless satire evokes the power of laughter that Sturges attempts to celebrate in his film. A spoiled Paramount film director is tired of making comedies and goes out into the world incognito to find out about "real" poverty and pain. When, in the end, his misadventures land him in a prison work camp, he is taken as part of an audience of chain-gang convicts to a Southern black church to watch a screening of a Walt Disney cartoon (starring Mickey Mouse and Pluto). It is clear that he at least has one form of resistance left—the laughter. As he laughs—tragically, defiantly, obliviously—along with other convicts, he finally realizes the power of laughter to spite destitution and pain. Comedy, which he initially understood as

shallow, no longer strikes him as mere entertainment; rather, he sees in it the final

resistance of dying men.[41]

From the beginning of the novel, we know that Mohun Biswas is such a dying

man and that he despairs at the possibility "to have lived without even attempting to

lay claim to one's portion of the earth; to have lived and died as one had been born,

unnecessary and unaccommodated." (11) Fearful of placeless existence, he confronts

the dismal barrack yard with a dream:

> He thought deeply about this house, and knew exactly what he wanted. He
> wanted, in the first place, a real house, made with real materials. He didn't
> want mud for walls, earth for the floor, tree branches for rafters and grass for
> roof. He wanted wooden walls, all tongue-and-groove. He wanted a
> galvanized iron roof and a wooden ceiling. He would walk up concrete steps
> into a small verandah; through doors with coloured panes into a small
> drawingroom; from there into a small bedroom, then another small bedroom,
> then back into the small verandah. The house would stand on tall concrete
> pillars so that he would get two floors instead of one, and the way would be
> left open for future development. The kitchen would be a shed in the yard; a
> neat shed, connected to the house by a covered way. And his house would be
> painted. The roof would be red, the outside walls ochre with chocolate
> facings, and the windows white. (201-2)

Despite Mr. Biswas's imaginative requirement that the house be "real," the description

that follows has the compact neatness of a child's drawing. He imagines himself

walking through such a space proprietarily, from room to room, as if surveying his

little domain. We see him walking through imaginary spaces which are connected: he

can circulate; there is a flow of movement rather than confined fragmentation. In the

small, solid and colorfully cozy world of Mr. Biswas's house, there is a childlike

wonder at the existence, even at the mere possibility, of ordinary things that can

ground the one who claims them. The miracle of this little (chocolate) house lies in its

absence: there is a tinge of wistful pain in the red roof and ochre walls, nostalgia for

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[41] Or again, a similar point by William Faulkner: "*How we laughed. Yes, we laughed, because I have learned this at least during these four years: that it really requires an empty stomach to laugh with, that only when you are hungry or frightened do you extract some ultimate essence out of laughing [...].*" (*Absalom, Absalom!* New York: Vintage International, 1990., p. 103)

something Mr. Biswas has never had. In this sense, the neat little house is a utopia

and instead of pointing outward to some allegorical or symbolic reference beyond the

text it only underscores the absence within it. In other words, the house is a miniature

that, as Gaston Bachelard argues, contains immensity:

> Ainsi le minuscule, porte étroite s'il en est, ouvre un monde. Le détail d'une
> chose peut être le signe d'un monde nouveau, d'un monde qui comme tous les
> mondes, contient les attributs de la grandeur.
> La miniature est un des gîtes de la grandeur. (146)[42]
>
> (Thus the minuscule, a narrow gate, opens up an entire world. The details of a
> thing can be a sign of a new world which, like all worlds, contains the
> attributes of greatness.
> Miniature is one of the refuges of greatness. (155))[43]

The detail and its smallness trigger, no doubt, the need for larger interpretations and,

as Bachelard suggests, it is the value of miniature to enable meanings vaster than

itself. Mr. Biswas's house as such a miniature inspires and, in its smallness, contains

the vast discourse on homelessness and alienation. But I would suggest that it also

remains a detail, a private, diminutive, even selfish concern, a simple child-like dream

of a shelter and, as such, speaks to the most profound tragedy in the novel: the

impossibility of the seemingly obvious. This dimension of the novel must remain

present to us if we are to perceive and interpret the multifaceted significance of the

house.

The miniature actually figures in the novel and suggests itself to the reader as

an alternative way of understanding what the house may be. It is a doll house that Mr.

Biswas buys as a Christmas gift for his daughter Savi. Since an unhoused Christmas

becomes a parody of itself and is reduced to "a series of anticipations" (206), Mr.

Biswas attempts to make up for the emptiness by purchasing something of its splendor

and promise at a reduced price:

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[42] Bachelard, Gaston, "La miniature." *La poétique de l'espace*. Paris: Quadrige/PUF, 2004.
[43] Bachelard, Gaston, "Miniature." *The Poetics of Space*, Trans. Maria Jolas. Boston, Massachusetts:
Beacon Press, 1994.

> The following day Mr. Biswas cycled from Green Vale to Arwacas. When he
> turned into the High Street the sight of the stores, open again and carelessly
> displaying Christmas goods at bargain prices, reminded him of the presents he
> had forgotten. He got off his bicycle and leaned it against the kerb. [...] Mr.
> Biswas disappeared into the shop. Not many minutes later Mr. Biswas and the
> shopman reappeared. They were both smoking and excited. A boy came out
> of the shop partly hidden by the large doll's house he was carrying. The doll's
> house was placed on the handlebar of Mr. Biswas's cycle and, with Mr. Biswas
> on one side and the boy on the other, wheeled down the High Street.
> Every room of the doll's house was daintily furnished. The kitchen had a stove
> such as Mr. Biswas had never seen in real life, a safe and a sink. (206)

As we contemplate this scene, we realize that the narrator's eye remains, like a fixed

camera, outside the store. We don't know how or why Mr. Biswas chooses this

miniature house, but we are not surprised that he buys it. It has all the household

wonders and riches that Mr. Biswas has never enjoyed in real life and is thus a tiny

image of a vast ideal. However, as Naipaul's narration clearly shows, we remain on

the outside of this desire and this dream. We only watch Mr. Biswas from the street as

he disappears into the store and reappears with the dainty doll house. His dream is

otherwise closed to us. Yet, as we read "The kitchen had a stove such as Mr. Biswas

had never seen in real life," we sense some of the craving and pain of Mr. Biswas's

poverty.

After Savi's doll house is broken to pieces in Hanuman House so as not to

inspire jealousy of other children, it is described as a wounded body:
> And there, below the almost bare branches of the almond tree that grew in the
> next yard, he saw it, thrown against a dusty leaning fence made of wood and
> tin and corrugated iron. A broken door, a ruined window, a staved-in wall or
> even roof—he had expected that. But not this. The doll's house did not exist.
> He saw only a bundle of firewood. None of its parts was whole. Its delicate
> joints were exposed and useless. Below the torn skin of paint, still bright and
> still in parts imitating brick-work, the hacked and splintered wood was white
> and raw. (209)

The merciless obliteration of Savi's doll house astonishes Mr. Biswas: not because the

house is "broken," but because it no longer "exists." The insides of the house are

exposed by means of Naipaul's language: we are made to perceive the miniature as a

flayed body, turned inside out, whose interior organs are, through an act of

annihilation, revealed. At the same time, we become aware not of what this house

stands for but what it is: a miniature of Mr. Biswas himself, his body and dreams

exposed, and made irrelevant. Indirectly, it is also as if his own body were torn to

pieces: note for example the language—"the skin of paint," the "delicate joints," the

"raw" flesh under the skin. Yet Naipaul's language does not resort to similes; we are

not reading a metaphorical account in which the broken doll house is "like" Biswas's

body. Instead, the passage uses almost imperceptible and, in context, quite literal

images (joints of a little structure, raw wood, skin of paint) to suggest, somewhere on

the periphery of our perception, that the miniature house is Mr. Biswas, or that Mr.

Biswas is this and any other ruined house. As he runs back inside to find the culprit

for this act of demolition, Mr. Biswas is similarly hurt: "The edge of a wall scraped

against his shoulder, tearing his shirt and tearing the skin below." (209) It is clear that

we are not dealing here with a mere conceptual substitution based on some essential

similarity as would be the case with similes, metaphors, or even allegories, but with

the most disturbing form of identity between Mr. Biswas and the house. Since the

house cannot really be built or preserved, neither can Mr. Biswas.[44]

    After the doll house episode, Mr. Biswas only sinks deeper into the void,

which seems to accompany, like a shadow, his dream of fullness: "The future he

feared was upon him. He was falling into the void, and that terror, known only in

dreams, was with him as he lay awake at nights, hearing the snores and creaks and the

occasional cries of babies from the other rooms." (217) Mr. Biswas's anguish is

always intensified by the presence of other people, the sounds of human life just

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[44] It is interesting to note that the initially useless, beautiful dream-object such as the doll house
becomes in this passage a properly useful one: a bundle of firewood. The impossibility for aimless
beauty or sheer fantasy to exist in Mr. Biswas's world, the fact that his world is always filled with and
reduced to the plain materiality of different "bundles of firewood" is part of this book's tragedy.

beyond the wall of his room, the multitude that threatens with its anonymity, but also with its equally "unaccommodated" humanity. What Mr. Biswas fears most is the fact that he is like all the other lost and forgotten people, that he is invisible in a vague undifferentiated crowd. The house is a space that stands in opposition to this drowning in the multitude and nowhereness of his small existence: "The sounds from the barracks were assertive and isolated one from the other: snatches of talk, the sound of frying, a shout, the cry of a child: sounds thrown up at the starlit sky from a place that was nowhere, a dot on the map of the island, which was a dot on the map of the world. The dead trees ringed the barracks, a wall of flawless black. He locked himself in his room." (227) This contrast between the locked room and the immensity of a starlit sky is precisely the contrast between miniature and immensity that Gaston Bachelard works with, but the difference is clear. While Bachelard celebrates the productive potential of complementary dualities, Naipaul traces his protagonist's anguish at their mutually threatening tension. When the miniature house reappears again, it is a distant vision from the window of a moving bus that takes Mr. Biswas to Port of Spain:

> He fixed his eyes on a house, as small and as neat as a doll's house, on the distant hills of the Northern Range; and as the bus moved north, he allowed himself to be puzzled that the house didn't grow any bigger, and to wonder, as a child might, whether the bus would eventually come to that house. (296)

Although this image echoes the earlier hut glimpsed from the bus, this time around, Mr. Biswas is puzzled that the image never comes any closer to him. The permanent smallness of the house in the distance, at which Mr. Biswas wonders "as a child might," clearly reasserts the dominance of a small unattainable dream of sheltered life and clear destination which can never be reached and remain on that horizon which Mr. Biswas cannot approach.

In opposition to the imagined and longed-for space, Naipaul constructs the reality of its absence. When Mr. Biswas scrounges some money and invests in his

first built house, the scarcity of his means translates into a gradual reduction of his dream: colored glass panes become coarse wooden boards; concrete pillars are forgotten in favor of rough crapaud pillars. The modest dream of a neat little house diminishes step by step and, with anxiety, we watch it dissipate as if we were observing Mr. Biswas's own disintegration. We know that the house is intimately linked to his sense of self and to his sanity. Mr. Biswas's mental breakdown is profoundly linked to space, i.e. we witness the spatialization of the diseased mind.[45] Since Mr. Biswas's sanity depends on the house, which cannot be built, his failure translates into his slow personal disintegration through mental and physical illness.[46] This sustained figure of ailment serves, according to Meenakshi Bharat, as "the means of tracing power struggles within a developing social culture, and for chalking out the history of a society in the midst of change in the context of the alienating forces of colonization and the dislocating ones of diasporic movement and exile." (67)[47] Bharat's argument, however, quickly substitutes literary details with broader claims about colonial and postcolonial history. Instead of Bachelard's miniatures that contain immensity, we constantly get immensities that are neatly exemplified in details. The distinction may seem slight, but crucial if we are to respect and preserve the specificity of a literary text. Otherwise, the novel becomes a perfect sourcebook of identifiable and pre-established conceptual categories. I would suggest instead that malady in *A House for Mr. Biswas* reflects a complicated and constantly reversible and reversed relationship between the psychological inside and spatial outside in this novel.

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[45] A similar spatialization of feeling can be found in Polanski's *The Tenant*, Cronenberg's *Spider* or Rilke's *Malte Laurids Brigge*. Also, even more importantly, in Freud's essays "Note on the Mystic Writing Pad" and "The Uncanny". In all of these examples the psychic space spills out into the architectural and urban spaces so that we observe the "outside" setting as if it were the inside of one's mind. Most texts that feature and rely upon architectural space proceed in this manner, i.e. through an interesting inside-out reversal.

[46] Bharat, Meenakshi, "Colonial Maladies, Postcolonial Cures? 'Sick' Politics in *A House for Mr. Biswas.*" *V.S. Naipaul: An Anthology of Recent Criticism*, ed. Purabi Panwar, Pencraft International, 2003.

[47] Bharat, Meenakshi, "Colonial Maladies."

6.   The void

The void that Naipaul constantly evokes finally materializes in the text. It is initially perceived as a solid structure of its own—a black wall—which encloses Mr. Biswas:

> The sounds from the barracks were assertive and isolated one from the other: snatches of talk, the sound of frying, a shout, the cry of a child: sounds thrown up at the starlit sky from a place that was nowhere, a dot on the map of the island, which was a dot on the map of the world. The dead trees ringed the barracks, a wall of flawless black.
> He locked himself in the room. (227)

Already locked up in the tight darkness of his solitude and aware only of fragmented traces of human existence, which reach him as disembodied sounds, Mr. Biswas makes his usual futile gesture: he locks himself inside his barrack room, in which he is, paradoxically, exposed to his anguish. The prison-like shape of the dark void—the barrack yard surrounded by the ominous dead trees—only pushes him further into his solitary confinement. His diminishing perception is only exacerbated by the starlit sky, whose immensity crushes the dot of the island, on which his barrack house is yet a smaller, more insignificant speck. Whether or not Naipaul's choice of words (dot) refers to a comment attributed to Charles de Gaulle who, on his 1964 visit to the Caribbean, described the islands seen from the plane as "specks of dust," Mr. Biswas's anguish about the scale of the world takes him a step closer to the complete annihilation of his sanity. In response, he reasons that unless he can build his own house, "nothing would arrest his descent into the void," (227) and sets out to fulfill his dream. Soon however, he runs out of money, gradually gives up on all the small "luxuries" he had hoped for and ends up inhabiting "the skeleton of the house," which he has no means to finish, and which—cheaply made—begins to disintegrate almost as quickly as it is built. (246)

One night, during a terrible storm, Mr. Biswas's half-built house finally gives way. The corrugated iron sheets that serve as a roof fly off and the torrential rain suddenly bursts into the fragile structure. This fragility and half-built quality refer interchangeably to the house and to Mr. Biswas himself as the two become more clearly synonymous. As a consequence, the destruction of the house amounts to the annihilation of any interiority, material or psychological:

> A shaking on the roof, a groan, a prolonged grinding noise, and Anand knew that a sheet of corrugated iron had been torn off. One sheet was left loose. It flapped and jangled continuously. Anand waited for the fall of the sheet that had been blown off.
> He never heard it.
> Lightning; thunder; the rain on the roof and walls; the loose iron sheet; the wind pushing against the house, pausing, and pushing again.
> Then there was a roar that overrode them all. When it struck the house the window burst open, the lamp went instantly out, the rain lashed in, the lightning lit up the room and the world outside, and when the lightning went out the room was part of the black void.
> Anand began to scream.
> He waited for his father to say something, to close the window, light the lamp. But Mr. Biswas only muttered on the bed, and the rain and wind swept through the room with unnecessary strength and forced open the door to the drawingroom, wall-less, floorless, of the house Mr. Biswas had built. (278-9)

The increasingly fragmented narration, more focalized on Anand than on Mr. Biswas, allows us to perceive the horror of a "wall-less, floorless" house. The lightning offers us occasional glimpses of an insane muttering man reduced, along with his house, to being a "speck in the center" (255) of the void. This scene emphasizes the permeability of the interior, its fragile and unprotected exposure to the raging elements. By unleashing the dark almost biblical flood, Naipaul subtly reveals Mr. Biswas's anguish and fatigue. As the dream of a neat colorful house gets swallowed by the infinite darkness of the storm, Mr. Biswas himself becomes the "wall-less, floorless" house through which the wind can sweep with "unnecessary" force. In this scene, Mr. Biswas's mental collapse comes as a result of a demolished dream in a demolished house. Identity, its imaginary locus and material space are thus woven

into a single entity and we can no longer extricate them. To speak of Mr. Biswas is to speak of the house, while the house becomes an urgent imagined answer to his fear of nothingness. None of these elements can merely symbolize. They are not substitutes for broader questions; they *are* themselves the broader question—about the nature and effects of destitution, understood etymologically, as I suggested earlier, as being outside and being forsaken. Both conditions become visible in the storm scene.

How does Mr. Biswas respond to the void, i.e. the empty space opened up by the absent house? In the chapter I had focused on so far, he initially does so by deliberately constructing pointless descriptions of his condition. The emphasis falls on "complete sentences", i.e. the linguistic control over psychological chaos and material limitations that trigger it:

> Slowly and carefully, like his actions the night before, his thoughts came, and he framed each thought in a complete sentence. He thought: 'The bed is a mess. Therefore I slept badly. I must have been afraid all through the night. Therefore the fear is still with me.' (255)

The completeness of Mr. Biswas's sentences represents his desperate attempt to give shape and logic to the overwhelming panic that threatens to destroy him. The anguish he experiences in the barracks arises, on the one hand, from his fear of blending in and disappearing in the crowd (or alternately, in the darkness of nature), and on the other hand, from being completely and alarmingly separate from himself: "his mind had become quite separate from the rest of himself" (254). Similarly, he paints signs for his walls filling them with words of wisdom; or he pastes newspapers on the wall and focuses on random stories he reads there to find reassuring bits of someone else's reported reality. Interestingly, the walls of his room are thus built out of words and he derives some comfort from narrative structures that counter the void by producing meanings, no matter how random or incomplete.

7.   Mr. Biswas among the Deserving Destees

When Mr. Biswas's gets a job as a journalist with the *Sentinel*, he excels in writing much appreciated sensational stories and is finally able to give expression "to the facetiousness that came to him as soon as he put pen to paper." (310) His exaggerated or completely invented "news" give voice to the fantasy, his one means of detaching himself from the unbearable reality of his material limitations. The editor-in-chief, Mr. Burnett is the first person to support and admire Mr. Biswas's way with words. The increased sales of the *Sentinel* attest to the general merriment and curiosity with respect to Mr. Biswas's dark humorous reports about the Bonny Baby Competition (about a dead white baby found on the rubbish dump) or the U.S. explorer's last journey on ice, entitled "Daddy comes home in a coffin." When Mr. Burnett loses his job and the *Sentinel* undergoes a general clean-up, moving from the sensational and offensive to the serious and prudish reporting, Mr. Biswas is appointed investigator for the Deserving Destitutes Fund, which is meant to boost the journal's suddenly dropping sales. Mr. Biswas's duty is to

> read the applications from destitutes, reject the undeserving, visit the others to see how deserving or desperate they were, and then, if circumstances warranted it, to write harrowing accounts of their plight, harrowing enough to encourage contributions for the fund. He had to find one deserving destitute a day. (423)

In this "beauty pageant" for the poor, Mr. Biswas faces all the chilling irony of his condition: although he can barely make ends meet, he appears to the poor contestants as the member of an elite invested with the power to evaluate whether their poverty is convincing and noteworthy. In reality, he is one of them: "'Deserving Destitute number one,' he told Shama. 'M. Biswas. Occupation: investigator of Deserving Destitutes.'" (424) In order to diminish the dread that abject poverty inspires in him, Mr. Biswas calls his destitute "Destees." This irreverent transformation of the word suggests the actor-recipient relationship implicit in the condition of being

dispossessed. If there are "Destees" who are made to receive poverty as their status, then we can imagine their counterpoint in the world of "Destitutors" who provide poverty in the same way that an advisor would give guidance to his advisee. Unfortunately, Mr. Biswas is in some way expelled from both of these roles: he is neither destitute enough nor privileged enough and thus vanishes between the cracks, "null and unprotected" yet again. In Mr. Biswas's world, even poverty is something to be measured, rated, sold or invested in. The description of the poor offers almost no respite from accumulating images of squalor and hopelessness:

> Day after day he visited the mutilated, the defeated, the futile and the insane living in conditions not far removed from his own: in suffocating rotting wooden kennels, in sheds of box-board, canvas and tin, in dark and sweating concrete caverns. Day after day he visited the eastern sections of the city where the narrow houses pressed their scabbed and blistered façades together and hid the horrors that lay behind them: the constricted, undrained backyards, coated with green slime, in the perpetual shadow of adjacent houses and the tall rubble-stone fences against which additional sheds had been built: yards choked with flimsy cooking sheds, crowded fowl-coops of wire-netting, bleaching stones spread with sour washing: smell upon smell, but none overcoming the stench of cesspits and overloaded septic tanks: horror increased by the litters of children, most of them illegitimate, with navels projecting inches out of their bellies, as though they had been delivered with haste and disgust. [...] Day after day he came upon people so broken, so listless, it would have required the devotion of a lifetime to restore them. But he could only lift his trouser turn-ups, pick his way through mud and slime, investigate, write, move on. (424)

Mr. Biswas's impression of the destitute focuses on their living conditions: the confined and forgotten spaces of their slimy yards, airless rooms and hopeless debasement. Their children are described as animals, in "litters," while their houses are filled with stench and illness. In this context, the destitute are clearly those who were forgotten, left to survive or die on their own. Even in the birth of destitute children, Mr. Biswas recognizes "haste and disgust," as if from the very start, these children were selected for exclusion and left unaccommodated. In these terrifying

conditions, Mr. Biswas recognizes his own predicament even though it is entirely hidden by his make-believe position of power.

During this time, American military bases are established in Trinidad, "something called Coca-Cola" (321) arrives with them, and the sense of the larger, more prosperous world (despite or thanks to the WWII) imposes a strange and shifting hierarchy on the island. Mr. Biswas begins to threaten Shama with becoming "a labourer with the Americans" (421), an occupation which seems more appealing than being a journalist for the local population. What emerges is a terrible hierarchy, not only among ordinary people who compete to be either at the top or at the bottom of the ladder (even if it's just poverty they excel in), but also among nations whose relative power dictates their position in the similar kind of global competition. On any established grid however, Mr. Biswas always loses: he does not make enough money to be independent nor has he sunk so low as to impress the charity donor on whose behalf he conducts his investigations. The paradox is disturbing: a destitute man does not qualify to be "rewarded" for his poverty unless his destitution is successfully performed.

Over time, Mr. Biswas learns to distinguish between real and make-belief Destees and acquires—he thinks—a flair for genuine poverty. He knows however that the *Sentinel* will honor only the applications of those poor who will receive the award with "groveling gratitude" (425)—the defiant destitutes do not qualify. In other words, as he parades around the slum judging peoples' misery or running for his life aware that the poor might take their revenge on him—he represents privilege because of his title and the clothes he wears—Mr. Biswas becomes conscious of the ways in which poverty is performed, ignored or abused. It is not certain what is worse: the poor who stalk and threaten him in order to get a coin or two, or the privileged who wish to remedy their own sense of guilt or make money from the pageant of the poor.

When in the end Mr. Biswas has to deal with his deaf relative's claim to the prize and sits in a dark squalid room diagnosing his own family's right to being destitute in a deserving way, he experiences the terror of abject poverty. And horrified by its reality, he runs back to his house to destroy his attempts at fiction writing: "He took the stories to the lavatory in the yard and stayed there for some time, creating a din of his own, pulling the chain again and again." (435) Confronted with daily misery of the people he can neither help nor ignore, Mr. Biswas turns against his own fiction, flushing it down the toilet like excrement. In the incommensurable oscillation between the actual and the imagined, Mr. Biswas's world suffers from too much reality. In its excess, this reality threatens to annul the power of the imaginary to restore some meaning to Mr. Biswas's quotidian frustrations. We realize that Mr. Biswas will really be defeated by his circumstances when he loses "the vision of the house" (474) and the ability to poke fun at daily tragedies, like he used to do in his sensational newspaper reports. But for as long as he can visualize and narrate his fictions, Mr. Biswas is still living. His defiantly humorous stories and his unrelenting dream-house seem to be his only anchor.

8. Expression and conceptual exteriority

Mr. Biswas's fundamental dependence on language gives us a way of understanding the complex correlation between the linguistic and architectural structures that dominate *A House for Mr. Biswas*. Although Mr. Biswas is a product of an abstract colonial education, he continually strives to oppose the void of his existence with various form-giving narratives.[48] From the very beginning, however, his learning is discontinuous from and unrelated to the context in which it takes place. Mr. Biswas reads, memorizes and repeats information from which his daily life is

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[48] See A.C. Derrick, "Naipaul's technique as a novelist." *Critical Perspectives on V.S. Naipaul*, ed. Robert D. Hamner, Washington, DC: Three Continents Press, 1977.

disconnected. Moreover, this kind of knowledge consists in amassing facts that exist

separately from one another, unmotivated, unexplained:

> Mr. Biswas was taught other things. He learned to say the Lord's Prayer in
> Hindi from the *King George V Hindi Reader*, and he learned many English
> poems by heart from the *Royal Reader*. At Lal's dictation he made copious
> notes, which he never seriously believed, about geysers, rift valleys,
> watersheds, currents, the Gulf Stream, and a number of deserts. He learned
> about oases, which Lal taught him to pronounce 'osis', and ever afterwards an
> oasis meant for him nothing more than four or five date trees around a narrow
> pool of fresh water, surrounded for unending miles by white sand and hot sun.
> He learned about igloos. In arithmetic he got as far as simple interest and
> learned to turn dollars and cents into pounds, shilling and pence. The history
> Lal taught he regarded as simply a school subject, a discipline, as unreal as the
> geography [...] (44-45)

This kind of education relies on mindless repetition (Mr. Biswas and his class-mates

often chant their lessons) and on a kind of fantasy that turns presumably useful factual

information into static images, such as Mr. Biswas's oasis with a pool of water and

date trees, which evoke yet again the simple outlines of a child's drawing. Such an

oasis is a fictional haven and a mirage of Mr. Biswas's desert-like existence.

Acquired knowledge is thus transformed into a disembodied exercise in repetition and

because it lacks concrete, perceptual grounding, it ends up hindering a different, more

accurate knowledge of oneself and of the living environment. The more Mr. Biswas

learns to repeat partially understood facts and ideas, the less does he see and

understand his immediate setting. When, later on in life, he attempts to write a short-

story, befittingly titled "Escape," he writes a single opening sentence: "At the age of

thirty-three, when he was already the father of four children..." (330) and keeps

repeating it, unable to move beyond the same opening and various standardized

romantic plots about "untouched barren heroines" derived from the novels Mr. Biswas

had read and the films he had seen:

> None of these stories was finished, and their theme was always the same. The
> hero, trapped into marriage, burdened with a family, his youth gone, meets a
> young girl. She is slim, almost thin, and dressed in white. She is fresh,

tender, unkissed; and she is unable to bear children. Beyond the meeting the stories never went. (330)

Mr. Biswas's incapacity to finish the story beyond its repetitive beginnings matches a similar static quality that characterizes his life. His sense of permanent out-of-placeness pushes him towards repetitive and futile actions. Yet, like in the case of Biswas's literary predecessor Joseph Grand in Albert Camus's *The Plague* (1947), whose perfect novel consists of a single opening sentence endlessly repeated, this obsessive focus on writing is also an attempt at meaning as a form of survival, to which I will return later. It is also, in both cases, a provisional grounding in the midst of chaos and despair.

Still, the only thing that gives Mr. Biswas real satisfaction in the last months of his life is the badly mortgaged "ownership" of the house on Sikkim Street:

> He thought of the house as his own, though for years it had been irretrievably mortgaged. And during these months of illness and despair he was struck again and again by the wonder of being in his own house, the audacity of it: to walk through his own front gate, to bar entry to whoever he wished, to close his doors and windows every night, to hear no noises except those of his family, to wander freely from room to room and about his yard, instead of being condemned, as before, to retire the moment he got home to the crowded room in one or the other of Mrs. Tulsi's houses, crowded with Shama's sisters, their husbands, their children. [...] And now at the end he found himself in his own house, on his own half-lot of land, his own portion of the earth. That he should have been responsible for this seemed to him, in these last months, stupendous. (6)

Mr. Biswas sees his house as his greatest achievement, almost an act of defiance. This house, as a dream space of independence and separation from the threatening or half-understood environment becomes clearer if we turn, for example, to V.S. Naipaul's autobiographical essay "Reading and Writing,"[49] where he addresses the intimate connection between material destitution and writing as an attempt to remedy it by means of fiction. Naipaul explains that the idea of becoming a writer was to him

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[49] Naipaul, V.S., "Reading and Writing." *Literary Occasions: Essays*, New York, Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003. pp. 3-31.

> [...] less a true ambition than a form of self-esteem, a dream of release, an idea
> of nobility. My life, and the life of our section of our extended family, had
> always been unsettled. My father, though not an orphan, had been a kind of
> waif since his childhood; and we had always been half dependent. As a
> journalist my father was poorly paid, and for some years we had been quite
> wretched, with no proper place to live. At school I was a bright boy; on the
> street, where we still held ourselves apart, I felt ashamed of our condition.
> Even after that bad time had passed, and we had moved, I was eaten up with
> anxiety. It was the emotion I felt I had always known. (12)

Combining his own experience of poverty with his father's situation, Naipaul again

reflects on the state of separation from others (from the street) induced by the

profound feelings of shame and anxiety born of destitution. To this, for both himself

and his father, he opposes the "nobility" of writing and its promise of release. I

understand this release to signify a form of liberation from the confinement and

humiliation of poverty. A writer's calling with its dream of handling and controlling

the imaginary serves as a response to the material limitations of daily life. It's another

escape, reminiscent of the title of Mr. Biswas's unfinished short stories. In Mr.

Biswas's case, the last house acquires an additional meaning: it serves to shut out the

world he is unable to understand and in which he feels like an alien. The doors, the

gate and the rooms are his closed spaces of security, his shelter. The outside world, on

the other hand, is hostile, incongruous and only half-perceived. Ill and dying, the

comfort Mr. Biswas derives from his house is the comfort of a tomb. A final place

where he can rest and from which he will never again be moved.

9. The fictional response and the response of fiction

Yet before he settles in this mortgaged and dangerously unsteady house on

Sikkim street in order to die in it, Mr. Biswas finds in language a defiant response to

being made continuously irrelevant and exterior. During his lonely stay in Green

Vale, which precipitates his mental breakdown, Mr. Biswas lives in a dismal barrack

whose walls are covered with discarded newspapers and allow him to discover,

ironically, the exciting world of news coverage. To this curious wall-paper, he will only keep adding:

> Mr. Biswas, as a driver, was given an end room. The back window had been nailed shut by the previous tenant and plastered over with newspaper. Its position could only be guessed at, since newspaper covered the walls from top to bottom. This had obviously been the work of a literate. No sheet was placed upside down, and Mr. Biswas found himself continuously exposed to the journalism of his time, its bounce and excitement bottled and made quaint in these old newspapers. (198)

In a room with no window or view, the newspapers plastered on the wall literally become Mr. Biswas's connection with the outside world. Random snippets of news and spectacular events, together with randomly chosen books, furnish his otherwise empty life with a sense of possibility: "Mr. Biswas yearned after the outside world; he read novels that took him there [...]." (198) At the same time, the yearning for the outside is always accompanied by an increasing fear of exteriority, which will end in Mr. Biswas's already mentioned mental breakdown during the storm. The flattening of the outside arises directly out of the obliterated inside. We face again the indissoluble dependence of these two categories, whether they be architectural, psychological or linguistic.

From his four-poster bed, Mr. Biswas reads and soon memorizes all of the stories that cover his walls. One opening line in particular holds his attention: "Amazing scenes were witnessed yesterday when." We can imagine that the rest is missing since in plastering the wall, the previous occupant of the barrack room must have sacrificed some of the content to the practical logic of the wall-paper.[50] Yet, after Mr. Biswas's breakdown, the familiar phrase returns in the chapter entitled "Amazing scenes." Mr. Biswas is now in Port of Spain, testing again the power of the

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[50] It would be interesting to read this passage as an overt reference to Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper". In many ways, Mr. Biswas's mental breakdown resembles that of Gilman's protagonist (at the time, Gilman herself was diagnosed with "nervous prostration"!), produced by and projected upon the confined architectural space.

outside world to frighten (292). With a vague idea that he can write for a newspaper and remembering his two familiar lines "Amazing scenes were witnessed yesterday when...Passers-by stopped and stared yesterday when...," Mr. Biswas walks into the offices of *The Sentinel*. What follows here is one of the most hilarious scenes in the entire novel, in which Naipaul's dark laughter reaches its peak:

> He turned down a lane, pushed open a door on the right, and then another. The noise of machinery was louder. An important, urgent noise, but it did not intimidate him. He said to the mad behind the high caged desk, 'I want to see the editor.'
> *Amazing scenes were witnessed in St Vincent Street yesterday when Mohun Biswas, 31...*
> 'You got an appointment?'
> *... assaulted a receptionist.*
> 'No,' Mr. Biswas said irritably.
> *In an interview with our reporter... In an interview with our special correspondent late last night Mr. Biswas said...*
> 'The editor is busy. You better go and see Mr. Woodward.'
> 'You just tell the editor I come all the way from the country to see him.'
> *Amazing scenes were witnessed in St Vincent Street yesterday when Biswas, 31, unemployed, of no fixed address, assaulted a receptionist at the offices of the TRINIDAD SENTINEL. People ducked behind desks as Biswas, father of four, walked into the building with guns blazing, shot the editor and four reporters dead, and then set fire to the building. Passers-by stopped and stared as the flames rose high, fanned by a strong breeze. Several tons of paper were destroyed and the building itself gutted. In an exclusive interview with our special correspondent late last night Mr. Biswas said...*
> 'This way,' the receptionist said [...]. (306-7)

In his fear of the bustling world of the big city and of the newspaper, Mr. Biswas fictionalizes his pending meeting with the editor. By juxtaposing comical and exaggerated versions of reality to the humiliating experience of asking for a job, Mr. Biswas endows his experience with grandeur of an event. Imagining such a bold and dramatic response to the receptionist's coldness, Mr. Biswas succeeds in feeling like he is in control of the situation and can modify or direct it as he chooses. If nothing else, he at least has the power to imagine a humorous and mocking alternative to the real event. In this sense, his mental texts are liberating: they provide that powerful

often assaults the receptionist who is guarding, as the reviewers contributions show, the standards of propriety. But as Homi Bhabha points out:

> Having been handed one of history's stiffest sentences, Naipaul's memorable characters serve their time with wit and style and wisdom. Dreaming and talking their way through their anxieties and alienations, they move toward a life that is radically incomplete and yet intricately communitarian. Noisy with stories, garrulous with grotesquerie, gossip, humor aspirations, fantasies— these are figures that signify a culture of survival that emerges strongly from the darker side of the colonial condition. When Naipaul's defiant creatures interrupt his melancholy mastery, he deserves our thanks for courageously stepping aside and letting these carnivalesque cosmopolitans take over the serious business of life, laughter, and literature.

From this imprisoned culture of survival born out of "the darker side of the colonial condition," one cannot and should not expect polite norms of either language or opinion. Instead, in the carnivalesque Mr. Biswas and consequently in Naipaul himself, there is a provocative defiance: in exaggerating the statement, these figures push against the established norms and silently confront us with a question: where did we derive our authority from? As Mr. Biswas remarks to himself, "The ordinary man cannot be expected to know the meaning of 'No Admittance.'" (309) And if he does, he refuses to admit it.

Chapter 3: MOSAIC

Squatters[1] in the Cathedral of the Written Word: Patrick Chamoiseau's *Texaco*

...il y avait mille guerres à mener pour seulement exister.

Patrick Chamoiseau, *Texaco*

Spatial images are the dreams of society. Wherever the hieroglyphics of any spatial image are deciphered, there the basis of social reality presents itself.

Siegfried Kracauer, "Rethinking Architecture"

Mais la pensée s'espace réellement au monde.

Edouard Glissant, *Poétique de la relation*

Squatter

1.   a. U.S. and early Austral. A settler having no formal or legal title to the land occupied by him, esp. one thus occupying land in a district not yet surveyed or apportioned by the government.

b. An unauthorized occupant of land.

c. One who occupies an uninhabited building illegally (esp. as a member of an organized group).

Oxford English Dictionary

1.   "A question to be lived"

Patrick Chamoiseau's *Texaco* (1992) chronicles the life of a squatter community in the slum of Texaco located at the edge of Martinique's capital, Fort-de-France. The novel opens with the arrival of the urban planner nick-named Christ, sent by the city authorities to inspect the neighborhood of Texaco and pronounce it insalubrious. The plan has been made to relocate its inhabitants and raze the slum. In the interest of progess, a new road, ironically named "La Pénétrante Ouest," will replace the impoverished neighborhood. However, as soon as he sets foot in the slum, Christ receives a stone in the head, falls down half-conscious and is taken to Marie-Sophie Laborieux, the novel's central protagonist and storyteller. As Texaco's founder, she faces the task of convincing Christ not to endorse the demolition plan. Following in the tradition of *One Thoursand and One Nights*, Marie-Sophie changes

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[1] For prompting me to think about the word "squatter" with respect to *Texaco*, I am indebted to Jacques Coursil's discussion of this novel on http://www.potomitan.info/travaux/muette.htm, 22 August 2008.

Christ's mind and turns him into an ally by telling him the story of Texaco's genesis. Chamoiseau gestures here towards a cross-cultural genealogy of the spoken word and builds his story around an implied invocation of Scheherazade's narrative resistance and survival. Marie-Sophie's tale ironizes, however, the filiations and sequencing of world history (including the literary one) even as it takes Christ and the reader not only through the stages of Texaco itself but through a large portion of Martinican colonial history. Traditionally, the world-changing shifts should probably include the Stone Age, Bronze Age, and Iron Age to be followed by all kinds of other important ages, marked by the systems of writing, which give rise to "civilization," itself periodized as Antiquity, the Middle-Ages, Renaissance, the Age of Enlightenment etc. Chamoiseau re-writes this familiar order of the world history by placing Texaco in its center and establishing a historical sequence of ages based on the revolution in Texaco's building materials from the Age of Straw and Crate Wood to the Age of Asbestos and Concrete. Not only is the history of the world different depending on where one identifies its center, but the large world-changing events are replaced by the "small" shifts in the life of the squatter community. Instead of following the monumental narrative of biblical proportions, Chamoiseau focuses on a very "small" Christ, our stone-stricken urban planner, and a slum neighborhood whose life claims a right to its historical stages and its historical record. By re-writing the world history from the perspective of a slum community, Chamoiseau critiques the structure of selective inclusions and systematic exclusions that have traditionally silenced the "small" local concerns of marginalized communities in favor of the grand historical narratives of progress, civilization and conquest.

By weaving together the question of material location and settlement with historical memory and its narrative representation, Chamoiseau explores the relationship between the real and imaginary dimensions of communal survival in both

space and language. This double question of survival—simultaneously linguistic and spatial—is, as Glissant points out, already contained in the world of plantation slavery, which gives the Caribbean culture its initial shape:

> L'acte de survie. Dans l'univers muet de la Plantation, l'expression orale, la seule possible pour les esclaves, s'organise de manière non continue. [...] La littérature orale des Plantations s'apparente [...] aux autres techniques de subsistance—de survie—mises en place par les esclaves et leurs descendants immédiats. L'obligation de contourner la loi du silence fait partout d'elle une littérature qui ne se continue pas avec naturalité, si on peut ainsi dire, mais qui jaillit par fragments arrachés. Le conteur est un djobeur de l'âme collective. (82-3)[2]

> An act of survival. In the silent universe of the Plantation, oral expression, the only form possible for the slaves, was discontinuously organized. [...] The oral literature of the Plantation is [...] akin to other subsistence—survival—techniques set in place by the slaves and their immediate descendants. Everywhere that the obligation to get around the rule of silence existed a literature was created that has no "natural" continuity, if one may put it that way, but rather, bursts forth in snatches and fragments. The storyteller is a handyman, the djobbeur of the collective soul. (68-9)[3]

The enclosed, regulated and silenced space of the plantation necessitates in turn what Glissant considers to be a linguistic opening or a kind of narrative survival. The liberatory voice of the storyteller breaks down the boundary of confined spaces and allows for discontinuous, but persistent flights beyond the imposed limit. It is in the context of the plantation that, as Glissant points out, a particular kind of stubborn humanity perseveres:

> [...] la Plantation est un des lieux focaux où se sont élaborés quelques-uns des modes actuels de la Relation. Dans cet univers de domination et d'oppression, de déshumanisation sourde ou déclarée, des humanités se sont puissamment obstinées." (79)

> [...] the Plantation is one of the focal points for the development of present-day modes of Relation. Within this universe of domination and oppression, of silent or professed dehumanization, forms of humanity stubbornly persisted. (65)

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[2] Glissant, Edouard, *Poétique de la relation*. Gallimard, 1990.
[3] Glissant, Edouard, *Poetics of Relation*. Translated by Betsy Wing. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1997.

Glissant's notion of Relation is itself precisely this spilling or growth beyond the imposed boundary. Such stubborn trespassing of humanity testifies to its unstoppable will to live, which characterizes not only every culture but, more specifically, those cultures that have been threatened with extinction. The Creole culture finds its source of endurance in its spoken Creole language and the spaces marked by its logic.

In *Lettres créoles*, Chamoiseau and Confiant insist, following Glissant's lead, on the same intimate link between the spoken word and the spaces of plantation slavery, which suppress and, paradoxically, generate the new creole aesthetic:

> L'oraliture créole naît dans le système des plantations, tout à la fois dans et contre l'esclavage, dans une dynamique questionnante qui accepte et refuse. Elle semble être l'esthétique [...] du choc de nos consciences encore éparses et d'un monde habitationnaire où il fallait survivre (résister-exister pour les uns, dominer pour les autres). [...] L'interaction de cette contre-culture et de la culture coloniale dominante donnera naissance aux zones vives de la culture créole dont notre oraliture alors, en un movement-miroir, recèlera témoignages. (57)[4]

> Creole oraliture is born in the plantation system, simultaneously in and against slavery, in a questioning dynamic, which accepts and refuses. It appears to be an aesthetic [...] of shock between our still scattered consciences and the plantation world where one needed to survive (resist-exist for some, dominate for others). [...] The interaction between this counter-culture and the dominant colonial culture will give rise to living zones of the Creole culture of which our oraliture will then harbor testimonies. (my translation)

What emerges from this observation and remains crucial for Chamoiseau's literary contributions is the paradox of acceptance-refusal, a kind of dual movement in which the counter-culture, as it resists, also acknowledges and honors its origines in bondage and servitude. Seen from this perspective, Marie-Sophie's slum of Texaco is itself such a dual space—an echo of the plantation—insofar as it is limited and forgotten on the one hand, and generates, on the other hand, a rich Creole counter-culture in the "living zone" of the slum. Texaco embodies the fragmented structure of the oral story

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[4] Chamoiseau, Patrick and Confiant, Raphaël, *Lettres créoles: Tracées antillaises et continentales de la littérature*. Paris: Hatier, 1991.

and contests, in the process, the limitations of poverty and racial exclusion of the former slaves. The destitution and poverty of Texaco are thus shown to result from a long history of colonial domination, which is, in the course of the novel, acknowledged, contested and overcome by the narrative act.

In the absence of material comfort,[5] social status, or prospects, the Texaco community defends and eventually preserves the neighborhood and its location through the act of storytelling. Although Texaco is a slum—a site of poverty and deprivation—it is nonetheless impossible to call its community destitute. What the slum lacks in material means, it makes up for in the richly interwoven acts of storytelling. If, as I have shown in the previous chapter, "destitution" literally means to be placed outside and forsaken, then Chamoiseau's novel deals with protagonists who manage to own their story even as they remain disowned and illegitimate on the territory that they occupy. Material *spatial* destitution is thus confronted and reconfigured by the claim to rich *narrative* belonging. Is *Texaco* thus subsituting linguistic wealth for actual marginality? Is this substitution adequate or even conceivable? As I proceed to examine the uneasy tension between material deprivation and narrative abundance, I trace Chamoiseau's spatial critque of binary oppositions and his attempt to dissolve them by constructing an alternative reading of the cultural and class struggle in the postcolonial context. In an intrinsically dual structure of poverty and privilege, Chamoiseau's *Texaco* settles for neither pole. Instead, by examining the mutually constitutive relationship between community and location, Chamoiseau offers, I argue, a vision of *a third space*—the space of the narrative itself—to encompass, but not resolve, the very real problems of cultural and

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[5] See, for example, Marie-Sophie's bitterly humorous description of the absence of any sewage system in the Quarter of the Wretched in Fort-de-France and the horrible smell rising from the improvised holes dug close to the hutches. (page 271 in the original / page 212 in the English translation of *Texaco*).

economic inclusion and exclusion created by the history of colonialism. As a result, Texaco's spatiality is always dependent upon the threads of storytelling and reflects the patchwork structure of Marie-Sophie's and her father Esternome's[6] narration. Conversely, the slum is built of many huts that lean into one another, connected and discontinuous at the same time. The shape of the story is thus also the shape of the settlement.

As he re-interprets the history of Martinique and translates Marie-Sophie's story into new urban knowledge, Christ-the-Urban-Planner finally makes a clear distinction between the City and the Creole city: the old normative and colonial city has to be forgotten, he realizes, in favor of the Creole city, built painstakingly in the interstices of the pre-existing order, which had no space for the liberated slave population and was unwilling to cede it. For this reason, the Creole city is, in its very essence, as transformative and fluctuating as the story which records its contestatory genesis. Christ concludes that what the Creole city teaches him is "Creole urbanism," which requires not just renovation or restructuring of space, but also *a mutation of the spirit.*" (300/234, original emphsis)[7] This is the moment in which the third space of *Texaco* takes shape: the material concerns of urban planning and the narrative concerns of transmitting memory merge into a third notion, or third space, of spiritual transformation, which is both concrete and ideal. In *Texaco*, it is impossible to separate the story and space since geography itself appears to be narrative and the

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[6] "Esternome" is, for my purposes, an interesting name: it is composed of "ester," which is a likely version of the Latin word *exter, externus*—foreign, and *nome*—name. The version "ester" of this Latin root still exists in Italian in a word like *estero*—foreign (adj.) or abroad (n.). Marie-Sophie's father Esternome is then literally called "Foreign name"—whatever his "real" name would have been is thereby banished and made destitute by being silenced. The unnamed name then rises—like everything in Chamoiseau's novel—to the status of a name by appropriating the very terms which erase it. The same could be argued about Texaco, whose name is an appropriation of the petroleum company's name. The corporate representatives threaten to demolish Texaco, but Texaco survives through its power to reclaim the "foreign" name. The gesture of reclaiming—spatially and linguistically—is therefore central to the composition and interpretation of the entire novel.
[7] Chamoiseau, Patrick, *Texaco*. Folio/Editions Gallimard, 1992.

narration always inherently spatial. The recognition of their necessary merging and mutual dependence may be precisely what the Urban Planner means by "the mutation of the spirit."

As *Eloge de la créolité* already shows, Chamoiseau's et al. vision of the Creole cultural identity centers on the image of a mosaic, which reflects, he argues, "the open specificity" of the Caribbean world. This open specificity is conceived as a permanent question rather than a firm answer; it follows intuition and poetic knowledge rather than the certainty of "taxidermic" definitions:

> [...] nous disons qu'il faut l'aborder [la Créolité] comme *une question à vivre*, à vivre obstinément dans chaque lumière et chaque ombre de notre esprit. Vivre une question c'est déjà s'enrichir d'éléments dont la réponse ne dispose pas. Vivre la question de la Créolité, à la fois en totale liberté et en pleine vigilance, c'est enfin pénétrer insensiblement dans les vastitudes inconnues de sa réponse. (27)
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> [...] we say that it [Creoleness] ought to be approached as *a question to be lived*, to be lived obstinately in each light, in each shadow of our mind. To live a question is already to enrich oneself of elements besides the answer. To live the question of Creoleness, at once freely and prudently, is finally to penetrate insensibly the immense unknown vastitudes of its answer. (89)[8]

This notion of a living question, which constitutes the cultural and linguistic identity but also diversity of a particular place, is offered theoretically in *Eloge de la Créolité* and explored narratively in *Texaco*. Like Creoleness itself, the slum of Texaco becomes an urban puzzle for the city authorities: it represents a living question by which a living community resists the deadening verdicts of abstract and centralized power.

The mosaic structure of Creole Texaco challenges the monolithic and monolingual notion of urban order and, by extension, any order bent on regulating and silencing the concrete chaos of living.[9] By focusing on the relation between spatial

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[8] Bernabé, Jean, Chamoiseau, Patrick, Confiant, Rafael, *Eloge de la créolité/In Praise of Creolness*. Edition bilingue. Gallimard, 1993.

[9] This notion of a generative chaos is something that Chamoiseau takes from Glissant, whose definition of "le chaos-monde" posits the necessity of poetic deregulation, which contests all hierarchies but

marginality and narrative empowerment in *Texaco*, I wish to explore the potential for the narrative response to material destitution and regulatory impositions of power. Does such a narrative act ultimately fail as a gesture of utopian substitution, or is the hard reality of material dispossession always productively modified by the narrative and artisitic form? What is at stake, especially in postcolonial fiction, in pitting the real against the fictional and why are spatial images, such as the slum in *Texaco*, often the preferred means of examining this relationship?

2.   Infiltration, linguistic and spatial

Concerned with the encounter between the imaginary and the real—"le frottment du merveilleux et du réel" (415)[10]—Chamoiseau suggests that the real spaces we live in can first be read as a narrative and then preserved in it. According to *Texaco*'s main premise, the significance of a location lies in its legibility: the specific place is marked by the lives and languages which it holds and which in turn shape it.[11]

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preserves the non-normative logic of its own: "Le chaos-monde n'est désordre qu'à supposition d'un ordre que la poétique n'entend pas révéler à toute force (la poétique n'est pas une science) mais dont elle a pour ambition de préserver l'élan. [...] Le chaos-monde n'est ni fusion ni confusion : il ne reconnaît pas l'amalgame uniformisé—l'intégration vorace—ni le néant brouillon. Le chaos n'est pas « chaotique ». Mais son ordre caché ne suppose pas des hiérarchies, des précellences—des langues élues ni des peuples-princes. Le chaos-monde n'est pas un mécanisme, avec des clés. » (*Poétique de la Relation*, 108) (The *chaos-monde* is only disorder if one assumes there to be an order whose full force poetics is not prepared to reveal (poetics is not a science). [...] *Chaos-monde* is neither fusion nor confusion: it acknowledges neither the uniform blend—a ravenous integration—nor muddled nothingness. Chaos is not "chaotic." But its hidden order does not presuppose hierarchies or pre-cellences—neither of chosen languages nor of prince-nations. The chaos-monde is not a mechanism; it has no keys. (*Poetics of Relation*, 94))

[10] "[...] how rubbing the real with the magical ... has added to the ways of apprehending human truths." (324-5). (Chamoiseau, Patrick, *Texaco*. Trans. By Rose-Myriam Réjouis and Val Vinokurov. New York: Vintage International, 1998.) All subsequent translations are drawn from this edition. Describing his interest in the productive encounter between the imagined and the actual, Chamoiseau says: "Avoir le miroitement entre l'imaginaire et le réel, entre le merveilleux et le réaliste, entre le poétique et le prosaïque, ce sont des gammes de variation qui me sont précieuses." (McCusker, Maeve and Chamoiseau, Patrick, « De la problématique du territoire à la problématique du lieu : un entretien avec Patrick Chamoiseau ». *The French Review*, Vol. 73, No. 4, March 2000, p. 729) (A mirroring between the imaginary and the real, the marvelous and the realist, the poetic and the prosaic, these are the scales of variation which are precious to me.) (my translation)

[11] An examination of the urban environment as text can be found in a collection of essays on architecture and urban planning entitled *The Hieroglyphics of Space: Reading and experiencing the modern metropolis*. The first section of this collection bears the title "The Legible Metropolis." Here,

To read a specific place is then to engage in reading a history of a people and its collective memory, which unfolds in and is inscribed onto space. We thus encounter an attempt to speak the material world into existence[12] and to build, in turn, a neighborhood in language. The movement is double: on the one hand, the life of a community etches itself onto inhabited space so that one can read the location and "decipher" from the spatial image, as Kracauer suggests, its social reality. On the other hand, when a voice—like Marie-Sophie's—offers an oral history of a place, spatial reality is invested with communal memory and is actively spoken back into existence. In the course of this telling, we are called upon to read and reconstruct spatial realtions from the trajectory of the narrative.

Considered spatially, the slum of Texaco looms on the margins of the city, while the city derives its centrality from the existence and resistance of this margin.[13] The slum is an illegal, squatted area, which ironically appropriates the name and former territory of the petroleum company "Texaco," transforming it into the heart of

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for example, David Frisby suggests that the notion of the city as text persists in the understanding of architecture since at least the nineteenth century:

> In particular, the conception of the city as text rests upon a number of presuppositions. Amongst these is that the city possesses features of textuality—at the basic level, a potentially decipherable constellation of signs and symbols. In its most basic form, a language is presupposed, a system of hieroglyphics. The city as text presupposes a reader or readers. [...] the city as text presupposes legibility in principle. (18)

(David Frisby, "The metropolis as text: Otto Wagner and Vienna's 'Second Renaissance'" in *The Hieroglyphics of Space: Reading and experiencing the modern metropolis*, ed. Neil Leach, Routledge: London and New York, 2002)

If the notion of city space is often understood in terms of legibility of urban signs and symbols, the question of how space is created and operates in a literary text remains insufficiently elaborated. How do we read space not as a perceptual and experiential category but as a literary figure and sometimes even as a protagonist in a work of narrative fiction? This is certainly one of the questions that *Texaco* brings into focus.

[12] This may be the only time when Chamoiseau's ironic re-writing of some aspects of the Bible and its messianic trajectory, actually borrows from the biblical worldview to establish the spoken word as generative of the perceptible world. By the end of the novel, Texaco will be saved through the magical power of invocation of its name.

[13] Geographically amplified, the same problems define the relationship between the colonial periphery and its metropolitan center. Between France and Martinique for example, notwithstanding the fact that Martinique is today a French "Département d'outre-mer" (DOM) and since 1946 technically no longer a colony, there remains a hierarchical relationship based on precisely the notions of centrality and marginality of cultures and geographical locations.

suburban opposition to the capital, "l'En-ville." Yet, true to the principle of broken

binaries, Marie-Sophie describes l'En-ville also as a dream of liberation from the

countryside marked by plantation slavery and slave owners:

> Mais ce qui m'a sauvée, c'est de savoir très tôt que l'En-ville était là. L'En-ville, avec ses chances toutes neuves, marchandes des destinées sans cannes à sucre et sans békés. L'En-ville où les orteils n'ont pas couleur de boue. L'En-ville qui nous fascina tous. (47-8)

> But what saved me was to know early on that City was there. City, with its brand new chances and sugarcane-less and béké-less destinies for sale. City, the place where toes aren't the color of mud. City that fascinated us all. (33)

L'En-ville thus remains a utopia of genuine freedom: Marie-Sophie's father

Esternome—a carpenter and master-builder of hutches—along with many former

slaves emancipated in 1848, immediately abandons the plantation-ridden countryside

for the promise of autonomy and opportunity in l'En-ville. Initially, they dream of the

city of Saint-Pierre:

> La plupart des mulâtres et des nègres affranchis s'étaient garés en ville. Ils fuyaient les champs d'habitation, hostiles à toute semence qui ne soit pas békée. L'En-ville par contre était offert aux vents du monde. Un côté pour envolées nouvelles. Dire En-ville en ce temps-là, c'était dire: Saint-Pierre. (89)

> Most of the mulattoes and black affranchis had parked themselves in town. They were fleeing the plantation fields which were hostile to any seed other than the Béké's. City on the other hand was open to the winds of the world. A place for new flights. To speak of City at that time was to speak of Saint-Pierre. (66)

When in 1902, the eruption of Mount Pelée completely destroys Saint-Pierre, it is

Fort-de-France that becomes the final destination for the unhoused enthusiasm of the

freed Afro-Martinican population. Very quickly, however, the enchantment of

freedom is revealed to contain a grain of future misery: the liberated slaves are now in

search of employment, working in factories, discovering the trap of their economic

dependence. Although they are no longer anyone's property, their lives are now

indirectly ruled by the logic of wage labor and job opportunities and thus still

mortgaged to the Békés. The abolition of slavery is, in other words, not the abolition of economic servitude: "lestravay" of plantation slavery is now replaced by the poorly remunerated work in the factory. The pyramidal power structure of the plantation, with the Békés on top,[14] continues to shape the post-abolition Martinique. Descending from the hills ("les mornes") around Saint-Pierre, the former slaves and maroons discover that they are being replaced by a new work force, brought from elsewhere—the Chinese, Indians (koulis), and Africans (congos)—as the Békés send abroad "for other models of slave" (179/138). Meanwhile, the former slaves face a new kind of threat—the threat of poverty—in a land they still cannot own despite the fact that they have first made it prosperous through their labor and are now officially freed to claim it: "On survivait oui, libre oui, mais bien vite se pointait l'arrière-goût d'une misère. C'est l'amertume d'une terre dont les promesses s'envolent." (181) (Sure, one survived, sure, one was free, but the aftertaste of misery was rising quickly. It was the bitterness of a land whose promises fly away. (139)) Freedom, as Esternome realizes, does not amount to inclusion or equality.

When he moves to Fort-de-France, Esternome's life unfolds in a neighborhood appropriately named "Quartier des Misérables." Circulating between the impressively modern and prosperous l'En-ville and his impoverished Quarter of the Wretched, Esternome discovers, and bequeaths to Marie-Sophie, the love of two contradictory-complementary faces of the "Creole" city composed of the orderly center and the

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[14] In *Poétique de la relation*, Glissant describes this pyramidal hierarchy in the following way: "Une organisation pyramidale : la masse des esclaves puis des travailleurs est partout d'origine africaine, ou hindoue—dans la Caraïbe—, après 1848 ; les cadres moyens, régisseurs, géreurs et intendants, sont des engagés d'origine européenne, en partie relayés dès le début de ce siècle, et toujours dans la Caraïbe, par une minorité des gens de couleur ; au sommet de la pyramide les Planteurs, colons ou békés—c'est ainsi qu'on les nomme aux Antilles—, s'efforcent de constituer une pseudo-aristocratie blanche." (78) (A pyramid organization : everywhere after 1848 the origin of the mass of slaves, then workers was African—or Hindu in the Caribbean; the middle level, managers, administrators, and overseers, were hired men of European origin, a small number of whom were replaced early in the century by people of color—once again in the Caribbean; at the top of the pyramid were the planters, colonists, or *békés*, as they were called in the Antilles, who strove to constitute a white pseudoaristocracy. (64))

chaotic halo of slums. These two aspects of urban composition she in turn reveals to the Urban Planner, teaching him to "re-read" the city from the perspective of her community's collective memory and experience:

> Elle m'apprit à relire les deux espaces de notre ville créole: le centre historique vivant des exigences neuves de la consommation ; les couronnes d'occupation populaire, riches du fond de nos histoires. Entre ces lieux, la palpitation humaine qui circule. Au centre, on détruit le souvenir pour s'inspirer des villes occidentales et rénover. Ici, dans la couronne, on survit de mémoire. Au centre, on se perd dans le moderne du monde ; ici, on ramène de très vieilles racines, non profondes et rigides, mais diffuses, profuses, épandues sur le temps avec cette légèreté que confère la parole. Ces pôles, reliés au gré des forces sociales, structurent de leurs conflits les visages de la ville. (218)

> She taught me to reread our Creole city's two spaces: the historical center living on the new demands of consumption; the suburban crowns of grassroots occupations, rich with the depth of our stories. Humanity throbs between these two places. In the center the memory subsides in the face of renovation, before the cities which the Occident inspires. Here, on the outskirts, one survives on memory. In the center, all dissolves in the modern world; but here people bring very old roots, not deep and rigid, but diffuse, profuse, spread over time with the lightness of speech. These two poles, linked by social forces, mold the face of the city with their push-and-pull. (170)

From Christ's newly transformed understanding of the city, it emerges that Marie-Sophie's Texaco is not only a way of materializing the dream of spatial belonging, which she inherits from her father, but that Texaco is also a site of linguistic diversity, a space composed according to the logic of the Creole language: like Creole, it is unofficial, resiliant, humorous, communal and ultimately dependent for its survival upon the acts of storytelling. The neighborhood of Texaco is defined linguistically while the Creole language is reflected in the logic of its architectural design. In weaving the unofficial status of the slum with the equally unofficial nature of its language, Chamoiseau persistently connects the urban environment with the language that it speaks, making them interchangeable. The Creole language and the slum of Texaco are profoundly connected in their in opposition to the official, mostly written,

French language and l'En-ville as the seat of its power.[15] And yet, the slum is also

attached to the city center and the humanity that "throbs" in the above passage is

situated *between* the two places, suggesting that "life" requires a continuous flux

rather than static rigidity.

In *Texaco*, the impoverished Creole community fights against the housing

dictates that arrive—with apocalyptic force—from the cultural and historical

"elsewhere" represented by the city and its authorities. Christ, as their envoy,

encounters for the first time, face to face, the entire community of Texaco and the

labyrinth of its hutches, which the city has pronounced literally "unhealthy"

(insalubrious). What plagues the city is the parasitical nature of unauthorized life. It

seems to develop and proliferate without proper system or purpose and thus

automatically jeopardizes the planned nature of the city. But in the place of binary

oppositions, opened by this initial juxtaposition between the "conceived" space of the

city and the "lived" space of the slum—to use Lefebvre's useful terminology, we

encounter instead various attempts to reverse the accepted notions of place ("lieu")

and territory on the one hand, and narration and language on the other.

Instead of settling for binaries divided by an interpretive abyss in need of

bridging, Chamoiseau—inspired by Deleuze and Guattari via Edouard Glissant—opts

for the strategy of infiltration. He allows each notion, image or historical relation to

be multidirectional and radically polysemic, evoking in the course of the novel

precisely that stubborn diversity glorified in *Eloge*. The consequence is an unabashed

celebration of squatting: an illegal yet productive and continuous reappropriation of

spaces—linguistic, geographical, and cultural—which deeply challenges the structures

of legitimacy and authority, in both geopolitical and linguistic contexts. Chamoiseau

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[15] For an interesting discussion of historical and conceptual legitimacy and self-legitimation in the (post)colonial context, see Edouard Glissant's "Histoire et Littérature." *Le Discours antillais.* Folio/Essais: Gallimard, 1997. pp. 234-267)

is interested in the reversable reversals in which no space, language or context can ever be proclaimed as final or finite. By collapsing the contained neatness of opposites (slum/city, place/territory, Creole/French, spoken/written, slave/owner, etc.), Chamoiseau follows the triumphant, but often unpredictable logic of rhizomatic growth with no conclusive or settled approach to either space or identity. While Christ-the-Urban-Planner learns how to conceive of a different kind of a city, in which diversity of the "chaos-monde" will be embraced rather than suppressed, so must the Word Scratcher attempt to write a text—the novel of Texaco—in which the spoken Creole's playful resistence to norms continues to animate the traditional regularity of the written page. The slum's disruption of the neat city is mirrored by the linguistic irruption of the spoken into the written, so that the Urban Planner and the Writer/Ethnographer face the same task: to learn and then translate, without betraying, an entire place and community—the slum into the city and the spoken word into a book.

3. Story and record

The two central dimension of Texaco—the urban and the linguistic—come together as soon as the narrator, Marie-Sophie Laborieux,[16] begins to tell the long and fascinating oral history of her family and community in Texaco. This story is told at least twice: to Christ-the-Urban-Planner and to the Writer/Ethnographer, "Oiseau de Cham." As a result, the fragmented and often broken flow of narration reveals a triangular relationship between Marie-Sophie, Christ and the writer, who all intervene

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[16] On page 35, before we even learn her name, we can identify the narrator as a woman. The grammatical structure of the past anterior—"j'étais demeurée"—reveals the storyteller's gender to the reader. It is ironic and appropriate that we discover an aspect of the narrator's identity only as a grammatical trace in the writing. Spoken, the distinction would not be perceptible. But the spoken word would have offered some other form of identification. Already in this way, Chamoiseau plays with the traces of the written and spoken languages, their haunted relationship to the real, and their incompatibility. For an important discussion of the relationship between spoken language and human body see Glissant's "L'assise du parlé" (*Le discours antillais*, pp. 404-414)

> In the center, an occidental urban logic, all lined up, ordered, strong like the French language. On the other side, Creole's open profusion according to Texaco's logic. Mingling these two tongues, dreaming of all tongues, the Creole city speaks a new language in secret and no longer fears Babel. Here the well-learned, domineering, geometrical grid of an urban grammar; over there the crown of a mosaic culture to be unveiled, caught in the hieroglyphics of cement, crate wood, asbestos. The Creole city returns to the urban planner, who would like to ignore it, the roots of a new identity: multilingual, multiracial, multihistorical, open, sensible to the world's diversity. Everything has changed. (220)

The two languages and spaces, the French-City (the normative center alone) and the Creole-City (the city center enriched by its margin, which it must learn to include), exist in a continuous dialogue between "here" (ici) and "over there" (par-là). Chamoiseau's writing clearly indicates the back-and-forth movement between the deictic elements, as he chooses, throughout the novel, the metaphors of sea and waves to depict the interlocking of places, histories and trajectories of the (post)colonial world. The vivacity and promise of this creolization lies in the indissoluble plurality of layers, clashes, encounters and contestations that this multiplicity brings to Martinique, to the Caribbean and, as Glissant has already argued, to the broader "Relation" of the Antilles to the world.

The Word Scratcher's task to write this complex story down brings him, however, face to face with a difficult passage from experience to speech to record. Unlike oral history, the written one seems to be final: it can no longer be changed or re-enacted. For this reason, *Texaco* is suspicious of its own written nature and its tendency to deaden and betray the flux of storytelling. At one point, the Word Scratcher writes to Marie-Sophie that he will not transcribe the part of her story in which she addresses her father's death. He respects her wish to keep Esternome's memory alive by never putting it down on paper and yet hopes that she might still agree to have it written. Aware of the paradox of his task, he concludes: "Il faut lutter contre l'écriture: elle transforme en indécence, les indicibles de la parole..." (258)

(Writing is to be faught: in it the inexpressible becomes indecency. (202)) As a novel, *Texaco* certainly struggles to honor the inexpressible by unsettling its own generic certainties and offering, in print, a sense of polyphony.

In the fissures between speech and writing, we discover the problem of transition from the life lived to the life represented. When she remembers her own attempts at writing the story of her life, Marie-Sophie speaks of the intimate connection between writing and death. In the section entitled "Ecrire-mourir," she describes the failure of writing to render the living image of a man: while preserving, the written text also redoubles the power of death. So when, in writing, Marie-Sophie attempts to remember and re-animate her father Esternome, he instead slips further away, his death confirmed by the act of textual immortalization:

> Vers cette époque oui, je commençai à écrire, c'est dire: un peu mourir. Dès que mon Esternome se mit à me fournir les mots, j'eus le sentiment de la mort. Chacune des ses phrases (récupérée dans ma mémoire, inscrite dans un cahier) l'éloignait de moi. Les cahiers s'accumulant, j'eus l'impression qu'ils l'enterraient à nouveau. Chaque phrase écrite formolait un peu de lui, de sa langue créole, de ses mots, de son intonation, des ses rires, de ses yeux, de ses airs. D'autre part, j'étais forcée de m'accommoder de mon peu de maîtrise de la langue de France : mes phrases appliquées semblaient des épitaphes. Autre chose : écrire pour moi c'était en langue française, pas en créole. *Comment y ramener mon Esternome tellement créole* ? Oh, de me savoir l'écrire en français l'aurait honoré, oui… mais moi, tenant la plume, je mesurais ce gouffre. Parfois, je me surprenais à pleurer de voir comment (le retrouvant pour le garder) je le perdais, et l'immolais en moi. Les mots écrits, mes pauvres mots français, dissipaient pour toujours l'écho de sa parole et imposaient leur trahison à ma mémoire. C'est pourquoi on me vit souvent parler toute seule, à mon corps même, me répétant sans respirer des choses inaudibles. J'étais raccrochée à cette cathédrale que je sauvais en moi et perdais du même coup – et par le même endroit. Je voulais en éprouver les libertés de mon créole et les joies bondissantes de la parole. (411-2)

> It's around that time, you know, that I began to write, that is: to die a little. As soon as my Esternome began to supply me the words, I felt death. Each of his sentences (salvaged in my memory, inscribed in the notebook) distanced him from me. With the notebooks piling up, I felt they were burying him once again. Each written sentence coated a little of him, his Creole tongue, his words, his intonation, his laughs, his eyes, his airs, with formaldehyde. On the

other hand, I was forced to accommodate myself to my scant mastery of the tongue of France: my painstaking sentences seemed like epitaphs. Something else: writing for me was done in the French language, not in Creole. *How to bring in my so Creole Esternome?* Oh, knowing I was writing him into French would have made him proud, yes...but I, holding the quill, measured the abyss. Sometimes I would catch myself crying when I realized how much (finding him again so I might keep him) I was losing him and immolating him myself: the written words, my poor French words, dissipated the echo of his words forever and imposed betrayal upon my memory. That's why so many could see me talking to myself, even to my body, repeating to myself inaudible things without breathing. I was hanging on to that temple [cathédrale] I was saving in myself and losing at the same time—and in the same place. I wanted to taste that ultimate treasure of repeating it according to the freedom of my Creole and bouncing joys of the word. (321-2)

Instead of the living words, Marie-Sophie encounters the epitaph-like quality of writing, a brief etching on a tombstone of past lives. She does not doubt that the language in general has the capacity, even a task, to circulate among and for the community like a blood-stream of a social body, but she doubts her own ability to translate her Creole father (*"tellement Créole"*) into the canonical numbness of her imperfectly mastered metropolitan French. As Priska Degras remarks, the hierarchy of languages is at stake here:

> La question de la langue ou, plus exactement celle du langage—question au coeur de toute réelle pratique littéraire—est, ici, l'histoire d'un double affrontement. Le rapport particulier qu'entretiennent en effet le créole—langue orale—et le français—langue écrite—a été largement décrit et analysé comme un rapport, non d'égalité mais de hiérarchie, une diglossie, et l'on sait en quel mépris fut tenu le créole auquel on a longtemps refusé le statut de langue pour n'y voir qu'un patois indigne d'être l'instrument d'une authentique création littéraire [...].(8)[17]

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[17] Degras, Priska, "La littérature caraïbe francophone : esthétiques créoles." *Notre Librairie : Cinq ans de littératures 1991-1995, Caraïbe 1.* No 127. Juillet-Septembre 1996, pp. 6-16.
Although the distinction between "langue" and "langage" comes from F. de Saussure, here is Glissant's definition of the terms: "J'appelle ici langage une série structuré et consciente d'attitudes face à (de relations ou de complicités avec, de réactions à l'encontre de) la langue qu'une collectivité pratique, que cette langue soit maternelle au sens que j'ai dit, ou menacé, ou partagée, ou optative, ou imposée. La langue crée le rapport, le langage crée la différence, l'un et l'autre aussi précieux." (*Le discours antillais*, 551-2) (I call human speech [or self-expression, as some translators will have it] a structured and conscious series of attitudes in the face of (of relations or complicities with, of reactions to) the language of a collectivity, whether that language be maternal in the sense I gave it; threatened, shared, optional or imposed. Language creates a relation. human speech creates difference; one is as precious as the other.) (my translation)

The question of language [langue] or, more precisely, of human speech [language]—a question which lies at the heart of all real literary practice—is here a story of a double confrontation. The particular relationship that exists between Creole—spoken language—and French—written language—has been described and analyzed primarily as a diglossia: a relationship of hierarchy and not of equality. We know in what contempt Creole was held: it has for a long time been refused the status of language and treated as a "patois" unworthy of being the instrument of an authentic literary creation [...] (my translation)

Marie-Sophie is neither confident about knowing this "high" language well enough nor can she conceive of "Creole" writing. The written word of her colonial context has always been that of a "grand-grec": someone versed in the European tradition, educated away from the Creole language and into French.

Given this perspective, Chamoiseau's novel plays an interesting game with its readers: it is a novel that puts into action as many forms and registers of language as it can summon. In this manner, Chamoiseau follows in the footsteps of Edouard Glissant, who already in 1981 examined the complexity of this oral/written dynamic of his own work:

> [...] je suis d'un pays où se fait le passage d'une littérature orale traditionnelle, contrainte, à une littérature écrite, non traditionnelle, tout aussi contrainte. Mon langage tente de se constituer à la limite de l'écrire et du parler ; de signaler un tel passage [...] Je ne discours pas de l'écrit ni de l'oral au sens où on observe qu'un romancier reproduit le langage quotidien, qu'il pratique un style "au degré zéro de l'écriture". J'évoque une synthèse, synthèse de la syntaxe écrite et de la rythmique parlée, de l'"acquis" d'écriture et du "réflexe" oral, de la solitude d'écriture et de la participation au chanter commun [...] (*Le discours antillais*, 439-440)

> I am from a country in which the transition is being made from a traditional oral literature, under constraint, to a written nontraditional literature, also equally constrained. My language attempts to take shape at the edge of writing and speech; to indicate this transition [...] I am not talking about either the written or the oral in the sense that one observes a novelist reproducing everyday speech, using a style at the "zero degree of writing." I am referring to a synthesis, synthesis of written syntax and spoken rhythms, of "acquired"

writing and oral "reflex," of the solitude of writing and the solidarity of the collective voice [...] (147)[18]

In Glissant's account of the oral and written dimensions of his work, the margin—which Chamoiseau paradoxically turns into the center of *Texaco*—occupies an important place: Glissant claims that his language takes shape on the edge between writing and speech, consciously preserving the liminal oscillation between the two poles. Instead of choosing one or the other, Chamoiseau—following in Glissant's footsteps—remains faithful to the concept of the edge,[19] where a kind of balancing act, such as *Texaco*, can take place.

Persistently concerned with the clash between the communal-spoken and the individual-written dimensions of language, Chamoiseau allows the two paradigms of language (Creole/oral and French/written) to interrupt, infiltrate and enrich one another. Throughout the novel, the Creole and metropolitan French are interwoven; often, the French dialogue is rendered in Creole in a footnote or a Creole conversation will be parenthetically, although loosely, translated into French. At all times, *Texaco* strives to be bilingual, mobilizing at the same time another form of uneasy diglossia: between the spoken and the written word. Since the spoken word cannot really exist in print, Chamoiseau creates a structure of orality, or what he calls "oraliture."[20]

Such an approach to writing attempts to dislodge a number of written conventions, most notably its teleological linearity. Instead, from the opening pages of *Texaco*, we are alerted to the possibility of losing the thread: our "conteuse" Marie-Sophie is often carried away by the force and joy of the telling and reprimands herself

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[18] This translation is by J. Michael Dash in Glissant, Edouard. *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1992.

[19] This interest in the edge is reminiscent of Heidegger's "horizon" (*horismos*)—a boundary—which allows for an opening of a new space. The boundary essentially gathers together—instead of separating—the two things which stand on either side of it. The edge, in Glissant echo of Heidegger, does not mark a limit but a possibility for another kind of space—in Glissant's case, the in-between space of confronted and combined written and spoken languages.

[20] The concept actually appears in *Texaco*, in "Résurrection", the final section of the book, where Chamoiseau provides an explanatory and autobiographical postscript to his narrative (see page 496).

for it—"mais ne perdons pas le fil" (21) (but let's not lose the thread here (11)). Often, she entices the reader with the story that could have been, but is not, told: "J'aurais pu raconter en cinémascope cette histoire d'amour entre le laïque instructionné et la dame Etoilus qui de l'alphabet ignorait même les blancs entre les vingt-six lettres, mais le détour serait risqué" (25) (I could tell the love story (in Cinemascope) between the instructed layman and the lady Etoilus who was ignorant even of the blank spaces between the twenty-six letters of the alphabet, but a detour would be risky (14)). Because of its freedom and irreverence, the spoken language is full of promise and threat. It is the spoken word which, in this context, neither conforms to the expectation of the genre (whatever the genre may be: a novel, a false or real ethnographic work, a linguistic tract, an essay on language and history, etc.) nor does it submit to any established order of telling.[21] Instead, it follows its own path, with a life of its own. The independence of the Texaco community is shown to exist and persist both on the level of urban resistance and on the level of narrative disorder. The disordered life of the Creole language is inscribed in the pulsating chaos of the slum huts and represents, as Christine Chivallon remarks, one of the "major thesis" of *Texaco*—the representation of *créolité* as chaos: "Pas n'importe quel chaos, pas celui du désordre déshumanisé, mais celui d'une mobilité, d'une légèreté où rien n'est figé ou rigide, seulement à l'état de traces, de lignes saillantes..." (89).[22] (Not any random chaos of dehumanized disorder, but the chaos of mobility and lightness, where nothing is fixed or rigid, but exists as trace, as salient lines...) (my translation)

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[21] Chamoiseau attributes a similar disruptive power to the laughter: "Le rire défait les cadres, les murs, les lignes habituelles. Ce qu'on respecte, ce qu'on crée, ce qu'on vénère, ce qui nous paraît juste, tout ça est ébranlé par le rire." (McCusker, Maeve and Chamoiseau, Patrick, "De la problématique du territoire à la problématique du lieu : un entretien avec Patrick Chamoiseau". *The French Review*, Vol. 73, No. 4, March 2000, p.728) (Laughter destroys the frames, walls, habitual lines. Things we respect, create, venerate, what we consider just, all is dislodged by laughter.) (my translation)

[22] Chivallon, Christine, "Texaco ou l'éloge de la 'spatialité.'" *Notre Librairie : Cinq ans de littératures 1991-1995, Caraïbe 1*. No 127, Juillet-Septembre 1996, pp. 88-108.

Ultimately, the slum and story echo one another as manifestations of creative disorder, which strives to embody and honor life itself.

The autonomous life of spatialized language is announced already in the epigraph to the first chapter in which one of the secondary protagonists, Ti-Cirique, a Francophile Haitian whose verbose nature is only equaled by his love of books, accuses our "Oiseau de Cham" of forsaking "Humanism" and its universality in favor of "les nègreries de ta Créolité" (the monkeying of your Creolity). In response, the Writer/Ethnographer offers this: "...littérature au lieu vivant est un à-prendre vivant..." (19) (...literature in a place that breathes is to be taken in alive... (9)). The word spoken, in Creole or otherwise, springs from and in turn creates life of a particular location.[23] The Creole language—and, by extension, the community and place which it animates—is understood, as I have already suggested, as a dynamic outcome of the plantation system, in which it served as a medium of "acceptances and denials, resignations and assertions" (*Eloge* 95):

> [...] l'oralité est notre intelligence, elle est notre lecture de ce monde, le tâtonnement, aveugle encore, de notre complexité. L'oralité créole, même contrariée dans son expression esthétique, recèle un système de contre-valeurs, une contre-culture; elle porte témoignage du génie ordinaire appliqué à la résistance, dévoué à la survie. (33-4)

> [...] orality is our intelligence ; it is our reading of this world, the experimentation, still blind, of our complexity. Creole orality, even repressed in its aesthetic expression, contains a whole system of countervalues, a counterculture; it witnesses ordinary genius applied to resistance, devoted to survival. (95))

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[23] Much can be said about this complex and often discussed notion of "life," but in order not to burden Chamoiseau's text with too many references to a conceptual elsewhere, it would suffice to say that in context, life is to be understood as a multiple and dynamic connection between the community, its language and its history. More than anyone else, it is Edouard Glissant and his notion of "Relation" that informs, I think, such a multifarious concept of "life" and its transformative, living power. Also, it is a concept that both Glissant and Chamoiseau attempt to link to the notion of lived experience, so that any definition would fail if it were to distance itself from the tactile, perceptible and narrated experience of either a community or an individual.

In this passage of *Eloge*, Chamoiseau affirms not only the centrality of the oral tradition in the definition of Creole culture, but its ability to accomplish two other crucial tasks: 1) to resist and counter the imposed aesthetic and other authorities, and 2) to bring the potential of a quotidian, "ordinary genius" into the struggle for cultural survival. The life of Texaco and its oral tradition are distinguished by their localized particularity and neither claim nor admit any existing "–ism" of the French tradition, even when they aspire to it and admire it. In numerous "French" episodes where we encounter the glory of the French literary tradition and its legacy, Chamoiseau shows his protagonists awed by and yet distant from the abstraction of the high cultural imperative even when it is meant to support or remedy their own hardships.

In the final section of the novel entitled "Résurrection," which marks the revival of Texaco, Chamoiseau describes his reasons for "collecting" the spoken word and weaving it into the novel. His method sounds like that of a reluctant ethnographer, who not only resents his tape recorder (he calls it "mon isaloperie de magnétoscope" (493)—"my bastard of a tape recorder" (387)), but also recognizes the inability of any record to do justice to the reality that it records. Reflecting on the crystallized reductiveness of the linear record and the treachery of the archival future, Chamoiseau expresses in this last segment of his novel the fear of treason embedded in the attempt at preserving the living presence of the word, whose preservation can only be accomplished, as Marie-Sophie realizes earlier, at the cost of its life: "[…] j'écrivis de mon mieux ce Texaco mythologique, m'apercevant à quel point mon écriture trahissait le réel. Elle ne transmettait rien du souffle de l'Informatrice, ni même n'évoquait sa densité de légende" (497) ([…] I did my best to write down this mythic Texaco, realizing how much my writing betrayed the real, revealing nothing of my Source's breath, nor even the density of her legend. (390)). The Word Scratcher fears that the written word can save very little of what once was a vibrant life and runs

the risk of conserving Marie-Sophie in a reduced form, or rather in form only: the written story threatens to empty the body—of a person, a town, a community—and leave nothing but its hollowed shell. The Word Scratcher duplicates in relation to Marie-Sophie the same fear she feels when she tries to create a record of her father Esternome. Every time a memory of life and place strives to become a historical record of that life and place, there is a chance that empty structures, like vacated buildings, will replace the texture of a lived present. If the Word Scratcher perseveres, it is only because—as he points out in the last triumphant sentence—he wants to allow for the internal naming of the Creole language and its force to animate a culture:

> Je voulais qu'il soit chanté quelque part, dans l'écoute des générations à venir, que nous nous étions battus avec l'En-ville, non pour le conquérir (lui qui en fait nous gobait), mais pour conquérir nous-mêmes dans l'inédit créole qu'il nous fallait nommer – en nous-mêmes pour nous-mêmes – jusqu'à notre pleine autorité. (498)

> I wanted it to be sung somewhere, in the ears of future generations, that we had fought with City, not to conquer it (in was City that gobbled us), but to conquer ourselves in the Creole unsaid which we had to name – in ourselves and for ourselves – until we came into our own. (390)

Paradoxically then, the generations to come are offered an archive for the future, which is, like Marie-Sophie Laborieux's fictitious notebooks,[24] duly numbered, bound together and submitted to the Schœlcher Library in Fort-de-France. In some way, the commemorative and epitaphic quality persists in the end and gives Chamoiseau's novel precisely that tinge of loss that accompanies any triumph. In the case of *Texaco*,

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[24] In the interview with Maeve McCusker, Chamoiseau explains with amusement that many have looked for Marie-Sophie's notebooks in the Schœlcher library: "Les gens sont venus de partout chercher ces cahiers, faire une demande à la bibliothèque. Je n'ai pas eu le temps, mais je voulais écrire les cahiers et les déposer là-bas" (729) (People came from everywhere looking for those notebooks, making requests at the library. I have had no time, but I wanted to write the notebooks and leave them at the library (my translation)). As in the case of the Sherlock Holmes house on 221B Baker Street or Proust's Combray—a name which never existed but was made official in response to the travelers who have often asked for it—the fictitious literary location or object can become real when, moved by the poignancy of the narrative, the readers materialize it, through their expectation, in reality. I am interested in these incidents in so far as they blur the supposed boundary between literature and life and produce, instead, the life of literature.

the highly staged and ironic snaring of the spoken word only serves as a reminder of its loss. Chamoiseau is fully aware of the irony of his position and quest: to be writing, often in "a French more French than that of the French" (see Ti-Cirique's epigraph to "Annonciation") a story of the triumph of the spoken word[25]—a triumph belied, in the end, even by the Prix Goncourt that *Texaco* was awarded in 1992. The literary success of *Texaco* marks, at least partially, the victory of the written word and of the Writer/Ethnographer, not of his speaking "Source" and her fast-dissolving oral culture and her slum.

Chamoiseau's awareness of and profound regret with respect to this historical change is already visible in his 1988 novel, *Solibo Magnifique*, a fascinating quasi-detective novel meant to elucidate the death of a great storyteller only to conclude that the "conteur" was killed by the spoken word itself. Already in this earlier novel, Chamoiseau imagines that only language can kill or revive language and with *Texaco*, he engages in the struggle to infiltrate his own "grand-grec" writing with the unruly vibrancy of Creole. As we know from his more theoretical and manifesto writings, this attention to inserting Creole into the written form is not just a spontaneous act but a deliberate literary and cultural project, which along with his co-writers, he calls "Créolité."[26]

4.   Infra-text: textual infiltration and the centrality of the margin

Examining this problem of linguistic "betrayal," in his essay "Topographie, texte et palimpseste: *Texaco* de Patrick Chamoiseau," Serge Dominique Ménager shows that Chamoiseau thematizes the problem of treason with respect to his fictional role of a witness. Yet he, as a writer, is not the only one engaged in betrayal: Marie-Sophie Laborieux's position of a witness-narrator is clearly marked by the name

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[25] "[...] il faut lutter contre l'écriture : elle transforme en indécence, les indicibles de la parole..." (*Texaco*, 258)
[26] See for example *Eloge de la Créolité* or *Ecrire en pays dominé*.

"Informatrice": in this war rhetoric, the word "Informatrice" suggests a going-over to the enemy, although in the English translation, it is neatly neutralized by the word "Source," which emphasizes the ethnographic rather than the war context. Ménager argues that although literature and imagination occupy a privileged place in Chamoiseau's novel, there persists a negative and embattled relationship to the canonical French language and its historical legacy: when she offers her beloved father Esternome to the domain of writing, when she "informs" Oiseau de Cham of all the aspects of her life and struggle, Marie-Sophie is not only telling a story, but also agrees to become an object of study or a site of preservation. In this sense, Marie-Sophie Laborieux is a fictional examination of a real problem: if the times are changing and the spoken word of storytellers is losing ground, should the written word step in to preserve it? Chamoiseau proceeds with the full knowledge that his position is tenuous: as he writes down the spoken, he acknowledges the impossibility of his task and answers the question dramatically, but vaguely: "Ecrire *La Parole*? Non. Mais renouer le fil de vie, oui." (377) (Write *The Word*? No. But tie the knot with life again, yes. (294))

Ménager draws attention to Chamoisau's ability to mislead us: "à brouiller les pistes, à se peindre sous les traits d'un auteur qui ne croit pas pouvoir parvenir à réussir le miracle du passage de la parole à l'écrit..." (65) (to confuse us, to present himself as an author who does not believe he can succeed in accomplishing the miraculous passage from the spoken to the written word (my translation)). To accomplish this passage, which Ménager considers miraculous, Chamoiseau opts for a particular "topographical" arrangement of his text, creating in print a visual and structural link between the embattled main story and its detours and, by extension, between Creole and French, Texaco and "l'En-ville." The "topographical" dimension of *Texaco* manifests itself in the relationship between language and space of the "mise

en page"—the visual layout of the printed page, which reflect in turn the battle between the slum and the city center. We perceive that the footnote—the actual margin of the page—contains those parts of the narrative that cannot be accommodated in the main text. The story is overflowing and expands beyond the boundaries of the printed text, in a way analogous to the uncontrollable overflow of Texaco with respect to the city of Fort-de-France. Ménager calls these textual supplements and intrusions "infra-texte": a text that is simultaneously disruptive, minor and exiled from the main text, and yet, to a large extent modifies or limits this "main" text. Through the "topographical" ordering of the page and story, both visually and narratively, Chamoiseau draws attention to those aspects of life, culture, history or identity which cannot be contained, ordered or erased within or by the dominant cultural or political forces. As readers, we are invited, if not forced, to accommodate (the word is appropriate because it raises the question of dwelling) those parts of the story which do not necessarily contribute to the outcome of the main story, but do contribute to the manner of its gradual unfolding.

The small concerns of the narrative detours appear in the short titled segments of the novel: each one carries its own name, plot and purpose. They are obviously an inseparable part of the novel and yet, appear as intrusions in it. By introducing this short-story structure into a vastly historical novel, Chamoiseau creates, on the level of text itself, a feeling of multitude, of a crowded tight space, like the slum of Texaco, where one person, house or story leans on its neighbor and draws its meaning from the agglomerated whole. In this manner, the printed text appears as a visual replica of the plot: the multiplicity of stories is, among other things, a visual reconstruction of the slum. When she describes the construction of Texaco, for example, Marie-Sophie focuses on the magnetic power of her pioneer hutch to attract other settlers, who

gradually become a community when they learn to perceive one another as connected

by their common goal and mutually dependent in the task of accomplishing it:

> Ma case attire d'autres cases. La parole sur l'endroit circula comme un vent.
> Comme chaque jour ramenait des Mornes son flot d'aspirants à l'En-ville, on
> sut bientôt qu'au bord de Texaco il y avait de la place. [...] il y avait déjà,
> accrochées a la mienne, une vingtaine de cases de tout grade d'avancement.
> Elles se construisaient le dimanche ou de nuit. Le nouveau surgissait, barrait
> un coin, et revenait avec la lune pour s'incruster en terre. Bientôt, il ne fut plus
> nécessaire d'aller chercher de l'aide. Les gens même de la pente apportaient le
> coup-de-main, conseillaient, aidaient, s'épaulaient. [...] En quelques mois
> nous étions devenus autonomes. (385)

> My hutch attracted other hutches. Word about the place blew about like the
> wind. Since every day brought with it a flood of would-be City people, it was
> soon known that there was room by Texaco. [...] hanging on to mine were
> already two dozen hutches in different stages of development. They were built
> on Sundays or at night. The newcomer appeared, closed off an area, and came
> back with the moon to take root in the soil. Soon, there was no need to get any
> help from outside. The very people on the slope lent a helping hand, gave
> advice, helped, shouldered each other. [...] In a few months we had become
> autonomous. (300)

The network of other hutches grows around her initially improvised but persistently

rebuilt house. This network soon produces a neighborly solidarity of the slope where

the hutches are built by the squatters and repeatedly razed by the city authorities and

the owners of the land (land-lords).[27] This solidarity—one inhabitant landing a hand

to another—is the first and lasting seed of a community, which will defend the name

Texaco.

5.   Rebuilding retelling surviving

As Chamoiseau explains in an interview,[28] he is interested in exploring the

relationship between story and place ("lieu") rather than between History and territory:

> [...] aujourd'hui nous sommes dans une problématique du lieu. Lorsqu'on voit
> la construction des Antilles, on s'aperçoit qu'il n'y a pas de genèse; il n'y a pas

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[27] For a brilliant rendering of the ultimately violent relationship between the "tenant" and the "landlord," see Langston Hughes's 1943 poem "Ballad of the Landlord."

[28] McCusker, Maeve and Chamoiseau, Patrick, "De la problématique du territoire à la problématique du lieu : un entretien avec Patrick Chamoiseau." *The French Review*, Vol. 73, No. 4, March 2000, pp. 724-733.

de mythe fondateur, puisque tout le monde est arrivé avec ses mythes
fondateurs. S'il fallait chercher la parole fondatrice pour les peuples créoles-
américains, ce serait le conte. Et le conte, c'est la diversité. Dans le conte on a
des personnages qui viennent du monde amérindien, de l'Afrique, de l'Europe,
de paysages divers. Le conte, c'est quelque chose de très particulier. Nous
n'avons pas de mythe fondateur, nous avons peut-être un conte fondateur. A
partir de ce conte-fondateur-là, il n'y a pas une Histoire qui est créée, mais des
histoires : l'histoire des Amérindiens, qui s'emmêle à l'histoire des Européens,
laquelle s'emmêle à l'histoire des Africains, laquelle va s'emmêler à l'histoire
de tous les immigrants. Et s'il faut raconter la totalité du pays Martinique, il
faut entremêler ces histoires-là pour voir comment elles se sont éloignées,
comment elles ont été isolées les unes des autres, comment elles se sont
mélangées. (725)

Today, we are dealing with the problematics of place. When one looks at the
construction of the Antilles, one notices that there is no genesis or foundational
myth because everyone arrived with their own foundational myths. If one
were to search for a foundational language of the Creole-American peoples, it
would be the story. And the story means diversity. In it, one finds characters
that come from the Amerindian world, Africa, Europe, from diverse
landscapes. The story is something very particular. We have no foundational
myths, but we have a foundational story. Beginning with that story, instead of
a single History, histories are created: the history of the Amerindians, which
mixes with the history of the Europeans, which mixes with the history of the
Africans, which is going to mix with the history of all immigrants. And if one
needs to recount the totality of the country Martinique, one has to interconnect
all those histories in order to see how they separated, how they got isolated one
from the other, how they merged. (my translation)

Chamoiseau concludes that a storyteller's view of history dislodges the notion of a

single History in order to reconstitute it as a braid of histories, "une *tresse* d'histoires"

(725).[29] The story emphasizes the specificity of a place, but it also sets in motion its

irreducible cultural diversity. Chamoiseau's approach to the Antillean history might at

first appear paradoxical: the particularity (even singularity) of a location is drawn from

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[29] In *Texaco*, the multiplicity of histories, which precludes any one history from dominating the
historical tapestry of a place, is emphasized in the same manner: "Oh. Sophie, ma doudoune, tu dis
'l'Histoire', mais ça ne veut rien dire, il y a tellement de vies et tellement de destins, tellement de
tracées pour faire notre seul chemin. Toi tu dis l'Histoire, moi je dis *les histoires*. Celle que tu crois
tige-maîtresse de notre manioc n'est qu'une tige parmi charge d'autres..." (117) (Oh Sophie, darlin',
you say "History" but that means nothing. So many lives, so many destinies, so many tracks go into the
making of our unique path. You dare say History, but I say histories. *stories*. The one you take for the
master stem of our manioc is but one stem among many others... (88))

an absolute multiplicity of histories that come to inhabit this location. The unique aspects of culture are, as Chamoiseau suggests, a consequence of multiplicity and not of lonely exceptionalism.[30] Only diversity can count as and draw attention to the specific and original aspects of the Caribbean, as a region in its own right and as a region of the world. The "unicity" ("l'unicité")[31] of the territorial and Historical imagination, which Chamoiseau clearly rejects, would amount instead to sacrificing a particular place in favor of an ideal Universal (i.e. placeless) narrative.[32] Chamoiseau's "lieu" strives to reflect the indissoluble link between a geographical location and the stories that make it significant. In other words, a mere location becomes a significant place ("lieu") only if and when it is recognized as a repository of the stories that mark it.

In creating such a reversal between territory and place, Chamoiseau follows a line of argumentation structurally indebted to Martin Heidegger's "Building Dwelling Thinking." In this essay, Heidegger distinguishes between space in general and a locale in particular. It is the locale that Heidegger recognizes as a meaningful place,[33]

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[30] The same critique of cultural exceptionalism can be found in Edouard Glissant *Poétique de la relation*. There Glissant argues in favor of the multiple and "impure" cultural genesis of the Caribbean. His notion of particularity and originality of cultures comes from this necessary encounter and mixing of cultures and not from their isolated and sterile conservation.

[31] McCusker, Maeve and Chamoiseau, Patrick, "De la problématique du territoire à la problématique du lieu : un entretien avec Patrick Chamoiseau." *The French Review*, Vol. 73, No. 4, March 2000, p. 725.

[32] Already in this theoretical stance, we recognize Chamoiseau's indebtedness to Deleuze and Guattari's *Mille plateaux*, which I will discuss later. In the introduction to this book, we read a similar formulation: "La notion d'unité n'apparaît jamais que lorsque se produit dans une multiplicité une prise de pouvoir par le signifiant. ou un procès correspondant de subjectivation [...]" (15) (The notion of unity (*unité*) appears only when there is a power takeover in the multiplicity by the signifier or a corresponding subjectification proceeding [...]. (8)). It is clear that for Deleuze and Guattari, unity is a moment of subordination of many meanings to a single one, which asserts its power over the multiplicity. Chamoiseau is invested in undoing any such domination and attempts to produce, in all of his writings, a return of the multiple against the dominant one.

[33] The locale (here, it is the bridge) gathers Heidegger's "fourfold" to itself. Since this concept of the "fourfold," i.e. the divinities, the mortals, the earth and the sky, can appear obscure, I will leave it aside. In any case, what interests me here is not the meaning that Heidegger gives to the locale but rather his distinction between on the one hand the marked, built place and on the other hand its relation to space, which is and remains an abstraction until it lets itself appear by means of a concrete spatial inscription (a bridge, for instance).

which allows space to become visible. In other words, the abstract notion of space can only come into being as a consequence of a particular site, concretely marked away from and yet generative of the abstract space. The usual relationship between space and place is here, at the very least, reversed and somewhat counterintuitive:

> Only things that are locales in this manner allow for spaces. What the word for space, *Raum*, designates is said by its ancient meaning. *Raum, Rum*, means a place that is freed for settlement and lodging. A space is something that has been made room for, something that has been freed, namely, within a boundary, Greek *peras*. A boundary is not that at which something stops but as the Greeks recognized, the boundary is that from which something *begins its essential unfolding*. That is why the concept is that of *horismos*, that is the horizon, the boundary. Space is in essence that for which room has been made, that which is let into its bounds. That for which room is made is always granted and hence is joined, that is, gathered, by virtue of a locale, that is, by such a thing as the bridge. *Accordingly, spaces receive their essential being from locales and not from "space."* (356)[34]

The built space (in the case of literary texts, this is narrated space: the text seen as building, the building seen as text) creates a perceptible boundary, a form, in which the abstract, general, unmarked space begins to "unfold." This built site makes room for space to appear, it makes space visible. One could even go so far as to say that space only exists insofar as it is marked and thus perceptible. Yet, the one who perceives from his vantage point does not stand outside of space, observing it. On the contrary, a human being is always there, spatial (and historical for that matter) by its very nature:

> When we speak of man and space, it sounds as though man stood on one side, space on the other. Yet space is not something that faces man. It is neither an external object nor an inner experience. It is not that there are men, and over and above them *space*; for when I say "a man", and in saying this word think of a being who exists in a human manner – that is, who dwells – then by the name "man", I already name the stay within the fourfold among things. (357)

Staying or dwelling with things, which defines the very nature of human beings is therefore inherently spatial. Both the separation of the human being from space (as in

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[34] Heidegger, Martin, "Building Dwelling Thinking." *Basic Writings*. Ed. by David Farrell Krell. HarperSanFrancisco, 1992. pp. 343-363.

the misleading separation between the subject and object, which Heidegger also critiques) and the erasure of space rendered only interior and experiential, do not really allow for a proper understanding of space. For Heidegger, space *is*, whether we experience it or not (therefore it is not purely phenomenological), but it is also the manner in which any human being *is* (space therefore unfolds, lets itself appear, thanks to the existence of a body). There is a fundamental parallel here between Heidegger's notion of a locale (the bridge) and a human being. In a certain way, the human being, since it cannot stand outside of space nor hold it inside, is also a locale, a site that allows room for space to manifest itself. The body and the built form—as boundaries—make space intelligible or even conceivable. However, in this process, the dwelling and the dweller become indistinguishable: they merge or are made to appear mutually constitutive. This merging of space and people is certainly what happens in *Texaco*, where the neighborhood and its inhabitants appear as one.

Following Heidegger's lead, we could say that a meaningful place, or Chamoiseau's "lieu," allows for something to become manifest, to appear and find its location: "L'En-ville désigne ainsi non pas une géographie urbaine bien repérable, mais essentiellement un contenu, donc, une sorte de projet. Et ce projet, ici, était d'exister" (492) (City thus designates, not a clearly defined urban geography, but essentially a content and therefore a kind of enterprise. And here that enterprise was about living. (386)). I would like to examine how this meaningful place, distinct from space in general, acquires its meaning because it allows for "content"—encounters, relations and, above all, stories to take place. These stories create a link between the past of experience and the present of its re-articulation.

Aware of the dangers of the disembodied spatio-historical narratives, Chamoiseau insists on the distinction, crucial for his work, between the standardizing "universalism" and the multilingual and multicultural "diversalism" (727). It is this

second concept—"diversalism"—which allows for and brings into being a complex and relational notion of "place," simultaneously autonomous from and dependent upon the larger world. Since such "diversalism" results from a continuous interweaving of histories, Chamoiseau creates a necessary bridge[35] between location and narrative: they cannot exist one without the other.

As in the case of Heidegger's abstract space that can only come into being by means of a specific site, Chamoiseau chooses to arrive at the abstract concepts (even those of his own making, like diversalism) by means of persistent invocation of the minimally organized and continually fluctuating personal stories of his protagonists. From the very beginning, instead of introducing a people or a culture, Chamoiseau lists names of the inhabitants of his Texaco and offers a succession of intertwined portraits, which give concrete narrative substance to his notion of Creole multiplicity.[36] Somehow, the ideals of Humanism, Freedom and Independence do not entirely translate into the Creole experience of Texaco. Its poverty and minimal strivings often remain illegible even to the well-meaning activist (like Christ-the-Urban-Planner), as if Texaco were written in too small of a print in the margin of the city. There is no glory to be had in either preserving or reshaping this margin: the authorities and owners want to see it vanish, preferably in silence. Instead, the community screams its existence: the word-play and alliterations between the French words "crier" and "écrire" (like in the brilliant sentence "il cria comme crier doit s'écrire" (327)), emphasize the intimate, yet embattled connection Chamoiseau wishes

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[35] Like in Heidegger, the bridge is a foothold suspended over the void and as such, has a particular significance: it is an impossible structure that somehow stands. Such an impossible, yet crucial connection lies at the heart of Chamoiseau's understanding of the oral and written language and their relation to place.

[36] For further discussion of this narrative procedure, see Chivallon, Christine, "Texaco ou l'éloge de la 'spatialité'". *Notre Librairie : Cinq ans de littératures 1991-1995, Caraïbe 1*. No 127, Juillet-Septembre 1996, p. 98.

to establish between the voice, name ("crier" in Creole means to name or call) and writing.[37]

6.   In praise of illegitimacy: squatting in language and territory

From the first moments of Antillean colonial history, through plantation slavery with its resentment of the master's Big House, through the illegal shanty-town and its battle with the City, to the irreverent attitude of the Creole language with respect to French, and finally even in the use of the topographical "infra-text," Chamoiseau interrogates the notion of settlement, conquest and illegal acquisition of space. In various and unexpected ways, he offers a glimpse of what it means to be a squatter on a piece of property owned by another, in a language reserved for another, on the edge of a city hospitable only to some. The hierarchy of places, languages and people is constructed around the concepts of entitlement and law. The ironic historical reversal, in which the former slaves re-conquer the spaces of their former masters, is traced in a detailed chronology that precedes the beginning of the narrative proper.

This prefatory timeline is offered with a short introductory remark:

> Afin d'échapper à la nuit esclavagiste et coloniale, les nègres esclaves et les mulâtres de la Martinique vont, de génération en génération, abandonner les habitations, les champs et les mornes, pour s'élancer à la conquête des villes qu'ils appellent en créole : "L'En-ville"). Ces multiples élans se concluront par la création guerrière du quartier Texaco et le règne menaçant d'une ville démesurée. (13)

> To escape the night of slavery and colonialism, Martinique's black slaves and mulatoes will, one generation after the other, abandon the plantations, the fields, and the hills, to throw themselves into the conquest of the cities (which in Creole they call "L'En-ville"). These multiple assaults will end with the fractious creation of the district of Texaco and the ominous reign of a boundless city. (3)

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[37] For further discussion of the anagrammatic pair "crier/écrire", see Larrier, Renée. "'Crier/Ecrire/Cahier': Anagrammatic Configurations of Voice in Francophone Caribbean Narratives." *The French Review*, Vol. 69, No. 2, December 1995, pp. 275-283. Also, Edouard Glissant's "A partir du cri" in *Le discours antillais* (pp. 27-8)

While the former slaves, who are granted their freedom, but are kept economically dispossessed descend upon the cities to claim their portion of the island, we are forced to contemplate the supposed legitimacy of the Béké plantation owner as well as the legitimacy of the economic and cultural privilege in general. The colonizer is, originally and etymologically, a tiller of the land, but also a squatter on the land of another. Over time, however, as the Caribs and Arawaks are decimated in the Caribbean, the colonizer makes his theft of land into a law and then defends, through his own legal and political systems, the robbery and massacre, which lie at the root of his wealth. The initial destruction of the native populations is simultaneous with European settlement and coincides—as Chamoiseau is careful to emphasize—with the building of plantations and cities: "Caraïbes et Arawaks seront décimés à mesure qu'apparaîtront les habitations sucrières esclavagistes et que naîtront les villes." (13) (Caribs and Arawaks are exterminated as slave sugar plantations and cities grow. (3)) The plantation and city are therefore not only spaces that symbolize European conquest, but are also the materials tools of colonial rule, which changes and controls the landscape as much as it controls all social relations. In a potent reversal characteristic of *Texaco*, however, the freed slaves such as Esternome become squatters on the land of a colonizer, who is himself the first squatter but whose geographical illegitimacy has been conveniently forgotten. In creating this circular problem of location and ownership, Chamoiseau interrogates any practice of intrusion, but does so in a non-binary and non-linear manner. Faithful to the idea of flux, whether it be narrative or ethical, Chamoiseau remarks:

> Moi, je crois que dans un pays comme la Martinique, qui subit des dominations silencieuses, il faut déchirer le réel. C'est comme une toile d'un tableau qui est devant nous, et qu'il faut déchirer pour voir ce qu'il y a derrière. Mais si on déchire tout le tableau, les gens ont l'impression qu'on fait de la fiction et qu'on invente des histoires. Par contre, si on déchire un petit bout du réel pour laisser entr'apercevoir ce qu'il y a derrière, un petit bout du ciel, et que ça se mélange avec le reste du tableau, et qu'on ne sait plus le réel ou

l'irréel, je crois qu'à ce moment-là on fait une œuvre de déshallucination. De déshallucination, c'est-à-dire que, par hallucination entre le réel et l'irréel, on met en doute le réel, on déplace le positionnement du réel pour le situer dans une perspective qui permet de reconsidérer le réel autrement. La finalité, c'est de faire en sorte que nous puissions nous regarder autrement nous-mêmes. (729)[38]

I believe that in a country like Martinique, which silently suffers different forms of domination, one must tear apart the real. It's like a canvas of a painting which is before us, but which we must tear in order to see what is behind it. But if we tear the entire painting, people will have the impression that we make fiction and invent stories. Instead, if we tear just a little piece of the real in order to allow a glimpse of what is behind, a bit of sky, and if that merges with the rest of the painting, and if we can no longer distinguish the real and the unreal, I think that in that moment we create a dehallucination. This means that a hallucination between the real and the unreal allows us to put the real in doubt and displace it in order to view it differently. In the end, the goal is to succeed in seeing ourselves differently. (my translation)

Chamoiseau's attempt to "put into doubt" the real and its reality-habits consists in displacing them in order to show them from a different angle. The tearing of the flat surface—of a painting, in his example—allows the viewer to perceive the landscape hidden, so to speak, by the image, or, in the case of my spatial analysis, the landscape hidden by the Big House or the City. This practice of peeling off the reality-surface by means of depth-fiction extends also to his understanding of truth, justice and other moral categories. He seems to make these abstract notions difficult to define, celebrate or condemn outside a given context—firmly identified in the above passage as "a country like Martinique." As I have pointed out earlier, Chamoiseau's suspicion of the de-contextualized universals often produces potentially contradictory interpretations. In each separate and concrete episode of his text we have to re-examine and re-establish our understanding of right and wrong—historical, communal or individual. The difficulty remains, however, in the fact that by doing away with the perpetual and universally valid abstract categories—a point through which Hallward

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[38] McCusker, Maeve and Chamoiseau, Patrick, "De la problématique du territoire à la problématique du lieu : un entretien avec Patrick Chamoiseau." *The French Review*, Vol. 73, No. 4, March 2000.

questions the validity of the entire postcolonial project—Chamoiseau forces us to start from scratch, building, as we read, our system of values and understanding painstakingly, again and again, like Marie-Sophie builds and rebuilds Texaco.

The lack of continuity, both historical and ethical, is thus closely tied to the history of slavery, destruction and displacement. For the people who cannot even own their hut or remain in it, it is hardly possible to hold on to any systematic or bookish set of values. Their values emerge and are shaped by the events through which they navigate and from which they emerge. Honoring the multitude of *Texaco*'s protagonists, Chamoiseau is less concerned with a single "moral of the story" than with the survival of that story itself. Right or wrong, true or false can therefore only be measured as the effects of the narrative as a whole; in the way it brings together all of its intertwined destinies and not in any individual destiny it contains. Despite the image of the woven and therefore uneven community that Chamoiseau repeatedly celebrates, Christine Chivallon poses an important question, which points to the ethical uncertainty in *Texaco*:

> La trame du roman vient d'ailleurs pallier la difficulté majeure à faire l'éloge du chaos en dévoilant en même temps des cohérences, des équilibres, fussent-ils secrets. Avec d'un côté, le "Noutéka" des mornes avorté, réduit à un moment fugace, et de l'autre la fondation d'un quartier urbain qui ne se fera qu'à la fin du roman, l'écrivain s'est aménagé un espace d'écriture où il peut à loisir faire l'éloge du désordre. Mais on peut se demander ce que deviendrait cet éloge sans que se profile la conception de l'identité-racine, ressource que le romancier utilise de façon singulière à l'état de désir ou d'aspiration collective, pour révéler ce peuple dont le risque serait en définitive de disparaître dans un abandon sans concession au paradigme du désordre. (107)[39]

> The plot of the novel attempts to palliate the major difficulty of celebrating chaos by revealing, at the same time, coherence and equilibrium, no matter how secret. With, on the one hand, the failed "Noutéka" of the hills reduced to a fugitive moment, and on the other hand, the founding of an urban quarter accomplished only at the end of the novel, the writer has created for himself a space of writing where he can celebrate chaos at will. But we can ask

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[39] Chivallon, Christine, "Texaco ou l'éloge de la 'spatialité'". *Notre Librairie : Cinq ans de littératures 1991-1995, Caraïbe 1*. No 127, Juillet-Septembre 1996, pp. 88-108.

ourselves what would become of this praise without there emerging some conception of the root-identity, which the novelist uses as a state of collective desire or aspiration, in order to elevate the people who, in the end, run the risk of disappearing in an unchecked abandon to the paradigm of disorder.) (my translation)

The choice of disorder runs into a number of conceptual problems—Chivallon's concern about the meaning of the disordered community is only one of them—and there is no doubt that, if one wanted, it would not be difficult to demolish some parts of *Texaco*. However, since Christ-the-Urban-Planner comes with the same mission, do we—as readers—really want to re-enact the drama of the novel itself and replicate the position of its figures of authority: to pronounce Texaco insalubrious?

According to Chamoiseau's main premise, the centralized order requires its marginal chaos while the peripheral chaos regenerates the sterile center. In order to condemn the slum (or the "war" for its survival), one would have to sacrifice the creative energy of illegitimate life[40] and preserve the seeming infertility of the established urban order.[41] Texaco, however, struggles to assert the right of the illegitimate growth, as the weed or the mangrove of the city:

> Au cœur ancien : un ordre clair, régenté, normalisé. Autour : une couronne
> bouillonnante, indéchiffrable, impossible, masquée par la misère et les charges

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[40] This "bastard"-nature of the people, the city, and the world itself is precisely what *Texaco* strives to reaffirm: if colonial history has made any pure lineage impossible (as Glissant also argues in *Poétique de la relation*), then any form of "métissage," creolization and "impurity" would have to be taken very seriously. What used to be illegitimate and impure is, from the perspective of *Texaco*, a site of a revised line of questioning: what does it mean to claim a territorial, systematic, ideological, blood-based, color-based or money-based legitimacy? What about the illegitimate? What about the bastard children of a morally corrupt colonial history? What about the return of the oppressed?

[41] As with all concepts in *Texaco*, it would be erroneous to give the concept of "sterility" a definitive reading. Although in most cases L'En-ville appears as an image of authoritative imperial order with respect to its fluctuating periphery, this city center cannot be deemed as merely "infertile": it generates, at the very least, the desire for conquest and the dream of reversal that drives the periphery to descend upon the ordered city. In this manner, Chamoiseau also shows the creative dimensions of any canonical or authoritative structure: if nothing else, it motivates the self-awareness of those who resist it. On the other hand, Marie-Sophie as a protagonist is described as childless. Her physical infertility (a consequence of her numerous violent abortions) is linked to her unwavering love for and persistence in protecting Texaco. She is the mother of a neighborhood and its community rather than of any particular child. Moreover, she recreates and preserves this community through her storytelling and is thus its mother in more than one way. Through these alternative and competing readings of "infertility," I simply hope to show that, for Chamoiseau, this and any other interpretative tool must remain unstable and multiple if it wishes not to become a tool of the oppressive meta-narratives.

obscurcies de l'Histoire. Si la ville créole ne disposait que de l'ordre de son
centre, elle serait morte. Il lui faut le chaos de ses franges. C'est la beauté
riche de l'horreur, l'ordre nanti du désordre. C'est la beauté palpitant dans
l'horreur et l'ordre secret en plein cœur du désordre. Texaco est le désordre de
Fort-de-France ; pense : la poésie de son Ordre. (235-6)

In its old heart: a clear, regulated, normalized order. Around it: a boiling,
indecipherable, impossible crown, buried under misery and History's obscured
burdens. If the Creole city had at its disposal only the order of the center, it
would have died. It needs the chaos of its fringes. Beauty replete with horror,
order set in disorder. Beauty throbbing in horror and a secret order right in the
heart of disorder. Texaco is Fort-de-France's mess; think about it: the poetry
of its Order. (184))

The spatial configuration of the City and the slum, which the Urban Planner learns to

perceive from Marie-Sophie's story, seems to reveal a potentially hostile relationship

between "le coeur ancient"—the center, and "une couronne bouillonnante"—the

effervescent crown of the city. The "disordered" and indecipherable periphery—"the

fringe"—is, instead, the only thing that gives the normalized and regimented center of

the city its possibility of becoming and remaining alive. The Urban Planner, and

through him the Writer/Ethnographer, learn to recognize that the meaning of the city

lies in its contrasts and battles, not in its homogeneity and artificial harmony. Yet the

"creolization" of space generated by this strife acquires a broader meaning as soon as

we realize that the impoverished slum has the elemental power to invade the city

exactly as if it were part of the natural, rather than urban, environment:

Il y avait un aller-virer incessant entre le Quartier des Misérables et le coeur de
l'En-ville. L'En-ville c'était l'océan ouvert. Le Quartier c'était le port
d'attache. Port d'attache des ripailles, port d'attache des espoirs en marrotte,
port d'attache des malheurs, port d'attache des mémoires que l'on ramenait de
loin. On y revenait dans le but de soigner ses bobos, trouver force d'un élan
vers l'En-ville à gagner. Parfois mon Esternome inversait son regard. L'En-
ville devenait une terre découverte ; le Quartier, une furie océane. Alors, le
Quartier éclaboussait l'En-ville sans cesse—comme une mer affouille sous une
falaise hautaine. (220)

There was a constant going and coming between the Quarter of the Wretched
and City's heart. City was the open ocean. The Quarter was the port of
registry. Home base of raucous blowouts, of fleeting hopes, misfortune, of

memories brought from far away. One came back there in order to clean one's booboos, in order to find the strength to move toward City. My Esternome sometimes saw things the other way around. City was exposed dry land; the Quarter was the oceanic nightmare. So the Quarter ceaselessly crashed onto City—the way the sea undermines a disdainful cliff. (172)

Like a large wave, Esternome's Quarter of the Wretched, for example, threatens to wash over the city. However, the image is, like most images in Chamoiseau's collection, a misleading one: it changes with the thought and feelings of the speaker. In the same breath, Esternome visualizes his slum neighborhood as a stable point of anchorage and as a raging sea. Sometimes, the slum is a chosen home; sometimes, a curse of the homeless whose poverty is, at times,[42] emphasized with a sort of matter-of-fact force and humor:

> Nous devions vivre sans, sans sel, sans légumes secs, sans riz, sans viande salée, sans savon, sans ail, sans chaussures. Les misérables ne trouvaient plus de caisses, plus de tôles, plus de clous. Le charbon devenait rare et de plus en plus cher. Qui allumait son feu n'avait pas d'allumettes et faisait-débrouillard pour le garder sous braise jusqu'à l'ad-aeternam. Il fallait se débattre dans une économie ignorée des personnes d'En-ville mais que les gens des Quartiers maîtrisaient bien. (305)

> We had to do without oil, salt, dried vegetables, rice, salted meat, soap, garlic, shoes. The poor could no longer find crate wood, corrugated tin, or nails. Coal was becoming scarce and more and more expensive. Those who lit a fire no longer had matches and did all that was possible to keep it glowing ad aeternam. The battle took place in an economy unknown to City's people but mastered by those from the Quarter. (238)

The passage from slavery to such material destitution suggests that the former slaves' invasion of the City, although it does not resolve their outsider status, at least asserts their right to be recognized as, literally, citizens of the island. *Texaco*'s reflection on the right of the destitute squatters amounts to posing at least two crucial questions: 1) what is the future of the relationship between the disdained periphery and monumental

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[42] At this stage of the story, the poverty of the Quarter is an echo of the WWII, which rages elsewhere but, like many "abstract" political concerns, affects most violently the daily life of the destitute periphery (i.e. Martinique *as* the periphery of that war, and then various peripheries *within* Martinique itself).

center,[43] and 2) what hope is there for integration that is neither assimilative nor destructive?

7.   Slum as the urban mangrove

As he acquires, through Marie-Sophie's narrative, a new and unexpected view of the slum, Christ-the-Urban-Planner shares with the Word-Scratcher the following revelation:

> Je compris soudain que Texaco n'était pas ce que les Occidentaux appellent un bidonville, mais une mangrove, *une mangrove urbaine*. La mangrove semble de prime abord hostile aux existences. Il est difficile d'admettre que, dans ses angoisses de racines, d'ombres moussues, d'eaux voilées, la mangrove puisse être un tel berceau de vie pour les crabes, les poissons, les langoustes, l'écosystème marin. Elle ne semble appartenir ni à la terre, ni à la mer un peu comme Texaco n'est ni de la ville ni de la campagne. Pourtant, la ville se renforce en puisant dans la mangrove urbaine de Texaco, comme dans celles des autres quartiers, exactement comme la mer se repeuple par cette langue vitale qui la relie aux chimies des mangroves. Les mangroves ont besoin de la caresse régulière des vagues ; Texaco a besoin pour son plein essor et sa fonction de renaissance, que la ville le caresse, c'est dire : le considère. (336-7)

> I understood suddenly that Texaco was not what Westerners call a shantytown, but a mangrove swamp, an urban mangrove swamp. The swamp seems initially hostile to life. It's difficult to admit that this anxiety of roots, of mossy shades, of veiled waters, could be such a cradle of life for crabs, fish, crayfish, the marine ecosystem. It seems to belong to neither land nor sea, somewhat like Texaco is neither City nor country. Yet City draws strength from Texaco's urban mangroves, as it does from those of other quarters, exactly like the sea repeoples itself with that vital tongue which ties it to the mangroves' chemistry. Swamps need the regular caress of the waves; to reach its potential and its function of renaissance, Texaco needs City to caress it, meaning: it needs consideration. (263)

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[43] As French city centers, Paris especially, flare up with racial violence that divides the beautified city center from its slum or ghetto-like suburbs. this urban question is far from being irrelevant for the broader examination of racial hierarchy. *La haine*, an award-winning film by Mathieu Kassovitz (1995), focuses on a day in the life of three suburban outsiders (Jewish, Maghrébin, and Black—these vague marks of identification are gleaned from their looks, dialogue or house decorations; nothing is specified with respect to their origin and they should be considered as simply French, but of course are not...) Through a series of mishaps, they end up spending a night in Paris and although they come from a Parisian suburb, it is clear that the city center is as inhospitable and alien to them as a foreign land. Fear and hatred are their main feelings towards this otherwise coveted metropole.

Like the mangrove, the slum of Texaco is a place in-between, neither of the city nor of the country-side. Instead, it is a living web of roots, shoots and branches that intertwine between land and water, exactly like Texaco replicates the structure of village life, but leans on and echoes the city.

To express the particularity of Texaco as an alternative urban space, Chamoiseau resorts to the metaphor of local vegetation—a mangrove—striving for the multiple interpretations offered by such an image. First, he combines in one phrase— "la mangrove urbaine"—the possibility of organic and inorganic life. This oxymoron fuses the built world with the world of nature in a linguistic and theoretical move reminiscent of Chamoiseau's literary predecessors who have thought of the Caribbean landscape as closely related to and responsible for the particularity of the Caribbean culture. From the doudouists to Glissant, the natural features of the land are constructed into metaphors of the social and artistic world. The urban mangrove is itself one such image, in which the two concepts are linked by a mysterious although suggestive notion of growth. Like weeds or fungi, the slum grows at the edges of the city, feeding on it and feeding it in turn. There is something about its existence which remains unstoppable, because life finds its way of surviving even when individual creatures do not.[44] In this manner, the persistent growth of the mangrove—"the haphazard whirls of the living" (328/257)—becomes a model for Texaco and strives to express something essential about the slum and its people. As Christ suggests in one of his notes to the Word Scratcher, Marie-Sophie's story teaches him to perceive the city as "an ecosystem" (328/257), which does not accept the model of Darwinian

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[44] The former site of the petroleum company Texaco undergoes the same ironic reversal as all else in this novel; it is conquered and preserved under its original name but for an entirely different purpose: "Autour de cet espace abandonné se bousculaient nos cases, notre Texaco à nous, compagnie de survie." (38) (Around that abandoned space are our hutches, our very own Texaco, a company in the business of survival. (24)) The profit-making petroleum company is transformed into a company of survival for the poor and in this transformation, the word "company" acquires a new meaning to which the entire novel is dedicated.

evolution and thus neither progresses nor recedes. Instead, the mangrove is described as a growth in-between: it is neither of the land nor of the sea, neither a root nor a stem, neither a plant nor a creature. In its in-betweenness,[45] it evokes the powerful images of mythical monsters (it is described as an "aberration"),[46] which—as David Punter rightly points out—become one of the most powerful literary tools of postcolonial imagination.[47] Chamoiseau's original contribution to this already existent postcolonial imagery is to attribute a kind of productive "monstrosity" to a specific urban space and examine it as a spatial relation.

The image of the urban mangrove—a city slum transformed into a force and ruse of nature—has its philosophical precedent in Gilles Deleuze's and Félix Guattari's "rhizome." They matter to Chamoiseau, at least in part, because of the work of Edouard Glissant, who draws on *Mille Plateaux* and in turn "infects" a great number of his postcolonial followers with its language. In *Mille Plateaux*, Deleuze and Guattari rely on the rhizome to evoke a cultural and theoretical alternative to the arboreal imagery that affirms and organizes European history and self-imagination. It is time, they claim, to do away with the tree:

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[45] In Salman Rushdie's *The Moor's Last Sigh*, a similar image of in-betweenness, a fluctuating line between land and sea, an unreliable horizon, serves to emphasize the effects of colonial conquest in which the imperial history, culture or principle tried—without ever fully succeeding—to cover the conquered one. The outcome was a palimpsest, or a line that instead of dividing actually connects, but with unexpected composite results. Here is a description of Aurora Zogoiby's paintings, which brings home the uncertainty of elements and entities we encounter:

> The water's edge, the dividing line between two worlds, became in many of these pictures the main focus of her concern. She filled the sea with fish, drowned ships, mermaids, treasure, kinds; and on the land, a cavalcade of local riff-raff—pickpockets, pimps, fat whores hitching their saris up against the waves—and other figures from history or fantasy or current affairs or nowhere, crowded towards the water like the real-life Bombayites on the beach, taking their evening strolls. At the water's edge strange composite creatures slithered to and fro across the frontier of the elements. Often she painted the water-line in such a way as to suggest that you were looking at an unfinished painting which had been abandoned, half-covering another. But was it a waterworld being painted over the world of air, or vice versa? Impossible to be sure.

(Rushdie, Salman. *The Moor's Last Sigh*. Vintage, 1994, p. 226)

[46] *Texaco* 313/244.

[47] See David Punter's *Postcolonial Imaginings: fictions of a new world order*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000. Here, Punter discusses the significance and centrality of the monstrous, hybrid and creaturely in postcolonial literature in general, but his prime example is Salman Rushdie's *Shame*.

Etre rhizomorphe, c'est produire des tiges et filaments qui ont l'air de racines,
ou mieux encore se connectent avec elles en pénétrant dans le tronc, quitte à
les faire servir à de nouveaux usages étranges. Nous sommes fatigués de
l'arbre. Nous ne devons plus croire aux arbres, aux racines ni aux radicelles,
nous en avons trop souffert. Toute la culture arborescente est fondée sur eux,
de la biologie à la linguistique. Au contraire, rien n'est beau, rien n'est
amoureux, rien n'est politique, sauf les tiges souterraines et les racines
aériennes, l'adventice et le rhizome. (23-4)[48]

To be rhizomorphous is to produce stems and filaments that seem to be roots,
or better yet connect with them by penetrating the trunk, but put them to
strange new uses. We're tired of trees. We should stop believing in trees,
roots, and radicles. They've made us suffer too much. All of arborescent
culture is founded on them, from biology to linguistics. Nothing is beautiful or
loving or political aside from the underground stems and aerial roots,
adventitious growths and rhizomes. (15)[49]

In this passage, Deleuze and Guattari propose an image that can indirectly illuminate
the structure of *Texaco* precisely in terms of the squatter's spatial intrusion that guides
my analysis: the rhizome penetrates into and invades the centralized structure of a tree.
It is, in this case, a parasitical growth which insinuates itself into the main structure,
radically changing it in the process. Needless to say, the implied image of the parasite
is itself spatial and useful for our understanding of *Texaco* since, etymologically, the
parasite serves to divert or entertain the rich.[50] It comes from the Greek word
parasitos, where *sitos* means "food." The parasite is thus a guest at the table who, in
exchange for food, entertains his rich host. We are back to the fundamental and
recurring image of the house with its owner and guest, its feast for the rich and its

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[48] Deleuze, Gilles and Guattari, Felix, *Milles Plateaux*. Editions de Minuit, 1980.

[49] All English translations of this text are taken from *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and
Schizophrenia*. Translation by Brian Massumi. Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press,
1987.

[50] Here is the etymology of this word taken from the *Oxford English Dictionary*.
> Classical Latin *parasitus* (also *parasita*, feminine) a person who lives at another's expense;
> ancient Greek: a person who eats at the table of another, a person who lives at another's expense
> and repays him or her with flattery, a person who dines with a superior officer, a priest who is
> permitted meals at the public expense.
> - παρα PARA- *prefix*[1] + σίτος food (see SITO- *comb. form*). Cf. French *parasite* someone who
> makes it his profession to dine at another's table (1680; also as adjective, 'living in laziness at the
> expense of society' (1817)

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hand-out to the poor, its structure of legitimate and illegitimate presence, its division of roles and rights. The parasite is merely a guest, but when he overstays his welcome, he is a peril. The possibility of settlement is the one thing a guest cannot have; otherwise, he will do what any settler does: he will colonize. In case the parasite settles, he is a disease—the insalubrious slum of Texaco with its insalubrious inhabitants. This vision of the sickly slum is, in effect, attributed to the "Western urban planner," who sees Texaco as "a tumor on the urban order. Incoherent. Insalubrious. A dynamic contestation. A threat. It is denied any architectural or social value. Political discourse negates it. In other words, it is a *problem*." (269, original emphasis)[51]

Of course, the etymology is here as tricky as it is fascinating: in French for instance, the terms do not differ. The host and the guest are one and the same concept—l'hôte—and can only be distinguished contextually. In this reversibility of concepts—is the city center a host or parasite, is Texaco?—we find the reason and principle of Deleuze and Guattari's ethical position, which permeates Chamoiseau's novel and enforces the undecidability of its meaning:

> Tout rhizome comprend des lignes de segmentarité d'après lesquelles il est stratifié, territorialisé, organisé, signifié, attribué, etc. ; mais aussi des lignes de déterritorialisation par lesquelles il fuit sans cesse. Il y a rupture dans le rhizome chaque fois que des lignes segmentaires explosent dans une ligne de fuite, mais la ligne de fuite fait partie du rhizome. Ces lignes ne cessent de se renvoyer les unes aux autres. C'est pourquoi on ne peut jamais se donner un dualisme ou une dichotomie, même sous la forme rudimentaire du bon et du mauvais. On fait une rupture, on trace une ligne de fuite, mais on risque toujours de retrouver sur elle des organisations qui restratifient l'ensemble, des formations qui redonnent le pouvoir à un signifiant, des attributions qui reconstituent un sujet—tout ce qu'on veut, depuis les résurgences oedipiennes jusqu'aux concrétions fascistes. Les groupes et les individus contiennent des microfascismes qui ne demandent qu'à cristalliser. Oui, le chiendent est aussi

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[51] « L'urbaniste occidental voit dans Texaco une tumeur à l'ordre urbain. Incohérente. Insalubre. Une contestation active. Une menace. On lui dénie toute valeur architecturale ou sociale. Le discours politique est là-dessus négateur. En clair, c'est un *problème*. » (345)

rhizome. Le bon et le mauvais ne peuvent être que le produit d'une sélection active et temporaire, à recommencer. (16)

Every rhizome contains lines of segmentarity according to which it is stratified, territorialized, organized, signified, attributed, etc., as well as lines of deterritorialization down which it constantly flees. There is a rupture in the rhizome whenever segmentary lines explode into a line flight, but the line of flight is part of the rhizome. These lines always tie back to one another. That is why one can never posit a dualism or a dichotomy, even in the rudimentary form of the good and the bad. You may make a rupture, draw a line of flight, yet there is still a danger that you will reencounter organizations that restratify everything, formations that restore power to a signifier, attributions that reconstitute a subject—anything you like, from Oedipal resurgences to fascist concretions. Groups and individuals contain microfascisms just waiting to crystallize. Yes, couchgrass is also a rhizome. Good and bad are only the products of an active and temporary selection, which must be renewed. (9-10)

Without lingering on the reasons that lead Deleuze and Guattari to reject and even condemn the notions of the subject, individual, line, stem, root or tree, I would merely like to draw attention to the reversible nature of concepts and meanings,[52] their endless ability to infiltrate and corrupt one another. Instead of clearly distinguishable binaries, Deleuze and Guattari—and Chamoiseau in another context—pay attention to and often celebrate the weed-like structure of meanings. In the end, the good and the bad can only be decided temporarily and contextually in a moment of pragmatic application and concrete understanding, not in theory or in principle:

Le repérage ne dépend pas ici d'analyses théoriques impliquant des universaux, mais d'une pragmatique qui compose les multiplicités ou les ensembles d'intensités. Au coeur d'un arbre, au creux d'une racine ou à l'aisselle d'une branche, un nouveau rhizome peut se former. Ou bien c'est un élément microscopique de l'arbre-racine, une radicelle, qui amorce la production du rhizome. (23)

The coordinates are determined not by theoretical analyses implying universals but by a pragmatics composing multiplicities or aggregates of intensities. A new rhizome may form in the heart of a tree, the hollow of a root, the crook of a branch. Or else it is a microscopic element of the tree-root, a radicle, that gets rhizome production going. (15)

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[52] As Chamoiseau writes, "L'envers valait l'endroit, et l'endroit le plus souvent était des deux côtés." (95) (One side was worth its reverse and two sides were often one side. (70))

The one always contains the possibility of the other; the root and the rhizome coexist and can generate one another endlessly, just like the host and the parasite, designated in French by the very same word "l'hôte," generate one another (although asymmetrically) on both sides of a permeable border. The same structure of mutual reversibility characterizes the relationship between the slum and the City in *Texaco*. It will depend on the context and its very concrete set of coordinates what meaning we will give to each concept and how we will judge its outcome. As Hallward points out, it is a difficult and possibly unproductive to argue such a shifting theory in the postcolonial context, even if it appears appealing in Deleuze and Guattari's assertive passages.

What matters, however, with respect to Chamoiseau's *Texaco* is the rejection of any dichotomy in favor of the multiple, connective and heterogeneous system of shoots that form the rhizome. It is fundamentally unpredictable, indestructible and chaotic, just like Chamoiseau's slum with its impossible hutches made of all kinds of materials, in all kinds of shapes. But most importantly, the rhizome traverses and conquers space, it is capable of movement, adaptation, and spreading; its intention is territorial. In this moment, we can fully appreciate the meaning that Deleuze and Guattari have for *Texaco* since the bidonville is itself a rhizomatic structure that seeks to reverse the relationship between the city and slum. It spreads, according to Chamoiseau, like the mangrove with its in-between and resilient nature. The continual flux of relations suggested in the novel reveals a fundamental indebtedness to Deleuze and Guattari's rhizome: Texaco is the chaotic and non-linear reversal, a suburb-guest preying on the city-host but also the contrapuntal heart of that city. It is ultimately the invasive and survivalist nature of the slum that should trigger a radical transformation of the city center.

8.   The master's spaces: the Big House and the City

The fascination with L'En-ville described by Marie-Sophie sends us back to the abolition of slavery in the French colonies in 1848, when the move to the city—exactly like in the United States—meant a final and definitive break with the plantation slavery and its legacies. Marie-Sophie describes the city as a place of possibility for autonomous life, which had hitherto been denied: "Mais ce qui m'a sauvée, c'est de savoir très tôt que L'En-ville était là. L'En-ville, avec ces chances toutes neuves, marchandes des destinées sans cannes à sucre et sans békés. L'En-ville où les orteils n'ont pas couleur de boue. L'En-ville qui nous fascina tous" (47-8) (But what saved me was to know early on that City was there. City, with its brand new chances and sugarcane-less and béké-less destinies for sale. City, the place where toes aren't the color of mud. City that fascinated us all (33)). Yet, although the city represents a multiplicity of chances, destinies and stories and, at least in imagination, offers itself as a solution to the enclosed and oppressive space of the plantation, it also reveals itself to be a hostile place that partitions communal space into the solitary nuclear housing, deprived of fellowship:

> Sans le savoir, j'apprenais sur l'En-ville: cette solitude émiettée, ce repliement sur sa maison, ces chapes de silence sur les douleurs voisines, cette indifférence policée. Tout ce qui faisait les mornes (le coeur, les chairs, les touchers, la solidarité, les cancans, le mélange jaloux dans les affaires des autres), s'estompait en froideurs au centre de l'En-ville. (328)

> Without knowing it, I was learning about City: that crumbled solitude, that withdrawal inside the house, these millstones of silence on the pain next door, this civilized indifference. Everything that made the hills (the heart, the flesh, the touching, the solidarity, the gossips, the jealous butting into others' business) would fade before the coldness of City's center. (256-7)

A house of one's own is, paradoxically, what Marie-Sophie and many former slaves dream of but recognize, at the same time, as the seed of dissolution of their traditionally communal existence. In order not to destroy "the heart and flesh" of communal life, Christ will realize that the cold City must receive and be changed by

the "morne"-like organization of the slum. In this way, the interwoven proximity of the country life will have moved into the city and made it more humane. As Christ concludes, if l'En-ville is to become anything other than "the *béké's kitchen*" (360/281, original emphasis), it must accept the transformation, which a periphery like Texaco will bring to it: "Texaco était ce que la ville conservait de l'humanité de la campagne. Et l'humanité est ce qu'il y a de plus précieux pour une ville. Et de plus fragile." (360) (Texaco was what City kept of the countryside's humanity. And humanity is the most precious thing for a city. And the most fragile thing. (281)) The cold City described above stands in sharp opposition to the "mornes," and the slums that mirror them, where the crisscrossed lanes and leaning huts allow an intimate encounter with each inhabitant's life:

> Toutes ces cases formaient une toile de matoumatou-falaise dans laquelle nous vivions comme des grappes. Avant même la communauté des gens, il y avait celle des cases portés l'une par l'autre, nouées l'une par l'autre à la terre descendante, chacune tirant son équilibre de l'autre [...]. Les rêves se touchaient. Les soupirs s'emmêlaient. Les misères s'épaulaient. Les énergies s'entrechoquaient jusqu'au sang. C'était une sorte de brouillon de l'En-ville, mais plus chaud que l'En-ville. (355)

> All these huts formed a trapdoor spider's web in which we all lived in clusters. Before there was a community of people, there was one of huts carrying each other, tied through one another to the sliding land, each getting its bearings from the other [...]. Dreams touched each other. Sighs mingled. Miseries shouldered each other. Forces knocked each other out until you saw blood. It was a sort of rough draft of City, but warmer than City. (277)

The laws of the Morne are established on the bases of required proximity by which the sheer multitude of interconnected huts shelters each individual hut. In such a context, the notion of solitude is, therefore, the opposite of survival. Most importantly however, Marie-Sophie's story gives to the arrangement of houses precedence over community: the group affiliation and solidarity follow from the spatial organization of the "morne" and the quarter. Conversely, the cold separation of the regulated city housing could just as easily destroy the community. From this perspective, the cold

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City is just another version of the master's house, which survived the time of slavery

and has multiplied into an impenetrable city center:

> Ville haute. Ville massive. Ville porteuse d'une mémoire dont ils étaient
> exclus. Pour eux l'En-ville demeurait impénétrable. Lisse. Ciré. Que lire
> dans ces fers forgés ? Ces volets de bois peint ? Ces grosses pierres taillées ?
> Ces parcs, ces jardins, tous ces gens qui semblaient en manier les secrets ?
> Bonbon lui dit un jour, et il avait raison, que l'En-ville c'était une Grand-case.
> La Grand-case des Grand-cases. Même mystère. Même puissance.
> Esternome mon papa en fût ti-brin malade. (107)

> Tall City. Massive City. City from whose memory they were excluded. For
> them City remained impenetrable. Smooth. Waxed. What to read in this
> wrought iron, these painted wood shutters, these enormous cut stones? These
> parks, these gardens, of which all these city people seemed to master the
> secret? Bonbon once said to him, and he was right, that City was a Big Hutch.
> The Big Hutch of all Big Hutches. Same mystery. Same power. This made
> Esternome my papa a tad bit sick. (80)

Relying on her father's experience and stories, Marie-Sophie communicates here the

problem of the City's fundamental illegibility. The fascination with the city points to

its promise of diversity, but the threat comes from what is unknown to the newcomers

and what escapes their capacity to interpret, narrate or remember. The City is thus an

echo of the plantation's Big House, which, in Esternome's eyes, offers a sinister

fascination of carceral solidity:

> C'était une longue bâtisse de bois immortel, environnée d'épineux pieds-
> citrons, de glycérias et d'orchidées. Dans son carrelage d'argile se lovaient des
> fraîcheurs et plongeaient sans fournaise les rayons de soleil. Piégés par les
> parisiennes, les cloisons ajourées, les vents la traversaient en un aléliron. Une
> galerie couverte, longée de jarres à pluies, lui filtrait les effluves du sucre et
> des fleurs du jardin. En plein jour, une pénombre emplissait l'intérieur,
> accusant la rougerie-acajou des meubles aux formes massives. [...] Une
> magie diffuse naissait, lui sembla-t-il, de l'amarre des poteaux et des planches.
> Il se demandait quelle qualité de force avait pu élever cela, associer ces
> essences, domestiquer ces vents, ces ombres moelleuses, et ces lumières. [...]
> La Grand-case s'élevait au centre des dépendances, des bâtiments et des
> paillotes. A partir d'elles, rayonnaient les champs, les jardins, les emblavures
> de café escaladant la pente des arbres au bois précieux. Elle dominait le tout,
> semblait tout aspirer. (60-1)

> It was a long building made from immortelle, surrounded by thorny lemon
> trees, sweet grass, and orchids. Coolness curled up on its fragile tiles into

which the sun's rays plunged without heat. Trapped by its louvered shutters, its partitions, the winds went through it all around. A covered porch, ringed by rain jars, filtered in the exhalations of the sugar and the garden flowers. In full daylight, a half-light filled the inside, bringing out the mahogany redness of the furniture's massive shapes. [...] A diffuse magic of the mooring of the beams and the planks. He wondered what kind of strength could have erected this, combined these scents, domesticated these winds, these balmy shadows and these lights. [...] The Big Hutch rose in the center of the outbuildings, sheds, and straw huts. From it poured the fields, gardens, the coffee-sown lands climbing the slope of trees (with precious wood). It dominated the whole, seemed to inhale all. (43-4)

The hermetically closed space is only a token of a hermetically closed history which, composed by and for the conqueror, will not accommodate the squatter, the guest or the former slave. Marie-Sophie's key question "Que lire [...]" (107/80) reminds us of her main quest: to change the text(ture) of the city by infiltrating it, to insert her story into an already written (pre-scribed) history, to make legible what her people cannot read, to conquer back, in space and language, the sites which have been denied. This technique of squatting—the infra-text—structures the relationship of Creole to French, slum to city, and even of Chamoiseau's literary endeavor to the French theory which it references. When he gestures towards Deleuze and Guattari for example, or to Glissant and Césaire, Chamoiseau does not succumb to the "grand-grec" status of literary elitism but reaffirms, instead, the principle of infiltration which dominates his novel. The theoretical and literary references are the illegal occupants—the squatters—of his text and challenge any single interpretation we may feel tempted to produce.

9.   Places of resistance: the story and the slum

Although he sees in the squatters' urban retaliation not only the inexorable logic of the pendulum, but also the beauty of the phoenix-like survival, some implications of Chamoiseau's notions of territory and place ("lieu") remain contradictory in appearance. Is *Texaco*, in the end, interested in the re-conquest of territories or the assertion of place? Chamoiseau's "lieu" (or Heidegger's "locale")

owes its existence to the meaning or markedness, which separates it from the unspecified and abstract domains of space and territory. Spatial meaning, as Chamoiseau suggests, arises from the many stories of which a place is composed. The huts of Texaco, for example, grow on us because we come to know not only their inhabitants, but also their trajectories, dreams and memories. The more familiar we become with the place, the more we accept and like it, mimicking in this respect the gradual transformation of Christ-the-Urban-Planner. Chamoiseau's strategy is to root and localize a grand historical narrative in an infinitely smaller and more modest space, which becomes the concrete battlefield of history. Christ draws our attention to the necessarily dual nature of the "Creole city" and the lasting dialogue between the opposites which compose it. Translating Chamoiseau into Heidegger's language of dwelling, one could say that Texaco is a locale marked away from the vast abstract spaces of history, which it in turn allows to appear.[53] At a risk of reducing Heidegger's point, I would suggest that in the case of *Texaco* the slum becomes an embodiment or a concretion of historical events and relations. In each hutch and inhabitant of Texaco, we discover some aspect of the past and some possibility for the future. The outskirts shelter narrated memories, while the city center registers History. The storytelling is thus an alternative reading of history on a smaller scale, where individual destinies combine and connect like the pieces in a mosaic. The vaster picture remains, but it is always indebted to the smaller pieces which compose it.

Yet if a place—a small local unit, which exists in solidarity with all others—is so important for Chamoiseau, why is his novel also concerned with the conquest of territories? The uncertain origin of the word "territory" is often linked to the notion of fright or terror: a territory is a space from which people are warned off. In the case of

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[53] For an inspiring discussion of the relationship between history, literature and orality—or between the superficial and subterranean histories and their legitimacy—see Edouard Glissant's chapter "Histoire, histoires" in *Le discours antillais* (219).

Texaco, to conquer a territory is to reclaim a forbidden city-center and tear down the invisible walls that bar one population from mingling with another. The problem of spatial containment and defiant trespassing sends us back to the history of slavery as *Texaco* traces the former slaves' need to move freely and unrestrained through any space. It is not conquest that Chamoiseau attempts to claim and celebrate, but rather a need to free up space (to borrow Heidegger's phrase) for any people, culture or story to live there. Like in the final sentence of Bessie Head's *A Question of Power*, the solution is in the very relationship between an individual or a community and its location. Bessie Heads' protagonist puts her hand on the ground, touching—we are told—her land: "As she fell asleep, she placed one soft hand over her land. It was a gesture of belonging" (206).[54] This image of a person who, although herself always dispossessed, claims a place by touching it, echoes Mr. Biswas's need to claim his "portion of the earth"[55] by building his own house. In *Texaco*, Marie-Sophie asks herself the question Mr. Biswas would not have dared to ask but which shapes his entire life: "Pourquoi cette obsession de posséder ma case? Etre dans l'En-ville, c'était d'abord y disposer d'un toit" (352) (Why this obsessing about owning my own hutch? In City, to be is first and foremost to possess a roof (275)). To exist is, then, to exist in a place, but also to tell about such existence.

Chamoiseau's storyteller Marie-Sophie is, along with all her friends and neighbors who build and defend the quarter of Texaco, concerned with the preservation of place—"le lieu"—and its fundamental relationship to language and narrative. In the end, we are told that the squatter will, of course, not conquer "l'En-ville" and all it stands for—"lui qui en fait nous gobait" (it was City that gobbled us)—but they will live in it and, most importantly, name it. The movement of

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[54] Head, Bessie. *A Question of Power*. Heinemann: African Writers Series, 1974.
[55] Naipaul, V.S., *A House for Mr. Biswas*. Vintage International, 2001., p. 11.

"[...] elle te déroute en te montrant ses rues alors qu'elle se trouve bien au-delà des rues, au delà des maisons, au-delà des personnes, elle est tout cela et ne prend sens qu'au-delà de tout cela... (368) ([...] she throws you off by showing you her streets while in reality she's well beyond streets, houses, people, she's all of it and takes on a meaning only beyond all of that...(287)) Disoriented by the lure of the visible in the City, one loses the way and can only combat this immense beast-like power of the urban hive by understanding it and then changing it in principle, as an idea—or, as Chamoiseau wishes to do, through narrative. As a result, the survival of Texaco resides, in the end, in the gesture of naming: Marie-Sophie, led by the Mentoh's counsel, secretly names the quarter of Texaco. The secret name is meant to protect and empower the slum, even when in reality it appears to be on the verge of destruction. Whenever her strength and faith seem to wane, Marie-Sophie invokes this name, summoning through it the reality and future of Texaco. Borrowing again from the biblical tradition of the world-creative naming, Chamoiseau finally renounces (and denounces) territorial conquest in favor of the story and the words that wield power. Significantly, the novel ends with the word "authority":

> Je voulais qu'il soit chanté quelque part, dans l'écoute des générations à venir, que nous nous étions battus avec l'En-ville, non pour le conquérir (lui qui en fait nous gobait), mais pour nous conquérir nous-mêmes dans l'inédit créole qu'il nous fallait nommer—en nous-mêmes pour nous-mêmes—jusqu'à notre pleine autorité. (497-8)

> I wanted it to be sung somewhere, in the ears of future generations, that we had fought with City, not to conquer it (it was City that gobbled us), but to conquer ourselves in the Creole unsaid which we had to name—in ourselves and for ourselves—until we came into our own. (390)

The word "authority" with which *Texaco* ends, seems to suggest an opening or invitation to fight not so much against the normative immensity of the city center (and by extension, the postcolonial metropole), but to discover and assert Texaco's

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maisons, les statues, mais dans le pas-visible. Un En-ville garde les joies, les douleurs, les songers, chaque sentiment, il en fait une rosée qui l'habille, que tu perçois sans pouvoir la montrer. (222))

communal agency and its ability to author itself and its place of existence. Such authority over self and language, or more precisely—the ability to create and make them grow, is forged in the narrative battle for the ownership of names. Chamoiseau's "lieu" is contained in this name and in the stories that unfold from and around it. This name opens onto the language of a people; the language in turn contains its history, while history reveals a place of its unfolding. The battle for Texaco is, in the end, a battle for spatial and linguistic (self)recognition. If such a battle is also a utopia and a dream and does not succeed in changing the fate of real people and places, it at least commemorates their stories and gives authority to what would otherwise remain silent and buried in the official records. In an "illegitimate" struggle, for a squatted place, in a marginal language, Texaco triumphs: it succeeds in asserting stories over History and places over Territory.

Chapter 5: PALIMPSEST

"Far Too Much Reality": Spectral Reality in Octavia Butler's *Kindred*

> We are on our own, the focus of no interest except our consuming interest in ourselves.
>   Is this too much reality? It is, yes. No one is watching, caring, extending a hand or taking a little demonic blame. [...]
>   Yes, this is far too much reality.
>   No wonder we need aliens.
>   No wonder we're so good at creating aliens.
>   No wonder we so often project alienness onto one another.
>   Octavia E. Butler, "The Monophobic Response"

1.   The spatial juxtaposition of histories

In "The Monophobic Response" (1995), Octavia Butler describes her

relationship to writing as a way of "journeying from incomprehension, confusion, and

emotional upheaval to some sort of order, or at least an orderly list of questions and

considerations." (415)[1] This view of literature, as a form-giving and world-shaping

endeavor, places Butler in dialogue with both V.S. Naipaul and Patrick Chamoiseau

and defines the structure of her only "historical" novel *Kindred* (1979)[2] in which the

process of writing constitutes the most viable response to the possibility of historical

and spatial fragmentation.[3] Butler thus examines history through the narrative focus

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[1] Butler, Octavia E., "The Monophobic Response." *Dark Matter: A Century of Speculative Fiction from the African Diaspora*. Sheree R. Thomas (ed.). New York: Warner Books, 2000. pp. 415-416.

[2] Butler, Octavia, *Kindred*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 25th Anniversary Edition, 2004.

[3] It is not self-evident why I choose to make the work of an African-American science fiction writer such as Butler part of a dissertation on the representation of space in diasporic postcolonial fiction. After all, African American studies stand apart from postcolonial studies and one would have some trouble relating the traditional notion of colonial and postcolonial history to that of the United States, regardless of its early colonial status and its territorial expansion at the expense of its native populations. Nevertheless, even if the modes of Caribbean colonial history differ significantly from the development of the United States, the connection I wish to draw out by putting the three novels together (written by an Indo-Trinidadian, an African Martinican and an African American author respectively) is the narrative's relationship to space produced by the trans-Atlantic slave trade, forced displacement and exploitation of labor. The ensuing marginalization of the displaced and exploited populations, their

on location. Moreover, by maintaining its focus on the "nonpeople," i.e. those who are made destitute by their racial and economic placement in a hierachical world, *Kindred* addresses the questions I already posed in the previous chapters. These nonpeople—similar to ghosts, zombies, or aliens—stand in the margins of our rational and visible world. Their marginality is spectral and destitute: visibly excluded from the territory of our norms, these beings terrify us. What if they were to step into our circle? Outsiders by definition (they materialize out of the dark void and must be expelled again), ghostly creatures incarnate everything that normative reality cannot account for or accommodate. With *Kindred*, I examine this problem of spectral marginality in relation to race and economic destitution. I treat a traditionally science-fictional concern as a very real and enduring problem: what constitutes a ghost is, on the one hand, its ability to return, to haunt us, and on the other hand, our ability to ignore it, pretend we cannot see. It is precisely these two dimensions of spectrality— the return of the "ghost" and the problem of its perceptible trace—that guide Butler's approach to race and destitution in the contemporary American context. *Kindred* foregrounds two such unaccommodated facts: one is racial discrimination and its historical roots in plantation slavery. The other is the link between slavery and contemporary capitalism, or more precisely, between exploitation and marginalization, which reflect slavery in the conditions of contemporary destitution. Butler's novel traces the re-emergence of slavery in contemporary capitalism and questions the possibility of freedom and belonging in the circumstances of enduring discrimination. My aim is to address the tangible spectrality in *Kindred* in order to approach race and

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lesser status and its lasting consequences, create—in my view—an important link between such domains of research as postcolonial and African American studies even if they are usually kept separate. I see this separation to be more a matter of academic convenience than of deep structural disparity.

economic dispossession as the marginalized facts of the present moment.[4] Concerned

with the mute nature of contemporary racial and economic inequality, I argue that the

historically produced hierarchies become legible though concrete spatial inscriptions

and demand to be read again. Butler's term "nonpeople," which suggests that the

destitute are forced into social invisibility, allows me to explore the relationship

between repressed histories, their spatial re-emergence and the role of the destitute in

bringing them back into view. *Kindred*'s protagonist, Dana Franklin, who is an

aspiring author and "word scratcher" (to borrow Chamoiseau's term), allows the

paradox of destitution to emerge: the overlooked genealogies of material dispossession

become spectral: they return to haunt us as they become visible through the act of

trans-historical storytelling.

By means of time travel, historical inscription in *Kindred* affects both a

physical location and the human body and creates a link between the past of

experience and the present of its reenactment. The main protagonist Dana Franklin

travels miraculously back in time to slave-holding Maryland and discovers her "home"

and origins only to emerge from that past scarred and mutilated in the end. Her

uncanny return is necessary in order for the history of slavery to become tangible

again. Violent markings of bondage remain imprinted on Dana's body and create an

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[4] The spectral nature of history and its demand for historical change are famously addressed in "The Communist Manifesto," where Marx and Engels write: "A specter is haunting Europe—the specter of Communism." Here, the haunting is understood as a historical force that, although marginalized, will not only keep returning but will accomplish its revolutionary purpose despite the efforts to suppress, control or expulse it. This force, as far as the Manifesto goes, is the unrelenting trans-historical struggle between the oppressor and the oppressed, which demands and will accomplish either the reconstitution or the complete demise of the existing social relations. The specter of communism is therefore a perpetual return of an unresolved and inextinguishable historical question, the question of exploitation and exclusion, which require their ultimately violent resolution through revolutionary change. In Derrida's *Specters of Marx*, the haunting spirit, which seemingly assails from the "outside," reveals an emptiness or absence of the inside and dismantles the very duality that defines the relationship between domesticity and foreignness, between the host and the guest (in French, the word is ambiguous and designates both—*l'hôte*). In this essay, I examine not only this spectral nature of concealed historical inequality and its constitutive violence, but also the fundamental ambiguity, which haunts the notions of domesticity, home, and kinship.

alternative text of historical inscription that forces us to see history not only as the undead, which by definition must return, but also as a visible (literally spectral) event—a spectacle of repetition. In this manner, history itself emerges into an embodied and spatialized form in order to be perceived and dealt with anew. Against the danger of forgetting and glossing over the past, Butler's novel examines the lasting connection between the histories of racial discrimination and economic destitution as they return to claim their place in the visible world.

Although Butler is a science-fiction writer, *Kindred* is often described as her only historical novel. According to Christine Levecq for example, *Kindred* offers a speculative philosophy of history, which "tends to be cyclical and sees the unfolding of history as an endless repetition of power struggles."[5] By revisiting antebellum slavery and slave narratives (particularly those by Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs), *Kindred* subverts the models of understanding historical facts, contemporary reality, relations of power, and even literary genres. The final outcome is, Levecq maintains, "a nonprogressive and nonlinear philosophy of history based on notions of conflict and desire."[6] Since, like Levecq, many critics emphasize Butler's effort to address history through speculative fiction,[7] my alternative reading of *Kindred* seeks to shift the common critical concern with history onto Butler's equally intense exploration of spatial configurations of that history. In so doing, I recognize the undeniable centrality of history in Butler's work, but also suggest that this history is most productively understood as a recurring bodily and spatial relation. The spatiality

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[5] Levecq, Christine, "Power and Repetition: Philosophies of (Literary) History in Octavia E. Butler's Kindred." *Contemporary Literature*, 41.3 (Autumn 2000): 526.

[6] Ibid., 534.

[7] In the case of Butler's work, generic labels are difficult to ascribe not only because her writing seems to resist them, but also because she rejects them explicitly. In a 1997 interview with Charles H. Rowell, she says: "Science fiction uses science, extrapolates from science as we know it to science as it might be to technology as it might be. A science fiction story must have internal consistency and science. Fantasy can make do with internal consistency. Speculative fiction means anything odd at all. Sounds nice though. Labels tend to be marketing devices. All too often, they mean anything, and thus nothing." (55) (*Callaloo*, 20.1 (Winter 1997): 47-66)

of Butler's work, especially in *Kindred*, has received little critical attention despite the fact that some of its most salient rethinking of history relies precisely on the spatial coexistence of different realities.[8] What interests me about Butler's "future past" slave narrative is the simultaneity of two distinct and otherwise mutually exclusive contexts: one is the 1976 Los Angeles house and the other, a slave plantation in antebellum Maryland. Dana Franklin travels between these two realities as if they were contemporaneous and geographically close, or rather, as if the disparate historical contexts existed as one another's geographical neighbors. The return to (and of) the past is in effect a voyage to an entirely different geographical location. *Kindred* is thus not only an exploration of African American history but also of the continuous survival and physical presence of that history in the contemporary moment. Whatever distance there should have been between 1976 and 1815, it has been abolished by Dana's involuntary spatio-temporal voyage, which collapses disparate historical circumstances into one continuous but fragmenting experience (not the least of which is Dana's amputated arm at the end of the novel). Although time travel contains all of history in one suspended moment of wholeness, it also results in absolute and most violent fragmentation. Body and space are diffracted by an uninvited guest: historical past invades the present and threatens to destroy it. Is this the necessary and enlightening confrontation between now and then, as many critics seem to suggest?

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[8] Time travel is usually not seen as a manifestation of spatial juxtapositions, at least not in the critical approaches to *Kindred*. Rather, it has served to emphasize the historical legacy of slavery in the contemporary United States. My entire argument, however, centers on a different kind of reading of *Kindred* based on the idea that, by the end of the novel, historical memory becomes not only part of the narrator's physical experience, but also merges with her spatial environment and is built into the very structure of her house. From my perspective, time travel is an exploration of spatial juxtaposition and simultaneity of the past and present. An alternative reading of time travel, which also departs from the usual history-centered analysis in favor of narrative memory, appears in Ashraf H. A. Rushdy's "Families of Orphans," where he writes: "I am not denying that Dana travels back in time to antebellum Maryland; she does—and that is part of the magic of Butler's novel. What I am saying is that her time travel is less important to the way she defines herself and her place in history than her narrative version of that time travel, a narrative version in which memory is the most important means of transportation." (137)

What is the price of history as it for ever changes the notion of empty or "innocent"[9] space?

A recently married couple of writers, Dana and Kevin Franklin, move to a new house in Los Angeles to begin life together for the first time. It's 1976—a bicentennial of American independence and Dana's twenty-sixth birthday. She and Kevin are unpacking boxes and arranging their many books, looking forward to bringing some sort of new coherence into their lives. According to Missy Dehn Kubitschek, all of these elements—the new house, Dana's birthday and the bicentennial—suggest a renewal of, and a confrontation with, both self and history: "The new house suggests the convergence of two individuals, and the birthday, of course, indicates the emergence of a new or modified self. [...] The bicentennial setting (1976) broadens the theme, implying that the country itself must reexamine its history in order to have any hope of resolving contemporary racial conflicts."[10] Yet, if there really is a productive revision of the country's history or the emergence of a "new modified self" in this novel, as Kubitschek suggests, it must be read against its rather violent and uncertain ending.

Already on that first day in the new house, Dana suddenly collapses on the floor: she is terribly dizzy and then, right in front of Kevin's eyes, disappears. She materializes on a river bank just in time to save a little boy from drowning. She will later find out that she has been miraculously transported to a slave plantation in Maryland some hundred and fifty years before her time. The boy is Rufus Weylin, Dana's ancestor and the future owner of the Weylin plantation, who is able to "call"

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[9] The critique of "innocent" and "transparent" spaces, which are usually imagined as independent from the historical complexities that inhabit them, constitutes one of the main interventions and contributions of postmodern human geographers. For a more detailed discussion, see for example Edward W. Soja's *Postmodern Georgraphies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory*, London, New York: Verso, 1989.

[10] Kubitschek, Missy Dehn, *Claiming the Heritage: African-American Women Novelists and History.* (Jackson and London: University Press of Mississippi, 1991), 28.

Dana into the past every time his life is in danger. During her five consecutive trips, Dana finds out that her task is to save Rufus's life so that he can rape one of his slaves, Alice Greenwood. Hagar, the child of this "union," is Dana's great-great-grandmother. Dana will recognize her name from the margins of an old family Bible, in which her bloodline is written down and passed on through generations. By ensuring Rufus's survival, Dana ensures her own, but the price she pays for the protection of her lineage is her unsettling complicity in Rufus's violence over his slaves. The only control Dana has over her time travel is the return: whenever she thinks that her life is in danger, she is suddenly back in 1976 Los Angeles. Butler thus explores the imperative to survive at any cost and seems to make all moral concerns subordinate to the preservation of life.

The significant racial facts, which determine the nature of this struggle for survival, are revealed rather slowly: in chapter two, we learn that Dana is black, and only in chapter three that Kevin is white. As these facts fall into place, it becomes clear that the hostility to meaningful interracial relationships also survives: the violence of antebellum racism continues to plague the contemporary moment. For example, when Dana and Kevin announce their union, their families see the interracial marriage as a betrayal of their group, a going-over to the enemy. Instead of acknowledging racial division and staying on the "appropriate" sides of the dividing wall, Dana and Kevin are seen as meddling with the established social order. Reinterpreting African American history from a feminist perspective, Kubitschek sees in *Kindred* "the female quest for a historically grounded understanding of self: the need to explore history, the process of excavation, and the subsequent interpretation of historical knowledge."[11] This historical exploration is shown to be "literally

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[11] Ibid., 24.

inescapable" and results in Dana's rapid transformation: her growing emotional understanding of slavery changes her contemporary identity.

In the "Epilogue," we find Dana and Kevin traveling to the 1976 Maryland to revisit the Weylin plantation of their time travel. An old newspaper article informs them that the plantation had disappeared in a fire and that its owner, Rufus Weylin, may have died in it. No other information is available about the place. The experience and the past itself are thus unverifiable, undocumented and, as Dana suggests, almost unbelievable. Revisiting Ralph Ellison's argument about the "unwritten history" of African Americans, Ashraf H. A. Rushdy explains the status of this unverifiable past: "Dana discovers what Ellison had discovered: that our "unwritten history looms" as the "obscure alter ego" of "our recorded history" (124)."[12] What emerges is a fascinating doubling effect: Dana exists in the present and in the past; her home is an ambiguous place/feeling/memory that is both here and there; her people's recorded history is forever shadowed by an unwritten history that waits to be discovered. This haunting and spatial doubling of history, which I address through Freud's "The Uncanny," has its price in the end: the effort of "remembering" is coupled with the event of "dismembering." Remembrance of the past (or better still, being re-membered *to* the past) is literalized as a force capable of destroying the body. This violent dimension of spectral history is already contained in the etymology of the word "ghost," whose old Germanic origins signify "to wound, tear, pull to pieces." In the ambiguous logic of time travel, which Butler maintains throughout the novel, it is unclear, of course, whether Dana is haunting the past or the past is haunting her. Yet the effect is undeniably injurious: the ghostly re-emergence of memory is capable of wounding Dana and, in the end, literally tears her apart.

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[12] Rushdy, Ashraf H. A., "Families of Orphans: Relation and Disrelation in Octavia Butler's *Kindred*." *College English*, 55.2 (February 1993): 138.

2. The threat of home

Despite this mutilating power of historical memory, Dana and Kevin have, as Kubitschek suggests, "acquired understanding of the past, not as some procession of abstracts like 'slavery' and 'westward expansion,' but as a collection of known individuals' experiences."[13] Dana becomes a witness to slavery and is forced to see this repressive institution, whether she wants to or not, as something lived and survived by the concrete people who are not only her ancestors, but also her fellow workers, her friends, her community. Moreover, the past is tangible as a trace imprinted on Dana's body: the price of her knowledge of self and history amounts to a bodily fragmentation as, on her last return trip, she loses an arm. The attempt to articulate her history and sense of heritage results in Dana's physical disarticulation so that an attempt at historical continuity brings about a kind of bodily fragmentation. Rushdy makes a similar point by emphasizing the paradox of wholeness and fragmentation in *Kindred*:

> Clearly, Butler agrees with these assessments of the necessity of remembering the past as a way of comprehending the present and developing a coherent sense of a historically-defined self. In *Kindred*, however, Butler also demonstrates the genuine physical danger involved in remembering the past. Remembering can lead to wholeness, but it also carries a risk of loss. The path toward integrity, ironically, requires as a toll exposing one's self (and body) to possible mutilation.[14]

According to Rushdy, Butler's approach differs from that of her African American contemporaries who, like bel hooks or Toni Morrison for example, focus on memory as a way of countering historical abstraction and cultural amnesia. Although Butler is herself interested in recovery (of the past, people, body), she is also keenly aware of the dangers of too close of an engagement with the past. Although on their "epilogue" trip to Maryland, Dana and Kevin cannot find a satisfactory archival trace of the

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[13] Kubitschek, *Claiming the Heritage*, 26.
[14] Rushdy, "Families of Orphans," 139.

Weylin plantation and its inhabitants and have to settle for inconclusive information, the verifiable trace of the past is available as an imprint of scars on Dana's body. Much like Toni Morrison's Sethe in *Beloved*,[15] Dana wears a delta of whip scars on her back, she is missing a couple of teeth from a kick in the face and her left arm is amputated above the elbow. These scars are the "written" proof of slavery and Dana carries them, like an archive of pain, on her very body. Even though Maryland libraries cannot offer this kind of tangibility, but allow instead for the facts of the past to recede into abstraction, the concreteness of slavery is, in *Kindred*, a physical mark. The scars, more than anything else, attest to Butler's "microscopic view of history,"[16] which she not only brings close, but brings home, to Dana.

From the outset, Butler insists on the spatial view of her protagonist's attempted wholeness and ultimate fragmentation. In the "Prologue," which tells the chronological ending of the story, Dana begins with: "I lost an arm on my last trip home. My left arm. And I lost about a year of my life and much of the comfort and security I had not valued until it was gone."[17] Yet, as soon as it is raised, the question of home is put into doubt.[18] What trip "home" is this: the one to or from the Weylin plantation? As she slowly learns how to adapt to her involuntary time travel, Dana finds out that her perception of slavery also changes: despite all her repugnance for

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[15] In *Beloved*, Sethe's maze of scars from a brutal whipping is alternatively described as a "chokecherry tree. Trunk, branches, and even leaves" (16) or as "a revolting clump of scars" (21). The novel is, to some extent, an oscillation between these two images: an acceptance or rejection of the past injury. Morrison, Toni, *Beloved*. New York and Scarborough, Ontario: Plume, New American Library, 1988.

[16] See Levecq, Christine, "Power and Repetition: Philosophies of (Literary) History in Octavia E. Butler's Kindred." *Contemporary Literature*, 41.3 (Autumn 2000): 525-553.

[17] Butler, *Kindred*, 9.

[18] According to Rushdy's reading of this ambiguity, Dana loses her arm "between 'homes'—between a past that has a claim on her and a present on which she has a claim. 'Home,' in Kindred, is more than a place: it signifies the liminal site where one can lose or reclaim a historically-defined modern self." (140) Rushdy's reading stresses the importance of liminality in Dana's transition between places and times. But as I intend to show, this creative-destructive threshold to which Dana loses her arm is, nonetheless, *built into* her contemporary house and always lurks there. This is why Dana suggests that she has forever lost her sense of security: the liminality that Rushdy talks about is, after Dana's time traveling experience, a constant threat (or possibility) in her life. In any case, the existence of the threshold radically changes her view of her life and history.

human bondage, she is able to accept what she would have imagined to be unacceptable and to treat as her home a place that could not be more unhomely. "The ease," Dana comments, "I never realized how easily people could be trained to accept slavery."[19] The ease of accepting slavery begins, at least in part, with her willingness to accept the Weylin plantation as her home. The question remains, of course, whether she accepts the plantation or simply has no option to reject it.

When Dana manages to bring Kevin back into the present after he's been stranded alone in the nineteenth century for five years, he has a hard time adjusting to his contemporary life. "If I'm not home yet," he says, "maybe I don't have a home." Instead, the Weylin plantation seems a sharper reality to both of them: "I could recall feeling relief at seeing the house, feeling that I had come home. And having to stop and correct myself, remind myself that I was in an alien, dangerous place. I could recall being surprised that I would come to think of such a place as home."[20] Aware of the oddity of her attachment to the place of bondage, Dana continues nevertheless to perceive the big house as a place of safety despite the many violent and life-threatening experiences she has had there. As a result of this fundamental ambivalence, which draws out the linguistic uncertainty already contained in the etymology of the word "(un)heimlich," home is no more than a place one is familiar with and used to, but it also ceases to be "home" as soon as one fails to recognize it. The love of home becomes merely a love of a known place, no matter how terrible the place and the knowledge. Estrangement, by contrast, springs from Dana's inability to accept or recognize the given. Instead, the known is somehow unlearned or annulled and becomes alien. For Dana, the return to the past incorporates three fascinating stages of this progression: first, her complete loss of orientation when she realizes that

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[19] Butler, *Kindred*, 101.
[20] Ibid., 190.

she is at a mercy of whimsical time travel; second, her attempt to learn the past and make it familiar; and finally, her decision to unlearn it once again in order to resist its violence.

Instead of offering the proverbial safety, "home" in *Kindred* is contaminated by a fundamental fear of being abducted from one place and forced into another. In this manner, Butler references not only the brutal experience of antebellum slavery with its forced dissolution of slave families, but also the horror of the Atlantic slave trade, which also consisted in snatching human beings from a familiar place in order to transport them elsewhere—in the interest of economic profit. Dana's time travel is thus reminiscent of the destruction of home contained in both of these historical events, a destruction which may be survived, but not without a price. Relating "home" to the notion of survival, I would then argue that "home" itself is precisely what Dana has to survive in both time periods. The place of her supposed "belonging"[21] is also the place that threatens her most.

In his essay "The Uncanny" (1919), Freud attributes the *Unheimlich* to the lingering, unresolved presence of our "animistic convictions" for which we find confirmation in the signs of unsettling repetition, coincidence and various inexplicable occurrences that mobilize our desire to find secret meanings outside of ourselves. In this form of the uncanny, Freud sees the civilized man's attempt to solve those aspects of life that escape immediate rational understanding and traces its origins back to the "primitive peoples." "Primitive" history bursts back into the more rational spaces of the civilized world and repeats, so to speak, the very principle of the uncanny, defined as the return of something repressed. The uncanny thus operates on at least two levels: in the scope of individual human life, it marks the return of repressed fears and

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[21] On the Weylin plantation, this idea of "belonging" acquires a whole new meaning: in 1819, Dana belongs to Rufus as property.

anxieties, but it also disrupts, by means of animistic primitivism, the very course of "civilized" history. The "animistic" view of history, i.e. the attribution of an animate nature to an inanimate object, is a means of bringing back to life something that may have appeared historically dormant or dead. As Anthony Vidler explains,

> [...] Freud identified two causes of the uncanny, both founded on the movement between prior repression and unexpected return. The first stems from the return of something that was thought to be definitively repressed, such as ideas of animism, magic, totemism, and the like, which no longer believed in as real, throw into doubt the status of material reality when they reoccur. [...] The second cause of the uncanny stems from the return of repressed infantile complexes, those of castration or womb fantasies for example, which, on returning, throw into question not so much the status of reality—such complexes never were thought to be real—but rather the status of psychical reality.[22]

In *Kindred*, the return of history throws into doubt Dana's and Kevin's notion of historical closure and progress, which should allow for one epoch, like slavery, to end and for another to begin. Yet the uncanny regression from the present into the past emphasizes the ambiguity of any return: does Dana return to the past or does the past come to visit her? Who, in this story, is the "revenant"?[23] Is Dana haunted by the ghost of history or does she travel back in time to become, in Rufus's eyes, a ghost herself?[24] Instead of recalling the past, Dana is recalled by it. The "re" part of Dana's "turn" towards history allows for the animistic reading of an otherwise concluded past event: it can be re-visited, re-lived, re-membered, and re-interpreted. In the uncanny fragmentation, the severing of parts becomes clearly visible. What seems to be whole and familiar is suddenly fragmented through a disorienting and involuntary repetition. Dana's return to the past is not a way of connecting the severed pieces of her history

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[22] Vidler, Anthony, *The Architectural Uncanny: Essay in the Modern Unhomely*, 5th edition. (Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press, 1999), 79.
[23] "Revenant" is the French word for "ghost"—literally, the one who comes back, and it clearly signals the centrality of the return in any invocation of spectral phenomena.
[24] On her second trip to Maryland, Dana tries to describe to Rufus the strangeness of being recalled into the past: "I vanished. Just disappeared. And then reappeared later." He responds: "Disappeared? You mean like smoke?" Fear crept into his expression. "Like a ghost?" (23)

into a whole, but is actually productive of further fragmentation. In this manner, Butler's use of the uncanny is far from being a positive encounter with an unknown self. Instead, the self that was believed to be familiar is cut off from the observing self and becomes unrecognizable. Such disturbing fragmentation of self is described as one of Freud's own uncanny experiences:

> I was sitting alone in my sleeping compartment when the train lurched violently. The door of the adjacent toilet swung open and an elderly gentleman in a dressing gown and traveling cap entered my compartment. I assumed that on leaving the toilet, which was located between the two compartments, he had turned the wrong way and entered mine by mistake. I jumped up to put him right, but soon realized to my astonishment that the intruder was my own image, reflected in the mirror on the connecting door. I can still recall that I found his appearance thoroughly unpleasant.[25]

If Dana's past is, to some extent, her mirror and if in it she becomes her own double, her sense of spatio-historical fragmentation is, much like in Freud's case, accompanied by an uncanny dislike of the self that she fails to recognize.[26] In other words, Dana's ease in adapting to the conditions of slavery produces at the same time her profound unease with her adapting self.

The uncanny experience of time travel thus throws into doubt both Dana's material reality and the status of her psychical reality. When she returns from her first time travel, Dana comments on Kevin's feeble attempt to explain away the strange occurrence as some kind of dream-like or hallucinatory state: "Rufus and his parents had still not quite settled back and become the 'dream' Kevin wanted them to be. They stayed with me, shadowy and threatening. They made their own limbo and held me in it."[27] Although Kevin invites Dana to "pull away" from this experience and to "let go of it," it is the returning past that will not let go of her. Instead of pulling away, as she desires, Dana is pulled into the vortex of her history. The feelings of

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[25] Freud, Sigmund, *The Uncanny*, (Penguin Books, 2003), 162.

[26] She is often surprised by and ashamed of her "complacency" (237) as she wonders why she doesn't defend herself: "Was I getting so used to being submissive?" (221)

[27] Butler, *Kindred*, 18.

dread and vulnerability, which make her feel "naked among strangers," are part and parcel of her uncanny regression. The uncanny can be situated in both the physical and cognitive disorientation produced by Dana's involuntary time travel. The inexplicable oddity of this experience leads to her growing estrangement from both of her spatio-temporal environments. Yet the reverse meaning of time travel is also brought to bear: Dana's encounter with the past provides her, on the one hand, with a way of understanding and interpreting the world around her and, on the other hand, with a means of recognizing herself as part of a historical community.

More crucial than cognitive disorientation, however, is Freud's "uncanny" return to the same spatial location, which may shed some light on Dana's similarly compulsive spatial movements. Freud's "factor of the repetition of the same thing,"[28] which signals the uncanny, centers primarily on the experience of spatial helplessness:

> Strolling one hot summer afternoon through the empty and to me unfamiliar streets of a small Italian town, I found myself in a district about whose character I could not long remain in doubt. Only heavily made-up women were to be seen at the windows of the little houses, and I hastily left the narrow street at the next turning. However, after wondering about for some time without asking the way, I suddenly found myself back in the same street, where my presence began to attract attention. Once more I hurried away, only to return there again by a different route. I was now seized by a feeling that I can only describe as uncanny, and I was glad to find my way back to the piazza that I had recently left and refrain from any further voyages of discovery.[29]

In this anecdote, the uncanny results from spatial repetition triggered when Freud, convinced that he has put some distance between himself and the red-light district, realizes instead that he is repeatedly brought back to the place he is trying to flee. The more he struggles to escape it, the more the disreputable neighborhood seems to draw him back. It is as if the place itself had some kind of magic power with which to establish control over the stroller's body at the expense of his will and rational mind.

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[28] Freud, "The Uncanny," 143.
[29] Ibid., 144.

From the prevailing tone of compulsion and thrilled despair—"I found myself," "I was seized by," "hastily," and "suddenly"—time itself appears to trap and surprise the walker: he hurries away, he hastily turns, he suddenly arrives. Stripped of agency, he is merely a puppet pulled around by the inexplicable power of time and space over his recipient body: he finds himself, he is seized by. It is as if Freud-the-walker of this passage has relinquished his will to some beyond-his-control force of the neighborhood itself. Something similar happens in *Kindred*: Dana has no control over her time travel, she is seized by it, she suddenly finds herself in antebellum Maryland and is, like Freud, forced to observe herself as if she were a stranger. The historical past from which she wants to distance herself draws her back in with magical power. Dana's dizziness and fainting suggest a literal, although temporary, loss of her rational faculties, which we also find in Freud's episode. The emphasis is, in both cases, on the relation of the uncanny to spatial and environmental disorientation. Losing one's way is, in *Kindred*, an important spatial feature of the uncanny time travel.

Such loss of spatial orientation throws into doubt the material reality of Dana's home. As I mentioned earlier, instead of counting on the comfort and safety of her house, Dana confronts the doubling of her home on the one hand, and its internal dangers, on the other. Dana's two homes—one in twentieth century Los Angeles and the other in nineteenth century Maryland—although they at first appear as opposites—begin to merge by the end of the novel and can no longer be viewed as unrelated. The result is a strange and uncomfortable blend of fear, familiarity and attachment, which the homely and unhomely bring into the notion of "home." In Dana's case, the domestic and homely—which are new and tenuous concepts for both her and Kevin—immediately trigger their opposite manifestation. On her first day in the new house, Dana is abducted from one space and sent into another. This other place also offers

itself as home but, being a slave plantation, it denies most of the features we might wish to attach to that concept. The plantation is at first neither safe nor familiar, and yet, it can gradually be learnt even as it remains dangerous. The moment of recognition is thus all that there is in Dana's notion of "home." In time, however, the return to the house in the past acquires the meaning of a genuine return: "Finally, after more woods and fields, the plain square house was before me, its downstairs windows full of yellow light. I was startled to catch myself saying wearily, "Home at last." I stood still for a moment between the fields and the house and reminded myself that I was in a hostile place."[30] The threat of the plantation house, as well as the increasing strangeness of 1976 house, lie in their ability to lull Dana into forgetting the threat of confinement between their walls, which become—by the end of the novel—the agents of Dana's bodily fragmentation. At the same time, Dana's confrontation with the past also reveals the dangers of the contemporary nuclear family: for example, Dana's contestatory decision to marry a white man is suddenly tainted by the fact that in antebellum Maryland, a sexual relationship between a white "master" and a black slave seems commonplace and is merely an additional manifestation of bondage. Kevin's pale eyes suddenly remind Dana of Rufus's eyes: the slaveholder and the husband grow dangerously similar.[31] The uncanny in *Kindred* is thus contained in the constant distancing of things that we expect to be close and the proximity of things that should have been kept apart. This is why Dana has to survive the idea of "home" itself instead of finding shelter in it.

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[30] Butler, *Kindred*, 127

[31] As Levecq aptly observes, the novel presents "Rufus's behavior towards Alice as a sort of antebellum variation of Dana's own relationship with Kevin" (545). In antebellum Maryland, "the whites' acquiescence to [Dana's] sexual relationship with her supposed master [Kevin] makes her feel 'uncomfortable, vaguely ashamed' (97), thereby momentarily tainting her feelings about their union." (539)

Dana and Kevin, already described as "out of place" people, slowly lose their place in their own time precisely because they compare its dangers and luxuries with another, starker time. They are made marginal in more ways than one: they are not only rejected by their families and friends who cannot admit of their interracial marriage, but are also struggling to survive as writers in a world of temporary wage labor; they live a-socially in 1976 and continue to be an anomaly in 1819; but most importantly, their contemporary ideas and education make them alien in the past, while their intimate encounter with the past sheds an entirely unexpected light on their present. As a result, the notion of "home"—as a place of familiar and understood order—becomes unavailable. Such historical homelessness reflects and brings into focus the problem of hierarchical displacement of the "lesser" people, whether they be marked for discrimination by race, gender, or geographical location.

3.   The contemporary "slave market" and its destitute

Dana's contemporary context is also far from settled. She describes her encounter with Kevin as a meeting of two lonely and "out of place"[32] people. They are both aspiring writers but Kevin, unlike Dana, manages to make some money from his books. Dana is working out of a casual labor agency, which the job hunters, with appropriate irony, call "a slave market": "It was nearly always mindless work, and as far as most employers were concerned, it was done by mindless people. Nonpeople rented for a few hours, a few days, a few weeks."[33] The labor agency is a meeting place for the anonymous destitute whose contemporary "slavery" consists in being bound to an occasional mindless job at a minimum wage. Although the present should be a better place than the Weylin plantation of the early nineteenth century, Dana's list of mindless tasks, most of them menial and undervalued, does not differ very much

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[32] Butler, *Kindred*, 52.
[33] Ibid., 52-53.

from the kind of work she is expected to do on the plantation. The difference is, of course, in the fact that her contemporary self believes she is free to choose, although the "slave market" metaphor and the description of the destitute job hunters suggests that such freedom is mostly nominal. Actually, even in her reflection on the antebellum past, Dana's request for freedom is very minimal: she needs to be left just enough control over her life to make slavery seem better than death.[34] This realization is as devastating as it is accurate: as long people are left with something, no matter how little, which they cannot bear to lose, they can be kept prisoners.

Butler's historical parallels, in which one political reality serves to interrogate the other almost a-historically, raise the following question: are the lives of contemporary "nonpeople" also held hostage to some minimal, even illusory, sense of freedom and hope? Are these people also property despite the fact that slavery is no longer the operative word? Since the space of contemporary capital(ism) implies "the perpetuation of political-economic power structures"[35] which have existed in other forms in the past, Butler traces a genealogy of American capitalism and exploitation of labor from slavery to the contemporary labor agency. Today's "freedom" in the capitalist society is "kindred" to plantation slavery. And if slavery is a direct ancestor to the present day U.S. socio-economic system of wage labor and welfare, Butler's exploration of lineage and inheritance runs deeper than just the level of individual ancestry. The roots of one socio-economic system are traced back to another such system, as if the very concept of economic oppression were running in the family. Larry McCaffery points out that Butler's work deliberately addresses such broad questions:

> What gradually becomes clear in both *Kindred* and *Wild Seed* [...] is that the dilemmas facing the heroines arise not only from specific, locatable sources of racial and sexual oppression but also from larger political, economic, and

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[34] Ibid., 246.
[35] Harvey, David, *Spaces of Capital: Towards a Critical Geography.* (New York: Routledge, 2001), x.

psychological forces. The struggle for power, control, and individual dominance/mastery over other creatures and the natural environment is a primal struggle common to all creatures—and it is in this sense that Butler's best work, for all its vivid particularities and subtle treatment of psychological issues, transcends narrow categorization as "black" or "feminist."[36]

It is, of course, tempting and to some extent unavoidable to arrive at this kind of

beyond-the-particularity view of Butler's work. The juxtaposition between the

survival story and its socio-political context makes the social environment appear as if

it were natural.[37] My objection to this reading, although I do agree that "black" or

"feminist" may be too narrow to account for *Kindred*, has to do with the danger of

reading a political and economic system as if it were a jungle and its leaders beasts of

pray. If such were our reading, it would amount to no critique at all: antebellum

slavery would then be one of the greatest playgrounds on which to test the fittest

survivor. Meanwhile, the capitalist economy with its inherent hierarchy would seem

to be a mere reflection (no matter how distorted) of a Darwinian natural environment.

For this reason, I reject the notion that *Kindred* is primarily about survival, although

this seems to be some critics', and possibly even Butler's, favorite line of analysis.

The reason to be suspicious of such a reading lies in the longer quote from *Kindred*

that I offered earlier: if Butler's emphasis falls on the "nonpeople" of both slavery and

capitalism, then her notion of "survival" cannot possibly be reduced to "the primal

struggle common to all creatures," as McCaffery concludes. If Dana is a survivor, she

is a survivor of a social system and not a natural one. This distinction has to be kept

[36] McCaffery, Larry, *Across the Wounded Galaxies: Interviews with Contemporary American Science Fiction Writers*. (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 55.
[37] Regarding survival stories and the progressive (capitalist) taming of the natural world, it is interesting to note that for the first reading lesson Dana gives Rufus, they use *Robinson Crusoe*. Although Dana dislikes the book for its representation of a slave-trading voyage which ends in Crusoe's shipwreck, she says, "as a kind of castaway myself, I was happy to escape into the fictional world of someone else's trouble." (87) The parallel between Dana's and Crusoe's experiences is made on the basis of their struggle to survive, no matter what that survival may require of them. Although contextually very different, their survival is also a slow progress towards a better, more "civilized" world. What is crucial, however, is that Butler also questions the apparent improvements in the contemporary setting.

sharply in focus if we are going to avoid the most disturbing, although familiar, naturalist apologies for political exploitation and abuse.

When she first meets Kevin in an auto-parts warehouse, he calls her a zombie[38]—she seems only superficially alive. She is one of the "nonpeople" and as such, her story has to be read as something other than the celebration of pure and triumphant survival against all odds. The labor agency with its destitute represents one of those non-places—a version of Foucault's heterotopias—in which the real and imaginary horrors of the social world are contained, reflected, ignored or simply kept in check. If Dana is one of such socially erased people, her time travel to the Weylin plantation is not a just a supernatural event but, according to the logic of the novel, a continuation of an already existing displacement. The root of this displacement and of the protagonist's marginal status is then found in the institution of slavery.

4. Surviving histories

Butler's juxtaposition of contemporary capitalism and plantation slavery allows her to make systematic historical comparisons in order to emphasize the cyclical nature of history. Her attempt to illuminate slavery from today's vantage point consists in evoking Nazism and Apartheid, for example, as political phenomena kindred to slavery: "Stories of beating, starvation, filth, disease, torture, every possible degradation. As though Germans had been trying to do in only a few years what the Americans had worked at for nearly two hundred."[39] American slavery is understood here as a product of "hard work" that took many years to bring to full fruition. Nazism, on the other hand, is the "same," only accelerated, attempt. In Dana's version of comparative history, the production of violence speeds up and grows more efficient: one oppressor learns on the experiences of another and counts on the historical

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[38] Butler, *Kindred*, 55.
[39] Ibid., 117.

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memory of brutality to arrive at quicker results. Paradoxically, just like Dana tries to learn from her ancestors, so does one violent political off-spring (Nazism) learn from its historical kin—slavery. Historical moments are thus not only cyclically repeated but are somehow simultaneous: like in a palimpsest, one moment seems to underlie another, connected to it in principle and spirit even though centuries separate them. Time travel is then "travel" only for someone like Dana, whose existence and safety depend on the notion of historical change. For Tom Weylin, however, materializing in the South Africa of 1970s, for example, would not have constituted much of a journey. Taken from this angle, time travel is a relative concept, which affects only those who believe in and depend upon the notion of social change.

According to Thavolia Glymph, the master's house is, like the plantation itself, above all a workplace. As sites of production, the plantation's houses distribute and organize not only labor itself but also the entire scope of daily experience of its working population. Yet, although they provide absolutely everything that ensures the survival of their owner, slaves themselves are no more than a silent backdrop to the loud luxury of the master's house. Glymph's insistence on the "barefooted and ill-clothed"[40] character of slavery creates a useful parallel to Butler's present-day labor agency. Today's under-class of workers, who perform undervalued but vital chores, poorly clothed, poorly fed and, in the end forgotten, seems to echo the ghost-like presence of plantation slaves whose purpose is to erase their own existence in order to make the owners' life smooth. Dana's only distance from such dispossession in both historical moments lies, it would seem, in her ability to formulate and possibly re-shape her reality in writing.

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[40] Glymph, Thavolia, *Out of the House of Bondage: The Transformation of the Plantation Household.* Cambridge University Press, 2008.

5.   Places of solidarity

Despite Butler's focus on the enduring links between contemporary and historical bondage, not all can be reduced to stark oppositions. *Kindred*, at least, makes it impossible to view the plantation merely as a site of violence and exploitation. Butler suggests that, despite the horrors of bondage, there also survives a sense of solidarity among the slaves. The spaces of expropriated labor they perform become sites of their communal bonding based on shared daily conditions and experience. In his commentary on *Kindred*, Robert Crossley remarks that

> Despite the severe stresses under which they live, the slaves constitute a rich human society [...]. Although the black community is persistently fractured by the sudden removal of its members through either the calculated strategy or the mere whim of their white controllers, that community always patches itself back together, drawing from its common suffering and anger a common strength. (275)[41]

Still, the suffering of families broken by the slave trade and the constant threat of mutilation and death plague the "communal" face of the plantation: solidarity among slaves is always paired with the inevitable concern for bare individual survival. In creating this paradox, Butler attempts to avoid the romanticized visions of both black and female solidarity. Instead, *Kindred* is full of conflicted and ambiguous relationships that place the reader in an awkward position of having to accept the feelings and behaviors s/he would rather ignore. Because of the paradox of self-interest on the one hand, and the group dependence on the other, the plantation is a site of complex negotiations.

Analyzing the architecture and spaces of plantation slavery, John Michael Vlach draws attention to the slaves' ability to reclaim the spaces of their confinement and suggests that this too was a strategy of survival:

> Beyond the white master's residence, back of and beyond the Big House, was a world of work dominated by black people. The inhabitants of this world knew

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[41] Crossley, Robert, "Reader's Guide: Critical Essay" in Octavia Butler's *Kindred* (25th Anniversary Edition). Boston: Beacon Press, 2003. pp. 263-284.

it intimately, and they gave to it, by thought and deed, their own definition of place. Slaveowners set up the contexts of servitude, but they did not control those contexts absolutely. There are many chinks in the armor of the "peculiar institution." Taking advantage of numerous opportunities to assert counterclaims over the spaces and buildings to which they were confined, slaves found that they could blunt some of the harsh edges of slavery's brutality. The creation of slave landscapes was one of the strategies employed by blacks to make slavery survivable. (1)[42]

The cookhouse, for example, is one such reclaimed space, in which some autonomy and "privacy" for the slaves can be preserved. On her fourth trip into the past (on which Kevin is accidentally transported as well), Dana is led to the cookhouse and assigned to help Sarah with her daily chores. The cookhouse is "a little white frame cottage not far behind the main house." (72) It is a space both attached to and separate from the main house and, as such, it ensures some form of autonomy from the central spaces of the plantation. Compared with the main house, "the cookhouse looked like the friendliest place [Dana]'d seen since [she] arrived." (72) As she looks around the kitchen, she is confronted with the depth of her alienness: she doesn't recognize or know the names of any of the kitchen utensils hung on the wall. And yet, as she eats her tasteless corn meal mush and slowly learns about Sarah's life, she also observes that the cookhouse is a privileged space of conversation and rest for the slaves: "Life went on around me as though I wasn't there. People came into the cookhouse— always black people—talked to Sarah, lounged around, ate whatever they could put their hands on until Sarah shouted at them and chased them away." (75) In the cookhouse, stories are told and gossip passed along so that this space becomes a kind of communal center and relay point for the entire slave community on the plantation:

> Sometimes old people and children lounged there, or house servants or even field hands stealing a few moments of leisure. I liked to listen to them talk sometimes and fight my way through their accents to find out more about how they survived lives of slavery. Without knowing it, they prepared me to survive. (94)

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[42] Vlach, John Michael, *Back of the Big House: The Architecture of Plantation Slavery.* Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1993.

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Thanks to the relative peace of the cookhouse, Dana encounters her ancestors—face to face. Instead of reading about their strength and courage as she would have done in 1976, she sits next to them and listens to them speak about their experiences. Their wisdom is available to her first hand and she is thus confronted with the immediacy of an otherwise archival memory. It is almost as if the slave narratives of Frederick Douglass, Harriet Jacobs or Mary Prince become living words and a living experience of the narrator. The entire history, which she otherwise evokes as part of her present-day knowledge, becomes her tangible reality precisely in the cookhouse where events are reflected upon as they unfold. In the immediate encounter with the past and with her people, Dana is forced to modify her relationship to the historical narrative.

After her return from the first travel in time, she tells Kevin that her ability to recall the trip rapidly fades: "As real as the whole episode was, as real as I know it was, it's beginning to recede from me somehow. It's becoming like something I saw on television or read about—like something I got second hand." (17) The immediacy of Dana time travel is, paradoxically, something she can only acquire in time. This immediacy is strangely muted and mediated by her present-day reading and viewing habits, which prepare her for everything to be a kind of a stage set.

As the time travel continues and both Kevin and Dana spend more and more time in the past, she realizes that they fit in so easily because they are "not really in": "We were observers watching a show. We were watching history happen around us. And we were actors." (98) Their initial conviction that the stay in the past will be brief, that there is a way out and back into the present, that they are not "really" living in antebellum Maryland, makes Dana and Kevin unable to treat the period as seriously as they should. Slowly, however, as the incidents of violence and brutal bodily injuries accumulate, Dana realizes that the time she is pulled back into is being written all over her body and threatening to kill her. By the end of the novel, however, the

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situation is radically changed. Instead of keeping too much distance, Dana is afraid of being unable to extricate herself from the nineteenth century slave plantation: "Once— God knows how long ago—I had worried that I was keeping too much distance between myself and this alien time. Now there was no distance at all. When had I stopped acting? Why had I stopped?" (221) The loss of distance from the past, both physical and mental, shows Dana's growing ability to feel the past "in her gut," as Butler says, without using her contemporary knowledge, writing practice or return time travel as a way out of her predicament. As soon as she embraces the fact that she is really living in the past and has to submit to its rules, she rebels openly for the first time and kills Rufus Weylin. Understanding slavery as an immediate, although paradoxically historical, fact pushes Dana not to tolerate everything that may happen to her. When Rufus finally makes an attempt to rape her, she stabs him to death. As her historical knowledge becomes her bodily experience, Dana is able to understand for the first time both the submissiveness and the rebellion of her predecessors.

6. Immediate history and its landscape

One dimension of this immediate understanding of the historical past emerges in relation to concrete places and concrete work. For example, as the cookhouse slowly becomes Dana's work place and shelter, she finds herself a participant in plantation labor:

> [...] I spent God knows how long beating biscuit dough with a hatchet on a well-worn stump. [...] I cleaned and plucked a chicken, prepared vegetables, kneaded bread dough, and when Sarah was weary of me, helped Carrie and the other house servants with their work. (81)

Butler's focus on daily household tasks entrusted to the slave women leads her to explore as carefully as possible the plantation as a site of production. Later on, when Dana decides to give clandestine reading lessons to Carrie and Nigel (her single disobedient act), they take place in the cookhouse to which white people never come. In this manner, at least for a little while, the cookhouse is Dana's deepest and most

meaningful connection with her fellow slaves and their experiences. She is not yet

confronted with the full horror of the work that takes place on the plantation: "[...] I

am doing better than field hands," she says to Kevin. "Their pallets are on the ground.

Their cabins don't even have floors, and most of them are full of fleas." (83)

On a subsequent trip, as a form of punishment, Rufus orders his new overseer

Fowler to send Dana to the fields. She is supposed to cut corn moving from the

opposite end of a row towards her fellow worker. She attempts to do as she is

instructed, but the work is too hard and Fowler is constantly coming behind her to lash

her with a whip. She reaches such a degree of exhaustion and pain that all she can

think about is the advantage of passing out or dying:

> I didn't think my shoulders could have hurt much worse if they had been
> broken. Sweat ran down into my eyes and my hands were beginning to blister.
> My back hurt from the blows I'd taken as well as from sore muscles. After a
> while, it was more painful for me to push myself than it was for me to let
> Fowler hit me. After a while, I was so tired I didn't care either way. Pain was
> pain. After a while, I just wanted to lie down between the rows and not get up
> again. (213)

Her demoted status and sudden encounter with the much more grueling work in the

fields transform Dana's perception of slavery. On the one hand, she is more afraid of

what can be done to her since the fields episode severs her reliance on Rufus's

protection; on the other hand, she has less and less to lose and is therefore more

willing to fight back.

The stark contrast between house work and field work (although Vlach argues

that their relative differences were, in the end, exaggerated) may serve to emphasize

Dana's transformed relation to slavery. For as long as she is, more or less, sheltered

by Rufus and resides in or close to the big house, Dana can still consider her plantation

life bearable. As soon as she is confronted with the reality of field work, her entire

sense of the period changes. The house and field, seen not only as two distinct spaces

of slavery but also as two distinct mentalities, appear to be Butler's echo of Malcolm

X's unforgiving speech on the difference between the "house" and the "field Negro":

There was two kinds of slaves. There was the house Negro and the field
Negro. The house Negroes—they lived in the house with master, they dressed
pretty good, they ate good 'cause they ate his food—what he left. They lived
in the attic or the basement, but still they lived near the master; and they loved
their master more than the master loved himself. They would give their life to
save the master's house quicker than the master would. The house Negro, if
the master said, "We got a good house here," the house Negro would say,
"Yeah, we got a good house here." Whenever the master said "we," he said
"we." That's how you can tell a house Negro.

If the master's house caught on fire, the house Negro would fight
harder to put the blaze out than the master would. If the master got sick, the
house Negro would say, "What's the matter, boss, we sick?" We sick! He
identified himself with his master more than his master identified with himself.
And if you came to the house Negro and said, "Let's run away, let's escape,
let's separate," the house Negro would look at you and say, "Man, you crazy.
What you mean, separate? Where is there a better house than this? Where can
I wear better clothes than this? Where can I eat better food than this?" That
was that house Negro.

[...] The field Negro was beaten from morning to night. He lived in a
shack, in a hut. He wore old, castoff clothes. He hated his master. I say he
hated his master. He was intelligent. That house Negro loved his master. But
that field Negro—remember, they were in the majority, and they hated the
master. When the house caught on fire, he didn't try and put it out; that field
Negro prayed for a wind, for a breeze. When the master got sick, the field
Negro prayed that he'd die. If someone come [sic] to the field Negro and said,
"Let's separate, let's run," he didn't say "Where we going?" He'd say, "Any
place is better than here."[43]

Dana's experience reflects Malcolm X's binary to perfection. The question she has to

confront is, literally, the question of identification with her master, not because she is

merely submissive but because, in *Kindred*, the master is her kin. As if she were

pushing the image to its extreme, Butler follows the path of Dana as the "house

Negro," but complicates her devotion to the master by making her very birth

dependent on his survival.

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[43] Malcolm X, "Message to the Grassroots", speech delivered on November 10, 1963 in Detroit, MI. 13
August 2008. <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/malcolmxgrassroots.htm>

In one such literal exploration of the Grassroots speech, Dana appears in Rufus's room in time to put out a fire he had set to his room in order to protest against his authoritarian father, Tom Weylin. And truly, as Malcolm X argues, she fights "harder to put the blaze out than the master would." As I suggested earlier with respect to the ambiguity of belonging, Dana would probably say "we" and "our" in reference to the master's house. She feels that, to a certain extent, the Weylin house is her home. When Rufus is ill, again exactly like Malcolm X describes, Dana nurses him back to health as if her own life were at stake. The particularity of Butler's approach to this problem lies, however, in the indissoluble and fully recognized connection between Dana and Rufus: if anything happened to him, she would also cease to exist. Her "house Negro" attitude is therefore taken as far as it can possibly go: it is shown to arise from an actual and undeniable (although absolutely involuntary) tie between the master and his slave. Moreover, even if she wanted to, Dana feels that she could not deny her help and caring to the person in need.

We are left to wonder, however, if this altruism is a consequence of Dana's unwavering will to survive or of her supremely generous nature. If it is the latter— and the question is never resolved—then Dana is more of a human being than any of her masters will ever be. She is able to rescue and help the man who she knows will become her torturer. Worse still, she is trapped by an unexpected feeling of love for Rufus: "I hadn't expected to still care about him except for my own and my family's sake. I didn't want to care." (203) The implication is, of course, that she does. On another occasion, she remarks: "[...] he wanted me around—someone to talk to, someone who would listen to him and care what he said, care about him. And I did. However little sense it made, I cared. I must have. I kept forgiving him for things..." (180) In this manner, she appears to be a victim to her gentler feelings, but also Rufus's superior for having them. She often ceases to act in her own best interest in

order to act in the interest of another and can be forced into submission not because she is afraid for herself, but because she is afraid for the others.[44] This dimension of Dana's character is what, on occasion, raises her above slavery and makes her able to salvage her own humanity.

However, after just one day of field work, Dana acquires some of that "field Negro" attitude: she is able to imagine herself severing the ties that bind her to Rufus. At first, she attempts suicide and by spilling her own blood, Rushdy argues, she "manages to escape her 'blood relationship' with Rufus." (147) This ultimate gesture of breaking away from Rufus comes after he sells Sam, one of the field slaves, to an itinerant coffle driver merely because he catches Sam and Dana in conversation. Rufus's deep and brutal need to own everything around him, and people most of all, then becomes so clear to Dana that slavery takes on a new meaning. It is not just a historical and economic fact but also a profound personal relationship in which one person is the subject and the other just an object of his whim. When Dana sees the trader leading Sam away in chains while Sam's family is watching the coffle and weeping, she pleads with Rufus only to discover that "it is like talking to the wall of the house." (238)[45] It is after Rufus slaps her for interfering and Sam's sister, in despair, calls her a "no-'count nigger whore" that Dana runs into the house and slits her wrists. She decides to disengage herself from Rufus's life because she finally understands that his blind possessive cruelty cannot be changed by any form of influence she may have wished to exert on him. Rufus's whimsical violence also makes her more afraid of him than she ever thought possible. In this clash between feelings of fear and indignation, she discovers, in the end, some form of truth about

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[44] Dana explains exactly what kind of control Rufus has over her: "He had already found the way to control me—by threatening others. That was safer than threatening me directly, and it worked." (169)

[45] Rufus's "wall-like" presence is, I think, significant and I will return to it at the end of this chapter in order to show a very peculiar meaning that the house as a built structure has in this novel. In this built structure, Rufus is, literally, a wall.

the past. It is a time of submission and resistance, of the loss and recovery of self, all at once.

Butler herself notes in an interview that her goal in writing *Kindred* consisted precisely in this attempt to understand why slaves did not refuse their condition, no matter what it would have cost them:

> [...] *Kindred* grew out of something I heard when I was in college, during the mid-1960s. I was a member of a black student union, along with this guy who had been interested in black history before it became fashionable. He was considered quite knowledgeable, but his attitude about slavery was very much like the attitude I had held when I was thirteen—that is, he felt that the older generation should have rebelled. He once commented, "I wish I could kill off all these old people who have been holding us back for so long, but I can't because I would have to start with my own parents." This man knew a great deal more than I did about black history, but he didn't feel it in his gut. In *Kindred*, I wanted to take somebody with this guy's upbringing—he was pretty much a middle class black—and put him in the antebellum South to see how well he stood up. (65)[46]

She soon realizes, however, that everything is wrong about such a character—"his body language, the way he looked at white people, the fact that he looked at white people at all." Instead, she chooses to focus on an abused female character, dangerous enough to kill, but not perceived as such. The outcome is Dana, a woman strong enough to resist and smart enough to negotiate depending on the circumstance. Moreover, Dana is a writer and, beyond the obvious fact that she echoes Butler's profession, her writer's approach to the past leads her to rewrite it.

7.   Reading and re-writing history: the problem of communication

Yet, although many slave narratives offer the acquisition of literacy as "*the vital means of escape form physical and mental bondage*,"[47] *Kindred* suggests instead that Dana has to liberate herself from the abstraction of the written word in order to face the immediacy of a given experience, no matter how unreal it may seem. When

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[46] McCaffery, *Across the Wounded Galaxies*.

[47] Steinberg, Marc, "Inverting History in Octavia Butler's Postmodern Slave Narrative." *African American Review*, 38.3 (Autumn 2004), 474.

she attempts to write about her time travel, after many failed attempts, she realizes that she is unable to commit to paper the complexity of events, feelings and thoughts that she had encountered: "Once I sat down at my typewriter and tried to write about what had happened, made about six attempts before I gave up and threw them all away. Someday when this was over, if it was ever over, maybe I would be able to write about it."[48] It is clear, however, that "this"—the reality of history and one's encounter with it—can never be "over" and that, consequently, there may never come a time when Dana can write about her time travel. Instead, as Rushdy convincingly argues, Dana must resort to a form of communication which is "more dialogic, more capable of communing with her partner at the same time as it communicates with the past."[49] Instead of writing her story, she narrates it to Kevin and turns, in the process, her almost unspeakable experiences into a dialogue between their two races, which the time travel had threatened to split apart.

In Butler's hands, however, "communication" proves to be a multifarious concept. It would be very satisfying—but almost too easy—to conclude that Dana must modify her medium of communication in order to accommodate a more dialogic engagement with her past and present. Rushdy argues that this dialogic medium is memory, which ultimately provides her with a way of reconstructing a sense of home. As I hope to have shown, however, there is no way to evoke "home" in *Kindred* without running into the obstacle of its inherent ambivalence. First of all, in *Kindred*, something intangible, which is transmitted, or communicated, across time and space is history itself. Looking at it from another angle, to communicate with history is to become, in turn, someone intangible, spectral, who can travel beyond the boundaries of the rationally possible in order to confront the irrationality of the given. In order to

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[48] Butler, *Kindred*, 116.
[49] Rushdy, "Families of Orphans," 141.

acquire the concrete "microscopic view" of history, to evoke Levecq's useful phrase, Dana has to accept her own disintegration. As a result of her back-and-forth movement, either the past looks unreal, or the present does. In either case, the emphasis falls on the price of "communication," not its relative benefits.

In order to illustrate this, let me focus for a moment on the ambiguous etymology of the word "communication." According to the *OED*, it is uncertain whether the word is derived from the Latin "com"—together, and "munis"—bound, under obligation, or from "com" and "unus"—like one. In Dana's case, both meanings are crucial for the unfolding of the novel and, particularly, for the ambiguity of its ending. In the last scene of her time travel, Dana stabs Rufus in self defense and he collapses on top of her, still gripping her arm:

> His body went limp and leaden across me. I pushed him away somehow—everything but his hand still on my arm. Then I convulsed with terrible, wrenching sickness.
>
> Something harder and stronger than Rufus's hand clamped down on my arm, squeezing it, stiffening it, pressing into it—painlessly, at first—melting into it, meshing with it as though somehow my arm were being absorbed into something. Something cold and nonliving.
>
> Something…paint, plaster, wood—a wall. The wall of my living room. I was back at home—in my own house, in my own time. But I was still caught somehow, joined to the wall as though my arm were growing out of it—growing into it. From the elbow to the end of my fingers, my left arm had become a part of the wall. I looked at the spot where the flesh joined with plaster, stared at it uncomprehending. It was the exact spot Rufus's fingers had grasped.
>
> I pulled my arm toward me, pulled hard.
>
> And suddenly, there was an avalanche of pain, red impossible agony! And I screamed and screamed.[50]

As if to echo the two dictionary definitions, Dana's communication with the past ends like this: with her arm merging with the wall (com-unus), and with her being bound to it (com-munis). Rufus's *nonliving* presence is paradoxically part of Dana's *living* room: in her home in 1976 Los Angeles the walls contain and preserve the threat of

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[50] Butler, *Kindred*, 260-1.

slavery, violence and the "red agony" of kinship. Somehow, the pull of that past threatens never to end. Although most critics suggest that there is a cost to Dana's time travel but that after the price is paid, Dana can proceed to rebuild her life and identity anew, the image of the Rufus-wall is much more disturbing than that: the communicating wall between Dana's past and present is also always a spatial marker of a possible opening that will permanently connect the two. In this sense, the unhomeliness of Dana's home continues to shape the novel until its end and is not resolved by the fact that her time travel appears to end with Rufus's death.

In the "Prologue," which narrates some of the post-amputation events, Dana emphasizes the fact that she will never feel safe again. The illusion of a dividing wall between her and the past of slavery is for ever broken. The past is in the very structure of her house, living around her, reminding her that her own life is built out of and on the seemingly nonliving traces of history. The spatial dimension of this ending is an appropriate way to conclude a novel whose main focus is precisely the haunting spatialized encounter with past events, which have heretofore been perceived as dead. Moreover, Dana is still not sure of the direction of the pull. Her arm appears to be growing out of the wall, or growing into it. Is Dana merging with her past, melting into it, as she suggests, and growing from it; or has that past now grown and melted into her life, never to leave her again? The uncanny dimension of this fundamental uncertainty, this disorientation, is until the end of the novel faithfully depicted as a bodily and spatial phenomenon.

Although most critics argue for the emergence of a new self and Dana's ultimate emancipation from the past (her growth *from* the wall), I would suggest in conclusion, that Butler's insistence on the uncanny ambivalence of the spatialized interplay between the present and the past, is far from being entirely conciliatory or hopeful. Emancipation comes, to return to an interesting etymological point, from

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Latin *emancipatus* (pp. of *emancipare*): "to declare (someone) free, to give up one's authority over someone," but more importantly, it comes from *ex-* "out, away" + *mancipare* "deliver, transfer or sell," from *mancipum* "ownership," from *manus* "hand" + *capere* "take."[51] To be emancipated is, in *Kindred*, literally an event of losing one's hand to the grip of another, relinquishing ownership of a part of one's own body for the sake of freedom from bondage. The place at which the two spaces, the past and the present, communicate—the wall of Dana's house—is also a place that will not release its grip on her body, until her hand is, not freed, but in the end, obliterated in the process of emancipation. The house of the present day is thus always potentially open to becoming a place of bondage; its walls contain a nonliving Rufus-the-slaveholder who can always come back to life. This is a much less comforting, but a much more potent warning about the endurance of the past in and through the present living environment. Its consequence is, of course, a telling comment on contemporary racial relations: to some extent, Dana remains destitute in her own home, which is neither a place of comfort nor safety. It is instead a reminder of the possible intrusion of racial oppression and violence into the space that is only in appearance built to protect her. The walls which she hopes will shelter her from the outside threat turn out to be, in their very structure, precisely the thing she wishes to shut out. By focusing on the spatial manifestation of such a threat, Butler clearly shows that there is no safe inside and dangerous outside and that no such neat dichotomy can protect the protagonist from the reality of possible oppression, lived or remembered. Because this is indeed, as Butler suggests, "far too much reality," it will not be shut out.

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[51] Skeat, Walter W., *The Concise Dictionary of English Etymology*. Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions, 1993.

Chapter 5: CONCLUSION

The Subject as Location

> Whoever has no house now, will never have one.
> Whoever is alone will stay alone [...].
>
> Rainer Maria Rilke, "Autumn Day"

My argument centers on the absence of place rather than its existence or possibility. In reading diasporic postcolonial literature, I focus on the problem of spatial dispossession, individually experienced and systematic, which defines colonialism as well as its postcolonial aftermath. The colonial conquest-driven view of the world presupposes and generates unequal and violent political relationships in which the colonizing power puts itself in charge of someone else's region, language, culture and life. The conquered are then strangers in their own world, which is transformed into a kind of hybrid between what used to be, could have been and now must evolve. What I consider as "location" or "place" in this narrative is not only the physical site of a culture, but also individual and communal identity. Throughout this project, I define identity itself as location: a place one chooses or is assigned, the site where one is, stands, exists, is situated. As a matter of fact, these words share their root: it is the Indo-European "sta,"[1] which designates standing. Not only is the particular physical location, a site, thus closely related to the notion of a body and, by extension, its identity, but also to a whole set of concepts important for my discussion: words like *state, status, establish, exist, destitute,* and *resist* among many others, all derive from this same root, which designates standing and staying.

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[1] In slightly varied forms, "sta" is found in a whole set of Indo-European languages such as Sanskrit, Greek, Latin, the Teutonic group (Anglo-Saxon, Islandic, Old High German) and Slavonic. It means "to stand."

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Metaphorically speaking, much is contained in the image of a standing person. In the novels I analyze, this linguistic image encapsulates communal autonomy and right to self-determination, personal dignity, cultural specificity, and revived memory that all depend on being housed in the place of one's choice. Consequently, standing upright in order to resist socio-economic and cultural destitution becomes a fundamental concern for the three novels I address here: the outcome determines the scope of individual and communal freedom. The physical places described in *A House for Mr. Biswas*, *Texaco* or *Kindred* crystallize the protagonists' ambiguous and complex relationship to the New World, where their ancestors were, in the course of the Atlantic slave trade, brought by force and kept against their will. Now, in the novels I analyze, they struggle to redefine their understanding not only of this diasporic location itself, but also of their own identity in it. Incomplete memories, inadequate homes, and partial self-understanding threaten to turn these protagonists' identity into either a pure fiction or an ossified token of some historically frustrated "original" existence. Like Salman Rushdie's Saleem Sinai, they are all "handcuffed to history"—a history of colonialism through which they become destitute in the first place.

However, the struggle to reinvent and, in the process of storytelling, bring into being another notion of spatial and historical identity forms the central and most original contribution of these novels. Naipaul, Chamoiseau and Butler recognize, unflinchingly, the horrors of slavery, dispossession, and minor status and offer, in return, a view of destitution as productive of narrative resistance. Although this narrative resistance and its imaginative contestation of coercive history may fail to transform the reality of postcolonial destitution, the construction of alternative identities in these texts offers the literary itself as an area of autonomous living. The utopian potential of such literature underscores the necessity to resist and transform

the reality of political and economic limitations: the absence of place is productive of imaginary spaces, whose existence is—by the end of these novels—shown as more powerful than the reality of material deprivation. At the same time, we are always made aware that the utopian dimension of the narrative, which contests destitution by the simple act of formulating it, cannot and should not substitute the pressing fundamental question of what it really means to marginalize people and deprive them of their ability to stand on their own.

The etymological meaning of "destitution"—to be placed outside—organizes my readings of the three novels and creates a conceptual link between them. I argue that the three texts share a concern with a fundamental paradox of colonialism: its practice of exclusion through forced inclusions. The systematic expulsion of the colonized from the geopolitical hierarchy of the global world rests, paradoxically, on the violently enforced participation of the enslaved peoples in the building of that hierarchy. Throughout colonial history and independently of specific locations we might focus on, the colonized are brought into the colonial system not only as the necessary contrapuntal Other to the colonizing powers, but above all as cheap labor or a kind of raw material of colonialism. In other words, the colonized are brought inside in order to play the outsider. "Destitution" allows me to emphasize the double meaning of this socioeconomic exclusion: "to be placed outside" suggests that the outsider is forced out after having been brought in. In other words, an outsider to the system had to be made its member first. Most generally speaking, this is what colonization produces—an enforced and violent bringing of the colonized into the system only to expel them as that system's undesirable remainders. On this very general level, the three novels I analyze in this dissertation share a common concern with the lasting cultural and socio-economic consequences of this colonial hierarchy in which dominant cultures and languages derive their centrality through the creation of

their cultural destitute. To be destitute in the colonial and postcolonial contexts means to suffer from an irresolvable split between material ownership and existential authenticity. The colonial subject is deprived of both by a single gesture that turns the colonized into property and substitutes human freedom for material possession. This colonial deprivation imposes on the colonial subject a desire for material possession and ownership of self, which are falsely presented as interchangeable. But as "my" novels clearly show, a material pursuit does not gratify an existential need nor does existential wealth resolve the problems of material poverty. "Destitution" is for me the concept that designates both the political and textual aspects of this problem of ownership/authorship.

Although "destitution" allows me to bring the three texts together by focusing on their protagonists—Mr. Biswas, Marie-Sophie Laborieux and Dana Franklin—who all construct their sense of self by writing their story in order to house it, the answers we find in these novels differ profoundly. In the case of Mr. Biswas, the answer to poverty and the socio-cultural abyss of his existence resides in the continuously deferred dream of the physical shelter of a house with the idea of being someone accomplished and recognized. Because Mr. Biswas's notion of self depends on his notion of ownership (of a house and, by extension, his own identity), his homelessness must ultimately result in the crumbling of self. Not only is his isolated marginality deprived of meaningful human connections, but he also fails to become an autonomous person because his dignity depends on precisely the material ownership from which he is precluded. In this manner, Mr. Biswas is the victim of the logic of ownership that structures colonialism in the first place, excluding him even as it presents itself as the sole means of self-possession. Ultimately, however, I attempt to show that in failing to stand on his own, Mr. Biswas serves as the most moving reminder of what it means to try.

By contrast, in Chamoiseau's *Texaco*, the notions of autonomous self and location do not rely on the concept of ownership, but on the creative notion of sharing. Despite their poverty and personal tragedies, the residents of the slum succeed in weaving their narratives together and, because their sense of identity is communal, they triumph in their resistance. The urban significance of the slum is derived from the life of its community, no matter how marginal it may appear. Although Chamoiseau's novel is, to some extent, a powerful response to Naipaul's sense of irreparable loss and failure, it cannot, despite its exuberant narrative utopia, neutralize or annul the profoundly relevant question that Mr. Biswas poses: what about those who do not succeed in standing on their own or have no one to stand with? What about fear and poverty? The two texts are connected by their deep concern with destitution born of colonialism, yet where one recognizes the terrible limits of destitution, the other continues to imagine and expand, at least narratively, beyond such limits.

Finally, through Octavia Butler's *Kindred*, I look at the continuity of colonial destitution through its radically spatialized history. Dana Franklin's time travel between slaveholding Maryland and 1970s California allows Butler to establish a disturbing kinship of destitution through the centuries: the African-American protagonist finds herself torn, and literally torn apart, by the lasting violence of contemporary capitalist exploitation that finds its blood relation, its kindred, in the history of slavery. In this version of destitution, the historical origins of an oppressive system—exploitative capitalism and its lingering white supremacy—find their roots, across time, in the systematically racialized violence of slavery. Those who were once slaves continue to exist on the margin of the so-called free world and can trace their contemporary destitution back to its historical sources. In Butler's analysis of destitution, a lesser status or identity cannot be simply resolved or re-imagined: they

are built into the "house" of our social world and can only begin to change if and when they are recognized as constitutive of our history. In Butler's view, the historical violence of slavery can be discerned today from the status of "masters" and "slaves" in contemporary hierarchies, in which the germ of violent encounters continues to live.

There is nothing wrong, of course, with the encounter between cultures and peoples, but there is critical attention to be paid to the particular way we meet and to the lasting consequences of the initial encounter. From this perspective, even today, the violence of colonialism does not stop. As I write this, somewhere in the world, someone continues to grab the land, lives and futures of those populations that have been, and continue to be, defined as minor, alien and ultimately dispensable. What precedes such violence and makes it possible is, of course, a practice of systematic evaluation: whenever the Europeans, for example, encountered another race or culture, they managed to relegate it to some sphere of analysis and identification that annuls the other's claim to humanity. In his preface to Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), Sartre emphasizes precisely this point:

> Our soldiers overseas, rejecting the universalism of the mother country, apply the "numerus clausus" to the human race: since none may enslave, rob, or kill his fellow man without committing a crime, they lay down the principle that the native is not one of our fellow men. Our striking power has been given the mission of changing this abstract certainty into reality: the order is given to reduce the inhabitants of the annexed country to the level of superior monkeys in order to justify the settler's treatment of them as beasts of burden. Violence in the colonies does not only have for its aim the keeping of these enslaved men at arm's length: it seeks to dehumanize them. Everything will be done to wipe out their traditions, to substitute our language to theirs and to destroy their culture without giving them ours. (15)[2]

From another perspective, offered by Joseph Conrad in *Heart of Darkness* (1899), it is precisely the unacknowledged humanity of the oppressed that so frightens the colonial oppressor and makes him pursue with relentless violence and determination the project

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[2] Sartre, Jean-Paul, "Preface" to Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*. New York: Grove Press, 1963, pp. 7-31.

of white supremacy. The fear and ultimate "horror" of human kinship across the established lines of racial superiority and privilege leads the colonizer to view such kinship as "remote":

> It was unearthly, and the men were— No, they were not inhuman. Well, you know, that was the worst of it—this suspicion of their not being inhuman. It would come slowly to one. They howled and leaped, and spun and made horrid faces; but what thrilled you was just the thought of their humanity—like yours—the thought of your remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproar. Ugly. (105)[3]

What interests me in this narrative of human hierarchy, which ultimately plagues the western world as much as it plagues its historical victims, is the taxonomic gesture of finding, classifying and naming the Other in order to place him/her within a bound system of claims and rights only to deny them. Designating a subject of any kind is already an indexical gesture by which the finger-pointing accomplishes not only the necessary "socialization" of an unnamed stranger, a pulling into my world, but also the violence of his/her potential expulsion from that same world. Such expulsion is what I have in mind when, in this dissertation, I read "destitution" as a category of spatial and ideological exteriority in postcolonial fiction. Louis Althusser's discussion of interpellation, which constitutes the subject, pulls him into the system and can, ultimately, expel him from it, informs my understanding of identity and its socio-political placement.

In his "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,"[4] Althusser discusses the production of the ideological subject through a perpetual and inflexible assignation of social roles. If individuals or a community fail at participating in this ideological game by which they are interpellated into a fixed social place, the threat of a repressive system immediately springs into action to enforce the seemingly "obvious"

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[3] Conrad, Joseph, *Heart of Darkness and The Secret Sharer*. Signet: New American Library, 1950.
[4] Althusser, Louis. "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)". *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*. Trans. Ben Brewster. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971.

and therefore uncontested regulation of roles and social possibilities of various

subjects, understood both individually and collectively. If, for Althusser, we are

always already subjects by means of ideological identification authorized by the State,

it remains unclear, however, what kind of subjects we are and how exactly the

conditions of our ideological placement determine the level, quality and scope of our

subjecthood (and ultimately our humanity).

The three novels that I analyze in this dissertation not only formulate this

question, but also probe and complicate Althusser's understanding of ideologically

assigned subject-positions. Naipaul, Chamoiseau and Butler contribute to this

important discussion of socio-political emplacement by drawing attention to the

ambiguous and problematic status of marginal location: the protagonists in these

novels desire, reject, or create social and personal places that contradict our ideas of

revolutionary postcoloniality as much as they dismantle the conservative status-quo.

No one in these novels wants to own a large suburban house and become a respectable

white man (this would be ironic: "my" authors are either *not* white or *not* men!), but

they all want to own. This desire for housed property and re-appropriation of

identity—itself understood as a right to a proper name and place—centers the three

novels on the spatial configurations of identity, its realities and fictions. Such spatial

configurations—houses, neighborhoods, and other domains of located identity—

produce a complex view of the mutually constitutive notions of the inside and outside,

psychological and political, private and public. However, this notion of spatial

property is, at the same time, a matter of linguistic and narrative re-appropriation. In

Patrick Chamoiseau's *Texaco*, for example, the battle for the slum of Texaco

culminates in a battle for naming or, the freedom to "hail" (to re-inscribe Althusser's

concept) one's own location and identity. Paradoxically then, Texaco and its

inhabitants struggle for the right to "self-interpellation"—if one may call it that—and

attempt to assign themselves a subject-position of their own choosing. Of course, according to Althusser's system of analysis, one may not be able to hail oneself because hailing is ultimately a violent and reductive conversion of the individual real into the political imaginary. Yet it is precisely this impossibility—and the gesture of attempting it—that defines the ambition and resignation in these novels.

The spatial dimension of the subject, understood precisely as an ideological location, characterizes Althusser's approach to the subject-assigning practice of interpellation. One of the crucial aspects of hailing, as Althusser shows, is its power forcibly to situate and fix a concrete individual into a stable subject position. From this perspective, Althusser's account centers on the ideological localizability of the subject or, even more precisely, on the subject seen as nothing more than a given social location. The spatial category depends, however, on a significant although entirely implicit tension: between authorized, legitimate, and surveyed spaces as opposed to marginal, illegitimate and clandestine ones. In order to show this dimension of the three novels, I focus on the destitute and their relationship to their living spaces. The defining characteristic of a destitute is his relation to the space he cannot inhabit or own. Borrowed or threatened space, and the anxiety created by it, constitute the destitute's relationship to the owner and, by extension, to all other institutional forces that appear to be legitimate and, through ownership, fully grounded in their social and political territories. From this perspective, the three novels ultimately address the legitimacy of the subject and the manner in which socio-political forces at large sanction or cancel subject positions. The notion of ownership matters here precisely because it raises the fundamental question of human freedom, of owning oneself or being owned by another. Although Althusser's subject of any kind belongs, by definition, to the system which creates him (and is, arguably, an object in that system), the matter of ownership becomes increasingly more important

in the postcolonial context, where the historical memory of slavery and indentured

labor continually brings the question of ownership—over places and identity—back

into focus.

When Althusser describes the essential features of an ideological subject, he

emphasizes the indissoluble link between the notion of the "subject" and the structures

of "ideology":

> [...] the category of the subject is constitutive of all ideology, but at the same
> time and immediately I add that *the category of the subject is only constitutive
> of all ideology insofar as all ideology has the function (which defines it) of
> 'constituting' concrete individuals as subjects*. In the interaction of this double
> constitution exists the functioning of all ideology, ideology being nothing but
> its functioning in the material forms of existence of that functioning. (171)

In other words, ideology can be perceived as material precisely in the way it

constitutes, regulates and limits the subject, who in turn makes ideology possible by

taking on and taking seriously the ideological role to which he is assigned. The

category of the subject then becomes, according to Althusser, the "primary

obviousness" by which our imagination limits itself in order to transform the contours

and rituals of our subject position into something natural and obvious. We persist in

seeing ourselves as "concrete, individual, distinguishable and (naturally) irreplaceable

subjects" (173), although we are merely called upon to occupy a fixed socio-political

location in a system of random social labeling.

The practice of "interpellation," which inaugurates the subject, is famously

exemplified by an imaginary scene[5]: that of a policeman who stops us in the street by

calling out, 'Hey, you there!' We inevitably turn around and thus perform a "physical

conversion" (174) into a subject who can be stopped because he believes in the

legitimacy of the hailing voice.[6] The violence of such a conversion lies not only in the

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[5] He actually calls it a "theoretical theatre" (174).

[6] In *Bodies that Matter* (1993), Judith Butler further explains this move: "In Althusser's notion of
interpellation, it is the police who initiate the call or address by which a subject becomes socially
constituted. There is the policeman, the one who not only represents the law but whose address 'Hey

limitation of individual and communal existence, but also in the fact that the practice

of hailing ultimately ascribes to the concrete individual a fixed and unchangeable

location, or rather, treats the subject himself as a location, a place of residence—fixed,

named, numbered. The fundamental arbitrariness of housing a human being in a

rigidly fixed social position becomes clearly visible when, in all three novels I

analyze, the protagonists are hailed into positions they neither want nor recognize as

their own. The practice of interpellation, which, according to Althusser, presumably

ensures for subjects "the *recognition* that they really do occupy the place it designates

for them as theirs in the world, a fixed residence" (178) backfires for the destitute in

"my" novels. When they are recognized in their "fixed residence," they are simply

forced to perform a "one-hundred-and-eighty-degree physical conversion" (Althusser

174) into a socio-political existence they loathe and wish to flee—the position of a

colonized people, a lesser race in a lesser world. In this perfect paradox of location,

whose reversible nature forever oscillates between home and prison, a postcolonial

subject like Mr. Biswas, for example, remains caught in an endless cycle of residential

anxiety, fighting the arbitrary violence of colonial placement through wishful fictions

about ideal place. These two types of physical locations translate, of course, into two

corresponding versions of identity: one violently assigned, the other resisting. The

latter necessarily fails because, as we know from Althusser's discussion, a subject can

only be hailed, and therefore brought into being, by an authoritative voice. It is

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you!' has the effect of binding the law to the one who is hailed. This 'one' who appears not to be in a
condition to trespass prior to the call (for whom the call establishes a given practice as a trespass) is not
fully a social subject, is not fully subjectivated, for he or she is not yet reprimanded. The reprimand
does not merely repress or control the subject, but forms a crucial part of the judicial and social
formation of the subject." (121) Butler's goal, however, is to complicate Althusser's analysis by
examining the production of the "agency" of a hailed subject precisely through the practice of hailing,
which "enables" a response to the address. It is unclear to me to what extent one is enabled or
annihilated by interpellation. I would argue that the system the destitute occupies, its violence and his
own "illegitimacy" in it, prevent him from being able to respond in any other way but through self-
destruction or fiction. These are, in the end, acts of resistance, no matter how inadequate or
inconclusive.

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therefore not surprising that in all three novels, the protagonists are striving authors: their dream is to acquire a position of authority from which a new—better— conversion of the subject can be scripted.

An alternative reading of (post)colonial location and identity centers on the necessity of a radical reversal: in *The Wretched of the Earth*, Frantz Fanon emphasizes not only the need but also the inevitability of a violent transformation of the colonial world because, as he points out, "decolonization is always a violent phenomenon." (35)[7] The world of the colonizer (the settler) and the colonized remain in a relation of "reciprocal exclusivity" (39) and between them, no conciliation is possible. Fanon's "anticolonialism" lies in this mutual canceling out of the two worlds precisely because their relationship is irreconcilably oppositional: one term must and will annul the other. In this case, the violence of the assigned subject-position (which Althusser will define as ideological), has to be countered. The revolutionary gesture of refusing the imposed socio-political role of the colonized entails, then, a radical reversal of all relations that make such a role possible in the first place. Revolution is, in this case, a radical conversion of an existing set of already violent colonial relations. In other words, the revolutionary anticolonial violence is made inevitable by the systemic and structural violence of the colonial world. Turning the colonial world up-side-down, the anticolonial struggle will reverse the existing relations so that, as Fanon reminds us, "the last shall be first and the first last." (37)

Borrowing from Althusser's discussion of the subject, we could say that Fanon's anticolonial struggle ultimately presupposes a rejection of a violently assigned subject position in favor of another subject position that the revolutionary class will assign to itself, making itself in the process the author of its own ideological

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[7] Fanon, Fratz, *The Wretched of the Earth*. Translated by Constance Farrington. New York: Grove Press, 1963.

existence. This is, ideally, what revolution means and does: it replaces an imposed

ideological and repressive authority by a presumably better, more organic, more

genuine one. At the very least, it replaces the imposed authority by the chosen one.

And this distinction—between the imposed and the chosen—constitutes the difference

between the upright, standing man and the downtrodden or, as Fanon has it, the

wretched.

Fanon opens his discussion of the wretched by evoking, above all, their

confined and squalid places of residence, which I understand as both physical and

symbolic, architectural and ideological:

> The town belonging to the colonized people, or at least the native town, the
> Negro village, the medina, the reservation, is a place of ill fame, peopled by
> men of evil repute. They are born there, it matters little where or how; they die
> there, it matters not where or how. It is a world without spaciousness; men live
> there on top of each other, and their huts are built one on top of the other. The
> native town is a hungry town, starved of bread, of meat, of shoes, of coal, of
> light. The native town is a crouching village, a town on its knees, a town
> wallowing in the mire. It is a town of niggers and dirty Arabs. The look that
> the native turns on the settler's town is a look of lust, a look of envy; it
> expresses his dreams of possession—all manner of possession: to sit at the
> settler's table, to sleep in the settler's bed, with his wife if possible. The
> colonized man is an envious man. And this the settler knows very well; when
> their glances meet he ascertains bitterly, always on the defensive, "They want
> to take our place." It is true, for there is no native who does not dream at least
> once a day of setting himself up in the settler's place. (39)[8]

This is the core of any revolution: it will enable a fill-circle conversion by which the

"native" will replace the "settler." One term of the binary system will cancel out the

other—it will set itself up in the other's place.

Fanon insists here on the fundamental humiliation of the colonized, which

stems, among other things, from the hierarchy of colonial locations: the native town is

a "crouching village, a town on its knees." The inability of the native town to stand on

its own two feet brings back into focus my initial suggestion that the fundamental

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[8] Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth.*

problem of the postcolonial novel lies in its concern with destitution. Those who are pushed down to crouch, as Fanon puts it, and to "wallow in the mire" will continue to dream of and fight for their standing, upright position.[9] Symbolically, but also literally, this should be a position of a human being, denied by and abolished under the colonial system. Fanon makes a clear connection here between a place of residence, an urban and geographical location, and its direct link to one's sense of humanity. The way we live, where and how, allows for or deprives us of our human characteristics. In Fanon's text, the phrase "it matters not where, or how" recurs. The conditions of existence of the "lesser" human being are irrelevant. The mass of hungry indistinguishable people replaces any notion of a particular human being, for and to whom we would feel responsible. Such a mass is stripped of its history and, possibly, its future. Instead, it is a feature-less agglomerate, deprived, as Fanon points out, of any "spaciousness." And having no "spaciousness," it has no meaningful identity: to have no place is to run the risk of vanishing completely.

One way of opposing such nothingness of location, or "the void" that Naipaul so relentlessly explores, is already implied, although unexplored, in Althusser's theory of the subject. If interpellation converts a "concrete individual" into an ideological subject, this conversion, since it is ideological, can itself be converted in order to transform one type of subjecthood into another. If Althusser's ideology is "imaginary," it follows that any subject who becomes aware of the ideological underpinnings of his subject position can plot ways to be free of it and replace it by a different kind of imaginary location. Since Althusser defines ideology as representing "the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence" (162), one form of opposition to the violence of colonial interpellation would consist

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[9] In Fanon's discussion, however, such dreaming is far from enough: his theoretical and concrete participation in the anticolonial struggle involves material and practical forms of resistance and refuses to be reduced to a position of "dreaming," which could amount to the quiet acceptance of inequality.

precisely in positing a different set of imaginary relations. Opposition would consist, in other words, in re-imagining an alternative kind of subject. Although we are now placed at a double remove from any reality since ideology is here a representation of the imaginary, somewhere—no matter how far away and buried – Althusser still talks about our "real conditions of existence." The utopian gesture of the postcolonial text would consist, then, in imagining a transformation of these real conditions of existence through alternative literary narratives, which offer a substitute subject-location in order to counter the oppression of existing ones.

A valuable critique—and ultimate recognition—of this postcolonial gesture of imaginative transcendence is to be found in Peter Hallward's *Absolutely Postcolonial* (2001). Concerned with postcolonial theory's persistent refusal to name and work with its conceptual location, Hallward argues that "the signature postcolonial concepts—the hybrid, the interstitial, the intercultural, the in-between, the indeterminate, the counter-hegemonic, the contingent and so on—are so many attempts to evoke that which no concept can 'capture'." (xi)[10] Hallward's point, which favors Fanon and other anticolonial thinkers over the postcolonial ones, is well taken:

> Like Parry and her allies, I see the specifically colonial relation as an emphatically divisive and exploitative one, and understand colonialism to be less a matter of 'interstitial agency' than the product of 'military conquest, massacres and dispossession, forced labour, and cultural repression…'. And like Fanon, I believe that every emancipatory process, every emergence of a *new* figure of universality, must begin as no less divisive: there can be no new mobilization of the universal interest that does not immediately threaten particular privileged beneficiaries of the old status quo. That we *are* relational in no way determines the kinds of (political or ethical) relations we should pursue. (xv)

Hallward suggests that there is, and always has been, much revolutionary potential in the divisive binary since, at the very least, it contains the possibility of its reversal. As

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[10] Hallward, Peter, *Absolutely Postcolonial: Writing between the Singular and Specific*. Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2001.

it shies away from any duality in favor of the one, single and unified world, postcolonial theory, according to this view, forsakes its promise of political engagement and opts for an illusory harmonization of radically opposed polarities. Hallward's objection to postcolonial theory focuses on the way it presumably promises and then forsakes the project of radical political critique and engagement. He understands this political and conceptual move to originate in postcolonial theory's preference for singular and singularizing terms, opposed, he will argue, to the specific. These two terms, singular and specific, designate two abstract poles of distinction and serve to structure and guide his critique of the postcolonial project. The specific is relational, the singular non-relational. (xii) Postcolonial discourse, in its singularity, "will operate without criteria external to its operation" and will ultimately "act even in the absence of others as such." (xii) Instead of an interpretation of reality, postcoloniality will then offer a creation of reality of which it wishes to speak. Consequently, everything about postcolonial theory is internal to its production and refuses a clear or relational reference to an outside of its conceptual premises. More than an issue of critical terminology, the problem lies in a general understanding of agency and context, and affects, more particularly, the very conception of politics and political action.

My own interest in Hallward's critique of postcolonial theory[11] has to do with his insistence on conceptual location: "Rather than debate the question of centre and periphery, then, I will identify the postcolonial orientation with a refusal of any identifiable or precisely located centre, in favor of its own self-regulating transcendence of location." (xv) If this is indeed the case, and I would gladly concede

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[11] Hallward, however, would probably be reluctant to calling it "theory" at all: "Readers familiar with postcolonial theory [...] will know that one of its peculiarities is its own apparent resistance to distinction and classification. Postcolonial theory often seems to present itself precisely as a sort of general theory of the non-generalizable as such." (xi)

the point, the crucial question is not so much in *how* exactly postcolonial theory (or literature?) fails to offer a general theory with potentially universal applicability, but *why* it does not. If only two sides are given, and you are neither, the focus may be, as Hallward suggests, on the ways in which you fail to choose, or maybe, as I argue in this dissertation, on the ways in which you cannot possibly choose because choice is a luxury you were not born with. The choice is paradoxically foreclosed from the outset because it merely reflects the existence of imposed "options," which draw into sharper focus the unfreedom of the predetermined conditions of choosing. In Patrick Chamoiseau's *Texaco* for example, the slum community can do one of two things: remain where it is and face police brutality before it is forced to relocate, or relocate of its own "free will," that is, under threat and in order to avoid actual physical violence. It is difficult to call these "choices" and it is not surprising when neither is taken. The very purpose of the novel is to interrogate and ultimately refuse the reduction of a living community to an object of urban design. In another example I examine in this dissertation, Octavia Butler's protagonist Dana Franklin finds herself supernaturally compelled to travel back in time from a 1970's urban setting to an antebellum Maryland plantation. She keeps saving, initially despite herself, a little white boy she does not even know. This boy will turn out to be her own ancestor, the rapist of her great-great-grandmother. She can either prevent the rape by letting him die, or keep saving him "for" the rape, so to speak, in order that she herself may some day exist. Are these extremes worth calling "options"? Is a person choosing when s/he chooses in this manner? Another famous and almost uninterpretable[12] example comes from Toni Morrison's *Beloved* in which, upon seeing her captors drawing closer, Sethe, a runaway slave, hugs her baby close to her body and cuts her throat so that she would

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[12] For a compelling interpretation of this scene, see Satya P. Mohanty's *Literary Theory and the Claims of History: Postmodernism, Objectivity, Multicultural Politics*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1997.

not know the horrors of slavery. Does the woman who makes such a "choice" really have the luxury of being a choosing subject?

From this slightly modified perspective, Hallward's "self-regulating transcendence of location" is worth reconsidering. It has its origin not so much in shirking political responsibility as from its historically inflected relation to polarities. In the "Preface" to his book, Hallward states—unabashedly—that the postcolonial domain defines itself "in terms of a vague reference to colonialism and its aftermath," and compares this to a similarly sloppy (although imaginary) "study of everything affected by modernization and its consequences." (xi) Hallward's assessment loses sight of the fact that postcolonial theory arises from a bloody historical experience of systematic subjugation for profit, which is all but vague. Modernization can be all sorts of things, but what kind of thing is colonization? It is a thing of slavery, exploitation, displacement, murder, conquest, and large scale devastation of cultures and lands. Who can call it "vague"? It is a thing of pain—physical and conceptual— which contains a profound autobiographical dimension for many of the thinkers who write for and speak from this "postcolonial" position. Such a position is, unfortunately, not just theoretical and has to be concerned, often to its own detriment, with questions and statements beyond the immediate realm of the logics of position.

In explaining his distinction between the singular (post-colonial) and the specific (counter or anti-colonial), Hallward suggests that the singular logic requires a stepping-outside and transcending of the world and posits this transcendence as a medium of a redemption from the world. The specific, on the other hand, remains faithful to the space of the historical as such and to the relation of subject to other. The singular, in contrast, wishes (and presumably fails) to dissolve both in "one beyond-subject." (5) If the singular (postcolonial) position actually sees itself as position-less and works towards the ultimate dissolution of all limits, those of the

subject included, in order to access the world in its entirety, whole and one, it necessarily entails a stepping-out of the world as it is. Much of postcolonial theory does indeed offer this extreme utopian version of the world and appears unable to settle for anything more tangible than a dream of transcendence. Actually, as Clifford's influential travel theory suggests, it cannot settle at all.[13]

Although Hallward himself does not do this, his discussion allows for the possibility of asking a different question based on the same premises: why is there in postcolonial theory and literature, as Hallward claims, this gesture of transcending place, of claiming to be outside and, finally, of moving beyond the subject itself? Precisely because the postcolonial must take into account and return, with some creative power, to the problems of being forcibly placed outside ("destitute" in my discussion), defined as subject-less and deprived of relational reciprocity. Take as an example any narrative of enslavement: it addresses a systematic transformation of human beings into objects of exchange, it denies these objectified subjects a possibility of autonomous or self-selected location, whether it be material or symbolic, and finally, it abolishes reciprocity of relations reserved for free human subjects only (you will now remember my introductory discussion of *White Zombie*). In an attempt to remember these facts and do something about them, postcolonial theory and literature tend to celebrate the denied subject, the impossible location and the transcendence of relation. In this gesture, there is, as Hallward suggests, a failure to redress actively the wrong of inequality by reversing the terms of engagement, but

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[13] In his brief discussion of *The Predicament of Culture* (1988), Hallward argues that "Clifford's work tends to idealize a certain u-topia of the *between* as such" and adds a nuanced reminder to keep the constructedness of identity distinct from the domain of the individual:
"To say that any positive, specified identity is 'constructed' (10) is one thing; to say that the very *dimension* of 'the individual is culturally constructed' (92), however, is to say something else altogether. Clifford tends to elide this difference. Like much postcolonial theory, his 'modern ethnography of conjunctures, constantly moving between cultures' (9) is a little too consistent for comfort with a quite particular set of cultural (and financial) privileges; the growth of 'rootlessness and mobility' does not *automatically* open on to 'a truly global space of cultural connections and dissolutions' (3-4)." (23)

there is also much bold defiance. If we cannot be free choosing subjects, in possession of our selves and our location, if we cannot cross borders or speak back to the sources of power, then we can most certainly imagine a world beyond subjecthood, place, border and relation, we can question the premise of the binary world and refuse to choose between the two positions we did not create in the first place. This is, I think, a gesture that Hallward perceives but does not address and, in so doing, misses, I think, some crucial features of postcolonial theory.

Hallward himself will conclude his discussion by reminding us of the centrality of literature for those theories which, in their very core, have arisen as and should remain theories of reading. In acknowledging the fact that "any literary work, however mimetic its intent, involves some degree of despecification, some degree of imaginative transcendence" (333), Hallward emphasizes in the end that "the realm of the aesthetic invariably solicits the exercise of a *thought-ful* freedom" and that "what goes by the name of artistic or creative writing will continue to open a fragile space of relational detachment and imaginative engagement." (334)

In his critique of the postcolonial position, Hallward objects to its persistent "suspicion of the 'soft' or 'creative' dimensions of literature" (334) to the point of abandoning its fundamental project of reading literature. The problem then lies in the tenuous relationship between imaginative literary representation and material determinations of political history. The misguided picture of either waving a flag on the bloody political barricades or contemplating the world from the snug parlor of literate privilege tends to dominate, despite its obvious crudeness, the discussions of the political and the aesthetic. Hallward is more than justified in rejecting this either/or reduction that too often postures as radical engagement:

> If literature did not offer *some* degree of creative disengagement from material circumstances and still more form bureaucratic discourse it would have been buried long before its materialist critics began arranging its funeral. The more forceful Marxist critics sometimes seem to forget that the postcolonial

> criticism they attack is primarily literary criticism, i.e. a practice of reading designed first and foremost to account for certain particular literary phenomena. (334)

I would suggest, in the end, that the postcolonial writers' "singular" insistence on the creative transcendence of place and subject has little to do with a refusal of radical politics and owes infinitely more to the nature of postcolonial location, in theory and in practice. What do I mean by "postcolonial location"? To be postcolonial is to be stranded in a world of hierarchies where your position has, from the outset of the colonial conquest, been defined as minor. For this reason, there is much understandable "slippage" between terms such as postcolonial, Third-World, immigrant, homeless, refugee, minority, etc. Is this slippage a sign of sloppy thinking or is there, in reality, a terrible similarity between all positions of power and all positions of powerlessness, wherever whenever they are?

More importantly still, "transcendence of location" appears to be almost inevitable. For people whose cultural and geographical location was first denied, abolished, repossessed, and then undervalued, there seems to be very little left to do. This transcendence of location may be the one productive and revolutionary move to be made yet. When, in the world of borders, one refuses to acknowledge the border and seeks to cross it by refusing its very existence, this move must be recognized as a radical one, even if its wishful magic remains to operate in words only and has no actual consequence in the world.[14] As a matter of fact, even global capital's promise of a borderless world turns out to be borderless for merchandise only. People usually stay put or will be shuffled like a deck of cards. In response, one can, and indeed must, think of an alternative: an escape so subtle as to remain almost unnoticeable. This escape may lead into the theoretical metaphors and literary magic of postcolonial writers. Even if such a fantastic encounter between the monstrosity of the political

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[14] For an illustration of the "minor" person's wishful magic, which strives for and, on occasion, achieves its concrete realization, see Appendix.

real and the utopia of the storyteller's imagination leaves us cold, I wish to insist on understanding the impossible hybrid that often turns out to be politically impotent and yet absolutely vital.[15]

In his conclusion to *Absolutely Postcolonial*, Hallward suggests that "it would be absurd, of course, to retreat to the indefensible position that art has nothing to do with society or culture," (335) but he also wishes to preserve it from answering only to the demands of the socio-economic materialism. The problem of the postcolonial, as I attempt to read it in this dissertation, lies in its constant and absolutely inevitable wavering between the material reality of destitution and the imaginative acceptance of this outsider's position in the name of some world in which there would presumably exist an option beyond the either/or of privilege and poverty, fiction and reality. Hallward himself suggests, but only in passing, that "what goes by the name of artistic or creative writing will continue to open *a fragile space* of relational detachment and imaginative engagement." (334, my emphasis) This "fragile space" appears to exist in some realm beyond the binary opposition of radical social change, whether it be "left" or "right." It is obviously fragile as it offers no quick answer, no slogan solution, no five-year plan. Yet the domains of the literary and the artistic offer some of the most radical thought we are capable of precisely because they can imagine everything and see the consequences to their last end without having to destroy anything to arrive at their particular kind of knowledge.

I focus on this *fragile third space* between the binaries in order to question the impossible choices and violence of forced locations, which inform the novels I analyze

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[15] A great recent example of this disconcerting marriage between political terror and fairy-tale imagination can be found in Guillermo del Toro's award-winning film *Pan's Labyrinth* (*El laberinto del fauno*) from 2006. The ultimate "victory" of its main protagonist, a girl-princess, lies in her refusal to obey either the side of reality or the side of fantasy, both of which present themselves as absolute and exclusive options. Instead, she lets herself die so that her final entrance into the world of mythical creatures appears to be a tragic gesture of redemptive magic that the film both offers and interrogates.

and which these novels refuse to obey, always opposing the universal through an

absolutely particular linguistic image in a paradoxical manner described by Theodor

Adorno as the properly artistic dialectic:

> In art, universals are strongest where art most closely approaches language:
> that is when something speaks, that, by speaking, goes beyond here and now.
> Art succeeds at such transcendence, however, only in that it says nothing but
> what it says by virtue of its tendency toward radical particularization; that is,
> only in that it says nothing but what it says by virtue of its own elaboration,
> through its immanent process. The element that in art resembles language is
> its mimetic element; it only becomes universally eloquent in the specific
> impulse, by its opposition to the universal. The paradox that art says it and at
> the same time does not say it, is because the mimetic element by which it says
> it, the opaque and the particular, at the same time resists speaking. (205)[16]

This is the kind of paradoxical movement that Hallward introduces when he claims for

literary and theoretical work both the universal validity of thinking and its particular

application and situatedness. The way in which a statement, whether it be theoretical

or artistic, transcends its location in no way undermines the existence and meaning of

this location. On the contrary, as Adorno points out, the very universality of art

springs from its consistent particularization. Conversely, the particular opacity of an

artwork (to borrow Adorno's language) in no way deters from its ability to

communicate in some partial way, which can never exhaust its speaking potential.

Tying this point back to my concern with specific literary texts of diasporic

postcolonial literature, "my" authors' insight into the problems of location in no way

decides the matter of placement even when the texts offer imaginative alternatives to

an imposed absence of meaningful choice. The questions posed by Naipaul,

Chamoiseau, and Butler, to name but these three authors, are both universally

meaningful and absolutely particular to the contexts which they address.[17] My reason

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[16] Adorno, Theodor W., *Aesthetic Theory*. Translated and edited by Robert Hullot-Kentor. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997.

[17] Discussing the meaning of "Négritude," Césaire points to this same dynamic and mutually constitutive relationship between the universal and particular: "We have never regarded our specificity as the opposite or antithesis of universality. It seemed to us—or at least to me—to be very important to go on searching for our identity but at the same time to reject narrow nationalism, to reject racism, even

for invoking Adorno's point lies in his careful attention to what in literature and art remains for ever paradoxical and resists final settlement. There may yet be something for binary politics to learn from this stubborn paradox of art.

reverse racism. Our concern has always been a humanist concern and we wanted it to have roots. We wanted to have roots and at the same time to communicate. I think it was in a passage in Hegel emphasizing the master-slave dialectic that we found this idea about specificity. He points out that the particular and the universal are not to be seen as opposites, that the universal is not the negation of the particular but is reached by a deeper exploration of the particular. The West told us that in order to be universal we had to start by denying that we were Black. I, on the contrary, said to myself that the more we were Black, the more universal we would be. It was a totally different approach. It was not a choice between alternatives, but an effort at reconciliation. Not a cold reconciliation, but reconciliation in the heat of the fire, an alchemical reconciliation if you like." ["The Liberating Power of Words," an interview with Aimé Césaire by Annick Thebia Melsan (UNESCO Courier, 1997) reprinted in *The Journal of Pan African Studies*, 2.4, 15 June 2008]
<http://www.jpanafrican.com/docs/vol2no4/2.4_The_Liberating_Power_of_Words.pdf>

The Story of A Place Transformed Or, How "Life without Aim Is A Chimera"

In order to illustrate my reflection on the "fragile space" between the imaginary and the real, I turn here to a story so small as to appear irrelevant. It is a story of a postman, Ferdinand Cheval, who in 1879 began building, pebble by pebble and with his own bare hands, the "Ideal Palace" whose meticulous, fantastic and controversial construction will occupy him for the next thirty years. On the southern wall of this uninhabitable building, the postman inscribed: "La vie sans but est une chimère." The passion to build—something out of nothing, to inscribe one's life onto place and leave a signature in stone, is responsible for this rare example of "naïve" architecture. Cheval's relentless desire to leave behind a mark of his life leads him to begin collecting curiously shaped pebbles along his daily route of 32 km. Remembering his fascination with their form, he will later write: "Je me suis dit puisque la nature veut faire la sculpture, moi je ferias la maçonnerie et l'architecture. Voici mon rêve ; à l'œuvre je me suis dit." [I told myself that if nature wishes to make sculpture, I will provide masonry and architecture. This is my dream; to work, I told myself.][1] For some, the outcome is not only hideous and insane, but springs, unsurprisingly, from the confused mind of a country bumpkin whose claim to art can only be misguided: "Le tout est absolument hideux. Affligeant ramassis d'insanités, qui se brouillent dans une cervelle de rustre. Mieux vaut ne pas parler de l' « art » en question." (9) [The entire thing is absolutely hideous. It is a sad pile of insanities,

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[1] Letter from March 15th, 1905. Cited in Jouve et al., p. 128.

which blur in the mind of a boor. In this case, it is better not to speak of "art."][2] The

dismissal in question targets the low and minor expression of a self with no recognized

right to selfhood. After all, the would-be architect is just a postman, a "naïve" builder

whose qualifications entitle him to no more than the distribution of mail in his

department of Drôme. Luckily for Cheval, the Minister of Culture from 1959 to 1969

is the celebrated author and revolutionary André Malraux, who manages to convince

the Ministry of Culture to protect the building as a monument of naïve architecture

instead of condemning it. In a letter from 1970, Malraux writes: "Personne ne m'a

demandé de classer le château du Facteur Cheval. Au contraire..., ma décision,

banale, tenait à ce que l'architecture populaire est extrêmement rare, et qu'il s'agissait

de protéger une œuvre exceptionnelle à maints égards." (11)[3] [No one asked me to

request the classification of the Postman Cheval's castle. On the contrary..., my

decision, rather banal, had to do with the fact that popular architecture is extremely

rare and that a work so exceptional is to be protected.] (my translation)

For others, of course, the same "Palace" is a product of pure imagination,

magical and true in the extreme. One such celebratory approach can be found in

André Breton's 1932 poem dedicated in part to Cheval's creation:

> [...] Nous te précédions alors, nous les plantes sujettes à métamorphoses
> Qui chaque nuit nous faisons des signes que l'homme peut surprendre
> Tandis que sa maison s'écroule et qu'il s'étonne devant les emboîtements
> singuliers
> Que recherche son lit avec le corridor et l'escalier
> L'escalier se ramifie indéfiniment
> Il mène à une porte de meule il s'élargit tout à coup sur une place publique
> Il est fait de dos de cygnes une aile ouverte pour la rampe
> Il tourne sur lui-même comme s'il allait se mordre
> Mais non il se contente sur nos pas d'ouvrir toutes ces marches comme des
> tiroirs [...][4]

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[2] This excerpt is from May 1964. written by the Ministry of State in charge of Cultural Affairs, cited in Jouve, Jean-Pierre, Prévost, Claude and Prévost, Clovis. *Le Palais Idéal du Facteur Cheval: Quand le songe devient la réalité*. Paris : Editions du Moniteur, 1981.
[3] Ibid.
[4] Breton, André, in *Le Revolver à cheveux blancs*, 1932.

Then we went on, plants subject to metamorphosis
Each night making signs that man may understand
While his house collapses and he stands amazed before the singular packing-
cases
Sought after by his bed with the corridor and the staircase
The staircase goes on without end
It leads to a millstone door it enlarges suddenly in a public square
It is made of the backs of swans with a spreading wing for banisters
It turns inside out as though it were going to bite itself
But no, it is content at the sound of our feet to open all its steps like drawers[5]

As Breton's poem suggests, this hybrid building—half castle, half tomb—overgrown

with vegetal motifs, bestial and mythical creatures and covered in text, is a crumbling

structure nonetheless capable of singular metamorphoses: it connects, tirelessly, the

imaginary to the real.

In their monograph on Cheval's "Palace," Jean-Pierre Jouve et al. adopt the

same view:

Le *Palais Idéal* a pris ainsi forme en tant qu'espace existential pour mettre fin
à la séparation entre réel et imaginaire. Là « *le songe est devenu la réalité* » par
une pratique poétique singulière : bâtir un monument inhabitable
« sublimement inutile », mais essentiel, gigantesque double de son auteur, lieu
d'une délectation labyrinthique et d'une volonté de demeurer." (274)

The *Ideal Palace* has thus taken shape as existential space in order to put an
end to the separation between the real and the imaginary. There, "the dream
has become reality" through a singular poetic practice: to build an
uninhabitable monument, "sublimely useless" yet essential, a gigantic double
of its author, a place of labyrinthine delectation and of a will to remain. (my
translation)

This poetic house turns inside out, as Breton so accurately suggests, and presents itself

to the world as a congealed dream. It is a petrifaction of a singular and persistent

desire to leave a trace in stone. Although the slow genesis of the postman's single

purpose is beyond my scope of analysis, I would like to emphasize that aspect of

Cheval's story which exemplifies an enduring artistic desire simultaneously to rise up

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[5] Translation by David Gascoyne, 14 May 2008 <http://www.jbeilharz.de/surrealism/gascoyne-translations.html>

and reach down, to achieve transcendence in meaning while rooting itself in the material. In this manner, Cheval's "Palace" symbolizes, or better yet, reminds us of the dual movement and inherent paradox of any artwork: its need for the most tangible material embodiment and its striving to overcome it in favor of its own timelessness. For this reason, Cheval conceives his "Palace" as an imaginary house and as a tomb, or more accurately, as a hybrid between the purpose of life and the refuge of death. Many of the animals and giants represented along the façade are themselves mythical hybrid creatures, composites of serpent, crocodile, bear, elephant. Three giants form a tower. The building itself is a "monster"—part Egyptian, part Roman tomb; a Hindu temple—a collage of all kinds of mythic places imaginable.

Upon his death in 1924 at the age of 88, the postman is buried at the Hauterives cemetery where he had already built his own grave. The "Ideal Palace," however, seems to be the place where he would have wished to be found. In the span of this mysterious quest, from the first pebble collected on the road to the strange monster of a monument, what emerges most distinctly is the desire to leave a trace, to mark and commemorate. The house-grave-palace is a useless formidable gesture that points towards building and writing as interchangeable practices of marking, since on all sides the façade is both stone and text. The imaginary and dream-like shapes materialize in stone and mortar of the "Palace" but will nevertheless continue to crumble away until the site is, in 1970, declared an official monument. The welding of permanence and transience, of reality and absolute fantasy, is clearly captured in Cheval's building: it comes into the world spontaneously, on a whim, with no justification or support other than faith in turning the inside out; an idea into a structure. As such, this structure is a tangible utopia, a place of anticipated commemoration and a grave build by a living man. Is this precisely the kind of art that Naipaul, Chamoiseau or Butler create when they imagine their houses of the

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future past: the kind of literary future where long-gone memories will continue to reappear, spectral? Is the purpose of any inscription to congeal a dream?

Aware of this dual nature of art, whether it be "professional" or "naïve," Jean-Pierre Jouve et al. evoke (214) a similar point made by Bachelard's in *La poétique de l'espace*:

> L'image de ces maisons qui intègrent le vent, qui aspirant à une légèreté aérienne, qui portent sur l'arbre de leur invraisemblable croissance un nid tout prêt à s'envoler, une telle image peut être refusée par un esprit positif, réaliste. Mais pour une thèse générale sur l'imagination, elle est précieuse parce qu'elle est touchée [...] par l'appel des contraires qui dynamisent les grands archétypes. [...] Si d'une maison on fait un poème, il n'est pas rare que les plus intenses contradictions viennent nous réveiller, comme dirait le philosophe, de nos sommeils dans les concepts, et nous libérer de nos géométries utilitaires. (62)[6]

> The image of these houses that integrate the wind, aspire to the lightness of air, and bear on the tree of their impossible growth a nest all ready to fly away, may perhaps be rejected by a positive, realistic mind. But it is of value for a general thesis on the imagination because [...] it is touched by the attraction of opposites, which lends dynamism to the great archetypes. [...] If we compose a poem about a house, it frequently happens that the most flagrant contradictions come to wake us from our doldrums of concepts, as philosophers would say, and free us from our utilitarian geometrical notions. (52-53)[7]

Bachelard addresses a dual but intertwined nature of the imaginary and the real, the need of the real for the imaginary in order to be capable of changing, the need of the imaginary for the real in order not to detach itself from the world. Although this dynamic and unsettled relationship may not satisfy a "realist," as Bachelard seems to fear, it certainly reflects one of the most crucial questions of my own research: the gesture of art to turn the quotidian and transient into the durable and embodied encompasses precisely that aspect of literature that interests Naipaul, Chamoiseau and Butler, that is, its ability to take the past, loss and fading of memory and give it another form, a kind of literary monument. Nevertheless, this commemoration in and

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[6] Bachelard, Gaston, *La poétique de l'espace*. Quadrige/PUF, 2004. (9th edition)
[7] Bachelard, Gaston, *The Poetics of Space*. Translated by Maria Jolas. Boston: Beacon Press, 1994.

universality and specificity, location and transcendence, the personal and the human. Having to choose between one and the other constitutes that reduction to binarism, which my authors recognize as practice, but refuse conceptually. Cheval's "Ideal Palace" is a place that also does this: it requires the material realization of a dream against the material deprivation of reality; it accepts to be monstrous in order to reveal all the possibilities of unpredicted hybridization (postman/architect is only one of them), and in the end, it claims, most loudly, that a "mere" postman can be and is an artist, even if all the authorized artists would cringe at the idea. In this manner, the high is brought low: art belongs to the postman. The low is rising high: the towers of the "Palace" reach up and away from the daily routine of underprivileged life. To take what is yours seems obvious, to take back what was stolen from you may be revolutionary. In this imaginative and revolutionary remembrance—that one can reclaim the domains stolen or locked away—lies the transformative potential of the authors I analyze and of postcolonial literature in general. Postcolonial literature often does like the postman Cheval: it says, this can be done even if, in the process, the owners of expression will laugh at "naïve" or "outsider" art. "High" art and theory will have to reckon with the outcast because he will have shown, like the postman Cheval, that no one owns or can control the means of expression. So the pebbles will do and remain until, even today, the art critic and the commentator will have to acknowledge the "insignificant" postman.

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