ABSRACT

RESISTING NARRATIVE: TOWARDS NEW STRUCTURES OF HISTORY IN CÉSAIRE, TROUILLOT AND IMACHE

by John Nimis

This paper is a reading of three literary works from the French-speaking formerly-colonized world that engage colonial and post-colonial history. Each writer struggles with the problem of memories and histories that seems impossible to represent, and they each formulate a critique of history and historical discourse through imagery and allegory, portraying post-colonial discourse as fragmented or dismembered.
RESISTING NARRATIVE: TOWARD NEW STRUCTURES OF HISTORY IN CÉSAIRE, TROUILLOT AND IMACHE

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Introduction:

It is one of the most vivid memories that haunts me: in a tiny room that acts as a local bar just across the road from my host family’s home in Dschang, Cameroon, a Cameroonian man, probably in his thirties, leans close to me. Up to this point, we have been speaking in light-hearted anecdotes, marveling at the differences between our two cultures. Now, however, his face looks pained, his eyes dart around the room, and he speaks in a low, urgent whisper. “Il faut parler aux gens là-bas dans ton pays - à ton président, Bill Clinton! Nous vivons dans la misère ici! Si seulement ils savaient, ils nous aideraient!” He was not, as was common in the streets of Dschang, asking for money, for my phone number and address, or to be my friend and guide while I was in Africa. He had a message for the people of America, and his call for help, accompanied by the sudden change in the emotional register of our conversation, has remained with me.

A little over a year later, an equally memorable exchange took place in a summer cabin in northern Minnesota. Faithful to my sense that I was the bearer of an urgent message from a suffering people, I was trying to convey to my aunt and uncle the economic and political links between their lifestyles and the conditions in countries like Cameroon. Whereas Bill Clinton’s name and opinions on his international policy were on the lips of almost every Cameroonian I had met, Africa was a far-off place to my family at home, whose importance ended with the interesting clothes, photos of animals and stories of my adventures that I had brought back. I remember this conversation because it was the last time I felt like I was failing as a messenger - that I hadn’t yet found the right words to make them understand. I’ll never forget the sight of my godmother’s normally placid, smiling face, now red with rage, her eyes blazing as she pointed at me and yelled: “How dare you! I’m going to tell your parents what kind of an education they’re paying for!” I don’t remember the details of the conversation that led up to this climax, nor do I remember what happened between her harsh words and our sincere embrace as I left that evening. I remember only that moment because I realized that there was something profound and powerful preventing me from passing the anonymous Cameroonian’s message on, even to those closest to me.

This paper is part of my ongoing search for an explanation of this experience, which is only one modest example of a common dilemma in the modern world: the apparent insufficiency of language to convey certain experiences and events. Other scholars have addressed this topic in the context of war, genocides and other traumatic history, and I will briefly discuss three analyses that focus on the problematic relationship between history and colonization.

In Voicing Memory, Nick Nesbitt discusses an episode in the history of Guadeloupe that was shrouded in silence for years after it occurred. In 1802, an uprising
began among the black and mûlatre troops, culminating in a group of rebel soldiers, led by the mûlatre officer Louis Delgrès, blowing themselves up with explosives rather than surrendering to French troops and returning to lives of servitude. His chapter, entitled “Vicissitudes of Memory,” traces the representation of this event for two-hundred years, during most of which the event was surrounded by silence in the “official” discourse of newspapers and histories. Nesbitt shows how this event which, at a glance, seems to have defied representation, resurfaces throughout Guadeloupean history, each time shrouded in a different mythology, and serving a different purpose.

In his book Discours Antillais, Edouard Glissant discusses the theory that the inability to write history is characteristic of Caribbean history in general, a “peuple sans histoire.” Glissant points to the origins of the Caribbean in the slave trade as the cause of this phenomenon, referring to “une histoire faite de ruptures et dont le commencement est un arrachement brutal, la Traite.” (Glissant 130) The original break from Africa initiates a fragmentary, de-mythologized past that is not conducive to the formation of a homogenous collective historical consciousness in the Caribbean. He does not bemoan this condition, though, and instead provides a critique of History (with a capital H), referring to it as “un fantasme fortement opératoire de l’Occident.” (Glissant 132) According to Glissant, the structure of historical discourse as defined by the West is not sufficient for the representation of Caribbean history because of its totalizing and hierarchizing structure.

In his book Silencing the Past: power and the production of history, the Haitian historian and anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot what he calls “formulas of erasure” (96) in the writings of historians, effectively erasing the Haitian revolution of 1791-1803. He compares this “erasure” to similar phenomena around writings about slavery and the Holocaust.

Trouillot’s chapter on the Haitian revolution begins with an anecdote about a former student of his, in a class Trouillot had named “The Black Experience in the Americas.” This student voiced her objection to reading so much work by white scholars. “What can they know about slavery?” she asked, “Where were they when we were jumping off the boats?” Trouillot admits that he should have known better that to name a course that would create such impossible expectations. “They wanted a life that no narrative could provide, even the best fiction,” Trouillot writes, “she needed this narrative of resistance.” (M-R Trouillot 70-71) He understood that this student was in his class because she hoped to be presented with a representation of the black experience in narrative form. His insistence on the term narrative underlines his understanding of the importance of a historical narrative to a sense of self, or a particular identity.

We can infer what Trouillot’s response to the young woman from his class must have been from the pessimism of the final paragraph of his chapter:

The silencing of the Haitian Revolution is only a chapter within a narrative of global domination. It is part of the history of the West and
is likely to persist, even in attenuated form, as long as the history of the West is not retold in ways that bring forward the perspective of the world. Unfortunately, we are not even close to such fundamental rewriting of world history, in spite of a few spectacular achievements … (M-R Trouillot 107)

The word “narrative” returns again, but this time to describe the domination by the West that renders narratives from the “perspective of the world” - such as “The Black Experience in the Americas” - impossible. Trouillot sees this “silencing” as persistent and inevitable, and only sees a radical “fundamental rewriting” of world history in the distant future. This conclusion could be read as a call to action, were it not for the lingering pessimism: Trouillot’s assessment sees us as “not even close” to resisting this “narrative of global domination.”

The question that remains unanswered at the end of Trouillot’s analysis is the following: “can historical narratives convey plots that are unthinkable in the world within which these narratives take place? How does one write a history of the impossible?” (M-R Trouillot 73) For Trouillot, as for Glissant and Nesbitt, his historical analysis comes down to a question of language: about the limits of written expression, and about the limits of the narrative as a form of representation. If we read it this way, it is really a literary question, which Trouillot frames in terms of narrative, and it is a question that has been addressed by many 20th-century fiction writers and literary theoreticians. Writers such as Nathalie Sarraute, Georges Perec or Marguerite Duras (to name only a few) have pushed the limits of narrative form and even experimented in abandoning narrative writing, as well as participated in theoretical debates about the limits of human expression. Trouillot stops short of what seems has been, in the literary world, the next logical step: a critique of historical narrative as a form of representation.

Glissant calls specifically for a different approach for Caribbean history, and he writes that, “en ce qui nous concerne, l’histoire…[n’est] donc pas l’affaire des seuls historiens.” (Glissant 133) In this paper I will discuss two recent novels from the formerly-colonized French-speaking world that engage history - both that of the West and of their countries of origin (Haiti and Algeria) - and, by resisting narrative forms of representation, construct histories that appear “impossible” or “unthinkable” in Western historical discourse. They address the mechanisms that I encountered when telling my family about my experience in Africa, and the process of “silencing” that occurs in historical narratives that, in constructing their narratives, ignore certain episodes.

*Rue des pas-perdus* by Lyonel Trouillot (Michel-Rolph’s brother) recounts the events of a political uprising in Haiti and relates it to Haiti’s “revolutionary” history, while Tassadit Imache’s *Presque un frère* treats a crime scene in a Parisian banlieue while evoking colonial history as well as an ancient history that is bound up in the idea of “French-ness:” the myth of the Trojan War. Both of these novels supply a perspective that is missing from the accounts that are received through the Western media and
contemporary historians. Through mutilated mythologies, scrambled memories and signifying urban topologies, they portray the processes of historical silencing and erasure as fragmentation and amputation.

In a second part, I will discuss a play by Aimé Césaire that engages history in a different way. Césaire’s *Une tempête* (a “rewriting” of Shakespeare’s *Tempest*) expresses, through allegory, a quite literal rewriting of Western history. I read the episode of an African voodoo spirit breaking the continuity of the Shakespearean plot as part of a broad critique of Western history, with a strong correlation with Césaire’s *Discours sur le colonialisme*, that anticipates Glissant’s critique of History. According to Césaire, it is not only Caribbean history, but a universal history that cannot be represented by historical discourse. This reading of *Une tempête* will lead me to a more general theoretical discussion about historical narrative and the role of the literary in our world’s shifting relations of domination, couched in fervently contradictory and mutually incomprehensible discourses.
Chapter One: Lyonel Trouillot’s *Rue des pas-perdus* and resisting narrative

*Rue des pas-perdus*, a novel by Michel-Rolph’s brother Lyonel Trouillot, is the intertwining of the intensely personal narratives of three different and somewhat typical characters in everyday Haitian life. The first of the three narratives to appear is from the perspective of an old woman, a madam at a brothel. The next is a young post office worker, a self-described “contestataire parasseux,” (L.Trouillot 1998 18) and finally a former taxi driver who, we eventually learn, is showing a young driver the ropes. Each narrative revolves around one specific night - the night of a bloody political uprising, referred to by the characters as the night of the “abominations” or the “massacres.”

Within each of the narratives, Trouillot’s narrators recite with familiarity, almost in a stream of consciousness, and speak about the past with a mixture of nostalgia and disbelief. The voices of the narrators seem “blurted out,” as if competing to be heard, and can’t wait to be explained before ceding to the next. The chapters seem to end only because the narrator has been interrupted, and when they return, their narrative is still at full speed, as if they hadn’t stopped talking in between chapters. The old whore, as she calls herself, describes her memories as clamoring and pushing each other out of the way: “Les jours, les années se brouillent dans mon esprit,” she says, “Je me souviens de tout en même temps.” (L.Trouillot 1998 16) Because of this “brouillage,” this scrambling of time, the narrative of the old whore skips around chronologically. This jumbled chronology is reflected at the level of the sentences, which tend to be strings of rich, oxymoronic and metaphoric descriptions, vivid bursts of imagery crammed together between commas, as if many voices were trying to speak over each other in each sentence. Trouillot demonstrates this characteristic on the first page of the text, in what seems to be a qualitative overview of the story:

Notre histoire est un justaucorps, un étouffoir, un grand feu qui brûle, un calypso d’apocalypse menant campagne touristique, mesdames, messieurs, venez-y voir: ce n’est pas un pays ici mais fabrique d’échouages épiques, un lieu-dit, un herbage, précipice pour danseurs de corde, colin-maillard d’aveugles nés avec la folie des grands, salaise rance, jarre sous terre, poudre de terre à rabattre le caquet des montagnes en bonnes mesures commestibles pour gueules en croix d’enfants malades accroupis dans l’attente de folles épiphanies, se tenant mal, noyés pareils, englués dans leurs mares au diable. (L. Trouillot 1998 11)

By comparing “our story” and “our country” to a wild variety of things using specialized vocabulary specific to dance, music, economics, and cuisine, Trouillot announces his project to narrate the ridiculous and cacophonous. The images are evoked in a few words - simply “justaucorps” or “fabrique d’échouages épiques” - and strung together in no
apparent order, creating a dizzying jumbling effect.

This structure exists at yet another level: there are several “fragments” of allegorical representation in Rue des pas-perdus. None of them are central to the narrative, nor are they rigorously pursued, echoing the cacophony of images at the level of the sentence.

The first allegorical fragment I will discuss is the story of a young, well-bred girl named Andrée, told by the old whore. This young, beautiful girl was expected to marry into the bourgeois class and elevate her parents’ social status, bringing them great fortune. Andrée, however, fell down in public one day, altering her destiny forever. She was no longer seen as enchanting and perfect by her peers or professors, and she went on to live a humble life and grow old and tired like everyone else. The old whore says, “Est-ce possible, monsieur, qu’avec si tant d’aisance les gens se trompent de destin et s’engagent dans les chemins de mue qui les confondent, les abusent? Que les peuples comme les jolies filles se trompent quelquefois de chemin?” (L.Trouillot 1998 92) These two sentences seem very clearly to refer to the nation of Haiti, which began in a place much like the French and American nations, but has remained “trompé” and “abusé” on a “chemin qui mue” of unstable and irresponsible leadership for two hundred years. Andrée’s failure was the source of arguments between her parents about who is to blame, and was ultimately the undoing of their marriage. The black former slave class and the Haitian mulatto elite, who united to carry out the revolution and found the nation of Haiti, have split into political factions, denouncing and violently usurping power from each other since Haiti’s independence until today, and always pointing to one political group as the one responsible for Haiti’s misery. Andrée’s last name, Polynice, refers to a character from ancient Greek tragedy. Etymologically, the name comes from the Greek poly meaning “many” and neichos meaning “struggles” or “trials,” thus, Andrée of the many struggles, a fitting name for an allegory of Haiti.

The narrative of the taxi driver is a story of survival and the losses suffered in order to survive, and can also be read allegorically. The narrator tells how, on the night of the massacres, he abandoned his beloved taxi in order to escape armed soldiers, dove into a trench of sewage, and wounded his leg. The next morning he wanders around the city, among lawlessness and violence, dragging his leg behind him.

In the present from which this character narrates, his leg, which was horribly infected, has been amputated. Ironically, this amputation ensured his financial security: he and his children benefit from his status as a victim of the revolution, earning a pension from the new government. This amputation is part of a broader theme of missing parts and of incompleteness, which is present in the other narratives as well, such as in when old whore compares herself and her “girls” to “les villes d’autrefois aux sourires timides,” where “à chaque voyage on avait l’impression qu’un quartier avait disparu, qu’il manquait un pan à la ville, des corps, des idées, des fenêtres.” (L.Trouillot 1998 60) Also, the postal worker asks, “dans ce merdier, quelle serait jamais la part du je?”
(L.Trouillot 1998 78), a metaphor which mirrors the physical reality of the taxi driver, and suggests that to survive in Haiti one must amputate some part of oneself. The taxi driver survives the night of the massacres, but loses his taxi, which he must abandon and never recovers, and his leg.

This theme is shown more clearly by another thing the taxi driver loses. He describes a madman in his taxi on the night of the massacres who was trying to navigate to a street called the rue des Pas-Perdus. He was shuffling through calculations and maps in the back seat, and just when they found the rue des Pas-Perdus, soldiers began firing at the taxi, and both men jumped into the slime pit called the ravine des Innocents. The madman “ne lâchait pas ses papiers,” and drowned while diving down to recover his notes - his last words are “j’ai récupéré mon diagramme des quatre centres de la ville,” (L. Trouillot 1996 67) which he cries out as the soldiers are firing into the slime pit. The madman then dives back down and never comes back up.

Later the reader learns that this character never existed: no human body was found in the ravine des Innocents, and the narrator says “c’était moi caché derrière moi.” (L. Trouillot 1996 50). The madman was actually a part of the psyche of the taxi driver that was “lost” or “amputated” that night. It was the rational, cartesian part of his prior self - the part that believed in maps, calculations, logic - that rejected oxymoron and logical contradiction, and that believed in the continuity of time and space. Since he could no longer believe in these things, he “amputates” this side of his personality, and says: “avec ma jambe j’avais aussi perdu la raison.” (L. Trouillot 1996 75) This lost side of his personality appears retrospectively as the rantings of a madman, just as revolutionary scientific theories are dismissed as impossible or insane.

Although there are clues that the night when these narratives take place corresponds to a specific moment in Haitian history, the text playfully eludes a perfectly “historical” interpretation. Two political figures overshadow the action are referred to only as “le Prophète” and “le dictateur Décédé Vivant-Eternellement.” These characters correspond in many ways to the historical figures of Jean-Bertrand Aristide and François Duvalier, but these political figures are never named in the novel, and are somewhat anachronistic: they don’t always “work.”

By making only vague and contradictory references to historical “fact,” Trouillot seems to suggest that these characters - as well as the massacres - are interchangeable and generalizable. The name Décédé Vivant-Eternellement suggests an oxymoronic figure of simultaneous death and eternal life. This resonates with the historical reality that dictatorship as such has rarely (some might say never) been absent from Haitian politics, but rather has shifted from one persona to another, reincarnated in each successive leader or regime. Although individual dictators are dead, dictatorship is immortal. The figure of the resistance leader is equally omnipresent, shifting from person to person. One narrator states that “les mêmes histoires…se reproduisent avec des acteurs différents.” (L.Trouillot 1996 137) The formula “de prophète en prophète, de dictateur en dictateur,”
(L.Trouillot 1996 78, 126) appears twice in the book, as if the shifting of power were a measurement of time. “Voilà notre permanence,” it is said, “et, à coups sûrs et réguliers.” (L.Trouillot 1996 137)

From the perspective of the Haitian peasants and working-class people, such as Trouillot’s narrators, events that would be considered “historical” - such as revolts or changes of government - become banal, indistinguishable from each other, and they represent no sense of forward motion. To speak of French history of the 19th and 20th centuries, we tend to organize or periodize according to revolutions (1789, 1830, 1848), wars (those of Napoleon Bonaparte, the Franco-Prussian war of 1870, the two World Wars) and scandals (the massacre of the Paris commune, the affaire Dreyfus, etc). A narrative account of Haitian history that attempted to periodize chronologically according to violent changes of power, civil wars and massacres would become senseless due to its seemingly endless repetition and lack of forward motion: it could only appear as the ridiculous cacophony Trouillot announced in the long quote at the beginning of this chapter.

All of the characters of Trouillot’s novel describe an overlapping of memories and a sense of timelessness. This is most clearly embodied by the old whore, who says: “Notre nuit se prolonge, se déroule dans l’indéfini, vaste hors-champ moqueur et mélancolique de toute contrainte chronologique.” (L.Trouillot 1996 16) For her, history has no need of chronological specificity, because all of her memories are so similar, and equally vague. “Je me souviens de tout en même temps,” she says. (L.Trouillot 1996 16) At the end of the book, the postal worker articulates a very similar sentiment, saying that “les souvenirs se brouillent dans ma mémoire, et j’ignore des deux fins laquelle correspond à la réalité.” (L.Trouillot 1996 135) He refers to the night of the massacres as “une nuit dont nous avions décidé de ne plus parler, de ne jamais plus entendre parler tandis que…elle durait depuis toujours et ne faisait que commencer.” (L.Trouillot 1996 57) It becomes impossible to articulate this night within a structure of linear time, the basis of conventional “linear” narrative.

Trouillot conveys this flattening of time through the overfilling and crowding of the text we have discussed - all the way down to the level of the sentences. It is also illustrated in the dreamy scene of the taxi driver’s wandering, disoriented, through the city streets of Port-au-Prince on the morning after the massacres, dragging his dead (but not yet amputated) leg behind him. He sees spectacles of looting and violence: little boys and girls playing at trying to explode a gas station, two retired officers who are burned alive in their home by an angry mob, and the unforgettable image of a man and pig, both dead and torn in half, laying together on top of a pile of burning garbage as if their two halves belonged to each other and made up one pig-man. (L. Trouillot 1996 101) I read this last image as the “sign,” in its binary structure, that has been condensed by the collapsing of time, overfilled, and left rich and vivid, but incomprehensible, spilling out urgently and cacophonously like the voices of the narrators. Because time has become
unarticulated, the taxi driver can wander through Haiti’s bewildering history by traversing the urban space of Port-au-Prince. The looting, death and mutilation he sees, consistent features of Haiti’s turbulent history, seem to be happening *tut en même temps*, remembering the words of the old whore.

The madman in the taxi was also navigating through this flattened space-time: when the madman claimed they had arrived, he said: “nous y sommes, [il] se félicitait, ah! Victoire de l’intelligence, mes calculs étaient bons.” (L. Trouillot 1996 66) The madman, ironically, is the bearer of “intelligence” and of maps and calculations. It is as if a “cartesian” aspect of the driver’s psychology is digging through history, employing all of his reason to search for the “pas perdu,” the false step in Haiti’s now-flattened time-space where the country stumbled and, like Andrée Polynices, fell off of the path to its great potential.

This collapsing of time - the remembering of “tut en même temps” - leads inevitably to oxymoron, figured by the image of the pig-man, but also by the ubiquitous name of the dictator Décédé Vivant-Eternellement. Oxymoron is a subject Trouillot treats in a short piece entitled “Je porte l’île en moi comme la langue l’oxymore.” In this page-long text in the journal *Notre Revue*, he compares the simultaneous insularity and universalism of the island to oxymoron, writing “L’île est une figure de style aux vents contraires, et je la porte en moi comme la langue l’oxymore.” (L.Trouillot 2001 39) Trouillot’s analogy creates an overlap between geography, psychology and literature, as the island, a geographical category, becomes a “figure of style,” and also an aspect of the author’s inner psychological life. Trouillot seems to suggest that the island is an irrepressible contradiction that is always present in his psychology, even if it is not always being expressed, just as oxymoron is an essential but self-destructive aspect of language.

Oxymoron and contradiction are guiding principles of Trouillot’s narration, established from the very first words of *Rue des pas-perdus*, where the first instance of this “figure de style” is through the image of wind. The first lines of the prologue are “Voilà. Monsier, cela commença par un grand coup de vent. Forcément. Toutes nos histoires commencent par des coups de vent.” (L.Trouillot 1998 11) The text goes on to describe the wind blowing away the pages of a speech, sending soldiers and priests running to cover, and “qui nous fit croire que c’en était fini de la dictature.” (L.Trouillot 1998 12) This image playfully foreshadows the jumbling and mixing of the words of each of the text’s narrators. A political speech - notoriously “calculated,” orderly and substanceless - is blown into a jumble by the island wind. A page later, after evoking the second American occupation of Haiti, the narrator says “alors, vous voyez bien qu’il n’est point vrai que tout cela ait commencé avec le vent.” (L.Trouillot 1998 13) The narrative contradicts itself directly within its first two pages, establishing the presence of the “vents contraires” Trouillot associates with the island.

This episode also represents the “chemin qui mue” and historical stumbling of the
Haitian nation that we saw in the allegory of Andrée, the promising young girl. The gust of wind seems to lead towards the end of the dictatorship - a burst of promise for the future - but the evocation of the American occupation disappoints the optimism of the first page. Because it never led anywhere, it is no longer possible to see the gust of wind as a “beginning.” On the next page, the author admits that “à la vérité, il n’y a ni plus ni moins de vent ici qu’ailleurs.” (L.Trouillot 1998 14) The contradiction remains unresolved: the narrator (and Trouillot) refuse to give a definitive narrative account. References to “how it all began” continue throughout the book: just a few sentences after the prologue, the old whore says, “moi je vous dirai que tout cela a commencé avec la marmite de pois chiches et la barre de gros savon,” (L. Trouillot 1998 15), and much later, she asks, “je vous demande, monsieur, qu’y avait-il au commencement?” (L. Trouillot 1998 80). Trouillot brings up this uncertainty of origin again and again as an echo, highlighting the instability and uncertainty of the narrative, not only in its conclusion, but even in its beginnings.

The narrative of the postal worker also takes place the night of the massacres, which he spent with his girlfriend from work, Laurence, at the house of a friend, a math professor. His sequence of narrative fragments, relatively uneventful compared to the other two, ends with a meditation on one detail of the night: whether or not he and Laurence made love. At first he states simply “nous avons fait l’amour cette nuit-là. Il importe que nous l’ayons fait.” (L.Trouillot 1998 111) He describes himself and Laurence that night as having “ni idées, ni origines,” and “nous ne prétendions à aucune pureté.” (L.Trouillot 1998 112) At the next reprise of his narration, he says just the opposite in just as matter-of-fact a manner, and adds “comment aurions-nous pu le faire alors que nous étions peut-être déjà morts?” (L.Trouillot 1998 123) At the next and final occurrence of his narrative, the only stand he takes is to refuse to choose between the two endings: “je refuse de trancher entre le souvenir de nos corps bienheureux, et celui, non moins vivant, d’une distance de quelques mètres.” (L. Trouillot 1998 132) What is interesting about this sequence, these “vents contraires” of storytelling which comprise the final three chapters of the postal worker’s narrative, is that each of the assertions about whether or not they made love is accompanied with an intricate ideology constructed around whichever fact happens to be asserted at that particular moment. At first, the act of love is a challenge to the violence swirling around them that night, and an affirmation of the human body’s ability to do more than destroy. Later, when he asserts that they did not make love, he says that there is no way they possibly could have, and paints their inability to connect as representative of and in harmony with the uprising around them. The last time, he condemns the act of remembrance as lying, saying that “me souvenir, c’est toujours me mentir.” (L.Trouillot 1998 134) This distrust of memory is pervasive in Rue des pas-perdus. The old whore says “peut-être toi aussi tu [voudrais] …reconstituer le monde sans cette nuit de haines triomphantes, tricher avec l’histoire, l’apprivoiser, lui conter des histoires pour qu’elle s’oublie, la mettre sur son bon côté.”
(L.Trouillot 1998:95) She alludes to a sense of the futility of trying to bring out history’s good side, parallel to Michel-Rolph Trouillot’s pessimism when faced with the task of a “fundamental rewriting” of history.

This insistence on contradiction and oxymoron - this resistance to a definitive account - is Trouillot’s rejection of a univocal, linear or conclusive narrative. Instead of doubting the possibility of telling Haitian history, Trouillot de-emphasizes the importance of that which could be considered “historical fact,” and suggests that the telling of history must include contradiction and uncertainty, casting doubt on the validity of separating “history” from “memory.”

*Rue des pas-perdus* admits to the futility of conveying an event from Haitian history (perhaps the uprisings of 1991 and the first removal of President Aristide from power) as part of a “cartesian” narrative of history - one with chronological continuity and a single beginning and ending - Trouillot’s novel instead takes on the form of a meandering polyphony. The stories his narrators tell point to the “amputating” operations demanded by teleological narration, and refuse to define the definitively real or embody any sense of direction or progress. Through this narrative structure, Trouillot articulates a model of historical témoignage that doesn’t conform the normalizing, amputating demands of the Western historical master narrative, instead including blatant contradictions, no chronological specificity, and no pretention of a single, omniscient and objective perspective. I read his text as participating in a historical rewriting that appears “unimaginable” and impossible to Michel-Rolph Trouillot.
Chapter Two: Past and Present Peripheral Wars: Tassadit Imache’s *Presque un frère* and the history of the Trojan War

*Presque un frère* by Tassadit Imache has many similarities to *Rue des pas-perdus*. Like *Rue des pas-perdus*, it is made up of intertwining narratives from first-person perspective of several “main” characters scattered across short chapters. Unlike in Trouillot’s novel, all of Imache’s narrators know each other, and their stories are all bound up in a somewhat cohesive “plot.” It also bears a relationship to history, and in this case a particularly literary history: through references to episodes and characters from the history of the Trojan War, Imache puts her novel in dialogue with the great ancient epics of Homer and Virgil. Unlike Trouillot, Imache’s writing style is sparse and dry, perhaps reflecting the physical background of the story in a gray, urban setting as opposed to the over-abundant, crowded style of Trouillot’s tropical island setting.

A different image than Trouillot’s contrary winds, which evoke the structure of his text, plays a similar role in Imache’s novel. Her characters are all hanging, suspended in the air, and moving their feet but unable to progress, as if spinning their wheels in the mud. The three main characters are Sabrina, a young half-French half-Algerian woman who works at a mall near a poor Parisian *banlieue*, her childhood friend E’dy who is half-Algerian like Sabrina and has recently returned from military service, and Bruno, the French security chief at the mall where Sabrina works. The story generally follows the unappealing relationship of Sabrina and Bruno as it, like the characters in the book, half-heartedly fails to go anywhere. The last chapter ends with Bruno and Sabrina still not having made up their minds about each other, and the final words of the novel are from Bruno: “je n’ai pas voulu piétiner ma mémoire ni dévorer son cœur.” (Imache 143) The word “piétiner” that he uses means to move one’s feet without advancing or, figuratively, to stay in place, to fail to progress, or to spin one’s wheels. This verb recurs many times in the novel, and combined with the contradictory image of feet (“pieds,” the etymological root of “piétiner”) planted on the ground, it symbolizes the situation of the characters, as well as Imache’s refusal to represent a definitive version of reality or progress. These are also shown in the confused and jumbled chronology, and the feelings of timelessness and scrambled memories in the characters.

The first appearance of the verb “piétiner” is in reference to the *troupeau*, the name of the youth gang that lives in the *Terrains*. In the preface, they “piétaient, sans se bousculer…il leur faut un nombre certain de paires de jambes, pour tenir au sol.” (Imache 7-8) This paradoxical imagery - an urban gang represented as a flock of domesticated animals, a quintessentially rural image - suggests that the troupeau is simultaneously stationary (or “piétinant”) and somehow also in danger of floating away and be lost if they don’t stick together. This exact passage recurs later in the book (on page 68), but the motif of “pieds par terre” is even more common.
In Sabrina’s last chapter, she tells a story from her adolescence with E’dy, when they made love in a public shower at a public pool. E’dy asks Sabrina, “touche-moi,” but she repeatedly whispers back to him, “ne Mets pas tes pieds par terre,” (Imache 111,112) in order to keep the guardian from catching the two of them in the shower. Towards the end of the novel, Sabrina steals Bruno’s car and asks E’dy to run away with her. He refuses, and we hear an echo in reverse of Sabrina’s words from their youth. This time it is narrated by E’dy: “Ne me touche pas, je la supplie. - Tu as les pieds posés par terre, elle chuchote.” (Imache 127) E’dy is running off to Italy with a girl he doesn’t know, with whom he has no “histoire,” and Sabrina seems to be reproaching him for refusing her, but at the same time warning him, as she had in the shower when they were younger.

In the final chapter of the book, after E’dy is gone and Bruno and Sabrina are together again, Bruno tries to seduce Sabrina in front of the panoramic view he has of Paris from his bay window. She says, “est-ce que je n’aurai pas le vertige?” to which he responds, “ne Mets pas tes pieds par terre.” (Imache 143) Sabrina, initially afraid of being so high above the city (suspendu in a sense), recognizes this phrase from her earlier conversation with E’dy, and says, “C’est encore ce jeu-là.” She suddenly understands this relationship as going nowhere, like with E’dy, but she also seems reassured by this impossibility of progress, and makes love to Bruno, after which he says, “rien ne s’est passé, comme dans la réalité.” Once again we see Imache’s characters suspended high above the ground, trying to keep their feet down, and unable to make progress (Bruno’s “nothing happened”).

Bruno is characterized throughout the book by his lack of ambition, sincerity or passion, and he admits that his relationships with women are driven by his need to flee his past. His life changed when, while working as a security guard, he shot and killed a young Arab “voyou” who was waving a toy gun around. He says: “Tuer vous jette hors du monde. Les autres peuvent l’ignorer. On est devenu un étranger, à perpétuité.” (Imache 40) Since that moment, he has felt like he has only pretended to still be a part of society. He has been “thrown out,” and we can imagine him in a metaphysical “orbit:” repetitively circling around society; floating outside of it.

Bruno’s feelings according to this description are echoed by one fascinating minor character. Sabrina’s sister, Lydia, has left the Terrains to live in a more affluent Parisian neighborhood. She rarely comes back to visit, and when she does, she seems psychologically worse off than those who have stayed in the banlieue. She and Sabrina meet in the hall, where they “piétinai[ent] devant l’ascenseur.” (Imache 94) Later, when she talks to her mother, she tells her that in her life outside she feels haunted by the Terrains, and says that “chaque fois que je me couche…je suis de retour chez nous. Aux Terrains…Je pourrais bien habiter…dans une maison à un étage, être heureuse toute ma vie. Dès que je ferme les yeux, je ne me repose plus…” (Imache 107) She feels as if torn in two, and says she doesn’t remember anything from her childhood. Sabrina describes her as piégée “là où je ne me souviens pas. Où j’ai décidé qu’il n’y avait rien à se
Lydia’s psychological condition is reminiscent of the testimonies of many of the women in Charlotte Delbo’s *Mesure de nos jours*, a book in which Delbo shows the lives of concentration camp survivors. Many of the women Delbo describes live comfortable lives, but because their memories from the camps have no place in the society in which they live, many of them feel torn in two, and forever haunted by and trapped in their past.

In a study of Delbo’s writing and that of Robert Antelme, another *survivant* from the camps, Jim Creech criticizes a common theoretical explanation of this phenomenon. According to one line of critical thought, which Creech associates with Emmanuel Lévinas and Maurice Blanchot, the experiences of the camps or of Lydia’s childhood in the *Terrains* surpass the capacity of human linguistic expression. This explanation is also along the lines of Michel-Rolph Trouillot’s article about the Haitian revolution: that its articulation is “impossible.” Creech suggests that the feelings of the *survivants’* condition are caused by an inability, or perhaps more precisely a subconscious refusal, on the part of mainstream society to listen to and try to understand these experiences:

*Il* nous *font honte*, et dans notre honte nous avons dit, massivement, et dans de bien divers courants de pensée: “Comment peut-on s’attendre à quelque chose de bon de notre espèce humaine. Comment, depuis plus de deux siècles, a-t-on pu être aussi *bête* que de croire à notre capacité de lumières et de progrès? Comment avons-nous pu croire à l’adéquatio de la parole pour nommer et pour comprendre le monde et nous-mêmes?“ (Creech 29)

Because the testimonies of the *survivants* from the camps are irreconcilable with the French narrative of identity with respect to World War II, and with the personal narratives of the listeners (the families, spouses, or friends of the *survivants*), the *témoins* feels that this part of their life is severed from the life they are expected to live. Creech shows that the only survivors who struggle in this way are without an “écoute fidèle,” what he describes as an “écoute aussi débridée que la parole qu’elle rend possible.” (Creech 9)

The *banlieues* are one of the main sites of the “ritual” reconciling the French national narrative of identity: gangs of immigrant youths such as the *troupeau* in *Presque un frère*, like Ellison’s “literary negro” in America, serve to conjure away contradictions between France’s idealized image of itself and the realities of racism and injustice. Lydia’s Parisian middle-class life would be filled with images of the *Terrains* that would leave no place for the memory of her childhood. As a result, Lydia must “amputate” her childhood memories (like Trouillot’s taxi driver who remembers a madman in his taxi when he thinks back on the night of the massacres) in order to understand middle-class French reality, forcing her to understand her childhood as the life of some “impossible” stranger. Her feeling is a variation of what all of the characters try to deal with: the feeling of being simultaneously inside of French society and a part of an invented interior “other” culture, that is, the mythology of the Parisian *banlieues* and of the Algerian...
immigrant population.

E’dy lives the experience of a “revenant” throughout the book, as he has just returned from his service militaire. He feels like he has no way to communicate his experiences of discrimination and humiliation in the French Army to the people from his youth, and he tells his mother, “vous ne me connaissiez pas. Vous vous souvenez de moi.” (Imache 87) Like Lydia, he is unable to reconcile his present self with his history, which is why he runs away with a girl who he just met, trying, much like Bruno, to abandon his past by running away.

Hélène is the mother of Lydia and Sabrina, and is a French woman who moved to the Terrains with her Algerian husband, who has subsequently abandoned her and their family. She evokes a vivid image that symbolizes her life. She says that since she moved to the Terrains, everything in her life before has been destroyed by her children except for one piece from a porcelain service. “Il ne reste plus que la saucière,” she says. “Elle est quelque part dans le ventre du canapé. Coincée entre les ressorts.” (Imache 24) Hélène is like this saucière, surviving only because she is suspended out of reach of the world and of history, and dissociated from her French upbringing, out of context like a saucière without the rest of the service.

Hélène is the character who provides the link to the Trojan War, first of all through her name. In ancient history, Helen was “face that launched a thousand ships,” and one of the protagonists in the Trojan War legend. Hélène is the only character in Presque un frère that shares a name with a mythological one, making her reference to Homer and Virgil as subtle as Trouillot’s invocation of the Prophet and the dictator Deceased Forever-Immortal.

The Trojan War is part of ancient mythology, which has the curious position of being at the root of two discourses that have become distinct in Western society. The Trojan War is both a historical event, considered by historians and treated as “history,” but we have access to it almost exclusively through the ancient epic poems of Homer and Virgil. The ancient epics are considered by many to be the foundation of Western literature, and are the basis of studies in poetics and the development of literary devices. The history of Troy is also well-represented throughout the history of French literature, and Homer’s Iliad and Virgil’s Aeneid were until recently the center of literary formation, and are to this day the sources of inspiration for the artists and writers. From Ronsard’s Franciade to Racine’s plays to Baudelaire’s “Andromaque, je pense à vous,” the French literary canon turns to the characters and events of the ancient epics throughout its history.

In addition to Hélène as allusion to the Trojan war, she narrates most of the intertextual references. She makes the most explicit reference to the history of Troy towards the end of the novel, as she is being interviewed by a group of men from “l’Office,” a figure of some far-off authority referred to throughout the book only by this generic name, reminiscent of “le Prophète” and the “Dictateur” in Trouillot. To a group
eschew the memory of Roman colonization.

Mirrors the historical ancestor “interpretation,” pouring que Racine that centuries no a thrown among Achilles’ hand covered his ankle. River mother a story she told to her children: the story of the mythological character Astyanax.

Astyanax is the son of Hector, the military leader of the Trojans in their defense of the city of Troy against the Greek invaders. His Greek counterpart in the Iliad is Achilles, the greatest of the Greek warriors, and son of a goddess. The duel between Hector and Achilles is perhaps the climax of the story, and the turning point in the war, and Astyanax is only a baby at this point in the story. Hélène’s version of Astyanax’s story is in fact a combination of several different elements of the mythology. She introduces the story to the men who are interviewing her as the story of a mother who “veut sauver son bâtarde de la mort et, par l’amour, le perd,” (Imache 132) emphasizing the relationship between the mother and son. She tells of how Astyanax’s mother, out of fear of him drowning in the river Styx, held him by his ankle “au-dessus du vide,” leaving him vulnerable where her hand covered his ankle.

As her listeners point out, this story is not about Astyanax, but Achilles who “nouveau-né, fut trempé, et non suspendu dans le vide,” (Imache 133) The legend of Achilles’s great strength was that his mother dipped him in the Styx in order to render him invulnerable, except at his ankle where his mother’s hand held him. Hélène confused the story of the newborn Achilles with that of Astyanax, causing an outcry among her listeners, “en chœur,” as if in a Greek tragedy: “Mais c’est Achille! se récriat-on, en chœur.” (Imache 132) In all of the ancient versions of the myth, Astyanax is thrown from the walls of Troy by Achilles’s son Neoptolemus (called Pyrrhus in French), a notorious depiction of an act of excessive cruelty. Hélène’s image of Astyanax over the “vide” is, then, a sort of anachronistic “jumbling” of Astyanax’s and Achilles’s fates.

It is worth mentioning here that, according to Homer’s accounts of the Trojan war, no son of Troy survived at the hands of the Greeks. When Racine wrote Andromaque centuries later, he changed this aspect of the story because the “Rois de France” claimed that their royal lineage reached back to Hector’s son. In his second preface to the play, Racine writes, “qui ne sait que l’on fait descendre nos anciens rois de ce fils d’Hector, et que nos vieilles chroniques sauvet la vie à ce prince, après la désolation de son pays, pour en faire le fondateur de notre monarchie?” (Racine 32) The Romans of Virgil’s time made a similar claim, and a similar modification to the Homeric myth in their own “interpretation,” adding the character Aeneis, a Trojan who escaped the Greeks, and the ancestor of the Roman people. These deformations of Homer’s ambiguously literary and historical narrative are perfect examples of the process Renan indicated as essential to establishing a nation: “get[ting] one’s history wrong.” (Renan 145) Hélène’s version of the myth, like those of Racine and Virgil, reflect her historio-political situation, which mirrors the recuperation of Troy by most French Renaissance historians in order to eschew the memory of Roman colonization.
By replacing Achilles, the greatest of the Greek warriors, with Astyanax, who was only a baby at the time of the Trojan war, shows Hélène’s sympathy for the conquered Trojans rather than the Greek conquerors, and for the defenseless baby as opposed to the fierce warrior. Her story can be read as a metaphor for the situation of the families living in the Terrains, with respect to the French police and the “Office,” who, like the Greeks, are outside authorities seeking to impose their own order on the space of the banlieue. Her story reflects the anxiety of a poor mother trying in vain to protect her “bastard” children (the father of Hélène’s children, an Algerian, has already left his family at the time the novel begins) from the dangerous life that surrounds them.

The remarkable thing about Hélène’s story is that it acts as the culmination of an “echo” effect of one of the images in the book: that of a child “suspendu au-dessus du vide.” The first appearance of this formula is at the beginning of the text, in the first chapter narrated by Hélène, when the guard stationed outside her building talks to her. He tells her about how he trapped a young member of the gang referred to in the novel as the “troupeau” on the roof of one of the buildings. He says, “je l’ai tenu un bon moment par les chevilles, tête en bas, au-dessus du vide.” (Imache 27) This vivid image and the verbal echo of “chevilles” and “au-dessus du vide,” prepares a comparison between the young gang member and Astyanax being thrown from the Trojan walls. Hélène’s story seems to be jumbled, her memories overlapping with fiction. In the very first chapter of Presque un frère, we see one of the “troupeau” who apparently has fallen to his death. The image of this urban youngster, whose death recalls the barbarous fate as Astyanax, reappears several times in the book, and an onlooker, one of the “troupeau,” comments that “on dirait une trace de roue de chariot…” (Imache 7), referring to the mythological ancient past.

The image of the child suspended over the “vide” appears, at least partially, at two other moments in the novel. In one of the chapters from the point of view of Bruno (the French security guard), he tells of a night he passed in a “maison de campagne” with no heat. Shivering in his bed, he is reminded of a night when he was six years old and had walked out on the roof of his boarding school without pyjamas. “A trois heures du matin,” he remembers, “le veilleur m’avait retrouvé, inerte, recroquevillé à quelques centimètres du vide.” (Imache 40) Although it is not the exact same scene, there is a verbal echo of the word “vide” and an image of a naked, defenseless child on the verge of falling. The other similar image is of Sabrina, when she is in Bruno’s apartment. Bruno describes her as having a “[façon de] ne pas s’inquiéter de la suite au bon moment. Comme si elle attendait qu’un vide s’ouvre soudain devant elle. Qu’elle tournoie, chevilles lâchées.” (Imache 79) The word “vide” once again, with the surprising description of Sabrina having been let go by her ankles (“chevilles lâchées”), connect this image with that of the guard holding the young gang member towards the beginning of the text, and of Astyanax being dangled later, in Hélène’s story. Both Bruno and Sabrina, the protagonists of Presque un frère’s “love story,” are represented, by this association, as
fragile beings on the brink of disaster, or perhaps on the brink of a fall; defenseless children in danger of falling into ruin at any moment. This sentiment of impending ruin pervades the entire book, also reflected in the bleak, sparse writing style and the desperation in the lives of all of the characters.

There is a similar mood in another recent version of the Trojan legend, the 2004 American film Troy. When watching this film, as with any representation of the Trojan war, the audience anticipates Hector’s tragic death at the hands of Achilles, the eventual defeat of the Trojan defenses, and Achilles’s death, since these are all well-known parts of the history, and are consistent in every version of the story. This gives the story an ambiance of inexorable, imminent tragedy, and rather than resisting this effect and trying to create a Hollywoodian “surprise-ending,” Troy’s characters are fatalistic, and seem resigned to sadness from the beginning of the film. Similarly, Presque un frère contains the motif “quelque chose de très mauvais va se passer aux Terrains,” taken up by several different characters, in the slow rhythm of a drum beating a death march. Lydia, another of Hélène’s daughters, speaks to her mother of “cette peur qui monte,” (Imache 52) and later asks, “est-ce qu’il va arriver quelque chose ici?” (Imache 109) E’dy tells his mother, “quelque chose se prépare…Il faut partir…Ce sera trop tard, bientôt.” (Imache 84) It is as if all of the characters in the book are “suspendus au-dessus du vide,” reflecting a reality of uncertainty and danger lived by so many residents of the cités of the Parisian banlieue.

There are some interesting parallels between the ancient Helen of Troy and Imache’s Hélène. From Homer’s perspective, Helen left the “civilized” (or at least familiar) land of the Greeks to live among “foreigners” in Troy, an “oriental” land with respect to Greece, with a Trojan, and thus “foreign” husband. Hélène’s husband in Presque un frère, an Algerian, is also an “oriental” foreigner, and she lives in a territory generally associated with Maghrebian and African immigrants: the banlieue. This is a semantic reversal, as the city of Paris takes on the role of the civilized “here” in Imache, whereas in Homer, Paris was the name of the Trojan that whisked Helen away from the Greek “here.” Although Homer certainly didn’t portray the Trojan war as a war of colonization, as his epics glorified Greek civilization, but Virgil’s version could be more conducive to this kind of reading, and the theme of colonialism seems implicit, albeit subtle, in the recent American film: in Troy, Agamemnon is characterized by his ambition to unify the Greek nation by dominating his most formidable enemy, Troy, and to benefit personally through this expansion of his sphere of influence. Although Homer’s Agamemnon is similar, the unification of the Greek nation is an invention of the 21st century filmmakers, and seems to respond (perhaps unconsciously) to the U.S. war against Iraq (which was still in the works when the film was being produced), and issues of national security and national unity which, in France, are centered to a great extent around the question of immigration and the banlieue. Imache’s story has as its background the war between the French forces de l’ordre and the residents of the
banlieue, with its overtones of the imperial domination of Algeria by France, and its place in the collective consciousness of the people of both countries.

In the preface to Presque un frère, Imache evokes French racism, strangely cast in an ancient and heroic past: “en des temps anciens et héroïques, on avait tracé à même le sol les plans des Terrains: ouvert à flots l’eau courante et déroulant sous ces va-nu-pieds du lino chaud tout l’hiver.” (Imache 8) There is an association here between racism, via the term “va-nu-pieds,” a nostalgia for a sort of mission civilatrice on French soil, and heroism and antiquity. War is ubiquitous in the text. E’dy, Sabrina’s childhood friend, is scarred by his experience in the French army, and Bruno by his memory of having shot and killed a man at his first security job. The word “Terrains” belongs to military vocabulary, and even the romantic relationships are permeated by a feeling of violence - the roughness with which Sabrina and her lovers describe sex, and the tactical elements of Sabrina and Bruno’s relationship, always trying to keep the upper hand.

Finally, late in the text, Hélène speaks to an anonymous French officer, telling him how the local gang guards the Terrains: “le Troupeau garde les Toits, c’est leur domaine.” (Imache 121) Like the Trojans, who repelled a vastly more numerous Greek army for years by fighting from their city’s famous high walls, the “Troupeau” stays on the roofs. Between the two words with uppercase T’s, “Troupeau” and “Toits,” in this phrase of Hélène’s, we can almost hear “Troie,” the French pronunciation of Troy. On the same page, Hélène is critical of the money spent by the state on armed police and guardians, making the Terrains dangerous for the youths, rather than spending money to feed or educate the poor. She compares the forces de l’ordre to the “Troupeau,” calling the former “votre cheval de Troie. Eux ont fabriqué leur machine de l’intérieur, avec rien, jour après jour.” (Imache 121-22) The police and guardians are offered by the state, ostensibly to help the people of the Terrains to be more safe, but in fact it is they who are destroying the community and bringing about the violence.

Tassadit Imache cleverly invokes an ancient history from which the French nobility used to claim legitimacy (and which gave its name to the city of Paris) and recasts it, reinterpreting the role of the French, and alluding to the uncomfortable subjects of the French colonial history in Algeria and the problem of the Parisian banlieues. It describes a reality that exists outside of mainstream French cultural discourse, and that has been replaced in this discourse by the image of lazy, violent lower-class youth that threatens to destroy the free and just society of good French citizens. This image functions in the same way the erasure of the Haitian revolution does: it reconciles the images from the banlieues reported on the daily news by French media and the well-documented history of French colonization and the Algerian war with the narrative of the French republic, by effacing the contradiction between French racism and injustice and the ideals of liberté fraternité, égalité.
Chapter Three: Aimé Césaire’s *Une Tempête*: d’un Prospero à ‘l’Autre’

A brief discussion of a situation across the Atlantic analogous to the Parisian banlieues will serve as a transition to my discussion of Aimé Césaire’s *Une tempête*. Ralph Ellison wrote the novel *Invisible Man* about an African-American struggling to find his place in the world of mainstream America. The protagonist spends his life attempting to inscribe himself in the discourse of American society, but he gradually comes to understand that he represents an impossibility in the American society’s discourse of reality. Like Lydia and Charlotte Delbo’s survivants, he struggles to resolve the parts of himself from which he feels alienated, and in the end, he resigns himself to invisibility, amputating himself from American society.

Although *Invisible Man* is his only novel, Ellison wrote a collection of essays published in 1953 called *Shadow and Act*. In a chapter entitled “Twentieth Century Fiction and the Black Mask of Humanity,” he describes the essential role that the black man plays in the American imagination. Americans, like the French, understand their country as founded on freedom, equality and justice, and yet they are confronted every day with the reality of an unjust, unequal society. To reconcile this discrepancy, white America uses images of black men in literature (and in television and film) as “projected aspects of an internal symbolic process,” (Ellison 27) at the center of a “magical rite” (Ellison 39) that white America performs. The contradictions between American ideals and American realities are explained away by understanding the source of the problem to be the nature of the black man, and the integrity of America’s self-image is preserved. Ellison says, “color prejudice springs not from the stereotype alone, but from an internal psychological state; not from misinformation alone, but from an inner need to believe.” (Ellison 28) This analysis parallels Michel-Rolph Trouillot’s and Jim Creech’s: all three insist that incomprehensibility (in Trouillot), ineffability (in Creech) and prejudice (in Ellison) are created by the observer - the historian, those who listen to the survivants, or the white American - and are not a function of human nature, the nature of language, or any inherent quality of the object of observation. Ellison’s insistence on the “ritual” nature of this psychological operation will be the key to my reading of Aimé Césaire’s *Une tempête*.

In her book *Mission to Civilize*, Alice Conklin analyzes the French project of assimilation - the mission civilisatrice - which is the defining characteristic of the French “style” of colonialism. From the perspective of the “civilizer,” young black men like Aimé Césaire, part of the earliest generation of students from the French colonies to study in large numbers in Paris, represented much of what was positive about the colonial project. They were proof of the belief, fundamental to French society at the time, in “the superiority of French culture and the perfectibility of humankind.” (Conklin 1) The idea
that all men are ultimately capable of understanding, appreciating and benefitting from western civilization was fundamental to France’s self-image, and to its imperial aspirations.

The encounter in the early 20th century between the intellectual elite from the colonies and metropolitan Paris, however, engendered some unanticipated questions. These students were confronted with the reality of color prejudice and French ignorance and indifference towards their homelands, betraying the realities of the colonial situation that were obscured or effaced by the assimilationist ideology. In reaction to this experience, these students reevaluated their situation and their adherence to French ideology.

Césaire was one of the founders of the “négritude” movement, “a revalorization of Africa on the part of New World blacks, affirming an overwhelming pride in black heritage and culture.” (Nesbitt 1999 1404) Beginning in the 1930’s, and inspired by a similar movement across the Atlantic in the U.S., this “elite” from the colonies, disillusioned by a civilization that lied to them, began to speak out in resistance to colonization and assimilation, and with great effect. Rob Nixon writes that:

"The era from the late fifties to the early seventies was marked in Africa and the Carribean by a rush of newly articulated anticolonial sentiment that was associated with the burgeoning of both international black consciousness and more localized nationalist movements. (Nixon 557)

This period was at what was perhaps the pinnacle of anti-colonialist optimism, and was the time when most of the African colonies won their independences and what was perceived as great strides in civil rights in the U.S. and around the world.

But the counter-discourse of négritude, like the French colonial discourse, took an unexpected turn. Primarily a literary movement, it participated in the mobilizing of independence movements in former colonies. Later, though, it became co-opted by some tyrannical African leaders as a justification for maintaining the status quo, such as later but illustrious example of Mobutu Sese Seko and his “authenticity” movement in Zaïre.

Perhaps even more insidiously, it has also led many to the perception of civil rights and racial equality movements in France as a fait accompli, and attitude that blacks have won their self-respect and national consciousness leads to the conclusion that there is no more racism in France, and thus no need for social change with regard to race relations. Originally a means to liberation and equality, the narrative of black identity that négritude offered was later integrated into the Western master narrative, and was used as a tool for a continuation of colonial-style relationships of exploitation.

Une tempête, published in 1969, is the “American chapter” of what Aimé Césaire called his “triptych,” three plays written in the 1960’s that are very much in the optomistic spirit of the “high time” for anticolonialism. The first of these, La tragédie du Roi Christophe, is set in newly-independent Haiti in the early 1800’s, a topic to which
Césaire also dedicated a book, *Toussaint Louverture*. The second play in Césaire’s trilogy is *Une saison au Congo*, set in what was then Zaïre (and is now the Democratic Republic of the Congo) around the time of its independence in 1960. Both of these historical events were central to the discourses of resistance of the time.

*Une tempête* is unlike the other two plays of the tryptich in that it doesn’t treat a specific event in modern history. Instead, it is an “adaptation” of the play *The Tempest* by William Shakespeare. *The Tempest* is the story of an Italian duke, Prospero, who has been wrongfully exiled to an enchanted island with his daughter. As the play opens, Prospero, with the help of his magical powers and a spirit named Ariel, orchestrates the wreck of a ship containing Prospero’s brother, who betrayed and exiled him, the King of Naples, and several other nobles and attendants, all of whom survive the tempest and make their way to the enchanted island. Through manipulations and magic, Prospero defends himself and the King from would-be usurpers, and arranges for his daughter and the King’s son (who was also on the wrecked ship) to fall in love. At the end of the play, he graciously forgives his political enemies, and unites them around the love of the young woman and the prince. Caliban is Prospero’s rebellious slave: the monstrous son of an evil witch that Prospero defeated when he arrived on the island. He tries to convince two of the shipwrecked nobles to help him attack Prospero, and is the only one not forgiven at the end of the play.

In his introduction to the 1948 edition of *The Tempest*, republished for years afterwards, Frank Kermode talks about Prospero and Caliban representing the opposition between nature and art. In his book *Bargains With Fate*, Bernard Paris sees Prospero and Caliban as Shakespeare’s attempt to reconcile disparate and conflicting aspects of his own personality. Both of these are fairly “standard” readings, and in both of them *The Tempest* serves as a window into a psychological space where Shakespeare grapples with the question of human nature.

But without any alteration or adaptation at all, *The Tempest* cries out for a colonial reading, and when Césaire wrote his adaptation it had already been read and analyzed with respect to colonization. The play emerges from the same historical moment as the beginnings of colonization: it was finished in 1611, just a few years after the establishment of the first colonies in the new world. The first permanent British settlement at Jamestown, Virginia was in 1607, and French settlement of the new world started at around the same time: Quebec was founded in 1608. Although there were murmurs of colonial readings in the late 19th and early 20th centuries (see Nixon 561), a book by Octavio Mannoni, a French psychologist, in 1950 entitled *Prospéro et Caliban: la psychologie de la colonisation*, provided the first “sustained reassessment of *The Tempest* in light of the immediate circumstances leading up to decolonization.” (Nixon 562)

Mannoni analyzed the psychological dynamics of the colonial situation in Madagascar (where he lived for many years), using Prospero and Caliban as “prototypes.” Aimé Césaire quotes Mannoni in his 1950 *Discours sur le colonialisme*, a
text in the form of a political speech that overtly denounces Western civilization, using Mannoni to exemplify the role of Western intellectuals in supporting the bourgeois capitalist structure that he considers to be at the root of the colonial problem. The Discours begins by stating that:

Une civilisation qui s’avère incapable de résoudre les problèmes que suscite son fonctionnement est une civilisation décadente. Une civilisation qui choisit de fermer les yeux à ses problèmes les plus cruciaux est une civilisation atteinte. Une civilisation qui ruse avec ses principes est une civilisation moribonde. (Césaire 1955 7)

Césaire goes on to discuss unresolved incongruencies in Western history, such as the fascism of Hitler and the immoralities of colonialism, and interpret them as tied to bourgeois capitalism. It is a “narrative of resistance” *par excellence*, providing an alternative narrative account of European civilization, and shedding light on the most troublesome aspects of European civilization - those that are ritually conjured away by such phenomena as Ellison’s “literary negro.”

In 1952, Franz Fanon published the book *Peau noire, masques blancs*, an analysis of the psychological condition of black people, but this time from the perspective of a black Martinican. Fanon devotes a chapter to a response to Mannoni’s book, which he describes in his introduction as “un travail qui, à mon avis, est dangereux.” (Fanon 10) The fourth chapter of *Peau noire, masques blancs* is a detailed critique of Mannoni’s analysis in his book. Fanon quotes Mannoni’s book and contests many parts of his argument on analytic grounds, but admits that the “pensée analytique” in Mannoni’s book is “correcte.” (Fanon 67) Fanon’s text is in the same discursive mode as Mannoni’s: it is a refutation of a psychological theory in its same scientific terms.

Another Carribean writer, George Lamming, took up *The Tempest* in a nonfictional book entitled *Pleasures of Exile*, first published in 1960, which Rob Nixon reads as “an effort to redeem from the past, as well as to stimulate, an indigenous Antillean line of creativity to rival the European traditions.” (Nixon 566) In particular, Lamming attempts to show the importance of Caliban’s own portrayal of himself as a counternarrative. In line with the tenets of négritude, he calls on the writers of the formerly colonized world to create their own self-image, “revalorizing” themselves, and he cites C.L.R. James’s portrayal of Toussaint Louverture as exemplary.

Césaire’s *Une tempête* of 1969 breaks with these earlier appropriations of Shakespeare in that, instead of incorporating Shakespeare’s play in a broader analysis, Césaire writes a literary work. In the subtitle to *Une tempête* he calls it an “adaptation pour un théâtre nègre.” It is not immediately obvious what Césaire means by the term “théâtre nègre,” or why, when Shakespeare’s play was clearly conducite to colonial readings, an adaptation would be necessary. Couldn’t a “théâtre nègre” express a critique of colonialism through a thoughtful production of Shakespeare’s original text? Because of Césaire’s prominent role in the négritude movement, we might expect his project, like
Lamming’s, to operate in terms of négritude’s “valorization” of the attributes normally
associated with blackness, such as a version with a black Prospero, somehow
commenting on the difference between a black or white “master” figure. Césaire’s
modifications of the text, however, don’t reverse Prospero and Caliban’s roles, nor do
they really “valorize” the character of Caliban, who is at least as angry, unpleasant and
hard-spoken as he is in Shakespeare [need examples from text here]. We might then
expect a “théâtre nègre” to be conducted in creole or an undervalued African language,
but Césaire’s play is in French verse, and often in the “vers somptueux,” in the words of a
character from an earlier work of theater by Césaire (Césaire 1956). In fact, there are
very few changes, and what I find most striking is that Césaire’s adaptation doesn’t
detract at all from the centrality of Prospero as the protagonist.

Instead Une tempête presents the character of Prospero from a different
perspective. Rather than, as Lamming prescribed, portraying Caliban in a different light,
the play presents Prospero from Caliban’s point of view, what I call a “perspective
nègre.” The title of this chapter, “d’un Prospero à ‘l’autre,’” would be translated
(particularly without the quotes around “l’autre”) as “from one Prospero to another.”
With the quotation marks, it asks for a somewhat different translation: “a Prospero
belonging to the Other,” or better, “according to the Other.” Césaire also constructs an
allegory of colonial history in Une tempête, in which Prospero embodies Western
civilization, and in particular the “hommes de main” of the French mission civilisatrice:
the colonists.

Whereas Lamming, like the works of Lyonel Trouillot and Tassadit Imache, is
concerned with making visible and “possible” the stories of the “Calibans” of the world -
people of Haiti and the Parisian banlieues - Césaire’s project is more in line with Michel-
Rolph Trouillot’s call for a “fundamental rewriting” of the West itself. The differences
between the Prospero of Shakespeare and that of Césaire reflect the differences in a
“nègre” perspective on Western history and the version of themselves told by Western
societies.

Shakespeare’s Prospero describes how he was forced into exile after suffering a
political failure he attributes to his detachment from politics in favor of the more
dignified pursuit of pure knowledge: “so reputed in dignity, and for the liberal arts
without a parallel…neglecting worldly ends, all dedicated to closeness and the bettering
of my mind.” (Shakespeare, Tempest I.i.88-108) Shakespeare’s Prospero represents an
intellectual that, according to his self-image, is above religious and political differences.
He is an astrologer and a magician, a philosopher and a free-willed individual.

The play The Tempest itself mirrors Prospero’s disconnection with the political
and historical realms. Laurence Porter points out the contrast between The Tempest’s
timeless, dreamy setting and “the keen [historical] precision of [Shakespeare’s] history
plays.” (Porter 373) Shakespeare, like dramatists of antiquity (and like Césaire in his two
other plays), wrote plays about specific historical figures and events, such as Henry V,
Antony and Cleopatra and Julius Caesar. The Tempest is not set in a specific historical period, and thus appears as more purely literary, “neglecting worldly ends” like Prospero. However, it turns out that The Tempest may have been part of a debate about the nature of man somewhat like the exchange between Mannoni and Fanon. It is clear that Shakespeare read John Florio’s translation of Montaigne, and Arthur Kirsch reads The Tempest as a rebuttal to Montaigne’s image of the “noble savage,” concluding, unlike Montaigne, that savage man, represented by Caliban, is neither civilized man’s equal nor even worthy of forgiveness. While Montaigne and Shakespeare disagree on the perfectability of the savage, they hold the common ideal of keeping their literary work above politics: Prospero’s “commendable unworldliness” recalls Montaigne’s “homme simple et grossier” in his essay “Des Cannibales.”

Césaire gives his Prospero an explicit historical specificity, as well as a political orientation. His exile is due to his condemnation by the Holy Inquisition, which has accused him of heresy “contre Dieu et la Création quant à la forme de la terre et à la possibilité de découvrir d’autres terres.” (Césaire 1969, 21) This Prospero was not above the internal conflicts about knowledge and religion that raged in the early modern period in Europe, such as the wars of religion in France that are the backdrop to Montaigne’s Essais. In this same section, Prospero refers to the island as “ces terres qui depuis des siècles sont promises à la quête de l’homme.” (Césaire 1969, 20) Prospero understands his presence on the island as predestined, and part of the master narrative of European superiority described in Conklin’s Mission to Civilize. In Césaire’s text, Caliban refers to Prospero’s “science,” (Césaire 1969 25) whereas Kermode points out that in Shakespeare, Prospero’s powers are always referred to as his “Art,” always appearing with a capital letter “A” in the Folio text. Shakespeare’s astrologer whose only fault was to have neglected politics becomes a “conquistador” or Christopher Columbus figure in Césaire: an astronomer and geographer with a sense of “manifest destiny,” situated at the time of religious wars in Europe, and of the first contacts in the new world. Césaire’s Prospero is an allegorical figure of the Western colonizers, who understood themselves as performing an important role for the progress of humanity. This echoes the general indictment of Western cultural practices with respect to the problems of colonization from Césaire’s Discours sur le colonialisme.

At the end of The Tempest, once Prospero has forgiven his European enemies, he turns to the audience:

Now my charms are all o’erthrown

... I must be here confined by you,
Or sent to Naples. Let me not,
Since I have my dukedom got
And pardon’d the deceiver, dwell
In this bare island by your spell...
(Shakespeare, *Tempest*, V.i 318-25)

He addresses the audience and asks them to release him so that he may return to his life in Naples. This seals a reading of the enchanted island as a psychological space which is only necessary in order to resolve the problems of human nature. This concept of the function of art and literature is also espoused by Montaigne, to whom Arthur Kirsch attributes the idea of the theater as a “community ‘void of all revenge and free from all rancour.’” (Montaigne in Kirsch 351)

At the end of Césaire’s *Une tempête*, however, Prospero announces that, “Je ne pars plus. Mon destin est ici: je ne le fuirai pas.” (Césaire 1969 90) He will stay behind on the island in order to complete his task to make “l’homme…de la brute, du monstre.” (Césaire 1969 90) In the final pages, the curtain falls, implying passing time, and rises again to show a brief scene in which Prospero, now “vieilli et las,” calls out to Caliban:

“nous ne sommes ples que deux sur cette île, plus que toi et moi.” (Césaire 1969 92) This reflects the difference between the European perspective on colonization - namely, that it is over since almost all of the colonies have declared their independence - and the way things look from the perspective of the former colonies, where daily life is still affected by colonial traditions and the influence of Europe and America. This tired Prospero represents the Europe of the late 1960’s (when Césaire was writing), weakened to the breaking-point by the weight of anti-colonial wars, fascism and world wars in Europe. Prospero’s acknowledgement that there are only two of them left is perhaps an echo of Césaire’s desire to represent the colonial struggle (as well as other questions of justice in Western civilization) to the dual problem of the bourgeoisie and the proletariat.

In my allegorical reading, Caliban and Ariel represent different colonies which, due to different experiences of colonialism and pre-colonial histories, have achieved different degrees of independence through different means. For example, Martinique is one of the “vieilles colonies” of France, dating to pre-revolutionary times. In 1969 it had already a Département d’Outre-Mer, and thus administratively a part of France itself (due in great part to Aimé Césaire’s political influence), since 1946, while most former French colonies in Africa were (at least nominally) independent. Algeria, on the other hand, came into French possession in the 1830’s and had arguably the most difficult struggle for independence, lasting through all of the 1950’s and 60’s.

Let us not forget that *Une tempête* is Césaire’s “American chapter” of his triptych. Césaire has cleverly displaced the play, setting it in the Americas by portraying Prospero as a Columbus figure, but the play also addresses problems of race in the U.S. more explicitly, particularly in one scene of a conversation between Caliban and Ariel that was entirely added by Césaire. The list of characters simply says “ceux de Shakespeare [avec] deux précisions supplémentaires;” that Caliban is a black slave and Ariel a mulatto slave. (There is also the important addition of the character of Eshu, which will be treated in the next section). By specifying the race of Caliban and Ariel, Césaire adds an element of complexity to the reading of Prospero and Caliban as colonial master and
native slave. Ariel becomes the figure of the “house slave” as opposed to the “field slave,” and the “slave” persona, rather than the master, becomes a complex, divided subject. In Act II, scene 1, Ariel and Caliban debate their respective relationships to Prospero. Their discussion mirrors a debate in the U.S. contemporaneous to Césaire’s writing (in the late 1960’s) between the militant resistance symbolized by Malcolm X and the peaceful resistance espoused by Martin Luther King, Jr. Caliban uses the slogan “freedom now” in English, calls Ariel an “oncle Tom,” and tells him “tu n’as rien compris à Prospero. C’est pas un type à collaborer.” (Césaire 1969 38) Caliban’s militant resistance is unflinching and pessimistic. Ariel, on the other hand, describes his “rêve exaltant qu’un jour, Prospero, toi et moi, nous entreprendrions, frères associés, de bâtit un monde merveilleux,” (ibid) clearly referencing Martin Luther King, Jr. through his reference to a “dream” and King’s calls for unity and peace. This section directly addresses the question of what form resistance to racial oppression should take, and is also the most clear depiction of Ariel and Caliban representing the “house slave” and “field slave” respectively.

Césaire’s play thus displaces Shakespeare’s representation of a complex personality through the opposition of Prospero and Caliban onto the slave characters. It is they who are complexified, and whose conflicts are dramatized, perhaps playing out Césaire’s own “double” identity: that of a “nègre” with respect to the metropole, and of an elite member of Martinican society: an educated French citizen and political representative.

To continue our allegorical reading, there is the character of Gonzalo, the wise old adviser to the king in Shakespeare’s Tempest. Shakespeare’s Prospero calls him “good Gonzalo, My true preserver, and a loyal sir To him you follow’st!” (Shakespeare, Tempest V.i 72-74) because when he was exiled, Gonzalo secretly gave him his books of magic. In Césaire’s play, Gonzalo figures prominently, and even provides a comic element. Throughout the opening scene of Une tempête, in which the tempest is raging and the ship is in danger of sinking, Gonzalo comments in a detached, aloof manner on the storm, unmoved by the struggles of the ship’s captain, and chiding the sailors for their unreasonable, emotional state. “Brave homme,” he says, “je comprends votre énervement, mais le propre d’un homme est de savoir se dominer dans toutes les situations, même les plus énervantes.” (Césaire 1969 15) Gonzalo’s manner is reminiscent of Césaire’s denigrating description of Octavio Mannoni from his Discours sur le colonialisme, where he criticizes “la persévérante tentative bourgeoise de ramener les problèmes les plus humains à des notions confortables et creuses.” (Césaire 1955 41) In Une tempête Gonzalo represents the thinkers and scholars who supported the colonial project by developing an intellectual discourse in which colonialism is rationalized. Perceived from the Western perspective as wise and unpartial, he provides a moral justification for Prospero’s “mission” of civilization, but appears, from the “perspective nègre,” as almost inhuman in his bare rationality.

27
The most important moment in this allegorical reading of *Une tempête* is the marriage blessing ceremony and the character of Eshu - the only character added by Césaire. In *The Tempest*, Prospero summons three pagan goddesses to sing marriage blessings on his daughter and the shipwrecked prince. These goddesses of fertility, marriage and maternity, and rainbows wish them “long continuance and increasing,” “earth’s increase and foison plenty,” “barns and garners never empty.” There is an interesting overlap of pastoral and also very economic language (“increasing, increase, growing, plenty”) in this section of *The Tempest*. This is by far the longest song in the play, sung in a trio (all of the other music is either Ariel or Caliban singing alone), and the ceremony calls for an extended group dance - the only place in the play where dance is called for. It is the pinnacle of Prospero’s “Art,” and a ritual display of his mystical powers. Frank Kermode describes Prospero as a Neo-Platonic mage:

His Art is supernatural; the spirits he commands are the dæmons of Neo-Platonicism…He is ‘divinorum cultor & interpres, a studious observer and expounder of divine things,’ and his Art is ‘the absolute perfection of Natural Philosophy.’ Natura [sic] Philosophy includes the arts of astrology, alchemy and ceremonial magic, to all of which Prospero alludes. (Kermode 181)

Prospero’s “ceremonial magic,” epitomized in the marriage blessing scene, echoes Ralph Ellison’s description of American literature as ritual. Césaire, who was inspired by the Harlem Renaissance writers throughout his career, may well have read Ellison’s essay, in which he describes the image of the literary negro as part of an “internal symbolic process through which, like a primitive tribesman dancing himself into a group frenzy necessary for battle, the white American prepares himself emotionally to perform a social role.” (Ellison 28) In Prospero’s ceremony, pagan goddesses instruct the young lovers in their roles in a married couple and their social role as producers of wealth and children.

In Césaire’s version of this scene, Prospero announces this rite as "le spectacle de ce monde de demain: de raison, de beauté, d'harmonie," (Césaire 1969, 67) alluding specifically to the classical ideals that characterize the European renaissance. Prospero’s ceremony is interrupted by Eshu, who arrives abruptly, uninvited and unexpected, and eventually chases away the goddesses with a song that culminates in the line “de son pénis il frappe, il frappe.” (Césaire 1969 68)

Eshu begins by chiding Prospero for not inviting him to the ceremony, and then drinks and says “Pas mauvaise, votre boisson! Mais remarquez, j’aime mieux les chiens!” (Césaire 1969 69) He then looks at one of the goddesses and says:

Je vois que ça surprend la petite dame, mais chacun ses goûts.
D’autres préfèrent les poules, d’autres les chèvres. Moi, la volaille, très peu pour moi! Mais si vous avez un chien noir, pensez au pauvre Eshu! (Césaire 1969 69)
Eshu refers to pagan sacrificial rites, which appears to shock what Prospero refers to as “cette noble assemblée.” By saying that it is only a question of taste, he reminds the spectator of a fact that is completely obscured by Shakespeare’s presentation of the goddesses: that in Western pagan traditions, these goddesses accepted sacrifices as well. In one ancient comedy, Aristophanes Birds, Iris says, “I am going to tell them to sacrifice sheep and oxen on the altars and to fill their streets with the rich smoke of burning fat.” (Aristophanes Birds 1230) Eshu demystifies the pagan goddesses, referring to elements of their past that were forgotten so that they be “cleaned up” when they were revived by neo-classical thinkers. Gregson Davis describes Césaire’s adaptation as a “‘demythified’ account.” (Davis 159) There are many examples of this process of “demythification,” such as when Caliban analyzes the psychology of Prospero’s self-delusions in Mannoni’s terms. Instead of admitting to having attempted to rape Prospero’s daughter, as he does in Shakespeare, he responds by saying, “tu me prêtes tes idées libidineuses,” (Césaire 1969 27) referring to one aspect of Mannoni’s “Prospero complex.”

Césaire identifies Eshu in the cast of characters as “dieu-diable nègre.” Eshu is an African voodoo spirit and, although a well-known figure to today’s scholars of the African diaspora (due in particular to an essay by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. called “The ‘blackness of blackness’: a critique of the sign and the signifying monkey”), Eshu probably would have been read by Césaire the way Alfred Métraux describes him in Le vaudou haïtien of 1960, as the African precursor to the Haitian voodoo figure Legba. Métraux’s only mention of this name is of the Brazilian version of the same deity, spelled Exu. He does talk about the African origins of Legba, though, which we know now to be equivalent to Eshu:

In Fon mythology Legba, as interpreter to the gods, fulfills a function of primordial importance in the whole system of religion. He alone can deliver the messages of the gods in human language and interpret their will…He is also a phallic god… (Métraux 360) This African Legba - or Eshu or Eshu depending on the local name - passes communication between the transcendent, spiritual world of the gods and the material world of humans. I read this scene as the invasion of the European imagination by the figure of the African, embodied here by Eshu, and parallel to Ralph Ellison’s analysis of the role of the literary negro. Because of contradictions between Western civilization’s ideals and the practices such as slavery and oppression that are introduced through colonial expansion, Prospero no longer has the power to “prepare himself emotionally to perform a social role” (as Ellison described it) through his old “ritual,” performed through art and literature. Prospero says, “par cette insubordination, c'est tout l'ordre du monde qu'il remet en cause.” (Césaire 1969, 71) This crisis in Prospero’s mystical powers remains unresolved at the end of the play. After Eshu’s interruption, Prospero cries, "Puissance! Puissance! Hélas! . . qu'est-ce que la puissance si je ne peux dompter mon inquiétude! Allons! Ma puissance a froid!" (Césaire 1969, 71) This also echoes
Césaire’s *Discours sur le colonialisme*, where he writes “cette Europe-là est *impuissante* à se justifier.” (Césaire 1955, 7 my emphasis) Césaire’s play locates the weakness of the Western “narrative of global domination” (as Michel-Rolph Trouillot called it) in the realm of “rituals” of identity: the literary and artistic imagination of the West. Although he rose to political prominence, and also chose to attempt resistance to the historical master narrative in the same historical terms as the West, such as his *Discours sur le colonialisme* or his book *Toussaint Louverture*, Aimé Césaire ultimately concludes, as George Lamming, Lyonel Trouillot and Tassadit Imache also do, that the work of resisting a discourse of domination must be done in the literary sphere.
Conclusion:

Alfred Métraux’s description of Eshu (Legba) continues by discussing the transformation the deity underwent upon his transplantation in Haiti:

Out of this the most potent of gods the [Haitian] Vodooists have made an impotent old man who walks on crutches…He has…remained the guardian of houses and to an even greater extent of roads, paths and crossroads. Since any intersection of ways is a hot-spot for magic, Legba-carrefour has become an important magician and presides over the ceremonies of sorcerers. (Métraux 360-361)

Eshu’s transformation into Legba-carrefour in Haiti mirrors Prospero’s transformation at the end of Césaire’s play. He becomes old and impotent, just as Prospero becomes “vieilli et las” and “impuissant,” and also presides over magical ceremonies. Even more interesting is the association of Eshu’s new-world incarnation with “crossroads” and “intersection,” shown by his new name of Legba-carrefour.

It is appropriate to Césaire play: Une tempête is geographically set in the crossroads of African, European and Native American cultures that is the Americas and, chronologically, at the point of the crossing of the histories of these continents through colonialism. The carrefour is also an important image in Presque un frère: the shopping mall where Bruno and Sabina work is at a highway intersection at the meeting point between metropolitan Paris and the banlieue. The figure of the intersection also fits perfectly into the topos of mapping history onto the urban space of Port-au-Prince in Rue des pas-perdus.

The works I have discussed are at another “carrefour” in Western discourse: they lie at the intersection of the imaginary space of the literary and the “real” and political space of the historical - between the two meanings in French of “histoire:” story or history. This division is a reflection of the split between the public and private domains that, according to Marxist critics, is characteristic of bourgeois society. (for a discussion of the relationship between this split and the literature of the former colonies, see Fredric Jameson, “Third-World Literature in the Era of Multi-national Capitalism.” Social Text 15 (Fall 1986): p. 65-88) The questions about history that Glissant, Trouillot and Nesbitt raise are about the ability of language to represent history, and there is no reason why they need not be treated as literary questions. Likewise, we can consider Rue des pas-perdus or Presque un frère as arising from a historical impulse - the “histoire” of a nation of people - although we also talk about them in terms of stories, in the sense of intimate personal memory. There need not be a conflict between considering them political works and also private and literary. This is the gesture Glissant makes in his statement that history is “pas pour les seuls historiens.”

In fact, it is this separation of the private and public spheres - this fragmentation
or amputation of the body of memory - that leads narratives of resistance, such as négritude, inexorably to be co-opted and absorbed into the master discourse of the West. The radical potential of texts can be filtered out into the literary sphere, where it purportedly has no bearing on politics or reality. In the opening anecdote from Michel-Rolph Trouillot’s book chapter about the Haitian revolution, he describes his student as taking his course because “she needed this narrative of resistance.” He knew that he could offer no such thing in a history course, and he fears that any alternative master narrative is ultimately doomed to fail. Trouillot insists that a rewriting of Western history that truly made a difference would have to be radical, or else run the risk of being reappropriated by the discourse of power and strengthening the status quo. It is the structure of a master narrative itself that must be resisted, and the literary question, “how does one write a history of the impossible?” that must be addressed.

By allowing the literary to bleed into the historical and vice-versa, we make room for a critique of the authority that “historical” or “factual” language commands: the authority of a discourse that claims to draw its “magic” from a place outside of the subjectivity of human memory and thought. This is the work that Nesbitt does in his analysis of the “unofficial” preservation of the memory of Louis Delgrès, the work that Glissant does in his theoretical work, and it is also the purpose of this study. As Ellison, Trouillot and Creech insist, there is no such thing as the “inexpressible” or “unsayable,” only processes that obscure or efface parts of the story. We need only listen to voices from the “peripheries” of global discourse that resist traditional narrative practices. By reading works like those in this study on their own terms although they may appear, as Eshu, to burst in uninvited on global discourse, we can come closer to an understanding of the human experience that is “unthinkable” without them.
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