

Race Fundamentalism: Caribbean Theater and the Challenge to Black Diaspora

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**Abstract**

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This dissertation engages with radical Caribbean theater as a crucial literary archive that is nonetheless underexplored as an expression of political culture and thought. The theoretical grounding of the chapters emerges from the analytically generative thrust of a comment by C.L.R. James in *The Black Jacobins*: “to neglect the racial factor as merely incidental is an error only less grave than to make it fundamental.” While the phrase asserts that race cannot be neglected, it also cautions against ensconcing race as fundamental analytical priority, suggesting a powerfully fluid conceptualization of radical political culture. My chapters argue that radical theater projects in Jamaica and the Dominican Republic share this fluid conceptualization of radical politics with the Trinidadian James’s own plays on the Haitian Revolution. These theater projects differ from more static paradigms within diaspora, transnational, and race studies that reduce political radicalism to race, precisely the “fundamentalist” approach to race against which James cautions. This reduction fails to register how race, diaspora, and nation continue to be

fashioned within a context of persistent class struggle, colonialism and imperialism, and sexism. Furthermore, scholarly discussions of race and diaspora often are rooted fundamentally in U.S. experience, obscuring the ways race is negotiated differently in various New World diasporas, including those in the Caribbean region.

The plays I analyze open up the articulations between race, class, and gender in anti-colonial, anti-racist, and anti-sexist struggles. Furthermore, I attend both to the intra-Caribbean differences that influence the development of radical political culture and to the important connections across areas too often analyzed along colonially fragmented lines. My pan-Caribbean approach avoids thinking of the region as exclusively understandable through linguistically-determined approaches. Across different linguistic and colonial histories, the plays I study cohere in the way they stage political agency through popular culture, collaboration, and spectator participation, all central to each play's aesthetic development and politics but irreducible to race. While race does feature in each play as the site for political radicalism, the performances of race, blackness, and diaspora in the plays are often unrecognizable to U.S. elaborations.

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## Introduction

This dissertation engages with radical Caribbean theater as a crucial literary archive that is nonetheless underexplored as an expression of political culture and thought. The theoretical grounding of my chapters develops from a comment by C.L.R. James in his well-known 1938 history of the Haitian Revolution, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution*, re-issued in 1963. In the comment, James subordinates the question of race to the primacy of class in a way that is indicative both of his political philosophy, at least at this early stage of his career, and of the leftist currents of his Marxist contemporaries: "The race question is subsidiary to the class question in politics, and to think of imperialism in terms of race is disastrous." Far less attention, however, is paid to James's subsequent line: "But to neglect the racial factor as merely incidental is an error only less grave than to make it fundamental" (283). This second line qualifies what might be read as the evacuation of race from analytical significance in the first line, which, in light of the second line, perhaps should read, "to think of imperialism *fundamentally* in terms of race is disastrous." Clearly, however, James stakes out in these lines the position that making race the fundamental question creates a critical problem even worse than leaving race out altogether.

My dissertation emerges from the analytically generative thrust of this phrase. If the first half of the phrase asserts that race cannot be reduced to something "merely incidental," the latter half cautions against ensconcing race as fundamental analytical priority. In other words, the phrase suggests a powerfully fluid conceptualization of radical political culture. The chapters argue that radical theater projects in Jamaica and the Dominican Republic share this fluid conceptualization of radical politics with the Trinidadian James's own stage versions of the Haitian Revolution. These theater projects offer important differences from more static theoretical paradigms within diaspora, transnational, and race studies that reduce political

radicalism to race, precisely the “fundamentalist” approach to race against which James cautions. This reduction fails to register how race, diaspora, and nation continue to be fashioned within a context of persistent class struggle, colonialism and imperialism, and sexism. Furthermore, scholarly discussions of race and diaspora often are rooted fundamentally in U.S. experience, obscuring the ways race relations are negotiated differently in various New World diasporas, including those in the Caribbean region.

The plays I analyze approach questions of race neither in fundamentalist nor fundamentally U.S. terms, instead opening up the articulations between race, class, and gender in anti-colonial, anti-racist, and anti-sexist struggles. Furthermore, in approaching plays from Spanish- and English-language regions, I attend both to the intra-Caribbean differences that influence the development of radical political culture, and to the important connections across areas too often analyzed along colonially fragmented lines. By using a pan-Caribbean approach, I follow in the wake of work by the journal *Small Axe* and scholars like Silvio Torres-Saillant, avoiding the mistake of thinking of the region as limited by or exclusively understandable through linguistically-determined approaches. Across different linguistic and colonial histories, the plays I study cohere in the way they stage political agency, manifested through popular culture, collaboration, and spectator participation, all of which are central to each play’s aesthetic development and politics but are not reducible to race. Although race does feature in each play as the site for political radicalism, the performances of race, blackness, and diaspora in the plays are often unrecognizable to U.S. elaborations of these same constructs.



## Black Diaspora and “Fundamentalist” Visions of Race

Perhaps the most obvious instantiation in the U.S. of James’s “fundamentalist” problem is the influential and highly contested Afrocentric movement, inaugurated, at least in its current form, by Molefi Asante and advanced by numerous other scholars. In his equally influential, if less contested work *The Black Atlantic*, Paul Gilroy derides Afrocentricity for encouraging blacks, “if not to forget the slave experience which appears as an aberration from the story of greatness told in African history, then to replace it at the centre of our thinking with a mystical and ruthlessly positive notion of Africa that is indifferent to intraracial variation and is frozen at the point where blacks boarded the ships that would carry them in to the woes and horrors of the middle passage” (189). However, even if Gilroy is interested in arguing “against the ethnic absolutism that currently [in 1993] dominates black political culture,” evident in Afrocentricity among other cultural movements, there are conceptual limitations for his own vision of what constitutes black political culture. Natasha Barnes has argued, “in a text that passionately exposes the need to implode the boundaries of the national, Gilroy’s meditations on the concept of a diasporic trajectory constantly returns to America—not the Americas—as the originary site of black modern formation,” giving the impression “that America is the Diaspora, and that black modernity cannot take place without it” (“Black Atlantic” 106). Laura Chrisman similarly argues, “The identity and experience of new world slave-descended black people is, by default, seen to contain or represent all modern black experience” (114).

The usefulness of *The Black Atlantic* is its critical debunking of narrow nationalisms and racial and ethnic essentialisms in favor of attention to transnational migrations that have been crucial to the formation of black culture and politics in the Atlantic world. However, as Alison Donnell puts it, the work also has “created an equally forceful critical sway, diverting attention

away from increasingly marginal texts focused on the located and the local” (*Twentieth-Century* 77). Donnell elaborates, “the preference for metropolitan diasporic writings that has emerged in tandem with the Black Atlantic, diasporic critical model has trumpeted the Caribbean as a theoretical utopia in which creolisation, hybridity, synchronicity, and deterritorialisation find their models but not their archives” (127).<sup>1</sup> Robert Carr calls out this “slippage between ‘African-American studies’ and ‘the African diaspora’ or ‘the Black Atlantic’” and its critical consequences: “the experiences of the over-developed countries continue to take preeminence in reterritorialization projects, thus overriding the realities of the international division of labor” (16). Even if Gilroy’s project is adamant about making “blackness a matter of politics rather than a common cultural condition” such that he can construct “a truly pan-African, diaspora sensibility” (Gilroy 27), his archival selections make it so that “the differences of the diaspora can only barely be grappled with, or only through the lens of African-America” (Carr 16).

Gilroy’s landmark work itself might not be aligned quite as cleanly with theoretical treatments of black diaspora as Donnell suggests; however, there is no question that its “reception threatens continually (despite Gilroy’s own qualifications) to conflate diaspora, and its particular history of usage in black cultural politics, with Gilroy’s proposition of that field he calls the ‘black Atlantic’— a phrase rapidly being canonized and institutionalized in the U.S. academy” (Edwards, “Uses” 45). This conflation and institutionalization combine with the U.S.-centric thrust that Brent Hayes Edwards has identified in the much earlier institutionalization of Black Studies programs in the U.S. academy. Edwards, citing a 1970 C. L. R. James interview in *The Black Scholar*, foregrounds how the “discourse of diaspora [...] is both enabling to black studies [...] and inherently a risk, in that it can fall back into either racial essentialism or American vanguardism” (“Uses” 57). Edwards’s point here echoes James’s admonition against

<sup>1</sup> For a slightly different elaboration of this critique, see Torres-Saillant, *Intellectual History of the Caribbean*, 44.

making race fundamental insofar as a project founded on black or African diaspora is not fundamentally a progressive agenda but an inherently risky one. This risk is a feature, too, of Gilroy's black Atlantic: "The risk here is that black Atlantic loses the broad range of the term diaspora" (Edwards, "Uses" 63).

Edwards's own argument for the "uses" of diaspora is invested in a conceptualization that "theorize[s] both culture and politics at the transnational level," against diaspora as "a simple continuity with 'Pan-Africanism'" that serves as "a reduction to its 'cultural sector'" ("Uses" 55). Furthermore, this conceptualization emphasizes the way

*diaspora* points to difference not only internally (the ways transnational black groupings are fractured by nation, class, gender, sexuality, and language) but also externally: in appropriating a term so closely associated with Jewish thought, we are forced to think not in terms of some closed or autonomous system of African dispersal but explicitly in terms of a complex past of forced migrations and racialization. ("Uses" 64)

Again, James's caution against the fundamentalization of race emerges here, this time in its stress on the way race and blackness—and Africanness—must be disarticulated from conceptualizations of diaspora so as to avoid thinking African diaspora in terms of a singular black identity, or thinking diaspora exclusively in terms of race.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> For important essays that focus on the multiplicities in black diaspora, see Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. Jonathan Rutherford, London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990, 222-37; Kenneth W. Warren, "Appeals for (Mis)recognition: Theorizing the Diaspora," *Cultures of United States Imperialism*, ed. Amy Kaplan and Donald E. Pease, Durham: Duke UP, 1993, 392-406; Robin D. G. Kelly, "How the West Was One: On the Uses and Limitations of Diaspora," *The Black Scholar* 30.3/4 (2001): 31-34; Colin Palmer, "The African Diaspora," *The Black Scholar* 30.3/4 (2001): 56-59; and David Scott, "Preface: Diasporas of the Imagination," *Small Axe* 29 (2009): vii-x. See, too, the special issue of *Small Axe*, "Blackness Unbound: Interrogating Transnational Blackness," edited by Glyne A. Griffith, for which Scott provides the preface cited.

## Diaspora as Practice (and Performance and Pleasure, too)

Noting its proliferation in both academic and popular spheres, Rogers Brubaker writes that perhaps there is now “a ‘diaspora’ diaspora,” then argues that diaspora should be thought of as “a category of practice,” not “a bounded entity, but an idiom, a stance, a claim” (12). Edwards seems to agree, evidenced by the development of his essay on “The Uses of Diaspora” into his influential work, *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism*. As the title suggests, *The Practice of Diaspora* focuses on the ways black diaspora functions less as a bioculturally unifying identity and more as a set of practices that emerges through the political and literary encounters between blacks from Africa, the U.S., and the Caribbean in metropolitan France in the 1920s and 1930s. These “often uneasy encounters” are as much about the way links are forged between these black writers as they are about what Edwards says becomes lost in translation: “unavoidable misapprehensions and misreadings, persistent blindnesses and solipsisms, self-defeating and abortive collaborations, a failure to translate even a basic grammar of blackness” (*Practice* 5).

While I agree with both the theoretical and political impulse of Brubaker’s and Edwards’s formulations, I want to revise “practice” into “performance,” a revision enabled both by James’s line with which I opened this introduction and the plays that I analyze in the rest of this dissertation. As an alternative way of thinking diaspora, performance neither divorces nor sees as oppositional the relationship between politics and culture, aesthetics, or pleasure. The work of the Caribbean playwrights I examine in this dissertation allow me to extend Edwards’s theoretically rich—but narrowly discursive—focus, from failed translations, misapprehensions, and misreadings to the way performances of race and blackness also challenge expectations of

racial unity across the black diaspora, even if these performances are neither explicitly nor recognizably aligned with a progressive black cultural politics.

The idea of performances of race and blackness, I argue, is much more attentive to the variety of black cultural practices than what black cultural unity might wish them to be. Of course, these performances do not necessarily negate racial unity, itself a performance strategy, perhaps even a compelling one, or at the very least politically and culturally compelling at particular historical moments. But black unity that isn't understood in terms of political and cultural performance seems less effective, especially as this unity runs up against the lived experiences of blacks around the world. This isn't to say that unified movements against global white supremacy are no longer needed, but to question whether or not global black unity—in Pan-Africanism, or a sprawling transnational blackness, or a culturally undifferentiated African diaspora—can do the same political work as global movements against anti-black racism.

In fact, James's statement that "to neglect the racial factor as merely incidental is an error only less grave than to make it fundamental" is analytically generative for me precisely because of what I argue is its affinity with notions of performance. By foregrounding the shifting importance of "the racial factor"—its ability to be displaced from fundamental priority—his remark suggests that the projects in which he foregrounded global black unity, most notably his landmark 1938 history *The Black Jacobins* and the 1936 stage production of *Toussaint Louverture*, were strategic performances with expressly anti-racist and anticolonial purposes. As I will demonstrate in Chapter 1, James recognized that different political contexts of the 1930s and the 1960s meant his performance of global black unity in the 1930s had to shift in the 1960s to staging tensions between blacks in newly postcolonial sites in Africa and the Caribbean. In

other words, James refused to make race the fundamental factor in how the Haitian Revolution could be useful for black cultural politics in different historical moments.

My emphasis on performance in black cultural production has received its strongest theoretical elucidation in Tejumola Olaniyan's *Scars of Conquest/Masks of Resistance*, a work that has not enjoyed the critical embrace that *The Black Atlantic* has, even though Olaniyan writes only two years later and similarly triangulates black experience. Olaniyan's triangle, however, focuses on plays by Africans, Caribbeans, and African-Americans. This focus might explain the far smaller reach it has had by comparison to Gilroy's black Atlantic formulation, with its transatlantic leap over the Caribbean islands to focus on blacks in Britain and blacks in the U.S., and its privileging of New World racial slavery in a way that sidelines African blacks from contributing to the constitution of "modern black experience" (Chrisman 114). Furthermore, Olaniyan is much more sympathetic toward Afrocentric thought, within which he includes Senghor's *négritude*, even if he has serious criticisms of its ability to effect material change for blacks across the globe. Olaniyan recognizes "the historically emancipatory effects of Afrocentrism" and the "continuing fact of aggressive imperialist cultural domination" to which Afrocentric thought responds (40). In other words, contra Gilroy, he sees Afrocentrism "as a symptom rather than a cause" of the material and cultural problems facing blacks around the world (Chrisman 111).

Nonetheless, Olaniyan casts both Eurocentrism and Afrocentrism as unified by the way they approach the question of identity and difference by conceiving of culture "as an essence, transparent, obvious, and unchanging," what he labels "the expressive conception of cultural identity." He then contrasts this with a post-Afrocentric conception that he calls "performative," which "stresses the historicity of culture, that is, its 'made-ness' in space and time" (30-31). For

Olaniyan, this performative dimension of post-Afrocentric discourse engages in a “perpetual questioning”—here he borrows from Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks*—that

subverts [...] the *culturalist* notion of difference that animates *both* the Eurocentric and Afrocentric discourses—the fixation of one upon white = civilized—black = barbaric opposition and of the other on a ‘white aesthetic’ against a ‘black aesthetic’—and the more or less quiet disregard by both for the complexity of the enabling conditions of their utterance. The post-Afrocentric discourse not only quests for different representations but also, simultaneously, queries the *representation of difference*. (27)

Olaniyan’s critique of the “culturalism” of both Eurocentrism and Afrocentrism is of a piece with Edwards’s concern, cited above, that conceptualizations of diaspora should not retain what he sees as Pan-Africanism’s “reduction to its ‘cultural sector.’” What I want to draw out from Olaniyan’s comment is his stress on “the complexity of the enabling conditions” giving rise to the very articulation of more “culturalist” approaches to identity and difference. He opens his book with the suggestion that such “enabling conditions” entail a problem at the core of conceptualizations of black diaspora: “African-American writers have never considered their cultural Americanness unproblematic” (4).

This is the crucial center of Saidiya Hartman’s *Lose Your Mother*, an honest and painful reckoning with what her cultural Americanness means as an African American in Ghana in the late 1990s. For my purposes, what matters is a particular scene that reveals the conditions of contemporary performances within black or African diaspora, performances structured not simply by the material inequality between Ghanaians and black Americans but also the cultural gulf that separates them. Located near the middle of the book, the scene has been set up by

Hartman's recurring emphasis on her status as *obruni*, or "A foreigner from across the sea" (3). If she "wanted to cross the boundary that that separated kin from stranger," then, she concedes, "disappointment awaited [her]" (17). This disappointment appears to be rooted in a misrecognition—hers—of diasporic unity, abrasively rubbing up against Ghanaians' recognition of her as a stranger, a foreigner.<sup>3</sup> The scene that interests me, however, is about the performance of recognition: Ghanaian boys "recognizing" her as a sister once lost but now "home," Hartman recognizing the "hustle" behind this recognition, the boys recognizing the economic wealth that she represents (84-85, 88-89).

What Hartman calls a hustle, I want to read under the rubric of performance. The adolescent boys' initial calls—"Sister!" "One Africa!" "Slavery separated us."—are performances they know will resonate with the African Americans able to visit tourist sites like the infamous slave fort, Elmina Castle (84). In other words, their performance fulfills the diasporic longings that motivate, if with different purposes and to different ends, African Americans who can afford to travel to Ghana as tourists. Hartman poignantly wonders about these longings: "Were desire and imagination enough to bridge the rift of the Atlantic?" (29) That the possibility of such a bridge is possible is less important to me than the way the adolescents perform diaspora, manipulating this "desire and imagination" for their own economic benefit.<sup>4</sup> Near the conclusion of her work, Hartman notes that when she was in the company of academics from various African states, "Diaspora was really just a euphemism for stranger [...]. They made it clear: Africa ended at the borders of the continent" (215). Between these academics' discursive invocation of diaspora as euphemism, and the adolescents'

<sup>3</sup> For a compelling reading of Langston Hughes's analogous experience seven decades prior, see Warren, "Appeals" 393. My use of recognition and misrecognition here is indebted to Warren's insights in that essay.

<sup>4</sup> Hartman's chapter, "The Famished Road," features a scene similarly rooted in a tourist economy revolving around slavery.



performed one, Hartman is caught in the politics and economics of black diasporic recognition, what Deborah Thomas dubs, “the broader contexts and relations of power within which diasporic cultural and political formulations are created and re-created *in relation to one another* over time” (26).

In the U.S., few scholars of black performances have explored such performances in relation to other sites—such as Africa or the Caribbean—and in terms of the different, at times competing ways blackness is performed, negotiated, and articulated. One notable exception is Louis Chude-Sokei’s study of Bert Williams’s “black-on-black minstrelsy,” in which he reads in Williams’s stage partner George Walker a recognition that “Bert William’s ability to play ‘the Negro’ better than it was being played suggests that ‘the Negro’ was more a site of contested performance traditions than it was a biocultural category” (33-34). Chude-Sokei’s analysis is predicated on the distance between the Barbadian Williams and his blackface performance as an African-American. In other words, if Williams’s appropriation of white racist blackface tradition politically altered the meanings of blackface such that it became a black cultural form, then this same appropriation also emphasized the very performative nature of blackness itself. Williams could play “black” or “African-American” not because he ontologically inhabited those spaces, but because he didn’t—he wasn’t black or African-American, not in the same way. Chude-Sokei draws attention to the way Williams’s performance destabilized the “bichromatic” norm of U.S.-centric racial politics, both conservative and progressive.

I turn to Caribbean racial performances as a way to disrupt the racial normativity of the U.S. framework Chude-Sokei invokes. Caribbean performances of blackness also highlight what Stephanie Leigh Batiste has noted about Depression-era African American performance, namely, the way “African Americans ironically maintain a national identity that figures them as

empowered on the global stage, particularly, but not solely, in relation to diasporic black populations” (4). Glossing over these “black imperial representations,” Batiste argues, threatens to “simplify diaspora and conflate black identities and differences in a utopian apprehension of a common blackness” (11). If the Ghanaian adolescents hailing Hartman are to be taken seriously, such a “utopian apprehension of a common blackness” is unsustainable the moment black cultural performances encounter one another. I examine black diasporas in the Caribbean for how they offer different conceptualizations of blackness, and how these different conceptualizations emerge within theater and performance. Furthermore, performances of blackness in the Caribbean challenge U.S. discourses of blackness that trade in their own universal pretensions, but do so at the risk of maintaining an imperial discourse of U.S. (black) exceptionalism.

#### Caribbean Theater and Performance, Roots and Grassroots

In his conclusion, Olaniyan stresses that his comparative study of black theater is not about a narrow culturalism: “Blacks across the three continents studied are questing for cultural identity not because they are black but because they are black *and* dominated.” He then adds, “The question here, of course, is how to keep this insight in focus *theatrically*, that is, through and in performance” (140). Theatricality and performance have been central to Caribbean writers and thinkers’ work since the anticolonial and anti-racist movements of the early twentieth century. One of the touchstone events for Caribbean writers, as for many black writers and intellectuals across the world, is the Haitian Revolution, as the paradigmatic instance of black triumphant overcoming in the face of white imperial and racist power. In his landmark 1939 poem, *Cahier d’un retour au pays natal*, Aimé Césaire links the Haitian Revolution with the

emergence of the influential *négritude* movement roughly 130 years later: “Haïti ou la négritude se mit debout pour la première fois et dit qu’elle croyait à son humanité” (46). Clayton Eshleman and Annette Smith translate the line as follows: “Haiti where negritude rose for the first time and stated that it believed in its humanity” (47). However, following other translators, I’m choosing to read the phrase “se mit debout” as “stood up” to emphasize in Césaire’s poetic phrasing the act of standing up, the embodied performance of rising as resistance to racial oppression. Relying on Rosello and Pritchard’s translation of the *Cahier*, Martin Munro argues that “standing up” signifies “a recurring, affirmative motif in *Cahier d’un retour au pays natal*’s gradual movement towards its final proclamations of victory” (10). As with Munro, for me there is something important in movement, something rich and understudied in Césaire’s emphasis on the performance of blackness, the performance of resistance, embodied for the first time, in his poetic estimation, in Haiti. That the predominant literary form is drama for Caribbean writers engaging with the Haitian Revolution underscores how important performance is for thinking about revolution, race, and the Caribbean. In other words, from Derek Walcott’s Haitian Trilogy of plays<sup>5</sup> to Édouard Glissant’s *Monsieur Toussaint* (1961) to Césaire’s *La Tragédie du roi Christophe* (1963), major Caribbean writers almost without exception choose to depict the touchstone event in the history of black revolution in the Caribbean using a form dependent on public performance.

George Lamming has similarly invoked performance and drama in his writings. *The Pleasures of Exile*, a collection of his essays first published in 1960, begins by citing a Haitian peasant religious Ceremony of the Souls that he witnessed. Emphasizing the dramatic function of the ceremony, Lamming connects it to Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*. Here, and throughout his essays, Lamming repeatedly invokes *The Tempest*, drama, ceremony, and performance—

<sup>5</sup> The three plays are *Henri Christophe* (1949), *Drums and Colours* (1958), and *The Haitian Earth* (1984).

primarily located in peasant life—as a way to approach writing about the Caribbean.

Furthermore, Lamming often employs dramatic conventions, from presenting his examples in the form of creatively imagined dramatic dialogues to literally staging “the theatre of the courtroom” (*Pleasures* 181). *The Pleasures of Exile* makes abundantly clear Lamming’s keen interest in turning, in the first instance, to ritual and ceremony as dramatic forms, and, in the second, to drama as a form to represent Caribbean peasants’ lived experience. In tying performance specifically to blackness and race, I rest on these writers’ investment in theater both as an expressive art form and as a powerful site for articulating with lower-class, peasant, and black cultural practices.

In *Caribbean Discourse*, Glissant reflects on the dialectical relationship between nation and theater, noting that a nation’s “theatrical expression is particularly vibrant, fertile, free when the collective consciousness is being formed” (197). Glissant concretizes this abstract rumination on theater-as-form by focusing on theater’s place in Martinique and in the wider Caribbean:

...there is a deficiency in “our” theater. What is this necessity that cannot find expression, this threat that remains invisible, this totality that fragments? Our tragedy is not resolved. The reasons for the deficiency are cumulative: the traumatic conditions under which the Caribbean was settled, structures (based on taboos) of the slave’s world, self-repression provoked by depersonalization, etc. But the fact that the Martinican is incapable of representing himself only makes the need more intense for the opportunity offered by the theater, through which he could be made to come to terms with himself. (197)

Glissant’s argument on the need for theater explains why drama is so central for so many Caribbean writers: there is a link between the theater and the people, theater providing a venue

through which the Caribbean subject can, as Glissant puts it, “come to terms with himself.”

Césaire offers a slightly different argument for the importance of theater to him and to Caribbean society: “Pour moi, le théâtre est un art complet, total. Dans le théâtre, il faut intégrer la poésie, la danse, le chant, le folklore, le conte; c’est un art de synthèse et d’intégration” (qtd. in Bailey 11).<sup>6</sup> Here, the relevance for my project is what Césaire synthesizes in his definition of theater: he includes the more “textual,” formal elements of theater—poetry and narrative—but he also stresses theater’s more performative, embodied, popular elements, including folklore, song, and dance. According to Césaire, theater necessarily includes the performances embedded in popular cultural practice, preserving and communicating knowledge not just through the oral or the textual but also through the embodied and the performed.

In an interview with David Scott reflecting back on the importance of engaged theater for political activity, Lamming stresses the link in Barbados of the 1950s and 1960s between the workers’ union and a local theater group. Lamming describes the genesis of the political theater as arising from grassroots interaction between workers and theater professionals, such that workers were central to the creation of the productions. In fact, Lamming highlights the way different performances elicited audience members’ revisions, a sort of participatory theater. “[I]t was that kind of *bridge* that I was trying to build,” he says. “What I was trying to do at the time was to establish for the union that what you call culture was the very foundation of your labor... That theater in a way became not a thing that those people did in that place or that place, but it was an organic part of what you were doing every day, of returning society to itself through this activity” (“Sovereignty” 151). Rooted in an anticolonial, antiracist practice that confronted European or Western dramatic superiority, Walcott is similarly invested in theater as

<sup>6</sup> My translation: “For me, theater is a complete art, total. In theater, one must integrate poetry, dance, song, folklore, story; it’s an art of synthesis and integration.”

a form that could link with popular cultural practice. Edward Baugh has noted, “[Walcott’s] development [as a playwright] reflects his foundational contribution to a Caribbean theater rooted in the experience of the common people, drawing on their arts of performance, including their language, and in the context of the colonial experiences of the region” (45).<sup>7</sup> This link between the theater and what people “were doing every day” and their own “arts of performance” is central to the concept of performance I’m investigating, specifically in terms of the way race and blackness become articulated through performances.

In the U.S. academy, Performance Studies as a discipline emerges out of a doubt about the relevance of a narrow concept of theater arts; however, this emergence often occludes the way Caribbean theater has a long tradition of using the stage to bring popular cultural practices to the fore, from the use of what Kamau Brathwaite has called “nation language,” to syncretic religious practices, to deep social rituals like carnival.<sup>8</sup> Arising from these Caribbean playwrights’ commitment to allowing people’s everyday practices to determine both form and content, the conceptualization of performance I foreground in this dissertation refuses to separate politics from performance and pleasure, while also foregrounding the mutual fertilization between playwrights, theater, and everyday popular practices.<sup>9</sup>

Dominican playwright Reynaldo Disla has been at the forefront of relying on this mutual fertilization in the development of *teatro callejero* (street theater) in the Dominican Republic. Like the Caribbean writers cited above, Disla argues for the necessity of a publically engaged, participatory theater, one that can begin to address the cultural and political erasure spread by Dominican elites through social institutions, an erasure of the history of enslavement, and the

<sup>7</sup> For more, see Bruce King’s study of Walcott and the Trinidad Theatre Workshop he helped to found in 1959.

<sup>8</sup> Brathwaite develops the concept of “nation language” most famously in his 1979 essay, “History of the Voice.”

<sup>9</sup> Perhaps this mutual fertilization goes some way to explaining why in his chapter “On Violence” in *The Wretched of the Earth*, Frantz Fanon turns to Aimé Césaire’s play *Et les chiens se taisaient* (*And the Dogs Were Silent*).

concomitant minimizing or outright erasure of black and African cultural contributions to Dominican society. However, Disla evokes Dominican carnival traditions society itself to combat this erasure. The irreverent satire in his history of street theater's emergence evokes the Dominican carnival traditions that feature so prominently in his plays:

Los negros esclavos africanos vinieron de turistas a disfrutar del trabajo en los cañaverales y las minas, y tanto les gustó su nuevo empleo que quemaron los cañaverales de puro entusiasmo y salían huyendo y se volvían cimarrones. ... Cuatro siglos más tarde el teatro callejero (1976-1979) mostraba a la ciudad de Santo Domingo los dramático suicidios [sic], los ayes, quejidos y alaridos indígenas y africanos, señalaba los explotadores antiguos y actuales, los héroes que se rebelaron contra el yugo, el yunque y la opresión; los patriotas y los vende patria. El teatro vengaba a los mártires.

La chusma, la plebe, el vulgo, la canalla, los descamisados, los hijos de machepa, el populacho pudo ver teatro, por primera vez en su vida, divertirse y disfrutar. (188)<sup>10</sup>

Disla helps me link Caribbean concepts of performance with ideas of blackness and race insofar as his argument about the need to show the city its history of shared indigenous *and* African origins stands out prominently against the backdrop of a Dominican racial formation marked by anti-black, anti-African—or at least African-obscuring, black-obscuring—racial projects. As a corrective to dominant Dominican racial thinking invested in actively forgetting, Disla offers

<sup>10</sup> The enslaved African blacks came as tourists to enjoy the work in the sugarcane plantations and mines, and so much did they like their new jobs that they burned the plantations out of pure enthusiasm and they left fleeing and became maroons... Four centuries later, street theater (1976-1979) showed the city of Santo Domingo the dramatic suicides, the indigenous and African “ayes,” cries, and howls; signaled the ancient and current exploiters, the heroes who rebelled against the yoke, the anvil, and oppression, the patriots and the traitors. Theater avenged the martyrs.

The mob, the plebs, the masses, the rabble, the shirtless, the children of everyday misfortune, the populace could see theater, for the first time in their lives, amuse and enjoy themselves. (my translation)

performance. This is not to say that his racial performance is unique, or even categorically distinct from performances of race as articulated by, say, Brathwaite or Lamming or Césaire. However, what is striking about all of these writers is the way blackness is consistently evoked in terms of performance.

As I hope to have made clear, my purpose in focusing on Caribbean theater and the performances of race and blackness that emerge in the plays I study is not intended to pit a monolithic sense of Caribbean race relations against an equally monolithic sense of U.S. race relations. Both U.S. and Caribbean race relations are fraught with complexity, even if both Caribbean and U.S. societies are similarly structured by white supremacy such that relative proximity to phenotypic and/or symbolic blackness too often corresponds with social status. My purpose, by contrast, is to analyze the way performances of race register differentially between *and* within the Caribbean nations represented by the playwrights I study, and to argue that the performances of race in these plays force us to reconsider the way diaspora, race, and blackness are conceptualized.<sup>11</sup>

Chapter 1, “The Tragicomedy of Anticolonial Overcoming: *Toussaint Louverture* and *The Black Jacobins* on Stage,” engages David Scott’s reading of C.L.R. James’s revisions to *The Black Jacobins*. Analyzing the revisions to this landmark historical work, Scott argues that tragedy is the appropriate form to narrate today’s postcolonial context, rather than the romance of earlier anticolonial struggles. In my chapter, I focus on James’s revisions to his play, the first version titled *Toussaint Louverture* (1936), and the second *The Black Jacobins* (1967). Although James’s revisions to the play correspond chronologically with those for the history, in the later

<sup>11</sup> Two relatively recent anthologies capture the thrust of my motivations here: Shalini Puri’s edited collection, *Marginal Migrations: The Circulation of Cultures within the Caribbean* (2003), and Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shi’s volume, *Minor Transnationalism* (2005).



play James invokes comedy, alongside tragedy, to imagine possible political futures in the face of postcolonial failures to live up to romantic anticolonial expectations for total revolution. Comedy also shifts how race operates in the play: in the first version, James's play, like his history, is both anti-racist and anti-colonial. By the second version, the stage time devoted to countering white supremacy, while still significant, has been replaced by the staging of relations amongst black leaders, and the relations between these leaders and black peasant masses. James does not rewrite history, but refocuses attention to what is relevant in the 1960s: the relationship between revolutionary leaders vying for power and the masses so central to revolution. To reduce both versions of the play to a single story of anticolonial black struggle is to fundamentalize race, thus missing the way the later version renders blackness secondary to the post-independence intra-black class struggles characteristic of neocolonial governance in Africa and the West Indies.

In Chapter 2, "Can a Mulatta be a Black Jacobin?," I take a different approach to *The Black Jacobin* plays to intervene in how we should read James's body of work. My intervention is twofold. First, I argue against reading James as the sole author and reviser of the plays, instead reading his revised play as emerging through his collaborations. Second, I argue that in the 1967 version of *The Black Jacobins* there is a radical feminism that emerges precisely from these collaborations. One tragedy in the play that Scott cannot read in the history, because it isn't there, turns on "the woman question," examined in the play through a depiction of women in the Haitian Revolution. Scott thus misses the crucial tragedy that black and mulatto women have faced both historically (in the Haitian Revolution and early twentieth century anticolonial politics), and historiographically, in scholarly representations of these revolutionary movements. The most radical revision is the centrality of a militant mulatto woman, a revision that presents a

challenge to scholarly interpretation of James's personal and professional relationships with women and with feminism. This scholarship depicts James, at worst, as a paragon of patriarchy and, at best, as a man caught between the feminist politics of the women in his life and the constraints of a male-centered Caribbean revolutionary and anticolonial tradition.

In “‘Listen, American Negro’: Racial Performance, Dominican Street Theater, and ‘Global’ Blackness,” I turn to Dominican popular theater to counter the dominant sense that Dominicans are averse to recognizing their own blackness. Simply casting Dominicans as “negrophobic,” however, misses a crucial question: who sets the terms for and controls admission to “global” blackness and “the” African diaspora? Scholarly indictments of Dominicans’ racial sensibilities fail to account for the distance between Dominican articulations of blackness and what I have been calling “fundamentalist” versions of blackness, often emanating from the U.S., that masquerade as global. In the chapter, I engage with Reynaldo Disla’s 1986 street play, *Un comercial para Máximo Gómez*, and Frank Disla’s 1985 carnivalesque play, *Ramón Arepa*. In their connections with Afro-creolized Dominican carnival traditions, both plays offer an important but woefully understudied instance of Dominican-centered Afro- and black-affirming cultural practice that does not depend exclusively on experiences with U.S. racism and anti-racist struggle. In addition, because their reliance on carnival as a method involves mobility as both evasion and pageantry; humor, indirection, and satire; and racial masquerade, the plays’ engagement with blackness and Africanness is unrecognizable to outside observers accustomed to a black-white binary and a discourse of black affirmation that has not been central to Dominicans’ experience. Thus, Dominicans are often misrecognized out of black and Afro-diasporic cultural politics.

My final chapter, “‘Teach His People the Value of Unity’: Black Diaspora, Women, and Una Marson’s *Pocomania*,” turns to the Jamaican writer Una Marson’s 1938 play *Pocomania* for its contrast between Jamaican yard life, specifically the religious revivalism of the Afro-creolized Pocomania tradition, and Jamaican middle class life, with its emphasis on proper Christian behavior, belief, and practice. The play is an early representation of African-derived cultural practice as not only crucial to but positive for Jamaica’s social formation. However, far from promising an easy, cross-class racial unity, the play depicts insurmountable cultural differences between Jamaicans of African descent. In the play, definitions of blackness and Africanness are sites of struggle between black Jamaicans, rather than Afro-descent operating as a fundamental unifier across class in the face of white supremacy. These struggles play out over middle- and lower-class black women’s power, and Marson renders a complex portrait of how the intra-racial disunity that frames black Jamaicans’ lives is enabled by gendered expectations of respectability.

## Chapter 1: The Tragicomedy of Anticolonial Overcoming: *Toussaint Louverture* and *The Black Jacobins* on Stage

Rare is the work on the Haitian Revolution that fails to invoke C. L. R. James's *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution*. Published in 1938, *The Black Jacobins* not only deepens understanding of the intricacies of Atlantic slavery, plantation economies, and the Revolution, but also emphasizes the way the Revolution led first to self-emancipation and then to Haitian independence in 1804.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, as Stuart Hall puts it, "It is James, in modern historiography, who elevates slavery to the world historical stage" ("Breaking" 22). In *Conscripts of Modernity*, David Scott analyzes James's revisions to the 1963 re-issue of *The Black Jacobins* to track a move from romance to tragedy as the "mode of emplotment" for the Haitian Revolution. Scott proposes that these revisions demonstrate James's understanding that the history of the Haitian Revolution cannot be told the same way—cannot do the same work—as it did in 1938, because the questions posed by James's 1938 "problem-space" were not the ones he confronted in 1963, and these are not the questions facing us today.

Kara Rabbitt also focuses on *The Black Jacobins*'s tragic and dramatic elements, for the way the book is "a site for the intersection of many of James's diverse literary capacities and interests—narrative, political, philosophical" (118). Both Scott and Rabbitt stress James's generic blurring in *The Black Jacobins*: it is as much an historical work as it is a literary one, specifically focused on Toussaint L'Ouverture as a dramatic hero. Their analyses resonate with James's 1971 lectures on *The Black Jacobins*, in which he asserts that "for no other reason than a *literary* reason" he decided he would write a literary biography about Toussaint ("Lectures" 67). James then traces his project's development: after arriving in England in 1932 he gradually

<sup>1</sup> On "self-emancipation" see Blackburn. On the idea of "dual revolution," see Fick 1; and Bogues, *Empire* 113-15, 140n40.

began “to see the San Domingo Revolution in a Marxist way” (68). James’s literary intentions persisted, as Scott and Rabbitt suggest, but were inflected by a Marxism that moved him from simply telling Toussaint’s story, to telling his story in a dialectical way, in relation to the movements around him. Rabbitt sees *The Black Jacobins* as important to James’s oeuvre because it incorporates narrative, political, and philosophical elements, in particular dramatic quality. It is strange, however, that Rabbitt and Scott use the language of drama to describe James’s historiographical narrative style, but fail to analyze James’s plays. In fact, it is strange that little sustained analysis of the play versions exists in James criticism at large. Whereas the history has received quite a bit of attention, including its minor—but still meaningful, per Scott—revisions, the versions of the play have been all but ignored, despite their much more substantial revisions.

In 1931 James invoked Toussaint as a counterargument to Sidney Harland’s racist argument on the inferiority of blacks in the pages of the short-lived Trinidadian journal *The Beacon*.<sup>2</sup> Writing about James’s response to Harland, Scott says, “The central problem at the heart of the problem of race was the question of the humanity and achievement of blacks” (*Conscripts* 79). It is, then, a problem that seems to require “black vindicationism” as an answer (Scott, *Conscripts* 81). Even though his 1936 play and 1938 history on Toussaint and the Haitian Revolution emerged in the context of his anticolonial and Marxist work in England, the relevance of this form of response—vindicating black humanity and achievement—marks both the play and the history. Arriving in London from Trinidad in 1932, James developed a Marxist orientation with which he explored the Haitian Revolution, turning to Black rather than European revolution to address the relationship between revolutionary masses and revolutionary leadership. Furthermore, in 1935, James and other anticolonial thinkers in England founded the International African Friends of Abyssinia (IAFA, later the International African Friends of

<sup>2</sup> For more on the exchange between Harland and James, see Scott, *Conscripts*, 79-81; and Rosengarten 21.

Ethiopia, IAFE) to protest Italy's imperial incursion into Ethiopia. As part of the IAFE, James was interested in depicting an instance of powerful black revolution against European empire, as he makes explicit in the 1971 lectures: "I had in mind writing about the San Domingo Revolution as the preparation for the revolution that George Padmore and all of us were interested in, that is, the revolution in Africa" (72).<sup>3</sup> The IAFE was followed in 1937 by the International African Services Bureau (IASB), an organization dedicated to broader anticolonial struggle in and for Africa. This is the 1930s problem-space informing both the history and the play.<sup>4</sup> The history and the play are circumscribed by an explicit focus on race because of the specific problem-space that demanded such a focus.

At the time of the re-issue of the history version in 1963, James confronted a changed problem-space, and Scott argues that the minor revisions to the history constitute a deep reflection on the changes in world history between earlier anticolonial movements and emergent postcolonial conditions in the 1960s. One important change is the degree to which black or racial vindication can respond to the new problem-space. To put it another way, unified, romantic black achievement does not carry the same critical purchase in the 1960s as it did in the 1930s. Scott reads the first edition of *The Black Jacobins* as "one of the great inaugural texts of the discourse of anticolonialism" (*Conscripts* 9), in which "past, present, and future have typically been emplotted in a distinctive form, one with a distinctive story-potential: that of *Romance*." These stories, says Scott, "have tended to be narratives of overcoming, often narratives of [racial] vindication; they have tended to enact a distinctive rhythm and pacing, a distinctive

<sup>3</sup> Anthony Bogues says James's intended audience includes "the anti-colonial revolutionaries in Africa and the Caribbean, and the European Marxists" (*Black Heretics* 74). Christian Høgsbjerg convincingly includes both West Indian and British working classes in that audience (39).

<sup>4</sup> For a slightly different contextualization, one that links Robeson's and James's political activities in 1930s London, see Dawson. For the relationship between James's work in England and his awareness of contemporaneous workers' struggles in Trinidad and other parts of the Anglophone Caribbean, see Høgsbjerg.

direction, and to tell stories of salvation and redemption” (7-8). One of Scott’s central claims is that in the 1963 edition, James shifts from emphasizing Toussaint’s romantic overcoming and black heroic achievement to Toussaint as a tragic black figure.

Scott’s claim is mostly substantiated by a comparison between the 1936 and 1967 versions of the play. The 1967 version of the play, however, challenges Scott’s emphasis on tragedy, as key scenes in the play demonstrating the masses’ activity and thought are in the mode of comedy. Additionally, the revised play reveals a stark shift in James’s representational economy, from focusing on Toussaint, the hero marked by tragic hesitations, and Dessalines, the hero of independence, to Moïse, Toussaint’s nephew whose popularity and activity among black Haitian peasant workers put him in direct conflict with revolutionary elites. James links Moïse to Haitian laborers not only through political advocacy, but also through comedy. This is one of the central revisions to the play: there is no sustained comedic element in the 1936 play. In the wake of the failures of anticolonial revolutionary overcoming, the comedic moments in the 1967 play suggest an alternative to tragedy not only in James’s thought, but also for our postcolonial present.

This alternative cannot emerge from a study of the history version of *The Black Jacobins*, as it focuses on Toussaint’s tragic condition as a modern colonial intellectual. I mostly agree with Scott’s claim that “*The Black Jacobins* [...] is about the ways in which, for someone like Toussaint Louverture, the modern is confronted *as* a tragic condition, a condition in which there are, as James puts it, *only* tragic alternatives” (*Conscripts* 164). Precisely this limited realm of possibility is what moves Scott to label Toussaint, and others like him, “conscripts of modernity.” But Scott’s argument is circumscribed by the history itself. In an interview with Kenneth Ramchand, James asserts, “I re-wrote the play, not the book, the book is as it always

has been” (“Extract”). Even though Scott convincingly argues that James made important revisions to “the book,” toward tragedy, my disagreement with him emerges from the play. While the play revisions reveal a sense of postcolonial tragedy, they also reveal through the mode of comedy a commitment to and continued hope in the political autonomy of the masses, specifically black masses. James’s 1967 play, then, would be more fruitfully read as a tragicomedy, what Verna Foster has defined as “a play in which the tragic and the comic both exist but are formally and emotionally dependent on one another, each modifying and determining the nature of the other so as to produce a mixed, tragicomic response in the audience.” This definition, Foster continues, posits an “organic relationship between the tragic and the comic in form and in the feeling it produces” (11).

Through the play, James invokes tragedy *and* comedy to represent the dialectical contradictions of the postcolonial problem-space of the 1960s. The ability of ordinary black people to create free lives, which creation James represents through comedy, is a politically meaningful response to the tragedy following black postcolonial leaders’ descent into neocolonial forms of leadership and governance. Hence my emphasis on the interdependence of comedy and tragedy in James’s revised play. For Scott, James’s revisions to the history “are an explicit consideration of the tragedy of Toussaint Louverture specifically, and through him and his predicament, I am going to suggest, the larger tragedy of colonial enlightenment generally” (*Conscripts* 11). By contrast, I argue that James uses tragicomedy in his play to suggest the enduring relevance of alternatives to a social life governed by the constraints of modernity. In other words, the trajectory of the play helps illuminate James’s persistent, if critical, hope in the face of tragic postcolonial failures.



### 1936: Black Vindicationism, Romance, and *Toussaint Louverture*

Originally titled *Toussaint Louverture*, the play was finished by the end of 1934. Sponsored by the Incorporated Stage Society, the play featured Paul Robeson in the lead role and ran March 15-16, 1936 at the Westminster Theatre in central London.<sup>5</sup> Its audience, Colin Chambers suggests, “is likely to have included major anti-colonial figures such as Jomo Kenyatta, George Padmore, and Eric Williams” and its production “was an important event for the diasporic community” (96). One version of the play in print, first published in 1976 in Errol Hill’s *A Time...and A Season: 8 Caribbean Plays* and later in 1992 in Anna Grimshaw’s *The CLR James Reader*, is often conflated with the 1936 version, but in fact was the 1967 revision, newly titled *The Black Jacobins*, first directed in Nigeria by fellow Trinidadian Dexter Lyndersay. The 1936 play had not been published until December 2012.<sup>6</sup>

In Act I, Scene 1 of *Toussaint* French representatives and white planters are discussing in 1791 the violently racist means to oppose slave revolt and perpetuate the slave plantation system. Evoking the August 1791 Bois Caïman meeting and ceremony that inaugurated the Haitian Revolution, James’s stage directions indicate that “there is a faint but insistent drumming” that should be heard throughout the scene, at a distance but indicating the ever present threat of revolt, masked in the language of music and ritual (1).<sup>7</sup> James understood quite well that this revolt-cum-revolution, let alone the very idea of widespread black revolt, was “unthinkable as it happened” (Trouillot 27). Thus, James’s focus on highly capable black leaders and his use of offstage ritual performance are a response both to the violently racist discourse of the time that

<sup>5</sup> For insights into Robeson’s and James’s work on the play, see Dawson and Nicole King, “Genre.” King also includes important background information on the radical nature of the Incorporated Stage Society.

<sup>6</sup> The published version comes from a copy in Jock Haston’s papers at the University of Hull, edited and introduced by Høgshjerg. The version cited in this and the next chapter is from Richard Wright’s papers in Yale University’s Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library. For an authentication of one typescript and the actual performance, and a comprehensive listing of archives where typescripts of the early play have been located, see Sweeney.

<sup>7</sup> The Bois Caïman ceremony has fomented controversy over its specific purpose and events, the ceremony’s precise date, the attendees, even the facticity of its very occurrence. For a rigorous study, see Geggus.

dismissed blacks' abilities to achieve anything politically, militarily, or intellectually, and to the violently racist actions that sought tautologically to prove this racist discourse and to maintain the material conditions that functioned as the evidence for its perpetuation. The first version of the play thus relies on the trope of "black vindicationism," which Scott links "to the wider formal features of the mythos of Romance and, in particular, to the figuration of the hero" (*Conscripts* 81).<sup>8</sup>

Anti-black racism emerges forcefully later in the opening scene. Monsieur Bullet, President of the Colonial Assembly of Saint Domingue, states, "Blacks strike for liberty! Such abstract notions do not enter into their heads" (*Toussaint* 5). More poignantly, Bullet's racist logic causes him to misread the meaning of the drums beating offstage: "Listen. (Sound of the drums.) They are quite happy! dancing in the forest somewhere with their drums and making their heathen sacrifices. Let us leave them where they are" (6). This racism later manifests in the opening of Act 2, set in 1799, as British, French, and United States representatives meet to discuss Saint Domingue. The conversation reveals that their meeting is motivated by white supremacist colonial unity, transcending their nations' political conflicts. Their need for racial unity emerges in the context of a viable political and military threat from the very blacks they deem inferior, signaling the vulnerability of their supposed racial superiority. Similarly, in Act 2, Scene 2, set in Napoleon Bonaparte's apartment, the French First Consul disparages the very possibility of black soldiers' and leaders' military achievements: "You [Colonel Vincent], a French Officer, frightened at some black savages in gaudy uniforms" (56).

Thus, when the early black leaders of the Revolution take the stage in Act 1, Scenes 2 and 3 to discuss military strategy, these conversations put before the audience the tactical

<sup>8</sup> For a comparison of the political place of racial vindication in *The Black Jacobins* and DuBois's *Black Reconstruction*, see Bogues, *Black Heretics* Ch. 3.

abilities of the revolutionary Haitian leadership. The conversations function dually: first as a direct response to the racism of the opening scene, and second as pre-emptive evidence against the racism of the first two scenes of Act 2. This “black vindicationism” is routed through leaders whose very existence negates notions of black inferiority. Boukman, the slave at the center of the Bois Caïman ceremony, opens Act 1, Scene 2 by referring to “the white slaves in France” who, he states, “suffered like us—they’ve made a revolution. They killed the slave-owners—made everyone free” (7). Boukman’s lines demonstrate his ability, as a black revolutionary, to read world events and translate them for revolutionary purposes, an ability that James places on the stage as part of his organizing efforts on behalf of Ethiopia against Italian imperialism.

Toussaint’s turn to speak follows Boukman, but just as he is making the case for petitioning the Colonial Assembly, an organization dominated by white slaveholders, Dessalines dramatically interrupts him, physically jumping out of the crowd to the platform:

No petition—we have to fight! (Stir in the crowd.) Not tomorrow but today—now! (crowd responds.) No more work. (response from the crowd.) No more whip. (There is almost a cheer.) Black man eat bananas. Black man eat potatoes. White man eat bread. If white man want bread let white man work. (There is a great laugh.) If we kill the whites we are free. (The drums are beating faster, as if quickened by Dessalines’ speech.) I, Dessalines, will work no more. Liberty! (With deep passion the crowd takes up the word: Liberty! Liberty! [...]). (7-8)

The passage is impressive for its deeply revolutionary structure. Dessalines emerges out of the crowd, and James’s written directions stress that the crowd, like a Greek chorus, retains an important dialogic link with Dessalines as it responds to each of his statements. These actions, too, suggest a fulfillment of James’s directions at the opening of this scene: “They, the Negro

slaves, are the most important characters in the play” (7). The crowd not only responds, but does so intelligently, recognizing Dessalines’s “broken” English in the middle of his polemic for what it is: a satirical jab at white racists’ inability to see New World blacks’ appropriation of language—Caliban’s cursing—as either conscious or coded. Deep in the forests, however, those codes are unmasked, and the crowd laughs in recognition of Dessalines’s revolutionary wordplay.

In this scene, through the stark contrast between Dessalines’s assertion for revolutionary activity and Toussaint’s interrupted appeal for diplomacy, the audience is introduced to a fundamental difference James sees between Toussaint and Dessalines. Dessalines is brutally unforgiving toward whites (verbally), while Toussaint is hesitant, both during the ceremony and in the discussions of violence against whites. At this point in the play Dessalines is a privileged character, whose organic relationship to black Haitian masses qualifies him to command the platform over the much more pensive and hesitant Toussaint. Even if in the play Toussaint ultimately becomes the revolutionary anticolonial black hero that in 1936 James needs him to be, it would be incorrect to see him as such in this early scene. Instead, James wants his audience to understand one of his consistent refrains: changing historical forces impinge on how Toussaint and Dessalines act and on who they become. Toussaint is not yet the revolutionary hero he will become, nor is Dessalines the authoritarian he will be at independence.

Across the first act, the audience glimpses what is beginning to make Toussaint the leader he will become, from moderate interactions with white planters and black revolutionaries to reading Abbé Raynal’s prophesies of a black chief to lead slaves out of slavery. In the rest of the play, James focuses on the interplay between European and American political representatives, white planters, mulatto elites, and black revolutionaries. I emphasize the amount of stage time

whites receive not to criticize James's representation, but to point out what James was choosing to foreground. Not one white historical figure depicted in the play fully supports the radical aims of the Revolution. All either make duplicitous overtures to Toussaint for economic, colonial self-interest or are outright hostile to him and black masses. What becomes clear throughout the play is Toussaint's ability, as a black leader, to read all of these moves and to counteract them decisively.

Also clear by the end of the play is the heroic centrality of Toussaint and Dessalines. The penultimate scene depicts Toussaint in his cell in the Jura mountains, his last words, "Oh, Dessalines! Dessalines! You were right after all!" (88). The final scene depicts not Haiti's formal declaration of independence on January 1, 1804, but the move toward independence in May 1803, the move to Dessalines's leadership. If Toussaint has admitted his own error and Dessalines's better judgment, Dessalines cements Toussaint's heroic status, proclaiming, "Toussaint is dead, who fought for our freedom. He made San Domingo our own country—the country of the blacks....Those whites said: 'Negroes are stupid, fit only to be slaves.' But Toussaint ruled. In one year he made San Domingo prosperous" (93). Dessalines contrasts white racism with black achievement, through Toussaint. These words come near the play's end, leading directly into Dessalines's informal declarations of independence, his rending of the white from the French flag to form the red and blue one and his renaming the nation Haiti. Thus, the close of the play establishes both Toussaint and Dessalines as black revolutionary heroes: Toussaint the "black chief" of Abbé Raynal's historical prophecy, and Dessalines the forger of the first independent black state in the Western hemisphere.

Ashley Dawson reads the Dessalines of the 1936 play in romantically heroic terms: "Dessalines refuses to don the captured silks and brocades of the planter elite after the uprising

begins. From the play's outset, he insists that the uprising forego the support of French revolutionary forces and instead establish its autonomy by force of arms" (167). Such a reading is correct only in terms of the play. While Dessalines remains heroic throughout the 1936 play, James uses the same archival material to construct a markedly different Dessalines in the history. If in the history James is careful to avoid casting Dessalines as a monster, he is also quite critical both of the way Dessalines crowned himself emperor of Haiti, with post-independence, monarchical pomp, and of the marriage between Haitian independence and United States and British capital. As independence nears and is accomplished, James makes it clear that Dessalines has lost his revolutionary zeal to his zest for power. Again, it is important to see James's development of Dessalines as patently dialectic in the progression from play to historical book. The Dessalines of the opening scene of the play speaks decisively, if violently, against white racism and enslavement, which speech James gives a positive valence. The depiction of Dessalines at the close of the play, on the cusp of formal independence, is also positive, but must be read with James's specific problem-space in mind, namely Ethiopian resistance against Italian imperialism, and broader African independence movements.

While the 1936 play maintains Toussaint as heroic (black) revolutionary leader and Dessalines as heroic (black) forger of independence, the 1938 history presents a more nuanced picture. What I am suggesting is that the dual romance of total revolutionary overcoming and black vindicationism is patently obvious in James's 1936 play, but his 1938 history—while still trading in the tropes of overcoming and vindicationism—is much less certain about Haiti's future under Dessalines and much less sympathetic to Toussaint's failings. To put a finer point on it, the differences between the 1936 play and the 1938 history suggest that even within the anticolonial

problem-space of the 1930s and “the hubris of the revolutionary (and modernist) longing for total revolution” (Scott, *Conscripts* 135), James shuttles generically between romance and tragedy.

Scott’s analysis of the 1938 history compellingly “link[s] vindicationism to the wider formal features of the mythos of Romance and, in particular, to the figuration of the hero” (81). However, I am more interested in the way such black vindicationism functions for James as a performance within a particular historical conjuncture, a performance rooted in the flexible terms of what I argue in my introduction is James’s theory of anti-imperial resistance: “to neglect the racial factor as merely incidental is an error only less grave than to make it fundamental.” In other words, while I agree with Scott that the black vindicationism of *The Black Jacobins* and similar anticolonial texts may not be politically effective for today’s problem-space, the plays suggest that James saw black vindicationism as fundamentally performative, rather than fundamental.

#### 1967: The Comedy of the Black Jacobins

James’s play revisions incorporate more tragic elements than in the 1936 version—Toussaint’s execution of his adopted nephew Moïse over political opposition, Toussaint’s failure to keep his message visible to black Haitian masses, Toussaint’s desire to maintain relations with France, and Dessalines’s megalomania. These elements, missing from the 1936 play, were not absent from the 1938 history. The point here is not to disagree with Scott’s reading that James sees 1960s postcolonial developments as tragically falling short of the romantic overcoming promised by anticolonial struggle. James himself noted that his depiction of the Haitian Revolution had to be revised to confront new global historical conditions and the great changes since the first play: “Now that was in 1936. Then came the independence of Ghana and the

whole revolutionary movement, India, China, all of them. [...] writing about struggle for independence in 1956 or 1960 was very different from what it was in 1936” (“Conversation” 115). In this new problem-space, the purpose was not just to cite a successful black revolution against European colonialism, but also to issue a warning against the postcolonial erosion of the ideals framing anticolonial struggle. In other words, race was no longer the central question, or at least not in the same romantic, vindicationist way.

The new play, however, casts doubt on tragedy as the best way of thinking through James’s work with the Haitian Revolution. James seems less interested in tragedy as a mode than in drama as a form that allows him to represent masses’ revolutionary self-activity. Comedy, more than tragedy, is crucial to James’s attempt to broaden the scope of who constitutes the revolutionary force of the Haitian Revolution, and of revolution writ large. If James is interested in tragedy as a mode of emplotment for the 1960s postcolonial world, he is also interested in the political relevance of comedy for the masses at the heart of revolutionary activity.

After leaving the United States in 1953, James immediately pursued the re-staging of his play. A September 15, 1953 letter from Gérard Jean-Baptiste, Secretary at the Haitian Embassy in London, acknowledges receipt of a letter from James and the typescript of “Toussaint Louverture.” Although the proposed production never materialized, the correspondence reveals James’s eagerness to introduce the play to a wider audience and his quick renewal of work on it.<sup>9</sup> But one could argue that even before he left the United States, James laid a foundation for this work, especially the new emphasis on comedy.<sup>10</sup> James’s 1950 prospectus for a thorough study

<sup>9</sup> With access to only one side of the correspondence, it is not possible to know how James pitched the play to the Haitian Embassy. Based on the title referenced in the letter, however, it is safe to assume that James sent a version of the 1936 play, before the revisions that would become the 1967 version.

<sup>10</sup> For a compelling case against periodizing James’s work as more political during his stay in the U.S., then experiencing “a cultural turn” (or “return”) when he arrives in England in 1953, see Andrew Smith, especially his introduction.



of United States society, never finished but published posthumously as *American Civilization*, includes a sustained exploration of Charlie Chaplin's comedy. James turns to Chaplin as "the greatest artist of modern times" because he was produced out of a pre-1929 milieu in which "early producers, actors, directors, etc. worked on their own for the simple public, despised by intellectuals, critics, and all the educated members of society." As attuned as James was to publicly-oriented art and politics, it is no surprise that he would find in Chaplin's films the sort of popular art that "goes very deep into the social needs of today and tomorrow" (132).

To develop his argument on tragedy, Scott traces James's deep study of Hegel, Aristotle, and Shakespeare, but he misses James's contemporaneous investigation of comedy. James's analysis of Chaplin is particularly instructive because he reads 1929 as a moment of rupture in terms of what comedy can do, an historical conjuncture where comedy and tragedy meet. Before 1929, Chaplin "could laugh at the world," James states, "and the world could laugh at him." However, "the Depression killed him as it killed all genuine creativity in the cinema," and despite Chaplin's best efforts to continue with comedy, a fundamental change had occurred: "Chaplin attempted to laugh at it, to deride it. *It could not be done*. Chaplin was not merely a comic man. The finest comedy is possible only where the author is comic because if he were not, the environment would become tragic or collapse altogether" (134). Against Scott's splitting of anticolonial political thought between romance and tragedy, James inserts comedy, which, to be sure, cannot "laugh out of existence" the "destruction of humanity by machinery," as James puts it (134). Nonetheless, even if James has designated 1929 as the death knell for Chaplin's comedic art, he does not see that moment as definitively erasing comedy's political relevance.

So much is clear when he imagines what the great Greek satirist Aristophanes might produce if he lived in the United States shortly after World War II, the context for *American*

*Civilization*. James lauds ancient Greeks for seeing serious social issues as proper subjects for both tragedy and comedy: “The Greeks could not have understood it if a serious comic artist did *not* write about these things. Aristophanes in particular took up religion, education, democracy, philosophy, the art of writing tragedy, every conceivable topic which affected the city was a fit topic for his merciless satiric drama” (157). For James, comedy is as fertile ground for political critique as is tragedy, provided that both emerge from and respond to social forces recognizable to everyday people. If Scott lands on tragedy as the proper narrative emplotment for our postcolonial present, then I read James’s 1967 play as a compelling argument for comedy as an equally appropriate mode of emplotment.

In the 1967 play, James locates the revolutionary activity not in the Black Jacobin leaders, but in the leaders’ uneducated, politically inexperienced attendants. Act 1, Scene 2 opens with four soldiers, Marat, Max, Orleans, and Mars Plaisir, attendants to the revolutionary leadership, Dessalines, Moïse, Christophe, and Toussaint, respectively. The first three have taken on names of French revolutionary Jacobins, making them literally the “Black Jacobins” of James’s title. In the scene, Marat immediately links their work under the revolutionary leaders with work under slavery. At this early point in the Revolution—and the play—Toussaint’s oppressive labor policy has not yet been criticized; however, Marat’s words presage, ominously if humorously, the way labor has the same quality when free or when enslaved:

MARAT: All this goddamn furniture to be moved. This is work for slaves.

MAX: They ain’t got no more slaves.

MARAT: All right. Not slaves, but fellas to do heavy work. I am a soldier. I am free. What is the use of being free and having to move a piano. When I was a slave I had to move the piano. Now I am free I have to move the piano.

MAX: You used to move the piano for M. Bullet. Now it is for General L'Ouverture.

MARAT: The piano is still a piano and is heavy as hell. (*The Black Jacobins, James Reader 73-74*)

The use of vernacular underscores James's desire to represent attitudes outside elite leadership. More important, though, is Marat's sense of the relationship between labor and value. Max is not incorrect to point to the difference in purpose for their labor, formerly for a slave master, now for the Revolution. However, neither is Marat incorrect to point out that the effects of their labor are still alienated—he can't see "the use"—even if they are working for a black revolutionary leader instead of a white master. Marat sees that in both forms of labor, having to move a piano has no apparent use, or only serves a bourgeois value system. Marat's critique is subtle but important, challenging Dawson's reading of the two versions of the play as differing "sharply." For Dawson, the 1967 version reveals "Toussaint's disconnection from the revolutionary sentiments of the people" as marking his downfall, whereas the earlier version ascribes this downfall to what Dawson sees as "the foolhardiness of his fellow generals" (166). I disagree. Marat here echoes James's critique of Toussaint in the history: while he does not disconnect from the revolutionary sentiments of the people, he fails to keep his program explicit to them.

Additionally, Marat's critique is not in a tragic mode, but a comic one, issuing not from an experienced revolutionary elite, but from a black military subaltern. Henri Bergson's early twentieth-century theorization of laughter as a social function elucidates how comedy operates in this scene. According to Paul Buhle, James developed an interest in humor through Bergson, recognizing that "Humour had the power of evoking deeply-held popular emotion" (*The Artist* 105). James says Bergson gave him, in 1934, his "first break with rationalism," one element of

which was comedy: “Humor, he said, was the fulfillment of the desire to see the snob and aristocrat humbled. So that the well-dressed man slipping on a banana peel was his classic example of humor. It is still individualistic [...] but I remember it broke me with morbid and melancholy philosophy speculation...” (qtd. in Buhle, Introduction xxii). James’s explanation of humor refers to Bergson’s 1900 essay on laughter. Bergson locates the comic in the “rigid, the ready-made, the mechanical, in contrast with the supple, the ever-changing and the living, absentmindedness in contrast with attention, in a word, automatism in contrast with free activity” (130). Laughter aims to correct such rigidity.

In James’s play, the comic emerges precisely in the mechanical repetition of life activities, despite a change in social circumstances. Marat’s comment, “This is work for slaves,” is met by Max’s rebuttal, “They ain’t got no slaves,” a reference to a changed social status—from being enslaved to being free—that masks the repetition of alienated labor. In a 1960s problem-space, James is attuned to the parallels between the authoritarianism immediately following Haitian independence and the antidemocratic modes of governance plaguing a number of postcolonial states immediately following independence. Such a postcolonial problem-space is tragic, to be sure, but the scene foregrounds repetition, mechanization, inelasticity—Bergson’s sense of the comic. James invites his audience to see Toussaint’s and Dessalines’s tragic moments alongside the aides’ comic responses. The play thus aligns with the tragicomic form, suggesting that the postcolonial repetition of neocolonial forms of governance, dependent on unfree, alienating labor, is not only tragic, but comical, even ridiculous. Tragicomedy aims to “evoke such complex and simultaneous combinations of responses, including simultaneous engagement and detachment, by its mixture of tragic and comic elements” that its audience is “called upon to be unusually active in its reception” (Foster 14). The audience’s laughter at

Marat's lines is a political response, laughing at the emergence of a tragically rigid, mechanized postcolonial state, as opposed to one encouraging free activity. It is also a political response that centers on intra-black conflict, a marked departure from the black unity against the anti-black racism that features in the 1936 version of the play.

The revised play's world premiere was staged December 14-16, 1967 at the University of Ibadan, Nigeria, within six months from the onset of the Nigerian-Biafran War, less than two years since the beginning of military rule, and seven years after Nigerian independence. The racial is also markedly different: instead of pan-African unity against a white imperial nation's incursion into Africa—Italy invading Ethiopia in the 1930s—this problem-space features intra-African, even intra-Nigerian, conflict among black leaders, between these leaders and black masses, and among black masses themselves. Some members of the university audience undoubtedly would have been acutely aware of the pitfalls of neocolonial governance following independence, in Nigeria and in other newly independent African states.<sup>11</sup> But the play encourages the audience to see the times not simply as tragic because they see on stage the degeneration into neocolonialism, but also as comic because they see popular, vulgar, and humorous critiques emerging from subaltern figures. The audience at the University of Ibadan, laughing at Marat's refusal to move a piano that is "heavy as hell," laughs at the way democracy, independence, and freedom are travestied by Nigerian military rule and the violent response to Biafra's secession.

James's depiction of the Haitian Revolution relies on both the tragic and the comic nature of this travesty. If in Nigeria the ideals are independence from colonialism and freedom through democracy and self-determination, the analogous ideals framing the Haitian Revolution are the *liberté, égalité, fraternité* associated with the French Revolution. Shortly after Marat's "piano"

<sup>11</sup> For a study of poetry that emerged in the midst of this mid- to late-1960s Nigerian context, see Ebeogu.

line, the four military attendants discuss the state of the French Revolution and meaning of these three ideals. When Orleans, who has just declared himself a duke, asks Max about how “the Revolution in France” is going, Marat interrupts, “Just like ours. The white slaves in France heard that the black slaves in San Domingo had killed their masters and taken over their houses and the property. They heard that we did it and they follow us. I am sure in France, the slaves do not move pianos anymore. They make the old Counts and Dukes move them” (*The Black Jacobins, James Reader* 74). Marat’s mistaken chronology cannot be unintentional on James’s part: if James stressed the dialectical relationship between the French and the Haitian Revolutions, he nonetheless asserted that the beginnings of the Haitian Revolution stemmed from an awareness of revolutionary stirrings in France. However, James inverts this chronology through Marat, not, I would argue, to mark him as a fool, but to suggest a radically revisionist historiography, one that foregrounds the bidirectional flow of revolutionary ideas and James’s investment in “popular critical insight” against a narrow focus on “modern intellectuals” (Andrew Smith 91).

In his 1971 lectures, James makes this connection even more explicit: “when the Revolution started in France and France exploded, the blacks were watching, and after a time they said, ‘Well, let us get in.’ They came in, they had a theory. They said, ‘The slaves in France have revolted and taken over the property of their masters; they are doing what we are doing here and we should go further with it here.’” Even though James concedes that “It wasn’t too correct historically,” his point is that “in general they had the idea of the thing, and they said, ‘What they are doing over there we are doing here’” (76). Furthermore, Marat’s comments reiterate the importance of comedy. Marat invokes the humor of his piano critique and extends it by relaying

a comic inversion: now “the old Counts and Dukes” move the pianos, not black slaves or white slaves.

The aide-de-camps then discuss the ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity, which discussion becomes the comic centerpiece of Act 1, Scene 2. Orleans asks Max about the state of the French Revolution, but Marat interrupts again:

MARAT: (*Intervening again with great speed*) Liberty-Equality-Fraternity.

ORLEANS: Everybody says Liberty-Equality-Fraternity. All right, Liberty is when you kill the master; Equality, he’s dead and can’t beat you again; and Fraternity (*He pauses.*) What is that Fraternity? (*Max listens with foot on stool*)

MARAT: Fraternity. That is very simple. Liberty, Equality... Fraternity!

ORLEANS: Yes, I know, but what is Fraternity?

MARAT: You are very stupid. Everybody knows what is Fraternity. Liberty, Equality, and then Fraternity. (*Max exits with stool in disgust.*)

ORLEANS: Yes, Marat, but what is it? Everybody talks about it but nobody says what it is.

MARAT: I just told you. (*The Black Jacobins, James Reader 74-75*)

Following Bergson’s claim that through mechanization an ideal can become comic, Marat’s mechanical repetition of what has become enshrined as the French revolutionary slogan induces laughter, awakening the audience out of the sense that mere repetition of those three ideals ensures their proliferation. Again, Marat is no simple buffoon. It is true that the comic arises from his mechanical repetition of “liberty, equality, fraternity.” However, the inability to repeat the stock definitions of “liberty” and “equality,” and the inability to repeat any definition whatsoever of “fraternity,” force the audience to laugh the French slogan out of its mechanical

repeatability. In no way can it simply transfer abstractly and transatlantically from France to Haiti.

The scene is also comic in the way the three ideals are transformed by their transatlantic travel to the concrete experience of New World slavery. Orleans defines liberty not as freedom, but as the violent end of the master-slave relationship through the death of the master. Equality is not defined as political, social, or cultural parity, as humans *qua* humans, but as the inability of the now-deceased master to enact the sort of dehumanizing violence—a beating—that marks the master as master. Both definitions surface via Orleans’s deadpan delivery, suggesting a comic incongruity between belief in exalted ideals—liberty, equality—and belief in violence as their defining characteristics. The incongruity is not Orleans’s, but that of French revolutionaries who did not consider human enslavement as a specific violation of those ideals, needing Haitian revolutionaries to push the “universal” sense of liberty and equality into the concrete experience of racial slavery.<sup>12</sup> In this way, race and blackness continue to be fundamental features of the play, even if the question of black people’s responses to imperialism cannot be reduced to a fundamental unity.

When Mars Plaisir re-enters the scene, he defines fraternity, along with liberty and equality, all in the more “universal” sense: “All right. Liberty, slavery abolished; Equality, no dukes, (*To Orleans*) pardon me, Orleans. No counts, no marquises, no princes, no lords, everybody equal. (*Marat and Max return with a plain table and chair.*) And Fraternity, everybody gets together and be friends, nobody taking advantage of anybody, everybody helping everybody else” (*The Black Jacobins*, *James Reader* 75). As Toussaint’s aide, Mars Plaisir is understandably more in line with the French sense of the terms. First, his is an abstract notion of liberty influenced by Enlightenment thinking, focused on abolition of slavery, both “abolition”

<sup>12</sup> See Blackburn and Nesbitt.



and “slavery” as terms without concrete elucidations. This is in marked contrast to Orleans’s more concrete program for ending the specifically New World version of the master-slave relationship. Second, equality takes on a narrowly class-based meaning, the erasure of aristocratic titles without any mention of the inequality inherent to New World slavery, a racially determined inequality that Orleans’s earlier definition of equality foregrounds through the violence of the slave master. Thus, Mars Plaisir’s “universal” definitions of liberty and equality are pre-emptively undermined by the ones offered by Orleans. Orleans’s definitions are specifically oriented by his experiences with racial slavery in Saint Domingue, giving the lie to the supposed universality of the definitions emerging from white revolutionary leaders in France. These competing definitions of freedom and equality accrue to racial difference, it is clear, but not reductively so: like Orleans, Mars Plaisir is an ex-slave, and the definitions emerging from France come through him, not through a white racist nor a liberal white revolutionary.

Orleans’s inability to define fraternity means he cannot pre-empt Mars Plaisir’s “universal” definition of fraternity about “everybody gets together and be friends.” However, Marat quickly asserts, “That’s exactly what I said. Liberty, Equality and then Fraternity, as Mars Plaisir has explained” (75). Unbeknownst to him, Marat revises the normative definition in a way analogous to Orleans. Mars Plaisir simply repeats the words, but Marat adds an important temporal destabilization: “Liberty, Equality *and then* Fraternity.” The introduction of chronological priority—fraternity will only come *after* liberty and equality—functions as a prophetic critique of Toussaint’s inability to imagine France profaning the sacrosanct political and social fraternity carried in French citizenship. To put it differently, if Toussaint cannot imagine the erosion of Saint Domingans’ liberty and equality because he believes fraternity will carry the day, Marat’s comic stance poses a far more revolutionary imagination, one in which the

fraternity implied in French citizenship carries no truck until both liberty and equality are preserved in perpetuity. Thus, his “That’s exactly what I said” is comically ironic, as he is unable to see how his revolutionary sense of fraternity is incongruous not only with the meanings emanating from France, but also with those emanating from Haiti’s revolutionary leadership. Toussaint’s tragic faith in European ideals is contested by Marat’s comic yet trenchant political critique of “fraternity” with Europe.<sup>13</sup>

James locates this ability to produce radical critique not in the revolutionary leadership but in their illiterate aides. The play dramatizes this beautifully: the aide-de-camps literally set the stage by arranging furniture for the leaders who are about to enter, bringing the work of stagehands into the foreground out of an invisible or darkened background.<sup>14</sup> As distinct from both tragedy and comedy, this sort of metatheatrical approach is characteristic of tragicomedy, which “is, coincidentally with its contrivance, conscious of its own artifice” (Foster 14). Literally setting the stage for the revolutionary heroes, the attendants symbolically set the stage for revolution through their revised definitions of liberty, equality, and fraternity. In effect, they (re)set the terms for the meaning of those three hallmarks of the French Revolution.

It should be clear by now that my doubt about Scott’s focus on tragedy is more an inflection than a fundamental disagreement. The Haitian Revolution does end tragically: Toussaint eventually disconnects from the people because of his inability to imagine a complete dissociation from the European thought he believes is necessary for revolutionary change, and Dessalines eventually inaugurates an authoritarian regime. Scott’s focus on the history revisions and his concomitant focus on Toussaint, however, render him unable to see James’s hope,

<sup>13</sup> For a sustained discussion of the political meaning of “fraternity” in this scene, though failing to register the use of comedy, see Stephens, *Black Empire* 212-21.

<sup>14</sup> This melding of stage setting and dramatic action opens Act 1, Scenes 2 and 3, and Act 3, Scenes 1 and 2. Furthermore, non-elite blacks, usually military subalterns or servants who not only arrange the stage but also speak, figure meaningfully in all but Scenes 2 and 3 of Act 2.

figured through comedy, in the revolutionary consciousness of ordinary Haitian people. He also misses James's case for how leaders must work from this revolutionary consciousness for political mobilization. In James's 1967 play, Moïse is this kind of revolutionary leader.

### The Calypsonian Hero: Moïse and the Black Jacobins

In *The Wretched of the Earth* Frantz Fanon famously refers to “the trials and tribulations” facing postcolonial nations: what to do with independence, freedom, and nation once power has been wrested from the colonial apparatus? How does postcolonial leadership avoid neocolonial forms of power? These questions are especially poignant as the 1967 play was revised in the context of James's own political fallout with Trinidadian Prime Minister Eric Williams and in the broader context of the short-lived West Indian Federation. From 1958 to 1966, James personally experienced in his native Trinidad the political and social tragedy at the historical moment when anticolonial struggle slides into postcolonial crisis.<sup>15</sup>

In 1962 James published *Party Politics in the West Indies*, criticizing Williams and the “educated classes” of Trinidad for failing to engage “their greatest asset, the power of the people” (176). James connects this Trinidadian crisis to those facing other postcolonial nations, including Nigeria. He underscores the way powerful colonial interests, both within newly independent states and within colonial powers, maintain the people at arm's length from, but within reach of, political power. James explains that his participation in Williams's People's National Movement was oriented around helping West Indian leaders understand the importance of turning slogans into political reality, specifically through programs emphasizing the education and self-activity of the people. James laments, however, “when I found it hopeless to make our

<sup>15</sup> James also experienced personal disillusionment with Kwame Nkrumah's postcolonial leadership in Ghana. For his writings on Nkrumah, see *Nkrumah and the Ghana Revolution* and two essays collected in *At the Rendezvous of Victory: Selected Writings*.

wise men understand it I left” (176).<sup>16</sup> Nonetheless, James is not interested in undermining the importance of West Indian independence. His language is celebratory, even if it is cautious: “Rejoice, but as you rejoice, gird your loins to make of Independence a reality, that true West Indian reality, which is still so far from us” (176). This closing call to all West Indians reveals both James’s disillusionment in Trinidadian independence and his hope for a West Indian future.

This experience helps to situate two of James’s major revisions to the 1967 play: his attention to relations amongst black leaders, as well as relations between these leaders and black peasant masses. Anti-black racism and white supremacy are still important elements of the play—the prologue’s dramatic rendering of the brutality of slave life; machinations among American, British, and French military leaders; an entire scene, Act 2, Scene 3, exposing Napoleon Bonaparte’s rabid racism. Nonetheless, much of the stage time for whites in the 1936 version has been cut or reduced in this later version. Far from rewriting history or ignoring the question of race, James refocuses attention to what is relevant in the 1960s, namely the relationship between black revolutionary leaders vying for power and the black masses who have been so central to the revolution. *Party Politics* shows how James is patently aware of the potential tragedy at the moment of independence, confirming Scott’s thesis that James reworks the form in which he can narrate the Haitian Revolution into the problem-space of the 1960s. However, James’s closing words in *Party Politics* suggest that tragedy wasn’t the only mode he was working with. Warning about the consequences when elite leaders disconnect from the people, James states, “all our economic and political programs and people are often comic, always mischievous” (176). Postcolonial failures are thus comic in terms of both political programs and political personalities.

<sup>16</sup> James is not immune to criticism for his own failings during this period. See, for example, George Lamming’s comments in an interview conducted by David Scott, “The Sovereignty of the Imagination” 138-41.

To register popular critiques of these comical political failures, at the end of *Party Politics* James turns to Mighty Sparrow's calypso art. James's interest in calypso dates from before he first left Trinidad in 1932. His participation in the "Trinidadian intellectual 'renaissance' of the 1920s and 1930s" moved him, Alfred Mendes, Alfred Gomes, Ralph de Boissière, and other writers associated with *The Beacon* toward thinking about how they, as middle-class intellectuals, could represent the lives of Trinidad's working-class poor (Carby, "Proletarian" 101).<sup>17</sup> *The Beacon*'s central objectives included "both the validation of a distinct West Indian culture through carnival and calypso and for a general indigenization of culture through a synthesis with these new vernacular forms" (Chude-Sokei, *Last "Darky"* 151). To be sure, the group's interest in calypso, carnival, and other elements of working-class culture was not without its critics. Raymond Quevedo, better known as the prominent calypsonian Atilla the Hun, foregrounds calypso culture's contributions to the *Beacon* figures, not the other way around: "a new page in kaiso [calypso] and cultural history was written which the outstanding literary representatives of the 1930s like C.L.R. James and Alfred Mendes were soon to parallel in their inward search for inspiration and rediscovery of local values" (30). Quevedo's criticism here is subtle: "soon to parallel" suggests both the historical priority of calypso art before these intellectuals' work and the way calypsonians' and the intellectuals' cultural fields do not in fact intersect (they are "parallel"). There is also a satiric jab at the modern intellectual's "inward search," a jab Quevedo later lands more directly: Trinidad's "cultural resurgence" ushers in *The Beacon* and draws the "native intellectual, chafing under his yoke, to the kaiso as a moth to a flame" (53).<sup>18</sup>

<sup>17</sup> See, too, Sander's book-length study, *Trinidad Awakening*.

<sup>18</sup> For an excellent study of calypso prior to Trinidadian independence, see Rohlehr.

Intellectual, middle-class motivations notwithstanding, what is clear is that, as he did with Toussaint, James took his early interest in calypso with him when he left Trinidad. During experiences abroad—in 1930s England and 1940s and 1950s United States—he sharpened this early interest into a deep investment in the politics of popular comedic cultural production, an investment that emerges in his writing on Chaplin and his re-engagement with calypso upon returning to Trinidad after nearly three decades away. In 1959, before *Party Politics* and his break with Williams, James says he is “continually astonished and delighted at the way in which Sparrow uses the calypso tradition, the way in which he extends it, the way in which he makes it a vehicle for the most acute observations on the social life and political developments around him, for his genuine musicianship, his wit and his humour” (“Artist” 188). By the publication of *Party Politics* three years later, James is enamored of the way Mighty Sparrow’s calypso “represents, makes known what the people really think, what they really are and how they speak” (179), even including a reading of Sparrow’s critique of Williams in his 1957 hit, “No, Doctor, No.” It is no stretch to imagine Mighty Sparrow as a model for the Moïse James creates for the 1967 play: Moïse represents a revolutionary counterpoint to the tragic failures of Toussaint and Dessalines, specifically connected to the popular revolutionary—and comic—sentiment that surrounds him. Moïse is James’s Calypsonian hero.

By highlighting the interdependence of tragedy and comedy in the play, Moïse provides the most compelling grounds to read the 1967 play as tragicomedy, as “a play in which the tragic and the comic both exist but are formally and emotionally dependent on one another, each modifying and determining the nature of the other so as to produce a mixed, tragicomic response in the audience” (Foster 11). Moïse, who lost his eye while fighting, uncovers the revolutionary elite’s tragically comic machinations, which function to preserve postcolonial leaders and

government at the expense of the newly free people they purport to lead. Unlike Toussaint and Dessalines, Moïse remains connected to the black masses. This difference corresponds with what Northrup Frye says distinguishes tragic from comic narratives: “fictions in which the hero becomes isolated from his society, and fictions in which he is incorporated into it” (*Anatomy* 35). Moïse, the hero who is incorporated into the Haitian people through revolutionary activity with them, challenges Scott’s focus on his tragic counterpart: the enlightened, modern, colonial intellectual whose isolation from the people marks his demise.<sup>19</sup>

In both the 1938 and 1963 versions of the history, James’s estimation of Moïse is glowing. Calling him “a different type,” James notes that Moïse “was the most popular soldier in the army, beloved by the blacks of the North for his ardent championship of them against the whites. He stood high in Toussaint’s favor until he refused to carry out Toussaint’s severe labour legislation in the North” (*Black Jacobins* 1963 history 257). In his 1971 lectures, James stresses that he would now write the history version differently by focusing on revolts internal to the Haitian Revolution, one specific example being “the extreme revolutionary grouping in the San Domingo Revolution, who, before Bonaparte sent his men, revolted against Toussaint. And the man whom they were rallying around was Moïse” (“Lectures” 103).<sup>20</sup> In the revised play, James depicts this very shift in emphasis that he never attempted in the history: “There can be no doubt that Moïse is the character through whom James expressed his own views about how to safeguard and actuate the ideals of a revolution” (Rosengarten 223). Although there are various political differences between Moïse and Toussaint, my argument stresses Moïse’s connection to Haitian subalterns, both the comic military subalterns analyzed above and the subaltern peasants

<sup>19</sup> James’s radical study of Ahab, Ishmael, and the crew of the Pequod in *Moby Dick* is another examination of the political paralysis of the modern intellectual. See *Mariners, Renegades, and Castaways*.

<sup>20</sup> For a bit more on the historical Moïse, see Dubois 246-48; and Fick 208-10.

whose labor is conscripted by Toussaint and then Dessalines in an effort to maintain economic and agricultural stability.

Reinhard Sander notes that the obviously humorous scenes featuring the attendants are not the play's only comedic moments ("C. L. R. James" 288-89). Sander highlights the satire in Act 1, Scene 3, in which Moïse ridicules both Dessalines and Christophe for entertaining the idea of establishing a monarchy in Saint Domingue: "Yes; and our own aristocracy. A San Domingo nobility. [...] It is a pity that Marmalade and Turkey are not in your provinces. You, Dessalines, could be Duke of Turkey—you make enough noise. And you, Christophe, could be Count of Marmalade. All sugar and spice" (*Black Jacobins, James Reader* 82). Moïse's sarcasm is a far cry from the aides' more playful humor, but he is nonetheless more like them—and like Mighty Sparrow—than the other revolutionary leaders: he invests political commentary with humor. The comic link between Moïse and the military subalterns cements what is apparent throughout the play, namely Moïse's persistent connection with Haitians' revolutionary sentiments and activity.

In Act 2's final scene, Toussaint asks Moïse why he should not sign his execution order, issued for plotting to overthrow Toussaint's government. Moïse defends himself by presenting a brief but compelling political platform that outlines transparency to the people, independence from colonial rule, the end of plantations, and land redistribution. He posits a new regime based on a freedom that does not restructure the plantation economic system without fundamentally changing it, simply replacing enslaved Africans with Haitian workers. In effect, Moïse argues for a regime that returns to and reintegrates itself with Haitian people. After Moïse exits the stage, Toussaint acknowledges that "Moïse says what [the laborers] want and what I know" (97), an echo of what James says Mighty Sparrow can do for Trinidadian people through his calypsos.



The tragedy is that the independent state's reintegration with society—reintegration, states Frye, is a hallmark of comedy—does not carry the day. If Toussaint sympathizes with Moïse's politics, he still asserts that Moïse must be sacrificed on the altar of national unity, arguing that Saint Domingans need paternal governance in the first years after slavery, before they are ready for the program Moïse delineates.<sup>21</sup> Moïse, by contrast, is not wedded to the idea of a vanguard leading the people into freedom. James's study of Hegel, published in 1948 as *Notes on the Dialectic*, "enable[d] him to put at the very centre of his theoretical world the reasoning self-activity of social actors," such that he emphasized "the capacities of the oppressed to overcome—to 'leap' over—the givens of historical necessity" (Schwarz, "C. L. R. James's" 37). James scripts Moïse as deeply committed to this principle, displacing Toussaint as the revolutionary hero whose vision of freedom emerges organically from the people, instead of being delivered to them by a strong, benevolent leader. Dessalines convinces Toussaint that Moïse's agitation will lead to fighting between revolutionaries, instead of a unified front against the restoration of slavery.

Both Dessalines and Toussaint fail to foresee the potential cost of consolidation: protective of their power, nationalist leaders often become tragically alienated from their people. In a 1967 speech James invokes Fanon, "who is saying that now we have actually achieved independence we have to fight against not only the old imperialism creeping back: we have to carry on a desperate all-out struggle against those native leaders who may have fought for independence" ("Black Power" 227). The temporal correspondence of this speech with the 1967 play bespeaks Scott's point about the postcolonial problem-space James addresses. As with *Party Politics*, James does not dismiss the gains at independence but emphasizes the need to keep revolutionary struggle alive. For the Haitian Revolution, this means heeding the lesson of

<sup>21</sup> This paternalism, in tension with individual liberty, manifests in the early Haitian constitutions. See Fischer 228.

Moïse's death: the integration of society and concomitant freedom for individual creativity entail a constantly renewing fight against external imperial forces and internal anti-democratic ones. A focus on anti-black racism addresses the former, to be sure. But such a focus cannot adequately address the latter.

Moïse's parting words make it clear that he foresees this struggle: "until you cut yourself off from all the symbols of colonialism and slavery (*He has taken in Madame Bullet with a withering sweep of his one good eye*) and be truly independent, you will remain just an old man with a dream of an impossible fraternity. (*A mirthless, almost soundless, laugh.*) Pitiful old Toussaint—and his dream" (*Black Jacobins, James Reader* 96). The passage richly brings together tragedy and comedy. Moïse rails against Toussaint's condition, his inability to divest himself of links to French colonialism and slavery, symbolized in the white body of his lover, Madame Bullet, wife of his one-time master. Toussaint is tragically unable to sever ties with France because of what the Enlightenment has provided him. This tragic condition is precisely what Scott is after in *Conscripts of Modernity*: "James's sense of the connection between, on the one hand, the indispensability of Toussaint's enlightenment to resisting colonial tyranny and domination, and on the other hand, the inevitable costs that accompany relentless and unheeding enlightenment thinking" (192). However, Scott also asserts that James depicts "a faultless Toussaint Louverture with perfect seriousness and complete devotion to the integrity of his hero. There is no trace of condescension or irony [...] We are not invited to laugh at Toussaint, to mock him, as from the position of those who already know his fate" (201). While this is true of the Toussaint in both editions of the history and in the 1936 play, in the 1967 play Moïse mocks Toussaint with a "mirthless, almost soundless laugh," precisely because he already knows Toussaint's tragic fate. If his sardonic laughter is one way that Moïse remains linked with

comedy—or, more precisely, tragicomedy—this link is reinforced through his condescending jibe at Toussaint’s “dream of an impossible fraternity.” Early in Act 1, Marat’s comic repetition first introduces the fraught sense of fraternity; at the end of Act 2, Moïse’s tragicomic sarcasm draws out the deep political critique behind that humorous scene.

When Toussaint authorizes Moïse’s execution to end Act 2, comedy’s subversive potential is also killed. At the opening of Act 3, the audience learns from Orleans that Moïse’s aide-de-camp, Max, has been executed with him. More strikingly, even though the stage directions indicate that Orleans arranges the furniture just as before, there is only mild resistance. Orleans opens Scene 1 by remarking, “Things look pretty bad. Things look pretty bad.” Marat, now a stage manager instead of a stagehand, is quick to censure him: “You are always seeing the worst of things” (*Black Jacobins*, *James Reader* 99). This is the same Marat who leveled the humorous critique about lifting pianos and offered a subtle critique of fraternity. By this point in the Revolution, however, something has changed, and the stage directions point to one explanation: “*Marat (now a Sergeant and an experienced soldier) is seeing that things are in order. Orleans is a corporal. Both are elegantly dressed as befits their rise in rank*” (99). The attendants are costumed in the “elegant” symbols accruing to their rise in rank and class. Not only have Moïse and his resistant satire been eliminated, but the aides, too, have given up the political bite in their humorous commentary. At the start of Act 3, Scene 2, Orleans comically repeats but reverses the opening to Scene 1: “Things are looking pretty good. Pretty good.” The difference, again, is in the stage directions: “*Orleans enters with a huge throne-like chair.*” In response to Orleans’s assessment, Marat again unwittingly provides the explanation: “Yes, we have come a long way from the days when we used to arrange meetings in the forest” (106). The material change in social and political power—“a huge, throne-like chair”—has caused Orleans

to shift dramatically in just one scene from saying “things look pretty bad” to saying “they look pretty good.”

The comedic opening of these two scenes displays no veiled critique of elite leaders. Instead, comedy has been co-opted into service for Dessalines’s soon-to-emerge imperial state. Even if revolutionary consciousness must be sought out in the masses and is often expressed through comedy, the shift in Act 3 reveals James’s awareness that there is no automatic radical quality buried in subaltern figures, nor in popular, comic sentiments. As Peter Stallybrass and Allon White put it, “there is no a priori revolutionary vector to carnival and transgression” (16). The aides are like carnival figures insofar as they are “masked” in their French counterparts’ names; they have met in the unauthorized, carnivalesque (and comic) space of the forest; and their vulgar speech mirrors Moïse’s mocking dismissal of the high/low hierarchies in the titles “Duke of Turkey” and “Count of Marmalade.” Before Act 3, these elements united the aide-de-camps and Moïse through “carnavalesque laughter”: “whilst it humiliated and mortified it also revived and renewed” (Stallybrass and White 8). By Act 3, however, their Jacobin “masks” are now overlaid with the pomp of military rank, they “have come a long way from [...] meetings in the forest,” and Moïse is dead. Max’s death alongside Moïse, and the other aide-de-camps’ incorporation into Dessalines’s state apparatus, suggests there is no inherent unity among black subalterns. The “carnavalesque laughter” has been stripped of its social criticism and social renewal, functioning only within the terms of Dessalines’s emerging state.

The 1967 production closes with this tragic end to comedy, apparently confirming Scott’s argument about James’s turn to tragedy. However, an unpublished and unperformed epilogue to the play, available at the Schomburg Center for Black Research and Culture and in the C. L. R. James Collection at the University of the West Indies, St. Augustine, ends more in line with

comedies: “in the ritual the tragic story has a comic sequel. Divine men do not die: they die and rise again. The ritual pattern behind the catharsis of comedy is the resurrection that follows the death, the epiphany or manifestation of the risen hero” (Frye, “Argument” 64). Toussaint dies and does not rise again. At the close of the epilogue, however, James resurrects Moïse, to bring him—and his politics—into the late 1960s present, revealing both the comic structure of the play, and, contra Scott, James’s continued belief in total revolution.

James’s directions for the epilogue indicate that the three actors playing Toussaint, Christophe, and Dessalines should play three of the epilogue’s four speakers, identified only as Speakers A, B, and C but marked as contemporary postcolonial leaders.<sup>22</sup> After a hotel room discussion of Cold War-era issues such as alignment versus non-alignment, socialism, communism, capitalism, and democracy, the speakers turn their attention to a radio broadcast put on by trade unionists. The stage directions indicate that after a servant adjusts the radio receiver, “Lights go on in the small room on the left and a speaker is seen speaking to an audience offstage. He has an aide by his side (Max). His back is to the people in the hotel-room. He is threequarters turned away from the audience” (*Black Jacobins*, Schomburg 45). The speaker’s position conceals his identity, increasing the comic catharsis that will erupt when he is revealed to be Moïse. His speech is peppered with the language of anticolonial revolutionary struggle:

What I have to tell you and particularly the youth among you is that you will have to fight. Make up your minds. The great democratic principles that we have inherited were won by people fighting for their rights. [...] Fighting means taking risks. You have to learn to risk your liberty, your property, even your life. [...]

<sup>22</sup> The epilogue included in the Schomburg copy and in most of the copies in the CLR James Collection vaguely alludes to postcolonial politicians. One version of the epilogue in the James Collection, however, is explicitly connected to the Caribbean, announcing its setting “in a hotel somewhere in the West Indies” and alluding to the breakup of the short-lived West Indies Federation (Box 9, Folder 230).

We in these parts have a great tradition of civilization. We have showed that abroad and at home. And when the day should come when we as a whole recognise that liberty and freedom and unity cannot be inherited, but must be fought for and won again for every generation, then our people will at last... (45-46)

The speech is cut off by applause from actors on stage and emanating from the radio. The directions then state, "*the speaker half turns to the people in the room. It is now seen that he wears a black patch over his right eye*" (46). Moïse's re-emergence at the play's close completes the turn to comedy. When Moïse directly addresses youth and argues for the cyclical nature of the struggle for "liberty and freedom and unity," he invokes the regeneration and renewal central to comedy. The risen Moïse articulates again the philosophy of freedom that is central to James's understanding of the Haitian Revolution and to his understanding of how liberty, freedom, and unity must be "fought for and won again for every generation." Even though the resurrected Moïse is cut off just as he is about to deliver the ultimate destination of "our people," this does not suggest the tragic impossibility of anticolonial overcoming. Instead, he is cut off because "the catharsis of comedy" overwhelms him and his jubilant but unseen audience.

This comic resolution to the play is predicated on society's regeneration and unification. In comedy, unification "include[s] as many people as possible in its final society: the blocking characters are more often reconciled or converted than simply repudiated" (Frye, *Anatomy* 165). After Moïse turns to the three speakers associated with Toussaint, Christophe, and Dessalines, the stage directions indicate that "one by one the political leaders stand and each in his own way joins in the applause" (*Black Jacobins*, Schomburg 46). Social regeneration includes even those responsible for Moïse's death, the death of comedy, and the death of his politics.

My contention is not that the epilogue represents an anticolonial overcoming that categorically opposes Scott's argument. In the revised history, James does not want "to obscure or minimise the truly tragic character of [Toussaint's] dilemma," nor does he believe that "Shakespeare himself could have found such a dramatic embodiment of fate as Toussaint struggled against" (*The Black Jacobins*, 1963 history 291, 292). However, as he elaborates in his 1971 lectures, James's tragic hero is not Toussaint but Dessalines, because tragic heroes "with tremendous energy and force and determination not to be defeated [...] hurled themselves at things which they cannot solve" and "the man who hurled himself was Dessalines," not Toussaint (147). Toussaint and Dessalines are tragic figures in the revised play and both versions of the history, and their presence is essential to both the tragedy of James's postcolonial present and the comic overcoming at the center of James's vision for potential futures. The key to understanding the play's comic resolution is James's attention in the 1971 lectures to the role played by the ex-slaves in the revolution.

Near the end of the lectures, James quotes from his revised history to connect the Haitian Revolution's historical and specifically West Indian tragedy to broader social and dramatic significance of a sort that he says not even Shakespeare could have created. Then, in characteristically exalting language, James adds, "Nor could the furthest imagination have envisaged the entry of the chorus [...] but what was the chorus that entered into it (because in the Greek tragedy the chorus was often decisive in the solution of the problem)? The chorus was the ex-slaves. They formed the chorus" (111). The ex-slaves who matter for my argument here are the comedic subaltern aide-de-camps and Moïse. Moïse's very presence suggests that overcoming is still part of James's vision for potential futures. No longer romantically figured through a highly effective, individual personality, this overcoming is comically figured through

the union of a capable leader and the revolutionary self-activity of masses. James resurrects Moïse in the play as a trade union leader whose entire movement is determined by the masses, like the ex-slaves that in his 1971 lectures James links with the chorus of Greek drama.<sup>23</sup> If by the 1967 play James offers a trenchant critique of postcolonial African and Caribbean leadership's failure to usher in the postcolonial futures that anticolonialism had imagined, James nonetheless retains hope in "the entry of the chorus," the emergence of the masses into political and social control ("Lectures" 111). It is no surprise, then, that James changes the title of the play from *Toussaint Louverture* to *The Black Jacobins*, marking a shift from tragically failing individual hero to comically overcoming collective actors, and perhaps even mapping the road from failure to success.

The 1967 play's shift away from the racial vindicationism central to the 1936 version makes it clear that to reduce both versions of the play to a single story of anticolonial and antiracist black vindicationism is to fundamentalize race. But instead of seeing James moving beyond his earlier investment in racial vindicationism, as Scott argues, I have focused on his two plays on the Haitian Revolution to show that such vindicationism must be seen under the rubric of performance. James staged black military and intellectual achievement in the 1936 play as a response to the anti-black racism structuring imperialism and as a way to galvanize Pan-African solidarity in behalf of Ethiopia not simply against Italy's imperial invasion but also against the League of Nations's—including England's—inaction in the face of such imperial aggression. Furthermore, the very production of the play featured what was then a rare, if not singular, combination of black participation: a black playwright of a play featuring a leading black actor

<sup>23</sup> For a similar reading about the role of ex-slaves as a chorus, see Andrew Smith 90. On the connection between the chorus and comedy, see Frye, *Anatomy* 175. On the etymological connections between the Greek antecedents for comedy, sleep (*kōma*), country-life (*kōmē*), and revelry (*kōmos*), see Segal 1-9.



and numerous black cast members (Chambers 96). In other words, the 1936 play functioned dually to galvanize direct political action and to reorient British theater aesthetically and culturally. This aesthetic reorientation relied on black actors instead of blacked-up whites and offered something other than “debasing roles” for these black actors (Chambers 94). When in 1936 James represents black achievement, ability, and humanity on stage, there is the powerful suggestion that even at that early moment black vindicationism, even if expressed through a romantic mode, is a performance strategy.

It is no stretch to imagine that his book, published two years later, also relies on a performance of racial vindicationism, rather than an investment in it. To be sure, as Scott puts it, there was a powerful “animating demand [...] to meet and displace a racist and colonial claim about the possibility of black political agency” (*Conscripts* 97). However, because James relies on theater to meet this demand, he confronts anti-black racism through a *performance* of black solidarity or unity, “not because they are black but because they are black *and* dominated” (Olaniyan 140). In this way, James reveals how theater, specifically its revisability and situatedness and the ethical demands it can make of the audience, affords the formal and aesthetic possibilities to represent through art his comment that the only analytical approach more damaging than ignoring race is making it fundamental. The recognition that racial unity is a performance allows James to re-frame the 1967 version of the play while relying on the same materials as he had for the 1936 version. In the later version, the problem space has changed, the political purchase of a romantic black unity has disappeared. Thus, instead of a performance of racial solidarity, the play stages not a tragic reflection on the impossibility of such unity but a tragicomic representation of intra-black conflicts between black leaders and black subalterns,

between different black leaders, even between black subalterns themselves. The performance of Pan-African unity gives way to a performance of black political difference.

## Chapter 2: Can a Mulatta be a Black Jacobin?

In this chapter, I return to the 1967 stage version of *The Black Jacobins* to continue my investigation of how theater and performance function for James in his effort to retain a focus on race without reducing his politics and aesthetics to race. In the previous chapter, I centered on James's revisions to the play because I wanted to draw attention to Moïse and introduce an element of comedy as a way to imagine political futures and possibilities in the face of postcolonial failures to live up to admittedly romantic anticolonial expectations of total revolution. The story I've given in that chapter has helped give a better understanding of James's position on the tragicomedy of Haitian revolutionary leaders: their abandonment of a politics that builds organically from black masses' own revolutionary consciousness, generated from their own responses to political, economic, and racial oppressions.

Here, however, I want to foreground the play's collaborations in two distinct but overlapping ways. First, somewhat crosswise to my focus on James in the previous chapter, I argue against seeing James as the sole author and reviser of *The Black Jacobins*, instead reading the 1967 play as the result of collaborative revision. Second, I argue that in line with the political and aesthetic shift to Moïse's cross-class collectivist politics, the revised play features collaboration and co-creation between Haitian revolutionary men and women. Both the collaboration structuring the play's creation and the collaboration featured as central to the play's development lead to what will be the central argument of this chapter. Whereas comedy serves as the mode through which Moïse and the subalterns become privileged political and social actors in the 1967 play, on the question of women in the Haitian Revolution, the play is much more tragic. The role of women in the Haitian Revolution receives minimal attention in the 1938 and 1963 versions of the history, a general characteristic of scholarship on the Haitian Revolution

and not limited to James.<sup>1</sup> Thus, notwithstanding his convincing point that James makes tragedy more emphatic in his revisions, David Scott misses the tragedy that black and mulatto women have faced both historically in the Haitian Revolution and early twentieth century anticolonial politics, and historiographically in the representations of these revolutionary movements.

Tragedy emerges through the revised play's depiction of Haitian women's roles in the Revolution, roles mirrored more broadly in anti-colonial revolution. This gendered exploration is addressed neither by James's 1971 lectures on what he would revise in the history, nor any of his other comments on the Revolution. The revision he does address in those lectures—the turn to Moïse and the subalterns—is superseded in the play by an even more radical one: the centrality of a militant mulatta.

The theoretical opening for this critical focus stems again from James's statement that while race cannot be neglected, it is more “grave” to make it fundamental. This approach to race is relational, neither arguing abstractly against race nor suggesting the analytical primacy of other modalities like class or gender at the expense of attention to race. In this chapter such a relational approach allows “the woman question” in the play to become analytically visible in ways critics have either ignored or dealt with unsatisfactorily, opening up critical space for thinking about black women within *and* against questions of black revolution. This approach owes much to Sylvia Wynter's important critique of the widespread political, discursive, and creative appropriation of Shakespeare's Caliban in Caribbean letters and the creative effort spent to trace his black ancestry.<sup>2</sup> What is displaced, Wynter argues, is “the most significant absence of

<sup>1</sup> This trend begins with the very first Haitian historians, Thomas Madiou and Beaubrun Ardouin. See Dayan, “Erzulie” 17-18.

<sup>2</sup> There are instances across the Caribbean's linguistic regions. For well-known creative appropriations, see Aimé Césaire's play, *Une Tempête* (1969), and Kamau Brathwaite's “Caliban” from his poetry collection, *Islands* (1969). Essays contemporaneous to these works include George Lamming's *The Pleasures of Exile* (1960) and Roberto Fernández's “Calibán” (1971). Recent analyses of these and other works include Anthony Bogues's *Caliban's Freedom*, Paget Henry's *Caliban's Reason*, Supriya Nair's *Caliban's Curse*, and Bill Ashcroft's *Caliban's Voice*.

all, that of Caliban's Woman, of Caliban's physiognomically complementary mate" (360).<sup>3</sup> In other words, one reason the revised play is crucial to my analysis is because it is not after the black Mother responsible for (re)producing, as mother and wife, revolutionary black men. Instead, the revised play foregrounds black women as collaborators with the Revolution's male leaders, a collaboration constrained by patriarchy, to be sure, but one that nonetheless offers something resembling "Caliban's Woman."

By tracking the emergence of "the woman question" in terms of James's collaborations, I argue for an alternative to the dominant approach to studying James on questions of gender. Studies that focus on James's individual development of "the woman question" find him at worst a paragon of patriarchy and at best a man caught between the radical feminist politics of the women in his life and the constraints of a male-centered Caribbean revolutionary and anticolonial tradition. By contrast, in the first section of my paper, I argue that instead of focusing on James the man, we can best understand the place of gender in James's work through collaboration as analytical category. I then turn to the way James's collaborations help to explain how, notwithstanding James's personal failings, Haitian women become much more crucial to the 1967 play than they are in the 1936 version. In fact, the later play's treatment of Haitian revolutionary women—both their participation and the tragedy of their erasure—turns on the degree to which they can collaborate culturally and politically with men during the Revolution and at independence.

<sup>3</sup> For a compelling reading of Wynter's "reluctance" to be interpellated by the label "feminist," see Barnes's "Reluctant Matriarch," which compares Wynter's essay with her much earlier novel, *The Hills of Hebron*.

## James and “the Woman Question”

Selwyn Cudjoe has offered the most generous study of James’s views on women. In his study of James’s love letters from to Constance Webb, Cudjoe acknowledges that “Despite James’s intellectual understanding of the ‘Woman Question,’ his behavior seemed otherwise” (“As Ever” 223). This concession, however, is overshadowed by Cudjoe’s attempt to see the love letters as playing “an important part in filling a rather wide lacunae in feminist thought in the Americas”:

revealing the struggle between one’s life and work, one’s words and actions, and the capacity of a genuinely and deeply felt relationship to make one (that is, our intellectuals and men of revolutionary fervor) into fuller human beings conscious of, looking into, recognizing, and treating with a certain degree of circumspection and trust the most important process of one’s social development: one’s relationship with a woman. (239-40)

Cudjoe’s passage is striking for its sweeping apologia for what is first a gender neutral “one” that metamorphoses (parenthetically) into “intellectuals and men of revolutionary fervor.” Cudjoe’s comments capture how this masculine “one” functions as the grounds for feminist intervention, with the explicit purpose of making these “men of revolutionary fervor” into “fuller human beings.” While I am sympathetic to the importance of considering men and masculinity as important concerns within feminism or the broader field of gender studies, I am less convinced that Cudjoe’s orientation toward masculine redemption, routed through James’s love letters to Webb, answers this need.<sup>4</sup> Cudjoe’s analysis is an apologia for what he calls a “struggle” but what might more accurately be rendered as patriarchal or at least paternalistic. Near the end of

<sup>4</sup> For one critical account of paternalism in James’s letters to Webb, his use of “a didactic tone,” see Schwarz, “C. L. R. James’s” 22.

his essay, he remarks, “[James] would have argued that to enjoy the most fulfilling relationship with a woman, one had to respect and lovingly cultivate her autonomy” (240).

By contrast, Hazel Carby has registered some of the most trenchant critiques of James’s gender politics, and the gender politics of 1930s male intellectuals who “created historical discourses of black manhood in the service of revolutionary politics.” Carby specifically notes the importance of James’s work in demonstrating the degree to which the “figure of Toussaint L’Ouverture emerged [...] as a popular model for creating contemporary images of a revolutionary black male consciousness” (*Race Men* 113). Carby argues that we must read across James’s works to see masculinity as central to James’s anticolonial politics, specifically reading James’s writings on cricket during the 1930s to argue that “ideologies of masculinity, whether conscious or unconscious, were already shaping his understanding of the performative politics of cricket *and* his idea of how colonialism should be opposed” (*Race Men* 120). However, Carby overreaches in her conclusion: “When James abandoned fiction to write about revolutionary politics and revolutionary heroes, he also gave up trying to write about women” (*Race Men* 125). To the contrary, the 1936 production *Toussaint Louverture* and the 1967 production *The Black Jacobins*, both written and staged well after he wrote his only novel, *Minty Alley*, demonstrate that James was still trying to write about women. His relative success in such an attempt is debatable, but the assertion that James summarily abandoned thinking and working on “the woman question” is unfounded. Carby herself ends her chapter with an allusion to the history and the stage version of *The Black Jacobins*; however, curiously absent is any attempt to read either the history’s or the play’s representation of women. Without much analysis to cement her case, Carby closes with the facile critique that James’s work on Toussaint “enables his readers to

imagine the possibility of the existence of a revolutionary black manhood that, both individually and collectively, gives birth to an independent black nation state” (*Race Men* 132).

Similarly, Belinda Edmondson writes that James’s fascination with Toussaint links to his earlier fascination with the English gentlemanly conduct he learned through reading works like William Thackeray’s *Vanity Fair*: “his emphasis on one central, masterful personality in an otherwise Marxist account of revolution makes sense only if we understand it to be a particularly West Indian, particularly middle-class and male version of revolutionary discourse.” Edmondson turns James’s reading of Toussaint into a metaphor for “the privileged relationship of the author to revolutionary engagement in Caribbean narrative: that is, [male] authors ‘author’ revolution through fiction” (106). Edmondson puts a finer point on it later: “The desire of the novel of revolution to liberate the Caribbean space by remaking it, literally and figuratively, in the image of Caribbean man is tied to its corresponding impulse to ‘erase’ the symbolic body of the black woman” (107). Edmondson’s critique of Caribbean male writers’ masculinist tendencies is warranted; however, more careful attention to James’s writings reveals an impulse, in fact, to represent black women’s heroism, specifically on the stage.<sup>5</sup>

Most recently, W. Chris Johnson has revived the trenchant critiques that both Carby and Edmondson raised in the 1990s, focusing on James’s systematic erasure of women from his political biography. Johnson’s language is particularly denunciatory, calling James “an obstinate patriarch who sustained authority through sexual domination,” who in his political association with Raya Dunayevskaya “adopted the style of a dictator” (187, 193). Johnson goes so far as to excoriate James for “inaugurat[ing] the tradition of erasing gender from his political biography” (187). Johnson’s evidence for these criticisms primarily comes from a thorough study of

<sup>5</sup> In addition to the revolutionary mulatta in the 1967 play, James sketched the ideas for a play about Harriet Tubman. See James, *Special Delivery* 81-85, 95-100. For brief discussions of the Tubman play, see Grimshaw, introduction to *Special Delivery* 22-23; and Schwarz, “C. L. R. James’s” 27.



correspondence between James and many of his female associates. The most damning evidence Johnson includes is James's correspondence with his ex-wife and former collaborator Selma James and with Paul Buhle about Selma James's influence on him. In the letters Johnson has examined, James is baldly defiant about Selma's contributions to his own thought, claiming instead to have guided her to the work she had accomplished (199).

Michelle Ann Stephens also brings Carby's and Edmondson's arguments into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, criticizing James for sharing with fellow "black male transnational intellectuals" the idea that "the state is embodied metonymically in the figure of the black male sovereign, a black emperor able to represent the masses *globally*, and not just nationally, on the world stage of early-twentieth-century geopolitics" (*Black Empire* 210). However, unlike Carby and Edmondson, and Johnson after them, Stephens sees "in James's later work the beginnings of a critique of a gendered politics of black transnationalism and pathways toward envisioning an equal role and place for the woman of color in a black masculine global imaginary" (212). Curiously enough, even though much of Stephens's essay analyzes the 1967 version of the play for its tension between black transnationalism and black empire, she does not even mention the women in the play, most notably the militant mulatta Marie-Jeanne. By Stephens's account, James's study of fugitive slaves in the U.S. is what "forced [him] to theorize the place of the domestic or local within the local," thereby resulting in the potential for seeing gender equality in James's work (212). However, as I will elaborate later, attention to the 1967 play and specifically Marie-Jeanne provides grounds enough for seeing James grappling with questions about women's participation in the Haitian Revolution and in broader antiracist and anticolonial struggle. Crucially, this grappling occurred within collaborations that included radical feminist

thinkers. In other words, what “forced” the “woman question” onto James’s agenda were the interactions with the women with whom he worked and lived.

Criticisms of James’s gender politics stretch from Carby and Edmondson in the late 1990s to Johnson’s 2011 essay. Temporally framing these critiques is another set of readings by Faith Smith and Aaron Kamugisha, who have analyzed James’s attitudes and actions regarding women in ways that avoid excoriating him for his failings, while maintaining critical pressure on those aspects of James’s thought and work undergirded by patriarchal norms. Smith attends to James’s mother in his intellectual life, and the historically complex relationship between not only James and his mother but also between them and Englishness, and between them and poor black Trinidadians. She points to the important “slippage between James’s appreciation of the centrality of his mother and aunts to his personal development and his inability to register them as more than marginal in his delineations of the historical and political development of the region” (902-903). She adds, “What of James’s mother? Now we see his earlier differentiation between his mother and father being played out: when he recalls the movers and shakers, the intellectual giants, they are all men,” but then captures the tension in James by recognizing, “it was Mrs. James [his mother] who was central to his intellectual formation, in vivid contrast to Mr. James” (912-13). Smith’s contribution is important for its nuance, for historicizing James’s views on women along both Caribbean masculine and Caribbean middle-class axes.

Kamugisha takes seriously Stephens’s invitation to consider James’s later work. He argues that James’s concept of a “new society” necessarily entailed “a radical transformation in gender relations. James’s firm linkage of human freedom to the liberation of women, while a fragmentary topic that appears and disappears across his texts, is deeply poignant and revelatory, and, as of yet, remains a generally unacknowledged part of his legacy” (77). Kamugisha is

careful, however, not to fall into the sort of James apologia that Cudjoe writes. Even though Kamugisha sets James apart—“The nature and extent of the ruminations on gender in James’s work take on greater importance when we consider how rare reflections of this kind are by black Caribbean men of his generation”—he is also cautious: “my reading of James on gender is not dependent on casting James’s comments as uniquely insightful, positioning him as a male feminist, or even resolutely profeminist. It is, rather, the contradictions, despair, and worry that animate James’s thoughts on women and gender that are the deeply poignant and instructive part of his legacy” (78, 82).

On the James-gender question I’m casting my critical lot with Smith and Kamugisha, because I appreciate their attention, respectively, to historical contexts and longer views of James’s work.<sup>6</sup> However, their essays still participate in the sort of scholarly practice that focuses on James the man, even if situated within familial, romantic, and intellectual relationships. If we are to take seriously the idea that James’s body of work can point us to new futures, I posit that we abandon studies of James in favor of studies of the various groups within which he worked. In fact, although representing opposite poles of criticism on James and women, Cudjoe’s and Johnson’s essays both gesture to this critical method. Cudjoe asserts, “One must see not only that he shaped and reshaped many of his ideas in the course of his correspondences with Webb, but also that his collaboration with Webb and other women during this period (particularly Raya Dunayevskaya and Grace Lee Boggs) was part of the genuine collective practice that characterized James’s work” (“As Ever” 222). Even if Johnson critiques Cudjoe for sounding “a congratulatory note when [male revolutionaries like James] have ‘come to see the light’ on questions of gender,” his critique of James’s patriarchy is an implicit argument for attention to

<sup>6</sup> For another thorough and compelling study of James’s evolving position on gender see Rosengarten, Chapter 5, “Women’s Liberation.”

the “intersectional politics of the Johnson-Forest Tendency,” which argument by analogy can extend to all of James’s work (199, 187).

Such a reorientation will avoid having to answer what to me is a less fruitful question: what are James’s individual attitudes about women, gender, and patriarchy? One of the great ironies in James studies is the amount of criticism directed at his focus on individuals—Cipriani, Toussaint—at the expense of masses or groups, even while the criticism specifically engages with James the individual. Instead, we can analyze James’s works less as products either of his singular genius or of his misogyny, and more as products of discussion, collaboration, and exchange across his life. Grace Lee Boggs, James’s collaborator in the Johnson-Forest Tendency, said as much two years after his death: “The C.L.R. James I worked with would have been politically outraged by the current emphasis on his individual genius and the implicit denial of the important role played by the group and the historical circumstances in the development of his ideas” (qtd. in Cudjoe, “As Ever” 242, n20). In this vein, I am less interested in reclaiming or declaiming James on “the woman question,” an approach that might tell us more about the politics of remembering James, and more interested in seeing how his collaborations contributed to moving James in important ways on that question, as manifested through works that we think of as his. Whether or not James wanted to acknowledge at the end of his life the significant role collaborations—often with women—had on his own intellectual development matters less than examining the ways they actually did.

## Black, Mulatta, and White Women in the 1936 Play

James's note for the play's program indicates that it "was conceived four years ago [1932] and was completely finished by the autumn of 1934,"<sup>7</sup> slightly pre-dating both his concentrated participation with the IAFA and IASB, and thus also pre-dating his close association with women like Dorothy Padmore, Amy Ashwood Garvey, and Sylvia Pankhurst who were politically active in those organizations.<sup>8</sup> The women with whom he was close from 1932 to 1934—a mixture of sexual, literary-social, and political associations—were predominantly white British women. The essays he sent home in 1932 from London to be published in the *Port of Spain Gazette* reveal his observations of the freedom and independence of single women in the city, across classes. James wrote home about his relations with and impressions about "the average [white English] young woman" who has "got rid, for the most part, of male complexes" ("The Women" 95). These women ranged from the literary, intellectual types to the average girl living alone and working in the city and were singularly striking to James: "Best of all she was very much at home [...]. That is what I admired in her chiefly, her independence, her ease, her total lack of constraint. They have a lot of freedom, these girls" ("The Women" 94). Furthermore, as Frank Rosengarten has pointed out, James's involvement with the Independent Labour Party (ILP) shortly after his arrival in England and his subsequent participation in the Marxist Group of the ILP were both spurred by women, Esther Ball and Margaret Johns, respectively. This was the beginning of James's "close contact with a number of women who helped to give shape and direction to his political activity" (Rosengarten 96).<sup>9</sup> Thus, nothing in James's activity in England during the 1930s indicates that he was wholly removed

<sup>7</sup> A copy of the 1936 play's program is in the C. L. R. James Collection at UWI, St. Augustine, Box 8, Folder 219.

<sup>8</sup> See Worcester 31.

<sup>9</sup> See Louise Cripps's memoir for a more intimate account of James's relationships with her and the politics they both were involved in during his time in England, *C. L. R. James: Memories and Commentaries* (New York: Cornwall, 1997).

from seeing women as political actors, or that he was attached to groups bent on maintaining separate “masculine” and “feminine” spheres in social life. Nonetheless, James’s writing of the play appears to coincide with significant relationships with white British women, not with politically active West Indian women.

By no means was James unfamiliar with depicting black and brown women. Much of the fiction he wrote before leaving for England, the novel *Minty Alley* and two of his better-known short stories, “Triumph” and “La Divina Pastora,” was set in Trinidad barrack-yards and specifically routed through Trinidadian working-class and peasant women.<sup>10</sup> The detached observer’s point-of-view and social realist style of the stories link them with his 1932 essays from London. The stories are distinct, however, from his writings on the women he observes in London, not simply because of geographic distance and racial difference, but, more crucially, because in James’s view the women in London had an ease of intercourse “in a manner impossible to the average young woman brought up under different circumstances” (“The Women” 95). These “different circumstances” are James’s way of distinguishing English gender relations from those of the Trinidad to which he is sending these observations.

However, James appears to have focused exclusively on the “different circumstances” of Trinidadians of his own middle-class background. Black Trinidadian women as far back as the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, while still under slavery, actually possessed “their own relative independence” from the structures of marriage and motherhood governing white women’s lives (Reddock 19). In the post-emancipation period, black women (and men) were not hurling themselves into the marriage relationship now deemed important by the ruling elite for civilizing ex-slaves. This refusal of marriage, Rhoda Reddock has pointed out, was “based on their own material and historical experiences” and reveals that blacks “had come to their own understanding of what

<sup>10</sup> See Sander’s *The Trinidad Awakening* for an important literary history of James’s novels.

their relationships should be” (24). Even if there was a concerted “Western European ‘housewifization’” project, marriage as “the ‘proper’ model” and restriction of work to the private sphere of the home were not “passively accepted by all women,” because monogamous unwed relationships could actually afford a bit of freedom that marriage constricted (Reddock 53, 60).

As a member of the educated black middle-class with an eye for class divisions, James must have been aware of the tensions between poor Trinidadians’ relative independence and ruling classes’ attempts at disciplining it: “In their struggle for survival in situations of extreme poverty, the independence of spirit and lifestyle of urban women was resented by the ruling classes who strove to bring it under control” (Reddock 79).<sup>11</sup> In fact, this awareness is clear both in the depiction of women in his fiction—one only needs think of *Minty Alley*’s Maisie—and in his reflections in the opening pages of *Beyond a Boundary* on what the cricketer Matthew Bondman meant to him as a young, middle-class boy.<sup>12</sup> Thus, the cultural shock at finding intellectual, middle class, and even working class women with freedom of movement, freedom of intercourse, and freedom—shock registered in his early articles from London to Trinidad—suggests an imaginative blind spot in his thinking: in 1932, James cannot see black and brown women in Trinidad functioning in the same way as the white women he encounters in London.

This blind spot helps explain why the 1936 play lacks any sustained depiction of black and mulatta women’s participation in the Haitian Revolution. Even if the composition of the play precedes James’s sustained interactions with politically active women of color in the IAFA and the IASB, James knew prominent and politically active women of color in London through his

<sup>11</sup> For a description of an analogous situation in Jamaica during the same period, see Cobham, “Women,” 195-97.

<sup>12</sup> James’s reflections on Bondman are in the opening chapter of *Beyond a Boundary*, “The Window.” For a compelling reading of Maisie attentive to the tensions in James’s narrative style, see Merle Hodge’s review of the novel’s 1972 re-issue.

relationship with the League of Coloured Peoples (LCP), like Una Marson, the Jamaican poet, playwright, and activist whose organizing efforts and writings reveal a deeply antiracist and feminist agenda. However, James leaves no record of his work and life with West Indian women in London analogous to his observations about white women there.<sup>13</sup>

Although the 1936 play did directly challenge white supremacy by placing black males' ability and achievement on the stage, its presentation of black women's abilities was far less emphasized and far more consonant with a "separate spheres" ideology of gender relations. Though the 1934 typescript for *Toussaint Louverture* does include three women of different racial backgrounds—Toussaint's black wife, the white Frenchwoman Pauline Bonaparte Leclerc, and Pauline's mulatto servant Suzanne—these female characters barely register women's participation in revolutionary activity.<sup>14</sup> Nonetheless, women feature more in this early version of the play than in both the 1938 and the slightly revised 1963 versions of the history, suggesting that James relied on theater more than history to explore "the woman question" in relation to the Haitian Revolution.<sup>15</sup>

James's depiction of Toussaint's wife, "Madame Toussaint" or "Madame L." in the stage directions, circumscribes her place in the revolution by her role as mother and wife, worrying over their sons or calming Toussaint when he has received distressing news. In the play she never participates in the revolution nor contributes to Toussaint's military or political thought. In fact, in Act 3, Scene 1, she shuttles between both of these roles, alternating between support for her sons against her husband's suspicions that Napoleon has sent them back to deceive him and

<sup>13</sup> A record of these interactions can be found in Worcester, and, more recently, Rosengarten.

<sup>14</sup> For this chapter, again, all references to the 1934 typescript will be to the copy in Richard Wright's papers in the Beinecke Collection at Yale. Regarding the women in the play, there is no significant difference in the Wright copy from the other known typescripts (James Collection at UWI, Alain Locke's papers at Howard, and Jock Haston's papers at the Hull Centre).

<sup>15</sup> Of all the contemporaneous reviews of the play available in the CLR James Archives at UWI, St. Augustine and in Paul Robeson's papers at Howard University's Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, not one mentions any of the female characters, except to note that Helen Wayne played Pauline Leclerc.



support for her husband against her one son, Isaac, who refuses to believe Napoleon's France intends any treachery. Furthermore, at the close of Act 1, Scene 4, upon hearing of the possibility that her sons will grow up without slavery, "Madame L." falls prey to that Victorian-era representation of women's response to overwhelming trauma or, in this case, overwhelming joy: she faints. The stage directions indicate, of course, that Toussaint is there to catch her.

Based on the act and scene descriptions in the Incorporated Stage Society's program for the 1936 play, these two brief appearances of Toussaint's wife—she is never mentioned by name, only as his wife or as Madame Louverture—appear to have been excised from the actual performance, as the typescript versions of both Act 1, Scene 4 and Act 3, Scene 1 have no corresponding reference in the program. In the actual production, then, there are only two women with meaningful roles in the play: Pauline (Bonaparte) Leclerc, Napoleon's sister and the wife of General Charles Leclerc, who had been sent by Napoleon as the head of an expedition to remove Toussaint and re-take control of Saint Domingue, possibly restoring slavery;<sup>16</sup> and Suzanne, Pauline's mulatta servant.

Though still a minor character, Pauline features prominently in Acts 2 and 3, and is far more significant to the play's plot than Suzanne. Set in France, Act 2, Scene 2 depicts her as both exercising a degree of sexual freedom outside conventional sexual mores, and having much more influence over her brother, Napoleon, than Madame Louverture has over her husband, Toussaint. When Pauline is introduced for the first time in Scene 2, she quickly displays the coquettish fondness of soldiers for which she is legendary, flirting with the mulatto soldier (and future Haitian president) Alexandre Pétion and casting also an admiring eye at Colonel Vincent, who had returned from Saint Domingue both to present Toussaint's 1801 Constitution to Napoleon and to convince him of Toussaint's military prowess.

<sup>16</sup> For more on Bonaparte's purposes for Leclerc's expedition, see Dubois 251-61.

Pauline's last appearance in the play is in the final scene, Act 3, Scene 5 (scene 4 of the 1936 production), highlighting again the sexual and political influence she demonstrates in Act 2. Set in May 1803, seven months before Haiti's formal declaration of independence, the final scene culminates with Dessalines's famous symbolic expulsion of France from Saint Domingue by tearing the white out of the French tricolor to create a new flag for the soon-to-be independent polity. At the start of the scene, Pauline not only asks the military leaders, including her husband, about the status of the French forces and their increasingly evident defeat at the hands of Haitian revolutionary forces, but she also advises them to act with the decisiveness of her brother Napoleon and immediately arrest the murderous Dessalines, an action her husband says is impossible. When Dessalines and Christophe enter the scene and challenge General Leclerc's authority, Pauline directly accuses them of treason, slowly realizing that her one-time love interest, the mulatto Pétion, has switched allegiance from France—and from her—to the movement for independence. When Pauline leaves for France with her husband Leclerc, he displays the symptoms of the yellow fever that eventually claimed his life. But her body and mind are intact, adding a physical independence from her husband that mirrors her sexual and political independence throughout the play.

This isn't, of course, to suggest that James was somehow attracted to Pauline Leclerc's politics—he presents her just as protective of French white supremacy against Saint Domingue's black insurgency as the other characters the play decidedly opposes—but to situate why James might have devoted so much time in the play to this one white woman. James's depiction of Pauline Leclerc suggests that he found a fruitful analogy between the freedom and independence of white women in 1930s London and Pauline's freedom and independence, her sexual and political "license" as an aristocratic woman, 150 years earlier. Perhaps this helps to explain why

the 1936 play devoted more stage time and dialogue to a white, French aristocratic woman aligned with counterrevolutionary military policy than to revolutionary black and mulatta Haitian women: James could both read about the independence of white women in Eurocentric archives of the French and Haitian Revolutions, and draw from the freedom and independence of white women with whom he consorted.

Pauline's mulatta servant, Suzanne, does offer one instance of revolutionary sentiment by a woman of color, even if her place in the play is minimal. Act 3, Scene 3, set in Saint Domingue in late 1802, opens with Pauline discussing the plans for "a grand ball to celebrate the peace" (*Toussaint* 74). The reality of French casualties due to yellow fever and war—her "peace" is imagined—soon interrupts the playful mood Pauline has attempted to introduce. Suzanne rushes in to announce Toussaint's arrival and asks to be excused to join the welcoming crowds. When Suzanne mentions that the band accompanying the troops is playing the legendary songs of the French Revolution, "Ça Ira" and "La Marseillaise," Pauline becomes defiant:

PAULINE (slightly hysterical): The Marseillaise? That is the song of the Republic.

SUZANNE: But it is our song too, Madame.

PAULINE: Your song?

SUZANNE: But yes, Madame. When we fought for freedom we sang those songs. The revolutionaries in France sang them and we sang them too. We made our own songs but always our soldiers march to the Marseillaise.

PAULINE: But that is impertinence. They have no right, the black savages.

(*Toussaint* 76)

Suzanne, to Pauline's disbelief, claims the songs belong to revolutionary blacks in Saint Domingue as much as they belong to revolutionary whites in France.<sup>17</sup> More importantly, she expresses this sentiment as a mulatta woman, in cross-racial solidarity with the gathering black crowds greeting the marching black army. Suzanne's "we" links all those who have struggled for emancipation from slavery as both fighters and singers, including black and mulatta women. Furthermore, she alludes to the creative capacity of this racially diverse but unified "we": if "the soldiers always march to the Marseilles," the "we" has also "made our own songs."

Both Pauline—one can imagine the "hysterical" way her lines might have been performed, an eruption in response to Suzanne's comments—and Napoleon use the phrase "black savages" to refer respectively to black cultural and military capability, underscoring the link between cultural and political racism.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, this primitivist anti-black racism provides James the grounds for utilizing Suzanne to represent race unity, adding a gendered element to the cross-class, cross-race black vindicationism analyzed in the previous chapter. By expressing this cross-cultural black unity theatrically, as performance, the 1936 play places such unity before a collective audience, quite different from the solitary reader of fiction or the historical treatment he will publish two years later. This is not to minimize the importance of the history, but to foreground the way performance and theater function as important cultural expressions for James's anticolonial, antiracist politics.

Pauline's "black savages" comment is quickly countered by General Lemmonier-Delafose, an officer in Leclerc's army, whose defense of black soldiers stems from having witnessed their bravery on the battlefield. As the stage directions indicate "that faint but growing stronger, is the sound of music and a low murmur," Delafose describes the way black soldiers

<sup>17</sup> For a discussion of this conversation that doesn't attend to gender dynamics, see Winkiel 225.

<sup>18</sup> For Napoleon's usage, see James, *Toussaint* 56; and my brief analysis of it in the previous chapter, 28.

would sing in unison while advancing against French forces (*Toussaint* 76).<sup>19</sup> The same stage directions note, however, that “Only Suzanne seems to hear” the growing music and murmur. Once Delafosse has finished his rebuttal of Pauline’s racist deprecation, the stage directions move her front and center: “Suzanne steps forward and sings, and the music in the distance faintly hitherto comes through clearly to accompany her” (77). Suzanne has become sonically linked with the black soldiers marching into the city, her voice matching their tune, their music accompanying her voice. It is a scene rife with multiple linkages—mulatto and black, men and women, bodies on stage and soldiers off stage—all pointing to the possibility of black revolution, a possibility at once intelligible to Suzanne and unthinkable for Pauline, for Napoleon, and for the nineteenth-century white imperial world.

After Suzanne finishes singing, Delafosse cements his retort to Pauline, “That was the song. None who fought against them that day, Madame, thinks of them as black savages” (77). His denial of black savagery, however, is still an a posteriori recognition that required black soldiers’ bravery as “proof” before recognizing their humanity. For this reason, even if Delafosse here authorizes both blacks’ subjectivity and capability, like the others he is still unable to hear the rising song outside the window. Suzanne, the mulatta servant, is the only one on stage in this scene who can hear the music of black revolution, a revolution romantically figured through the unity between a mulatta woman, black masses, and black and mulatto leaders.

The scene represents an incipient and brief but nonetheless important reflection of James’s engagement with feminist politics. Its feminism, however, is only radical in comparison with contemporaneous black male revolutionary thinkers, affirming Kamugisha’s invitation to “consider how rare reflections of this kind are by black Caribbean men of his generation” (78).

<sup>19</sup> James drew upon Lemmonier-Delafosse’s own account of his participation in battles for Saint Domingue, incorporating much of his account in the history version of *The Black Jacobins*. See the 1963 history, 368-69.

Outside of that comparison, however, the scene trades in a separate spheres ideology of gender relations. There is a clear distance between revolutionary sentiment (female) and revolutionary action (male armies, male military leaders). Additionally, female revolutionary agency is coded through a cultural form—song—rather than revolutionary action. Throughout his political life, of course, James was attuned to the important relationship, the dialectical interdependency, between cultural forms and political actions. However, if the inclusion of the song figures as an important cultural contribution to the play’s sense of the Haitian revolutionary program, it is still in the gendered terms that sees women singing praises to heroic, freedom fighting men, still a far cry from Wynter’s call for “Caliban’s physiognomically complementary mate.” James’s staging of the Haitian Revolution has not yet arrived at a criticism of the way, as Mimi Sheller has put it, “The republican veneration of arms-bearing males in a brotherhood of manly civic duty [...] helped to create an authoritarian and statist political system that privileged military elites and significantly undermined the radical democratic premises of the Haitian Revolution,” particularly in terms of women (234).

#### Revision and Collaboration for the 1967 Play: An Interpretive Imperative

In turning to the 1967 version of the play, I want to analyze the way it makes the “woman question” much more central, and much more radical, than in the first play. If the original play features only one revolutionary woman (Suzanne) and only one with any degree of complexity (Pauline Leclerc), the later version builds from both of these women to place on stage two highly complex women, one a white woman bound to the white plantocracy, the other a mulatta allied to the black revolution. Furthermore, the play includes a black peasant woman, much more minor than the other two women in the play, but nonetheless important for the way she points to

the need for alternative archives and methodologies for understanding not only the Haitian Revolution, but also black women's participation in black struggle more broadly.

As I demonstrated in the previous chapter, in his 1971 lectures James says he would focus on Moïse and the revolutionary actors working with him to if we were to conduct a full-scale revision of his history. What James imagined for a revised history emerged concretely in the revised play. In those same lectures, James does not make any mention of a revision that would attend to women's participation in the Haitian Revolution, even though the 1967 play stages such participation much more significantly than the earlier version. In other words, in the lectures James's fails to address how attention to women also would change the way the Haitian Revolution could be told and the work such a telling would perform. He only parenthetically refers to Dessalines's marriage to "a very well educated young woman" ("The Lectures" 80). James was unable to fully comprehend the way the 1967 play registers the powerful but complex story of women's participation in the Haitian Revolution, because, I argue, it wasn't a story he was invested in telling, at least not in 1967. To put a finer point on it, I am suggesting that James himself is not exclusively—perhaps not even directly—responsible for the presence of women in the revised play. But instead of a crisis of authorship, I want to argue that this can help James scholarship move from James the man to James the collaborator.<sup>20</sup> James is not exclusively—perhaps not even directly—responsible for the presence of women in the 1967 play. The revised play goes beyond what James himself could see, revealing the complexity of Haitian women's participation in the Revolution.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>20</sup> For responses to the 1967 play specifically in terms of this sort of crisis, see Cudjoe, "James Misbound"; and McLemee's afterword to *C.L.R. James and Revolutionary Marxism* (234n9).

<sup>21</sup> I am inspired in some measure by Anthony Bogues's call to "think *with* and then *beyond* James, rather than through his iconic writings" ("Afterword" 117).

James himself emphasizes the collaborative quality of producing the play in a letter to Dexter Lyndersay, the Trinidadian director of the 1967 production at the University of Ibadan, Nigeria. In the letter James states, “a play is what the performers and stage managers make of it.” He goes on to say that a playscript intended for publication “is something else,” but even such a script “will depend, to a large degree, on the effect upon an audience from the stage.”<sup>22</sup>

Lyndersay’s “From the Director” note in the playbill confirms this collaboration:

This production is—in more ways than is ordinary in the Theatre—a co-operative one. The second rehearsal period was devoted to a discussion, among all members of the production, on the play’s ideas, situations and characters. [...] The strengths and weaknesses of the original script were exposed as the attitudes of the author and his characters, as we saw them, were scrutinized. [...] I say ‘original script’ because the author himself had termed it a ‘working script’ and had authorized any reasonable changes in order that the play might be presented in the Theatre. And there were changes. Suggestions from the cast, the director, the production staff, and (by correspondence) the playwright, have shaped the performances you will see tonight.<sup>23</sup>

James clearly saw his play—and plays in general—as inherently collaborative, involving not only work between writer, director, and actors, but also, crucially, the audience. In fact, Lyndersay saw fit to share the collaborative nature of the play’s creation with the audience.

Reading the 1967 play against a singular focus on James has precedents in James studies. In an essay emerging from a 1991 conference on James’s intellectual legacies, Grace Lee Boggs reminisces about the period when she worked in organizations with him. Though Boggs does

<sup>22</sup> The letter, dated 23 November 1967, is located in the James Collection at UWI, St. Augustine, Box 7, Folder 190.

<sup>23</sup> A copy of the 1967 play’s program is in the James Collection at UWI, St. Augustine, Box 24, Folder 467.



point to James's influence on many people, the essay ultimately eschews talking about James in favor of the collective "we" that organized, studied, wrote, and participated together. The beauty of the essay is that the reader does not notice the point, about halfway through, when references to James disappear, not to return until the final paragraph. Even there, Boggs invokes James to point to his ability to help others "rediscover America and the world," then quickly shifts the emphasis in the sentence to the Johnson-Forest Tendency, "a unique political community, a fellowship of revolutionary intellectuals and grassroots people united by a common goal, the unleashing of the creative energies of those at the bottom of our society" (172).

More recently, Joshua Jelly-Schapiro's essay and Frank Rosengarten's biography share Boggs's methodological approach, focusing on James's relationships with Constance Webb and Selma James, respectively. Jelly-Schapiro's essay on James and Webb's relationship critiques James's "biographers' tendency to approach Webb much as James did: as object of his desire and reflection of his own thought" (41). Instead, Jelly-Schapiro relies on Webb's memoirs to balance a discussion of her work, life, and writings during the period she and James shared a life, with an analogous discussion of James. Similarly, Rosengarten's entire chapter on James and "Women's Liberation" foregrounds Selma James, who, not C. L. R., becomes the authoritative "James" when the questions turn to women's liberation, feminism, or gender. In analyzing the 1967 play, I'm after something like Jelly-Schapiro and Rosengarten, and Boggs before them, where C. L. R. isn't the privileged subject of studies exploring "his" work. James's shifting thought about women's issues was never anything but a result of his collaborations.

As I highlight the greater role of women in the 1967 version, I don't want to forget James's connections in the mid-1930s with white, brown, and black women activists in the IAFA and the IASB. In the 1936 play, however, James is less concerned with depicting women's

struggles and political activity, except as they support or unify with (men's) anticolonial politics. But within a few years after he arrived in the U.S. in 1938, James began a new collaboration with Dunayevskaya and Boggs in the Johnson-Forest Tendency, which collaboration has been ably documented by a number of James's biographers. The Tendency and its subsequent splinter groups also put James in a close working relationship with many more politically active women, including his eventual third wife, Selma James. If while writing the original version of the play James was blind to women of color as political activists on a par with their male counterparts, his collaborations beginning with the IAFA and IASB and extending through his time in the United States make it impossible to explain James's later failings on the "woman question," particularly with regard to black women, as a lack of experience. In drafts of an unpublished autobiography penned late in his life, James himself provides the reason: "a powerful prejudice against women as women, a prejudice to the extent that I could not give myself completely and allow all my affairs to angle with [theirs] and develop the relationship" (qtd. in Rosengarten 85). The centrality of revolutionary women in the 1967 play is especially remarkable considering James had not yet come to terms with his failings in his intimate relationships with women.

In fact, James appears not to have even recognized that the play contained any revolutionary women of color. At the invitation of the director Lyndersay, James wrote a short note that was included in a "From the Playwright" section of the program for the 1967 Ibadan production. James's note indicates that the main characters include Toussaint, Dessalines, Moïse, and Christophe, and the supporting characters are Toussaint's soldiers. The note then adds, "Two women play major roles; one, a white woman, the wife of a former slave-owner, sympathetic to the slave revolution; the other, a mulatto, a former slave, who is a sexual target for all sections of

the population, but is much more besides.”<sup>24</sup> Even if it lists the women without names and set apart from the named male main characters, the note at least appears to indicate that James was attuned to the “major roles” played by the two women, Madame (Louise) Bullet and Marie-Jeanne.

However, Lyndersay’s handwritten comments to James’s original note reveal that James might not have seen these women as “major” to the play. In the original, instead of saying the women “play major roles,” James says they “play key roles.” Additionally, in the description of Marie-Jeanne, James writes simply that she is “a mulatto, a former slave, who is a sexual target for all sections of the population.” Lyndersay’s handwritten addition, “but is much more besides,” and his revision of “key” to “major” are accompanied by compelling justifications. He feels “key” is an appropriate description of Madame Bullet since her “only function, it seems, is to ‘unlock’ exposition from Toussaint and help delineate his character.” Lyndersay’s case for using “major” to describe the women, then, rests on Marie-Jeanne: “Her role seems more ‘key’ out of proportion with [Madame Bullet].” Lyndersay then goes on to explain why he adds to the description of Marie-Jeanne: “You have written into her character much more than a ‘sexual target.’”<sup>25</sup> What is striking in this correspondence is the way Lyndersay makes a case—to James—for recognizing Marie-Jeanne as a much more important character than James’s original note indicates.

I have spent time on this subtle revision and marginalia both because they reveal James’s strange inability to see a mulatta woman’s centrality to his own play’s staging of the Haitian Revolution, and because this small-scale collaboration between Lyndersay and James draws attention to the collaborative conditions necessary for revolutionary women to emerge in James’s

<sup>24</sup> See note 21 for the citation to the 1967 program.

<sup>25</sup> Lyndersay’s notes on James’s original draft of “From the Playwright” can be found in the C. L. R. James Papers, 1933-2001; Box 5 Folder 16; Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Library.

work. One reason James may have misread Marie-Jeanne, as discussed above, is that he had been fascinated more by the struggle and activity of white middle-class women, which would explain his greater emphasis on Madame Bullet, the wife of a former slave-owner. In a real sense, Madame Bullet appears to be a more developed and revised version of Pauline Leclerc from the 1936 play: both are white women at the complicated crossroads of French colonial white supremacy and plantocratic patriarchy, and both transgress sexual boundaries, Pauline with the mulatto Pétion and Louise with the black Toussaint.

Another possibility, one that can only be speculative, is that perhaps other collaborators were instrumental in bringing her into the play, or developing her character. In a February 4, 1967 letter, James writes to William Gorman to ask for his and Priscilla Allen's feedback on the play, discussing what appears to be a collaborative writing process already underway.<sup>26</sup> James's connection with Allen specifically raises some interesting possibilities. Allen, like Gorman, was a member of Facing Reality, a socialist group including James that had formed after the split of the Correspondence Publishing Committee, itself a split from the Johnson-Forest Tendency. While teaching in the English Department at Indiana University, Allen participated actively in feminist and other radical movements in the Bloomington area. She was also one of the authors, with Selma James, of the *Wages for Housework Notebook no. 1 [i.e. no. 2]*, included in a pamphlet published in 1975 by the New York Collective. Furthermore, in addition to literary criticism, Allen was herself a playwright whose plays were produced during the time revision for the 1967 play was occurring. Allen was invested in feminism in a way that must have affected any contribution she made to the revisions of the play.

These collaborations are crucial to understanding how a powerfully revolutionary mulatta character can be so central to the 1967 play in spite of James's expressed regret for his "powerful

<sup>26</sup> James's letter to Gorman is located in the James Collection at UWI, St. Augustine, Box 10, Folder 240.

prejudice” against women. As his original note for the 1967 program indicates, James appears to have been particularly inclined to focus on Madame Bullet, the white woman whose plantation- and slave-owning husband is summarily banished from the play in the opening scene. To be sure, her romantic and sexual relationship with Toussaint would have been particularly scandalous because of the pairing of a formerly enslaved black man and the white wife of his former slave-owner.<sup>27</sup> However, for my purposes these sexually transgressive politics are less crucial, even if (or perhaps because) those politics may have long been at the forefront of James’s mind.<sup>28</sup> Because I am interested in analyzing the play beyond James, I am not invested in finding fault with James for elevating Madame Bullet above the mulatta Marie-Jeanne and black Celestine, whom the play depicts as crucial actors in the Haitian Revolution. Instead, I am interested in the way these two Haitian women participate in the revolution through political and ritual performance—masquerade and Vodou—but whose collaboration with revolutionary men ultimately is betrayed by Dessalines’s emergent patriarchal state.

#### Marie-Jeanne’s Performance as the *Mulâtresse Jacobine*

Anthony Bogues’s afterword to the publication of James’s 1971 lectures points out that James’s history relied on an archival method that was already compromised: “the archive used already shapes the questions. Archives are determined by categories. Thus one purpose of *The Black Jacobins*, vindicationism, was constructed on grounds of achievement that made black humans within a certain frame.” For Bogues, then, the critical problem facing attempts to narrate the Haitian Revolution is that “the categories and historical language by which we can adequately reconstruct the narrative of its unfolding elude contemporary English-speaking

<sup>27</sup> For an important reading of this relationship, including an analysis of the differences between two 1967 typescript versions of the scene featuring Toussaint and Louise, see Rosengarten 222.

<sup>28</sup> For an account of James’s fascination with relationships between white women and black men, see Cripps 55-69.

Caribbean historiography” (116). In *Haiti, History, and the Gods* Joan Dayan has taken up this challenge, arguing for a historical project rooted in what she calls a “vodou history”: “composed from materials such as oral accounts of the possession of Dessalines and his emergence as lwa, god, or spirit, and equally ambivalent accounts of figures like Ezili, Jean Zombi, or Défilée” (*Haiti* 54). Furthermore, Dayan argues for attention to women in the Haitian Revolution’s historical record, and also “how these women are mentioned, how their appearances work within the historical narrative” (47).

Rooted in male and female Vodou deities and in revolutionary black and mulatta women, Dayan’s historical method considers both “the historical functions of vodou” and its “project of thought, the intensity of interpretation and dramatization it allowed” (*Haiti* xvii). I want to retain Dayan’s implicit connection here between Vodou and drama as I analyze the respective performances of a mulatta and a black woman. One way to work beyond James, I’m suggesting, is by looking at the way the 1967 play relies on these performances to draw upon and constitute an alternative archive that only finds echoes in the textual archives of the Haitian Revolution. This archival problem is similar to the one Jenny Sharpe confronts in her “literary archaeology” of enslaved black women, a problem she describes as a “tautology of facts in the colonial documents” that she confronts “with evidence from contemporary Caribbean fiction, poetry, and dramatic performances” (xiv). Sidestepping the problem of archival “facts” or “evidence” of women’s deep participation in the Revolution, the play breathes life into its female characters precisely through depicting their participation via stage performance. These performances are embodied in the mulatta Marie-Jeanne’s politically-charged masquerade and the black peasant Celestine’s participation in Vodou ceremony and dance. Furthermore, both Marie-Jeanne’s

masquerade and Celestine's religious practice are collaborations, Marie-Jeanne with black male revolutionary leaders and Celestine with male and female co-participants.

In the history, James alludes very briefly to four specific women, indicating that he did have some archival evidence to substantiate women's participation in the Revolution.<sup>29</sup> Two of these women most likely are the sources for Marie-Jeanne. The first is Dessalines's unnamed wife, whom James describes as "one of the most notable women in San Domingo, a Negro of remarkable beauty and intelligence, the former mistress of a planter who had given her a good education" (*The Black Jacobins*, 1963 History 256). The second is to Marie-Jeanne, the only woman named by James in the history (315). Dessalines's wife was Marie-Claire Heureuse Félicité.<sup>30</sup> Marie-Jeanne was the wife of another soldier, Louis Daure Lamartinière, whom James correctly places at the important Battle of Crête-à-Pierrot and whose participation in the battle is noted by the early Haitian historians Thomas Madiou and Beaubrun Ardouin. The history correctly links Marie-Jeanne and Lamartinière. The creation of Marie-Jeanne in the 1967 play, however, takes on the role of the historical Marie-Claire, Dessalines's literate mulatta wife who was sympathetic to whites and to a degree was able to curb Dessalines's violence, and Marie-Jeanne, Lamartinière's wife and fellow combatant. Whether this is an intentional conflation or one born of error is not important. Just as Sharpe makes use of an incomplete or missing archive "to tell a gendered story of slavery," so the revised play finds in the archive enough traces of women's participation to imagine—and center—the compelling and contradictory Marie-Jeanne.

A mulatta slave at the start, Marie-Jeanne is depicted as a politically savvy militant throughout the play, whose agency and power are ultimately circumscribed by the power of her husband, the Emperor Dessalines. However, the play affords Marie-Jeanne significant stage

<sup>29</sup> For a discussion of historical sources' references to women, see Dayan, *Haiti*, 47; and Fick 221, 226.

<sup>30</sup> For more on the historical Marie-Claire Heureuse Félicité, see Girard 72.

time, consciousness, agency, and activity: she appears in all three acts, and even if always paired with a male, her revolutionary actions and words make her central not only to the play but also to the revolution. Although Cora Kaplan favors the play over the history in its depiction of women, she does not see Marie-Jeanne as a powerful female character, reading her instead as “the stock character of the tragic mulatto” and lumping her with Madame Bullet: “These women, intelligent and spirited, are nevertheless subaltern figures whose role in the revolutionary drama, as victims, lovers, double agents and ethical witnesses, is always instrumental” (55). Her reading of Madame Bullet is accurate. However, to echo Lyndersay’s comment to James, far from being a “stock” tragic mulatta, Marie-Jeanne evinces much more than an “instrumental” relationship to the Revolution and to its male heroes. Kaplan appears to conflate the U.S. story of the tragic mulatto with a different experience for Haitian mulattas. The stock tragic mulatto emerges in mid-nineteenth century U.S. abolitionist fiction.<sup>31</sup> In Haiti, while mulattas in general embodied a direct threat to white supremacy, free mulattas were particularly threatening: “the mulâtresse, a free ‘mixed’ woman, crystallized fears over the loss of white creole legal, economic and social power” (Fabella 109). Still more troubling to the white colonial imaginary, “free women of colour contested racial *and* gender hierarchy” (Fabella 113). Though depicted as a slave at the start of the play, Marie-Jeanne as mulatta nonetheless embodies these threats to white male power. What the play depicts above all, though, is Marie-Jeanne’s ability to “destroy the most masculine power of all, reason. White men become [...] downright irrational in the presence of mulatto women” (Fabella 120). This ability, I want to suggest, is tied to Marie-Jeanne’s deployment of cultural and sexual masquerade.

<sup>31</sup> For more on this character, and how the “stock” version has been re-appropriated and challenged by African American women writers, see Zackodnik.



Act 1, Scene 1 opens in the living room of the white slaveowning Monsieur Bullet shortly after the slave revolution has erupted following the famed Boïs Caiman meeting of August 1791. The stage directions indicate that Madame Bullet is singing an aria “from Don Giovanni, Act 1: ‘*Vendetta ti chieggo, la chiede il tuo cor,*’” and when the lights come up after a few bars, Madame Bullet is playing the piano with Marie-Jeanne sitting beside her (*The Black Jacobins, James Reader* 71-72). The opera features a revenge plot against the title character, who under the cover of a mask sexually assaults a woman, Donna Anna, as but the first of his attempts to seduce women through subterfuge and violence. But masking also functions in the opera for those seeking vengeance. Thus, the words of the aria, “I demand revenge of you, your heart demands it,” must take on important meaning for Madame Bullet, as she is quite aware of her husband’s sexual liaisons with Marie-Jeanne, revealed after he has appeared on stage: “As soon as [Madame Bullet] leaves the room, Bullet goes to Marie-Jeanne and embraces her. She submits willingly but is not responsive” (72).

More than Madame Bullet’s disdain for her husband’s infidelity, however, I am interested in how this initial scene reveals Marie-Jeanne’s masks, performed through her body rather than articulated through words. One is a mask of submission to Bullet’s sexual advances, which mask quickly transforms once Dessalines and Toussaint enter the scene to announce the revolution’s arrival at the Bullet plantation. Because “any form of sexual relations between a slave woman and a white master was conditioned by the coercive nature of the slave system,” Marie-Jeanne’s apparent sexual willingness is unmasked once his power disappears (Charles 53). She immediately joins with Dessalines and Toussaint, leaving “without even a glance at the Bullets” (*The Black Jacobins, James Reader* 73).

A second, more subtle masking disrupts the sense of safety in the initial bourgeois image of Madame Bullet singing and playing at the living-room piano alongside Marie-Jeanne. The stage directions indicate a musical conflict: “Marie-Jeanne is humming, sometimes singing, a phrase when it is often repeated, perhaps in descant” (72). The “descant” is a musical counterpoint, suggesting that while Marie-Jeanne appears to be singing and humming in harmony, in fact she is moving in a different rhythm. This different rhythm is revealed in the direction that immediately follows: “While this is going on, there is, upstage, a subdued humming of ‘La Marseillaise’” (72). Subtly indicated by this musical counterpoint, Marie-Jeanne turns the masking and vengeance in the opera into the grounds for her own political activity: like the mulatta Suzanne from the 1936 version of the play, her singing links with the revolutionary singing and movement outside and off-stage. Masked in the docility of her performed submission to Monsieur Bullet and her performed musical companionship with Madame Bullet, her vengeance entails a sexual dimension against him and, against both him and her, a revolutionary dimension against racial slavery.

Marie-Jeanne hums this same aria later, in one of the play’s most striking examples of her power and centrality. Set in 1800, Act 2, Scene 1 opens in Marie-Jeanne’s small room, the directions indicating that she is in a dressing gown and General Hédouville, the French Governor of Saint-Domingue, is putting on his coat.<sup>32</sup> After she helps to button his coat, Marie-Jeanne pouts, “I suppose you are leaving now,” a none-too-subtle indication of what has just transpired. Hédouville is quick to assert his genuine romantic feelings: he wants to stay and talk with her, going so far as to admit he wished they “had met under different circumstances” (*The Black Jacobins*, *James Reader* 85), a euphemistic avoidance of naming “the coercive nature of the slave system” that governs sexual relations between black women and white men. Marie-

<sup>32</sup> The chronology is bit off here: Hédouville fled Saint Domingue in 1798.

Jeanne's retort is quick and biting: "You mean you wish I were a white woman" (85). Hédouville re-asserts the sincerity of his feelings, and Marie-Jeanne uses this opening to pry a bit more into what Hédouville knows, feigning ignorance about things "which only a man who has lived in Paris can tell me" (86). Plying him with wine after endearing him with a performance of post-coital coyness, Marie-Jeanne is able to loosen Hédouville's lips about French military strategy in Saint Domingue, specifically regarding her "racial group," the mulattoes. Even though at first he indicates that he shouldn't discuss such matters, her performances—charming hospitality, European literary erudition, sex—have done their work: he is convinced he can confide in her, revealing that the French government will throw its power behind the mulattoes and Pétion against the blacks, removing Toussaint from power.

The irony of the scene is known only to Marie-Jeanne: both Hédouville and the audience are completely unaware of the way hers is a sexual performance, playing duplicitous coy mistress to Hédouville's romantic advances to extract important military information from him regarding France's intrigues between Haitian mulattoes and blacks.<sup>33</sup> Immediately after Hédouville has exited the stage, the directions say that "without haste, but with decision" Marie-Jeanne writes the information she has gleaned from Hédouville in a letter to Toussaint, all the while humming "*Vendetta ti chieggo*." The play thus emphasizes her importance to the Revolution, a key collaborator with Toussaint. As she finishes the letter, Dessalines bursts onto the scene, looking for Hédouville. In response to his jealous rage, Marie-Jeanne calmly reveals the way she had used her sexuality as a political and military maneuver. Blinded by his stubborn jealousy, Dessalines at first cannot see beyond the mask to the political work. But after the contents of the letter are read to him, he understands her.

<sup>33</sup> For an historical account of this practice, see Girard 62.

Unmasking herself before Dessalines, Marie-Jeanne reveals her revolutionary use of erotic power and then links this power to the freedom—from racial and gendered forms of slavery—she insists is hers as a free woman. Dessalines distinguishes his visits to her as nobler than Hédouville's: "for him you are just a mulatto woman. I want you to marry me. In the Church. [...] I am Governor of the province. You will be the wife of the Governor." Linking racial slavery with the form of marriage Dessalines is offering, Marie-Jeanne asserts, "General Dessalines, I do not want to be the wife of the Governor of a Province. [...] I prefer to be what I want to be. You don't own me, General Dessalines. Nobody owns me. Slavery is finished" (*The Black Jacobins*, James Reader 87). Marie-Jeanne is not anti-marriage—by Act 3 she and Dessalines are married—but she asserts here a vision of marriage that reconfigures a general emancipation from racial slavery into a specifically gendered liberation from patriarchal control over women's agency. This moves Faith Smith to assert that Marie-Jeanne "is crucial to the play's discussion of sexual and ideological independence" ("Reading" 26). In this way, I argue, Marie-Jeanne approximates "Caliban's Woman" much more than any figure in the first version of the play, challenging the expectation that a woman marry in order to physically and socially reproduce a patriarchal social order. Marie-Jeanne demands a marriage founded on equality and collaboration, or no marriage at all.

The collaborative nature of their marriage emerges in the first scene of the final act, set two years before Haitian independence. While discussing military strategy, Dessalines mentions to Toussaint, "Marie-Jeanne insists on fighting side by side with me. And I believe she likes the life in the bush more than all that music and all those books" (*The Black Jacobins*, James Reader 100). This is a departure not only from James's history version, but also from "most standard histories, especially those written by foreigners," in which "the mulatta women who fought with

the black rebels [...] are not mentioned” (Dayan, *Haiti* 47).<sup>34</sup> At this point of their marriage, they fight “side by side,” suggesting equality in purpose and action. When Marie-Jeanne enters the scene, the stage directions emphasize her militancy: “She is wearing military dress, trousers and high boots, both spattered with mud. But her bodice is frilly and her hair is carefully done” (103). Her “military dress, trousers, and boots” would be no more than militancy-on-display, a mere costume, if they did not include the mud that indicates active participation. However, her bodice and hair, as markers of femininity, suggest an uncomplicated ability to combine fighting in the bush with the maintenance of a “properly feminine” appearance. While this is a valid reading, the staging of her femininity through her costume also signals her ability to engage various forms of revolutionary resistance. Her frilly bodice and well-kept hair point to her strategic use of her sexuality to revolutionary ends, as in the scene with Hédouville, evidence of the way her sexuality is part of the work of war as much as fighting in the bush is. In other words, her bodice and hair are part of a strategic performance of sexualized femininity—for the revolution—internal to the narrative development, while her military accoutrements function as externally directed evidence—for the audience—of her militancy.

Through the penultimate scene, the play places Marie-Jeanne on stage to stress the importance of women in the revolutionary struggle and to suggest the potential for a radically different end to free black women’s participation in independent Haiti. The final scene, however, dramatically shifts, foregrounding the tragic end of women’s participation in revolutionary struggle, co-opted by male political leaders. In other words, there is no romanticism in the representation of Marie-Jeanne’s role in the Revolution, no teleology that allows the romanticized, patriarchal family unit to become a synecdoche for independent Haiti’s national unity. Mimi Sheller remarks that in the immediate post-independence period, “a fundamental

<sup>34</sup> See, also, Girard 62, 71.

aspect of the Haitian nation-building project was the elevation of the black man out of the depths of slavery into his rightful place as father, leader, and protector of his own people. Familial imagery was closely allied with a masculine call to arms and a depiction of women as grateful recipients of male protection” (241-42). Thus, after representing Marie-Jeanne’s erotic power, the play foregrounds a tragedy of representation: her power and the broader story of Haitian women’s participation in revolutionary activity are erased, at the moment of state formation, as Marie-Jeanne is conscripted into Dessalines’s postcolonial, patriarchal Haitian empire. This sense of tragedy from the play adds a crucial, gendered component to Scott’s argument about the sense of tragedy he derives from James’s revisions to the history. It is a tragedy categorically distinct from that of the “stock” tragic mulatta, routed through racial passing, that Kaplan invokes in her analysis of the play. Unlike the tragic mulatto, whose racial unveiling was a necessary end to elicit the sentiment appropriate for the tragedy in U.S. abolitionist romances, Maria-Jeanne’s tragedy is specifically tied to political revolution and state formation.

The 1936 play closes in 1803 with Dessalines assuming command and announcing independence, formally declared January 1, 1804, while paying homage to Toussaint. At the end of the 1967 play, by contrast, Dessalines has declared himself Emperor of Haiti, and he orders that the ceremonial pomp at the moment of formal independence in 1804 continue despite news that Toussaint has died. The stage directions indicate that Marie-Jeanne is initially “mystified” by and “at a loss” in the face of Dessalines’s declaration, including the declaration that she is now Empress of Haiti. Upon hearing of Toussaint’s death, she breaks down. The closing tableau suggests that Marie-Jeanne’s power as militant mulatta revolutionary has been circumscribed by the power of her husband-emperor: “As the minuet hesitantly begins, [Dessalines] steps forward and almost forcibly takes the hand of the weeping Marie-Jeanne to continue the dance...Marie-

Jeanne and Dessalines freeze in a final tableau as the lights fade” (*The Black Jacobins*, James Reader 111). This is a long way from Marie-Jeanne and Dessalines’s unity in the trenches. Closing with a tableau also challenges histories that, as Richard Drayton puts it, “seek to freeze the story of individual leaders, and indeed our historical narratives, into a fixed heroic pose” (30). Clearly, the fixed pose here does not exalt Dessalines into the pantheon of uncomplicated national heroes, and the movement throughout the rest of the play resists the stasis of the closing tableau.<sup>35</sup> Though the use of force in the closing image is muted—Dessalines “almost forcibly” takes Marie-Jeanne’s hand—the stage directions encourage a performance that audience members would undoubtedly recognize as the tragedy of anti-colonial revolutionary overcoming in a context in which women’s freedoms are pushed off-stage even while women are forced into the limelight.

There is a clear overlap between the closing tableau and Selma James’s influential 1952 pamphlet *A Woman’s Place*, which C. L. R. knew quite well. The pamphlet, Rosengarten says, “tried to express what many women [in the U.S.] were feeling in the immediate aftermath of World War II, when women’s wartime labors and sacrifices were already being forgotten or minimized in order to justify a return to domesticity and a restoration of male authority in the home” (90). Caribbean working-class women’s lives during the interwar period were distinct from their U.S. counterparts, thus affecting their post-war experiences. In Trinidad before the second World War, Reddock states, “For most women, the street was their arena of activity. They worked there, were entertained, quarrelled, fought, and even ate there. The Victorian adage that women should be seen and not heard was not applicable here, and the strict division between public and private life was not yet instituted among working classes” (80). But even if in

<sup>35</sup> For a discussion of stasis and movement in the aesthetics and politics of twentieth-century Haitian Carnival that bears an interesting relevance to this point, see Averill.

Trinidad after the war, women did not “return to domesticity” and men did not return to the head of the home, post-war British colonial policy in the West Indies combined with U.S. influence to emphasize “the male breadwinner and the female housewife/consumer” (Reddock 215). The close of the play thus mirrors Selma James’s pamphlet enough to see it as important to the play’s reorientation toward “the woman question.” The play depicts the failure of the Haitian state, at independence and with Dessalines at its head, to live up to the liberatory promise of the Haitian Revolution. This tragic failure is routed specifically through a woman—a mulatta whose history of received gendered violence when a slave and mistress to her white master persists at the point when Haiti’s independence is announced amidst fanfare.<sup>36</sup>

#### Celestine and the Ritual Performance of Gender Egalitarianism

The idea of emancipation reoriented specifically around women’s freedoms is cemented in the scene when Marie-Jeanne shows Dessalines her letter to Toussaint, proving her sexual manipulation of Hédouville and her commitment to the Revolution. Dessalines protests that he cannot read the letter, so Marie-Jeanne invites her maid Celestine to read it to him:

Celestine, I want you to do something for me. Here is a letter. You must read it aloud for General Dessalines. As you know, this is the General. He doesn't know how ... (*Dessalines glowers a warning.*) ... he doesn't know how well you can read, Celestine. Show him how quickly you have learnt. (*Marie-Jeanne hands the letter to Celestine. Celestine, embarrassed, does not know what to do.*) Read it, child; you know you can. (*The Black Jacobins, James Reader 88*)

<sup>36</sup> For excellent discussions of the gendered meanings of citizenship in post-independence Haiti, see Sheller and Peabody.



Marie-Jeanne not only vindicates her visits with Hédouville, but in summoning Celestine, she reveals her commitment to a radical educational program. As opposed to fulfilling the “feminine” role of reproducing, raising, and educating the emerging state’s (male) citizens—as mother, as teacher—Marie-Jeanne here is teaching Celestine, an illiterate black peasant woman.

In the 1936 play, there is no black woman analogous to Celestine, only the mulatta Suzanne whose inclusion I have analyzed above.<sup>37</sup> More than simply signaling black women’s revolutionary activity, Celestine’s place in the 1967 play orients audience to a performance distinct from Marie-Jeanne’s, namely, the ceremonial, spiritual, and embodied performances in Haitian Vodou. As Faith Smith puts it, “The body is presented as the Revolution’s major resource, and the movement and song which are so crucial to the impact of the play demonstrate the collective will of the Haitian people” (27).<sup>38</sup> Vodou thus becomes an important expression of revolutionary participation, specifically focused on the participation of lower-class blacks, and for my purposes, of lower-class black women. Furthermore, as Lyndersay notes in the play’s program, the incorporation of these more embodied performances cements the play’s collaborative development: “there are the other elements not included in the script: the music of the Theme and the Slaves’ Lament of the Prologue brought to life by Tony White; the movement used for the voodoo dance created long before the play by Beryl McBurnie; the drum rhythms and drumming of Tunji Oyelana and his Orisun Theatre drummers.”<sup>39</sup>

Celestine is the only black woman in the play who is named, but aside from the scene in which she nervously reads Marie-Jeanne’s note to Dessalines, she does not feature in the play

<sup>37</sup> Madame L’Ouverture is the one black woman in that earlier version, but only a really generous reading can read her as participating actively in the Revolution.

<sup>38</sup> See, too, Nicole King, “Genre.”

<sup>39</sup> See note 21 for the program’s citation. See, too, Rosengarten 255n3. In his review of the production, Willfried Feuser briefly discusses Tony White’s composition of the play’s theme song, then enthuses over Oyelana’s drummers: “Any director eager to produce the play would consider himself lucky to have a group of drummers like that of Tunji Oyelana; their rendering of the Marseillaise electrified the whole theatre with a raucous sort of ‘Verfremdung.’” A copy of the review is in the James Collection at UWI, St. Augustine, Box 24, Folder 467.

through discourse. Instead, she communicates her presence through ritual, gesture, and dance. Nicole King argues that “James seizes upon the theatrical currency of Vodun [...] and successfully uses it as a medium to bring to the fore the people and non-European traditions as twin elements that, when combined with Jacobin revolutionary forms, contribute to San Domingo’s eventual triumph” (*Creolization* 38). Even though King erroneously conflates the 1967 play with its 1936 antecedent, she compellingly notes the way Vodou in the play “presents an alternate and yet parallel ontology and epistemology to the political-historical frame of the play” (“Genre” 29). This parallel ontology and epistemology, I would add, are not preserved in and passed on through text, script, or discourse, but in and through ritual, dance, embodied memory, and song. As Elizabeth McAlister puts it, central to Vodou epistemology are the ideas that the “body is always the site of instruction and learning” and that “*konesans* or ‘knowledge’ is arrived at through direct experience” such as initiation, possession, or other forms of participation (131). The fundamental importance of the body and participant experience to Vodou renders it theatrical. Noting “the continuities between possession and theater,” Richard Burton states that possession “always involves play in the sense of simulation and acting” (223).

The context for the emergence of the play’s staging of Vodou dance and ritual is the news in 1794 that France has formally declared slavery abolished, news transmitted to Toussaint toward the end of Act 1, Scene 2. In light of the news, Toussaint explains to the Spanish delegate his decision to remain with France. He then adds that the black masses are “all listening to us now. As soon as you and I have finished speaking, they will know what we have said, because Moise, my nephew, is translating what we say into Creole. Many discussions have taken place in front of these men while Moise translated” (*The Black Jacobins*, *James Reader* 77). This connection with the Kreyòl-speaking black majority sets up the transition to the scene’s closing

performance, which features Celestine's first emergence on stage as part of black peasants' spiritual and cultural engagement with the Revolution through Vodou ceremony.

The action on stage begins with a "crowd of slaves who are excitedly conferring among themselves. Other ex-slaves converge from all sides to hear the news" about the formal end of slavery (78). There is a shout and then those on stage begin to sing "La Marseillaise." As drummers enter the stage to accompany the French anthem, they mark the beginning of the sonic progression from French song to chant to Vodou dance and ritual. Drumming, Carolyn Fick states, plays a "vital and pivotal role" in Vodou as drums "animate and govern the elaboration of dances" (41). The stage directions indicate that as soon as the drums enter the scene, "men begin to jump up ad lib" and an offstage chant begins that eventually overtakes "La Marseillaise" (*The Black Jacobins*, James Reader 78).

This is the musical and performative introduction to the Vodou ceremony, and to the importance of female Vodou practitioners. In the alternative spiritual and cultural practice of Vodou, marked by a social space that Burton calls "theaterlike in its structure," gender and political relations and structures of power are upset and inverted, raising the possibility of new social relations (224).<sup>40</sup> However, these relations become new only through constant renovation: "If vodoun remains a locus of feminine strength—with women and men equal in practice—it can be so only because it ever reconstitutes specifically gendered stereotypes" (Dayan, "Erzulie" 6). This perpetual reconstitution of the gendered order confirms the theatricality of Vodou: its focus on adaptation in the face of new conditions and contexts, its focus on the body and ritual, and its stress on a direct relation between participant and audience.

<sup>40</sup> For the irreverent, carnivalesque gender and sexual inversions associated with the Guédé/Gédé family of spirits, in which women are mounted by male *lwa*, see McAlister 129. For the specific tendency of the male *lwa* Ogun to mount women, see Burton 251.

The stage directions, penned by Lyndersay, are striking for the way music, chant, ritual, and call-and-response figure among the men and women Vodou participants:

*When all the men are chanting ‘Enfin les Français ont donné liberté’, a priestess enters with a voodoo container which has three compartments—to hold small jars—and a central lighted candle. She kneels facing the audience in front of the drummers who are seated on a bench. Then three women dancers enter with a new chant, ‘La Liberté’, in counterpoint to the men’s chant. Each woman brings in a jar with which they appear to sprinkle the floor. They converge on the priestess and deposit their jars in her container. The drums and chanting stop suddenly. A new rhythm starts immediately. The three women whirl and jerk their bodies in time with it. The men do a simple movement in the background until the women spin off to stage left. (The Black Jacobins, James Reader 78)*

The importance of the ceremony is the way black women are central to the ritual, dance, and ceremony. If, as Burton notes, a “woman may not display herself on the streets (except as haggler or prostitute),” Vodou provides a “public/private stage” on which she can (225).

Making women central to the performance of this ritual appears to have been Lyndersay’s contribution. Located in the C. L. R. James Collection at the University of the West Indies, St. Augustine, an earlier draft of this scene—a post-1936 revision, most likely by James’s hand—not only makes Dessalines “the centerpiece of dancing in the main area” but also does not include any women in the ritual or dancing.<sup>41</sup> The draft is instructive for the limitations of James’s version of Vodou ritual and spirituality, circumscribed by an instrumental depiction of Dessalines. In Lyndersay’s revised ritual dance, Dessalines only emerges after the female assistants—*hounsiss*—have initiated the ritual dance and possession. In an October 31, 1967 letter

<sup>41</sup> This earlier version can be found on page 8 of manuscripts archived in Box 9, Folder 229.

to James, Lyndersay praises the revised dance, invoking the collaboration of its creation: “The dance, based on Beryl [McBurnie]’s Shango (in which I danced) is simply fantastic, if I do say so myself.”<sup>42</sup>

In Lyndersay’s version, the one published and performed, what begins as black men’s celebration of the end of French slavery, black women transform into a Vodou ceremony. In addition to stressing the transformative potential embedded in Vodou ritual performance, this transformation entails the *hounsis*’ revised version of liberty: “a new chant, La Liberté,” divorces the French decree—a “gift” of liberty—from the liberty blacks fought for and won for themselves. The chief priestess, or *mambó*, is staged in a position of power befitting her importance to the ritual, revealing the way the ritual performance is predicated on a gendered reversal of power. Facing the audience and positioned in front of the drummers, she summons both the *hounsis* and the more radical definition of liberty. Each woman also is instrumental in preparing the ground—the stage—for the transformation from celebration into ritual, sprinkling the ground with powder to form the *vévé* that calls forth the *lwa*. Fittingly, then, once these preparations are complete, the rhythm shifts abruptly and dramatically, and the women dancers begin the movements that will render them more available for possession by the *lwa*.<sup>43</sup>

Even though at this point a chief *houngan*—male priest—enters the scene, it is significant that the priestess—a *mambó*—initiates the shift to ritual, ceremony, and possession. Burton has cautioned against overstating the female power in Vodou: even if women “have definite influence within the *hounfor* [...] aside from the *mambo* herself they have little power, and even the *mambo*, especially in rural Haiti, remains ultimately subordinate to the male Master of spirits” (236). Nonetheless, in at least this scene, the *mambó* begins the process that will summon

<sup>42</sup> The letter is located in the James Collection at UWI, St. Augustine, Box 10, Folder 240.

<sup>43</sup> For an excellent introduction to Vodou, see Bellegarde-Smith and Michel.

the *lwa*, and the *houngan* continues the ceremony, but both are essential to the ritual and to this scene. This performance emphasizes the necessity of men's and women's collaboration to prepare for spiritual experience routed through the body. What is more, the *mambó* and her *hounsís* are central to the ceremony's genesis.

During the seamless transition from celebration to ceremony, Dessalines returns to the stage and observes intently. The stage directions also indicate that "a woman—to be known later as Celestine—has entered dancing behind the two candle-bearing attendants." Seeing Dessalines, Celestine moves toward him and begins to dance with him, both spinning such that they "become dizzy enough to be more susceptible to possession" (*The Black Jacobins*, *James Reader* 78). Both Celestine and Dessalines become the focal points of the performance, dancing together toward ritual possession. The collaborative Vodou dancing here is a stark counterpoint to the dancing at the end of the play, when Dessalines has shifted to forceful methods of preserving the state, "almost forcing" Marie-Jeanne to dance with him a French minuet. By contrast, Dessalines's dance with Celestine draws attention to his early spiritual and political link with the most oppressed in Haitian society, namely black women.<sup>44</sup> Vodou spiritual possession—being "mounted" by *lwa*—and the ensuing mask of power offer an opportunity to accrue "reputation and respect, a precious reward for any black West Indian, but especially a black West Indian woman" like Celestine (Burton 226).

In other words, Dessalines recognizes Celestine both spiritually and politically as his equal, creating an alliance, however temporary, between a rising black military figure and a black peasant woman. It is a performance of the most radical political alliance possible between

<sup>44</sup> For an account of Dessalines's historical fondness for dancing (and for women), see Dayan, *Haiti*, 21.

black Haitian men and women.<sup>45</sup> M. Jacqui Alexander has argued that scholars need to attend to such spiritual connections, because transnational feminism fails when it forgets that “the majority of people in the world—that is, the majority of women in the world—cannot make sense of themselves without” what she calls “pedagogies of the Sacred” (15). Furthermore, the scene utilizes embodied performance to draw attention to performances themselves—Vodou, dance, song, drumming, ritual—as a crucial archive of oppressed Haitian blacks’ historical memory and as the grounds for a new philosophical project foregrounding black performance as central to black political culture.

The close of the play, as I’ve been arguing, represents the tragedy that befalls women at independence. It might be read similarly as the tragedy of the failure to institute the political power of Vodou, “a locus of feminine strength—with women and men equal in practice” (Dayan, “Erzulie” 6). This equality in practice—or rather, in performance—does not inhere in Vodou nor its ritual and carnivalesque performances of social and gendered inversion. It is, to borrow Burton’s apt phrasing, a “theoretical egalitarianism”—I would, again, route egalitarianism through performance—that can only transform into political equality when “the propensity toward hierarchy, inequality, and authoritarianism” is acknowledged and then politically and culturally addressed (Burton 254). Men and women’s collaborations and alliances are the most powerfully revolutionary moments of the play: Moïse’s political alliances with black masses, Marie-Jeanne’s military collaborations with Dessalines, Dessalines’s spiritual collaboration with Celestine. Perhaps it is fitting, then, that James’s own collaborations are what allow women to take center stage in *The Black Jacobins*.

<sup>45</sup> For an alternate reading of this scene, one that misreads Dessalines’s descent into megalomania as foreshadowed in the Vodou scene, see Nicole King, *Creolization*, Chapter 2. For a reading of Dessalines’s relationship to Vodou later in the play, see Nicole King, “Genre” 28-31.

In the remaining two chapters, I build from my analyses of James's plays. These first two chapters have been attempts to think through James's theoretically rich suggestion that race can neither be neglected nor made fundamental. I have relied on theater because it offers the sort of formal flexibility rooted in contextualized performance that I argue is at the core of James's comment. In the next chapter, I return to the question of intra-black difference explored in the first chapter by situating the demands made of Dominicans to assert their blackness against the ways blackness emerges through performance in theater rooted in Dominican carnival. Furthermore, similar to the importance of comedy to that first chapter, humor, satire, and irreverence become the performative grounds upon which different articulations of blackness can and have emerged in the Dominican Republic.

In the fourth and final chapter, I return to this chapter's focus on women by turning to Una Marson's female-centered play *Pocomania*. That chapter brings together the different strands of the first three chapters. My focus on the place of women in black diasporic cultural politics, explored in and through Marson's play, is made possible by opening away from a focus on black unity as the fundamental condition of black diasporic cultural production. In other words, antagonistic visions of black cultural politics emerge through attention to women's responses to the constraints of patriarchy and to the demands for cross-class black unity. The chapter's attention to Marson's play responds to Tina Campt and Deborah Thomas's call for "sustained attention to performances of gender and sexuality" because of the way these performances "expose the limits of diaspora—both as a concept and as a rallying call" (3).



### Chapter 3: “Listen, American Negro”: Racial Performance, Dominican Street Theater, and “Global” Blackness

If U.S. scholarship on Dominican race relations is to be believed, the Dominican Republic is the racial pariah of the Americas: self-hating, negrophobic, and anti-Haitian. For many U.S. scholars, race becomes the fundamental issue when dealing with the Dominican Republic, and much of this engagement erroneously exports the black/white binary dominating U.S. race studies into a Dominican context, depicting Dominican understandings of blackness as global blackness’s antithesis. This antithetical relationship, however, may reveal more about the way U.S. race studies run the risk of maintaining an imperial discourse of U.S. (black) exceptionalism.

A more rigorous sense of global blackness would approach the complexity of Dominican blackness as one of many racial negotiations in the Americas. Characterized by a racial spectrum, Dominican race relations challenge the analytical rigidity of a black-white binary, especially considering the degree to which Dominicans of various “shades” of blackness—the Dominican indio, mestizo, or mulatto, like Jamaican brown or Haitian mulatto—have become political and economic elites. Of course, Dominican society is no “racial democracy,” devoid of white supremacy and anti-black racism.<sup>1</sup> Quite the contrary: socio-economic standing and mobility are too often tied to a racial standard that privileges phenotypic and symbolic whiteness.<sup>2</sup> This race hierarchy proves race is not, as James put it, “merely incidental” to class stratification in the Dominican Republic. However, James’s deeper concern about making race “fundamental” cautions against reducing Dominican social analysis to a race hierarchy, blinding analysis to the way class, color, and gender stratifications operate within different understandings

<sup>1</sup> One early use of the phrase is in Juan Bosch’s *Composición Social Dominicana*, 118.

<sup>2</sup> See Itzigsohn and Doré-Cabral 226.

of blackness. Furthermore, the sense that Dominicans are racially dysfunctional is compounded by the idea that Dominican Afro-affirmation is indebted to U.S. racial dynamics, which help Dominicans “discover” that they’re black. Far from “discovering” their blackness in the U.S., Dominicans discover a *discourse* of blackness distinct from what is offered on the island, a discourse in which blackness is valorized in a particular way because of a distinct historical trajectory. Thus, as I will elaborate below, U.S. scholarship on Dominican race relations appears to doubly “fundamentalize” race, first by prioritizing race and blackness in such a way as to render other modalities insignificant, and second by making U.S. racial studies the foundation—the fundamental grounds—upon which a critique of Dominican race relations is mounted.

While I do not intend to suggest that the Dominican Republic is more progressive or advanced in terms of understanding blackness, the complexity of blackness in the Dominican Republic could help the U.S. explore its own conflicted, messy, fragmented histories of blackness. To put it differently, while there are notable differences between studies of race and blackness in the Dominican Republic and the dominant study of race in the U.S., the very intra-black differences internal to the Dominican Republic, and, by extension, internal to Caribbean societies, can help highlight the way such differences are more internal to U.S. society than is often projected.<sup>3</sup>

One important site for alternative Dominican languages and practices around race is street and popular theater, which speaks back to white supremacist logic operating at national and official levels and undermines both dominant narratives about Dominican blackness: the sense of racial confusion and the need for U.S. racial tutelage. Emerging in the wake of contestations over national identity at the end of Rafael Trujillo’s thirty-year dictatorship in

<sup>3</sup> For one example, see Kenneth Warren’s discussion of Northern black intellectuals’ encounter with Southern black laborers who migrated to the North in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

1961, Dominican popular theater challenges dominant modes of racial thinking in the Dominican Republic and prevalent modes of thinking race by U.S. scholars. Afro- and black-affirming theater does not depend on U.S. experiences, but represents how radical theater on the street and in theater halls performs a blackness rooted in Dominican experience. In this chapter, I examine two plays—Reynaldo Disla’s *Un Comercial para Máximo Gómez* (*A Commercial for Maximo Gomez*) and Frank Disla’s 1985 *Ramón Arepa*—for their reliance on Afro-creolized carnival traditions. Reynaldo Disla’s play, part of the street theater festivals of the late-1970s and mid-1980s, approaches questions of blackness through indirection, satire, and masquerade, while aligning with the struggles of Dominicans oppressed by class and race. Frank Disla’s play routes its carnivalesque humor and masking specifically through Califé, Dominican carnival’s social critic *par excellence*.

#### U.S. Foundations for Studying Dominican Blackness

Literary critic Silvio Torres-Saillant has argued repeatedly that the view of the Dominican Republic as espousing an anti-Haitian, anti-black discourse is a limited one: Dominican people do not wholly abide by state-sponsored or elite-formulated identity formations.<sup>4</sup> Nonetheless, U.S. scholarship on Dominican race and ethnicity overwhelmingly focuses on official discourses of *antihaitianismo* and *negrophobia*, often uncritically conflating the two. Emphasizing the way these Afro-negating or Afro-obscuring official discourses have dispersed throughout the nation, the contemporary story of Dominican racial backwardness is cemented through interdisciplinary proliferation. Within the last ten years, works foregrounding the problems of race in the Dominican Republic—*antihaitianismo* and *negrophobia*—can be

<sup>4</sup> For an early instance of this argument, see his “Dominican Literature and Its Criticism: Anatomy of a Troubled Identity” (1994), and for a more recent elaboration, see “One and Divisible: Meditations on Global Blackness.” See, too, Baud.

found in political science (Ernesto Sagás), geography (David Howard), anthropology (Kimberly Eison Simmons), literary studies (Dawn Stinchcomb), sociology (Karin Weyland), education policy (Sheridan Wigginton), even democratic Marxism (LaToya Tavernier). These works combine to make anti-black and anti-Haitian racism fundamental to the story of the Dominican Republic, with the sometimes subtle, sometimes explicit antidote emerging from Dominican diasporic experiences in the U.S.<sup>5</sup>

Just as damaging is the popular dissemination of these same ideas through Henry Louis Gates's PBS series *Blacks in Latin America*, which features as one of its four hour-long episodes a discussion of Haiti and the Dominican Republic.<sup>6</sup> The episode includes the perspective of Torres-Saillant, the leading Dominican scholar on Dominican blackness; however, it appears only to selectively incorporate his insights, featuring only those comments that help depict the Dominican Republic in the negrophobic and anti-Haitian narrative that the documentary wants to emphasize. While this may be attributable to the constraints of constructing a narrative of Dominican blackness under thirty minutes, for a popular if educated television audience, and alongside a discussion of Haiti, the representation of the Dominican blackness nonetheless smacks more of an attempt to expose Dominican negrophobia than an attempt to reveal the "discovery" of vibrant black culture in Latin America, as happens in the series's other episodes.

The problem is not that the narrative is false, but that it is not new, sharing much the same narrative thrust as Michelle Wucker's *Why the Cocks Fight* and, curiously, as Peter Winn's 1994 documentary *Mirrors of the Heart*, also a PBS program as part of the *Americas* series.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Howard's work is an exception to this latter trend: his ethnographic results demonstrate that Dominicans do not become racially "progressive" because of experience in the U.S. Nonetheless, Howard still hopes that Dominicans will overcome the anti-black ideology that besets them.

<sup>6</sup> For individual critiques of each of the four episodes in the series, see the recent issue of *Latin American and Caribbean Ethnic Studies*, 8.1 (2013).

<sup>7</sup> For Torres-Saillant's own criticism of Winn's documentary and Gates's earlier *Wonders of the African World* documentary, see "Introduction to Dominican Blackness" 1-2.

Worse, it adds to the weight of this same narrative in studies of Dominican race relations, such that no other narrative appears possible, let alone existent. In the documentary, there are but two indications that Dominicans do accept their blackness. First is the inclusion of Dominican anthropologist Juan Rodríguez's admission that he had to learn he was black by going to New York. Second is a brief and undeveloped discussion of the Congos of Villa Mella that awkwardly transitions to a reiteration of the short film's central contention: "Some Dominicans reject their African heritage and are shy about claiming a black identity." In the latter, there is an untapped potential for examining the practices—and performances—of blackness in the Dominican Republic. However, the former narrative wins out in the way it aligns with the thrust of the rest of the documentary, including a gratuitous shoring up of U.S. (black) exceptionalism.

Gates's documentary, and the scholarly works that mirror its focus, engage but lightly with a Dominican bibliography dating at least back to the end of the *trujillato* that, if minor, has an established history affirming blackness, denouncing white supremacy, and offering alternative analyses of race. Instead, these works build from social scientific and political scientific work on the Dominican Republic prominent in the U.S., or if referring to Dominican works, examines these under the analytical lens of "a bichromatic model of difference," or a U.S. conceptualization of race foregrounding a black-white racial binary.<sup>8</sup> This is symptomatic of U.S. scholarship on the Dominican Republic: the overwhelming majority of scholarly conversations in the U.S. on race and blackness there are *about* Dominicans, not *with* Dominican scholars. Or, if Dominican writers are invoked, they are the objects of study: those writers of the elite superstratum, like Joaquín Balaguer and Manuel Arturo Peña-Batlle, historically responsible for managing Dominican racial identity away from blackness, Haiti, and Africa, and toward

<sup>8</sup> The phrase is from Chude-Sokei, *The Last "Darky"* 16. Torres-Saillant uses the term "racial polarity" ("Tribulations" 1090).

whiteness/mixedness, Spain, and Europe. In other words, U.S. scholarly engagement with Dominican scholars typically fails to register Torres-Saillant's caution that "any inquiry must [...] avert the pitfalls of investigating Dominican attitudes about race exclusively through the words of the scribes of the ruling class; despite their negrophobia from colonial times to the present, it is inevitable to find the omnipresence of black contribution to Dominican culture" ("Tribulations" 1088). When black-affirming Dominican scholars are included in the discussion, as in Gates's documentary, the comments that make it into circulation discuss race in ways recognizable to the "bichromatic model" dominant in the U.S. Anti-haitianism and negrophobia are one and the same and both reveal Dominicans' racial self-hatred.

However, as U.S. historian Lauren Derby cogently argues, "Anti-Haitianism must be understood as more than racism as such" (495).<sup>9</sup> Derby and her colleague Richard Turits's studies of the Haitian-Dominican border underscore the complexity underlying the historical articulations between race, Haitianness, and Dominicanness. Sociologist Ginetta Candelario introduces a similar complexity in what she dubs the "strategic ambivalence" of Dominican racial discourses articulated across multiple sites—in Santo Domingo, Santiago de los Caballeros, New York City, and Washington, D.C.— and in particular around "identity displays" in museums, beauty shops, and hair culture. These works represent an important but statistically minor challenge to the tendency elaborated above, highlighting Torres-Saillant's point that "though the imperial history that spawned racialization happened on a global scale, the conditions in which differentiated communities have lived their sense of selves as racial beings unfold on an inexorably local terrain" ("One and Divisible" 8). In other words, if global blackness has had both a history rooted in imperialism and slavery and a history of political mobilization against those same forces, it also is not "global" or universal in any stable sense.

<sup>9</sup> For a similar point, see Torres-Saillant, "Tribulations" 1093.

In the remainder of this chapter, I turn to Reynaldo and Frank Dislas' post-Trujillo street and popular theater because their plays explore blackness on the "inexorably local terrain" Torres-Saillant invokes. The paucity of critical attention to Dominican playwrights in both U.S. and Dominican literary studies, both of which focus on fiction and poetry, results in a blind spot regarding the important contributions Dominican theater has made to conversations about race and nation. Analogous to James's dramatic representations of the Haitian Revolution, the Disla brothers' plays are particularly instructive for the way blackness is represented through performance, articulating with Dominican carnival traditions and helping to demonstrate the analytical significance of James's comments on the incidental/fundamental relationship between race and class.

#### "Listen: American Negro Soldier"

To set the stage for the entry of the Dislas' plays, I turn now to an article penned in the midst of the political strife following Trujillo's assassination in 1961. The article, written by Antonio Thomem, launched a rhetorical salvo specifically at African American soldiers serving in the Dominican Republic as part of the U.S. forces intervening against the threat of another Cuba. By the time of the U.S. intervention in April 1965, the democratically elected, leftist leader Juan Bosch had already been deposed by a military coup in 1963 after only seven months in office. The U.S. intervention came on the heels of the *Revolución de Abril*, a movement that aimed to restore Bosch and the constitutional government.<sup>10</sup>

Thomem's piece appeared in the September 18, 1965 issue of *¡Ahora!*, a Spanish-language weekly news magazine begun in 1962 amidst national conversations about how to establish democracy in the wake of Trujillo's death. Founded by journalist Rafael Molina

<sup>10</sup> For more on the politics of the post-Trujillo period, see Hartlyn, esp. Chapter 3.

Morillo, a lawyer by training who recently served as president of the Inter American Press Association, *¡Ahora!* has the distinction of being the only weekly that produced a daily national newspaper, *El Nacional*, which is based in the capital and is still in wide circulation in the Dominican Republic today.<sup>11</sup>

Written in English, Thomem's article opens with a bold title—"Listen: American Negro Soldier"—and then volleys various broadsides against not simply the occupation but the presence of the black U.S. soldiers to whom the article is explicitly addressed. Quite aware of U.S. Civil Rights struggles, Thomem nonetheless troubles the hierarchy of racial politics that imagines Dominicans in the U.S. as eagerly absorbing struggles for racial equality there, then returning to ameliorate racial problems back home. In fact, Thomem's opening line places the Dominican civil war on par with the U.S. Civil Rights movement: "We Dominicans are fighting for our freedom from social injustice, from racial discrimination. We are giving our lives so that our sons will have what we have never had: WORK, FOOD. EDUCATION, SECURITY." While the invocation of "social injustice" fits well with post-Trujillo Dominican leftist and 1960s Marxist and Third World struggles, the explicit criticism of anti-black racism internal to the Dominican Republic challenges commentators who ignore such criticisms or push them to a later date, after Dominicans have "awakened" to their African descent and blackness.

Thomem's article thus troubles the dominant narrative that Dominicans are racially backwards, self-hating, or otherwise universally dominated by white supremacist logic. In fact, Thomem appeals to the black U.S. soldier in decidedly pan-African terms: "American Negro Soldier: We are your brothers. We have the same color." However, while Thomem's anaphoric and apostrophic call to the "American Negro Soldier"—the phrase appears six times, including

<sup>11</sup> The last issue of *Ahora!* was published in February 2004. A comprehensive digital archive launched recently, Archivo Histórico de Ahora Digital: [biblioteca.funglode.net.do/revistaahora/](http://biblioteca.funglode.net.do/revistaahora/). For a brief study of this periodical's attention to Dominicans in New York, see Hoffnung-Garskof 174.



the title, in an eight-paragraph piece—clearly links Dominicans racially with U.S. blacks, not U.S. whites, it is more instructive to see such unity as both strategy and performance. This rhetorical performance of transnational black unity aligns Dominicans’ struggles with U.S. Civil Rights but foregrounds the tension between U.S. blacks’ struggle for political and economic justice and U.S. black soldiers serving to spread U.S. imperialism.<sup>12</sup> In other words, the call to racial unity must be read as part of a wider *constitucionalista* campaign to rid the Dominican Republic of U.S. interference, not as a call for racial unity for its own sake.

Rhetorically attentive to both nations’ racial politics, Thomem asserts a brotherhood based on color but never labels Dominicans “black” nor “negro.” His apostrophic call to the soldier refuses to disarticulate “American” from “Negro,” insisting on the culturally-bounded nature of the soldier’s blackness and the corresponding *distinction* from Afro-descended Dominicans, whose social history to this day has not experienced a widespread valorization of the term “black”—in Spanish, “negro.” Even if they share some sort of ancestral kinship, this kinship does not translate into cultural unity, and Thomem’s advice to African American soldiers to go home is a way of emphasizing the Americanness of their blackness even as it recognizes the way white supremacy links Americans and Dominicans of the same color. Thus, “Listen: American Negro Soldier” is not at all about Dominicans recognizing their own blackness but, on one reading, asking African American soldiers to recognize Dominicans as their brothers, sutured by the political and material consequences of being black in countries dominated by “white masters”: “Open your eyes, American Negro Soldier. Back in Missouri, in Alabama, in Little Rock, in Selma, your brothers, sisters and parents are being killed by the same white men who are sending you to die in this Island.”

<sup>12</sup> For an account of the relationship between U.S. imperialism and U.S. black political culture during the Depression Era, see Batiste 17-18.

The injunction, “Open your eyes,” also directly challenges the sense that Dominicans require experiences with the racist and anti-racist strands of U.S. racial politics to discover their own blackness. In addition to asking African American soldiers to recognize the racial struggles they share with Dominicans, the article implicitly encourages African American soldiers to recognize *themselves* as blacks by admonishing these soldiers not to forget the South’s virulent racism. The message is clear: U.S. blacks should attend to the racial discrimination at home instead of fighting Dominicans on behalf of “white masters.” Thomem boldly closes his article: “So lay off, American Negro Soldier. Point your gun at your own white oppressor. Don’t shoot at your Dominican brother.”

Thomem’s piece opens a window onto how Dominican blackness is performed, in relation to U.S. senses of blackness *and* in relation to its own racial politics. The article is shot through with imperatives—the “listen” of the title, the implicit call to remember, the “lay off” at the close—imperatives that, like Kenneth Warren’s call for misrecognition as crucial to black diaspora studies, demand of U.S. audiences another way of seeing Dominican society. Thomem knows how to perform blackness in a way that resonates with his black brother in the U.S., all the while maintaining cultural distance: Dominicans might be the “same color” as the “American Negro,” but this does not necessarily redound to ontological sameness. This performance of blackness suggests that one must be attentive to the way Dominican articulations and performances of blackness are often indirect, masked, and strategic, not simply for historically necessary reasons but politico-aesthetic ones as well.

## Conjunctures, Articulations, and Possibilities for Afro-Affirming Theater

Indirect, masked, and strategic performances of blackness, often relying on humor and satire, can be found in street theater movements of the 1970s and 1980s. As Thomem's piece reveals quite starkly, tracing the emergence of this black and African-affirmative theater need not fall back on the dominant story that Dominican society culturally awakens to its blackness and Africanness because of what Juan Flores, riffing on Peggy Levitt, calls the "cultural remittances" sent home by Dominicans in the U.S. Flores asserts that for Dominicans (and Puerto Ricans and other Latinos) experiences in "urban diaspora communities" or "working-class diaspora 'hoods' in the United States" constitute "a lesson in blackness" and "a veritable apprenticeship in black consciousness" (47-48). These observations follow in the wake of the unidirectional thrust of U.S. transnational studies, privileging the U.S. as the site of radical intellectual and social production on race, to be exported to off-shore locales. Flores only nominally acknowledges "the mutual articulation between cultural remittances from the outside and some of the oppositional cultural tendencies at work within the national territory" (49).

Because of Flores's importance within U.S. Latino and Afro-Latino studies, his focus on the remittances Caribbean transmigrants in the U.S. send back home threatens to foreclose the possibility of focusing on the local "oppositional cultural tendencies" in the Spanish-speaking Caribbean.<sup>13</sup> However, within his mere acknowledgement is a suggestive phrase: "mutual articulation." As Stuart Hall has put it, in addition to its discursive definition, articulation suggests a strategic and unfixed relationship, a joint-like operation that marks coming together as much as separation ("Race, Articulation" 328). Thus, Flores's use of "mutual articulation" to describe the relationship between cultural remittances from the U.S. and Dominican oppositional

<sup>13</sup> Flores's influential works include *From Bomba to Hip-Hop: Puerto Rican Culture and Latina Identity* (2000) and the anthology he co-edited with Miriam Jimenez-Román, *The Afro-Latin@ Reader: History and Culture in the United States* (2010).

strategies implies a crucial disarticulation that I argue is at the heart of Thomem's declaration to black American soldiers.

Like Thomem's piece, Dominican street theater offers an important insight into the way Dominican race relations vis-à-vis U.S. race relations would be better understood in terms of mutual articulations and disarticulations. While it is entirely possible to narrate Dominican street theater's development in the light of U.S. racial politics and its influence on Dominican society, a focus on this narrative obscures the way street theater also emerged from within Dominican-specific struggles against anti-black racism and white supremacy. One important facet of these struggles is the contribution made by literary and cultural groups that began to emerge in the waning years of the *trujillato* and continued with force in the immediate aftermath of the 1965 U.S. intervention. Some of the major literary and arts groups and journals that formed during the 1960s included the journals *Brigadas Dominicanas* (1961-1962) and *Testimonio* (1964-1967), and the groups El Frente Cultural and Arte y Liberación. These pre-1965 groups and journals catalyzed the emergence after the 1965 war of such groups as El Puño, La Isla, and La Antorcha.<sup>14</sup> Though short-lived, these literary groups and journals register an important tradition of counter-hegemonic discourse in broad political, literary, and social senses, including anti-racist ones. Like Thomem's article in *¡Ahora!*, this tradition offers an alternative story to the paradigmatic sense that Dominicans did not, do not, and cannot imagine answers to white supremacy and anti-black racism except through U.S. migration.

In 1973 the group Bloque de Jóvenes Escritores (Young Writers' Bloc) "attempted to overcome the isolation and disintegration of the previous groups, in addition to fomenting fruitful literary activity," publishing the journal *Bloque: Revista Crítica de Arte, Literatura y Ciencias Sociales* (Paulino Ramos, "El Puño"). Bloque was a literary bloc in the strongest

<sup>14</sup> For more on these groups, see Ramos, "Revista y Grupos."

interdisciplinary sense, bringing together not only the literary artists and critics comprising the various earlier groups and journals, but also historians and social scientists equally interested in re-orienting Dominican historiography and society toward its African descent. Important historical and social scientific works of this early post-Trujillo period, many with a decidedly Marxist orientation, include Emilio Cordero Michel's *La revolución Haitiana y Santo Domingo* (1968), Franklin Franco Pichardo's *Los negros, los mulatos y la nación dominicana* (1969), and Hugo Tolentino Dipp's *Raza e historia en Santo Domingo: los orígenes del prejuicio racial en América* (1974). Among literary figures, it featured well-established playwrights of the Trujillo era such as Máximo Avilés Blonda, Manuel Rueda, and Marcio Veloz Maggiolo, whose prominence continued in the post-Trujillo period, as well as emerging playwrights like Ivan García Guerra and Jimmy Sierra, who continue to influence an entire generation of Dominican playwrights, directors, and actors.<sup>15</sup>

Bloque's cross-disciplinary collaborations reveal the links between these theater figures and a range of Dominican artists, writers, and social scientists who, despite political differences, were committed to working together for social change. For the purposes of my argument the most interesting collaborative connections are between the dramatists and social scientists Dagoberto Tejeda Ortiz, June Rosenberg, and Martha Ellen Davis, whose works on Dominican carnival, religious practice, and music have shed light on the importance of creolized African cultural forms to Dominican culture. It is clear by these connections that an Afro- and black-affirming cultural politics had an early and important place among a prominent and cross-disciplinary segment of Dominican writers, artists, and intellectuals. A failure to so frame the ebbs and flows of black or Afro-Dominican politics risks missing crucial political and cultural

<sup>15</sup> Unfortunately, precious little Dominican drama is available in the U.S. For selections, see Quackenbush's anthologies.

movements like el Bloque de Jóvenes Escritores, while at the same time positing a teleology that sees the “development” of global blackness in terms of a continuum with the Dominican Republic far behind and the U.S. leading the way.<sup>16</sup>

These interdisciplinary collaborations are the seeds of the emergence of Dominican street theater, which flourishes in two periods, 1976-1979 and 1984-1985, that overlapped with political oppression and economic austerity. (The intervening years saw the election of President Antonio Guzmán of the left-leaning Partido Revolucionario Dominicano, or Dominican Revolutionary Party.) Dominican theater critic José Molinaza has cautioned against seeing this progressive theater as immanently connected to Dominican people, but he does credit its emphasis on structural change with “making possible a conjuncture [*posibilitando una coyuntura*]” that opens a space for popular theater (233).<sup>17</sup> Molinaza’s use of the word “coyuntura” is translatable as conjuncture, in a historical sense, and articulation, in the physical sense of a joint between bones. The former definition highlights the contextual possibilities and limitations of late-60s progressive theater projects, making possible certain conjunctures while foreclosing others. At the very least these possibilities opened the door for a radical theater that could explore Afro-Dominican identity in ways that dominant cultural and political practices have historically obscured, submerged, or eliminated. In other words, the possibilities of exploring Dominican blackness were specifically tied to structural changes away from the Europhilic and Hispanophilic theater dominating Dominican theater.

The latter definition is a bit more productive for conceptualizations of black diaspora, resonating with Brent Hayes Edwards’s point that “*diaspora* is taken up at a particular conjuncture in black scholarly discourse to do a particular kind of epistemological work”

<sup>16</sup> For one “developmental” narrative of Dominican blackness, see Stinchcomb.

<sup>17</sup> All translations of Molinaza’s work are my own. I include the Spanish original when translation in English captures less than the Spanish can convey.

(“Uses” 46). In the U.S., this particular conjuncture has banished Dominican intellectual and cultural production to the waiting room of the black diaspora. However, I want to draw out from Molinaza’s use of “coyuntura” not just conjunctural possibility but also articulation, an echo of Edwards’s conceptualization: “articulation offers the means to account for the diversity of black ‘takes’ on diaspora, [...] as a frame of cultural identity determined not through ‘return’ but through difference” (“Uses” 60). By framing a progressive theater movement as an articulation that opens the possibility for acknowledging Dominican society’s African identity, Molinaza uncontestedly presents one “black ‘take’ on diaspora,” even if it is neither recognized by nor recognizable to black scholarly discourse in the U.S.

In the wake of the intellectual reorientation represented by *Bloque*, Molinaza analyzes Dominican theater to criticize the Afro-subordinating dominant conceptions of Dominican identity, manifested in theater and at large: “For us, believing ourselves to be eminently Spanish or with Spanish lineage, the negation of Africa becomes a daily fact, and with that same frequency is it manifested in the literary realm” (130). Molinaza’s criticism places him squarely within an important, if minor, Dominican intellectual tradition interested in not simply affirming African descent but doing so as part of a larger political project aimed at recognizing popular participation in the creation of an “authentic national theater” and, more broadly, a more “authentic” Dominican society. It should be no surprise that Molinaza himself was one of *Bloque*’s collaborators. Molinaza highlights the widespread practices—religious rites, festival, song, humor, carnival—that under repressive conditions cannot announce their creolized Africanness, but can nonetheless perform them.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>18</sup> See James Scott.

## La Calle es Libre: Ways of Staging Race in Dominican Street Theater

Reynaldo Disla is one of the key figures in the development of street theater. In a performance-talk delivered at Casa de las Américas in Havana in May 1987, Disla narrates the history of street theater's emergence during national festivals and carnival in the 1970s as a calculated political strategy of survival during the repressive regime of Joaquín Balaguer, one of the key ideological architects of Trujillo's dictatorship whose presidency followed the 1965 revolution and lasted until 1978. At the same time, street theater performers' integration into popular festivals and carnival also served as a Brechtian blurring of the distinctions between performers and spectators and, as Disla puts it elsewhere, to succeed where elitist and national theater does not: "The rabble, the mob, the common, the riffraff, the shabby, *los hijos de machepa*, the masses could watch theater, for the first time in their lives, have fun and enjoy it" ("Poner").<sup>19</sup> Disla argues that in its first phase street theater techniques borrowed the movements, characters, and occasions from Dominican carnival, while also taking on carnival's irreverence, impropriety, and excess and its potential for subversion, play, and satire. Disla's performance piece not only playfully indicts the way "transculturized Taínos [*taínos transculturizados*]" have become the constructed mask for Dominican national identity,<sup>20</sup> but also argues that the mobile form of Dominican carnival masquerade is useful as a street theater technique.

One of the most perduring street theater plays is *Un Comercial para Máximo Gómez*, written by Disla in 1986 and premiered that same year by Teatro Gayumba under the direction of Manuel Chapuseaux. The occasion for the premiere was the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of Dominican national hero Máximo Gómez, more widely known as a leading general in the Cuban Ten Years' War (1868-1878) and the subsequent War of Independence (1895-1898). By the

<sup>19</sup> Thanks to Disla for graciously supplying me a full typescript of his performance-talk. I follow the same translation practice I have used for Molinaza's work.

<sup>20</sup> Taínos were the predominant indigenous group on Hispaniola when Columbus arrived.



1986 staging, Dominican street theater had shifted away from a theater that moved with carnival *comparsas*.<sup>21</sup> Nonetheless, this later iteration still featured irreverent humor and social inversion, retaining the link with the popular street performance-ritual that is carnival. In other words, carnival ritual as popular cultural practice remains central to the formal aesthetic principles of *Un Comercial para Máximo Gómez*.

In directing and performing in the play over various public performances from 1986 through 2011, Chapuseaux has utilized the participatory nature of the play to foreground class discrimination and oppression, never directing it explicitly as a commentary on race. He concedes, nonetheless, that Disla may have an entirely different attitude to the play's relationship with the question of race and blackness.<sup>22</sup> Disla, in response, affirms the importance of race to the play: "No, because it's a topic that's in there. Because [Chapuseaux] is thinking about something social in general. [In the play] there is economic exploitation, there is slavery, but in the attitude of the director [of the commercial within the play] there is racial prejudice."<sup>23</sup> The apparently contradictory comments from director and playwright about the place of race in the framing of the play represent not conflicting or oppositional imaginings, but the crucially open terrain that the play represents in performance. In this way it confirms what I'm arguing is the potentially performative thrust of James's assertion. James sees race and class in imperialism as fluid and shifting, arguing against positioning race as the fundamental question for the intellectual, activist, and critic, or, in this case, street theater practitioner. Thus, *Máximo Gómez* should not be interpreted narrowly in an either/or bind regarding class or race, but a both/and flexibility that is capacious enough to include a strategic, contextually and artistically determined

<sup>21</sup> "Carnival krewes" is the best translation.

<sup>22</sup> Manuel Chapuseaux, Personal Interview, 31 Jan. 2012.

<sup>23</sup> Reynaldo Disla, Personal Interview, 29 Feb. 2012.

focus on race, on class, or on both.<sup>24</sup> While my analysis will focus on the ways the play features race as a central problem for Dominican society, I do so not to privilege the playwright's word above the director's. Chapuseaux's staging is a viable one. My focus on the question of race is a strategic one, to intervene against the dominant sense of Dominicans as race traitors.

The play features three scripted characters: an unnamed female director of the commercial, a male actor named Rómulo who will play the role of Máximo Gómez in the commercial, and a sugarcane cutter who inadvertently interrupts the commercial filming with his vendor's tricycle. The other characters of the play are the spectators, who function as the extras to the commercial filming and who are involved immediately in the play, both by the commercial director and by the canecutter.<sup>25</sup> In fact, the canecutter emerges from the margins of the audience, navigating his tricycle while hawking his sugar cane, into the center of the director's increasingly annoyed attention. At first the director sees the canecutter as simply a nuisance whose image, and the image of the tricycle and the cane, must be absent from any shot so she can depict a sanitized presentation of the history of Máximo Gómez. After all, the commercial is for Banco Atlántico, and the opening shot of the commercial features a large sign appropriating the story of Máximo Gómez's heroic anticolonialism for the bank's financial gain: "Bank Atlantic, Yours Like Your History" (15).<sup>26</sup> Or, as the director puts it more poignantly, "The profound and subconscious image is that the bank is as solid as the hero, the valiant soldier"

<sup>24</sup> It is important to remember, of course, that especially in Latin America and specifically in the Spanish-speaking Caribbean attention to class over race has been one way of perpetuating racial hierarchies. From Puerto Rican jibarismo, to Cuban and Brazilian claims of racial democracy, the elevation of class struggle and anti-imperial struggle by way of de-emphasizing race often undergirds racist social formations. However, to make race fundamental is to foreclose the possibilities of alternative forms of politics, performance, and pleasure.

<sup>25</sup> In a personal interview, Disla mentioned that for one staging of the play Chapuseaux issued a casting call for a commercial so the spectators who arrived did not realize that instead of being cast in a real commercial, they were participating in a trenchant criticism of transnational capital's appropriation of the country's resources, its heroes, and its working people.

<sup>26</sup> "Banco Atlántico, tan tuyo como tu historia." For both plays, I include the original Spanish as a footnote when the English translation works well enough. Where the vernacular and idiomatic Spanishes employed by the characters present a challenge to translation, I keep the original Spanish in the main text.

(16).<sup>27</sup> For the director, the transatlantic economic structure the bank's name suggests is the economic obverse of the poor Dominican canecutter: not simply must he be banished from the center of the commercial, but he must be removed to the invisible edges of the audience.

The canecutter is also the class and racial obverse of the image the director wants to project about the interlocking institutions of bank, hero, and state. Thus, the director never wants the canecutter to enter the camera's racialized scopophilia, but she also always has him in her scope. Speaking about this scene, Disla links the removal of the canecutter from the frame of the camera with the techniques found in publicity to "make everything pretty [*hermosear todo*]."<sup>28</sup> In the play, this removal shifts from the individual canecutter to all those spectators who, as extras, do not fit the correct racial profile for the commercial, who are not sufficiently "hermoso." In setting up a shot of the audience members carrying their hero on their shoulders, the commercial's director reveals the specifically racialized politics of "hermosear todo": "(*Removes blacks from the area, leaving whites. Puts up front those considered good-looking.*) You, lady over there, so elegant and good-looking, please come up front so the camera captures you. You, get to the back. A white person here next to the lady, you no, you over there. No, people of color outside this area; I want a pleasant and beautiful scene" (23).<sup>29</sup> The muted anti-black racism of the terms "elegant," "pleasant," "beautiful," and "good-looking" is heightened through the performance of moving to the fore the white or light-skinned spectators described by those terms, and pushing to the back the black or darker-skinned spectators who would make the scene less "pleasant and beautiful."

<sup>27</sup> "La imagen profunda y subconiente es que el banco es tan sólido como un héroe, como un soldado valiente."

<sup>28</sup> Reynaldo Disla, Personal Interview, 29 Feb. 2012.

<sup>29</sup> "(*Va sacando de la zona a los negros y dejando a los blancos. Coloca delante a los que considera buenmozos.*) Aquella señorita, tan elegante y buenamoza, póngase delante para que la capte la cámara. Tú, vete para el fondo. Una persona blanca aquí al lado de la señorita, usted no, aquel. No, las personas de color fuera de esta zona; quiero una escena agradable y bella."

The marginalization of people of color to a place outside the camera's frame links these spectators with the similarly marginalized canecutter. While a discourse of class difference buttresses the director's disdain for the canecutter, this linkage between him and the spectators notes the crucial racial component to Dominican class discrimination. As Disla has put it, the scene is a confrontation that allows spectators to be both participants in and victims of the commercial director's discrimination.<sup>30</sup> In other words, the Brechtian technique employed here is calculated to allow spectators to experience, as the price of their spectatorship, the race and class-based discrimination permeating Dominican society.

This participatory encounter between spectators and actors becomes a racial confrontation when the director realizes that to remain faithful to history she must include black and brown faces. Despite this realization, she nonetheless wants to preserve a stylized (read: white) aesthetic. Thus, she instructs her crew to insert "some black hands and faces" but only to "satisfy the historians, the only ones who know—this is a nation of illiterates that accept without question any image that comes in through their eyes" (24).<sup>31</sup> Of course, even the black hands and faces she selects must have "refined features,"<sup>32</sup> or as the stage directions indicate, those that she considers "fine [*finos*]," underscoring her ability to manage the display of blackness by choosing more aesthetically acceptable blacks (24). The director's dig is doubly racist. First, it deflects her own racist tokenism, begrudgingly using black bodies—or, to be more precise, parts of black people's bodies—to satisfy the demands of those historians who emphasize that black people and cultures are crucial to Dominican history. Second, she sweepingly dismisses all Dominicans as illiterate and thus unable to question the white supremacist images they receive.

<sup>30</sup> Reynaldo Disla, Personal Interview, 29 Feb. 2012.

<sup>31</sup> "varias manos y rostros negros"; "satisfacer a los historiadores, que son los únicos que lo saben—este es un país de analfabetos que aceptan las imágenes que les entran por los ojos y no las cuestionan"

<sup>32</sup> "de rasgos refinados"

What is curious is that this second aspect of her racist dig aligns with the racially “progressive” scholarship that indicts Dominicans for being unable to recognize their own blackness: “folk and myth tales show that [...] Dominicans [...] hold dearest the idea of being White” (Weyland Usanna 111). As a street theater play, *Un Comercial* invites its Dominican audience to participate. Thus, the director’s indictment must confront the very Dominican people it dismisses, in contrast to scholarly indictments of Dominicans for their purported racial backwardness. The director’s own racism is both an indictment of Dominicans’ anti-black racism and an invitation to Dominicans to refuse it.

Like anti-black racism writ large, the director makes a calculated shift from initially keeping the canecutter wholly outside the camera’s frame to subsequently appropriating for the commercial’s purposes his knowledge as a poor, black worker. In the first instance of this shift, she sees the machete, the tool for his labor, as a more historically accurate prop than the sable they had been using, the machete a “ubiquitous image of the [Cuban War of Liberation]” and popularly associated with Gómez as that war’s Dominican hero (Tone 9). Later, the director stumbles upon the idea that it would be great to have Máximo Gómez move through the crowd on wheels, so she calls the *cañero* again. He replies that his tricycle is filled with sugarcane, but the director sees yet another opportunity: sugarcane is a perfect prop, because of the “Spanish sugar mills.”<sup>33</sup> The canecutter comically suggests that because they are renting out everything that is his, they might as well rent him as well, since, as he puts it, “I’m already the one who’ll put on the show [*ya soy yo que le voy a hacer el show*]” (25). The humor lies in his ability to make light of exploitation, as a performance of comic deference, to extract more money from the director. The director has already planned on exploiting the canecutter, as she wants him to push

<sup>33</sup> “ingenios azucareros españoles”

his vehicle while the actor playing Máximo Gómez is in it, what she refers to as “technical work [*trabajo técnico*],” but still wants to keep him out of the camera’s gaze (26).

The director fails to see the canecutter’s deference as a comic performance. She also fails to register the irony of gradually relying on him, as his racial and class identities serve as synecdoche for the Dominicans she strives to keep outside the camera’s frame. However, there is no question the play expects its Dominican audience to be able to register this irony. What is more, the director misses the historical conflation represented in the material equality between the canecutter and Gómez’s time period. On the one hand, through this conflation the play announces the lack of material and technological progress for the mass of Dominican poor, marginalized as they are from whatever progress Dominican élites have experienced. On the other hand, the conflation contains the seeds of a countermovement: the canecutter recognizes that his technical abilities and his labor cause him to become the center of the play—“soy yo que le voy a hacer el show”—symbolically becoming the center of the national narrative.

The racial implications of this contradiction are clear in the play. As the initial filming begins, the director reads the script aloud: “With the solidity of an ideal—liberate black and white Cubans from slavery and Spanish exploitation—the guerrilla leader Máximo Gómez ordered the first machete charge, to fight hand-to-hand against the Spanish army and defeat it, amidst thick undergrowth, grass reaching their necks, defying hunger and thirst with indomitable courage. Viva Máximo Gómez!” (14).<sup>34</sup> Deciding to cut filming, she denounces the script as some kind of “Marxist pamphleteering [*panfletismo marxista*]” and immediately begins to revise. Her first excision is “liberate,” because for her it evokes a whole host of Latin American leftist

<sup>34</sup> “Con la solidez de un ideal: liberar de la esclavitud y la explotación española al negro y al blanco cubano, el guerrillero Máximo Gómez ordenó la primera carga al machete, para pelear cuerpo a cuerpo contra al ejército español y vencerlo, entre la maleza espesa, la hierba hasta el cuello, desafiando el hambre y la sed con bravura indómita. ¡Viva Máximo Gómez!”

jargon that she dismissively enumerates: “liberation movement, *sandinistas*, El Salvador, liberation front, party” (16).<sup>35</sup> Her next two cuts are “exploitation” and “black and white,” eliminating in one fell swoop the class-based and race-based critiques the scriptwriter imagined as central to Máximo Gómez’s anticolonial militancy in Cuba. At the moment when she is revising out the “panfletismo marxista” and the traces of any progressive race and class-based agenda, she is, ironically, simultaneously drawing the poor, black canecutter into the center of the play by requesting his machete.

When filming resumes, after machete rental negotiations, the newly revised script unmasks the racial erasure at the center of dominant Dominican discourse, but also the traces of progressive racial discourse that remain in an almost too-literal palimpsest. It reads, “With the immaculate solidity of an ideal—unleash Cubans from the black night of Spanish colonialism—the apostle Máximo Gómez made the first machete charge, to defeat the Spanish army, amidst thick undergrowth, defying all with indomitable courage. Viva Máximo Gómez!” (22).<sup>36</sup> Not only have “liberate,” “exploitation,” and “black and white” disappeared, but so have “slavery,” “guerrilla leader,” and “hunger and thirst,” or, in other words, discursive hallmarks of revolutionary struggle. These have been replaced by religious discourse—“immaculate,” “apostle”—indicting the Church in the national sin of racial forgetting. Furthermore, in this version “Spanish colonialism” has become the new target, muting both slavery and exploitation. Anticolonialism thus becomes divorced from struggles against racism and class-based exploitation, becoming, in other words, a retrograde nationalism that mirrors both U.S. struggles for independence while maintaining slavery and Enlightenment philosophers’ idealistic

<sup>35</sup> “movimiento de liberación, sandinistas, el Salvador, frente de liberación, partido”

<sup>36</sup> “Con la solidez inmaculada de un ideal: desatar a la negra noche del colonialismo español a los cubanos, el apóstol Máximo Gómez, dio la primera carga al machete, para vencer al ejército español entre la maleza espesa, desafiando todo con bravura indómita: ¡Viva Máximo Gómez!”

engagement with enslavement while curiously neglecting to engage material enslavement, neither the enslavement of workers nor racial slavery.

The trace of race discourse from the original is in the transformed use of the word “black [*negro*].” Even if the new script displaces “negro” as a racial category with “negro” as (arguably) neutral modifier, translated above as the “black [or dark] night of Spanish colonialism,” the phrase nonetheless retains the link with racial blackness. In this way, the play points to a way of seeing Dominican blackness in spite of attempts to erase, negate, or otherwise obscure it. Since the canecutter moves to the central position of the play, those attempts to erase, negate, and obscure must be countered by attention to the Dominican marginalized poor who perform their blackness in ways that are legible neither to Dominican élites nor to foreign observers trained to recognize a particular performance of black identity. The play thus stages an internally-directed criticism of whitening and Hispanicizing tendencies in the Dominican Republic, performed by the commercial director and symbolized by the “Banco Atlántico,” while also signaling an autochthonous Dominican blackness as the crucial grounds for that critique. If the play clearly inveighs against the anti-black racism of the “Banco Atlántico” commercial, it also subtly cautions against a transnational “Black Atlántico,” an economy of blackness that, as Natasha Barnes has put it in her critique of Paul Gilroy’s work, gives one “the unsettling feeling that America is the Diaspora, and that black modernity cannot take place without it” (“Black Atlantic” 106). The play also offers a much different form of black cultural politics, rooted both in satire and in labor, than that offered by Gilroy’s focus in *The Black Atlantic* on New World black culture as rooted in nihilism.<sup>37</sup> The canecutter clearly challenges dominant Dominican notions of national identity, but he also challenges dominant notions of blackness that fail to recognize the way Dominicans perform their blackness.

<sup>37</sup> For a developed critique of this aspect of Gilroy’s book, see Chrisman 73-88.



The canecutter always has a ready response to the director, who gradually descends into vitriolic epithets emphasizing the gaping class and racial divide that separates them. To her first attempt to banish him and his tricycle from the set, he retorts that “the street is free [*la calle es libre*],” highlighting the street as a site of public political confrontation and contradiction (14). On the same street exist oppressive narratives of Dominican history, represented by the commercial, as well as popular interruptions of those narratives, like the canecutter’s accidental intrusion. But the canecutter moves from accidental participant to intentional film critic. When he realizes the director has invited him, or, rather, his machete, into the commercial, he seizes on the opportunity to register an observation about the authenticity of the commercial’s representation. He has been listening to the narrative of Gómez fighting and is confused by the tidy image of the actor playing him in the commercial. This disjuncture reminds him of a film depicting legendary and mysterious anti-trujillista Enrique Blanco, which film relies on both historical and racial misrepresentation: “Enrique Blanco was black and the guy in the movie was white, good-looking, and bathed in a river with a woman, like in some earthly paradise...Look, I left that movie theater *con un pique*! Because everyone knows that Enrique Blanco was fleeing Trujillo’s guards, and he wasn’t living it up like that” (19).<sup>38</sup> The canecutter sees an analogy between the film’s depiction of Enrique Blanco and the commercial’s depiction of Máximo Gómez, concluding that because of its falsifying representation, the commercial “will be boring/annoying [*va a ser un clavo*]” (19). The canecutter contests the director’s revisionist appropriation of Máximo Gómez with his own sense of how to represent him.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>38</sup> “Enrique Blanco era prieto y el de la película era blanco, buenmozo y se bañaba en un río con una mujer, como en el paraíso terrenal...Mire, ¡y yo salí de ese cine con un pique!...Porque todo el mundo sabe que Enrique Blanco andaba huyendo de los guardias de Trujillo; y no vivía así tan feliz.”

<sup>39</sup> In a case of life imitating art almost too literally, Gérard, a Haitian man living in the Dominican Republic tourist destination of Boca Chica, similarly appropriates the name “Máximo Gómez” as his own on his fake Dominican *cédula* (identification card). In Steven Gregory’s ethnographic account, Gérard appears to be aware that he is performing a subtle appropriation of the radical politics of Máximo Gómez. His awareness of the irony of assuming

This is the canecutter's most subtle and powerful criticism of the racial erasure at the heart of dominant Dominican representations, in both visual media and historical texts. He bases his criticism of the actor playing Máximo Gómez not on racial misrepresentation but on the misrepresentation of an image: a tidy image does not square with fighting in thickets and brush. Nonetheless, placed immediately between the original and revised versions of the script, the canecutter's criticism of racial inauthenticity in the film anticipates the director's discursive sublimation of Dominican liberatory struggle against colonial, class, and racial oppression into a white-washed story of nationalist anticolonialism.

The canecutter's presence is thus a direct challenge to the commercial's revision of Dominican history away from slavery, black African descent, and class struggle. However, more than exerting a force through physical presence in the commercial, the canecutter clearly also understands and can articulate his value to the commercial. Even though he concedes a material inequality between the director and him—"I'm going to leave on my tricycle, and you in a big ol' car [*ahorita salgo en mi triciclo y usted en un carrazo*]"—he argues that in fact the commercial depends on him, his resources, and his knowledge: "But with all that you can't deny one thing: without me, my tricycle, the sugarcane, and my machete you can't make the movie" (32).<sup>40</sup> While the thrust of his assertion focuses on the indispensability of his tools and products to the director and the film, what is most striking is his inclusion of himself: without me, a poor, black, marginalized Dominican, he seems to be saying, you cannot make this story work. The wider criticism of the whitening or Hispanicizing tendency in dominant Dominican national narratives seems self-evident, but more crucial to my argument is the way the play articulates a

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that identity, linking him as a black Haitian with a revered Dominican national father, is contained in his smile. See Gregory 170.

<sup>40</sup> "Pero con todo y eso no puede negar una cosa: sin mí, mi triciclo, las cañas y mi machete no puede hacer la película."

version of Dominican blackness through the canecutter, whose mobility is circumscribed by his tricycle, emphatically not a transnational figure. His Dominican-specific practice and performance is a cogent argument within the play for the importance of attending to the way popular cultural forms are constitutive of Dominican history, culture, and thought. The power of Disla's play is the connection to popular cultural practice it carries within its very form: as Disla has noted, the dramatic techniques of Dominican street theater traces its own development to popular Dominican carnival practices of mobility, irony, indirection, humor, and masking.

#### Califé on Trial: *Ramón Arepa* and the Ambiguity of Carnival Masking

The humor and playfulness of Dominican carnival masking in no way papers over an anti-black racism that seeks to use indigenous mask at the expense of acknowledging African descent. This indigenous carnival masking appears to be consonant with the Dominican national-historical falsification that emphasizes indigenous origins to stress Spanish-indigenous mixture while obscuring African origins.<sup>41</sup> In other words, there is no immanent racial critique in carnival masquerade and such masking can easily be linked to a wider whitening national project.<sup>42</sup> Disla's discussion of street theater, by focusing on the technical usefulness of identity masking, argues for something in racial masquerade that is more important than simply indicting it as false. Distinct from asserting indigenous *origins*, indigenous carnival *masking* both perpetuates the national myth and reveals the limits of such identitarian constructions: the mask is removable, changeable, in a word, anti-essentialist.

This has important implications for the way black masquerade operates in Dominican carnival and street theater. In his performance piece Disla implicitly makes this link when he

<sup>41</sup> For perhaps the most widely known analysis of this Dominican historico-literary project, see Sommer, Chapter 8.

<sup>42</sup> On Dominican carnival, see Tejeda Ortiz's *El Carnaval Dominicano*.

masks in satire a history of enslaved Africans in the Dominican Republic: “black African slaves came as tourists to enjoy work in the plantations and mines, and they liked their new jobs so much that they burned the sugar plantations out of sheer enthusiasm, then fled and became maroons” (“Poner”).<sup>43</sup> The use of humor neither trivializes the middle passage and New World slave labor, nor minimizes the importance of slave resistance. Instead, humor bridges the history of enslavement in the Dominican Republic with carnival and the performance politics of street theater. Carnival is in the ecstatic excess of “sheer enthusiasm,” in the movement of fleeing, and in the identity transformation that happens when enslaved blacks become “maroons.”<sup>44</sup> Carnival masking and the satire that attends it thus become a crucial way to re-articulate, in Edwards’s and Hall’s sense, Dominican culture with its African past and “transculturizado” present.<sup>45</sup>

Sociologist Dagoberto Tejeda Ortiz, the leading authority on Dominican carnival, has distinguished two different, if overlapping, carnival traditions: “the carnival that arrives with Spanish colonization and [...] the process of transformation in popular, street carnival, where the African presence is fundamental in the creolization process” (56). Tejeda Ortiz’s focus on the street-based creolization of carnival reveals a national identity in constant transformation, precisely because of contacts with people on the street who are at a substantial remove from the seats of political power. Even though Tejeda Ortiz exaggerates carnival’s democratic force, he registers perhaps the most radical sense of Dominican racial identity, an identity paradoxically rooted in carnival and its attendant racial masquerade. The implications of this paradox are crucial to understanding the most important figure in Dominican black masquerade: Califé.

<sup>43</sup> “Los negros esclavos africanos vinieron de turistas a disfrutar del trabajo en los cañaverales y las minas, y tanto les gustó su nuevo empleo que quemaron los cañaverales de puro entusiasmo y salían huyendo y se volvían cimarrones”

<sup>44</sup> For a discussion of the contributions *cimarrones* made to both Dominican culture and specific forms of Dominican carnival, see Tejeda Ortiz 489-525.

<sup>45</sup> For the inauguration of the term “transculturación,” see Fernando Ortiz’s *Contrapunteo cubano del tabaco y del azúcar* (1940), first translated by Harriet de Onís into English in 1947 as *Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar*.

Dominicans recognize Califé as the social critic *par excellence* of their carnival. His origins are characterized by multiple and ambiguous narratives, fitting squarely within what Edouard Glissant theorized first as the submarine roots, and later re-articulated as the rhizomatic nature of Caribbean creolization.<sup>46</sup> Tejeda Ortiz locates Califé's precursor in Champol, who, with help from not a few swallows of potent rum, took to the streets to denounce loudly and in verse the country's problems during the first U.S. occupation from 1916-1924. The spirit of Champol's social criticism re-emerged in the 1940s, in the midst of the *trujillato*, via Califé, the creation of a tin-worker named Inocencio Martínez (Tejeda Ortiz 213). In creating Califé, Martínez's use of a cane linked him with Champol, but his creation took on a carnivalesque dimension through costuming: "his face painted black and his mouth white, dressed in a black tuxedo with a white shirt, exaggerated top hat, white leggings, and black bow" (Tejeda Ortiz 214). Reynaldo Disla has disavowed any connection between Califé and the racism in U.S. blackface traditions, citing a series of lectures by famed Dominican folklorist Fradique Lizardo which outlined a version of Califé painted with a white face and black lips.<sup>47</sup> Similarly, Tejeda Ortiz makes no mention of any blackface tradition, offering instead two other possible origins beyond Champol, one a satiric appropriation of the dress-coat and tails worn by the intellectual and artistic elite who gathered in el Parque Colón for literary *tertulias*, and the other inspired by el Barón del Cementario, the head of the guedé division of lúas in Dominican vudú and Haitian-Dominican gagá religious traditions.<sup>48</sup>

It is difficult to imagine a Califé completely divorced from the racist uses of blackface that by the middle of the twentieth century would have been widely familiar in the Caribbean. It

<sup>46</sup> On the first formulation, see *Caribbean Discourse* 66-67. On the second, see *Poetics of Relation* 11-15.

<sup>47</sup> Reynaldo Disla, Personal Interview, 29 Feb. 2012.

<sup>48</sup> El Barón de Cementerio is analogous to Haitian Vodou's Baron Cimetière, and linked to the pervasive trickster figure in African-influenced New World belief systems. For more on Dominican vudú and gagá, see Rosenberg and Davis.

is even more improbable considering the other Spanish-language islands' history of blackface caricature, from Cuba's nineteenth century *teatro bufo* to the tremendous popularity of Ramón Rivero's televised blackface in midcentury Puerto Rico.<sup>49</sup> Nonetheless, the rhizomatic origins for Califé suggest that it is also critically inadequate to reduce this Dominican carnival character to the racist black caricature of Cuban, Puerto Rican, and U.S. blackface. At the very least, Califé's potential predecessor in Barón del Cementario, with his skeleton-like visage that is rendered by white face-painting, offers a different sense of what the face painted black may signify.

Furthermore, Dominican playwright and actor Juan María Almonte emphasizes that Inocencio Martínez himself was black, so painting his own face black can be read in terms similar to black Dominicans' and Haitians' use of burnt oil to blacken their bodies in carnivalesque costuming.

The ways Almonte and the Disla brothers understand Califé's origins, as emphatically not rooted in anti-black racism but in carnival social critique and inversion, directly inform their depictions, both as actors and as directors, of Califé on stage. This is crucial to understanding Frank Disla's "drama carnavalesco," *Ramón Arepa* (1985).<sup>50</sup> Even more than *Un Comercial*, *Ramón Arepa* represents a shift away from the street theater that moved with carnival *comparsas*, as the play was produced in a theater hall. Nonetheless, like *Un Comercial*, it invokes the humor, irreverence, and social inversion that are the hallmarks of carnival. In a real sense, it represents the carnivalization of the theater hall.

The play is a monologue in which the eponymous protagonist is on trial for the murder of a white German man he believes to have been an American. Throughout the trial, Ramón Arepa is costumed as Califé, giving the clear sense that Califé is on trial. The play thus presents an important index of the limits of Califé in his function as the masked social critic at the center of

<sup>49</sup> On Cuba's *teatro bufo*, see Lane, and on Puerto Rican television, see Rivero.

<sup>50</sup> Thanks, again, to Reynaldo Disla for supplying me with an unpublished typescript of his brother Frank's play. Citations in the text correspond with page numbers on typescript.

Dominican carnival. And because Califé is the epitome of social subversion, he functions as synecdoche for carnival as a subversive social practice. Thus carnival itself is on trial. Finally, because Califé performs blackness through black masking in order to challenge the light-skinned, hispanophile elite, this carnivalesque racial performance is also on trial. Crucially, Ramón Arepa provides both his own defense and a defense of Califé, his carnival alter-ego.

The play opens with an original song, “La vida, la careta [The Life, The Mask],” with words written by the playwright and music composed by Luis Díaz, who collaborated in the early 1970s with Tejeda-Ortíz and others to form Convite, “a loosely structured group of musicians, folklorists, and social scientists with a common desire to rediscover and re-examine the country's autochthonous musical traditions, particularly those with clear African roots that had been most persistently ignored by folklorists and cultural observers since the Trujillo era” (Pacini Hernández 114).<sup>51</sup> Thus, the collaboration between Díaz and Disla for the play's rock opening carries with it the echoes of the interdisciplinary collaborative effort manifested most profoundly by Bloque. Ethnomusicologist Deborah Pacini Hernandez emphasizes the way Convite “insisted on recognizing [...] the country's debt to its African cultural heritage” (114). But I'm more interested in the way collaborations like Convite routed this recognition specifically through performance in a way that, to re-invoke Kenneth Warren, often gets misrecognized or goes unrecognized by foreign observers. Recognition is the price for admittance into the black diaspora, the contours for which are often outlined under a limited and limiting U.S. racial framework. Because Dominicans' articulation—and disarticulation—with this dominant sense of U.S. blackness is often performed, as in Luis Díaz's “lucha sonora [sonic struggle]”<sup>52</sup> and

<sup>51</sup> For more on Luis Díaz's place in Dominican music, specifically his relation to merengue, see Chapters 5 and 6 in Austerlitz.

<sup>52</sup> The phrase is quoted in Pacini Hernández 105.

Califé's carnival masquerade, rarely is it recognized as inhabiting the political and aesthetic sphere that Afrocentric models of black cultural politics inhabit.

The first verse of the song sets up the tensions inherent to Dominican carnival masking and its meaning for poor Dominicans: "Vendedor de tradiciones / jugador de profesión / que da vida a las caretas / se esconde detrás del ron" (3).<sup>53</sup> Even though the third line of the stanza ascribes creative power to Ramón Arepa, as it is he who gives life to the masks, the first two lines of the stanza pre-empt a wholly positive reading of that third line: he is a seller of traditions and a professional handler. In other words, his profession—carnival performer—is already masked in artifice, both through sleight of hand and through the economics that disrupt any attempt at reading the performance of traditions as recovering or displaying authentic, folkloric culture. Hence the despondent fourth line: of all the masks in the first three lines, the one that Ramón Arepa uses to hide himself is rum.

The first verse invites the audience to watch Ramón Arepa's movements in the carnival procession but also to understand the history behind those movements. In the second verse, the lyrics draw attention to the fact that Ramón Arepa is "vestido de Califé / ondeando su dignidad." Again, the image is fraught with tension. If Ramón Arepa can demonstrate his dignity, it is only through performance. He must wave it like a banner and only from under the mask of Califé. His dignity, in other words, emerges in and through his performance as Califé, not as Ramón Arepa. This performance signals one of the radical potentials of Califé: the ability of the lower class, often dark-skinned, to demonstrate its dignity through socially sanctioned masquerade and satirical critique. However, it also underscores the constraints under which lower classes can hope to speak their dignity back to the state, the upper classes, and the economically powerful.

<sup>53</sup> Because the rhyme of the song is lost in translation, I incorporate translation of the song into my analysis.



The final stanza completes the journey into Ramón Arepa's past, the life circumstances that inexorably end in his current profession: "Y se acuerda de Cevicos / de la arepa del Mercado / de su infancia demacrada / y su rostro hecho una máscara / que ríe y se desgarrá" (3-4). His past emerges through his own memory, as the song captures the poverty of his childhood. This poverty is marked in the song by food ("la arepa del mercado") and by naming his infancy emaciated. The final couplet is the most powerful, as in one line the face of his childhood morphs into the mask he dons as carnival performer. This mask both laughs and is rent, suggesting again the limits of thinking carnival as necessarily liberatory. By routing these limits through Califé, traditionally celebrated as possessing an unbridled freedom to register social critique against the highest levels of political and social power, the song suggests that even the most socially inverting aspects of carnival must be situated within a system bent on life-denying social and political practices. Califé's position, I would argue, is less about social inversion and more about recording the contradictions of an oppressive system, contradictions that both contain and produce the very critiques Califé offers. In opening with "La vida, la careta," Disla's play invokes those contradictions as a lyrical/musical reminder to consider Califé's social function within specific social constraints.

The entire one-act play is set in a Santo Domingo courtroom and features caricatures of a judge, district attorney, and defense attorney.<sup>54</sup> As the play's theme song fades, a purple ceiling light falls onto Ramón Arepa, who is dressed as Califé, "in coattails, black shoes and hat, his chin and both hands resting on his cane."<sup>55</sup> The purple lighting overlay emphasizes the somber mood represented in the stage direction indicating that Ramón Arepa should open the play sad, seated, with his head down. Although the stage directions announce that this is "the classic

<sup>54</sup> According to Reynaldo Disla, different productions the secondary characters have been represented through both puppets and live actors.

<sup>55</sup> "de frac, zapatos y sombreros negros, tiene su mentón y ambas manos apoyadas en su bastón"

Califé of our carnival,” the opening image is in no way the classic image of the standing, vocal, performing Califé (4). This initial image also closes the play, thus framing the trial. This frame, focused on Ramón Arepa’s and thus Califé’s immobility, underscores the tension in Califé’s powerful image as social and political poet-critic in motion, walking the streets of Santo Domingo. The tension in the play in terms of Califé’s mobility cautions against misreading him as an inherently subversive figure, a caution that reverberates across his critical function and across carnival’s social inversion writ broadly.<sup>56</sup>

Ramón Arepa’s initial comments reveal that part of his defense has to do with belonging to the Dominican nation. He wonders aloud to the judge why he has been mistreated:

I’m from here...I’m Dominican. [...] Yes, I’m from this nation. It’s just that sometimes people forget, but I’m from this land, and thinking about it seriously, all of this belongs to me [...] [I’m] from la Cueva de Cevicos [...] Because if someone is born in a place and breathes the air there, watching as the green sprig of the almond bush grows with him, is it right that one fine day things happen to him like they happened to me? Climbing the stairs to ask for work at one of who knows how many offices? (5)<sup>57</sup>

Ramón Arepa says he has been forgotten, and because he is addressing a state institution in the form of the court, it is clear he feels he has been forgotten by the state. Ramón Arepa is from Cevicos, a poorer municipality in what is called, often derisively, “the interior,” because it is not part of the capital, Santo Domingo, nor the second city, Santiago de los Caballeros, nor the

<sup>56</sup> For an important early caution against reading carnival as inherently subversive, see Stallybrass and White. See, too, James Scott, Chapter 6, in particular 172-82.

<sup>57</sup> “yo soy de aquí... yo soy dominicano. [...] Si, yo soy de este país. Es que a uno a veces se le olvida, pero uno es de esta tierra; y pensándolo bien todo esto le pertenece a uno [...] De la Cueva de Cevicos [...] porque si uno nace en un sitio y respira el aire de ese sitio, mirando el verde de la mata de almendra que ha ido creciendo con uno mismo, ¿es justo que un buen día le pase lo que me pasó a mí, subiendo las escaleras de una de las tantas oficinas donde he ido a solicitar empleo?” Page numbers refer to an unpublished typescript of the play. Thanks again to Reynaldo Disla for sharing a copy.

tourist destinations dotting the coast. Thus, Ramón Arepa has various reasons for feeling forgotten by the state: he is from a rural part of the nation, he is poor, and he is unemployed.

However, there is a much less obvious but no less compelling reason for being forgotten: he is black. Dark-skinned Dominicans have historically been left out of the dominant sense of national identity, at times because of their sometimes true, sometimes imputed foreign ancestry as *haitianos* or *cocolos* (black West Indian immigrants), and at other times simply because dark-skinned Dominicans are swallowed up in and thereby excluded from projections of the nation as mestizo, universally mulatto, and/or racially democratic.<sup>58</sup> While Dominican scholars who assert that the Dominican Republic is majority mulatto acknowledge the mixture of Spanish and African identities, even such a pronouncement can obscure the way skin shade follows class standing, prestige, and privilege: just as the more economically disadvantaged one is, the more likely one is forgotten, so it goes with the darker one's skin is.

In dressing as Califé, Ramón Arepa underscores his lower-class position, but not without implicitly underscoring the way his blackness maps onto that class position. In the play, the power of Ramón Arepa as Califé is the way a discourse of blackness is there even though on the one hand it is not legible to dominant conceptions of blackness in the U.S., and on the other it can only present itself in Dominican society through indirection. Nonetheless, the use of indirection signals an important element of how racial blackness operates, or can operate, in the Dominican Republic. Since Ramón Arepa's personal narrative includes his life under the *trujillato*, during which time explicit overtures to blackness simply could not surface, it is important to track these indirect methods of invoking blackness as a social practice that has continued to be both necessary and effective during the five decades after Trujillo's death.

<sup>58</sup> On *mestizaje*, see Veloz Maggiolo; on mulatto identity, see Pérez Cabral; and on racial democracy, see Bosch 118.

Two particularly effective uses of indirection in the play employ irony as a way to satirize both white supremacy and anti-black racism in Dominican society. Throughout the play, Ramón Arepa defends his love for Germans as arising from his relationship with one Señor Ranzau, a German immigrant who during “la era de Trujillo” gave Ramón Arepa a job working in his yard, and then promoted him quickly. In Ramón Arepa’s narrative, “what happened was that Señor Ranzau become fond of me” to such an extent that he was treated like family and became “[Ranzau’s] right-hand man” (10).<sup>59</sup> Ranzau’s magnanimity toward Ramón Arepa reached its pinnacle when, after being imprisoned in Trujillo’s infamous prison, *La Cuarenta*, Ramón Arepa was freed because of Ranzau’s intercession on his behalf. Ramón Arepa’s belief in Ranzau’s inherent goodness, however, is immediately rendered suspect by his own narrative about how Ranzau was able to extract him from *La Cuarenta*. He points out that Ranzau went directly to Johnny Abbes, the notorious chief of Trujillo’s Servicio de Inteligencia Militar (SIM), and had Ramón Arepa released. What Ramón Arepa does not acknowledge is Ranzau’s power within the Trujillo regime, manifest in the ability not only to secure an audience with Abbes but to influence him, a fact that speaks volumes about his politics and connections.

Nevertheless, Ramón Arepa says his love for Ranzau, and thus for Germans, stems not from obsession but from gratitude. Ramón Arepa invokes his relationship with Ranzau as an answer for his “acute Germanophilia,” defined by his psychiatrist—whom he quotes—as “an exaggerated love for Germans” (21).<sup>60</sup> However, as Ranzau’s implicit connections within Trujillo’s brutal police apparatus make clear, it is difficult to disentangle his ability to give Ramón Arepa a job from his ability to navigate so easily within Trujillo’s regime. In other words, there is the not too subtle suggestion that Ranzau’s ability to free Ramón Arepa means

<sup>59</sup> “lo que pasó fue que el señor Ranzau se encariñó conmigo”; “hombre de confianza”

<sup>60</sup> “*germanofilia aguda*”; “un amor exagerado por los alemanes”

that he supports or has the support of the very police force that imprisoned and tortured Ramón Arepa in the first place. The Dominican audience would undoubtedly see the irony of Ramón Arepa's love for such a well-connected German in Trujillo's Dominican Republic.

This same Dominican audience would also register the charge of "Hispanophilia" that "Germanophilia" indirectly evokes. Dominican society has been universally criticized for being excessively Hispanophilic and Hispanocentric, at the expense of African origins, blackness, and Haitians. In fact, only one year before *Ramón Arepa's* premiere in 1985, former (and future) president Joaquín Balaguer, part of the team of ideological architects sustaining Trujillo's regime, published his infamous *La isla al revés: Haití y el destino dominicano (The Backwards Island: Haiti and Dominican Destiny)*, a devastatingly racist polemic against all things black, African, and Haitian and in favor of all things white, European, and Spanish. Ramón Arepa's "Germanophilia" is only one white European nation removed from the Hispanophilic racism of Dominican élites like Balaguer. Ramón Arepa himself unwittingly acknowledges this when he throws the Germanophilia diagnosis back at the psychiatrist: "But it would be good to know what the psychiatrist suffers from! [...] Maybe he suffers from 'acute Hispanophilia,' from an exaggerated love for the Spanish" (31).<sup>61</sup> It is important in this regard to note that both Spain and Germany were sources for Dominican political élites' attempts to whiten the nation, the former in early nineteenth century preference for Canary Island immigration, the latter in Trujillo's encouragement of German immigration in the middle of the twentieth century.

Relying on a similarly ironic indirection, the play gives voice to the contradictions of Dominican protestations against racism, again through the voice of Ramón Arepa-as-Califé. In addition to upholding Germans as the epitome of intelligence, goodness, even elegance, Ramón

<sup>61</sup> "Pero sería bueno saber de qué sufre el siquiatra! [...] A lo mejor sufre de 'hispanofilia aguda', de un amor exagerado por los españoles."

Arepa disparages Chinese people in the Dominican Republic. At first, he begins by comparing German beauty with Chinese beauty: “As far as I can remember, never have I seen an ugly German; they’re not like the Chinese.”<sup>62</sup> Responding to the outrage this comment raises, he quickly adds, “I didn’t say the Chinese are ugly...just that they’re not like the Germans...and they have eyes like this...(*Extends the corners of his eyes.*) A flat nose... (*Presses his nose.*) And the hunched walking, not upright like Germans” (14).<sup>63</sup> The physical racism here is doubly significant, as racist descriptions of both ethnic Chinese and black Africans overlap in the latter two descriptors. Furthermore, the description that Chinese walk bent or hunched over evokes the dehumanizing racism connecting blacks to pre-human, ape-like species.

Ramón Arepa is narrating an instance in which he was confused by a young boy as being Chinese, a confusion that led him to his first prison time for assaulting the boy. However, the play again employs ironic humor to bridge the distance between, in this case, anti-Chinese racism and anti-Black racism. In response to an implied taunt by the prosecutor that he is in fact Chinese, Ramón Arepa retorts, “What did you say? You are more Chinese than I... District Attorney... The people from the capital and surrounding areas, I’m referring to Bonao, are Chinese behind the ear” (15).<sup>64</sup> The last phrase, “chino detrás de la oreja,” is a clever riff on the well-known Dominican saying that satirizes the denial of black or African ancestry, “black behind the ear [*negro detrás de la oreja*].”<sup>65</sup> To distance himself from accusations of being Chinese, he dismisses any similarity to Chinese physiognomy as mere coincidence, leaving open a connection to African ancestry. Then, to cement the link between this anti-Chinese racism and

<sup>62</sup> “Que yo recuerde nunca he visto un alemán feo, no son como los chinos.”

<sup>63</sup> “Yo no he dicho que los chinos sean feos...simplemente que no son como los alemanes...y tienen ojos así... (*Se prolonga la comisura de los ojos.*) La nariz chata... (*Se presiona la nariz.*) Y el andar tirado, no recto como el de los alemanes...”

<sup>64</sup> “¿Qué dijo? Usted es más chino que yo... Fiscal... La gente de la capital y zonas aledañas, me refiero a Bonao, tienen un chino detrás de la oreja”

<sup>65</sup> For a discussion of the origins of the phrase, see Candelario.

the merging of anti-Haitian and anti-black racism, he answers the unspoken charge of racism: “No, no racism; just so you know, I have Haitian friends” (15).<sup>66</sup> The humorous slip here is that in defending against his anti-Chinese racism, Ramón Arepa’s only recourse is to cite Haitian friends. This humorous moment suggests that racism in the Dominican Republic can only be read as anti-black or (and) anti-Haitian. This is because of a pervasive anti-black racism internal to the Dominican Republic but also because external observers of the Dominican Republic can only see racial strife there bichromatically. Anti-Chinese racism cannot even register as racism, even if Ramón Arepa’s comments subtly link the discourse of Chinese inferiority with that of both Haitian and black inferiority.

So what does it mean that the man dressed as Califé, Dominican carnival’s preeminent social critic, harbors a Eurocentric/Europhilic attitude not too far removed from the Hispanophilia of which the Dominican Republic’s elite can justifiably be accused? It suggests that neither Califé nor Dominican carnival is automatically subversive of the white supremacy that predominates in Dominican society. And what does it mean that this same Califé can harbor an anti-Chinese racism only slightly removed from an anti-black racism? It means that racism does not simply manifest as obviously and explicitly anti-black discourse, nor even that blackness is the fundamental category of racism. Of course, this does not mean that anti-black racism disappears in anti-Chinese racism, as evidenced by the way Ramón Arepa’s comments blur the distinctions between these two categories of racism. In fact, the critique in the play is that a program exclusively targeting anti-black and anti-Haitian racism, while assuredly an important and progressive measure, might have the unintended consequence of obscuring xenophobic racism against those Dominicans without black African ancestry, Dominicans who are also read as perpetually foreign: “No, no racism [...] I have Haitian friends.”

<sup>66</sup> “No ningún racismo, para que lo sepa yo tengo amigos haitianos”

I've devoted substantial time to Ramón Arepa's racism not to paint him as an inherently racist figure but to account for contradictions that attend any performance as Califé, one of the most socially critical of Dominican popular practices/figures. This accounting is important to remember as I shift into the way the play stages the subversive potential that Califé also represents.

The play presents Califé's potential for racial subversion through indirection, in the same way that it poses the limits of that potential. The alternative, indirect invocations of blackness and Africanness emerge through the carnivalization of the courtroom. As with other popular cultural and religious forms such as music, religion, and dance, Dominican carnival registers, if unevenly, African-derived cultural practices that predominate across the nation but specifically emerge from the black and mulatto populations. I have already noted the opening theme song, linking the politics of the play with social projects of the 1970s aimed at registering the important political and cultural functions of Dominican popular music—and specifically African-derived music—to the formation of Dominican national identities. In addition to music, the play features a courtroom audience that is exclusively composed of Dominican carnival characters: *Se me muere Rebeca*, *la Muerte en Yipe*, *los Diablos Cojuelos*, *los Africanos o Tiznaos*, *los Indios y Marimantas*. Their inclusion in the play cements the way street performance has invaded the courtroom, rendering the courtroom as state institution a place of play, subversion, and masquerade as much as the carnival processions outside.

The carnival characters comprising the courtroom audience participate actively in the court proceedings, rallying behind Ramón Arepa. It is clear they see in his double defense of himself and of Califé a defense of themselves as carnival characters. Crucially, their participation does not register primarily through verbal means but through both silent and noisy performance



involving all parts of the body: staring, gesturing, throwing objects, shouting, clapping, stomping, drumming. However, these bodies are not black or African in any essential sense. As carnival characters they perform the way Dominicans and other New World blacks engage with Africa from a distance, an Africa that is neither more nor less than a construct based on reimagined, re-created links with the continent on the other side of the Middle Passage. Far from diminishing the importance of these creative links, the performed link with Africa these Dominican carnival characters evoke is of a piece with Caribbean writers like Aimé Césaire, Edouard Glissant, Kamau Brathwaite, and Antonio Benítez-Rojo who refuse to see Africa as a continental essence and homeland, focusing instead on the energies African-descended blacks in the New World deploy to create new cultural formations in the Caribbean. In other words, in the hands of the Disla brothers, Dominican carnival functions as a generative popular practice for creating specifically Dominican black Afro-diasporic identities, challenging a normative sense of the African diaspora as singular, or even of *afrodominicanidad* as itself singular and coherent. Carnival performance and masquerade disrupt this coherence in favor of performed creations and re-creations, the ontologies of which productively resist any singular genesis story.<sup>67</sup>

Although performances of Afro- and black Dominicanness render ontogenetic coherence suspect, the play nonetheless relies on a strategic political coherence to black cultural forms that perform links with Africa. The play is the trial of Ramón Arepa for killing a white man, a not-too-subtle indictment of dominant racial fears that the nation's *hispanidad* is always in danger of dissipating, or, in other words, the persistent fear that the nation is in danger of becoming less white and more black. Historically, these fears of encroaching or increasing blackness have been addressed politically through violence, for example, in the 1937 massacre of Haitians at the

<sup>67</sup> For what continues to be one of the most powerful reflections on the dialogue between unity/essence and difference/play in conceptions of black diaspora, see Stuart Hall's "Cultural Identity and Diaspora."

Dominican-Haitian border, and through encouraging immigration from European countries, linking this Dominican state practice with similar immigration policies throughout the Americas.

The play's indictment of these elite racial fears, and their corresponding permeation throughout the Dominican Republic, underscores how Dominican popular sentiment and the sentiment of political elites can be anti-U.S. imperialism without necessarily extending to U.S. racism, allowing for a denunciation of the U.S. as imperial force in the Americas while welcoming the whitening influence of German immigration. So while Ramón Arepa believes his killing of the white man is self-defense against U.S. gringos' touristic and imperialist condescension, he actually kills the German he supposedly loves and welcomes. But white privilege is embodied by both the gringo tourist from the U.S. and the sympathetic German capitalist. So when the victim's identity is unmasked as the son in the family he loves, Ramón Arepa is confused. However, what the play registers above this confusion is the way white privilege does not leave simply by removing the U.S. This helps to explain a central paradox in Dominican progressive politics: how a vehemently anti-imperialist agenda can nonetheless embrace or at least tacitly accept white privilege.<sup>68</sup> Thus, the play suggests that Dominican cultural forms that attack white privilege cannot direct their attack exclusively against U.S. imperialism and its specific forms of racism. These attacks always already target European white privilege, even if European white privilege—Germany in the play, Spain in Dominican elitist history—is more “benevolent” than the U.S. variety. Ramón Arepa's melancholy at the close of the play is the realization that carnival subversion and Califé's social critique cannot indict U.S. racist imperialism without addressing global white supremacy.

<sup>68</sup> For one instance of this, see Nestor Rodríguez's account of Manuel Arturo Peña Batlle's “ideological trajectory” from anti-U.S. imperialist/radical nationalist during the first U.S. occupation to socialist to Trujillista ideologue, 479.

This melancholy, however, is not counterproductive. It is important to recall that Ramón Arepa is on trial for killing a German man, and, by extension, all forms of white privilege in the Dominican Republic. Ramón Arepa's trial, then, is the trial of carnival's ability to upend white supremacist social norms. Carnival, like religion, music, and other African-derived Dominican social practices, is a potential antidote to anti-black racism in the Dominican Republic. Ramón Arepa's melancholy is not a realization that carnival cannot disrupt white supremacy in the Dominican Republic, but a realization that his social critique as Califé implies a wider target—beyond American imperialism to include all white supremacy—than he has imagined. The limits of his social criticism are determined by his “Germanophilia,” and Califé's and Dominican carnival's potential for social change must surpass those limits. The implication is that both Califé and Dominican carnival, like other black creative cultural forms, *can* take a political and cultural stance against racism in the Dominican Republic. In other words, the seeds of racial progress are contained within the Dominican nation; a transnational approach that imports black cultural politics into the Dominican Republic would do well to respect that fact. Or, as Ramón Arepa asserts, “¡A Califé, no me le falte el respeto!”

On my reading, the respect Ramón Arepa demands for Califé is not simply the obverse of the disrespect registered by the white tourist gringo. Califé also demands respect as a character native to the Dominican Republic whose social criticism can function as a method for transforming Dominican racial relations from within. If Ramón Arepa-as-Califé is on trial for killing the dominant ideology structuring Dominican racial identity, an ideology that privileges whiteness and *hispanidad* over blackness and *africanidad*, the play affirms that an oppositional strategy against that dominant ideology can also emerge from Dominican culture. This potential for racial restructuring from within is attentive to the contradictions of Dominican race relations,

contradictions that cannot adequately be addressed by relying exclusively on external racial projects, such as those from the U.S.

When the play opens with Ramón Arepa asserting his Dominicaness, the implication is that he is somehow outside the nation. In other words, the court is putting on trial the putatively external forces contained in carnival. Since Dominican carnival as a cultural form is marked as black through its links with Africa and African diasporic practices across the Caribbean, including Haiti, the charge of foreignness to Ramón Arepa, Califé, and the “African” parts of carnival implied in the court proceedings is a charge that equates blackness with foreignness. But the categorically Dominican Califé, with the support of his fellow carnival characters, refutes this charge, assert his *dominicanidad*, and thus reinserts blackness and Africanness as crucial components of Dominican identities and social life. Even though Ramón Arepa’s hometown, Cevicos, might be disparaged as being in “the interior,” away from cultural, political, and economic centers, it is literally the geographic center of the nation, suggesting that Ramón Arepa as Califé emerges from the heart of the country, not from its margins, even less so from outside. The play revalorizes “the interior” via Califé’s carnival performance, and through a cartographic reimagining that puts Califé and black cultural forms at the literal center of the nation.

Unfortunately, as Ramón Arepa laments toward the end of the play, “chances are many of my childhood friends are unaware [desconozcan] of the existence of Califé” (28).<sup>69</sup> *Desconocer* is inadequately translated in English as “to be ignorant or unaware about,” a translation that misses the etymological connection with *reconocer*, the Spanish word for recognize. Thus, Ramón Arepa’s lament is tied up with a politics of recognition. This politics of recognition, however, is rooted in Califé’s performance, with a pedagogic edge: Ramón Arepa implicitly makes a case for introducing Califé’s social practice and critique throughout the nation. Ramón

<sup>69</sup> “lo más probable es muchos de mis amigos de infancia desconozcan la existencia de Califé.”

Arepa argues for recognizing the social, even sacred, importance of Califé, a recognition that entails accepting black cultural contributions as central to Dominican identities. It is also an argument, however, against misrecognizing Califé as simply racist blackface caricature: “¡A Califé no me le falte el respeto!”

In fact, what Ramón Arepa gestures toward is a methodology of Califé, a methodology that I’m arguing is less recognizable because its anti-racism is dissembling, emerging as ridicule and satire, and because its elevation of black culture relies on the spatial and performative dimensions of carnival. Califé’s humor is necessarily indirect, evasive, and able to escape detection, much like the way mobile carnival *comparsas* initially provided a cover for Dominican street theater to criticize dominant political powers. The failure to see this as a part of black cultural politics, in a context of politically and socioeconomically stifling conditions, is precisely a failure of recognition. For this reason, Ramón Arepa emphasizes the cognitive act necessary not simply to understand but, more importantly, to respect Califé’s performance. Through Califé, the play relies on a specifically Dominican set of epistemologies and practices, which are crucial to understanding both the operation and function of race, racism, and anti-racist critique in the Dominican Republic. In other words, far from an invitation to import U.S.-specific knowledge sets to interpret Dominican racial realities, there is an invitation to respect Califé.

As I hope to have made clear, Antonio Thomem’s performance of racial unity with U.S. blacks and the Disla brothers’ carnivalesque plays should unquestionably register as part of “the diversity of black ‘takes’ on diaspora” (Edwards, “Uses” 60). In the case of Califé, what matters less is whether he represents the donning of a black African mask or the utilization of a creolized Dominican form. More crucial is the way Califé challenges U.S. scholars beholden to U.S.

regimes of blackness. Much like Thomem's injunction to the "American Negro Soldier" to listen, Califé makes specific demands of U.S. audiences to approach Dominican race relations with a dose of humility,<sup>70</sup> to hear and watch Dominican performances of race with a different set of eyes and ears. Otherwise, these audiences will fail to recognize—or, rather, will fail to misrecognize—the black cultural politics in Califé's irony, dissimulation, satire, and song.

The Dominicans involved in *Bloque* were much better trained in approaching the differences in global black cultural productions, what in Edwards's work becomes a focus on the fundamentally international character of black cultural politics. Reporting on a landmark conference at the Universidad Autónoma de Santo Domingo on the African presence in the Caribbean, an editorial in the 1973 issue of *Bloque* eventually turns to the U.S. It does so, however, not to privilege racial struggle there but to situate U.S. racial struggles within "the struggle waged for blacks in diverse latitudes of the planet." The Dominicans writing in *Bloque* prove that a truly transnational approach cannot ignore the contributions made by writers on the island who may or may not have migrated to the U.S. but are nonetheless fully versed not just in U.S. black struggles but international ones as well.

These Dominican-specific racial struggles continue to be unrecognized by U.S. studies of race and blackness. This tendency is one instance of what must have moved David Scott to enjoin diaspora scholars to consider "the varied ways in which the historical technologies of racial formation in the Americas *make up* black subjects and make them up in ways that render them *both* recognizable and unrecognizable to each other, both convergent *with* and divergent *from* each other" ("Preface" viii). In this chapter, I have not been arguing that Dominican black cultural politics simply should be recognized and subsequently accepted into "the" African diaspora. Instead, the very idea of a singular diaspora is framed by exclusions and inclusions

<sup>70</sup> This idea of humility comes from Torres-Saillant, "Blackness and Meaning" 188.

dependent not simply on mutual recognition and misrecognition. Additionally, because the geographies of black cultural politics are uneven in contemporary global political economy, recognition (as black) and misrecognition (as not) result in markedly uneven distributions of cultural, political, and economic capital.

While Deborah Thomas reads diaspora under the rubric of translation, her point resonates with mine: when we “privilege particular narratives” of diaspora, “this leads us to pay less attention not only to those aspects of particular diasporic formations that might not be readily translatable, but also to broader contexts and relations of power within which diasporic cultural and political formulations are created and re-created *in relation to one another* over time” (25-26). To my mind, this is one of the crucial lessons of Saidiya Hartman’s *Lose Your Mother*: it is critically irresponsible to imagine a transcendent, or even transatlantic, blackness or Africanness that is not contaminated by performances of black and African unity by Third World blacks seeking U.S. capital. To ignore this lesson is to absolve “global” black cultural politics of a responsibility to consider its imbrication in a global political economy that favors metropolitan centers and the black cultures and politics emanating from them.

More troubling still is the way a transcendent sense of blackness becomes imperial force. Speaking specifically about the dominant view of Dominican racial discourse, Torres-Saillant first weakly dubs this imperial force a “wish,” then, much more strongly, an “ethnocentric compulsion”:

Since the Dominican people's racial language defies the paradigms prevalent in countries like the United States, well-intentioned observers from such countries would *wish* this community adopted the racial vocabulary generated by the historical experiences of their societies. But, apart from safeguarding us all from

such *ethnocentric compulsions*, paying heed to the specificity of the Dominican case can incite reflection on the elusiveness of race as an analytical category both in the Dominican Republic and elsewhere. (“Tribulations” 1090, italics added)

Torres-Saillant’s call to consider the “elusiveness of race as an analytical category” echoes James’s worry that making race fundamental is an error more grave than ignoring it altogether. While James’s comment clearly intended to point to class as a more robust analytical category, what matters more for my argument is less the priority of class over race (or vice versa) than the way his comment forces scholars to consider race a relational analytical category, not a fundamental one. Contrary to foreclosing the theoretical rigor of race, such a relational consideration of race opens it up as an analytical category in two ways. First, following Torres-Saillant, it forces scholars to consider race as variously articulated—“elusive”—instead of grounded in one foundational—“fundamental”—iteration, such as a privileged U.S. experience. Second, denying race fundamental priority allows for relational considerations of gender, class, and sexuality. Race thus becomes shifting methodological terrain, ebbing and flowing from analytical priority depending on context. In the next chapter, I aim to show how this understanding facilitates a reading of Una Marson’s play *Pocomania* along both racial and gender axes.



## Chapter 4: “Teach his People the Value of Unity”: Black Diaspora, Women, and Una Marson’s *Pocomania*

The preceding chapters have argued that James’s critique of the “fundamentalization” of race opens up a more fluid analysis of race and blackness, an analysis attentive to the articulations between race and class and between different negotiations of race in New World African diasporas. This final chapter extends the critical purchase of James’s admonition—to neither ignore race nor to “fundamentalize” it—to the question of gender. As I argued in my earlier chapter on women in James’s stage version of *The Black Jacobins*, James did not envision women nor feminism as the critical beneficiaries of displacing race from fundamental analytical priority. Even if that revised play featured a powerfully militant mulatta, Marie-Jeanne, as a central character, there is no clear sense that James himself was invested in this figure. Thus, to read James’s ignore/fundamentalize dialectic as opening up a space for “the woman question” is to read it beyond James’s own thinking when he was revising the play in the 1960s.

One problem with analyzing race in the “fundamental” way James outlines is that feminist literary production that is not recognizable to male-centered regimes of blackness can become left out of genealogies of black thought. Such appears to be the case of the early twentieth century Jamaican poet, playwright, radio programmer, and activist Una Marson, who, like C. L. R. James, “altered London theatre history by bringing, for the first time, all-black casts to the stage in serious drama” and “directly confronted the double bind of colonial imitation” (Emery 101).<sup>1</sup> In Marson’s case, argues Anna Snaith, her “neglect” is due to “the connection she makes between gender and racial politics.” Snaith goes so far as to label this neglect as an “almost total erasure from literary and general histories of the period,” an erasure that “belies her

<sup>1</sup> Emery’s work puts James and Marson in more direct comparison than I am offering here, tracing the importance of the visual in their interwar literary works and the influence of James’s *Toussaint Louverture* on *Pocomania*.

important role in several literary circles and political movements and ignores her complex writing about the experience of being black and female in London” (“Little Brown Girl” 95). Marson and her work have been obscured by the canonical Caribbean male writers who followed her and for whom she helped create a platform through the BBC’s *Caribbean Voices*, such as George Lamming, Sam Selvon, V.S. Naipaul, Victor Reid, and Derek Walcott, in the mid-century boom of anti-colonial and post-colonial Anglophone Caribbean writers.<sup>2</sup> Alison Donnell has been particularly critical of the “origin” stories of West Indian literature that begin with these writers, to the neglect of Marson, “a black Jamaican woman whose experiences and achievements provided a link to all these major movements and figures” (“Una Marson: Feminism” 114). Denise deCaires Narain is even more direct: if Selvon’s 1956 novel *The Lonely Londoners* is “a text which is read as providing early examples of diasporic figures,” Marson’s work “provides a useful reminder that some of these migrants were *women*” (21).

However, her literary works have also been obscured by the more pronouncedly black- and Afro-centric poetics and politics of Caribbean, African American, and Black British women writers in the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>3</sup> In a political biography of the Trinidadian black Communist Claudia Jones, who has been erased in ways analogous to Marson, Carole Boyce Davies is particularly critical of the way U.S. black feminist thought has been marked by “the absence of a geopolitical approach to black identity.” In other words, Boyce Davies argues, such black feminism “stays within U.S. borders” (11). Donnell has compellingly argued that in the wake of Paul Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic*, “the demands of black diasporic criticism have shaped feminist scholarship on Caribbean women’s writing and draw attention to what has been eclipsed as a result of this dominant methodology and its concentration on contemporary, diasporic, African

<sup>2</sup> See Rosenberg, *Nationalism* 159-60.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Jarrett-Macauley, “Exemplary” 51-54. For an alternative reading that argues for the crucial place of early Jamaican feminists, see Rosenberg, “The New Woman.”

Caribbean women” (*Twentieth-century* 130). Donnell’s point is that Gilroy’s paradigm is unduly influential in two ways. On the one hand, much like the “emergence” of West Indian literature noted above, the constitution in the 1990s of a canon of Caribbean women writers traces its origins to the 1970s, with writers like Merle Hodge, Erna Brodber, Lorna Goodison, and others who fit the Black Atlantic or postcolonial feminist mold (131). On the other hand, earlier writers like Marson gain admission into this canon through conscription, either into a Black Atlantic or a postcolonial feminist framework (151). Meant to disparage neither women writers since the 1970s nor the critical approaches that coincide with their emergence into critical view in the 1990s, such an argument foregrounds the conditions under which certain texts are embraced in a post-colonial, post-national now, and others left behind in a colonial, pre-diasporic and nationalist, pre-third wave feminist past.

Considering her argument against forcing Marson into Black Atlantic or postcolonial feminist theorizing, perhaps it is not strange that Donnell would elsewhere be averse to arguing that “Marson initiated a tradition of black British feminist thought.” This is even after Donnell recognizes Marson’s efforts to bring “the politics of colonial rule and the operations of racism” to bear on contemporary debates around feminism and inequality in London (“Una Marson: Feminism” 127-28). Donnell may be excessively cautious, however, because her own language suggests a compelling argument for considering Marson, as Honor Ford-Smith puts it—well in advance of Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic*—a “Jamaican Black nationalist and feminist writer” (21). Even if Marson’s work is fraught with contradictions in both its feminism and its anti-racism, this does not mean that one cannot continue to place her at the beginnings of black British

feminism.<sup>4</sup> It does mean that the contours of both black diasporic thought and black feminist thought must be reshaped around Marson's work, rather than her work being tailored for a Black Atlantic or postcolonial feminist fitting.

Thus, taking a cue from deCaires Narain, I argue there is something apart from "the undeniable *archival* importance of retrieving" Marson from literary-historical obscurity: her work speaks not only to current conceptualizations of black diaspora but forces such conceptualizations to consider the place of black women within them (4).<sup>5</sup> Emerging from an engagement with Marson's 1938 play *Pocomania*, I contend that Marson opens up an opportunity to argue for a broader conceptualization of what can be constituted as black cultural politics proper. The play necessarily dissatisfies twenty-first century readers seeking an Afrocentric embrace of diaspora culture as an effective counter to anti-African and anti-black racism. *Pocomania* contrasts Jamaican yard life, specifically the religious revivalism of the Afro-creolized Pocomania<sup>6</sup> tradition, with Jamaican middle class life and its emphasis on proper Christian behavior, belief, and practice. While the play connects Pocomania with African traditions, its focus is not in authenticating the Africanness of Jamaican culture. Instead, it underscores the intraracial struggles between African-descended Jamaicans, struggles marked not only by religion but also by linguistic, educational, and class-based hierarchies. In the play, definitions of blackness and Africanness are sites of struggle between Jamaicans of African descent, rather than Afro-descent operating as a fundamental, biogenetic force for cross-class unity.

<sup>4</sup> For a discussion of the contradictions across black women's writings in interwar Jamaica, see Altink. See, too, Barnes's "Reluctant Matriarch" for an account of Sylvia Wynter's ideological contradictions, an account that has some applicability to Marson.

<sup>5</sup> For an argument similar to deCaires Narain's, see Emery, Chapter 3.

<sup>6</sup> In this chapter, I spell the religion as Pocomania, even though it is a corrupted spelling of Pukkumina, because it is how Marson spelled it in the play. For discussions of the various spellings, see Cooper, "Something" 85n3; Jarrett-Macauley, *The Life* 130; and Rosenberg, *Nationalism* 165.

What is more, Marson depicts these struggles as playing out over middle and lower class women's power. Thus, her play stages the sort of analytical flexibility I am arguing is at the center of James warning about "fundamentalizing" race: Marson, her biographer argues, "brought issues of gender into male-dominated nationalist politics, racialised white mainstream feminist thinking, and creolised conservative Jamaican theatre" (Jarrett-Macauley, *The Life* viii). In other words, Marson's work is relational, drawing race, gender, or class to the forefront as historical and aesthetic conditions demanded, but without allowing the other modalities to disappear from view. *Pocomania* represents a powerful example of precisely this relational attention to race, gender, and class.

#### Pan-Africanism and the Value of Racial Unity

*Pocomania*, a three-act play, was first staged in Kingston, Jamaica in January 1938.<sup>7</sup> Marson had returned to Jamaica a little over one year before, after four years in England. While in London in the mid-1930s she was deeply committed to political and cultural activism on behalf of Africa, like James and other West Indians and Africans in London at the time. Serving as a representative of League of Coloured Peoples, Marson developed a close relationship with Nana Sir Ofori Atta I, who had traveled to London in 1934 to argue for political changes that would benefit the people of the Gold Coast. Later, in the context of Italy's 1936 invasion of Abyssinia that prompted James to stage his play on the Haitian Revolution, she met Emperor Haile Selassie of Abyssinia, serving as his close personal assistant when he traveled to the League of Nations in Geneva as a final effort to plead for international support against Italian aggression.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> For a brief treatment of the play's reception at the time, see Rosenberg, *Nationalism* 160.

<sup>8</sup> For more on her relationships with both African leaders, see Jarrett-Macauley, *The Life*, Chapters 7 and 10.

Marson's sustained interactions with these two prominent African leaders resulted in a burst of interest in African letters, politics, and causes, prompting her biographer Jarrett-Macauley to argue that Marson experienced "a change in political consciousness." Through her dealings with Ofori Atta, Jarrett-Macauley writes, Marson "came to the realisation that Africa mattered: that its cultures, people and wisdoms equalled those of Europe and that, without persistent attention of African people, its history would be lost, neglected and denied" (*The Life* 73). The language Jarrett-Macauley uses to describe Marson's changed outlook following her encounter with Selassie three years later is strikingly similar: "Una's early belief system had taken a bashing. She had undergone an enormous transformation: now she distrusted 'Europe' and looked to 'Africa', and to a greater degree she looked to herself" (*The Life* 104).

The difficulty with Jarrett-Macauley's reading is not simply the time lapse between what appear to be suspiciously similar large-scale personal transformations. Another problem emerges in an intervening chapter between these two biographical moments, in which chapter Jarrett-Macauley discusses Marson's "bizarre public dispute with Paul Robeson" in 1935 (*The Life* 92). Responding to Robeson's article, "I Want Negro Culture," Marson stridently asserts, "A negro myself, I say without the least hesitation that negroes have a long way to go before they can take a place of equality, as a race, among other races of mankind. [...] The cry for negro culture is putting the cart before the horse and the first task of the negro who has achieved is to teach his people the value of unity" (qtd. in Jarrett-Macauley, *The Life* 93). Jarrett-Macauley runs through a series of explanations for Marson's comments: a sort of pained jealousy at Robeson's prestige over her own, the "great speed" (probably) with which she dispatched the letter, an opposition to Robeson's communism (*The Life* 93-94). While speculation may necessitate both the variety and

number of reasons, they nonetheless are a bit dizzying in a way that suggests a strained attempt to reconcile Marson's sentiment.

Donnell's recent comments on Marson's work, even if in a different context, seem appropriate here: "Reading Marson troubles us and it is precisely on account of this that we should value her" ("Fractured" 347). Far from valuing the troubling parts of Marson's writings, Jarrett-Macauley implies in the communism explanation that Marson's comments were irrational. She writes, "Una had recently written a passionate plea for racial unity in *The Keys* [the literary organ of the League of Colored Peoples], but running deeper than this *rational concern* was her opposition to communism" (*The Life* 94, emphasis added).<sup>9</sup> In Jarrett-Macauley's formulation, "racial unity" is a "rational concern," and, by implication, what is irrational is the charge of racial disunity Marson leveled at blacks (and that she herself displayed?) in her heavy-handed—and patently problematic, from a progressive standpoint—criticism of Robeson. To be sure, the implication of Marson's comment is that she was invested in racial unity, but one that had to be forged from above by an educated black elite to the uninformed and disunited black masses: "There is nothing the negro needs more than sound, wise leadership by men and women able and willing to sacrifice for the good of their own people" (qtd. in Jarrett-Macauley, *The Life* 93). But there is another equally important implication, pace Jarrett-Macauley's reading, one that Marson herself did not appear to support. The disunity among blacks that Marson perceived—and believed needed to be corrected—offers insight not simply into the multiplicity of "black takes on diaspora," but also into the different attitudes blacks across the world have taken and continue to take over the very question of the value of black or Afro-diasporic unity.

<sup>9</sup> In her introduction to *Una Marson: Selected Poems*, Donnell also foregrounds Marson's attention to "black unity" as an important development in her thought (24).

*Pocomania* offers a compelling account of precisely the sort of black disunity—not global, but within the national frame of Jamaica—that Marson felt black elites should work to dispel, but that the play stages with much more complexity. Deborah Thomas has observed a “tendency to privilege similarity, or unity, among African diasporic populations rather than difference, disunity, and asymmetry” (25). The disunity in Marson’s play runs against this tendency in black diasporic thought, signaling both the difficulty of situating Marson within a black diasporic framework invested in racial unity, and the importance of attending to the diverse ways diaspora might actually work. Donnell has recently made an analogous and quite compelling case for reading Marson as one of a number of “fractured subjects of modernity” who wrote “across the Black Atlantic” in the early twentieth century. For Donnell, “the fractures and fractions of [Marson’s] work indicate a continuously turbulent relationship to literary tradition and the promise of modernity” (“Fractured” 348).<sup>10</sup> However, while Donnell argues that there is a critical significance in retaining a sense of Marson’s complete oeuvre as “strain[ing] visibly against the ideas of both nationalism and feminism that she also advocates,” she is not equally invested in investigating the way Marson’s work might also strain against dominant conceptualizations of black diaspora organized around racial unity (“Fractured” 350). Incorporating Marson’s work, in particular *Pocomania*, into black diasporic thought forces a reconsideration of what constitutes black cultural politics.

My approach to Marson’s *Pocomania* diverges from Jarrett-Macauley’s and Donnell’s investment in stressing the importance of “the Pan-African dimension of her thinking” or “the potentially unifying connection to Africa” she developed because of her time in London in the 1930s and 1940s (“Una Marson: Feminism” 126). As her interactions with African and West

<sup>10</sup> For a similar argument but focused specifically on Marson’s poetry, see Donnell’s introduction to *Una Marson: Selected Poems*. See, too, Chapter 1 of deCaires Narain.



Indian intellectuals, writers, and political figures make clear, there is no question that Marson developed her thinking on Africa during this crucial period. However, rather than finding a “unifying connection to Africa” in the play and then explaining this discovery by situating the play in terms of her experiences in London, I read the play as Marson’s attempt to bring Jamaican social life and Pan-African thought into conversation. As Snaith has pointed out, even if Marson developed in London an interest “in a different kind of relationship with Africa,” this interest did not prevent her from being “aware of the problems in a simple and essentialist identification with African and the black ‘race’” (100). Far from asserting a unifying connection with Africa or even Pan-African solidarity, the play is rooted in the Jamaican struggles over the place of African-derived religious and cultural practices, struggles that reveal class, gender, and intraracial stratifications structuring Jamaican society in the 1930s and that continue to remain relevant today.<sup>11</sup>

#### Pocomania, Christianity, and the Sounds of Intraracial Strife

*Pocomania* features as its central protagonist Stella Manners, a modern girl whose attitude toward marriage, country life, and religion are at odds with her more “properly” Christian sister and her patriarchal Church deacon father. Citing Ivy Baxter, Erika Smilowitz writes that the play “represented a turning point in what was acceptable on stage,” because, Baxter states, “it talked about a cult from the country” (qtd. in Smilowitz, “Una Marson” 65).<sup>12</sup> Through Stella and her interactions with Sister Kate’s community of Pocomania congregants, the play presents a stark contrast between religious life in the Jamaican yard and religious life among

<sup>11</sup> Because Revival traditions continue to be a force in the twenty-first century, as Jean Besson has shown, Marson’s play also has a contemporary, religious relevance for exploring the relationships between Myalism, Revival, Rastafarianism, and Christianity in Jamaica.

<sup>12</sup> For more on Ivy Baxter’s and Rex Nettleford’s respective use of *Pocomania* ritual in their dance companies, see Sörgel 75-81, 115-32.

the Jamaican middle class. While Marson's depiction is far from an embrace of Pocomania as grounds for Jamaican oppositional culture, it is nonetheless important for registering women's struggles within male-dominated religious traditions and for revealing the powerful roles women assumed within alternative religious communities. The play represents a compelling example of what Ford-Smith calls Marson's pioneering work: "the organization of women through the use of cultural form—seeing this as most important to the success of work with women. It was as if the political edge of her awareness of her double exploitation as a black woman could only find full expression here" (28). Rhonda Cobham similarly calls Marson "a pioneer for her time in the search for an authentic literary style: a style that could reflect and utilise the heritage of those half-forgotten voices, skills, and gestures" (Introduction 7). This focus on Marson's cultural and aesthetic work is important because it illustrates the wide scope of Marson's black feminism, much broader than simply a "focus on the economic conditions of lower-class women" (Altink).<sup>13</sup> While *Pocomania* is not divorced from the material oppression facing lower-class blacks and women in particular, her play does not revolve around economics.

The "uses" of Africa in the play are the opportunities that Pocomania affords Stella to explore freedom, movement, and emotion as a woman in ways that her Christian upbringing discourages. In other words, African-derived religious practices are not affirmations of black cultural practice—or are not exclusively about black affirmation—but are ways of utilizing black social life to think through questions of women's power and place in early-twentieth century Jamaica. Critical attention to the play cannot neglect, to invoke James, questions of race. However, while Marson's play asks its audience to think about broader struggles against anti-black racism, it also asks its audience to consider the particular plight of black women. What is more, even the play's focus on African-descended Jamaican women foregrounds key cultural

<sup>13</sup> In making this argument, Altink considers Marson's journalism but neither her poetry nor her play.

differences, even disunity, between middle and lower classes. This focus on intraracial cultural difference is neither merely an indictment of middle class life for eschewing African-derived cultural practice, nor a facile celebration of lower class lives as romantically Afrocentric and woman-empowering.<sup>14</sup> Instead, the play's central conflict revolves around brown and black women's complex performances vis-à-vis their class positions, gender, and race.

The play's alternating settings highlight a binary engagement with class, but this binary neither guarantees cross-class racial unity nor militates against such a possibility. In other words, race and class are loci for both articulations and disarticulations. Each act features two scenes, one set in Deacon Manners' drawing room and the other in Sister Kate's yard. Thus, the play invites its audience to see the relationship between religious figures—Deacon Manners as Baptist leader and Sister Kate as Revivalist leader—split as much by gender, class, and geographic lines as it is by theological and spiritual ones. As depicted in the play, the movement across these lines is fairly unidirectional. Deacon Manners, Parson Peter Craig, Stella Manners, and David Davies all move from Deacon Manners' drawing room, the middle-class symbol of respectability, into the yard space. The only exception to this middle-class border-crossing mobility is Stella's sister, Dawn, who accepts her place as homemaker and wife and eschews any connection with Pocomania, no doubt part of a general disdain for all the squalor associated with the spatial and social organization that corresponds to yard life.

By contrast, only one lower-class character in the play moves between Sister Kate's yard and the Manners' drawing room, Sarah, a servant in the Manners' home who participates in the Pocomania meetings and provides cover of access to these meetings for Stella. All the other

<sup>14</sup> Jarrett-Macauley asserts such a facile celebration in both her essay and her book-length biography. She states that Stella "forms her closest alliance with a 'woman of the people,' Sister Kate, whose strength comes from her slave, African, woman-centred culture ("Exemplary" 51). In the biography, she says Marson's play at "first appears to be a challenging exploration of structural opposition between African, progressive, and feminist values as against Christian, conservative, and non-feminist values" (*The Life* 132).

characters who inhabit the yard—Sister Kate, Sister Mart (Martha), and Brother Kendal—remain exclusively in Sister Kate’s yard. Thus, if the play is equally split between scenes in the yard and scenes in the drawing room, there is no corresponding equality in the ability to transgress the social and geographic boundaries that separate middle-class life and yard life. The message is clear: social mobility is only available for middle-class black and brown Jamaicans. Whatever upward mobility is possible for denizens of the yard, as with Sarah, is only connected with middle class needs for domestic labor.

As the only middle-class character who does not cross the boundary into yard life, Dawn Manners introduces a complexity to social mobility that is not reducible to a self-imposed restriction. In fact, her restricted movement stems from the expectations of her as a middle-class woman: she must be a respectable Christian daughter and wife. In the prologue to the play, Marson depicts quite vividly the way such expectations are inculcated at an early age. Stella, age six, wakes up Dawn, age eight, because she can hear the drums that have begun before the curtain rises on this nocturnal scene set in the young girls’ room. While Stella is entranced by the drums, Dawn is much more sensible: she checks Stella’s fascination by invoking their father’s efforts to remove the “noisy” Pocomania meetings to a more distant location. When Stella’s fascination persists to the point that she wishes to call in the two boys their father has adopted, David and John, Dawn counters that the boys should not visit the girls at night in their room. All of Dawn’s responses, from her “knowledge” about Pocomania dancing to her protestations about proper behavior, stem from what “Daddy says”: “*Daddy says* he is going to do everything he can to get those noisy people to go and hold their all-night meeting somewhere else...*Daddy says* it’s something awful...Well, that’s what *Daddy says* they do” (118, emphasis added). Dawn’s

reliance on the word of her father prefigures her future as a wife who similarly submits to her husband and to her god.

Stella, by contrast, focuses on what their father doesn't say: "O, my Daddy never tells us the meaning of things. He only says, God says so, or Jesus says so, or I say so" (119). Hers is a precocious ability to recognize the patriarchal norms that collapse fatherhood with godhood, in order to contain female knowledge and power. What is more, 6-year-old Stella's critique of patriarchy is preceded in the scene by her desire for knowledge from the mother she has never known: "I wish I had a Mummie. She could tell us about it [the Pocomania drumming]" (118). The prologue thus functions to root Dawn's later pursuit of respectable and compliant femininity in her girlhood, while simultaneously locating Stella's resistance to such childhood training in a desire for the Mother and Her knowledge. Thus, I concur with Ford-Smith that Stella, "the middle-class black woman unable to find nurturance in her cultural milieu, orphaned and alone turns to African ritual and the Motherwoman at its centre" (30). However, the distinction between these middle-class sisters challenges Ford-Smith's reading. Ford-Smith says nothing about Dawn, focusing instead on Stella to argue that "Marson strikes at the heart of the contradiction facing middle-class black women—the desire on the one hand to identify with African culture and the need on the other hand to conform to the reality of European middle-class social organization" (29). While this statement is certainly true for Stella, the same cannot be argued for her sister Dawn, also an African-descended middle-class woman.

It quickly becomes clear in the first act that Sister Kate, a black, marginalized, vernacular, lower-class woman who leads a Pocomania congregation, fulfills the role of the Mother figure. Sister Kate lives in the yard, at the peripheries of "respectable" Jamaican society, and forces the audience to consider Stella's yearning for the Mother as specifically a yearning for

a black Mother through whom “recuperation of identity is accomplished by reappropriating devalued folk wisdom—that body of subterranean knowledge that is often associated with the silenced language of women and the ‘primitiveness’ of orally transmitted knowledge” (Cooper, “Something” 65). However, to focus on Sister Kate’s blackness would be to essentialize race and blackness as stable cultural categories. Because Deacon Manners, the father in the scene, is also black, both his and Sister Kate’s blackness must be read in cultural, rather than biological, terms. Jean Besson has demonstrated that this intra-black religious schism dates back to the Great Revival of 1860 and its African turn in 1861: “two variants of Revival were distinguished, Revival-Zion (seen as nearer to Baptist Christianity and as opposing Obeah) and Pukumina (closer to the original Obeah-Myal complex and regarded as practising Obeah)” (29).<sup>15</sup> The play thus offers an internal fracture to black Jamaican culture. Far from unequivocally celebrating black culture—which is located both in Deacon Manners’ Baptist Christianity and in Sister Kate’s Pocomania—Marson focuses on the way multiple articulations of blackness compete with each other.

Louis Chude-Sokei has underscored the importance of avoiding a racial ideology in which “the specifics of one African experience [are] lost in the Atlantic for the sake of an ahistorical, transcendental ‘ness.’” But whereas his point draws attention to the “differential truths of black history” by citing the cultural differences between West Indian and U.S. blacks, what he dubs “the shock of seeing each other,” my point here draws a similar conclusion within a national frame instead of across a transnational encounter (“Post-nationalist” 83). In other words, if, as Carolyn Cooper has argued, “the ideological lines are firmly drawn” between “the upright piety of middle-class Baptist respectability versus the spontaneity of the Afro-centric religious practices of the peasantry” (“Something” 66), these are lines drawn between black Jamaican

<sup>15</sup> For more on these revivalist movements, see Chapter 3 of Moore and Johnson.

cultures that themselves express “differential truths.”<sup>16</sup> At this early stage of the play, it is clear that Sister Kate’s articulation of black culture, routed through African-derived religious practice while maintaining connections with creolized Christian traditions on the island, is privileged over Deacon Manners’s and Parson Peter Craig’s embrace of a more respectable, more European- and less African-influenced version of Christianity.

The play’s first scene challenges Cooper’s point that the “ideological lines are firmly drawn.” In it, Sister Kate maintains a foot in both religious traditions, even if she must do so through subterfuge. The drums in the prologue have moved from a distant, off stage beating to the action on the stage, becoming the central topic of the early part of the scene. Sister Kate is quite aware of how the drums function as synecdoche for the Pocomania tradition, their noise becoming the target for the Christian leaders’ censure. When Leader Kendal announces that the drummer is arriving to accompany their singing, Sister Kate remarks, “I tells you I don’t wants drums here in me yard. Next thing the parson hear de noise and come down. I is done tell him I don’t keep meeting in me yard” (30). Her banishment of the drums is no disavowal of African-derived drumming in Pocomania but a strategy of concealment to preserve her ability to hold the meetings outside of Parson Craig’s gaze, or, rather, outside of his hearing. In deference to Sister Kate’s instruction, Leader Kendal thus instructs the drummer to “bat dar drum as softly as [he] can,” to which she makes no objection (30).

This opening scene reveals how lower-class black Jamaicans have relied on multiple black performances to maintain cultural links with a distant Africa, a distance both physical and temporal that renders the continent inaccessible except through imaginative, creolized

<sup>16</sup> Diana Austin-Broos points out that even within Jamaica’s African-derived religious practices, there are important differences in what “Africa” signifies: “The Africa in Zion Revival and Kumina is different from the Africa in Rastafarianism. [...] the forms of possession common in Revival and the ancestral links that Kumina invokes are different from Rastafarianism’s modernist aim to reunite with Africa through political critique” (20).

performance.<sup>17</sup> Both Emery and Snaith similarly argue for the importance of utilizing the rubric of performance to analyze the Africanness in Marson's earlier play, *London Calling*, which she began to write in London following her time with Ofori Atta and later staged in Jamaica in 1937. *London Calling*, writes Snaith, "depicts a metropolitan West Indian identity caught, if not lost, between England and Africa" and features a middle-class female protagonist characterized by a "lack of connection to her African ancestry." The play, however, is not about this lack, but about the way the characters, West Indian students in London, must perform their Africanness for their English hosts, "a performance conforming to the metropolitan idea of blackness" (99). In focusing on the performative nature of the students' Africanness, Snaith concludes that the play stresses that "Return to Africa, a place the students have never seen, can only be achieved at this point through parodic performance and appropriation" (100). In *London Calling*, for the educated, middle-class West Indians in London, the central cultural forms through which Africa had come to signify are the black minstrelsy and African exhibitionism white British audiences knew and demanded (Snaith 100). But the play also "[draws] on traditions of masquerade and the turn-about associated with Caribbean carnival" and its "subversive mockery" (Emery 132).

That *London Calling* emerged directly out of Marson's experiences in London suggests that she was not invested exclusively in depicting for her Jamaican audience the African- and black-affirming politics of her pan-African associations there. Here I am reading against Snaith's argument that Marson's "pan-Africanism and her feminism [...] come together" in *Pocomania* (105). I am less compelled to see pan-Africanism as the operating logic of the play. In fact, as Emery notes, if *London Calling* staged the "affinities felt between Afro-Caribbean students and émigrés from Africa," it also "makes a clear distinction between Afro-Caribbean culture and that

<sup>17</sup> For a compelling reading of Garvey's Back to Africa movement and Black Star Shipping Line in terms of spectacle and performance, see Stephens, *Black Empire*, chapters 3 and 4.



of Africa” (133). Following closely on the heels of *London Calling*’s production, *Pocomania* reveals a desire to explore the conditions under which Jamaicans could explore their cultural Africanness. *London Calling* and *Pocomania* thus become theatrical sites for exploring how Pan-African thought and Jamaican culture both articulate and disarticulate.

Whereas *London Calling* features transnational, performance-based encounters between middle-class West Indians and Londoners, *Pocomania* shifts to much more local terrain, focusing on what Cooper calls “strategies of –oracy—praisesong, animal tale, religious ritual” to both perform and mask African-derived cultural practice (“Something” 84). When Sister Kate attempts to hide the drumming and thus the meetings, the play reveals the sort of performative link with Africa that *London Calling* demonstrates, now routed through yard culture. Distinct from *London Calling*’s interracial conflict between blacks and whites in London, *Pocomania* underscores the intraracial tensions between Jamaicans of African descent competing for control over black Jamaican culture. By quieting the drums and hiding evidence of the Pocomania meetings, Sister Kate is culturally savvy: as a poor black woman she must perform respectability to both established middle-class Jamaicans and Jamaicans aspiring to middle-class status, represented respectively by Parson Craig and Deacon Manners. In performing respectability, she attempts to protect herself and her Pocomania congregants from interference and condemnation by the male Christian leaders.

Unlike Parson Craig and Deacon Manners, Sister Kate sees neither competition between the two approaches to worship, nor a contradiction in worshipping both ways. However, when the parson and the deacon arrive in the yard, their conversation repeatedly turns to competition and contradiction. First, the parson tells Sister Kate, “Well, you must know that you are taking away a large number of my congregation to your meetings and they have given up the Church

though you still attend” (122). In her own defense, Sister Kate stresses, “I is tell dem to go to Church and worship de Lawd dere too.” Contrasting Parson Craig’s zero sum game of attracting and retaining congregants—her gain is his loss—Sister Kate asserts a more inclusive, less competitive model: “You can’t worship de Lawd too much, Minister” (122). Only after Parson Craig and Deacon Manners have banished Sister Kate from the Church does Sister Kate move into a more proselytizing method of growing her congregation. After they have left, Brother Kendal re-enters to ask if they can continue singing. Sister Kate replies, “Yes Broder Kendal, and I charge you dat you mek de singing sweeter dan ever you did before. Charge de sisters to shout and sing and de broders to invoke de Lawd so de spirit can come and we get more and more” (125). If, as Emery argues, “the staging of ritual and ceremony” allows Marson to foreground “the role of performance in creating social identity,” I would add that in this specific use of religious song and drumming the creation of social identity takes on an explicitly political charge (125).

What might be read as a binary—the assertion of Pocomania’s African-derived religious practice over European-derived Christianity—must be tempered by the way the scene unfolds. Initially, Sister Kate does not see the need to choose between her Christian and her Pocomania religious lives, the play thus refuting the idea that these religious practices are locked in an eternal opposition. What forces Sister Kate to reconsider her position is not the realization that Christian theology and African-derived religion are mutually incompatible. Instead, she realizes that in the eyes—or, rather, the ears—of respectable, middle-class Jamaicans, Pocomania in the yard represents a spiritual and sonic threat to respectable, middle-class Christianity and to its male leadership, a forerunner of what sociologist Cecilia Green labels a “discourse of ‘black matriarchy’ and black male victimology” (11). The sounds are simply too close and, as the

prologue has shown and the rest of the play will confirm, are too enticing to impressionable middle-class girls and women. Sister Kate's injunction to Brother Kendal, to increase the sweetness and the volume of their singing, indicates her understanding that sound is a crucial locus of political and cultural struggle. Arguing for the central place of sound cultures for diaspora communities, Chude-Sokei writes, "the discourse in sound is separate from those of the literary, of the *logos*; it is a space independent of the centered semantic structures of science, freed from the objective bias of literacy. It is necessarily the space of oral knowledge" ("Post-nationalist" 80). What is more, it is a struggle specifically over lower-class and middle-class women's power, freedom, and sexuality.<sup>18</sup>

The second concern raised in the conversation between the male Church leaders and Sister Kate shifts from competition over congregants to the morality of Sister Kate's religious practices, though the former clearly articulates with the latter. Parson Craig states, "I am told that much that is done at your meetings is of the devil," then indirectly invokes rumors of sexual excess and drunkenness that circulated about Jamaican revival traditions like Pocomania: "You know that some bad things have happened at your meetings" (122, 123).<sup>19</sup> Sister Kate decisively refutes both accusations by asking Parson Craig to provide his source and then asserting that she would "tek [him] to Court to prove" the implied charge of impropriety (123). Parson Craig's quick deflection of the issue demonstrates his knowledge that even the slightest rumor of impropriety is enough to ruin the precarious respectability of black Jamaicans' cultural practices, especially because respectability is gendered in ways that render Sister Kate particularly vulnerable to rumored sexual misconduct. Furthermore, like Sister Kate's emphasis on singing

<sup>18</sup> While I am focusing on the only published version of the play, Rosenberg's superb archival work has uncovered that the complete manuscript of the play edits out "images of the sexual license of the peasantry" that "occur only in the fragments" of scenes found with the complete draft in the National Library of Jamaica (*Nationalism* 169).

<sup>19</sup> 122, 123. For more on the gendered politics of rumored sexual deviance, see Rosenberg, *Nationalism* 166.

and shouting, the parson's recourse to word of mouth reveals his recognition that orality/aurality is as at least as important as text/scripture in the contest for control of Jamaican religious practice and in the broader struggle over the terms of national culture.<sup>20</sup>

On the incorporation of oral culture, Cooper argues that "Marson's play is remarkable for its sophisticated handling of Jamaican Creole" ("Something" 68). Marson's deployment of Jamaican nation language through Sister Kate, against "Standard" (proper, respectable) English through Parson Craig, is one way the play centers orality in the national conversation. However, while Marson's use of the vernacular and the focus on orality is an early and important instance of the elevation of lower-class black Jamaicans' language to cultural parity with "Standard" English, to only read it this way is to reduce orality to race, blackness, and/or Africanness. Far from being reducible to a mere representation of black speech, Marson stages the conversation between Parson Craig and Sister Kate in the yard to center expressive culture politically, making orality central to the debate over Jamaican national culture. Outside of the closed private sphere of the drawing room and into the much more open space of the yard, the rumors become ethical in the face-to-face confrontation between Parson Craig and Sister Kate, who, by invoking the court, extends this public ethical confrontation into the realm of the law. Furthermore, the yard becomes doubly public through theater: the audience as jury hears Sister Kate's challenges, witnesses her strength and resolve in the face of Parson Craig's cowardly recourse to rumor, and feels compelled to side with her.

There is no doubt that oral culture has been a mode through which black Jamaicans historically have carved out epistemological and cultural space against the white supremacist logic of racial slavery and post-emancipation and post-independence anti-black racism. However, the play situates orality not merely as a black public sphere that poses an alternative to

<sup>20</sup> For more on the specifics of the way this struggle played out over religious practice, see Moore and Johnson 52.

white supremacy. Oral culture, represented both by Pocomania song and by rumor, is also a site of struggle *between* African-descended Jamaicans over the place of black expressive culture.

Furthermore, orality in the play is not reducible to race: in addition to casting aspersions on poor, black Jamaicans' lives, the parson's invocation of rumors reveals the class and gender power available to him as a respectable—brown, middle-class, male—preacher.

### Stella, Middle-Class Conscript

The power that accrues to Parson Craig and Deacon Manners because they are respectable Christian men is crucial to my resistant reading of the close of the play. In the first scene of the third and final act, Stella has convinced her suitor David to consider allowing her to attend Sister Kate's Ninth Night Celebration. This David is the same boy of her youth, adopted and raised by her father, who has now become a respectable doctor and is "curing" her of her attraction to Pocomania. David neither explicitly grants this permission nor denies it, instead arguing "reasonably" against her attendance. Stella, recognizing the condescension of his position, retorts, "I know you think I am still just a silly hysterical girl who will be upset by the sound of the drums. I tell you, I am not—I have grown up" (140). The conversation ends with a frustrated Stella taking quick leave of David, who is soon joined by the rest of Stella's family: her father Deacon Manners, her sister Dawn, and Parson Craig, now married to Dawn. All of them are alarmed by Stella's relapse. However, in the face of Deacon Manner's rigid opposition to what he dubs the "nonsense" of Pocomania, David says, "Not nonsense..." and adds that he thinks "it might be easier to humour her" (141). While David's position is in no way a radical acceptance of Pocomania nor a radical concession to Stella's autonomy, it does suggest a break with the irrational rigidity of Stella's father's opposition. Nonetheless, even the more "rational"

arguments David offers are rooted in a middle-class understanding of lower-class cultural practices like Pocomania, an understanding that emerges from the liberal reason, education, and privilege that accrue to him as a middle-class doctor.

In the previous act, David reveals the apparently reasonable nature of his understanding of Pocomania, what Ford-Smith calls his “‘scientific’ approach” (31). Parson Craig laments that it is “very unusual for a girl of Stella’s upbringing and education to fall in with such an obviously obnoxious cult.” David studiously replies, “It isn’t strange. It appeals to the emotions. You see, your churches are cold and strict and severe—not attractive enough. Besides, what is there in this district to interest anyone with a grain of imagination. And you know Stella has always craved for excitement. I am afraid the Church does not fill the essential need.” Lest it appear that David’s criticism of the Church is an endorsement of African-derived religious practice, David continues his explanation:

listen old man: these people are not like the Nordics with hundreds of years of discipline, restraint [sic] and orthodox religion behind them. [Our] people are made of sun and fire. Take from them the joy of life and you take everything. [...] you have got to remember that our people are full of emotion, vitality, rhythm—that’s why Pocomania appeals to them. It supplies their need for social institutions that glorify the ego. (136)

The anti-black racism is jarring because of the “Our people” included within the sort of sympathetic racism one might expect of white religious leaders discussing their black congregants. Of African descent himself, David relegates Africa to primitivist caricature: “full of emotion, vitality, rhythm,” but by the same token undisciplined, unrestrained, and ego-driven. David casts lower-class black Jamaicans and the Africa they somehow represent—and that he

has somehow transcended—as children in need of the “Nordic” educational and cultural disciplining that blacks like him have received. It follows, then, that David diagnoses Stella as suffering “an emotional crisis” whose only cure is the “calm reasoning” he can provide as a doctor who has severed the connections to primitive Africa through his own liberal, “scientific” education. There is no contradiction, then, in David’s recognition of the attractive vitality of Pocomania and Revivalist churches and his dismissal of the same as “religious mania” filled with “abominable shouting fanatics” (135).

Whereas Donnell focuses on the way Marson’s “work acted as a lightning rod for the internal contradictions of colonial modernity,” she nonetheless implicitly registers a geographic split between Marson’s work on gender and race, asserting that Marson spoke “from the ‘borderline’ in both Kingston and London, as a woman and a black subject” (“Fractured” 367). The implication is that what matters in Kingston is her work on behalf of women and what matters in London is her work as a black subject. My contention is that the latter privileges a certain kind of study of blackness, one that responds to anti-black racism by whites. But as David’s comments reveal, *Pocomania* stages something quite far from black racial unity: blacks voicing anti-black racism.

With his forward-looking liberalism, David represents what Rosenberg calls “a new professional Afro-Caribbean middle class, one guided by reason and science rather than strict adherence to Victorian conceptions of propriety and Christianity” (*Nationalism* 167). Part of the new black male intellectuals taking the reins of Jamaica’s national and cultural identity in the 1930s, David asserts a liberal-rational break from the religiously-based, anti-African arguments white, brown, and black religious leaders offered against black religious practices like Pocomania. Unlike Rosenberg, however, I read this break as structured by the continuity of

patriarchal power. In other words, middle-class women like Stella are pawns in the transfer of power from black male religious authority to black male political authority. Green confirms this transfer: after the labor rebellions across the West Indies in the late 1930s, the immediate historical context for Marson's play, social reforms reintroduced "the masculinist model" but now included "the adjunct 'housewife' role of women [...]. In some ways, it was a more public minded, secular, bureaucratic, and urban-centered version of the missionary vision, constituting a virtual lesson in modern imperial civics and the gendered responsibilities of emerging nationhood" (17). The play's numerous conversations between men (at times including Dawn) about Stella's mental health—judged in terms of her fascination with Pocomania—emphasize the "anxiety for the ruling and elite classes about female 'modern' autonomy, which became an enduring concern for the colonial administration in the late 1930s after the intensification of labour unrest from 1934 to 1938" (Donnell, "Fractured Subjects" 353). This anxiety was most intense for those, like David and Deacon Manners, seeking to preserve patriarchal privilege in the emerging Jamaican nation.

Thus, David's comments in the second act are part of a larger patriarchal project of control over women and are crucial for understanding the play's apparent failure to imagine Stella embracing Pocomania, with which she has been flirting throughout the play, and the corresponding freedom this might entail for her as a black woman. Far from signaling an unproblematic denial of Pocomania, however, the play seems to suggest that Stella runs into David's arms because as a middle-class woman, she has almost no option to choose otherwise because of both "limited opportunities and the burden of respectability" (Snaith 106). David is not "the handsome hero," as Ford-Smith reads him, "who replaces Sister Kate as the healing power at the end of the play" and through whose "love, it is implied, Stella will find salvation"



(32). Instead, David is the only sensible option, sensible because what little hope Stella had for a romantic relationship that would have permitted her to maintain close contact with Sister Kate and the Pocomania community was dashed when her first love interest, David's brother John, died while abroad. Stella received the news of John's death in Act 1, Scene 2 by reading a cablegram the rest of the family intended to keep from her. The next scene, the first of Act 2, provides the reason for Stella's deep grief. Set in Sister Kate's yard two weeks after the news of John's death arrived, the scene reveals how close John was to Sister Kate. She says, "Me poor sweet Mass John. Him used to come look fe him Moder Kate. He neber lef' me out" (130). Clearly, this marriage would have meant something quite different for Stella, as John saw Sister Kate as a mother figure in ways analogous to Stella. His death, then, represents not only the loss of Stella's love interest, but the foreclosing of the only possibility through which she could maintain a connection with Sister Kate and her knowledge.

But even that possibility is fraught with tension, as it is open to her only through a man, not through her own position as a woman. There is no potential narrative outcome in the play in which a single, middle-class brown or black Jamaican woman clears a space for herself to pursue a social life according to her own dictates, especially if those dictates imply a "racial descent" into the lower-class black Jamaican culture represented by Pocomania. Thus, reading the play as a failure depends on reading the play teleologically and romantically: Stella's dalliances with the Pocomania congregation, Sister Kate, and the yard are somehow inexorably leading to her freedom from the constraints of respectability, with all the racial, classed, and gendered connotations of that term. On the one hand, Stella's hope of marriage to John suggests a much more fulfilling life than the one she faces through marriage to David. On the other hand, in both situations, Stella's possibilities are circumscribed by marriage to a middle-class man. Thus,

against seeing the close of the play as a disappointment, it is possible to read it in much the same fashion as the close of the 1967 version of *The Black Jacobins*, in which Marie-Jeanne is “almost forcibly” pulled into a dance by her husband Dessalines. Preceding the revised version of James’s play by three decades, Marson’s depiction of the forceful pull Jamaican middle-class life makes on Stella is misread as a failure.<sup>21</sup>

The final setting of the play subverts the apparently romantic close, a subtle criticism of the tragedy of women’s conscription into middle-class respectable life. In the penultimate scene, Stella has left David on her own terms, forcing him to consider how he must change so that he can woo her successfully. In the final scene, Marson has David follow Stella to the Ninth Night Celebration in the yard. In other words, even if the conditions of possibility for Stella’s autonomy are circumscribed by middle-class women’s expectations, she is able to wrest a minor victory against patriarchy by forcing David to pursue her to the yard, where the play closes, instead of capitulating to his “reason” in the drawing room. Thus, the romance of the close is circumvented, if only slightly, by the spatial ordering of the play. In other words, for the final scene, supposedly a victory of middle-class sensibilities, Marson does not return the middle-class characters to the middle-class, respectable setting of the drawing room but leaves them in the impoverished setting of the yard. That David, not Pocomania’s religious community, ultimately wins over Stella might be a dissatisfying ending, but such dissatisfaction is the luxury of writing in the wake of the relative success of black arts, black power, and Afrocentric movements in places like the U.S. and Jamaica. For Marson and late 1930s Jamaica, such a luxury is a distant

<sup>21</sup> Jarrett-Macauley’s reading has already been cited. Another instance of this kind of reading can be found in Rosenberg, who states, “In depicting Pukkumina, Marson ultimately adhered to conceptions of modernity and morality with which she began her career” (*Nationalism* 172).

future, and her imagination can only take her so far against the cultural force middle-class women feel to seek out a respectable life through a proper Christian marriage.<sup>22</sup>

#### The Unbridgeable Divide between “Respectable” and “Common” Black Women

Sister Kate’s own words may be the strongest indication that Marson understood the delimited opportunities for middle-class and brown Jamaican women to upend or otherwise challenge patriarchal society’s expectations of them. In the same scene in which Sister Kate speaks highly about the deceased John, Stella asks Sister Kate about an upcoming Revivalist meeting. Clearly connected to her grief over John’s death, Stella’s interest in the meeting focuses on the leader of Revivalists, a Sister Miriam whom Sister Kate calls “a sainted soul,” and the drummer, Josiah. Sister Kate’s praise for Sister Miriam as a female spiritual leader feeds Stella’s hunger for maternal spiritual knowledge to combat the paternal(istic) knowledge she imbibes from her father and Parson Craig. Once Stella leaves the scene, Sister Kate reinforces the matrilineal transfer of knowledge Stella seeks, commenting to herself, “What a sweet pickney Deacon Manners hab, she tek after her moder dough, she don't have a dying ting fe de miserable Puppa” (132). This criticism does not extend to all forms of patrilineal knowledge transmission, however, as evidenced through the conversation about the drummer. Stella asks Sister Kate who taught Josiah to play the drum, to which she replies, “No him puppa, mam.” Stella then asks where Josiah’s father received his knowledge. Sister Kate states, “Him puppa, dat is Josiah grand fader come here a little boy pon slave ship from Africa” (131). It is significant that the only reference to Africa in the entire play comes from an orally transmitted genealogy that traces

<sup>22</sup> For a similar reading of the ending as “less conclusive than may appear,” see Snaith 106.

drumming ability patrilineally.<sup>23</sup> Marson locates the knowledge about African retention not in the ethnographer's genealogical archaeology but in a lower-class female spiritual leader's memory.

Rosenberg argues that because she can trace the African genealogy of Josiah's knowledge, "Sister Kate becomes [Stella's] conduit to African culture" (*Nationalism* 169). I would argue, more precisely, that Sister Kate is Stella's conduit to the African-derived cultures of Jamaican peasant life. In other words, I want to emphasize the important distinction between Sister Kate being a conduit to African culture and her possessing orally transmitted knowledge about the African elements of Jamaican culture. In an interview seven years after the play's production, Marson herself spoke of the Africa in Jamaica not in terms of an authenticating identitarian link, but in terms of limits: "pocomania is the nearest thing to Africa that we have in the West Indies," then adds, "our African ancestry is still with us" (qtd. in Jarrett-Macauley, *The Life* 136). Far from asserting an identity between Jamaicans and Africans, Marson's statements subtly reveal both geographic and temporal distance: Pocomania, not Africa, is in Jamaica; Jamaicans are not Africans, but of African ancestry.

While Rosenberg criticizes Marson's depiction of Pocomania (or Pukkumina) as inaccurate, her reasoning suggests some of the distance I am arguing is central to Marson's depiction. Citing anthropologist George Simpson's attempts in the 1950s to connect Pocomania and West African religions, Rosenberg points out, "Simpson's observation suggests that practitioners of Pukkumina may not have viewed Pukkumina as a form of African retention and may not have identified themselves as Jamaica's link to an African past" (*Nationalism* 174). This would be a problem only if Marson's aim was to root her representation of Pocomania in

<sup>23</sup> In a fragment of the play distinct from this published version, Rosenberg has identified an additional, matrilineal connection to Africa through Sister Kate: "Stella tells David that Sister Kate's spirituality is effective because if comes from Africa, 'after all Sister Kate's grandmother told her a lot about life in...Africa'" (*Nationalism* 169).

practitioners' actual beliefs. However, instead of being evidence for Marson's representational inaccuracies,<sup>24</sup> Simpson highlights what I have been arguing is a central feature of the play: there is no automatic unity over what Africa means between middle-class blacks like Marson and lower-class blacks like Sister Kate, the play foregrounding the divisions in attitudes toward Africanness that actually obtain in Jamaica.

Such divisions do not matter for the political relevance of Sister Kate's ability to trace the transmission of Josiah's drumming to his African grandfather. This genealogical knowledge undoes one of the central projects of plantation slavery, namely the severing of enslaved African ethnic groups from their respective ethnic communities in the New World in order to secure against revolt.<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, there is the clear suggestion that such a transmission enables, rather than disables, poor Jamaicans' cultural survival against multiple oppressions: anti-black racism, class-based condemnation, even patriarchal control. Thus, mentioning Africa does not represent the sort of Afrocentric sensibility that Jarrett-Macauley emphasizes, neither "Jamaicans looking to their African home," nor Stella as a child "find[ing] her psychic place of origin" or as an adult "drawn from her physical abode to her spiritual home" (*The Life* 130, 131). Instead, invoking Africa is a response to the anti-African Eurocentrism adopted by many upper- and middle-class Jamaican white, brown, and black elites. In other words, Sister Kate's reference to Africa neither extends centrifugally from Jamaican experience to Africa nor to a wider New World African experience, but forces the audience to see its much more local relevance for Jamaican society.

<sup>24</sup> Rosenberg later qualifies her argument about the representational inaccuracies in the play, noting that they may have been "a strategic inauthenticity designed to mask the radicalism of her proposals" (*Nationalism* 177).

<sup>25</sup> For a discussion of this plantation strategy and the possibility it opened for cross-ethnic racial unification against the horrors of slavery, see Robotham. While my essay is less invested in the unification argument Robotham proposes, to his credit he is not interested in "the absurdly exaggerated, indeed ridiculous, claim that the Caribbean and Afro-America are holding up to Africa the mirror of its future. Nor is it to suggest," he continues, "that cultural unification processes in Africa will or should follow any particular uniform path" (24).

Jarrett-Macauley's Afrocentric reading predetermines the way she can approach the play's ending, evacuating the complexity of Stella's relationship to Pocomania, Africa, and lower-class black life in Sister Kate's yard. Thus, she fails to note that Sister Kate's most striking defense of Pocomania comes in her chiding of Stella when Stella remarks that the drums "fascinate" her. Sister Kate's rebuke is swift but loving: "Fascinate, Miss Stella? Dem is more wonderful dan dat! Troo de drum de spirit speak—de Lawd Himself speak to de soul of him people" (131). Echoing the way both her sister Dawn and suitor David dismiss her interest as mere fascination, Stella's language reveals her middle-class provenance, even if one might justifiably read her as attempting to break from those constraints by learning from Sister Kate, Revivalist spirituality, and drumming. That Sister Kate calls out Stella's specific use of the word "fascinate," rather than Stella's use of Jamaican Standard English throughout their conversation, underscores Sister Kate's ability to distinguish between language dialects as cultural and class markers that can exist relationally, and specific words that hierarchize class relationships. In other words, Sister Kate's Patois co-exists conversationally with Stella's English until the word "fascinate" suggests Stella's distant, elevated position in relation to the drumming, and by extension to Pocomania, the yard, even Sister Kate.

The praise of the female leader, the tracing of an African genealogy for the drummer's skill, and the gentle criticism of Stella's "fascination"—all carry a positive valence in the play, representing a direct criticism of the "reasons" proffered by David and "decent" Jamaican society for dismissing lower-class society as constitutively inferior. This inferiority is based, so the reasoning went, on the deviancy of female-headed homes and the backwardness of African-derived practices, fascinating but only from a careful, respectable distance.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>26</sup> On female-headed homes in the wider Caribbean see Safa. Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* is the classic account of the development of black inferiority under colonization.

The first half of the scene aligns well with the 1930s West Indian literary context, when a key shift occurred toward representing “folk” or “yard” lives, but was either filtered through bourgeois and middle-class characters’ perspectives or included these characters as central to the plot.<sup>27</sup> About halfway through Marson’s scene, however, Stella exits, leaving the yard denizens to discuss her visit and the larger issue of relations between Jamaican classes. In this “private” exchange between lower-class residents of the yard, Marson reveals Sister Kate’s cultural and political savvy, and her argument about the impermeability of class boundaries that I argue helps to explain Stella’s turn to David at the end. What I want to emphasize is that this conversation represents, like the subaltern aide-de-camps’ comments in James’s 1967 version of *Haitian Revolution* play, the knowledge required to analyze the thematic development of the play. In other words, when Jarrett Macauley laments the “abrupt and contradictory denouement” in Stella’s turn to David, running into his arms at the play’s close to escape the violence that mars Sister Kate’s Ninth Night Celebration, she fails to recognize the importance of this scene (*The Life* 132).<sup>28</sup> It is the literal centerpiece of the play and the strongest argument for the yard as a locus of cultural, political, and spiritual knowledge that Jamaican elites and middle classes neither countenance nor understand.<sup>29</sup>

When Stella has left the scene, Brother Kendal and Sister Mart both inquire about Stella’s interest in the meeting. Sister Kate responds, “I don’t kip wid respectable ladies like she fe come to de meetings. Dem can’t understand it. It is not possible to be respectable and common at the de same time” (132). Coming on the heels of her pedagogic response to Stella’s use of “fascinate,” Sister Kate’s comment, now freed by the absence of a middle-class interlocutor,

<sup>27</sup> A classic example is C. L. R. James’s *Minty Alley*, but also the fiction of many of the other members of the Beacon Group in 1930s Trinidad. See Sander, *Trinidad Awakening*.

<sup>28</sup> Though Rosenberg addresses the scene, she fails to specify that Sister Kate’s criticism is directed specifically at Stella (*Nationalism* 169).

<sup>29</sup> Emery also argues for the centrality of this scene (139).

stresses the incommensurability between middle-class and lower-class life, the racial disunity that I argue is at the center of the play. This analysis from below, from Sister Kate's position as a lower-class black woman, re-situates normative narratives of the time. Such narratives also argue that "respectable and common" are incommensurable, but do so to keep lower-class, black Jamaicans in their place and to keep middle-class, brown Jamaicans—particularly women—from losing respectability by becoming "common" through engaging in cultural practices associated with blackness, Africanness, and the lower class. Sister Kate confirms that "dere will always be de common people and de better class people," but in direct opposition to the dominant narratives, asserts, "I know I like to stay in common set, for den I can spress meself widouten noting happen" (133).<sup>30</sup>

Sister Kate's comment about the freedom she has as a poor, black woman in her own sphere, represented geographically by the yard and spiritually by Pocomania, in no way minimizes the structural racism, classism, and sexism that impinge on poor black women's lives in Jamaica and globally. In fact, her removal from the Church proves that something does happen precisely *because* she expresses herself freely. What her comment does suggest is her ability to feel free in spite of those structural constraints and because she and others can maintain the yard as a closed community.<sup>31</sup> Even though the middle-class characters literally enter the yard with apparent freedom, the play emphasizes that Sister Kate and the other yard denizens consistently engage in verbal and cultural subterfuge—hiding the drums, speaking openly about Stella only after she has left—to maintain a border between the "respectable" and the "common."

<sup>30</sup> See Cobham's analysis of H.G. de Lisser's 1914 novel, *Jane's Career*, for an analogous argument about lower-class black women's relative freedom compared to middle-class and white Jamaican women ("Women in Jamaican Literature").

<sup>31</sup> For a similar argument, based on a study of Afro-Caribbean women's labor from slavery through the twentieth century, see Green.



Furthermore, Sister Kate's freedom is a relational one: in comparison with brown, middle-class women in their social world, in hers she need not worry about how she expresses herself.

Sister Kate's death is announced in the opening to Act 3, set eighteen months after the scene analyzed above and six months after the close of Act 2. It further complicates the sense that Stella turns her back on Pocomania and Sister Kate's community. Throughout the first two acts of the play, Marson elevates Sister Kate's perspective to the central authoritative position, able not only to reveal the problems middle-class women face but also to read accurately all of the men in the play, from Deacon Manners' underhanded betrayals of yard life to David's eventual concession to Stella in the play's final lines. Without Sister Kate's presence in the final act, Stella's connection to Pocomania has been weakened: she has lost the Mother whom she had been seeking since the prologue.

Mirroring Stella, the Pocomania congregation appears to have weakened in Sister Kate's absence, as the Ninth Night celebration for her degenerates into a drunken brawl. But Marson is careful to stage the disorder as something quite separate from Pocomania believers and their religious practice. One of the hired banjo players interrupts the singing to demand more rum. Sister Mart replies, "But you is profane, if you don't like sing, den depart broder, depart." A second banjo player is quick to retort: "We is no broder—we is high-class hintertainers" (146). Against pleas for peace and decency, a fight breaks out after the second banjo player pushes Sister Kate. At this point, when it is clear that the Ninth Night celebration has ceased and something far less spiritual has broken out, Stella runs to a nearby David and utters, "There is no 'spirit' here now she is gone. Only noise" (147). Stella's comment is not the lament of one who has lost her faith, but of one who has lost the source of her knowledge and spiritual power. Even though she agrees with David that she will have "No more Pocomania" because she "was always

really frightened of it,” she is rejecting a Pocomania community that has lost its spiritual head and embracing the only possibility that was really ever open to her as a middle-class black woman, namely marriage to a respectable, educated, middle-class brown man. As Snaith puts it, the ending “is a reflection not of Marson’s morality or conventionality as much as her honesty” (106). Emery pushes this argument even further: “it becomes possible to imagine that, had Sister Kate lived to guide her,”—and, I would add, had John lived—“[Stella] might have achieved the vision she sought” (141).

In other words, Marson has carefully constructed the play such that Stella is rejecting something different from the Pocomania religious practice that had fascinated her from the beginning, and she is accepting a different David than the one the audience has known throughout the play, a David at least partially similar to his deceased brother John. It is only fitting, then, that David concedes that they can have “a little madness in [their] lives,” to which Stella replies, with the final words of the play, “Now you have admitted that, it will be so much easier to love you” (147). Snaith reads these closing lines as indicating that if Stella has had to compromise, then so has David, as he “has made a concession for her, however small and symbolic” (106). Similarly, Rosenberg reads the marriage as “symbolically represent[ing] a harmonious integration of peasant and middle-class cultures” and stresses that the David at the end is “a new David, embodying the reforms that Marson envisioned for Jamaica’s new professional class” (*Nationalism* 170-71). Even though Rosenberg criticizes both the play and Marson for being ultimately unable to imagine something other than a nationalism “through which the culture of the dispossessed became a symbol of a country that systematically excluded

the dispossessed,” she misses the ambivalence that remains through the end around both his character and the marriage (*Nationalism* 171).<sup>32</sup>

As I have shown above, I read neither David nor the marriage so positively, nor do I read David, as Snaith does, “sympathetic to and understanding of [Pocomonia’s] presence” (106). Thus, I have difficulty equalizing David’s compromise with Stella’s. In fact, there is something subtle in Stella’s last line that suggests that she, not David, is responsible for his concession: the fact that she would love him, her closing line suggests, was a given even before this scene, a fact that had already delimited her possibilities. In other words, Stella seems to have known what Sister Kate articulates earlier: middle-class women’s oppression is no worse than the oppression visited upon lower-class women; however, there is no alternative space for middle-class women, like the yard, nor alternative cultural practice, like Pocomania, within which they can “spress demself widouten noting happen.” As Emery puts it, “marriage is the only safe place for intelligent women” (127). Stella’s flirtation with Pocomania, on this reading, can be seen as one long strategic attempt to wrest the concession she gets from him at the end, rather than a concession he has made for her.

### Marson and the Schism of Diaspora

Even if Marson’s body of work is categorically opposed to anti-black racism, the power of *Pocomania* is the way it expands the contours of what constitutes black cultural politics. As my analysis of Dominican street theater in the previous chapter has demonstrated, black cultural production strains at the demands for Afro-diasporic unity, especially as that unity is predicated upon a recognizable sense of blackness. This recognizable blackness is narrowly delimited by

<sup>32</sup> For a much more developed version of Rosenberg’s argument but focused on Jamaican social and political history, rather than on Marson’s play, see Thomas’s *Modern Blackness*.

“the strong purchase that a black diasporic critical framework has held within studies of Caribbean writings since the early 1990s and the dramatic reversal for nation-based texts since the 1960s,” instead of capacious enough to deal with competing, even antagonistic, articulations of blackness, Africanness, and diaspora (Donnell, *Twentieth-Century* 77). Jarrett-Macauley reveals the problems of such a demand for diasporic unity when she asks, “What framework can comprehend both Una and Zora [Neale Hurston] and allow us to see what they might have shared?” (“Exemplary” 38). While Jarrett-Macuauley’s comparison of Marson’s and Hurston’s lives and writings is otherwise compelling, her query about a possible framework that can “comprehend both Una and Zora” already implies its answer: “As women of African descent they both felt a strong, organic if discontinuous link with the struggle to keep African cultural connections and reconnections alive” (49). If Donnell is invested in interrogating the way Marson’s “recovery” into a Caribbean women’s literary canon “has been structured through the political-cultural agendas of various critical moments, including that of the high-point of feminist criticism in the mid-1980s” (*Twentieth-Century* 151), I would add that Jarrett-Macauley’s aim to connect Marson and Hurston similarly reveals that Marson enters a black literary tradition in the 1990s under the post-national—as distinct from transnational—sign of the Black Atlantic.

The desire to articulate a framework that would unify Marson and Hurston forces Jarrett-Macauley to dismiss many early twentieth-century black Jamaicans as self-hating, not unlike the treatment Dominicans continue to receive today: “many educated Black people, determined to show that colour is only skin-deep, preferred to have nothing to do with their African origins or the taint of slavery” (“Exemplary” 41). While I am not arguing that such African denial should be defended, the racial complexities in *Pocomania* avoid the danger of suggesting that “educated Black people” are only superficially black, a curious revision of Fanon that intimates that these

self-hating blacks wear black masks and have white souls. *Pocomania*, by contrast, stops short of indicting as somehow not black enough even its most Anglophilic characters, focusing instead on the constitutive cultural differences between African-descended Jamaicans.

Similar to Jarrett-Macaulay, Snaith argues that *Pocomania* “shows Marson recognizing the need for attention to working-class culture in the reclamation of African identity” (107). Even if Marson did place tremendous importance on the cultural practices and lives among lower-class black Jamaicans, women in particular, I’m not certain a strong case can be made that *Pocomania*, with its one explicit reference to Africa, is about “African cultural connections” or “the reclamation of African identity.” At best, it is about Marson staging a political articulation, in Stuart Hall’s sense of the word, of lower-class black Jamaicans’ religious practice with Africa. More than this articulation, however, the force of the play is in the cultural conflicts between Afro-descended Jamaicans, the sort of racial disunity that Marson lamented in her polemic directed at Robeson. Jarrett-Macaulay asserts that Sister Kate’s “strength comes from her slave, African, woman-centred culture” and glosses the play “as a critique of marriage” in which the “usual heterosexual couple is supplanted for other, same-sex relationships between mother and daughter, sisters, or aunts” (“Exemplary” 51). In desiring to draw Marson into a romanticized African women’s diaspora that would link her with Hurston, Jarrett-Macaulay empties the play of its racial and gendered ambivalences, which ambivalences make her play so relevant for contemporary conceptualizations of black and African diaspora.

*Pocomania* compellingly stages middle- and lower-class black Jamaican women’s struggle against patriarchy. Thus, Marson goes well beyond James’s *Toussaint Louverture*, staged only two years prior, because it foregrounds the constrained circumstances within which black and brown women could function, circumstances that would emerge three decades later in

James's revised play, *The Black Jacobins*. Emery perceptively demonstrates that Marson "appropriated [James's] historical play about revolution in the Caribbean to explore the conflicts facing a Caribbean woman who seeks independence and freedom of the spirit" (144). At the same time, the play avoids allowing the cross-class patriarchal oppression women faced to slide easily into a cross-class black women's unity. Instead, through Sister Kate the play voices black lower-class women's resistance to their cultural appropriation by middle-class women seeking to be liberated from their middle-class expectations of respectability.<sup>33</sup>

Concerning the relationship between lower-class black women's cultural importance for Jamaican society, and for educated, middle-class black women specifically, Marson's own views appear to be in conflict with Sister Kate's views. Her answer to Robeson—"the first task of the negro who has achieved is to teach his people the value of unity"—reveals a model of education that moved from educated blacks "down" to their less fortunate black brothers and sisters. Jarrett-Macauley also notes that near the end of her life, Marson "longed for a Jamaica which would retrieve some of the values she had known as a girl," values represented by "Christian faithfulness" and "quiet dignity," as Marson noted in a July 1964 *Daily Gleaner* tribute to her much older and recently deceased cousin Angie, with whom she was quite close. Jarrett-Macauley continues, with the same tinge of disapprobation or disappointment that characterizes her reading of *Pocomania*'s denouement: "[Marson] was by that time reluctant to admit that she too had changed, and altered her ways and principles, preferring to stand as representative of 'old Jamaican values' to the newly independent country in 1962" (*The Life* 7).

There are two problems here that I hope to have traced through my reading of *Pocomania*. First, Marson's politics, however short of revolutionary fervor, are not somehow

<sup>33</sup> Building from Chude-Sokei, Thomas states that dancehall is a popular cultural form similarly un-appropriable by middle-class Jamaicans, as distinct from reggae (*Modern Blackness* 242).

less compelling in the wider portrait of black cultural production. To put it differently, a narrow focus on the more palatable of her politics presents a Marson that matters because she fits contemporary institutional demands for a particular kind of black cultural politics. In fact, Jarrett-Macauley cites the same 1964 article to register Marson's apparent change into an anti-independence, conservative Jamaican, *and* to provide evidence that rather than explore her European ancestry, Marson "turned instead to Africa: this, she felt, was her true ancestral home, the land of her father's forefathers" (*The Life* 2). Here is my point: if in the same article Marson is recoverable as an Afrocentric foremother and as a "representative of 'old Jamaican values,'" then her very person carries what might be considered competing visions for what can constitute black diaspora culture and politics.

Second, beyond confirming or denying Marson's Afrocentric or black cultural credentials, *Pocomania* uncovers Marson's honesty: her portrayal does not simply avoid relying on Pan-African discourse to gloss over the differences between Jamaicans of African descent, but stresses their lack of racial unity. In other words, while Marson herself may have hoped for a world in which middle-class, educated black women and men "who have achieved" have a duty to preach racial unity to black masses, what matters more for conceptualizations of diaspora today—as it appeared to matter to Marson in the 1930s—is that Marson places intra-black difference and disunity, what Torres-Saillant calls the "schism within the territory of blackness," center stage ("One and Divisible" 25). Perhaps Marson could not foresee the stubborn resolve with which lower-class blacks in Jamaica and elsewhere have refused to embrace "the value of unity" implied in Pan-Africanism or its modern-day descendent, the African diaspora. Sister Kate, on the other hand, appears to have been much more prophetic: "dere will always be de

common people and de better class people. I know I like to stay in common set, for den I can spress meself widouten nothing happen.”



### **Conclusion: Diaspora, Recognition, and “Conscripts of Performance”**

My dissertation has examined Caribbean theater from Trinidadian C.L.R. James’s stage versions of *The Black Jacobins*, Reynaldo and Frank Disla’s carnivalesque Dominican theater, and Una Marson’s Jamaican-specific and female-centered *Pocomania* to draw attention to a pan-Caribbean tradition of reimagining Caribbean social and political life through popular theater. Through a radical politics that takes shape dialogically and imaginatively with popular cultural forms, these plays break down boundaries between art and politics while providing a platform to raise questions about race, class, and gender. Relying on James’s warning against the dangers of making race the “fundamental” category of analysis, I have argued that these theater projects sound a crucial cautionary note against the “fundamentalization” of race in African diaspora, transnational, and race studies. This “fundamentalization” of race finds its salient expression in the theoretically static tendency of dominant studies of race, often emerging from the U.S., that disarticulate race from questions of class privilege, colonialism/imperialism, and sexism. By contrast, the plays I analyze approach questions of race neither in fundamental nor fundamentally U.S. terms, instead opening up the articulations between race, class, and gender in anti-colonial, anti-racist, and anti-sexist struggles.

In linking Caribbean theater with conceptualizations of black or African diaspora, I have been particularly attuned to the way demands for unity across “the” diaspora come up against performances that not only represent intra-black differences, but, as in Marson’s *Sister Kate*, may even reject the very premise of that unity. Here I am neither arguing for nor against the political value of global black solidarity. Instead, I am emphasizing the particular demands that global black solidarity, in the name of diaspora, makes of blacks around the globe, and the disparate ways blacks respond to them. To be sure, these demands include struggle against white

supremacy and the material inequalities facing blacks globally. However, because metropolitan centers include metropolitan forms of blackness—or, to put it differently, because imperialism can carry blackness with it—calls for global black unity can mask a demand for unification with a particular performance of blackness, one that might represent far more local, and far less global, black political cultures. This was most clearly revealed in Chapter 3, in my invocation of the interdisciplinary chorus of U.S. scholarship indicting Dominicans for their collective failure to accept their own blackness. By routing Dominican blackness through performance in the Dislas' plays, I argued in that chapter that the particular performance of blackness U.S. scholarship has failed to find in the Dominican Republic reveals more about what this scholarship is looking for, than whether or not black political cultures actually exist there.

What such scholarship is looking for are assertions of blackness and black unity recognizable under what has come to be called the African diaspora. But, as Colin Palmer has pointed out, “for most scholars, the African diaspora means, rather simply, *Africans Abroad*. Many writers carelessly view these very diverse peoples as *monolithic* and equate the formation of these communities as being the product of the Atlantic slave trade” (57). Recalling Saidiya Hartman's experience with the Ghanaian youth at Elmina Castle, such a conceptualization of diaspora and its concomitant politics of transnational recognition often devolve into what Kenneth Warren has dubbed a “comedy of misrecognition,” the idea that in spite of whatever blackness or Africanness one may assert, “one can always be identified as other than what one claims to be” (400). Because the call for worldwide black unity often is answered by these cross-cultural misrecognitions, the plays I have analyzed become that much more crucial for thinking black diaspora today. Against reading these plays for how they might fit within the normative notion of African diaspora outlined by Palmer, my chapters have foregrounded blackness as

performance: in James's *Toussaint Louverture* the performance of pan-African unity, which transforms into *The Black Jacobins*' staging of tragicomic intra-black conflict; in the Dislas' plays, the performance of a carnivalesque blackness unrecognizable to U.S. scholars.

Furthermore, when blackness becomes performance, race ceases to become fundamental in the way James warns against. Instead, race articulates with class and gender to reveal the way colonialism and imperialism are as much about oppression of women and lower classes as they are about oppression of blacks. Thus, in addition to complicating the story of black political performances, *The Black Jacobins* puts on stage the tragedy of women's erasure from anticolonial movements and their conscription into the post-independence, post-colonial patriarchal state. Similarly, Marson's play simultaneously stages the oppression black and brown women of all classes face in a patriarchal society, and the disunities that frame these women's relationships with each other because of class and color differences. Finally, both plays demonstrate that in spite of the constraints of patriarchy women are able to carve out some political and cultural space and agency through the religious practice and spiritual power available to women in Vodou and Pukkimina (Pocomania). This underscores again the importance of performance—in this case the embodied performances within religious ritual—as a crucial analytical category for understanding black cultural politics. These plays suggest that performance has provided a way for black women to insert gender into questions of black diaspora.

As I've tried to make clear in each chapter, black performance—from carnival to comedy, Vodou to Pukkimina—is not inherently transgressive. In fact, there is a felicitous overlap for my dissertation between David Scott's and James Scott's respective uses of the term "conscript." David Scott argues that in today's problem-space, it is more fruitful critically to read

Toussaint L'Ouverture as “a conscript—rather than a resisting agent—of modernity” (*Conscripts* 107). This critical re-orientation puts pressure on the tendency to criticize Toussaint, James, and other colonized subjects educated under Eurocentric systems for emphasizing too much the value of European thought and not emphasizing enough African contributions to world history. Such a tendency, as I've been arguing, runs the risk of fundamentalizing race, blackness, and Africanness such that admission into the black diaspora depends on the degree to which one eschews Europe and embraces Africa. However, black diaspora so constituted becomes an oppressive system itself, policing the borders of blackness, or as Deborah Thomas puts it, “assessing other narratives [of African diaspora] primarily in relation to the extent to which they accede to or diverge from that which seems normative” (25-26). Furthermore, the normative sense of black diaspora obscures attention to gender and class oppressions and to black performances that do not fit neatly into the dominant sense of what constitutes black cultural politics.

These normative narratives of diaspora, however, come up against what James Scott has dubbed “grudging conscripts to the performance” (15). Though Scott here is discussing systems of interracial domination, among other forms of domination, his concept is useful for thinking about how normative conceptualizations of black diaspora “conscript” blacks from across the world into a performance of blackness, and the way blacks become “grudging conscripts.” Such racial performance often is dictated by material inequalities between blacks from metropolitan centers like the US and the UK and blacks from peripheral sites like Africa and the Caribbean, or between lower-class and middle-class blacks within both metropolitan and peripheral locations, more than it is dictated by an attempt at black political and cultural unity. But just as Toussaint, James, Marson and others did to the colonial modernity into which they were conscripted, the

conscripts of black diaspora themselves raise serious questions about the constraints of “fundamental” notions of race, blackness, and diaspora.

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