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Calypso Magnolia: Transience and Durability in the Global South¹

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Abstract: *The transnational turn in U.S. literary and cultural studies has led to a new consideration of the Atlantic world, particularly of the circumCaribbean, which has been the theatre for some of the most dramatic events of Atlantic history. Haiti, as a nexus for revolution, racial turmoil, and colonial and postcolonial struggle, has always been a lodestar for Southern and circumCaribbean writers. This paper briefly considers links between the U.S. South and the Caribbean, and then examines many examples of the ways in which the Haitian Revolution was reflected in both well-known and more obscure works of U.S. Southern and Caribbean literature, focusing on writers such as S  jour, Cable, Bontemps, Faulkner, Carpentier, Glissant, and James. The concluding section demonstrates how the contemporary Southern writer Madison Smartt Bell drew on this rich literary vein to create his magnificent trilogy on the Haitian Revolution, which begins with the text considered here, *All Souls Rising*. I also argue that this new configuration of region and cultural history has had and will have future consequences for the status of “durable” and “transient” notions of literary canons.*

One of the salutary effects of transnationalism/globalization has been the rethinking of nation and national boundaries. The rise of multi-national entities of all kinds and the advent of transnational markets has shaken us into an awareness that cultural configurations have always ignored real and imaginary sovereign boundaries. The American South, we now should see, is in many ways the northern rim of the Caribbean - especially the coastal states of Texas, Louisiana, and Florida. As such, alongside Mexico and the Northern shores of Central and South America, the area embraces the islands that are usually the only thing one thinks of when the word "Caribbean" crops up. This does not mean that the permanence of national boundaries is a factor we can ignore - although recent events in Europe would seem to indicate that these same boundaries are still open to flux and redefinition. Culture, however, is not a “permanent” object in any way; always dynamic, transient, constantly shifting, it is nevertheless often read as distinctive, even though this exceptionalism can only be stated in terms of relation to other cultures.

One of the myriad ways culture has been graphed and documented is through the canons of national and regional literatures. Over the past three decades, both American and U.S. Southern literature have experienced canonical earthquakes; the new collections of texts found in the path-breaking Heath and Norton Anthologies of American Literature and the Norton Anthology of Southern Literature indicate that transience and durability are terms we must apply to the concept of canons, especially since the inclusion of texts by women, minorities, and more recently the idea that U.S. Southern literature is also part of a larger whole: the narratives of the circum-Caribbean.

Homi Bhabha has stated that counter-narratives of the nation that continually evoke and erase its totalizing boundaries - both actual and conceptual - disturb those ideological maneuvers through which ‘imagined communities’ are “given essentialist identities.” Constituting the Caribbean world to include its center and rim(s) as a new kind of imagined community is in fact a counter-narrative that questions and critiques the totalizing concept of nation, which blinds its people to the multiple connections with those outside its borders. Of course very often national powers have a vested interest in preventing these kinds

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of recognitions and extensions, for they may lead to efforts at secession and attempts to form new nations - witness the opposition of both former dictator Saddam Hussein and the Turkish government to the bonding of the Kurds. In the more mundane world of "Southern-Lit-Nation" there may well be resistance to the kind of argument I am making today, as it can be read as a threat to the hegemony of the platitudes that have reigned in Southern Studies for decades. However, as I hope to suggest, we can better understand the local through the lens of the transnational and the global, and Southern literature and culture have always transcended the physical boundaries of a geographical South. These assumptions can and will lead us to a new formulation of canon; durable texts (by Faulkner, O'Connor, Wright, and so on) may well be joined soon by what we have seen as "transient" ones (Hurstun's *Tell My Horse*, for instance, Claude McKay's *Banana Bottom*, or Martin Delaney's *Blake*).

Cultural shifts always have a complex background. How have these concepts played out in the United States South and the Caribbean? The pre-contact circumCaribbean had broad bands of differing cultures, and as European conquest proceeded, they were superseded by new ones. We now remember that before the Louisiana Purchase, whose bicentennial we celebrated in 2003, New Orleans was the crown jewel of a Franco-Caribbean empire that spread French culture up the Mississippi and across the Gulf. Further, from the earliest days of exploration, Spanish speaking cultures proceeded from the Hispanic conquest of the Americas, and the American South, currently awash in new waves of Latino immigrants, always had many markers of the long period of Spanish domination, especially in Louisiana, Florida, and Texas. Miami now resonates as a kind of Latino capital, and business and culture often as not is negotiated there in Spanish. A.J. Liebling once claimed that New Orleans is Mediterranean, with allusions to the Greeks, the Italians, the Lebanese and the Egyptians, a comparison that takes in three continents and the Afro-Asiatic roots of Western culture. "Like Havana and Port-au-Prince, New Orleans is within the orbit of a Hellenistic world that never touched the North Atlantic. The Mediterranean, Caribbean and Gulf of Mexico form a homogenous, though interrupted, sea" (Toole 980). This inscription suggests much, especially when we consider the way it annuls boundaries and ethnicity as it insists on a criollo cultural model of coastal rims, ideally thought of as a cradle of myth and legend. Certainly Derek Walcott's *Omeros*, a Caribbean refiguring of Homer's *Odyssey*, takes a similar tack.

The linkage of Homer's great epic to the Caribbean is hardly surprising when one considers the military and trade histories of the two seas, so often coupled with the national mythologies of the surrounding cultures. Then too, we recall some of Homer's opening lines, "Many pains he suffered, heartsick on the open sea," lines redolent of the traffic in the Caribbean in human bodies and the Middle Passage. The poet calls for the Muse to "start from where you will - sing for our time too," speaking of the continuing need for myth, one centered on "one man alone...his heart set on his wife and his return - Calypso, the bewitching nymph, the lustrous goddess, held him back, deep in her arching caverns, craving him for a husband" (Homer 77-78). For the Caribbean has always been seen singing a siren song, and it has taken many registers. For many Southerners the islands beckoned as places where great fortunes could be made. Benedict Anderson has helped us question the origin and maintenance of the idea of nation and nationality, but has also demonstrated how slavishly we have maintained borders in intellectual work. His study ends with consideration of Fernand Braudel's *The Mediterranean*. Braudel, building on the sweeping changes in historiography by his great predecessors, Marc Bloch, Lucien Febvre and the Annales school, mapped a history of region and culture that was based on the lives of individuals, on trade patterns, census reports, and tied it all together with the mesh of all this living and dynamic material on the shores of the great sea he loved. However, in his extensive revision of the first edition in preparation for the work's translation into English, he attempted to do justice to the Ottoman Empire, which at its height controlled more than half of the shores washed by the Mediterranean; he admitted, however, that he was unable to do justice to this task, for much of the information needed was in inaccessible archives in Istanbul - documents, he neglects to say, which were written in non-Western languages. For scholars who

only speak English and French, the shores of Mexico, Central America, and Northern South America are our versions of Braudel's Ottoman coast.

Glissant and his fellow theorist, Antonio Benitez Rojo, find a solution to the isolation of discrete islands through the element that unites them - that is, the sea. This monumental fact of nature nevertheless creates similarities for cultures, both shaping and connecting them, particularly in terms of folklore and myth. Here both scholars take me back to my point about the Mediterranean. Some might take umbrage at the comparison of the Mediterranean and the Caribbean, especially if the South becomes part of the latter, and thus threatens to "re-colonize" the region, but the fact that so many natives of the wider Caribbean region are making this comparison points to the utility of the configuration, at least as it follows Braudel, who pointed out that "[The Mediterranean] is not an autonomous world; nor is it the preserve of any one power..." Further, Braudel declares that in writing his study he sought to "shatter traditional forms" (Braudel I 20). Similarly, Paul Gilroy's *Black Atlantic* forms part of new considerations of the black diaspora, with the Afro-Caribbean at its center.

In my work in progress, *Calypso Magnolia: The Caribbean Side of the South*, I begin by examining the Mexican American War, a struggle that brought massive numbers of U.S. Southerners into contact with the Caribbean for the first time. Most of the combatants shipped to Vera Cruz from New Orleans, some stopping en route in Havana. These three cities had already triangulated the vast trans-Caribbean shipping lanes, which of course had been central arteries for all kinds of trade, including slavery. My chapter focuses on a little-known novel by William Faulkner's same named ancestor, a romance entitled *The Spanish Heroine*, which touches on the war but also oscillates between New Orleans, Vera Cruz, and Havana. I then turn to the travelogues of U.S. combatants Raphael Simms and Edward Manigault, whose memories of Mexico and the Caribbean employ versions of what I call the "tropical sublime."

The ensuing chapter compares the African American writer Martin Delany's *Blake: or the Huts of America* with a novel and non-fictional accounts of what were called filibustering expeditions, private efforts of adventurers to conquer Latin American islands and countries such as Cuba and Nicaragua. Delany's novel concerns the efforts of a free black man to mount a slave insurrection, first in the Southern U.S, and then in Cuba, while seeking the liberation of his wife, who has been sold by U.S. owners to a Cuban plantation. Delany's insurrectionists ultimately hope to colonize an all-black country in Latin America, a goal ironically similar to those of the filibusters, who have no intention of abolishing slavery.

The third chapter, which I will digest here today, concerns the ways in which the Haitian Revolution continues to reverberate for writers of the circumCaribbean. Ishmael Reed's experimental 1972 novel, *Mumbo Jumbo*, depicts an epidemic in America called "jes grew," a parody of the Africanization of American culture, particularly through music and dance. Reed's comic riffs seize on the old shibboleth of blackness as infection, transforming it into a liberating, expansive trope, one that celebrates a dynamic and creative culture. The prologue to the novel takes place in New Orleans, where the epidemic began, presumably after the arrival in the city of the African gods or loas, led by Guede. Reed declares that "Guede got people to write..." This chief loa got to New Orleans early on, as he rode the slaveships as cultural cargo. He had even more adherents after the Haitian revolution brought thousands of Africans from the island to the Crescent City in the early 1800s. They were part of a migration that almost doubled the city's size, making it more than ever a Caribbean metropolis.

Yet long before "Southern Literature" was invented as a field, the Haitian presence in Southern culture had been hushed up. Particularly when slavery still reigned, the island's spectral legacy was regarded, like Reed's "jes grew," as an infection that if acknowledged and released, might spread. Now however, as the new notion of a global South has led us to look at cultural histories and traditions that spread over artificial boundaries, we can finally break the silence on Haiti that the white South enforced for so long, particularly in its literature, which was already even more restricted in its blinkered focus on only the writing of white men. The most shameful connection between the south and the Caribbean was

the slave trade. The importation of slaves to Louisiana began in 1719 with shipment of 500 Guinea slaves. But soon slaves were imported from the Caribbean as well, particularly from Saint Domingue. The French Governor of Louisiana, Bienville, proposed exchanges of Indian slaves for the Africans of Saint Domingue. But after the Saint-Domingue slave revolt of 1791, it was felt that the introduction of the island slaves would foment revolution, and the Spanish Governor Hector banned slave imports from the West Indies (Hanger, 4). Enslaved Africans in St. Domingue seized the opportunity provided by the rupture of the French Revolution to mount their insurrection. Abolitionists linked the struggle to the American Revolution. But the revolt's brutal massacres and the ensuing chaos in the new nation provided slave-owners ammunition in their argument against emancipation. Haiti took on a menacing new aspect after Gabriel Prosser's slave conspiracy of 1800, Denmark Vesey's in 1822, and most significantly, Nat Turner's Virginia slave rebellion, which terrorized the white South in 1831. The Charleston editor Edwin C. Holland thundered that "our Negroes are truly the *jacobins* of the country...*anarchists* and the *domestic enemy*...who would, if they could, become the destroyers of our race." (Cited in Sundquist, 33)

This meant the Haitian Revolution remained a taboo subject in white Southern letters, although black writers saw it as a cause for pride and inspiration. For slave owners, however, the volcanic force of the uprising, and its strong association with narratives and myths of revenge validated the fear that where blacks were in sufficient numbers, they could rape, torture, and kill their hated masters, and destroy the imprisoning and brutalizing plantations and farms. "Jes' grew" indeed; the fear of infection from Haiti found confirmation in the numerous slave rebellions that punctuated Southern history from 1791 to the outbreak of the Civil War. It was feared that black revenge would be exacted *after* the war as well, which had much to do with the swift creation of the Ku Klux Klan, new restrictions on black liberty, and the neo-slavery of sharecropping. Indeed, this reimposition of virtual slavery during Reconstruction had much in common with events in Haiti after the revolution succeeded in 1804, when successive black rulers of the island republic forcibly reharnessed the energies of agricultural workers in an effort to enrich their new black masters. The example of Haiti was cited often and repeatedly in the writings of escaped and freed slaves; one of them, Frederick Douglass, would become minister to Haiti in 1889. William Wells Brown, once a Southern slave, published *St. Domingo: Its Revolutions and Its Patriots* in 1855. "Let the slaveholders in our Southern States tremble when they shall call to mind these events," wrote William Wells Brown. "[...]the day is not distant when the revolution of St. Domingo will be reenacted in South Carolina and Louisiana" (32). But with few exceptions, white Southern writers kept monumental silence on the subject, both before and after the Civil War. This is most surprising in the case of the New Orleans's writers, as thousands of refugees from Haiti poured into the city after the revolt began in 1791. But merely telling the story could give it circulation, and possibly encourage mainland slaves to revolt. As Sybille Fischer has reminded us, this silence was observed in other slave cultures of the Caribbean as well; from 1791 to 1805, the leading Havana newspaper of the time, *Papel Periódico* made no mention of 1) the revolt; 2) the abolition of slavery; 3) the defeat of Napoleon's troops; or 4) the establishment of the independent nation in 1804 (Fischer, 3) Napoleon's defeat at the hands of black slaves was a defeat for slave owners *everywhere*; the "infection" of the hemisphere's first black republic had to be contained, and it was.

Haiti was shunned by other nations for decades, in a manner similar to the United States's attempted "containment" of Castro-style communism after the fall of Fulgencio Batista in the mid-twentieth century. Haitian trade dwindled to a trickle as the collapse of the plantation system destroyed sugar and coffee production, which moved to other locales in Louisiana, Brazil, and Cuba. It is no accident that U.S., and later, Confederate interest in colonizing the latter country increased dramatically around this time.

On the eve of the revolution, in 1791, there were 39,000 whites in the colony, 27,000 mixed bloods, and 452,000 slaves, two-thirds of them born in Africa (Bell, xiii). Louisiana, where French was the common language, clearly offered the best U.S. refuge for exiles. In 1791 New Orleans had 4,446

inhabitants - however, by 1797 the population had doubled, largely from absorbing exiles from Saint Domingue. By 1809, 1,887 whites, 2,060 free Negroes, and 2,113 slaves came to New Orleans from the island. Creoles soon were publishing newspapers, and devoted much space to the events in Haiti. Gradually, they began to espouse the survival of Francophone culture in general in American ruled Louisiana after the purchase. The transfer of thousands of black Haitians to New Orleans, meant that the already existing African inspired religions - particularly hoodoo - became transfused with a more directly African form, Haiti's *vodun* (the word was Dahomean for deity or spirit). This religion, which was practiced by many of the leaders of the Haitian Revolution, had a definite political and empowering element at the time of its admixture with New Orleans hoodoo. The Rada and Petra gods took on more definitely African aspects and modes of ritual and cultural performance were directly influenced and directed by the Haitian traditions.

Not surprisingly, one of the first significant U.S. fictions to employ Haiti was written by a New Orleanean, Victor Séjour (1817-1874). Born to free parents of color, one from San Domingue and the other of Louisiana, Séjour received a fine education in Paris. He began to write journalism and plays after the publication of his remarkable short story, "The Mulatto," (*Le Mulâtre*) in 1837, the first published African American short story.. The tale is rendered initially by an unnamed traveler, but he soon hands the reins over to an old black man, Antoine, who relates the history of a beautiful African girl Laïssa, who is sold to the young planter Alfred. After Alfred rapes her, she gives birth to a son, Georges, but the father tires of them and sends them to live in destitution. Laïssa dies after Georges promises not to look at the portrait of his father she leaves in a bag until his 25th birthday.

Laïssa's funeral rites are clearly African, and no doubt derive from Séjour's knowledge of such practices brought to New Orleans by Haitian slaves after the revolution. Georges, grown, saves Alfred's life, but soon afterwards the latter tries to rape George's wife Zelia, who defends herself, and is thereby sentenced to be hung. Georges takes his son and joins the Maroon colony in the forest. Years later, Alfred, now married, has fathered another son. George poisons the wife and kills Alfred, but the latter's dying words reveal he is his murderer's father, causing George to commit suicide.

Séjour no doubt was attracted to the Haitian scene because he knew it would resonate with his new audience in France, but also because he had knowledge of the island and its revolution from his parents and from Haitian refugees in New Orleans communities of color. The story also echoed many tales of interracial rape, parentage, and revenge in Southern literary narratives, particularly among African Americans, who would begin to write about such situations in increasing numbers after emancipation.

Martin Delany's *Blake: or the Huts of America* (1861) concerns the efforts of the free man of color, Blake, to rescue his wife, who has been sold away from her Southern plantation to one in Cuba. The first half in the novel thus unfolds in the South, the second in the Caribbean. As such, the narrative comprises one of the earliest transnational novels that yokes the two realms. Henry Blake is similar to Mrs. Stowe's George Harris, but with a militant edge. Henry is "black - a pure Negro - handsome, manly...of good literary attainments...educated in the West Indies, and decoyed away when young" (16-17). Here Delany suggests better possibilities for people of color in the islands, where there were indeed many more free blacks. Importantly, Delany creates a communal dimension for insurrection, which will radiate out as he travels onward and meets with other imprisoned communities, first in the South, then in Cuba. This "contagion of freedom" echoes the method that was used before and during the Haitian revolution, which Delany clearly had studied. His preference for a violent revolution on the order of Haiti's stemmed from his deep pessimism about racial prospects in the United States. In a letter to Frederick Douglass, he predicted that to save the Union, the North would eventually reinstall slavery (Levine, 2003, 225), which Napoleon tried to do in Saint Domingue. Moreover, he believed that men of color could never succeed except in societies where they predominated in physical numbers, which explains his choice of Latin America as a site for possible black colonization.

The absence of Haiti, however, in white Southern letters after the Civil war, was, with few exceptions, deafening. The general index to the 17 volume *Library of Southern Literature* (1907) has no entry for Haiti or Saint Domingue, and certainly not for Delany. Perhaps the editors were just working with what they had, for Haiti is notably absent in the literature of the South before the twentieth century.

The index does list voodoo, and the very first volume concludes with an eerie tale by Mississippi born Sherwood Bonner (1849-1883), "The Hoodoo Dance." A strongly Haitian mood is cast when the white young "missy" Dina goes in mufti with her Maum Dulcie to observe a nighttime hoodoo rite. The details of the story make it clear that the participants are being "mounted" by loas, that they are hoodoo "horses."

Grace King's little known but extensive history, *New Orleans: The Place and the People* (1895) contains detailed description of the exiles from St. Domingo. However, the horrors of the Haitian revolution never emerge fully; instead King concentrates on the cultivation of the luxury-loving exiles. As she states, "As a biographer of the times explains, thankful for the escapes they had had from unmentionable horrors, all were contented, satisfied, happy, and more charming men and women than ever (171)." The closest she comes to the bloodshed is "What tales of their escapes the St. Domingo ladies had to tell...the alarm, the flight, the cries of the blood-infuriated blacks in pursuit, the deathly still hiding-place in the jungle; and always, in every tale, the white sails of an English vessel out in the Gulf, watching for signals for rescue...a grandmother spattering with her brains the child in her arms, - or a child shot away from a mother's breast..." (172-174).

The great novel dealing with the immediate effect of the Louisiana Purchase is by King's hated nemesis, George Washington Cable. His *The Grandissimes* (1880) set in New Orleans in 1804 (the same year Haiti achieved nationhood). Depicting the clash of the Creoles and the invading Americans, the novel also closely examined both communities' relationship to slaves and free people of color. The powerful inset story of the novel concerns an African prince who has recently been bought by the Grandissimes, the muscular giant Bras Coupe. He and other Africans in the novel are depicted in a detailed, virtually anthropological way by Cable, whose chief source on African cultures and religions was M. L. E. Moreau de Saint-Mery's *Description topographique, physique, civile, politique, et historique de la partie française de l'île Saint-Domingue*. This monumental work was especially valuable in its description of the Jaloff people, who had been brought to both Saint-Domingue and Louisiana. In the course of the story, Bras Coupe becomes enamored of the mistress's slave Palmyre, who dreams of her champion instigating a slave revolt. Bras Coupe eventually escapes to the swamps, successfully practices vodoun on his white enslavers, is captured, tortured, has his ears cut off, and is hamstrung. The story rehearses, without mentioning, the similarity of Louisiana's Code Noir with maroon bands in Saint Domingue, and the Western African origins of vodoun.

Cable's silence on the subject of Haiti is more remarkable in his non-fiction work of 1810, *The Creoles of Louisiana*. The revolt is barely mentioned when he gets to the 1790s, and only receives lengthier treatment when he comes to the second migration of 1809. That year, the thousands who had fled to Cuba were ejected from that island when Spain and France went to war. Creoles welcomed their West Indian brethren, as they substantially strengthened their communal power. Cable is notably silent, however, about the revolution itself, or about the wide fear all New Orleanians had that "San Domingo" fever would spread to the local slave population.

The Haitian inspired Southern novel that engendered the most interest until lately is *Absalom, Absalom!*. Thomas Sutpen, a poor immigrant from Appalachia, seeks his fortune in Haiti, where he marries a wealthy planter's daughter and fathers a son. "I learned of the West Indies," he tells General Compson, where "poor men went in ships and became rich" (242). Compson himself describes Haiti as

a spot of earth which might have been created and set aside by Heaven itself as a theater for violence and injustice and bloodshed and all the satanic lusts of human greed and cruelty...a little island set in a smiling and fury-lurked and incredible indigo sea, which was the halfway point between what we call the

jungle and what we call civilization, halfway between the dark inscrutable continent from which the black blood...was ravished.

The incredible abundance of the sugarcane is seen as “recompense for the torn limbs.” The irony, of course, is that this description could also be of Mississippi. Faulkner knows enough of voodoo to describe the tokens the French planter finds ominously laid on his pillow. But there is little in the narrative to suggest any deep involvement on Faulkner’s part with the American occupation of Haiti in the 20th century, as some have claimed. For that matter, as Richard Godden has shown, Sutpen could hardly have returned from Haiti with slaves after an insurrection, as the Haitian Revolution had preceded his stay there by some years, and the French had abolished slavery in 1793 (Godden 57). More recently, however, John T. Matthews has demonstrated that Faulkner more likely intends to show that Sutpen, ever an “innocent” of sorts, thought he was working for whites who were really “affranchis,” the mulatto class of the island. Desselins had killed or exiled virtually all whites in the early 1800s.

In any case, Faulkner clearly found the concept of Haiti compelling as something radically different, alien, and at the same time terrifyingly familiar. Faulkner’s lifelong love of the French and the French language must have made this setting appealing as well. It should be noted here that Mr. Compson’s characterization of Haiti is notably condescending and clearly linked above all to race. The slaves are described by Mr. Compson as virtual animals, and it is true that white Southerners were always fearful of slaves imported from Haiti. Just as important, however, was the fact that many if not most of the plantations in the islands had absentee landowners who left their plantations in the hands of overseers. Consequently, slave culture in the islands allowed for far more African retentions and led to less inter-racial sexuality. When it did occur, however, the children were often accepted and educated.

Barbara Ladd points to the ways in which *Absalom* reflects how U.S. nationalism drifted into imperialism. She sees a connection between the racial fears and desires for new territories common to slaveholders analogous to those of late nineteenth/early twentieth century national imperialism. There is no question, however, that whatever he knew about Haiti or the Caribbean, Faulkner made indelible use of the replication and interbraiding of the racial complexities and resultant tragic histories of the islands and his own Mississippi.

Louisiana born Arna Bontemps’s 1939 novel *Drums at Dusk* reminded Western readers of the importance of the ignored “third” revolution of the Atlantic world. Bontemps had Haitian ancestors, and he grew up not far from Pointe Coupee parish, the site of a large slave rebellion shortly after the Revolution. The novel, however, is far more restrained in its presentation than one might expect. Perhaps yearning for large sales, Bontemps deals mainly with the white colonials who ruled Haiti, and only concerns the opening years of the revolution itself. The French protagonist Desaultels belongs to the revolutionary group that had grown up in France as part of the revolution, *Les Amis des Noirs*. He has links with the maroon communities of runaway slaves that are hotbeds of revolutionary activities and vodun rites. Toussaint is a character, but doesn’t come to central stage until relatively late, when the Rebel leader Biassou leads an attack on Toussaint’s plantation of Breda. The emphasis then shifts to Toussaint, who is given more prominence than he actually had, ignoring other leaders and the fate of the country after Toussaint was taken prisoner and taken to France. Vodun itself is kept off-stage, along with any real glimpse of the maroons, and while a few brutal scenes unfold, the extremities of the slaves’s long oppression and the resulting horrors of the initial revolt are not dramatized. For all its faults, however, Bontemps’ novel offered a necessary intervention after sensational works such as John W. Vandercook’s *Black Majesty* (1928) and Orson Welles’s *Voodoo Macbeth* (1931) had kept outsiders fixated on stereotypes of Haitians as voodoo dominated near savages, an image that had helped sustain the long American occupation of the island (1915-1934).

In one of the ironies of history, the most complete and graphic account of the Haitian revolt ever written has come in the past few years in a trilogy of historical novels by a white Southern writer from Nashville, Madison Smartt Bell, that was completed in 2004, the year of the Revolution’s bicentennial. *All*

Soul's Rising, *Master of the Crossroads*, and *The Stone That the Builder Refused* are magnificent achievements that raise the standard of historical fiction; although they are based in Haiti, they relate in myriad ways to Bell's native South. While all three novels deserve extended commentary, I will only address *All Soul's Rising* here.

The trilogy is the product of Bell's sustained research into Haitian history, religion, and culture, and profits from his mastery of French, Kreole, and African-derived rituals of possession.

The novel concludes with a very helpful and quite accurate "Chronology of Historical Events," extending from 1757 to 1805, when Dessalines began the extermination of all whites remaining in Haiti. The insertion of this timetable offers evidence of Bell's determination to create historical fiction that is, in fact, largely true to actual events. However, his multi-layered narrative, which takes care to provide insights from the slaves, mulattoes, *petit* and *grand blancs*, as well as the various European groups represented on the islands, generously embroiders on these facts, offering a dramatization of history through individual and compelling stories, thereby following the method Tolstoy employed in *War and Peace*, whereby actual historical figures such as general Kuzutsov interact with fictional families. Prince Andrew, Pierre, Natasha, Helene and their families in Bell's novel find equivalents in Doctor Hebert, Ninon, Choufleur,

Bell also provides a preface, which summarizes and brings to life what the chronology lays out in cold facts later.

Bell's novel is indebted to several narratives of the revolution which preceded his, particularly the Cuban writer Carpentier's short but powerful novel, *The Kingdom of This World*. The structure, however, which alternates between scenes of Toussaint's imprisonment in France, and the events of the revolution from 1791 up to the 1800s, clearly was inspired by Edouard Glissant's play, *Monsieur Toussaint* (1961), which takes place in Toussaint's cell as he reminisces about his past life. In the introduction to the published version of the play, Glissant admits his own debts to Aimé Césaire's *Toussaint Louverture*, C.L.R. James's *The Black Jacobins*, and Victor Schoelcher's stirring biography. Yet Glissant declares that his drama is "a prophetic vision of the past"...to renew acquaintance with one's history, obscured but obliterated by others, is to relish fully the present, for the experience of the present, stripped of its roots in time, yields only hollow delights. This is a poetic endeavor" (15-16).

In seeking a poetic prose that can simultaneously evoke horror, sensuality, and profound meditation, Bell is following these predecessors artistically, yet he also seems to feel that this history is also his, and the South's. His decision to write about these events seems to have included, on Bell's part, a principled determination to do justice, in a way never before achieved in fiction, both to the tragic experience of enslaved Africans and their heroic revolt against it, but in such a way that would reflect the terrible realities of that struggle. Treated barbarically themselves, their revolt was barbaric in turn. Bell does not flinch from depicting atrocities, but in keeping with his idea, which he shares with Douglass, Du Bois, and other great black intellectuals, that slavery was damning to all that encountered it, all the groups he depicts, the *grande blanc* slaveowners, the *petit blancs* poor whites, the mulattoes, and the slaves themselves, all commit horrible deeds. The temptation to exact revenge is seen inherently related to a seemingly innate human tendency to depravity, yet the whites, who initially are in control in the narrative, are equally brutal without this justification. Bell tempers this by providing fully rounded portraits of numerous people of color in the story, including of course, the actual figure of Toussaint. Perhaps the most poignant and arresting figure, however, after the General, is his soldier Riau - like two thirds of the Haitian slaves, he was born in Africa. His first person narrative, accented with Kreole, richly figured with allusions to the African religious pantheon that he and many other black figures in the novel follow, illustrates his claim: "Their story is not the same as ours. This is a story told by god, but a different god chose me" (27).

Riau is the most salient example of Bell's determination to tell the story of the insurrection from "below," that is from the burning volcano of the enslaved, and their desire for liberation. His mastery of

vodoun, its loas and mysteries, brings the narrative into a virtual other/parallel plane, and demands that the reader accept what in other discourses has been called the “marvelously real,” as when we must believe that a Zombie has actually died and been reborn into a second slavery.

Like Bell, Carolyn Fick, in *The Making of Haiti: Revolution from Below* (1990), steers readers away from loading the whole history of the revolution on the shoulders of the hero Toussaint; instead, she makes a case for the black and mulatto masses, whose African backgrounds, relation to the land, and cultural arrangements on the island gave them a peculiar vision of history. This thematic has been taken up again more recently by Sybelle Fischer, whose *Modernity Disavowed: Haiti and the Cultures of Slavery in the Age of Revolution* (2004) pinpoints the many ways in which Haiti’s story has been shut out of the histories and literatures of modernism. And yet, she notes, the plantation culture of the West Indies was the very model of efficient production, sacrificing human needs to commodity. On a related note, Georg Lukács once said that the transformation of all things into commodities inevitably leads to the debasement of society, and slave culture was the very model of this, as human bodies themselves became not only commodities, but expendable, replaceable tools of production (26).

For this reason, among others, we need to attend more closely to Riau, who gives us access to the immediate antecedents of the armed revolt, when Boukman and other leaders visit maroon communities and plot death for the whites, thereby following in the tradition of the Macandal poisonings that terrified white Haiti in 1757. During the sacred rites, the African loas “ride” humans, who in effect become the gods; Achille is ridden by Ghede, greatest vodoun deity, while Merbillay becomes Erzulie, chief female diety; Riau is ridden by Ogun Feraille, the god of war and iron. These scenes involving African religions are totally convincing, and demonstrate Bell’s mastery of the works of Hurston, Janheinz Jahn, and above all, Alfred Métraux. We come to understand character’s *ti-bon-ange* (the little good angel that is their unique identity) and their *gros-bon-ange*, their life force that maintains life and returns to the gods once death occurs. We also come to see how all the slaves believe We trace the *veve* or sacred designs of the loas, and sing their songs along with the characters, learning some Kreole along the way.²

Always alternating viewpoints, Bell forces us to see the attacks through Riau’s eyes; describing a raid, he refers to himself as Riau, indicating that he has been mounted by Ogun. He murders and rapes, without comment on either action, as pandemonium and horror reigns. Later in the novel, after Revolutionary France has betrayed the black rebels in favor of the mulattoes, Toussaint unleashes Riau and men like him to kill again, but in a more circumspect way. The “new” way is to follow the western mode of combat arms, replete with drill and weapons maintenance, both necessary skills for the looming combat with French battalions now en route to the island.³

For a time Riau deserts the army, and when he returns, Toussaint, at first enraged, softens, and declares that Riau’s son, Little Toussaint, was born free, and to remember it. But Riau thinks “It was Toussaint who forgot that Riau was born free in Guinée. while only he, Toussaint, was born to slavery” (421).

Here Bell reminds the reader that two thirds of the slaves were, like Riau, born free in Africa, and although this novel portrays Toussaint as the hero he was, it also refuses to valorize him above those who brought the revolution “from below” with the aid of their *loas*.

In one of the book’s most powerful utterances, Riau wonders why white men think only Christ could come back from the dead, for the men from Guinée like him survived the “death” of the middle passage.

² The role of the *gros-bon-ange* and *ti-bon-ange* in Haitian culture are explained in Deren 26.

³ As Maya Deren notes, many accounts of the vodoun rite that generated the Revolution state that an old black woman appeared, who sacrificed the black pig. She may have been the original Marinette, or the horse of that figure, who is the major goddess of terror in the Petro nation. The ritual is clearly Petro, both because it is conducted to foster death, and because pig sacrifices are Petro (Deren 63n).

Gruesome scenes of torture, murder, and rape are repeated again and again and it would be pointless to focus on more details. Suffice it to say that Bell clearly refuses to spare us, anymore than the slaves were spared their agonies before the revolt. Kafka said that the role of the artist was to break through the frozen heart of the reader, and here Bell's theater of cruelty matches that of his predecessors such as Jerzy Koszinski in grand guignol of *The Painted Bird*. But we find scenes like these in Faulkner, Wright, Ellison, and other U.S. Southern writers as well, when they detail racial conflict. He would seem to be intent on dramatizing what C.L.R. James asserted in 1938:

The slaves destroyed tirelessly...the destruction of what they knew was the cause of their sufferings; and if they destroyed much it was because they had suffered much. They knew that as long as these plantations stood their lot would be to labour on them until they dropped. The only thing to do was destroy them. From their masters they had known rape, torture, degradation, and, at the slightest provocation, death. They returned in kind (88).

This demonic carnival obeys the rules of the genre - as Bakhtin states, the more usual joyous carnival permits the latent sides of human nature to emerge into expression; all combinations are possible, and all orders can be inverted. Profanation, blasphemy occurs, the body and its appetites are emphasized, and above all, a new mode of interrelationship between individuals is established that contradicts all pre-existing arrangements (Bakhtin, 123). Bakhtin does not take this where I am going, into demonic carnivalization, which is another expression for insurrection of the most extreme kind, as was practiced in Haiti.

This issue of therapy - which contrasts with the alternate thematic of infection - perhaps explains the invention of Dr. Hebert, who starts out as an observer but becomes a participant, and whose attentive eye to nature reveals its medicinal qualities, yes, but also its tropical beauty. In a limpid and tranquil scene, Dr. Hebert bathes off the coast, mingling with pink octopi, sea urchins and minnows in "translucent turquoise" waters. His wound is "healing nicely with no more treatment than the ocean soaks and the herb poultices he'd learned while prisoners of the blacks" (328).

Similarly, after the initial horrors, the long combat of forces begins, and Bell signals the break by having us explore the mountains and rain forest alongside Toussaint and Hebert, taking packed, ancient trails made by the now extinct Carib Indians, trails that later facilitate Toussaint's army's miraculous transits from battle to battle. In these scenes Bell reminds us of the verdant paradise that today's treeless, parched Haiti once represented, when it was indeed the "pearl of the Antilles." Toussaint informs the Doctor that the Caribs are all dead because "they would not be slaves" (253), a stance that now of course has been transferred to the Africans. In the mystical green light of the mountain, under a purpose sky, the Doctor "understood he was in the presence of God" (253).

At novel's end, Dr. Hebert, Nanon, and their son Paul have just escaped the burning city of Le Cap, and after a grueling journey on a mule that recalls the flight into Egypt, they reach L'Ennery, site of Hebert's sister Elise's plantation. Mysteriously absent for the entire novel, she now appears with her new husband Xavier Toquet and their small daughter, who wonderingly comes to look at Paul. In a moving conclusion, Hebert assures the little girl it's alright to greet this little mulatto boy, for he is her cousin.

This final scene of escape, refuge, and reunion, offers up many strands of the novel's great subject, hybridity and its role in survival. Throughout the trilogy, Bell relentlessly portrays new combinations of people, events, catastrophes, and more mundane things, such as novel combinations in herbal medicine, adaptations of Carib Indian ways, legacies from dual ancestries that commingle in various ways. The story is profoundly Caribbean, but has many affinities to the literature of the American South that gave Bell his first introduction to fiction when he was growing up in Nashville.

I cannot here delineate the extension of these thematics and patterns into the final two parts of Bell's trilogy, but I would like to close with a consideration of how these novels fit into a larger framework of CircumCaribbean writing. The great theorist of this tradition has been Edouard Glissant, who endorses Kamau Braithwaite's dictum that the peoples of the Caribbean are linked by a transversal,

submarine unity, one that, Glissant intones, evokes “all those Africans weighed down with ball and chain and thrown overboard whenever a slave ship was pursued by enemy vessels and felt too weak to put up a fight. *They sowed in the depths the seeds of an invisible presence*” (Glissant, 66-67), an utterance that logically extends to the thousands of black killed in the liberation of Haiti. Indeed, Glissant also approves the 1976 Caribbean Festival’s organization around Caribbean heroes Louverture, Marti, Juarez, Bolivar, and Garvey. Clearly, the ways in which Caribbean history has been shattered by western institutions through the device of separation - that is, the forced creation of national rather than regional histories - has forestalled the potential power of a CircumCaribbean historical foundation based on struggles with regional implications, such as those in Haiti, rather than forcing Barbadians to valorize British national heroes, or Guadeloupeans to fixate on French epic narratives.

Bell’s role in all this might be to claim not just Toussaint, but all the heroic figures of the Revolution for a newly configured regional history that includes the United States south, for the “submarine” connections of the diaspora extend powerfully into the full gamut of Southern literature and culture. While Bell is white, the overall thrust of his project - like that of African American writers, particularly those in the South - is not dissimilar from what J. Michael Dash has described as the point of departure of Caribbean literature, namely “the effort to write the subject into existence. Its master theme has been the quest for individual identity. The heroic prodigal, the solemn demiurge, the vengeful enfant terrible, outspoken Caliban - these are some of the pervasive images of the transcendental subject in Caribbean literature [...]. Glissant’s work treats the subversion of the ordering ego and attempts to transcend the monomania of Caliban. What Glissant emphasizes is the structuring force of landscape, community, and collective unconscious” (xiii).

Bell’s recognition of the penetration of African elements into the creolized cultures of the lower United States South and the South of the South led him to see, along with James, Glissant, Walcott, Carpentier, and the many other CircumCaribbean writers not from Haiti, the centrality of that island nation’s revolutionary achievement, and how elements common to its history and theirs - such as a concentration of African people, maroon cultures and histories, and the power of the African religion of *vodun* helped create a spirit of resistance and creativity that has, over the centuries, not died with the specific failures within Haiti, but to the contrary, has, as in Reed’s novel, “jes grew” into a standard of struggle and achievement for people everywhere.

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