Chapter 6

"Les Créoles Galantes?
White Women and the Haitian Revolution

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Women have the right to mount the scaffold. They should have the right to mount to the tribune too.

– Olympe de Gouges, *Declaration of the Rights of the French Woman and Citizen*, 1791)

The only true word [about] the Caribbean is . . . schizophrenia.

– Fignolé

"White Women, Slaves, and Oxen"

In her book on *Slavery from Mary Wollstonecraft to Jamaica Kincaid*, Moira Ferguson underlines the subordinate position of women in general in the colonies of the New World: "white women, slaves, and oxen become part of a metonymic chain of the tyrannized; this association of colonial slavery with female subjugation opens up new political possibilities, despite its ethnocentric dimension".[1] A feminist *avant la lettre*, Mary Wollstonecraft (1759–97) put forward her claims for equal rights at the time of the French Revolution, while contemporaries such as Olympe de Gouges (1755–93), Mme de Staël (1766–1817) and Mme de Duras (1778–1828, author of *Ourika*, 1811) similarly protested against the cruelty of paternalism and the subordination of women, independently of questions of colour. Needless to say, women in France remained far from emancipated at the time of the French Revolution. Olympe de Gouges referred to the oppression suffered by blacks in the French Caribbean, as demonstrated in her dramatic work *De l'esclavage des Noirs ou l'heureux naufrage*.[2]

She died on the scaffold for being the first to defend the rights of French women, and women of colour and slaves in the French colonies. Although their situation was immeasurably better than that of slaves, white and Creole women in the colonies were considered largely the "property" of their husbands, faced neglect and cruelty, and had to find ways to resist the biases of a hypocritical masculine world.

As was true in other European colonies, French women lived in the shadow of their husbands and were deprived of social and political roles. The male-defined world of colonialism and the plantation society not only reproduced a model of the broader patriarchal world, but also rendered white women invisible. When referred to in accounts written by white men, the white woman is portrayed as a victim of the white male's colonizing adventure. The historian Moreau de Saint-Méry, in his *Topographic Description of the Island of Saint-Domingue* briefly summarizes French women's destiny in the French colony of St Domingue: the *Française* or the Creole born lady (of European descent) is said to rapidly lose her charms and youth in France's richest colony.[3] Worse, the wife of the planter was seen as a difficult creature, frustrated about her repressed artistic and emotional aspirations, the subject of all kinds of fantasies, and capable of the worst deeds of jealousy. Not only does she rapidly lose her beauty and youth, her freshness and charms, very often, like her sister in the Deep South, she becomes "the green-eyed monster of slavocracy" taking revenge for the inferior place and minor role that society has defined for her.[4] Because both the circumstances and the status of the white and Creole women remain largely un-documented in colonial and postcolonial literature, white women have remained as invisible and unheard as the illiterate slave. Moreover, in Haiti, most of the planters who survived the slave uprising left the island after the events of 1793–1804, a mass departure of Saint Domingue's whites and free persons of colour that interrupted in Haiti the creolization process that was characteristic of all Caribbean colonies. Most of the French families fled to America (New Orleans), travelled back to France, or to other Caribbean islands (Trinidad, Cuba, Jamaica). As a consequence of that historical turmoil, the white presence in Haiti is even more marginal than it already is on the Dutch, British, Spanish and French Caribbean islands. Subsequently, the Creole language of Haiti uses the word *blanc* (white) to designate every non-Haitian, every individual coming from abroad, whether coloured or not. At the same time, the word *nègre* has lost in Haiti its racial signification to mean simply "man". Except for the notorious Marie Chauvet (*Amour, Colère, Folie*, 1968), who could pass for white but belonged to the coloured elite, and in contrast to writing from other Caribbean

islands, white women writers and white protagonists are generally absent in Haitian literature.[5] It will therefore be the aim of what Hayden White calls "historiographic metafiction" – the counter-narrative generated by overall scepticism and suspicion about the "truth" of history to uncover the Creole lady, silenced and excluded by historians and storytellers alike. In these counter-narratives, dominant versions of particular epochs, struggles and historical figures are revisited, often through a polyphonic lens, with much parody and dense intertextual play. Historiographic metafiction, as Linda Hutcheon similarly observes, is a specific postmodern version of the novel, in that it questions the underlying assumptions of female inferiority, the ideologies of paternalism and the narrative of history as a particular discourse.[6]

While the white woman is a marginal character in most of the novels of the Caribbean and more specifically of the Haitian Revolution, two recent novelists – the American Madison Smartt-Bell and the Haitian Jean-Claude Fignolé – have presented French and white Creole women in detail, bringing them out of the shadows of history. Not only do these authors fill in this historical gap, revising previous portraits of white Caribbean femininity offered by Victor Hugo in *Bug-Jargal* (1846) or by Alejo Carpentier in *The Kingdom of this World* (1949), but they also seek out the reasons – and not the excuses – for the terrible deeds and wrongdoings some mistresses inflicted on the "livestock" of the plantations. However touching and beautiful Carpentier's *The Kingdom of this World* is, neither the slaves nor the white women in that novel speak for themselves; the narrative is conducted by a dominant (white) male omniscient writer who speaks and thinks for the Other (the reader reads Ti Noël's and the planter's wife's thoughts through the mediation of the narrator). Bell and Fignolé recuperate the place and voice of this neglected character, the white women living in France's richest colony on the eve of the revolution. Both authors turn to Haiti's past and some of its most obliterated aspects, notably the white female's contribution to the war on race, filling in the gaps on "proceedings too terrible to relate", to quote Toni Morrison.[7] For Bell, an established, prolific writer born in Tennessee, *All Souls' Rising* is a new and important step in a successful career: famous for his focus on violence (*Doctor Sleep; Save me, Joe Louis*), and for his forays into the underside of America's society, Bell holds a "messianic fascination" for Toussaint Louverture. In planning his work on Toussaint and the Haitian Revolution, Bell discovered that there existed no single historical novel nor a fictional biography of the "master of the crossroad", he who opened all the barriers so that his troops called him "L'Ouverture", or "The Opening". This lack of a fictional biography of Toussaint

brought Bell to conceive a three volume encyclopaedic novel of which the final tome was published in 2004.[8] The second novelist, Fignolé, remains somewhat on the margins of the Haitian canon.[9] Fignolé is not as widely read as René Depestre, Émile Ollivier and Edwidge Danticat (the latter's books having been reviewed by Bell). Fignolé portrays black and white women (*La dernière goutte d'homme*, 1999), and like Bell he published symbolically in the year of Haiti's bicentenary, an avatar of the slave narrative with his *Moi, Toussaint Louverture, avec la plume complice de l'auteur*.[10] It is however his second novel, *Aube tranquille* (1990), in which Toussaint is a minor character, which interests me here because in this work he presents the condition of European and Creole mistresses in a way which is strikingly similar to Bell's presentation of one particularly unforgettable French lady.[11]

Both novelists clearly distance themselves from the classic novels of race and sex set in St Domingue on the eve of the revolution. Instead of race melodramas and colonial romance, subgenres in which the attraction between male and female individuals from different ethnicities has generally been the frame to alter the (presumably white) reader's perception of the black slaves or the coloured subordinates, they enhance empathy and compassion with the slave's condition and consequently suggest the moral damnation of the enslaver. Neither white women nor coloured slaves had a voice in Hugo's *Bug-Jargal* or Carpentier's *Kingdom of this World*, classics which without doubt are well known to Bell and Fignolé. In these works white women cannot speak for themselves. Moreover, where Hugo[12] and Carpentier[13] pass over the (sexual) violence between white and black, the modern authors explicitly present scenes of interracial violation, sexual abuse, torture and murder. In *Aube tranquille*, it is the white female character Sonja Biemme, recently married to the Swiss Wolf von Schpeerbach, who will be feared by everyone because of her merciless punishments and stifling cruelty. In *All Souls' Rising*, Claudine Arnaud, married to the Creole Michel Arnaud, commits the most terrible acts of torture and murder. The two novels can be read as historiographic metafictions in that they parody the century of Enlightenment, deliberately setting the tragedies and turmoil, the inequalities between men and women, the total incomprehension and even annihilation of the women as subjects, their insanity and self-destructive behaviour, against the putative gallantry, "refinement" and "delicacy" of that period. Through many intertextual references to the music, literature and philosophy of that time, the writers show how women, especially women in the colonies, were rarely considered as reasonable beings, gifted with intelligence, deep emotions and feelings. The ideals of romantic

marriage and equal partnership were incompatible with the daily brutalities of managing a Caribbean plantation.

For instance the concept of *marivaudage* – sophisticated banter in the style of the French dramatist and novelist Marivaux, and an invention of the eighteenth century – is mentioned in *Aube tranquille*, but appears hopelessly out of place in the context of slavery and colonization. While Wolf Schpeerbach expresses his admiration for Marivaux, his spouse lives their marriage not at all as a light-hearted *badinage*, but as a life-threatening war. Although her partner withdraws into his own world of fantasy (baroque art and libertine lifestyle) accorded to him by the privilege of birth and origin, she becomes increasingly sour, sad and sadistic, resorting to the most irrational behaviour, and eventually descending into madness. Their love is not at all subject to romance, and as one of Wolf's mistresses remarks, his substitute passions with women of colour – the affairs between master and slave – can never be innocent: they are literally "dangerous liaisons" (another masterpiece from that time, alluded to in the intrigues between Wolf and his white concubine Cécile).

A further example of the disjuncture between cultural productions of the European Enlightenment and the brutal lived reality of the colony is suggested in the reference made by Sonja to the famous opera by Rameau, *Les Indes galantes* (1735), which is said to encounter huge success in Paris, encouraging Parisians to dream about the gallantry and preciousness of the far away Indies and their inhabitants. Wolf, Sonja's self-professed philantropic humanist realizes that he has to give up his enlightened spirit and ideals of European democracy and gallant lifestyle if he wants to maintain authority over an increasingly large number of slaves. Similarly, in *All Souls' Rising* the French doctor Antoine Hébert discusses the bestial cruelty that is all around him, and which takes place in "an age of reason" (p. 185). Wolf von Schpeerbach is forced to face the dilemmas of the Enlightenment: the promises of the French Revolution, of Romanticism – Chateaubriand's success is mentioned (p. 185) – and the threefold ideals of liberty, equality and fraternity. The contradictions of the time are laid bare in the fact that, while he was raised with Salomon, his black nurse's son, he later uses total terror to rule his property, and refuses civil and political rights to people of colour (p. 148). As soon as she arrives in St Domingue Sonja realizes that her husband literally and figuratively does not see her, and does not pay attention to her needs and desires.

Despite their shared focus on white women and their rich mixture of historical fact and creative fiction neither of these novels has yet been analysed in depth, nor

have they ever been compared. There are many reasons for this critical neglect of both narratives. First, most obviously, *All Souls' Rising* is written by an American author, and inclusion of non-Haitian authors in the Haitian canon remains problematic, just as André Schwarz-Bart (Guadeloupe) and Jean Rhys (Dominica) have long been considered outsiders in Caribbean writing. But for an American from the South, the problems of race, class and gender are integral components of his vision of American society and identity. For Bell, the question of who has the right to deal with a narrative challenge as complex as the Haitian Revolution is irrelevant. He firmly defends his "appropriation of voice", reacting against what he calls "splintered thinking" and what another gifted American author, Russell Banks, similarly denounces as "literary ghettoization".

In addition both novels are considered problematic because of their staggeringly violent scenes. The torture of the flesh and its demoralizing effect on the soul of the slave is described in scientific, surgical detail. Whipping and raping, torturing and castrating are pictured in graphic, at times cinematographic writing, which has a deliberately unpleasant and discomforting impact on the reader. One example of this will suffice, one that alludes in both novels to a canonical masterpiece, so to recall that in many senses nothing new happened in the New World, and that all there was a rehearsal of the Old World's barbaric rites and savage acts. Re-enactments of Gloucester's torture from Shakespeare's *King Lear* feature in *All Souls' Rising*, as well as in *Aube tranquille*, where Fignolé presents the Biemme dynasty as a family of cruel and sadistic planters, forever cursed because one of the ancestors is said to have stolen Lord Gloucester's diamond. In *All Souls' Rising*, the mulatto nicknamed Choufleur, the son of Maltrot, a particularly cruel white planter, forces Michel Arnaud to watch an anonymous white man have his eye removed with a corkscrew:

> with a slow precision [he] began to turn [the screw] in. The white man went rigid against the chair back, and from behind the gag came a strangulated retching out. Arnaud's eyes squeezed shut and he bit into his lip. He heard Choufleur's voice in the dark, rapturously tonguing an English phrase.
>
> "*Out, vile jelly*", and in French again, "Does it remind you of the blinding of Gloucester?" He noticed Arnaud then, and slapped him so that his eyes popped open. "Watch, or you will take his place. You must see."
>
> Arnaud obeyed, his lids pinned back. He was having difficulty with his breathing.
>
> "Take out the gag," Candi said, and one of the others quickly did so. What came from the white man's mouth was a kind of sigh, an *aaahhhhh*. .

> . . There was a sucking *plop*, followed by a shout of appreciation all around the room. The eyeball was larger than Arnaud would have thought possible, and pudgy, like a dumpling. It depended from a number of white twisting tentacle-like cords, till someone reached with a knife to cut it completely free. (p. 199)

Not only are eyes taken out, legs cut off, prisoners skinned and crucified in Bell's novel, but first whites and then blacks will raise heads and even infants' unborn bodies on spears as terrible prizes of war (p. 185).

It comes as no surprise, than, that the few reviews in the French and francophone realm of *All Souls' Rising* have been negative. The violence of sex scenes in particular reviled critics like Léon-François Hoffmann who judges Bell's work to be pornographic literature.[14] Hoffmann's disapproval however obliges me to think about the "acceptable" representation of the suffering body of the slave, in its relation to its effect, be it voyeurism and sadistic pleasure or empathy and compassion. Clearly there is no "easy" way to present this kind of extreme suffering, mutilation and killing, but as Bell recalls, it is part of the historical truth of the Caribbean's past.

Another reason for the critical neglect of both novels is their complex structure and rich tapestry of historical facts and figures; fictional elements as well as unconscious fantasies are interwoven so as to blur the realm of the real and the imaginary. The dense fabric of the narratives might dissuade even the most skilled reader or scholar of Caribbean writing; the multiplicity of narrative perspectives, and the presence of various historical and spatial worlds, especially in Fignolé's narrative, do not make for straightforward reading. The historical scope of the works is monumental. *All Souls' Rising* is an exceptionally long novel at more than five hundred pages long, whereas *Aube tranquille* narrates in two hundred and seventeen pages five centuries of Haitian history in a narrative that is without ordering principle, punctuation or chapters. Bell's linear historical novel is encyclopaedic in its accurate details and yet it also reconstructs imaginatively the perspective of a voiceless slave, Riau, inventing a stilted, though eloquent type of speech for the maroon figure. On the other hand, Fignolé is (like Glissant and other Caribbean writers) deliberately hermetic and opaque. As a co-founder of the "spiralist movement", a loosely defined literary movement breaking with indigenism in a reaction to Duvalierism, Fignolé, together with the late René Philoctète and Frankétienne, dismantles literary conventions and promotes chaos as a narrative principle. His novels are puzzles of meaning and demand a "participative" effort on the part of the reader. Fignolé brings into

focus Haiti's "nightmare of History", to rephrase Joyce, and he denounces the "Caribbean ailment", the fact that all Caribbean communities developed what he calls a "pathology of expectations". Haitians in particular, says Fignolé, have not come to terms with the foundational madness, the violent beginnings of their country. Consequently, Haiti spirals downwards, as Fignolé states in an article in a special issue of *La Revue Noire*:

> Whichever way we look, the Caribbean is outburst. Of sweat and blood. Posted from the finite of the earth to the infinite of the heaven.
>
> Brought up from the South to the North, if it's not the other way round, sailing, indefinitely turned towards the West. . . . Imagination thus binds us to references which trap reality: chains of islands scattered into as many archipelagos. Chains? As if to plot out in advance for the Caribbean a destiny other than of suffering fits of tectonic Anger. CRUCIFIED!
>
> The only true word [about] the Caribbean is . . . schizophrenia.[15]

Both *Aube tranquille* and *All Souls' Rising* are particularly challenging because their women characters are capable and culpable of the most unthinkable and staggering atrocities. Claudine Arnaud (and to a lesser extent other Creole ladies, like Isabelle Cigny and Elise Thibodet, Hébert's sister) in *All Souls' Rising* and Sonja Valembrun Lebrun in *Aube tranquille* are monsters who display sadistic behaviour, pitiless creatures who slaughter their husband's concubines. But as the narratives unfold, the reader learns how prior to these bestialities, they repeatedly had to deal with the infidelity and betrayal by their husband, with excesses of interracial sex and violence in the household and plantation. *All Souls' Rising* and *Aube Tranquille* both focus on the black body as the most important site in the racial and gender wars. The skin and the womb were the eminent sites of power and counter-power in the hellish life of the plantations, as Françoise Vergès aptly shows in her essay on literature from the Indian Ocean.[16]

The Womb, the Unbearable "Métissage"

Claudine and Sonja are driven to take revenge on what is the most precious "possession" on the plantation: their husbands' lovers. Both women understand clearly the dreadful law of atrocious tyranny and bloody rituals perpetrated by the master in order to guarantee his "safety" over the oppressed majority. Claudine formulates these "sacraments" in *All Souls' Rising*: "All over the island masters and slaves were

expressing their relation in similar ways, and it was nothing to lop an ear or gouge an eye, even to cut off a hand, thrust a burning stake up a rectum, roast a slave in an oven alive, or roll one down a hill in a barrel studded with nails. All these were as sacraments, body and blood" (p. 89).

Driven insane by loneliness, boredom, but most of all by the repetitive scenes of adultery committed in her own home, Claudine withdraws into alcoholism and loneliness. When her husband leaves her for business in the city, she seeks solace in alcohol, a common refuge for alienated white women (think of the second woman of Lenormand de Mézy in *The Kingdom of this World*). Claudine whips Mouche, the pregnant slave, but loses control over the situation when she hears the young rebellious slave sing in her native language. All of a sudden, her hands cut out the foetus – her husband's child – from the womb:

> Mouche's body opened down the plumb line to the center and beyond, like a banana peel splitting down its seam. The blade furrowed through a whitish layer of fat; there was no blood, oddly, until the viscera slithered and slapped down tangling over Claudine's feet, and then she bled. . . .
>
> She stepped back and looked down, inexorably, at the snarl of vitals on the dirt floor. Something else was among them, pulsing inside its membranous sac; it was not exactly independent life, but it still lived a little, as her organs were still slightly living, though Mouche was certainly dead. (pp. 91–92)

Examples of this kind of unbearable butchery, described in clinical detail, are recurrent in the novel and naturally have a traumatizing effect on the slaves as well as on the colonizer. Witnessing the scene, some of the slaves escape from this madwoman and plan a rebellion which will be, as a consequence, just as "inhuman" and bestial. The author deliberately and provocatively confronts us with dreadful deeds such as these that have to be recalled, since Haiti and France have to come to terms with the origins and ongoing turmoil and torments of the Republic, in order to avoid their insane repetition and the "addiction to death", which more than one anthropologist has observed in modern-day Haiti.[17] Forever haunted by her own inhuman acts, Claudine feels trapped in a spiral of never-ending violence. Like Sonja in *Aube tranquille*, who realizes that slavery degrades both master and slave (p. 104), that it has created a barbaric, insane world for which they will have to pay one day (p. 85), Claudine becomes acutely aware of the haunting character of her insane acts of violence, which subsequently cuts her off from reality and makes her slip into the realm of the zombie-like priestess:

> But always the thing [the foetus] returned, and when she least expected it – she never learned to expect it, but she might wake to find it settled on her navel, wiggling in a puddle of afterbirth and staring down at her with a dolphin's black eye, or, during her solitary ramblings through the house, it might come on suddenly from out of the other rooms. It had a metamorphic power and it showed her all its changes from a dot of plasma to a fish into a being like herself, but it let her know that her own being was as futile as some ancient extinct beast. (p. 93)

As in *Aube tranquille*, the generations that follow long after this savagery have to "account for", not to pass over such facts in order to mourn the dead and not to surrender to amnesia. However much the perpetrators of these deeds try to forget and erase this history, their offspring are doomed to come back to it.

The Skin, the Unbearable Mask of Difference

Claudine dreams of the harsh violations that marriage and her husband Michel Arnaud have inflicted on her; as he lies fatigued in the adjoining room with Mouche, she recalls her wedding bed, "the great carved wooden monstrosity where he had murdered her virginity, left her stabbed and bleeding in her tenderest recess while he amused himself with the better-experienced whores of the town" (p. 85). Not much later the young married woman discovers the harsh laws of Creole marriage, which oblige both master and slave to hide their feelings, to wear a mask. What Sala-Molins has aptly called "the underside of Enlightenment", the hidden realities of an age of reasoning by fine and delicate philosophers, by gallant elites and rich aristocrats is demonstrated in both novels, situated as they are at the birth of modernity.[18] Every reference to the Enlightenment becomes highly ironic, if not pathetic; the authors prove how the spirit of that time was incompatible on all levels with the daily reality of the plantation household. In other words, how hypocritical France was and how long after the decline of this colonial empire, France still hesitates before admitting the manifold wrongdoings and damages, preferring to celebrate the conquests and national heroes of the nation. As is shown through the interior monologue and conversations of the female characters, French colonialism in St Domingue involved insensitive masters mistreating their "livestock" and implied a constant and terrible masquerade. Hence the motif of the mask in both novels as a symbol of the master-slave dialectic.[19]

In *Aube tranquille*, Sonja's husband symbolizes the colonial moral dilemma in the age of Enlightenment. Born in the Jura and having Calvinist origins, Wolf

initially takes a righteous, neutral stand on the French debate over slaves' rights. While aspiring to free the slaves and to improve their miserable and inhuman condition, Wolf confesses that he is too weak to take such a measure and admits that he failed, being totally passive to intervene in the insane society based on terror and inhumanity (p. 89). Yet, he does not undertake any measure to better their desperate lives or to intervene for the slaughter of his very young concubine, Carmen, whom Sonja literally skins:

> Boto made an incision in the skin at the base of the neck, introduced in the narrow orifice a previously hollowed-out thin stem of *palma Christi*, he blew into it, the skin swelled up immediately, the disjoining was first like a hissing sound, almost imperceptible, then the veins cracked, fixed the throbbing torn skin in Carmen's throat. Behind the shutters of my office, I witnessed the slow agony of the flesh, I did not intervene. (p. 20)

An unbearable rift later tears Sonja and Wolf apart. In both novels, the married couples are set apart, as their husbands betray them and make bastard children with their coloured concubines: "She, Claudine, had conceived no child; Arnaud, however, had been sure to prove that this was in no way his fault; her husband's face grinned back at her from every yellow brat in the yard" (p.85). The two planters are completely blind to their wives' frustrations and disappointments. Upon arrival at the plantation, Sonja is immediately treated as an unwelcome intruder:

> I had wanted your weakness, I discovered it in her most primitive substance, the most bestial, infamous, cries of joys for your homecoming, you come out of the barouche that we hired in Jérémie, the hysterical clan of women around you, their gibberish, their childlish talk, the sensitive words of which I only remember *bonjou mèt, mèt, retou nou kontan*, that little black talk assailed me, repelled me, even before they knew me. (p. 80)

Judged as an outsider by the black slaves and domestics, the French lady is considered an intruder. Consequently Sonja immediately hates the black domestic servants and slaves. Much later in the novel, another reason for her racism becomes clear: "a certain Biemme de Valembrun Lebrun . . . gave justification to the rabble who opposed us, demeaned, degraded his own family" (p. 134); her ancestor having brought "negroes" to France and therefore publicly scandalised his family, his hands cut off by order of Louis XIV, who had forbidden entrance to blacks in France (p. 80). It is suggested that these stories of her family being cast

out because of her great-great-grandfather's involvement with the "inferior race" are in part responsible for Sonja's turbulent character:

> when I was a little girl, I listened to the memory of the storms of Brittany, terrified by the whistling of the wind through the ramparts of the castle, the roaring of the waves breaking against the cliffs . . . . In Saint Domingue, it's not the same thing, as in a hallucination, hallucinating, the night snaps its fingers, then a tree collapses in a great din, which is preceded by an immobile silence, but immediately taken over by the apocalyptic wailing of noices, . . . I open myself to all those unknown noises . . . they are stormily sensitive, mortally perverse, madly exciting, they liberate in me a chaos of barbaric blood of the Valembrun Lebrun dynasty, I cried out and frenetically, I was no more but a hurricane. (p. 134)

This incursion into Sonja's youth reveals how her senses were influenced by nature's tempestuousness, and how her transfer to the Caribbean island intensified this disposition, culminating in an untamed, "savage" frame of mind. The violent nature of the island echoes the violent, apocalyptic events that take place on their plantation. Femininity in those times was clearly defined by maternity, the need to provide an heir for the plantation. In the colonies, a white woman had no other task or responsibility than to raise the future commanders and rulers of slaves. Whereas Claudine Arnaud is rejected by her husband because of her infertility, Sonja will give birth to the heir but will show no maternal affection, as a reaction to Wolf's weakness and unfaithfulness, which creates a gap between them that only deepens as time passes. Sonja will try several times to convince her husband of the inhumanity of the system and to leave the colony before it is too late. She even suggests that Salomon, the gifted and beautiful mulatto, who reminds the reader of Soliman in Carpentier's novel and is the overseer of the plantation and her husband's *frère de lait* ("milk brother") should take over the management of their plantation so that they could return to France. This *nègre à talents* inspires more than just profound admiration in Sonja's head and heart; she nourishes secret feelings for the slave. Sonja argues with her husband about the constant tension between rules and rights, between reason and emotion; she tries to save them both from the downward spiral of slavery. Altered by the discovery of her forbidden love, confused by her feelings but determined to punish the man who dared to resist her seduction, she informs her husband, who ignores her. To prove that she can stay and maintain her place as the wife of a white planter who looks down on all coloured people, she will go so far as to destroy the very object of

her sincere love by mutilating and castrating him herself, in front of Saintmilla, the Vodou-like character of Fignolé's novel. This kind of slaughter counters the interracial romanticism offered in some novels dealing with slavery in the Caribbean, and at this point of the narrative, the reader is left wondering about the reasons for such an act. At the moment of her most extreme agony, Sonja still finds Salomon's body beautiful, and it is this precise, distorted emotion that clearly underscores her total loss of reason: "I'm troubled, to change my vision, his naked beauty, virile, an impression of serene force as if misfortune has made him more mature, a force, I would like to share his pain, feel the same joy of being unhappy together" (p. 168). Total chaos and madness seem to have taken over.

The novel ends with the complete ruin of the Valembruns: Sonja will be decapitated in a kind of "souls' rising" by a mob of armed zombies led by Toukouma, a woman warrior who was brought to Saint Domingue and violated several times at age thirteen to the point where she could not walk nor conceive children. With the approval of Saintmilla, mother of Salomon and wet nurse of Wolf, and magical healer of Toukouma, the white sorceress now suffers the same painful death as the one inflicted upon her son, who was chastised and castrated by Sonja.

Creole Ladies and Their Hearts of Darkness

Both *All Souls' Rising* and *Aube tranquille* bring to the forefront white women at the time of the uprisings in St Domingue; in each novel, the behaviour and despotism of the white and Creole women bring the colony into the spiral of violence, which will in turn bring St Domingue to its fall. Have Bell and Fignolé exaggerated the female ferocity and the "abnormal" behaviour of Claudine Arnaud and Sonja Biemme de Valembrun Lebrun? Revising Moreau de Saint-Méry's stereotype of the white lady in the colonies, both authors, through their historiographic metafictions, show how race hatred of white women developed as a kind of indirect revenge against their betraying husbands, how the worst of their behaviour was generated by their own miserable condition as women, and how they gradually shifted from contesting and rebelling wives to overt outrage and destructive, criminal deeds committed on both the slaves and themselves. The extremes of racial hatred are coldly programmed acts of revenge for being "othered" by the plantation universe. White women, as portrayed in Bell's and Fignolé's novels, bear chains of slavery, which if not identical to those of the blacks, are similar in that they generate the same dehumanising, compulsive acts. Bell

and Fignolé offer chilling evocations of what some white women became in the Caribbean as a consequence of neglect and frustrations. If they suggest explanations for the white women's behaviour, the authors avoid excusing them. Without moralizing or being apologetic, the novels shed light on the marginal, invisible, subaltern white female in such a brutal, racist and inhuman society. They remind us how this violence existed at the origin of the Republic, and that this violent birth of Haitian society has to be memorized, just as the heroes of the revolution are remembered.

Notes

1. Moira Ferguson, *Colonial and Gender Relations from Mary Wollstonecraft to Jamaica Kincaid* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 22.

2. Olympe de Gouges, *De l'esclavage des Noirs ou l'heureux naufrage* (1793; repr., Paris: Ed. Côté-Femmes, 1989).

3. Moreau de Saint-Méry, *Description topographique, physique, civile, politique et historique de la partie française de l'Isle de Saint-Domingue (1784–1790)*, 3 vols., 3rd ed. (Paris: Publication de la Société française d'histoire d'outre-mer, 2004), 39.

4. Minrose Gwin, "Green Eyed Monsters of the Slavocracy: Jealous Mistresses in Two Slave Narratives", in *Conjuring Black Women: Fiction and Literary Tradition*, ed. Marjorie Pryse and Hortensia Spillers (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1985), 39–45.

5. Evelyn O'Callaghan, contesting Braithwaite, observes that white women did contribute to a Creole culture in Barbados, Antigua and Jamaica. Evelyn O'Callaghan, "Politically Correct: Marginalisation and Early Narratives of the West Indies by White Women", in *Centre of Remembrance: Memory and Caribbean's Women Literature*, ed. Joan Anim Addo (London: Mango Press, 2002), 235–53.

6. Linda Hutcheon, "Historiographic Metafiction: The Pastime of Past Time", in *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 1988).

7. Toni Morrison, "Unspeakable Thoughts Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature", *Michigan Quarterly Review* 28, no. 1 (1989): 1–34.

8. Madison Smartt-Bell, *All Souls' Rising* (New York: Pantheon, 1995). All references are to this edition. The two other tomes are *Master of the Crossroad* (New York: Penguin, 1996), and *The Stone that the Builders Refused* (New York: Pantheon, 2004). The last title refers to the French rejection of Toussaint's idea of a free nation, ruled by democratic principles and resulting in a successful plantation economy.

9. Apart from Yves Chemla's insightful comments on the predominance of the female and the multi-layered narrative in *Aube tranquille* ("Entrée dans une spirale" on his personal website, http://homepage.mac.com/chemla/fic_doc/aub_tranq.html), this novel has been excluded from essays on spiralist writing. Cf. Philippe Bertrand, *Rêve et littérature*

romanesque en Haïti. De Jacques Roumain au mouvement spiraliste (Paris: Karthala, 2003), as well as from comparative studies on the Gothic and marvellous real, Colette Maximin, *Littératures caribéennes comparées*, Paris: Karthala, 1996. Colette Maximin studies at length Fignolé's first novel, *Les Possédés de la pleine lune*, and she interprets the lunacy of descendants of slaves as the protest of the author against a violent past and the ongoing repression in modern Haiti.

10. Reviews of *Moi, Toussaint Louverture, avec la plume complice de l'auteur* (Montreal: Ed. Plume et Encre, 2004) are rare. One is available online:

http://www.biblio-select.com/librairie/catalogue/product_info.php?products_id=319.

11. The first one is *Les possédés de la pleine lune* (Paris: Seuil, 1987) which encountered some critical attention and was said to be "promising". Three years later Fignolé published a second volume of what he announces as a trilogy, *Aube tranquille* (Paris: Seuil, 1990). All references are to this edition.

12. Also, in *Bug-Jargal*, the narrator spares us from the most upsetting effects that some evocations might have on our sensitive (and civilized) minds: "Numerous others have portrayed the first disasters of Le Cap, consequently, I pass rapidly over memories full of blood and fire; I will limit myself to tell you that the slave rebels were in possession of, as was told, of Dondon, Terrier-Rouge, the city of Ouanaminte, and even of the unfortunate states of Limbé, which made me very upset given its proximity to Acul." In *Bug-Jargal*, trans. K. Gyssels (Paris: Press Pocket, 1985), 72–73.

13. As subtle as Carpentier's baroque prose might be, *The Kingdom of This World* shows us Lenormand de Mézy who can have all the servants he desires, while the white and Creole lady has to keep the "terrible secret" of racial mixing. Take for instance chapter 3, "L'Appel des Buccins": the insurrection is about to take place. We have the omniscient narrator describing how the master is extremely bothered by the turmoil in the colony, meditating on what he should undertake (or not) to prevent a slave insurrection. Looking for some distraction, Lenormand de Mézy is on his way to the tobacco house with an intention that the narrator presents as only "natural", inherent to the habits and customs of the planters at that given time: "It must have been ten o'clock in the evening when Monsieur Lenormand de Mézy, under the weight of his meditations, went into the tobacco entrepôt with the intention of raping one of the young slaves who came at that hour to steal tobacco leaves. *Le Royaume de ce monde* (Paris: Gallimard, 1954), 70.

On his way to rape one of his slaves, the master witnesses how the main buildings were invaded by rebellious blacks. As the slaves take all they can, some profit from the situation to finally realize their racial fantasies and forbidden dreams, and Ti Noël's thoughts are again rendered indirectly: "Afterwards he went upstairs, followed by his eldest sons, since he dreamed since a long time of raping Miss Floridor, who in the nights of tragedy (theatre) still showed beautiful breasts which have not been altered by the years under a dress with Greek motifs" (p. 72). It is clear that the narrator does not actually confirm if the rape takes place, but only suggests it.

14. Léon-François Hoffmann, "Prolégomènes à l'étude de la représentation de la Révolution haïtienne en Occident", *Anales del Caribe* 9, no. 20 (1999–2000): 364. I can think immediately of one particular scene which indeed calls for the term "voyeuristic" and pornographic. When Riau and his fellow runaways invade the Lambert plantation, they rape both Mme Lambert and her daughters, forcing the master to watch the scene. The illiterate "maroon" who in Bell's novel is a major voice, Riau gives us his report on the gruesome details of this scene: "Then the Noé *commandeur* had a new idea and got himself behind the master and throttled him slowly with a lace from one of the whitewoman's dresses, holding him so he was forced to watch [the rape of a younger whitewoman, her bared body flopping on the floor like a skinned fish, crooked elbows working like fins in water]. Each time he tightened the master's eyes went white, and his tongue stuck out of his blackening face while the commandeur cried out in a loud voice, 'See! I am making a new nigger here!' . . . Under the strangulation the master's member rose and pointed and the commandeur called out thunderously, 'See how the whiteman is ready to take his pleasure!' . . . But he held the lace too long so that the whiteman died. . . . Riau finished and got up, scrambling for the knife he'd dropped when he began" (p. 172).

15. Jean-Claude Fignolé, "A Poetics of Schizophrenia", *Revue noire* 6, "Afrique, Caraïbe, Haïti: Schizophrénie, Art", http://www.revuenoire.com/anglais/essay/TH5.html

16. Françoise Vergès, *Monsters and Revolutionaries: Colonial Family Romance and Métissage* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999).

17. Laënnec Hurbon, "Violence et raison dans la Caraïbe: le cas d'Haïti", *Notre Librairie* 148 (July–September 2002): 117.

18. Louis Sala-Molins, *Les misères des Lumières: Sous la raison, l'outrage* (Paris: Laffont, 1992).

19. Both novels draw on the (iron) mask to denounce the false appearance of colonial society with its rigid rules and hypocrisy. This is most notably the case with *Aube tranquille*, in which one of France's most famous legends, which has inspired numerous books and movies, is introduced: "The man with the iron mask", one of Sonja's ancestor's having stolen an iron mask which haunts the castle since then. By taking the idea of the mask in the Biemme de Valembrun's castle, Fignolé not only sets his novel in the Gothic tradition, to make tangible the haunting of the past of wrongdoings which will have to be paid back by subsequent generations, but he also reflects upon insanity as a consequence of oppression and subalternity. It is highly significant that his protagonist is a nun, Soeur Thérèse, who embarks on the Air France Millennium flight to Port-au-Prince. The "iron mask" fascinated Alexandre Dumas-père, himself son of a Haitian slave, in *L'homme au masque de fer* (1839–41) as well as Voltaire, in his *Le Siècle de Louis XIV* (1751).