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Salomé Montoriol

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IMAGES OF THE SEA IN THREE CARIBBEAN WOMEN'S TEXTS

Jamaica Kincaid's *At the Bottom of the River*, Grace Nichols's *I Have Crossed an Ocean* and Olive
Senior's *Hurricane Watch*

MÉMOIRE

MONTORIOL Salomé

Directrice de mémoire : POULAIN Alexandra

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“The Sea is History”

Derek Walcott



Figure 1 - Édouard Glissant at the Anse Caffard Memorial



Figure 2 - Anse Caffard Memorial, Le Diamant, Martinique

« Homme libre, toujours tu chériras la mer ! »

Charles Baudelaire

“Where are your monuments, your battles, martyrs?
Where is your tribal memory? Sirs,
in that grey vault. The sea. The sea
has locked them up. The sea is History.”

Derek Walcott

“History is a river
That flow to the sea
Laced with the bone of memory”

Grace Nichols

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	8
General presentation of the corpus	10
Contextual elements	12
Theoretical framework and underlying concepts	12
Literature review	14
Research question.....	16
CHAPTER I - Liquid biographies: Jamaica Kincaid’s <i>At the Bottom of the River</i> and Howardena Pindell’s <i>Autobiography: Water/Ancestors/Middle Passage/Family Ghosts</i>...	18
A – Water and self-discovery in Kincaid’s work.....	18
a. Introduction to <i>At the Bottom of the River</i> (1983) in parallel with <i>Lucy</i> (1990).....	18
b. Finding one’s identity “at the bottom of the river”?	20
c. Ambiguous depths: an imaginary world in the river’s bed or a mere reflection?	21
B – Subaquatic subtexts: an underwater world full of intertexts	23
a. From crossing the river to crossing texts.....	23
b. “The unity is submarine”: the river as a choir of voices	25
c. Subverting the canon?	26
C – Exploring parallels with Howardena Pindell’s <i>Autobiography: Water/Ancestors/Middle Passage/Family Ghosts</i> (1988)	28
a. Introduction to the work of Howardena Pindell: “texturing abstraction”	28
b. The <i>Autobiography</i> series (1980-1995)	30
c. <i>Autobiography: Water/Ancestors/Middle Passage/Family Ghosts</i> (1988).....	33
d. Water and History	34

CHAPTER II - “I have crossed an ocean / I have lost my tongue / From the roots of the old one / A new one has sprung”: the sea as an image of a split identity in Grace Nichols’s *I Have Crossed an Ocean* and Isaac Julien’s *Paradise Omeros*..... 36

A – “Life Between Islands”: the sea, in-betweenness and exile in Grace Nichols’s *I Have Crossed an Ocean* (2010)..... 36

 a. The Windrush generation in *I Have Crossed an Ocean*..... 36

 b. An Ocean Apart: Black life in England in *The Fat Black Woman’s Poems* 38

 c. “The Sea returns to haunt this carnival” (*Sunris*): crossing the Ocean, a biographical image with historical resonances 42

B – “Je te salue, vieil océan”: the ocean as a digénèse in *I Have Crossed an Ocean*..... 44

 a. “Africa, how to begin / After all dis time and water” (*Sunris*): reading Grace Nichols through Édouard Glissant’s “Open Boat” 44

 b. “I, Cariwoma Watched History” (*Startling the Flying Fish*): spreading re-echoes of Derek Walcott’s “The Sea is History”? 48

 c. “She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks”: breaking with the silence of the sea and gathering a sea-archive with M. NourbeSe Philip’s *Zong!* (2008) 52

C – Visual fragmentation as a form of creolization: images of the sea in Isaac Julien’s *Paradise Omeros* (2002) 56

 a. Isaac Julien: creolization through the aesthetic of the “remix” 56

 b. *Paradise Omeros* (2002): an “inquiry of creoleness” 58

CHAPTER III - The sea between “shell”-shocks and reconstruction: Olive Senior’s marine ecopoetics and the leitmotiv of the shell in <i>Hurricane Watch</i> in parallel with Ellen Gallagher’s <i>Watery Ecstatic</i> series.....	63
A – Exposing the “shellshocks” of History.....	63
a. Senior’s poetic of the seemingly insignificant and the motif of the shell	63
b. “Shelling” the marks of History	67
c. “Pass it on”: the shell, memory and the song of History.....	70
B – “So far from the sea I find myself / worldless”: reinventing marine life as a shelter ..	74
a. “Recovering the land through imagination”: resisting colonial disruption	74
b. Senior’s “language of the landscape”: natural life as an extension of human life ..	76
c. Recovering the mythological relationship to the sea?.....	79
C – Ellen Gallagher’s “kingdom underwater” in dialogue with Olive Senior: reinventing a submarine resistance.....	82
a. “It’s all subtle and submarine”: Ellen Gallagher’s fantastic oceanography	82
b. Afrofuturistic visions, the myth of Drexycia as a counterdiscourse	84
CONCLUSION.....	90
TABLE OF ILLUSTRATIONS	94
BIBLIOGRAPHY	95

INTRODUCTION

Always, unfettered man, you will cherish the sea!
The sea your mirror, you look into your mind
In its eternal billows surging without end
And its gulfs are bitter, so must your spirit be.

Charles Baudelaire, “Man and the Sea”

As epitomized by Baudelaire’s poem “L’homme et la mer”, the topos of the sea is a common theme in poetry. Highly lyrical, the flow and unpredictable restlessness of the ocean supposedly reflects the whirlwind of the poet’s emotions. In the Western lyrical tradition, the sea appears as intrinsically linked to the notion of freedom and of the universal. It is not surprising that Baudelaire should dedicate his poem to “l’homme libre”, for whom the ocean connotes the unknown, an “invitation to travel” and for whom it is an infinite source of poetic inspiration. Paradoxically, although potentially violent, the ocean embodies a deserted and silent space allowing the poet to give free rein to his imagination. That is why the sea stands as a poem—Saint-John Perse thought of it as a textual element (he famously wrote “Textuelle, la Mer”). In Nathaniel Hawthorne’s poem “Ocean”, the depth of the ocean is depicted as peaceful and harmonious: “The Ocean has its silent caves, / Deep, quiet and alone; / Though there be fury on the waves, / Beneath them there is none”.

However, far from the notion of freedom and escape, the sea bears drastically different connotations in the context of Caribbean history. While it stands as a metaphorical blank page for Hawthorne, and more generally for European poets, on which to write down their feelings, it is on the contrary a historical palimpsest for Caribbean writers, one that is overloaded with History. It is a prison, both literally and figuratively. Indeed, beyond being of obvious historical resonances, as it witnessed the arrival of the conquistadors and of the slave ships, the sea represented a genuine prison to the maroon or runaway slaves who had no way to escape the plantations without being confronted to the prison of water. That is why the sea qualifies as a limit, far from its Western connotation of emancipation. On the contrary, in Caribbean literature, the sea is mostly associated with collective trauma and a feeling of entrapment—and even madness, in Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea*.

In *Poetics of Relation*, Martinican thinker and poet Édouard Glissant proposes an alternative portrayal of the ocean to the Western poets': instead of the calm, indigo blue of the ocean, he writes about the "abyss" and "the depths of the sea". The hold of the slave ships is depicted as "pregnant" with accumulated bodies, in a dreadful tension between life and death. As Derek Walcott underlines, "the Sea is History". The evidence of history and the martyrs of slavery have all vanished into the great vault of the ocean, and yet the ocean is a constant reminder of the tragic history, associated to the drowning and death of millions of people.

Hence a very different vision of the sea for Caribbean writers than Western poets, yet this theme is omnipresent in Caribbean literature too, whether it be Saint-John Perse's *Amers* (1957), Édouard Glissant's *Sel Noir* (1960) or Derek Walcott's *Omeros* (1990). To illustrate his founding theory of creolization at the heart of Caribbean identity, Édouard Glissant resorts to the metaphor of the archipelago, a plurality of islands connected yet separated by a body of water. In this sense, the sea can be regarded as actualizing Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's idea of identity as a rhizome¹, that redefined genealogy as a hybrid network, a multiplicity that is always evolving—this idea was redefined by Glissant as "identité-Relation". Indeed, despite the sea being a vivid reminder of a painful history whose legacy is still very painful today, water also tends to connote fluidity, both a palimpsest and a violent fragmentation of African roots and cultural legacy from which the Caribbean identity is born. That is what Guyanese poet Grace Nichols states in her poem "I Have Crossed an Ocean":

I have crossed an ocean
I have lost my tongue
From the roots of the old one
A new one has sprung

In fact, the sea seems to serve as a medium of Caribbean subjectivity in memory of the past. However, most studies on the sea in Caribbean literature so far have been concerned with the holy trinity of Caribbean men writers: Saint-John Perse, Édouard Glissant and Derek Walcott². To break with this traditional male tradition, I chose to focus my dissertation on Caribbean women writers and to question their approach of the sea in relation to History. I will analyze how for Jamaica Kincaid the sea stands as a powerful element of rebirth and

¹ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2013.

² Bonnet, Véronique. "Maritime Poetics: The Atlantic, the Caribbean and the Mediterranean Seas in the Work of Saint-John Perse, Edouard Glissant, and Derek Walcott." *The journal of Caribbean literatures* 3.2 (2002): 13–22.

reinvention, while it is on the contrary associated to the Caribbean split identity in keeping with History for Grace Nichols and Olive Senior.

General presentation of the corpus

My corpus comprises the works of well-acclaimed writer Jamaica Kincaid from Antigua, and of poets Grace Nichols from Guyana and Olive Senior from Jamaica. Theirs is an intimate relation to the sea, perhaps less grandiloquent than Walcott's in his rewriting of the *Odyssey* or than Saint-John Perse's poetic flourishes in *Amers*—perhaps more interspersed with humor and filled with humbler perspectives on the sea. My main corpus includes one work of fiction and two poetical works: Jamaica Kincaid's collection of shorty story and first published work *At the Bottom of the River* (1983), Grace Nichol's poetry collection *I Have Crossed an Ocean* (2010) and Olive Senior's most recent poetry collection, entitled *Hurricane Watch* (2022), composed of previously published poems. All these texts have a common point: they all display feminine figures and are pervaded by the same image of water that stands an element of solution to their identity quest.

Along with Dominican-born Jean Rhys, Jamaica Kincaid is perhaps one of the most famous fiction writers in the English-speaking Caribbean literature. Now a teacher at Harvard University, she gained recognition for her novels *Annie John* (1985) and *Lucy* (1990), both very autobiographical accounts of her childhood in Antigua followed by her settling in New York as an au pair as a young woman. In *At the Bottom of the River*, Kincaid gathers ten short stories with the common feature that they are all first-person narratives centered on female protagonists. The liminal story "Girl" is a one-sentence list of injunctions from an Antiguan mother to her daughter telling her how she should take care of the household when she is older. The theme of water, although not explicitly tackled in the collection, is central to the eponymous short story, which closes the collection. In "At the Bottom of the River", Kincaid stages the construction of an autonomous subject, as the character contemplates—and metaphorically uncovers—her own body through the water of the river, ending with "I claim these things then—mine—and now feel myself grow solid and complete, my name filling up my mouth".

Grace Nichols is a Guyanese poet who was born in Georgetown in 1950 and moved to Britain at 27. Nichols received the Commonwealth Poetry Prize for her collection *I Is a Long-Memored Woman* (1983), and recently won the Queen's 2022 Gold medal for poetry. It was awarded in the wake of the Windrush scandal in the UK that raised awareness on the risk of

deportation that threatened British people descending from the generation of people who came from the Caribbean to the UK after the second world war³. Nichols's collection *I Have Crossed an Ocean* is a miscellany that includes poems from previous collections, among which *I Is a Long-Memoried Woman*, *The Fat Black Woman's Poems* (1984) and more recent collections such as *Sunris* (1996) and *Startling the Flying Fish* (2006). The collection is named after the epilogue poem from *I Is a Long Memoried Woman*, and it introduces us to the key feature of Nichols's poems: the importance of the sea in the Caribbean culture — her poem "Island Man" (56) is dedicated to "a Caribbean Island man in London / who still wakes up to the sound of the sea". One leitmotiv is the persona of the "Cariwoma", a goddess-like persona who incarnates the spirit of the Caribbean in the poem "I, Cariwoma Watched History" (132).

Olive Senior is a poet, novelist and short story writer from Jamaica who is now living in Toronto, Canada. Her best-known work is her short story collection *Summer Lightning* (1986) and her poetry collection *Gardening in the Tropics* (1994). She is the current Poet Laureate of Jamaica (2021-24), which explains the recent collection *Hurricane Watch* (2022) that gathers many of her previous poems, including *Gardening in the Tropics* and *Shell* (2007). Senior's work is particularly marked by her relationship to Caribbean natural elements, either botanical or marine. The recurrence of the metaphor of the shell is particularly striking in her poems. The biological object of the shell becomes a personification of human feeling and a new kind of relation to the past and history: "Growth rings inscribe / inside each shell / the markers of / a former life" ("Shelter"). The collection is full of the leitmotiv of the hurricane and of incantations to the sea drawn from the Caribbean folklore.

Contextual elements

The Caribbean archipelago refers to the islands east of Central America, surrounded or bordered by the Caribbean Sea. The term also comprises the surrounding coasts. Situated at the crossroads between America, Europe, Asia and Africa, the Caribbean represents a point of junction between all these different cultures. Geographically, the sea is what connects the Caribbean islands to one another, as part of an archipelago, but it is also what connects them, at a larger scale, to these four continents. That is why it can be regarded as a symbolical bridge.

³ The issue was for instance recently tackled through the "Black and British" slogan, Steve McQueen's miniseries *Small Axe* (2019), and the *Life Between Islands* exhibit at the Tate Britain (2022).

Caribbean people are very eclectic ethnically, with many people of mixed racial backgrounds. As a result from History, there are people descending from the Indigenous peoples of the islands, people descending from the importation of African slaves and people descending from the quasi forced Indian migration of the late 19th century (when indentured workers were brought to work in the cotton and sugarcane plantations), and descendants of European settlers as well.

Historically speaking, the Caribbean Sea is bound with the history of colonization and slavery, as it is a reminder today of the “Middle Passage” between Europe and the New World, the crossing of the Atlantic Ocean that brought enslaved Africans to work as slaves in the Americas and the West Indies in cotton and sugar plantations. As it is located in-between Europe and the Americas, the West Indies were regarded by European colonists as a space of transition, a mere passage between Spain and the Americas: in Antiguan-born writer Jamaica Kincaid’s autobiographical novel *Lucy* (1990), the heroine ironically explains that her native island “was discovered by Christopher Columbus in 1493 [although] Columbus never set foot there but only named it in passing” (135). The sea thus bears the weight of history insofar as it served as a medium, that which brought the European colonizers to the Caribbean and enabled colonization. In “The Open Boat”, the first chapter of *Poetic of the Relation*, Glissant highlights the paradox of the pleasing turquoise appearance of Caribbean Sea although it is haunted by the ghosts of History: “Navigating the green splendor of the sea [...] still brings to mind, coming to light like seaweed, these lowest depths, these deeps, with their punctuation of scarcely corroded balls and chains” (6). On the pictures of the Anse Caffard Memorial Martinique (Figure 1), Édouard Glissant sits along the statues that face the sea in an attitude of reverence: the sea itself is in fact a memorial. Jamaican poet Olive Senior speaks of the “shellshock” of History: the understanding of the historical background of the Caribbean is crucial to the reading of my theme and corpus.

Theoretical framework

The topic of the sea in Caribbean women’s texts lies at the crossroads between three theoretical fields that are postcolonial studies, gender studies, and ecocriticism. My theoretical frame is thus very much indebted to those three lines of study.

In my dissertation, my reading of the corpus will be greatly inspired by Glissant's theorization of Caribbean culture as "creolized" and "relational". In *Poetics of Relation* (1990), Glissant places his theory of Relation in the continuity of Gilles Deleuze and Philippe Guattari's theory of rhizomic identity:

Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari criticized notions of the root and, even perhaps, notions of being rooted. The root is unique, a stock taking all upon itself and killing all around it. In opposition to this they propose the rhizome, an enmeshed root system, a network spreading either in the ground or in the air, with no predatory rootstock taking over permanently. The notion of the rhizome maintains, therefore, the idea of rootedness but challenges that of a totalitarian root. Rhizomatic thought is the principle behind what I call the Poetics of Relation, in which each and every identity is extended through a relationship with the Other (11).

In fact, Glissant replaces the botanical metaphor of the rhizome in *A Thousand Plateaus* with an analogy with the Caribbean landscape—or rather seascape—that of the archipelago. Indeed, the sea can be regarded as "relational", insofar as it is a contact point between cultures and identities, epitomizing the archipelagic dynamic on a wider, metaphorical level. That is why Glissant helped establishing the Caribbean Sea as a powerful metaphor endowed with figurative dimensions, and not just a natural element: this will guide my analysis of the symbolical charge of the sea in my corpus. The aquatic image has become an emblem of Caribbean culture and History⁴. A few years after Glissant's *Poetics of Relation*, Paul Gilroy published the *Black Atlantic and Double Consciousness* (1993), which further explored the link between the ocean, the sea, and the Black diaspora: the sea is a fluid boundary, or rather transcends the notion of border: it is an image of motion and *métissage*, that echoes Glissant's concept of creolization⁵.

In some respects, Glissant's work also foreshadowed special attention to the Caribbean landscape, paving the way for Caribbean ecocriticism: "Landscape is its own monument: its

⁴ In *Routes and Roots: Navigating Caribbean and Pacific Island Literatures*, UCLA Professor Elizabeth Deloughrey points at "submarine roots" as a symbol of "in betweenness, hybridity, mobility and... potential" (*Routes and Roots: Navigating Caribbean and Pacific Island Literatures*. University of Hawaii Press, 2007.)

⁵ *Introduction à une poétique du divers*, 15: "Ce qui se passe dans la Caraïbe pendant trois siècles, c'est littéralement ceci : une rencontre d'éléments culturels venus d'horizons absolument divers et qui réellement se créolisent, qui réellement s'imbriquent et se confondent l'un dans l'autre pour donner quelque chose d'imprévisible, d'absolument nouveau et qui est la réalité créole".

meaning can only be traced on the underside. It is all history”⁶. Indeed, my analysis of the Caribbean seascape in the works of Jamaica Kincaid, Grace Nichols and Olive Senior will be inspired by an ecopoetic approach, understood as “a reading of literary texts not only in relation to ecological themes, but with regards to aesthetic strategies”⁷. I will study to what extent these authors address the theme of the sea and how they reinvest it with a quest that is both personal and historical.

Literature review

While Derek Walcott and Édouard Glissant both enjoyed a prominent place in the field of Caribbean studies (they were both shortlisted for the 1992 Nobel Prize, which Walcott was awarded), Carole Boyce Davies and Elaine Savory Fido’s seminal work *Out of the Kumbla: Caribbean Women Writers and Literature*⁸ brought Caribbean women’s writing into focus in the 1990s, at the crossroads of postcolonial theory and gender studies⁹. Since the 2000s, Curdella Forbes, a Caribbean literature professor at Howard University, has taken a keen interest in analyzing questions of gender in Caribbean literature¹⁰.

And yet, although some studies were made on the theme of the sea in Caribbean literature since the heyday of postcolonial studies in the 1990s, it was almost exclusively in a corpus that included Walcott, Glissant and sometimes francophone poet Saint-John Perse. Such is the case, for instance, of Véronique Bonnet’s article “Maritime Poetics: The Atlantic, the Caribbean and the Mediterranean Seas in the Work of Saint-John Perse, Edouard Glissant, and Derek Walcott” (2002) or Lara Cahill Booth’s “Walcott’s Sea and Caribbean geomythography” (2003): it is no wonder, since Glissant and Walcott both founded the analogy between the sea

⁶ Édouard Glissant. “From the landscape,” *Caribbean Discourse*. trans. J. Michael Dash. University of Virginia Press, 1991, p.11.

⁷ Savory, Elaine. “Toward a Caribbean Ecopoetics. Derek Walcott’s Language of Plants”. *Postcolonial Ecologies: Literature and Environment*. Oxford University Press, 2015, p.81.

⁸ Davies, Carole Boyce, and Elaine Savory Fido. *Out of the Kumbla: Caribbean Women and Literature*. Trenton, N.J., Africa World Press, 1990.

⁹ To some extent, this evolution of the literary criticism in favor of the acknowledgment of women’s writings in Commonwealth literature followed the 1988 seminal article “Can the subaltern speak?” by Indian philosopher and feminist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak.

¹⁰ Her scholarship covers the works of George Lamming, Jamaica Kincaid and Maryse Condé: *Through the lens of gender: a revisionary reading of the novels of Samuel Selvon and George Lamming* (2000); *Fracturing subjectivities: international space and the discourse of individualism in Colin Channer’s Waiting in vain and Jamaica Kincaid’s Mr Potter* (2008); “*Trespassers will be persecuted*”: *reading migratory subjectivities in Maryse Condé’s ‘Heremakhonon’ and perambulatory chain emails* (2010).

and History, that their works were the first to be studied through this prism. However, a new wave in the research has displayed particular interest in Caribbean women's texts.

Indeed, as British critic Denise Decaires Narain points out, in the poetic field, Caribbean women poets are still very much in the shadow of Walcott, Lamming, Kamau Brathwaite¹¹, while the best-known among Caribbean women writers are fiction writers—Jean Rhys and Jamaica Kincaid being the most famous in English-language Caribbean literature. And yet, in the wake of Decaires Narain's *Caribbean Women's Poetry: Making Style* (2001)¹², there has been more literary criticism on Caribbean women poets: Marlene Nourbese Philips, Lorna Goodison, Michelle Cliff, Grace Nichols and Olive Senior. In *Contemporary Caribbean Women's Poetry*, Decaires Narain highlights how Caribbean studies used to be a very male field, as postcolonial studies were thought of separately from the issue of gender¹³, before critic Curdella Forbes combined both in her work.

Following the ecocritical line of study, a younger generation of critics was inspired to combine postcolonial interests with ecocriticism as well as gender studies: recently, Pauline Amy de la Bretèque's PhD thesis *Vers Une Poétique Féminine De La Créolisation* (2020)¹⁴ has laid emphasis on the relationship between nature and women in the Caribbean. However, this thesis focuses on the natural landscape in general rather than the seascape and marine fauna and flora, or the sea itself. Although the theme of the sea in Olive Senior's poetry has not been studied yet—the emphasis was laid on natural elements in general—it has already been tackled in Jamaica Kincaid and Grace Nichols's works, although through a different corpus. In Chapter 6 of *Whiteness and Trauma*¹⁵ ("The Sea is History"), Victoria Burrows analyses Kincaid's novel *Lucy* through the prism of Walcott's poem, drawing a very fruitful parallel that I found

¹¹ [...] Within this newly defined field of writing, it is fair to say that, while a handful of Caribbean women poets (such as Lorna Goodison, Grace Nichols, Dionne Brand and Marlene Nourbese Philip) have now established international reputations, it is women's fiction (by writers such as Jamaica Kincaid, Olive Senior, Erna Brodber, Pauline Melville and many others) which has made a much bigger impact in establishing Caribbean women's writing as a recognizable category of literature."

¹² Decaires Narain, Denise. *Caribbean Women's Poetry: Making Style*. Routledge, 2001.

¹³ Decaires Narain states "This book offers an account of Caribbean women's poetry [...] It is motivated, in the first place, then, by an apparently straightforward agenda: that of making Caribbean women poets more visible in the literary discourse of the region. [...] The substantial increase in publications by women in the last two decades, however, has significantly altered the shape – and 'gender' – of this literary landscape." (*Caribbean Women's Poetry: Making Style*, 2001).

¹⁴ Amy de la Bretèque, Pauline. *Vers Une Poétique Féminine De La Créolisation : Une Pensée Caribéenne Et Diasporique De La Littérature De Jean Rhys, Paule Marshall, Michelle Cliff, Olive Senior Et Jamaica Kincaid*. Sorbonne Université, 2020.

¹⁵ Burrows, Victoria. "The Sea is History" *Whiteness and Trauma, the Mother-Daughter Knot in the Fiction of Jean Rhys, Jamaica Kincaid, and Toni Morrison*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2004.

resonated in *At the Bottom of the River*. She questions the relationship with water in Jamaica Kincaid's stories. In Andrea A. Davis's "Re-turn to the Sea" from *Horizon, Sea, Sound*¹⁶, Grace Nichols's *Cariwoma persona* is addressed in parallel with Dionne Brand and Nourbese Philip's poetry. The chapter reflects on the *topos* of the horizon, of the movements and sounds of the waves in the Caribbean Sea. Re-turn reads as re-memory here: the analysis verges on a psychological analysis, or even sometimes sociological, but mostly it is a general reflection on the sea and how the sea is present in Caribbean memories. Therefore, although the topic of the sea is central to Caribbean literature, it has never been studied in a corpus that places Kincaid, Senior and Nichols in a dialogue. My thesis will thus be placed in the continuity of Andrea A. Davis's research. I chose to place Grace Nichols's *I Have Crossed an Ocean* collection into the perspective of a new corpus, composed of Jamaica Kincaid's *At the Bottom of the River* and Olive Senior's recent *Hurricane Watch* (2022).

Research question

“And most of all beware, even in thought, of
assuming the sterile attitude of the spectator, for life
is not a spectacle, a sea of grief is not a proscenium,
a man who wails is not a dancing bear...”

Aimé Césaire, *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*

How does this utmost lyrical *topos* of the sea become a full actor in the Caribbean context? As Césaire argues, far from the object of contemplation of romantic poetry, in which it serves as a medium for lyrical expression, the sea “is not a proscenium”. Indeed, as a lively personification of a tragic History, the ocean comes to embody a true agent there to recall the past. Instead of a recreational space, associated to the turquoise waters which attracts tourists, the ocean is a traumatic space, a “sea of grief”: it is haunted by the memories of slavery, the arrival of the slave ships and the horrors of sugar plantations. Historically, water prevented runaway slaves to escape from plantations: far from Baudelaire's image of the sea as freedom and escape (in “Man and the Sea”), the ocean stands as a prison of water in Caribbean literature.

¹⁶ Davis, Andrea A. “Re-turn to the Sea” *Horizon, Sea, Sound: Caribbean and African Women's Cultural Critiques of Nation*. Northwestern University Press, 2022.

And yet, despite the historical burden it cannot but bear in such a context, many Caribbean thinkers have placed the sea at the core of their definition of a “creolized” Caribbean identity. For one, in his essay *The Black Atlantic*¹⁷, Paul Gilroy redefined the space of the Atlantic as the epitome of the Black diaspora, a network of encounters. The sea thus became a symbol of the fluidity of boundaries, an interface between the Caribbean and the West, a space of hybridization, later theorized by Martinican thinker Édouard Glissant as “creolization”. Glissant referred to Kamau Brathwaite’s quote “The unity is submarine” in his epigraphs to his *Poetics of Relation*, perhaps suggesting that the antidote to the dispersal of Black communities was to be found underwater, like a solution or a key to peacefulness. To that extent, the sea can be seen as reunifying the disseminated voices of the diaspora into a choir of voices¹⁸: is the sea an isolating or a unifying body?

Jamaica Kincaid, Grace Nichols and Olive Senior’s works all address differently this tension between the sea as a graveyard, on the one hand, and as a place to express one’s conflictual identity or reinvent oneself on the other. Interestingly, theorists of Caribbean identity and creolization are almost exclusively male (as highlighted by Pauline Amy de la Bretèque’s recent work *Vers une poétique féminine de la créolisation*). For this reason, I chose a female corpus to look at the ways women writers from the Caribbean addressed the relation between the ocean and Caribbean History, that Walcott so famously addressed in his poem “The Sea is History”. This will hopefully lead us to a more inclusive point of view on Caribbean history for, as Grace Nichols reminds us, “I Cariwoma watched History happen”.

I will first analyze how subjectivity is developed through and thanks to watery imagery in Jamaica Kincaid’s short story collection *At the Bottom of the River* (1983). Yet, I will insist on how the sea is also an image of a split identity, through Grace Nichol’s poems collected in *I Have Crossed an Ocean* (2010). Finally, I will study how Olive Senior’s collection *Hurricane Watch* (2022) epitomizes the tension between violence and reconstruction at the heart of the image of the sea in Caribbean literature. I chose to incorporate parallels with visual artworks, with one artist echoing each literary work, to explore how literary images of the sea dialogue with pictorial expressions, and how images are an archive particularly apt to make the submerged past resurface.

¹⁷ Gilroy, Paul, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity & Double Consciousness*, 1993.

¹⁸ In his article “W.E.B Dubois: An Interpretation”, Cornel West describes it as “the metaphorical association of black hearts, black people, and black culture with water (the sea or river) [which] runs deep in black artistic expression”.

Chapter I – Liquid biographies: Jamaica Kincaid’s *At the Bottom of the River* and Howardena Pindell’s *Autobiography: Water/Ancestors/Middle Passage/Family Ghost*

A - Water and self-discovery in Kincaid’s work

a. An introduction to *At the Bottom of the River* in parallel with *Lucy*

Jamaica Kincaid’s writings were first published in journals when she arrived in NYC. The collection was published in 1983, at the beginning of her career as a writer, and gathers stories previously published in the *New Yorker* and *The Paris Review*. Strikingly, the collection is of highly poetical dimension, which has led many critics to address the stories as prose poems. One imagery that pervades *At the Bottom of the River* is the one implied by the very title, the water imagery, which is also to be found in later work *Lucy* (1990). Indeed, although it is not clear where the stories in *At the Bottom of the River* are set, in *Lucy* there is a clear allusion to the Great Lakes in Northern America. To a certain extent, the river in *At the Bottom of the River* and the lakes in *Lucy* stand as echoes of the Caribbean Sea. Indeed, in the *Caribbean Discourse*¹⁹, Édouard Glissant opposes the American lake and the Caribbean Sea:

What is the Caribbean in fact? A multiple series of relationships. We all feel it, we express it in all kinds of hidden or twisted ways, or we fiercely deny it. But we sense that this sea exists within us with its weight of now revealed islands. The Caribbean Sea is not an American lake. It is the estuary of the Americas. (39)

In fact, the lake is a body of water surrounded by land, contrary to the sea, which stands as a bridge open between two bodies of land, thus relational—using Glissant’s terms. Although some studies on *Lucy* have questioned the underlying theme of the sea as linked to history²⁰, the river in *At the Bottom of the River* has not been analyzed by critics. Does it echo the Caribbean Sea too, or are the sea and the river antithetical elements? In a way, the two bodies of water are linked insofar as, by definition, the river flows into the sea. However, is the river

¹⁹ Glissant, Édouard. *Caribbean Discourse*, trans. J. Michael Dash. University of Virginia Press, 1991.

²⁰ See chapter 6 “The Sea is History” from *Whiteness and Trauma*, on the historical symbolism of the sea in *Lucy*.

charged with the same historical background as the sea in the Caribbean context? It seems so, according to Grace Nichols's poem "Sunris" from *I Have Crossed an Ocean*: "History is a river / That flow to the sea / Laced with the bone of memory" (103). And yet, in *At the Bottom of the River* personal history seems more central than History, far from Walcott's poem "The Sea is History". What prevails is rather the theme of self-discovery: just like *Lucy* ends with the heroine's self-assertion as a diaristic writer, as she writes the first sentence of her own diary, "At the Bottom of the River" ends with the protagonist's self-assertion, empowerment, and fulfilment.

In fact, if the river in the last story is metaphorical of something, it is rather of the protagonist's self-empowerment. The story opens with a depiction of the river that anticipates the ending:

The steepest mountains [...] where a large stream might flow, and flowing perilously, having only a deep ambition to see itself mighty and powerful, bends and curves and dips in many directions, making a welcome and easy path for each idle rill and babbling brook, each trickle of rain fallen on land that lies sloping; and that stream, at last swelled to a great, fast, flowing body of water, fall over a ledge with a roar, a loudness that is more than the opposite of complete silence [...] ruthlessly *conquering* the flat plain, the steep ridge, the grassy bed [...] and then it winds its way to a gorge in the earth, a basin of measurable depth and breadth, and so collects itself in a pool. (62-63)

Interestingly, the river is depicted as the result of the combination of "idle rills" and "babbling brooks" with a mightier stream. In fact, the watery imagery resonates well with the heroine's progressive blossom throughout the story, resulting in her pronouncing her own name: "I now feel myself grow solid and complete, my name filling up my mouth". Sound, as opposed to silence, symbolizes the heroine's rebirth through the utterance of her own name, in the same way as the brook is brought to life when joining the river "with a roar, a loudness that is more than the opposite of complete silence". The metaphor of the river is quite commonly to reflect subjectivity.

It is interesting to note that the stories from the collection are often compared to prose poems by critics. What is striking from the very beginning of the story is the rhythm and unusual punctuation. The very first paragraph is composed of two sentences only: the first one is very pithy ("This, then, is the terrain"), in sharp contrast with the second one, depicting the flow of

the river, which is almost one-page long. Quite clearly, the sentence imitates the flow of the river, its little brooks translated by short phrases inserted with dashes, and climaxing in a proverb-like ending following a colon: “now comes the gloaming, for day will end, and the stream, its flow stilled and gathered up [...] awaits the eye, the hand, the foot, that shall give all this a meaning”.

b. Finding one’s identity “at the bottom of the river”?

The title of the collection is quite enigmatic and seems incomplete: one can wonder what lies at the bottom of the river. What is at stake there? In the last short story, the bottom of the river becomes a place where the heroine gives free rein to her imagination and explores her own creativity. The bottom of the river thus stands as a place dedicated to introspection and reverie, in continuity with Bachelard’s *L’eau et les rêves* (1942). Progressively, the heroine becomes aware of her own reflection:

I stood above the land and the sea and looked back at myself as I stood on the bank of the mouth of the river. I saw that my face was round in shape, that my irises took up almost all the space in my eyes, and that my eyes were brown, with yellow-colored and black-colored flecks. (78)

Like Narcissus, she observes herself in the water, but hers is no superficial gaze nor one that is filled with self-contentment. On the contrary, it leads to a metaphysical introspection, as she becomes aware of her own feelings, of her being alive: “I was not myself as I had once known myself to be: I was not made up of flesh and blood and muscles and bones and tissues [...] but I was made up of my will, and over my will I had complete *dominion*.” (79) As she “stooped down and touched the deepest bottom” and “stretched [herself] out and covered end to end a vast crystal plane”, it is in fact at the bottom of the river that the heroine finds self-confidence and strength.

To that extent, the last short story throws light upon one of the main themes in the collection and in Jamaica Kincaid’s works in general: subjectivity and introspection, and how to challenge gender roles and what is expected of women. This is famously tackled in liminary story “Girl”, published in the *New Yorker* in 1978, in which an Antiguan mother tells her daughter how to

behave and what is expected of her as a young woman through a list of instructions. Famously ending with “*but what if the baker won’t let me feel the bread?*; you mean to say that after all you are really going to be the kind of woman who the baker won’t let near the bread?” (5)., The story is quite autobiographical and draws from Kincaid’s own childhood in Antigua to explore the arbitrariness of gender codes. The title of the collection can be read as the key, the solution to the identity quest of Kincaid’s heroines, that can be found “at the bottom of the river”.

c. Ambiguous depths: an imaginary world in the river’s bed or a mere reflection?

What is “at the bottom” is opposite to what is superficial. In the short story “At the Bottom of the River”, it is as though the protagonist looked *through* the river as though through a looking glass. It is as if she looked, not at the reflection, but as though she went *through* the water and reached the other side of the mirror—the bottom—like in *Alice Through the Looking Glass* where Alice discovers a world beyond the glass where everything is reversed:

The water was clear and still. I looked *in*, and *at the bottom of the river* I could see a house, and it was a house of only one room, with an A-shaped roof [...] The house had four windows on each of its four sides, and one door. Though the door and the windows were all open, I could not see anything inside and I had no desire to see what was inside. [...] Beyond the green, green grass were lots of pebbles, and they were a white-grey, as if they had been in water for many years. (75)

In the story, this ambiguous tension between reflexivity and depth remains unclear: is the underwater world the heroine discovers a mere reflection of our world or a different world, fruit of the protagonist’s imagination? The term “reflect” is repeated sixty-six times throughout the story, as though to make us suspect that the fantastical world is in fact just a reflect in the water. Besides, unrealistic aspect of the house and the garden underwater make us wonder, as readers, whether the story verges on the genre of fantasy or whether the heroine is in fact daydreaming. Even the protagonist highlights the oddness of this world: “even though the water flowed in the natural way of a river, none of the things I could see at the bottom moved”. This uncanny²¹

²¹ Echoes of the myth of Atlantis, which inspired the Afrofuturist myth of a Black Atlantis called “Drexciya”: underwater world where the descendants of the pregnant African women thrown off of slave ships in the Middle Passage would supposedly be living, after adapting to breathe underwater in their mothers’ wombs.

phenomenon stands in contradiction with natural forces and physical constraints. In fact, the recurrence of verbs of perception (“I looked in”, “I could see a house”, “I could not see inside”) helps building up an eerie atmosphere questioning the heroine’s reliability.

Thus, perhaps one way of reading this passage is as a direct access to the protagonist’s imagination, as she daydreams an Edenic place, a utopia—for some critics, it even stands as a rewriting of Milton’s *Paradise Lost*²². In keeping with the character’s introspection, the play on reflectivity, mirroring and light is extended until the character reaches a state of self-disclosure: “I stood as if I were a prism, many-sided and transparent, refracting and reflecting light as it reached me, light that never could be destroyed” (80). This comes as a climax in the character’s identity quest.

d. “Crossing the river”: from death to rebirth

The utterance of the name at the end of the story stands as a symbolical rebirth in sharp opposition with the predominance of the themes of death and nothingness at the beginning of the story: “in *nothing*, in *nothing*, in *nothing*” (64) “death on death on death” (68). Indeed, the notions of birth and rebirth are often associated to water. Beyond the symbolism of the amniotic fluid associated to water, “entering the water” is full of religious echoes: it is associated to baptism (as a metaphorical second birth). The act of “crossing the river” is commonly referred to in spirituals. Surprisingly, yet, the sea replaces the river in the course of the story, perhaps giving the water a wholly metaphorical dimension:

I entered the *sea* then. The *sea* was without color, and it was without anything that I had known before. It was still, having no currents. It was warm as freshly spilled blood, and I moved through it as if I had always done so, as if it were a perfectly natural element to me. (79)

In the short story, a tension between life and death lies at the heart of the image of the water. One finds numerous connotations of death in relation to water: for instance, it is said that “There were no other living things in the water—no birds, no vertebrates or invertebrates, no fragile insects” (75). The sea stands as a bridge between life and death, echoing the threshold

²² “Kincaid and the Canon” by Diane Simmons.

mentioned on p.67. However, the sea does not stand as a graveyard here, it is the antipodes of death, it is reinvention, life: it is a reversal of the Styx—not the river leading from the world of the living to the world of the dead but the contrary. A return to the moment of birth is described as the amniotic fluid is implicitly alluded to: “I moved through [the water] as if I had always done so, as if it were a perfectly natural element to me” (79). And yet more than that, the heroine finds meaning in life at the bottom of the river. She finds a truer version of things and of herself, as she contemplates—and metaphorically uncovers—her own body through her reflection in the water of the river, in a self-disclosure full of Platonic resonances.

B – Subaquatic subtexts in “At the Bottom of the River”: an underwater world full of Platonic and biblical intertexts

a. From crossing the river to crossing texts

As studied by American critic Diane Simmons in her article “Jamaica Kincaid and the Canon”²³, the whole collection is full of echoes of Western literature classics. Platonic and biblical subtexts lie under the water. In “At the Bottom of the River”, Plato’s theory of forms is almost translated word for word, when the protagonist leans upon the river, looks in and discovers the world underwater:

Everything was so true, though—that is, true to itself—and I had no doubt that the things I saw were themselves and not resemblances or representatives. The grass was the grass, and it was the grass without qualification. The green of the grass was green, and I knew it to be so and not partially green, or a kind of green, but green, and the green from which all other greens might come. And it was so with everything else that lay so still at the bottom of the river. It lay there not like a picture but like a true thing and a different kind of true thing: one that I had never known before. (76)

In fact, the ambiguity about whether the world she uncovers deep in the water is a reflection or not is answered here: it is no reflection nor imitation of our world, but on the contrary the

²³ Simmons, Diane. “Jamaica Kincaid and the Canon: In Dialogue with *Paradise Lost* and *Jane Eyre*.” *Melus* 23.2 998, pp. 65–85.

essence of things (“not resemblances or representatives”). According to Plato, material things are mere refractions of their essence, that is pure and unique. It is depicted in his famous theory forms and ideas, where he argues that our world, the physical world he calls the world of Forms, is a mere copy of the essences to be found in the world of Ideas. As opposed to our world, where things are subjected to changes, time and decay, I Ideas are universal and absolute: they are the truer version of things, the thing for itself (“not like a picture but like a true thing”). In “At the Bottom of the River”, the heroine rewrites this well-known thesis, insisting on the truer quality of the things that lie underwater, including their color: “the green from which all other greens might come” particularly resonates with Plato’s theory, as though the green of grass in our world were just an imitation of the green of underwater grass.

The heroine’s reflection on the truer aspect of things underwater soon shifts towards her own reflection in the water: metaphorically, she unveils the truer nature of herself, in something like a second birth. As we saw, the river is loaded with references to baptism, a spiritual rebirth, and thus religiously connoted. One can find many echoes of the Book of Genesis in the story, for instance when the heroine describes the natural landscape that lies underwater:

And in this world were many things blessed with unquestionable truth and purpose and beauty. *There were* steep mountains, *there were* valleys, there were seas, *there were* plains of grass, *there were* deserts, *there were* rivers, *there were* forests, *there were* vertebrates and invertebrates, *there were* mammals, *there were* reptiles, *there were* creatures of the dry land and the water, and *there were* birds. And they lived in this world not yet divided, not yet examined, and not yet dead. I looked at this world as it revealed itself to me—how new, how new—and I longed to go there (78).

Through her depiction, she invents the world, it is as though this world came to existence through her faculty to name and enumerate “mountains”, “valleys”, “seas”, etc. The rhythm and the anaphora in “there were” (repeated twelve times) is evocative of the rhythm of Biblical diction, while the mention of “a world not yet divided” is a clear allusion to the Book of Genesis, in which God is said to shape the world by progressively separating the “heavens and the earth”, the “land from the sea”, light from day, etc. The heroine adopts a gold-like posture (“I stood

upon the land and the sea” 79), and names each thing just like God’s performative use of language in the Genesis (“Let there be... And it was so”)²⁴.

b. “The unity is submarine”²⁵: the river as a choir of voices

In a way, the river makes the works of Plato and the Bible communicate, like an echo chamber of Western literature. In Caribbean literature, the sea has indeed inspired rewritings of classics among European literature, the most famous instance being Derek Walcott’s *Omeros* (1990), an epic poem set in the Caribbean. Although not an actual rewriting of Homer’s *Odysseus* and *Iliad*, it contains many allusions: it is set in the Caribbean, but some of the main figures in the poem are two fishermen called Achille and Hector, and it loosely refers to the Homeric plot. The marine metaphor stands as a bridge between Homer’s work and Walcott’s. The sea occupies an important place in the poem, like a bridge figuratively unifying Walcott’s Caribbean Sea and Homer’s Mediterranean (a parallel often tackled by Walcott, who relates his travels in Mediterranean Europe in *White Egrets*).

Drawing on the Christian connotation of the river—it being often associated to baptism—, it also interesting to note that is a very common theme in gospel songs. Like a gospel choir, the river stands as a union of voices, where multiple texts are hyphenated, intermingled and find harmony underwater. “The unity is submarine”: the water metaphorically grounds an underwater union of voices, as the watery imagery serves as a symbol of inter-textuality in the sense that it gathers numerous connotations to other texts (among which Plato’s philosophy and the Bible). More than that, water is perhaps a link between two cultures (a “Relation”, in Glissant’s terms), in this case between Jamaica Kincaid’s Antiguan childhood and the Western authors that she has been taught at school in the British colonial system.

²⁴ It is interesting to note that this passage finds an echo in the ending of the story, where the heroine utters her own name, thus fully becoming a person.

²⁵ Edward Kamau Brathwaite, *Contradictory Omens: Cultural Diversity and Integration in the Caribbean*. Mona, Jamaica, Savacou Publications, 1974, p. 64.

c. Subverting the canon?

The river forms a choir, and yet is it a harmonious choir? Or a mere echo chambers that repeat the exact same thing? No, there are elements of reappropriation and subversion. Kincaid's relationship to the Western canon is examined in Diane Simmons's article "Jamaica Kincaid and the Canon": the author's childhood was marked by the reading of Western classical texts including the Bible, Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*²⁶. In her largely autobiographical novel *Lucy*, Kincaid describes an Antiguan schoolgirl's traumatic reading Wordsworth's "Daffodils"—the English flower which does not exist in the Caribbean and which the protagonist does not see until she is 19. This traumatic memory triggers inexplicable anger in her—against this discrepancy of references under British control:

I remembered an old poem I had been made to memorize when I was ten years old and a pupil at Queen Victoria Girls' School. I had been made to memorize it, verse after verse, and then had recited the whole poem to an auditorium full of parents, teachers, and my fellow pupils. [...] The night after I had recited the poem, I dreamt, continuously it seemed, that I was being chased down a narrow cobbled street by bunches and bunches of those same daffodils that I had vowed to forget, and when finally I fell down from exhaustion they all piled on top of me, until I was buried deep underneath them and was never seen again. I had forgotten all of this until Mariah mentioned daffodils, and now I told it to her with such an amount of anger I surprised both of us (17-18).

This passage thus displays the suffocating effect of the imposed English culture, as in her dream Lucy finds herself metaphorically crushed under daffodils: her own culture and history is thus erased, dominated by the English model (which Simmons calls the "English fairy tale"). However, Kincaid's relationship to the British—and more generally European—canon is more complex than pure rejection: Simmons notes that "[Kincaid] sees her education in the English classics as an undeniable part of who she is" ("Jamaica Kincaid and the Canon", 66). One reading that greatly influenced Kincaid from her schoolyears was Milton's work²⁷: quite ironically, as a young girl from a country dominated by an imposed culture, "Kincaid found a

²⁶ "Reading from Shakespeare and Milton by the age of five. Sometimes the canonical works of English literature were administered as punishment for her schoolgirl crimes. [...] Kincaid was forced copy large chunks of John Milton's *Paradise*." (Simmons, 1).

²⁷ Simmons notes that "for her schoolgirl crimes Kincaid was forced copy large chunks of John Milton's *Paradise Lost*" ("Jamaica Kincaid and the Canon: In Dialogue with *Paradise Lost* and *Jane Eyre*, 65).

hero with whom she could identify in *Paradise Lost*, the defiant outcast Lucifer” (ibid.). This explains why, in *Lucy*, the eponymous heroine is named after the fallen angel Lucifer (“Lucy, short for Lucifer”, *Lucy*, 152): an axiological inversion and reevaluation of Milton’s villain, which reflects Jamaica Kincaid’s taste for unpopular opinions and subversion.

In fact, one way to read “At the Bottom of the River” is through its numerous echoes to Milton. The underwater world can read as the heroine’s own lost paradise, with the mention of the garden which might allude to the Garden of Eden (“All around the house was a wide stretch of green—green, green grass of uniform length. The green, green house of uniform length extended from the house for a distance I could not measure”, 75). The question is, what does this lost paradise stand for: an English fairy tale’s garden? Or rather “the lost childhood and the lost Africa” according to Simmons? The story allows for multiple readings. Another echo is the importance of the light, which can read as an allusion to Genesis or... as a rewriting of *Paradise Lost*. Indeed, “Is life, then, a violent burst of light, like flint struck sharply in the dark” (73) is reminiscent of the first lines of the Book of Genesis: “And God said, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light.” (1:1-3). But one other way to read it is through the etymology of “Lucifer” from Latin *lucius* “light”: it can be regarded as another homage to Lucifer, standing as a figure of rebellion (here understood as rebellion against British dominion).

Yet what was that light in which I stood? How singly then will the heart desire and pursue the small glowing thing resting in the distance, surrounded by darkness; how, then, if on *conquering* the distance the heart embraces the small glowing thing until heart and glowing thing are indistinguishable and in this way darkness is made less? For now a door might suddenly be pushed open and the morning light might rush in, revealing to me *creation* and a force whose nature is implacable, unmindful of any of the individual needs of existence, and without knowledge of future or past. (81)

Perhaps the heroine is not a god-like figure after all but rather stands as a Lucifer bringing light to the creation. Knowing that Kincaid associates Lucifer to a figure of opposition and subversion to the British colonial rule, one may want to reread the story through a postcolonial perspective: are there echoes to history of the Caribbean to be found? Does the river carry implicit hints to the history of conquests and colonization? Through a parallel with artist Howardena Pindell’s canvas *Autobiography: Water/Ancestors/Middle Passage/Family Ghosts* (1988), I will now attempt to throw light upon historical resonances in “At the Bottom of the River”.

C - Exploring parallels between *At the Bottom of the River* and Howardena Pindell's *Autobiography: Water/Ancestors/Middle Passage/Family Ghosts* (1988)

a. Introduction to the work of Howardena Pindell: “texturing abstraction”²⁸

Howardena Pindell is an American artist, born in Philadelphia in 1943. She is also a curator, Professor, and critic: Pindell studied painting at Boston University and Yale, before working in the Department of Prints and Illustrated Books at the MoMA, then becoming a Professor at Stony Brook University, New York. On the whole, her work is regarded as abstract:



Figure 3 - Howardena Pindell

some critics consider her as belonging to the second generation of Afro-American abstract artists, a current that first emerged in the late 1940s-1950s²⁹. As her contemporary Frank Bowling³⁰ expressed in an interview, claiming abstraction over a more political form of art in the 1960s, as a Black artist, was not the easiest thing³¹. At the time of the Black Panthers and Civil Rights movement and in the US, it was often expected of Black artists that their art took part of their activism. And yet, for Bowling or Howardena Pindell, abstraction is far from apolitical. Pindell's body of work expands from a more clear-cut activism through the medium of film (her film *Free, White and 21* from 1980 stages the difference of experiences whether you are White or Black³²) to abstract paintings full of colors, relief and geometrical forms. In fact, through her art, she tackles the subjects of race, feminism, memory, identity. Although most of the time in a less obvious manner than figurative art, abstraction has a way of expressing different layers of identity

²⁸ Cowan, Sarah Louise. “Texturing Abstraction: Howardena Pindell’s Cut and Sewn Paintings” *Art Journal*, vol. 79, no. 4, pp. 26-43.

²⁹ See article on the recent re-discovery of Afro-American Abstract Expressionism: O’Grady, Megan. “Once Overlooked, Black Abstract Painters Are Finally Given Their Due”, *New York Times*, Feb. 12, 2021.

³⁰ Another representative of Abstract Expressionism, Guyana-born British artist, Frank Bowling is famous for his colorful paintings, like *Who’s Afraid of Barney Newman*. He was elected a member of the Royal Academy of Arts in 2005.

³¹ Mercer, Kobena. “Black Atlantic Abstraction: Aubrey Williams and Frank Bowling” *Discrepant Abstraction*, 2006, p.184.

³² She alternatively appears a white young woman, with a white film on her face and a blonde wig, and as herself.

through what Pindell calls “surface tension”³³: texture. Pindell grants special attention to the making the work of art. Her paintings are often simply described as “mixed media on canvas”, resulting from “lengthy, metaphorical processes of destruction/reconstruction”³⁴.

In “Texturing Abstraction”, Sarah Louise Cowan explains that Pindell “began making paintings by cutting strips of canvas sewing them together into a large rectangular grid, and covering them with collaged and painted materials to form an abstract field”³⁵. From this process, a patchwork of “colorful irregularities” is formed. Although the first step of fragmentation serves to deconstruct the meaning of the canvas, as though cutting it into abstraction, the sewing process creates “a dense, nubby texture [that] bear[s] traces of [the] fracture and the artist’s labors”. Perhaps, then, Pindell’s paintings invite us to read meaning otherwise: texture itself representing memory, physical experience, or the body through “surface tension”. Besides, the sewing process can even be read as a sort of *métissage* of multiple identities brought together, entwined as to create a whole. The feminine medium of sewing is revisited in what Cowan calls a “feminist reclamation of the decorative”: a modernist way of detaching herself from the artistic constraints of the 1970s. The idea of sewing itself came from the artist’s travels during the 1970s to Nigeria, Kenya, the Ivory Coast, and Senegal, where she was fascinated by the textiles. In “Been to Africa and Back: Contextualizing Howardena Pindell’s Abstract Art”, Andrea Barnwell suggests that “Africa may have offered a potent point of access to a cultural Blackness that was absent from her workday environment”³⁶. The resulting intertwinement of media stand as a symbolical layering of identities of race, gender, and class – a way for the artist to affirm her identity as a woman, African American, and white collar. That way, through the choice of the sewing technique, Pindell “adapted abstraction to a historically specific, personal material culture”³⁷.

³³ Pindell uses the term “surface tension” in an interview by Joseph Jacobs, in *Since the Harlem Renaissance: 50 Years of Afro-American Art*, p.35.

³⁴ Howardena Pindell’s website, <https://www.howardenapindell.org/>.

³⁵ Cowan, Sarah Louise. “Texturing Abstraction: Howardena Pindell’s Cut and Sewn Paintings” *Art Journal*, vol. 79, no. 4, pp. 26-43.

³⁶ Barnwell, Andrea D. “Been to Africa and Back: Contextualizing Howardena Pindell’s Abstract Art,” *International Review of African American Art* 13, no. 3.

³⁷ Cowan, Sarah Louise. “Texturing Abstraction: Howardena Pindell’s Cut and Sewn Paintings” *Art Journal*, vol. 79, no. 4, pp. 26-43.

b. The Autobiography series (1980-1995)

In 2019, the exhibit *Howardena Pindell: Autobiography* at the Garth Greenan Gallery singled out a singular series from Pindell's body of work. Covering pieces from the 1980s up until 1995, the exhibition displayed the artist's Autobiography series, spreading from very abstract pieces to more figurative ones, whose only common point is the recurrent resort to an oval-shaped framing. In fact, the series was sparked by a car accident which nearly killed the artist in 1979, and led to a partial amnesia. As a result, Pindell moved towards more personal



Figure 4 - Howardena Pindell, *Autobiography: Oval Memory* (1980-1981)

subjects, trying to recover her memories through her art³⁸. Her painting, thus, became more figurative. For instance, the first painting of the series, *Autobiography: Oval Memory #1* (1980-1981) testifies to the artist's attempt to recollect her memories, that are staged in a chaotic patchwork of disconnected images (from Montmartre in Paris on the left, to a forest of fir trees on the right corner). Throughout the series, the oval shape seems to serve as a “memory-scape”, in other words the visual landscape of Pindell's fractured memory.

Pindell's change towards figuration is particularly manifest in the huge gap between her 1987 *Autobiography: Fire (Suttee)*, and the following work in the series, *Autobiography: Water/Ancestors/Middle Passage/Family Ghosts*. The more abstract red canvas of *Fire* stands in sharp contrast with *Water*, in which a distinct figure emerges. In fact, the paintings form a diptych, hinted at by their opposing titles: what is merely a silhouette in the first painting, resembling a dead body outline from a crime scene, becomes a woman bearing Pindell's features in the second. The paintings complete one another, and each seems to help the understanding of the other. For instance, their common motif of the little stripes, similar to

³⁸ In *New York Times Article* 2020 interview, Pindell writes how her accident inspired her Autobiography series <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/24/t-magazine/howardena-pindell.html>.

scratches from a fork, may find an explanation in *Fire*, in which images of human hands seem to find an echo in the stripes, as though distorting them into fingers. In *Water*, the scratches convey a feeling of entrapment, similar to the bars of a prison. This perhaps suggests the physical limits that Pindell faced after her head injury, as well as her powerlessness facing the limits of her memory.



Figure 5 - Howardena Pindell, *Autobiography: Fire, Sutte* (1986–1987)



Figure 6 - Howardena Pindell, Autobiography: Water/Ancestors/Middle Passage/Family Ghosts (1988)

c. *Autobiography: Water/Ancestors/Middle Passage/Family Ghosts* (1988)

Autobiography: Water/Ancestors/Middle Passage/Family Ghosts (Figure 6) presents as a nine-foot-high canvas, with a central female figure representing the artist. As critic Lowery Stokes Sims notes, ironically, the oval scape seems to “engulf Pindell herself”³⁹. In a distant echo to the canonical Pre-Raphaelite painting *Ophelia* (1852) by John Everett Millais, death looms over the painting. The pallid face is reminiscent of a corpse’s: is she dead? Alive? One cannot tell whether the body is emerging from the water or being submerged, surfacing or drowning. Perhaps the oval scape could be reminiscent of the belly of the mother, inside of which a child would be floating in the amniotic fluid, but the figure resembles much more a specter or a ghost: the face is colored in white, some arms hanging loose in the water like those of a dead corpse, others raised up like those of a zombie, and the six of them forming a marine creature’s tentacles. With a closer look, the figure appears as a Frankensteinian monster. Indeed, Pindell’s sewing technique takes on a whole new meaning in that painting, in which the limbs of the creature are sewn to the rest of her body: the sewing becomes a surgical act which is reminiscent of Pindell’s accident. Death is thus omnipresent – water being a common symbol of the subconscious, and by extension, death. In this painting, like in “At the Bottom of the River”, the various objects lying underneath the surface are what escape awareness, or in that case, memory. For one, the collage of eyes and hands – two body parts evocative of power, that of sight or action – may reflect the artist’s attempt to recover her visual memories and physical aptitude.

All through the 1970s, before the car accident in 1979, Pindell travelled to five different continents, and lived in Japan, Sweden and India. She was often invited to give lectures on racism and the art world – something she had personally experienced⁴⁰. The *Autobiography* series draws from her travels, superimposing elements from different countries. In *Water*, different cultures are superimposed. For instance, the multiple arms are reminiscent of Hindu gods and goddesses: perhaps does it translate recovered memories from India? On another level, the myriad of eyes scattered over the canvas read as a reference to Argus Panoptes, the one-hundred eyes giant in Greek mythology, changed into a peacock by Hera to serve as the

³⁹ Sims, Lowery Stokes. “Synthesis and Integration in the Work of Howardena Pindell 1972-1992”, *Callaloo*, 2018, vol. 41, no. 1, p.93-100.

⁴⁰ Pindell talks about her experience of racism as an African American woman in the artworld: see the Smithsonian’s interview “Howardena Pindell: On the Performance of *Autobiography*”. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4WX3wHJobnA>.

goddess's all-seeing watchman. Through this variety of references, the painting forms a syncretic whole, transcending cultures. Pindell chooses to represent herself as a Hindu goddess possessing Argos's all-seeing qualities, at the crossroads of multiple cultural heritages. Pindell states that "*Water (Ancestors/Middle Passage/Family Ghosts)* represents [her] family's multicultural heritage"⁴¹. Like in Kincaid's short story, water acts as an intertextual medium, open to a creolized identity.

d. Water and History

The painting echoes "At the Bottom of the River" insofar as it depicts an identity quest that places water at the crossroads of multiple layers of identity. The title *Autobiography: Water/Ancestors/Middle Passage/Family Ghosts* evokes different kinds of memory – that of personal history (references to her accident), family heritage (multicultural allusions), and finally the hidden parts of US History⁴². Indeed, fragments of texts are to be found in the water. One can decipher the segregationist motto "separate but equal" on the bottom right corner of the painting, as well as what seems to be a passage from a slave code:

Or if the slave owner attempts the violation of the slave's wife and the enslaved *ressit* [resists] his attempts without the least effort to injure but merely to shield his wife from his assaults this law does not merely permit but authorizes the slave owner to murder the enslaved on the spot.

Interestingly, the letters are made difficult to decipher, covered by blue painting as though engulfed. This attests to Pindell's will to depict the repressed parts of US History, to make them emerge from the water, resurfacing from national amnesia. On the bottom left, a big white shape stands out: the attentive viewer recognizes the slave ship, hauntingly colored in white, as to suggest amnesia, as though erased from memory/History. This image works almost like an illustration of "The Open Boat", which marks the first chapter of Glissant's *Poetics of Relation*, in which the author describes the experience of "falling into the belly of the boat" (6)⁴³.

⁴¹ "Artist's statement" on Howardena Pindell's official website: <https://pindell.mcachicago.org/the-howardena-pindell-papers/artists-statement-1989>.

⁴² "*Water (Ancestors/Middle Passage/Family Ghosts)* represents my family's multicultural heritage, as well as hidden American history" (ibid).

⁴³ Glissant, Édouard. *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing. University of Michigan Press, 1997, p.6.

In fact, Pindell's aesthetic of showing what is hidden⁴⁴ is political: there is a crucial need to show the hidden history of the United States. A sense of entrapment is conveyed through Pindell's depiction of water: its texture seems more solid than liquid, and the blue striped motives appear as "pieces of water". The motives form a superimposed layer, spread over the different collaged pieces, like the bars of a prison. This seems to question fluidity of water: it is rather associated, here, with the prison of history.

As opposed to Pindell's painting where History resurfaces, the theme of conquest and *dominion* is merely a dormant theme, lying at the bottom of the river's bed in "At the Bottom of the River". Kincaid's portrayal of water is ambiguous: it is both a place of self-affirmation and, less evidently, the historical medium that allowed colonization and slavery. Indeed, the verb "conquer" is interspersed throughout the short story, discreetly, like a clandestine allusion: "And that stream then hugs closely to the path made, ruthlessly *conquering* the flat plain, the steep ridge, the grassy bed" (63); "I can see with my own eyes the sea, its surface smooth and calm; then in the next moment comes a breeze, soft, and small ripples turn into wavelets *conquering* wavelets" (72). Without ever it being a theme in the story, an implicit parallel is drawn between the motif of the conquest and self-affirmation. The image of the "*conquering* wavelets" indeed reflects the heroine's conquering of her identity. A parallel is drawn between the character's discovery of her inner world and the discovery of the New World: "I looked at this world as it revealed itself to me—how new, how new—and I longed to go there." (78).

In both Pindell and Kincaid's works, hidden parts of history resurface through the water, while the protagonist proceeds to an identity quest. However, in "At the Bottom of the River", the History of conquest and slavery seems rather distant, and manifests only through a little word, *conquer*, employed in a seemingly innocent way. In that respect, Howardena Pindell goes further in her painting *Autobiography: Water/Ancestors/Middle Passage/Family Ghosts*, tying together water and the history of slavery in the very title: her painting invites us to re-read "At the Bottom of the River" through this association of Water and History. In fact, as I will demonstrate in my second chapter, through these historical resonances, the sea becomes an image of split identity in the Caribbean context.

⁴⁴ The name of her major retrospective "What Remains To Be Seen" (2019) testifies to her conception of art as a way to confront the viewer to what is hidden.

Chapter II – “I have crossed an ocean / I have lost my tongue / From the roots of the old one / A new one has sprung”: the sea as an image of a split identity in Grace Nichols’s *I Have Crossed an Ocean* and Isaac Julien’s *Paradise Omeros*

A- “Life Between Islands”: the sea, in-betweenness and exile in Grace Nichols’s *I Have Crossed an Ocean* (2010)

a. The Windrush generation in *I Have Crossed an Ocean*

As has already been explored, both Jamaica Kincaid and Howardena Pindell resort to the watery imagery to conciliate multiple layers of identities, while also carrying another historical subtext – the history of slavery. In *I Have Crossed an Ocean*, instead of being a fluid space of connections and migratory circulations, the ocean lies at the heart of a biographical and geographical divide. Indeed, Grace Nichols left Guyana to settle in England at 27 years old: through her poems, the sea embodies the rupture between the poet’s former life in Guyana and her new life in England as an immigrant. The ocean is a mass of water that separates the two countries, something that has to be “crossed”: a feeling of exile is conveyed through the sharp contrast between the Caribbean (associated to her childhood) and England (the present reality). This idea of division and split is implied in the very title from the collection – *I Have Crossed an Ocean* – which was drawn from the epilogue poem of *I is a Long Memored Woman*: “I have crossed an ocean, / I have lost my tongue, / From the roots of the old one, / A new one has sprung”. The ocean is presented as a split that “cuts” the poet’s tongue in half, granting her a new form of lyrical expression – one that “springs from the roots of the old one” throughout the collection, interspersing standard English with Creole words.

In fact, through her poems, Nichols does more than merely depict her personal experience as a Caribbean in England: her own experience embraces that of the Windrush generation⁴⁵, a generation of Caribbean immigrants who arrived to England in the late 1940s and faced racism and rejection, and police brutality, in the following years evoking the harsh

⁴⁵ The Windrush generation is named after the the ship that brought the first West-Indian immigrants to the UK after World War Two. In 1948, the HMT Empire Windrush brought 1027 people from Jamaica to the London.

reality of this generation, Grace Nichols's poems stand as an archive of voices, building up a gallery of first-generation Caribbean British immigrants' portraits: "First Generation Monologue" (113); "Two Men on a Leicester Square Park Bench" (56); "Island Man" (56)⁴⁶.

The four-stanza poem "First Generation Monologue" exemplifies this interest for the Windrush generation. The poet's voice disappears to let an unnamed woman she refers to as a "Caribbean émigré" share her experience of "the bad old migrant days":

*Like every other Caribbean émigré
who'd put away the lamp of the sun
she spoke of the bad old migrant days:*
Yes, it seemed that as if the whole of England
Was a Scrooge in those days of
four-people-living-in-a-room.

Paradoxically, this "monologue" stages a polyphony of voices, with that of the poet introducing that of the Caribbean lady: the title insists on the solitude of the "émigré", whose experience nobody cares for (just as the Windrush generation did not find an attentive audience). The very choice of the French term "émigré" is interesting: the term is typically used in English to refer to a political refugee—it originally referred to people who were escaping the French Revolution in the 18th. Beyond that, the use of French in the middle of an English sentence seems to be reminiscent of Creole: indeed, orality is here performed, and even emphasized, with the use of "Yes" that opens the speech—as though to answer a question—and with the oral rhythm of the wholly hyphenated line "four-people-living-in-a-room". The spondaic rhythm at the beginning of the line translates the idea of an overcrowded space, and the words packed together convey the idea of suffocation, while later the references to senses serve a vivid representation of the "migrant days" in 1950s England: "The smell of clothes, dank / Before the only heater / The white landlady exact as the coin / clanking in the grudging meter". The hypallage marked by the unusual distribution of adjectives—the landlady grudges as the coin clanks in the exact gas meter—perhaps translates a feeling of . In fact, the émigré's new life in England is associated to a feeling of entrapment, a feeling that is conveyed by fricatives and plosives to describe the English architecture in lines 35-36: "The walls sealed and solid; / The closed door against the

⁴⁶ In fact, Nichols's realistic portrayal of this first generation of immigrants works like an archive: the interracial couple from "Configurations" (83) echoes the real-life couple in Charlie Phillips's photograph of the *Notting Hill Couple* (1967).

cold". The portrayal of this grey, cold, entrapped life in England stands in sharp opposition with memories of Caribbean landscapes. The end of the second stanza bursts into a lyrical longing: "How I long for the openness of verandahs" (l.20).

Just like Jean Rhys's *Voyage in the Dark* (1934), whose title refers to the heroine's journey from the brightness of the Caribbean to the darkness of English skies⁴⁷, the poem opposes the greyness of the English sky to the blueness of the Caribbean: "Still I lighted my days / with memories as blue as the indigo / of my mother's rinsing water" (l.11-12). Extending the color metaphor (grey/England and blue/Caribbean), the émigré lady becomes herself a poet when she depicts how she got carried away by a memory: "The days I got my colors mixed... a dream of colors / on my brain's muddled palette; / Bright blue suddenly brushing grey aside". But she is then brought back to a reality devoid of nature, where nobody listens to her story, as is expressed through the nostalgic floral metaphor: "the ivy of [her] voice no longer / climbing towards the ceiling / to overhang green and listening". Yet, by invoking the voice of this Windrush generation émigré, Grace Nichols places us in the role of an audience listening to her monologue—even more so since the poem is meant to be performed and read out loud.

b. An Ocean Apart: Black life in England in *The Fat Black Woman's Poems*

In the diptych formed by *The Fat Black Woman's Poems* (1984) and *The Fat Black Woman's Cycle* (1984), following *I is a Long Memored Woman* (1983), Nichols introduces a series of Caribbean immigrants in exile in the London, as perceived through the point of view of the Fat Black Woman persona. Through the phrase "Fat Black Woman", Nichols reclaims the stigma of the fat black woman, by both recording and subverting the imposition of white, western norms about female bodies. Contrary to the oneiric aspect of the poems in *I is a Long Memored Woman*⁴⁸, the *Fat Black Woman* cycle draws a more realistic portrayal of Black life in England. We, as readers, are given direct access to the Fat Black Woman's subjectivity, in poems like "Iguana Memory" (50) in which the Fat Black Woman shares a childhood memory

⁴⁷ Rhys, Jean. *Voyage in the Dark*, W. W. Norton & Company, 1994, p.1: "The colours were different, the smells different, the feeling things gave you right down yourself was different. Not just the difference between heat, cold; light, darkness; purple, grey [...] I couldn't get used to the cold. Sometimes I would pretend that the heat of the fire, or the bed-clothes drawn up round me, was sun-heat."

⁴⁸ Grace Nichols explains that the collection "owes its inspiration to a dream [she] had one night of a young African girl swimming to the Caribbean with a garland of flowers around her" ("Glossary", *I Have Crossed an Ocean*, 185).

from the Caribbean (“Saw an iguana once / when I was very small / in our backdam backyard”). The cycle portrays the everyday life of the character, through an apparent matter-of-fact tonality. For instance, with “The Fat Black Woman Goes Shopping” (65) Nichols chooses to depict the ordinary, banal act of running an errand: “Shopping in London winter / is a real drag for de fat black woman [...] in de weather so cold”. The poem is marked by the irruption of the Fat Black Woman’s voice through marks of orality (“de fat black woman”, “in de weather so cold”) as though to transcribe her foreign accent. In fact, everything in the poem seems to signify the Fat Black Woman’s exile—from the cold to the “frozen thin mannequins”. Nichols’s lyricism rises from an alliance of banal elements and orality to a more tragic undertone, as the character comes to the conclusion that this world is not adapted to her: “when it come to fashion / the choice is lean / Nothing much beyond size 14”. Here, “lean” reads as an ironic comment on how not only the choice in sizes is limited, but in fact there is no choice but to be thin. This combination of a prosaic set of images to a more serious undertone is even more striking in “Like a Beacon” (55), where the food imagery (“plantains”, “saltfish”, “sweet potatoes” and “beacon”) serves to convey the lyrical longing for home. Far from the light-heartedness the reader may expect from the title, the poem offers a reflection on the excruciating separation from home:

In London
 every now and then
 I get this craving
 for my mother’s food
 I leave art galleries
 in search of plantains saltfish
 sweet potatoes

 I need this link

 I need this touch
 of home
 swinging in my bag
 like a beacon
 against the cold

Home is here associated to rupture (“I need this link / I need this touch / of home”), as the persona tries to compensate for the distance, the broken link between her homeland and her land of exile. This idea of a ruptured link is even echoed typographically through the visual isolation of “I need this link”, separated in its own stanza, and the enjambment (“this touch / of home”) that cuts the phrase in half. The Fat Black Woman’s solitude in London is portrayed through sarcasm and gritty humor with the final simile that breaks with the nostalgic subject of the poem: “like a beacon / against the cold”.

In the Fat Black Woman’s cycle, the solitude of the main character is also echoed by other characters’ solitude, as it brings together a gallery of nostalgic first-generation migrants dreaming of their Caribbean homeland. The leitmotiv of the cold, wintery weather serves as a recurrent reminder of their separation from home. Indeed, the diptych formed by “Spring” (57) and “Winter Thoughts” (59) highlights the variety of seasons in comparison to the year-long tropical climate in the Caribbean—a contrast Édouard Glissant points out in *Soleil de la Conscience*⁴⁹. This is exemplified in “Two Old Black Men on a Leicester Square Park Bench” (60), in which Nichols conjures up a London wintery scene where two Black men “wrapped up in scarves / and coats of silence / eyes far away from the cold” are haunted by the memory of “some sunfull woman”. Opposing the “sunfull” woman reminiscent of the homeland—in an unusual term that echoes “sinful”—to the acute reality of the cold cityscape, the poem yet ends on a disenchanting note that breaks with the idealization of the past: “O it’s easy / to rainbow the past / after all the letters from / home spoke of hardships”. In a mix of lyricism (“O”) and sarcasm, Nichols enters the elderly men’s dreams (“What do you dream of / you old black men sitting”, “do you dream of revolutions”) only to end on a disabused return to their London reality: “the sun was traded long ago”.

The poem “Island Man” (56) portrays “a Caribbean island man in London who still wakes up to the sound of the sea”, and is transported to the Caribbean through his dreams:

Morning
an island man wakes up
to the sound of the blue surf

⁴⁹ Édouard Glissant’s *Soleil de la Conscience* (1997) opens with the image of winter, working as an allegory of France itself: “L’hiver a ses séductions redoutables, dont il faut parfois se garder... Venu de Martinique (qui est une île de la ceinture caraïbe) et vivant à Paris, me voici depuis huit ans engagé à la solution française [...]”.

in his head
the steady breaking and wombing

Although the character lies between a state of dream and awakening, the isolation of “in his head” through the run-on line, foreshadows that it is in fact but a dream. Indeed, the “Caribbean island man” recalls “the wild seabirds”, “the fishermen” and the sea “emerald island” from which the sun emerges, before he is eventually brought back to the London cityscape: “he always comes back groggily groggily / Comes back to the sands of a grey metallic soar / to surge of wheels / to dull North Circular roar”, with the indentation of “groggily groggily” that conveys his reluctant return to “another London day”:

muffling muffling
his crumpled pillow waves
island man heaves himself

Another London day

The repetitions seem to translate the character’s slow awakening (“muffling muffling” echoes “groggily groggily”), while the image of the “pillow waves” softly introduces a rupture with the dreams of “emerald sea”, as the everyday object of the pillow quietens the “steady breaking and wombing” of the waves. This geographical blur resonates with “First Generation Monologue” (113), which also addressed exile and displacement (although with gritty humor: “Sometimes I was as stranded / as a salmon” – with the surprise effect of the simile after the enjambment) and ends with a reflection on geographical uprooting: “Never enough to keep us rooted”. In “Wings” (122), the British Caribbean community is even portrayed as birds, that are devoid of roots:

root-lovers
root-grounders
root-worshippers

But isn’t it wings, our own wilful wings,
still taking us into migratory pull,
still taking us in homing-instinct

The Fat Black Woman's cycle thus forms a miscellany of uprooted characters haunted by the memories of the Caribbean islands, like an archipelago of solitary island men and women separated from their islands by an ocean, and who can only rely on themselves in their new life (contrary to John Donne's "No man is an island"), all haunted by the sound of the blue surf.

- c. "The Sea returns to haunt this carnival" (*Sunris*⁵⁰): crossing the Ocean, a biographical image with historical resonances

The sea is an underlying presence throughout the whole collection: subtle, yet everywhere to be found. In *The Fat Black Woman's Poems*, the sea is mentioned in the description of the Fat Black Woman's "blue sea dress" (in "Tropical Death", 67), or in her "black sea belly" (in "Invitation", 68). Nichols makes it rhyme with "me" in "Winter Thoughts" ("I've reduced the sea / to the throbbing fruit / in me"⁵¹) as well as in "Thoughts Drifting Through the Fat Black Woman's Head While Having a Full Bubble Bath" ("steatopygous⁵² sea / steatopygous waves / steatopygous me"⁵³), thus assimilating the woman to the sea through sound. In other poems, the sea is hyphenated to other things, like an entity that embraces everything that is associated to the Fat Black Woman: "staggering Caribbean blue sea-eye" ("Out of Africa", 85) and "our sea-chest of losses" ("Wings", 122); "my sea-weary bones" and "my sea-going spirit" ("Is That You Columbus", 138). Nichols's characters carry the sea *with* and *in* them like a reminiscence of their Caribbean past, as in "To My Coral Bones" (131) where the lyrical "I" of the Cariwoma merges through sounds with the "I" of the "islands".:

Deep
I Cariwoma
have always carried deep
these islands
this piece

⁵⁰ *I Have Crossed an Ocean*, 103.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 59.

⁵² The term "steatopygia" was used in colonial times to refer to the bodies of enslaved African women that were considered having prominent buttocks by Western scientist—as epitomized by the tragic fate of Sarah Baartman. Through the voice of the Fat Black Woman, Nichols reclaims this racist point of view on black female bodies: the anaphorical use of the adjective seems to subvert its axiological connotations, and the term becomes a source of pride and empowerment.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 70.

of Atlantic coastland
inside me

In each of her collections, Grace Nichols takes on a new Caribbean female figure – first, the “long memoried woman”, then the Fat Black Woman, and eventually the Cariwoma in *Startling the Flying Fish*. Although these multiple *personas* could be read as doubles of the poet, a way of indirectly tackling the latter’s experience of exile and displacement, the lyrical “I” in fact transcends the autobiographical “I” to embrace a larger subjectivity⁵⁴. Although *The Fat Black Woman’s Poems* seem very personal (“Thoughts Drifting Through the Fat Black Woman’s Head”, “Small Questions Asked by the Fat Black Women”), the eponymous *persona* also becomes the embodiment of many other Caribbean women in London as she goes shopping and realizes none of the thin, white mannequins look like her (“The Fat Black Woman Goes Shopping”).

Interestingly, in addition to the reality of the Windrush generation, Nichols conjures up a more ancient history. The polysemy of “shell” in “Small Questions Asked by a Fat Black Woman”, being both a bomb (“Will the rains / cleanse the earth of shrapnel / and wasted shells”) and a seashell, encapsulates how Nichols’s poems explore both the memory of the Windrush generation in post-World War II England, and, more subtly perhaps, the memory of slavery through the sea imagery.

Therefore, when Nichols writes “I have crossed an ocean” in the epilogue of *I is a Long Memoried Woman*, not only does she refer to her personal journey from Guyana to England, but also to “the traumatic transatlantic crossing of slaves from Africa to the New World”⁵⁵. Indeed, this collection was inspired by a dream Nichols had of an “African girl swimming to the Caribbean with a garland of flowers around her”. This historical resonance is made obvious from the liminary poem (“One Continent to Another”), that explores the journey of an enslaved woman from Africa to the Caribbean: “Now she stoops / in green canefields / piecing the life she would live”. By doing so, Nichols’s lyrical “I” becomes that of an atemporal Caribbean consciousness (just like Aimé Césaire’s in *Cahier d’un Retour au Pays Natal*). In “Sunris”, the lyrical I refers to African relatives (“Africa, when I remember my father / pouring a small

⁵⁴ See the grammatical rupture in “I is a Memoried Woman”, which either exemplifies Nichols’s use of Creole alongside standard English or prefigure that I is another person—in keeping with Rimbaud’s “Je est un autre”.

⁵⁵ See the glossary of *I Have Crossed an Ocean* (185).

libation in a corner”), thus creating a historical and geographical bridge with the “lost” African cultural roots. Throughout the poem, it is unclear where the carnival takes place: the Caribbean? Africa? the Notting Hill Carnival in London⁵⁶? The parade conjures up the spirit of Africa itself, (“so invigorate me, Africa, with your passing touch”) while the celebrations revive the memory of African ancestors:

History is a river
That flow to the sea
Laced with the bone of memory
I riding her choreography
I paying homage in ceremony
The Sea returns to haunt this carnival⁵⁷

And yet, despite the celebrations, the Sea still appears like a threatening presence, as it “returns to haunt this carnival”, “laced with the bone of memory”.

B- “Je te salue, vieil océan”⁵⁸: the ocean as a digénèse in *I Have Crossed an Ocean*

a. “Africa, how to begin / After all dis time and water” (*Sunris*): reading Grace Nichols through Édouard Glissant’s “Open Boat”

Miracle of Vision!
Who is dis apparition?

If is not Africa herself
Come out to play –
Making dih dance steps
Both of mourning and merriment
On dis carnival day

⁵⁶ British filmmaker Isaac Julien draws a parallel between the Notting Hill carnival and police brutality in the UK in his experimental documentary *Territories* (1984).

⁵⁷ Nichols, 103.

⁵⁸ Glissant, Édouard. “Open Boat”, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing. Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 1997.

In “Sunris”, “Africa herself” is personified and invited to join in the yearly carnival of “mourning and merriment”. Nichols addresses Africa as a long-lost friend through the following apostrophe: “Africa, how to begin / After all dis time and water” (102). Symbolically, the image of water is connected to that of a split, as the geographical separation from Africa by the physical mass of water takes on a temporal dimension. In fact, this refers to the historical echoes of the sea, and is reminiscent of the “Middle Passage”. By means of this association of ideas, water comes to embody the crossing of the Atlantic and the separation from the African roots. The ideas of water as disjunction and of the crossing of the Atlantic as a divisive process are theorized by Édouard Glissant in the first chapter of *Poetics of Relation*, “The Open Boat”⁵⁹, in which Glissant relates the violence of this uprooting, and of the arrival to an unknown land. Glissant refers to “the belly of the boat”⁶⁰, as the slave ship transforms into a mythological monster swallowing the bodies. The abyss is a projection into the unknown, the sea is the beginning of an exile, of an uprooting: “Paralleling this mass of water the third metamorphosis of the abyss thus projects a reverse image of all that had been left behind in the blue savannas of memory and imagination”. Glissant’s poetical account defamiliarizes the sea – referred to as “blue savannahs of memory and imagination” – so as to place us, as readers, in the perspective of the slaves projected into an unfamiliar environment (“The banks of the river have vanished on both sides of the boat. What kind of river, then, has no middle? Is nothing there but straight ahead?”). Through the text, the image of the holds of the slave ship, of the dark depths where bodies accumulate, become a metaphor for the chasm, the void of the unknown, that Glissant calls “the experience of the abyss”. Full of Glissantian resonances, the notion of chasm permeates *I Have Crossed an Ocean*, especially in reference to the Caribbean seascape. In “Wherever I Hang” (80), Nichols’s lyrical I resorts to the image of the ocean to express how she is torn and “divided” between two the Caribbean and England: “Yes, divided to de ocean / Divided to de bone / Wherever I hang my knickers – that’s my home”. Interestingly, the idea of the ocean and division is associated to the image of the bone, here through the anaphoric structure that draws a parallel between “ocean” and “bone” in the memory of the slaves thrown into the ocean. This resonates with “Price We Pay for the Sun” (47), which reunites both the image of the “split” and of the “bone” through the phrase of the “split / bone”⁶¹:

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Interestingly, Glissant’s poetical essay addresses the African enslaved ancestors, in a process of defamiliarization: “In your poetic vision, a boat has no belly, a boat is steered by open skies”. Glissant forces us, as the readers, to rediscover things through eyes for which not familiar (“What kind of river, then, has no middle?”).

⁶¹ Two poems later, the phrase “split bone” finds an echo in the mention of a “split moment” in “Iguana Memory” (50).

these islands
not picture postcards
for unravelling tourist
you know
these islands real
more real
these islands split
bone

Contrasting with the heavenly landscapes often associated to the Caribbean, the macabre ending of the stanza on the “split / bone” serves as a reminder of the deadly history of the Caribbean. Besides, the choice of enjambment reproduces the image of the split in the very typography of the poem, breaking the natural flow of the sentence. In fact, Nichols’s poetics of the split translates through her recurrent use of enjambments throughout the collection: while fragmenting a semiotic unit, enjambments also help revealing another, hidden meaning. For instance, in “To the Running of My River” (110), the enjambment breaks the word “hardships” in two when evoking “the hard / Ships of her immigrant history”. As the word “ships” emerges, the text is endowed with a new layer of meaning—could it be a hint to the Glissantian ship?

According to Glissant, however, this crossing is not pure destruction (although it “reaps havoc” in “Back Home Contemplation”), nor division. It is also a genesis. From the shared experience of the abyss, the forced displacement and the uprooting, creolization occurs. The belly of the boat is also a womb, a “matrice” that divides yet procreates – Glissant coins the term “di-genesis”, allying division and genesis. This is in fact what lies at the core of the collection *I Have Crossed an Ocean*: “I have crossed an ocean / I have lost my tongue / From the roots of the old one / a new one has sprung” (44). Uprooted, the enslaved Africans figuratively lost their tongue, but this resulted in the emergence of the Creole language from the encounter between the African languages spoken by the slaves and the European languages of the slave-owners. Nichols asks: “What is the meaning / Of old tongues / Reaping havoc in new places?”⁶². This question first reads as meta-poetic, in the sense that Nichols’ own writing style mixes Guyanese Creole and standard English. Although the poem was inspired by a “hurricane that hit England”, it indirectly points to the historical violence of the arrival of

⁶² “Hurricane Hits England”, *I Have Crossed an Ocean*, 125.

African languages to the West Indies, and resonates well with this passage from the “The Open Boat”:

African languages became deterritorialized, thus contributing to creolization in the West. This is the most completely known confrontation between the powers of the written word and the impulses of orality. The only written thing on slave ships was the account book listing the exchange value of slaves. Within the ship’s space the cry of those deported was stifled, as it would be in the realm of the Plantations.

More than a mere linguistic phenomenon, creolization, as theorized by Glissant, refers to the birth of Caribbean culture, since it was from this encounter between two different cultures that a third one was born – one that was neither African or European, but Creole. Drawing from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s botanical metaphor of the rhizome⁶³, Édouard Glissant theorizes that Caribbean culture is born from the unpredictable union of multiple roots that, brought together, produces a whole new plant. In “Out of Africa”, the lyrical I becomes an embodiment of creolization as it retraces the series of displacements of the African diaspora through a series of anaphors (first in “Out of Africa”; then “Into the Caribbean”; and eventually “Into England”). Likewise, Nichols hints at the concept of creolization in “To the Running of My River”, dedicated to a certain Indo-Caribbean woman named Kamal: “Here comes my unsaried daughter / Walking in the simple / Creolization of herself”. This poem appears as an homage to the Indo-Caribbean cross-cultural heritage, descending from indentured workers from India that were brought to the Caribbean as labor after the abolition of slavery.

Despite conjuring up a gallery of characters torn between Africa, the Caribbean, and England, Nichols attempts to recreate unity through her poetry, past the fragmentation. Through her poems, a Creole voice resurfaces and calls for unity in the deep: “spread re-echo / regather / down down / wake dih ear/of the middle passage/drown”⁶⁴. It is the voice of the Cariwoma.

⁶³ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2013.

⁶⁴ “Sunris”, 92.

- b. “I, Cariwoma Watched History” (*Startling the Flying Fish*): spreading re-echoes of Derek Walcott’s “The Sea is History”?

In her attempt at reviving a Creole voice, and “regathering” the fragments of the tongue that was lost to the sea, Nichols introduces the *persona* of the Cariwoma. The character clearly asserts herself as the lyrical I of *Startling the Flying Fish* since the first three poems of the collection all open with “I, Cariwoma” – the very first poem opens on “I, Cariwoma, / watch my children / take off like / migrating spider-birds / carrying the silver threads / of their linkage”⁶⁵. The Cariwoma (from “Caribbean woman”) stands as an atemporal Caribbean entity, depicted as a sea creature living in the deep of the ocean:

Wind and Shore are my closest companions
In my sea-house there are many mansions
Who knows more than me
the songs of the drowning?

Through the artifact of my shells
I whisper to the living
To the dead I offer treatise
Of continuous remembering

My memorials between rocks
My altar-places between weeds
Nightly I dance with my children
In the dancehalls of the deep⁶⁶

Reminiscent of a science-fiction character living in “the deep”⁶⁷, the Cariwoma lives in a sea-house: the poem interestingly displaces elements of the familiar world (“mansions”, “memorials”, “altar-places” and “dancehalls”) into the deep of the ocean (“between rocks”, “between weeds”, “the deep”). These lines also full of meta-poetic resonances, in particular with the reference to the “songs of the drowning”: the Cariwoma “re-echoes” and “regathers”

⁶⁵ “My Children Are Movers”, 132.

⁶⁶ “In My Sea-House”, *I Have Crossed an Ocean* (134).

⁶⁷ In *The Deep* (2019), sci-fi writer Rivers Solomon invents an underwater society of the water-breathing creatures descending from the slave women who were thrown overboard during the crossing of the Middle Passage.

the scattered voices of the drowned slaves. Instead of the usual lyre, the creature resorts to “the artifact of [her] shells” to whisper their songs to the living, to pass on the memory of the sea.

The Cariwoma thus stands as an abstract Caribbean consciousness, a timeless allegory of the islands who long preceded the arrival of the Europeans and the slaves, or the indentured workers⁶⁸. Voice is inseparable from water in “Is that You Columbus?”, as the Cariwoma hears the arrival of European colonizers’ “oceanic voices / rolling through turquoise waves of clearness” (138). The Cariwoma even embodies the spirits of the indigenous people of the islands that “watched history happen” (132) – history here referring to the arrival of Columbus:

Yes, I Cariwoma watched history happen
like a two-headed Janus,
however far apart heads can be.

In keeping with the themes of division and duality, the mythological image of the two-headed Janus features one head that “rose up from the hammock’s languorous belly / and turned towards the winged ships / of Columbus’s faith” and another that “rose up / from the misery ship, that other hammock” – a hint to Glissant’s “belly of the boat”? By drawing a parallel between the perspective of the indigenous people in the hammocks watching the arrival of Columbus, and that of the enslaved Africans in the holds of the “misery ship, that other hammock”, the spirit of the Cariwoma embodies unity and goes beyond the antagonism that opposes these two different journeys. The sea acts as a unifying factor, as the Cariwoma gathers the echoes of the two peoples, and reemerges from the sea as a whole: “Sea right here on your lipshore / is where I Cariwoma must come / to reacquaint with all of me”; “make we catch up / Let me hear once more your mouthwash / echoes in my own voicespeak”. It appears that her “unity is submarine”, to quote Kamau Brathwaite⁶⁹.

In fact, by associating the voice to the sea, the poem resonates with how the sea carries the “sound / like a rumour without any echo / of History, really beginning” in “The Sea is History” by Derek Walcott⁷⁰. There is indeed a parallel to be drawn between Nichols and Walcott, in the sense that they both interrogate the capacity of the sea to carry the memory of

⁶⁸ In “Other Ships”, Nichols draws our attention on the lesser-known history of the indentured workers from India: “But there were other ships / rocked by dreams / and fears and promise / Rolling / with new arrivals / across the Atlantic [...] their indentured mud – / stained feet, soon embroidered / like the slave’s instep to the fields” (133).

⁶⁹ Brathwaite, Kamau. “Caribbean Man in Space and Time”.

⁷⁰ Walcott, Derek. “The Sea is History” *Selected Poems*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007.

History despite the drowning of the slaves' voices – hence Walcott's mention of an oxymoronic "rumour without any echo". Both poets are confronted to the absence of written testimony on the crossing of the Atlantic Ocean: Walcott depicts how "the ocean kept turning blank pages / looking for History", while "sea memory is as clear / as a desert island" for Nichols⁷¹. The sea stands either a desert without any footprints, or a book devoid of characters, since all prints have been submerged by the sea, as Walcott portrays in "The Sea is History":

Where are your monuments, your battles, martyrs?
Where is your tribal memory? Sirs,
in that grey vault. The sea. The sea
has locked them up. The sea is History.

This tragic question ("Where are your monuments, your battles, martyrs?") points at how the sea has ruined all possibilities for archeological research on remains or "monuments", any scientific research on the legacy of the drowned ancestors. It has engulfed all evidence of the slave trade. The sea serves as a vault – extending the religious imagery in the poem, similarly to Nichols's poem "In My Sea-House" that conjures up "memorials between rocks" and "altarpieces between weeds"⁷². In "Facing the Atlantic", the Cariwoma appears to be somewhat sarcastic of the majesty of the waves crashing on the shore, and its divine aspect: "Well this is a classic – / the pauses and crashes / the biblical rises" (136). Indeed, the religious reverence towards the sea is a commonplace in Caribbean literature. It can be found in "The Sea is History", where the ocean is compared to "The Ark of the Covenant": "Bone soldered by coral to bone, / mosaics / mantled by the benediction of the shark's shadow, / that was the Ark of the Covenant.". The sacred image of the relic becomes a composite image, a mosaic of coral and bones of the dead slaves. This image of the bones, incorporated to coral, clearly stands out as a creolized mosaic of human and sea life. Interestingly, we also encounter this image in Nichols with the "coral bones" of the Cariwoma ("I hold / these islands / to my coral bones"⁷³) that find an illustration in Ellen Gallagher's *Ecstatic Draught of Fishes* series of paintings (Figure 7)⁷⁴. All these allusions to bones and human remains surely aim at pointing out that, far from the

⁷¹ "Footprints of my Arrival", 160.

⁷² "In My Sea-House", 134.

⁷³ "To My Coral Bones", 131.

⁷⁴ See Gallagher's *Watery Ecstatic Series* (2001- ongoing).

deceptive peacefulness of the islands⁷⁵, and beneath the “turquoise dress” of the sea⁷⁶, hides a deadly history. Nichols warns her readers against the “Palm-Tree Seductions”: “No need to know that sea / does not always keep up / this front of blue serenity” (135).



Figure 7 - Ellen Gallagher, *Ecstatic Draught of Fishes* (2020)

⁷⁵ In *A Small Place* (1988), an essay often regarded as a pamphlet against white tourism in the Caribbean, Jamaica Kincaid shatters the reductive image of the Caribbean as turquoise sea and palm trees.

⁷⁶ Nichols, “Footprints of My Arrival” (160)

- c. “She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks”⁷⁷: breaking with the silence of the sea and gathering a sea-archive with M. NourbeSe Philip’s *Zong!* (2008)

What kind of archive, then, is the Caribbean Sea? In line with Derek Walcott, French historian Arlette Farge establishes a close link between History and the Ocean in her essay *The Allure of Archive*⁷⁸, comparing the study of archives to an “oceanic experience”:

L’archive ne ressemble ni aux textes, ni aux documents imprimés, ni aux “relations”, ni aux correspondances, ni aux journaux, ni même aux autobiographies. Elle est difficile dans sa matérialité. Parce que démesurée, envahissante comme les marées d’équinoxes, les avalanches ou les inondations. La comparaison avec des flux naturels et imprévisibles est loin d’être fortuite ; celui qui travaille en archives se surprend souvent à évoquer ce voyage en termes de plongée, d’immersion, voire de noyade... la mer est au rendez-vous.

Ironically, if Arlette Farge refers to the Western historian’s confrontation to an abyssal infinity of historical writings and archives, the oceanic imagery in relation to History addresses the exact opposite phenomenon in the Caribbean context, where the historian is confronted to an incomplete archive. This is what American writer and academic Saidiya V. Hartman points at in her 2008 article “Venus in Two Acts”⁷⁹, in which she relates her research on the journey of an enslaved woman that appeared in several archives under the nickname of Venus. She asserts: “One cannot ask ‘Who is Venus?’ because it would be impossible to answer such question. [...] And the stories that exist are not about [her], but rather about the violence, excess, mendacity, and reasons that seized hold of their lives.” In fact, even her real name is obliterated from the archives, since we only know her as Venus, a nickname that the slave-owners probably gave her because of her beauty – she remains anonymous, and silent. Pointing at both the lack of information, and at the limited point of view translated by the Western archive, Hartman concludes:

The archive, in this case, is a death sentence, a tomb, a display of the violated body, an inventory of property, a medical treatise on gonorrhoea, a few lines about a whore’s life, an asterisk in the grand narrative of history.

⁷⁷ M. NourbeSe Philip. *She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks*. The Women’s Press, 1993.

⁷⁸ Farge, Arlette. *The Allure of the Archive*, trans. Thomas Scott-Railton. Yale University Press, 2013.

⁷⁹ Saidiya Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts,” *Small Axe*, vol. 12, no. 2, June 2008, 1-14.

NourbeSe Philip's poetry stage an attempt at breaking this silence of the archive –one of her well-known collections is titled “She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks”. Addressing the lack of archival material, NourbeSe Philip dedicates her collection *Zong!* (2008) to the memory of the *Zong* Massacre of 1781. The *Zong* is the name of the Dutch slaver ship whose captain and crew threw one hundred and forty-two slaves overboard after the ship ran out of drinking water, so as to not lose the insurance money that had been taken out on the lives of the enslaved Africans. The captain and crew were tried, and found guilty: this sparked a scandal, and motivated the rise of abolitionist movements in the late 18th and beginning of the 19th, inspiring J. M. W. Turner's *The Slave Ship*⁸⁰ (1840).

In her collection, M. Philip “tries her tongue” to “break the silence” of history. Since it is impossible to reconstitute what the slaves experienced through the only existing archive that we have, poetry stands as the only way to express the traumatic experience of the Middle Passage. Instead of filling the blanks of history through “critical fabulation” (a method coined by Saidiya Hartman that combines archival research and fictional writing to produce a narrative filling the blanks of the archive) Philip's choice of aesthetic fragmentation in her poems stands as a respectful way to “enter” the archive without “violating” it.

In keeping with Pindell's collage technique, *Zong!* displays words visually scattered on the page – poetry seems to meet visual arts here. Philip mixes words and onomatopoeias, so as to revive the voices of the drowned slaves mingled with that of the Europeans on the ship. Matthew Reynolds points out “the mixture of different languages; different tongues”: “Among the mayhem of *Zong!* are words in Yoruba, Spanish, Latin, Shona, Portuguese, West African patois, Hebrew, Greek, Italian, French, Fon, Dutch and Arabic.”⁸¹ Interestingly, Philip proposes collective readings of *Zong*, reproducing the fragmentation orally as every participant reads a piece of the text, so as to make the multiple voices form a whole in a choir of voices in a moment of collective remembrance⁸².

In fact, this “mayhem” allows the disappeared tongues to reemerge from the sea: “the sea, by allowing Philip to mourn—to be attentive to the wake—and by allowing the lost to

⁸⁰ Originally titled *Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying – Typhon coming on* (Figure 9).

⁸¹ Matthew Reynolds, “A poetry of disorder and mayhem: M. NourbeSe Philip.”

⁸² Recent readings can be found on M. NourbeSe Philip's official website: <https://www.nourbese.com/zong/>.

resurface and speak, provides possibilities for renewal”⁸³. The image of the sea looms over the poem through the recurring apparitions of the term “wat” on the page, which resonates with the Jamaican word for “water”:

Guttural meditation on water—the source of desperate desire, deprivation, sustenance, and death. The protracted syllables in the word ‘water’ also suggest the question ‘what’ (or “wat” in Jamaican). What legal logic could justify these murders? What ancestral guilt could justify such a punishment? (97)

In “‘The Sea is History’: on temporal accumulation”, Ian Baucom explains that “the labor of resuscitation remains perpetually unfinished and unending rather than preliminary” (*Specters of the Atlantic*, 332). In fact, what remains is an “open wound”, as the wounds this bodies open in the Atlantic remain open. “This is, not was,” Philip insists. Wat(er) is thus a question left without answer.

Zong! #1

w w w w a wa
 w a w a t
 er wa s
 our wa
 te r gg g g go
 o oo goo d
 waa wa wa
 w w waa
 ter o oh
 on o ne w one
 w o n d d d
 ey d a
 dey a ah ay
 s one day s
 wa wa

Figure 8 - M. NourbeSe Philip, “Zong” #1

⁸³ Andrea Davis, “Re-turn to the Sea,” *Horizon, Sea, Sound*. 2022.



Figure 9 - J. M. W. Turner, The Slave Ship (1840)

C- Visual fragmentation as a form of creolization: images of the sea in Isaac Julien's *Paradise Omeros* (2002)

a. Isaac Julien: creolization through the aesthetic of the “remix”

The work of British artist and filmmaker Isaac Julien (who was knighted by Queen Elizabeth II in 2022) resonates with Grace Nichols's *I Have Crossed an Ocean* as it tackles the theme of exile and draws a portrait of Black life in the UK – in particular the Windrush generation. In keeping with the visual fragmentation at work in Philip's poems, Julien's body of work examines the notion of connection by expressing the notion of diaspora through visual fragmentation. Although my analysis will focus on *Paradise Omeros* (2002), in which the sea occupies a central position, it is interesting to observe that earlier works like *Territories* (1984) already foreshadow Julien's usage of montage and superpositions – allying multiple layers of sound and images – to address the theme of dis-location. In *Territories*, Isaac Julien intertwines different types of territories and tonalities: visually, he intercuts footage of the Notting Hill Carnival in London with that of police brutality in the UK; sound-wise, Joan Baez's “The Ballad of Sacco and Vanzetti” is mixed with Quincy Jones's “Boyhood to Manhood” (the soundtrack of 1970s show *Roots*, that retraced Kunta Kinte's journey from Gambia, where he is captured and made a slave, to America). In an interview with David A. Bailey, co-curator of the *Life Between Islands* exhibit, Julien explains that style-wise *Territories* “should be encountered like a remix”⁸⁴:

In a work like *Territories*, the power of sound and music counterpoints the visual montage strategy. Using visual alliteration and echoes – of questions of rupture and desire, the gaze and policing – and bringing these into motion under impact of dub aesthetic, the film should be encountered as a remix. Its repeated phrases, oscillations and orchestrations depart from reggae.

Drawing on a musical metaphor, the aesthetic of the “dub” – Jamaican music that superimposes spoken or chanted words on an instrumental reggae background – highlights the system of echoes and superpositions at work in *Territories*, both in terms of sound and image⁸⁵. In its dub

⁸⁴ Bailey, David A. “Life Between Islands: Caribbean-British Art 50s – Now” (interview with Isaac Julien and Alberta Whittle).

⁸⁵

soundscape and visual repetitions, the film prefigures the work of French musician Chassol – in particular his film *Big Sun* (2015), shot in Martinique (where Chassol’s parents were born), that documents Martinican landscapes, creole language and culture through a remix of natural sounds and human voices.

Interestingly, the remixing of sound particularly resonates with Julien’s *Paradise Omeros* (2002) on a visual level: through a three-channel film installation, the film stands as a triptych put into motion. Strikingly enough, the choice of the “split screen” is reminiscent of the “dub aesthetic” in *Territories*: the play on visual (dis)continuity through montage in *Territories* is transfigured into the concrete rupture of the three separate screens in *Paradise Omeros*. At times, the screens offer a visual continuum – with each continuing the other’s image; sometimes, on the contrary, the screen in the middle interrupts the continuity between the other two screens; and sometimes the same image is shown thrice – conjuring up once again the idea of repetition, of “visual alliteration and echoes”. Julien draws an explicit parallel between montage and the aesthetic choice of the multiscreen:

Working with multiple screens allows you to transgress time and location. I think that was what attracted me to the effects of montage and bricolage – effects that are also in earlier works like *Territories* 1984, where there is a layering using different transitions of images and collage.

In his interview with David A. Bailey (co-curator of *Life Between Islands*) and artist Alberta Whittle (whose works were also exposed), Isaac Julien draws a parallel between his work and the journey of Alberta Whittle from sculpture to film. She explains that her relationship to film lies in continuity with her experience as a sculptor: “prior to making films I made sculptures which were mostly *assemblage* and bricolage works. When I started making films it was always very much from a sculptural perspective, with *that feeling of layering*”⁸⁶. Interestingly, for Isaac Julien, this process of “assemblage” and “bricolage” in *Paradise Omeros* is echoed by the multiscreen format: I will explore how this assemblage aesthetic translates in *Paradise Omeros* as an “inquiry of creoleness”.

⁸⁶ Bailey, David A. “Life Between Islands: Caribbean-British Art 50s – Now” (interview with Isaac Julien and Alberta Whittle).

b. *Paradise Omeros* (2002): an “inquiry of creoleness”

Julien explains in his interview with David A. Bailey: “What I was trying to articulate in those works was the syntax of the language in relationship to ideas around créolité, and how this could translate into artistic and cinematic forms”⁸⁷. Creole, as the language of hybridity, becomes an aesthetic through the multiplicity of screens but also through the multiplicity of references – primarily to Walcott’s *Omeros*, that is itself inspired by Homeric mythology. Indeed, the title of the film is a direct reference to Derek Walcott’s epic poem *Omeros* (1990), that itself took its title from Homer’s name in ancient Greek. *Paradise Omeros* was created in collaboration with the poet – whose voice can even be heard in the film, where he reads excerpts from *Omeros*. In fact, Isaac Julien’s film is full of echoes to Walcott’s contemporary, Caribbean-set rewriting of Homer’s *Odyssey*. The film tackles the theme of displacement and hybridity through the mixing not only of languages – English is spoken alongside French Creole – but also landscapes. Partly set in contemporary Saint Lucia, where both Walcott and Isaac Julien’s parents were born, and partly in 1960s London, the film plays with discontinuity by intercutting shots of the turquoise sea, the tropical plants and beaches in the Caribbean with shots of bleak urban London. According to Nat Trotman, associate curator at the Guggenheim Museum, the film “steps outside the bounds of linear time to link two island cultures: 1960s England and contemporary Saint Lucia”⁸⁸. Achilles, the protagonist, appears in both locations: first as a waiter in a tropical resort, and then wandering through housing projects in London. Starting in the Caribbean, the film begins like a tale: Achilles is given an unclear mission by a stranger – an “oracle-like figure” according to Alberta Whittle⁸⁹ – he meets on the beach. Without any explanation, the camera then follows Achilles as he walks into the ocean, drowns and resurfaces in 1960s London, in a concrete estate.

Considering the contrast between the two “territories”, the one-word addition to Walcott’s title *Omeros* – “paradise” – is quite intriguing. As Peter Erickson points out in his article: what is the paradise in *Paradise Omeros*, and where is it located?”⁹⁰. At first glance, the turquoise sea of Saint Lucia illustrates perfectly the paradise mentioned in the title. Indeed.

⁸⁷ Erickson, Peter. “Visualizing Cross-Media Encounters: From Derek Walcott’s *Omeros* to Isaac Julien’s *Paradise Omeros*”.

⁸⁸ Trotman, Nat. “Isaac Julien: *Paradise Omeros*”, Guggenheim website.

⁸⁹ Bailey, David A. “Life Between Islands: Caribbean-British Art 50s – Now” (interview with Isaac Julien and Alberta Whittle).

⁹⁰ Erickson, Peter. “Visualizing Cross-Media Encounters: From Derek Walcott’s *Omeros* to Isaac Julien’s *Paradise Omeros*” *Nka*, vol. 35, no. 1, 2014, 14.

in an interview with Marie-Hélène Laforêt, Derek Walcott associates Saint Lucia to this “paradise”, as he interprets the contrasts between dream-like Saint Lucian seascapes and bleak English cityscapes as a heaven/hell opposition. And yet, Erickson highlights that this is an oversimplification: “to see Saint Lucia exclusively as paradise is to simplify it”. Isaac Julien instead was hoping to question the dreamlike aspect of Saint Lucia, that is for him a “site of mythic cultural fantasy”. In fact, the shots of the turquoise sea are purposefully interspersed with suggestions of violence – tension lies beneath the idyllic surface of the sea. Erickson quotes Julien:

‘In reference to Derek Walcott’s *Omeros*, I was hoping that the film would return to the Caribbean as a site of mythic cultural fantasy’, the term ‘fantasy,’ understood as having political content and critical edge rather than idealized wish fulfillment, suggests that to see Saint Lucia exclusively as paradise is to simplify it. Both *Paradise Omeros* and *Encore* begin with a scene of the young man’s violent expulsion from this ‘paradise,’ from which he is seen running for his life to the sound of gunfire. As Julien explains this escape elsewhere, ‘In *Paradise Omeros*, when I show the man running through the plantation of bananas and we hear dogs barking, I evoke the slave’s escape from the plantation, the landscape of the maroon.’

In fact, this, merely superficial, Caribbean paradise finds a counterpoint in England that is all the more violent: the most flagrant example is how the scenes of a house party are intercut with a scene of domestic violence. The festive tonality and (sexual) tension of the party, as couples dance to The Paragons’ song “The Tide is High”, finds a counterpoint in the underlying violence and danger of the father beating up his son in another room of the house. This tension of the party, in fact, hides a sense of danger that is perhaps to be linked to police brutality and racism that the Windrush generation faced in England, but that is only implied in *Paradise Omeros*⁹¹: “*Paradise Omeros* is also about the Windrush generation; for example, in the party scene we hear The Paragons’ song ‘The Tide Is High’, and during that moment, the important questions of home and belonging and of resistance come to the foreground.”

⁹¹ Steve McQueen’s *Lovers Rock* (from his 2020 miniseries *Small Axe*), which focuses on a Caribbean house party, seems to hint at Julien’s, and yet explicitly establishes this paralleled tension between the dance scenes and the threats of white police.

This troubled sense of “home and belonging” is conveyed in *Paradise Omeros* as the film keeps going back and forth between the Caribbean and England. By doing so, Julien accentuates the sense of contrast and dis-location: sometimes the middle screen displays a shot of the Caribbean Sea that interrupts the continuity of the two other screens showing a London cityscape. This is not unrelated to Julien’s own revisitation of “The Sea is History”, as the latter highlights in the *Life Between Islands* interview the symbolically importance of the images of the sea in his film, in continuity with Walcott’s poetry:

In his Nobel Prize-winning poem *Omeros* (1990), [Walcott] recasts Homeric mythology around the Caribbean, and I tried to re-articulate this in my own work. Walcott’s incredibly important poem ‘The Sea Is History’ also figures in the work – not literally but visually, in that I was interested in the way in which the Atlantic was being evoked, and to make that a passage for my protagonists in the work, as well as to create the flow between the islands – between England and Saint Lucia.⁹²

However, the ocean stands as a paradoxical alliance: although it links both spaces – since Achilles walks into the Caribbean Sea and reemerges in London – it is also as a space of rupture – Achille’s journey is also reminiscent of the drowning of the enslaved Africans brought to the Caribbean. The resurfacing in 1960s London thus appears like a resurrection, and directly point to the Windrush generation through the symbolical crossing of the Atlantic Ocean. Over the course of the video, Achilles becomes the Everyman embodying the Caribbean diaspora. The film “delves into the fantasies and feelings of ‘creoleness’ – the mixed language, the hybrid mental states and the territorial transpositions that arise when one lives in multiple cultures”. This seems to be embodied by the object of the silver ball handed by the oracle figure. The ball appears as a globe-like metaphor (from the ancient Greek “transfer”) that creates continuity despite the geographical rupture: “It transports itself between Saint Lucia and London between screens” and “transgresses geography and, in a way, time too.”: a symbol of creolization.

Using Ian Baucom’s words, Julien portrays the sea as “an archive of the enduring, an array of underwater signposts, the ‘gathering in the scattering’ that characterizes creolization.” (329). Through its fragmentary aesthetic, the play between the screens, and the way it goes back and forth between the Caribbean and England, *Paradise Omeros* illustrates the tension between

⁹² Erickson, Peter. “Visualizing Cross-Media Encounters.” 2014.

fragmentation and unity that is at the core of creolization – “the disparate and the diasporization of the unified—a gathering in scattering.”⁹³

⁹³ Ian Baucom. “‘The Sea is History’: On Temporal Accumulation,” *Specters of the Atlantic*, 329.

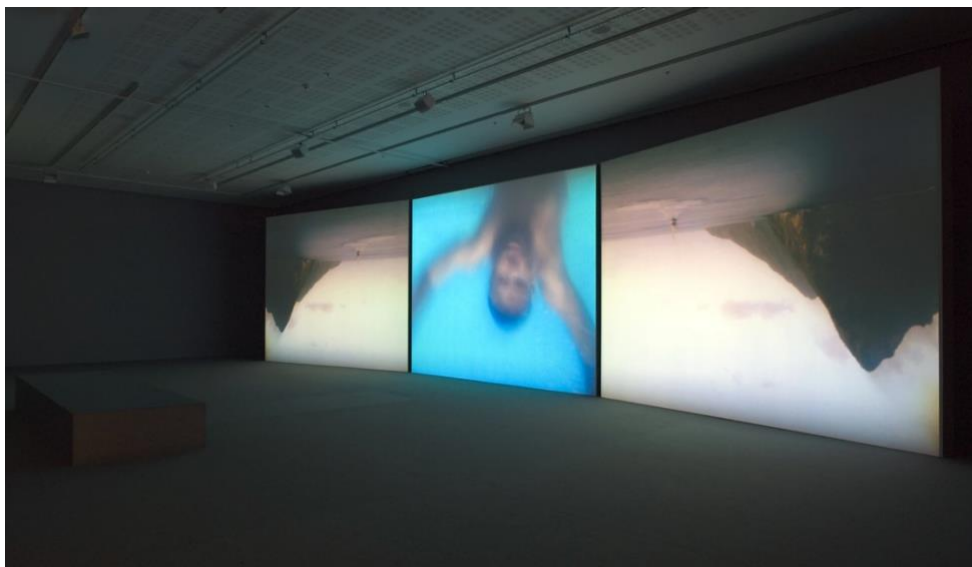


Figure 10 - Isaac Julien, Paradise Omeros (2002)

Chapter III – The sea between “shell”-shocks and reconstruction: Olive Senior’s marine ecopoetics and the leitmotiv of the shell in *Hurricane Watch* in parallel with Ellen Gallagher’s *Watery Ecstatic* series

A- Exposing the “shellshocks” of History

- a. Olive Senior’s poetic of the seemingly insignificant and the motif of the shell

“Come: / study me. Take my chambered shell apart.
Brace yourself in the whirlwinds / coiled at my heart.”
Olive Senior, “Gastropoda”

It is with this invitation to “take [the] chambered shell apart” that Jamaican Poet Laureate Olive Senior opens her anthology *Hurricane Watch* (2022). As the poet makes the unsettling choice of a gastropod’s voice to invite the reader into the collection, these lines resonate as a metapoetic invitation to unfold the poem and find its true meaning at the core of it. Although it foreshadows Olive Senior’s simple aesthetic, the poem warns us against its misleading straightforwardness—and the frivolity of its gastropod subject. Diametrically opposed to grandiloquent lyrical effusions, Senior’s poems strike one as humble both in subject and style, as they lie among the little creatures—either animal or vegetal. In a review of *Hurricane Watch*, literary critic Kate Kellaway indeed refers to Senior as “a champion of inclusion”⁹⁴:

Olive Senior – the name itself nudging towards becoming a poem – has an inclusive attitude towards her work and never disdains humble things. She will give full, equal and affectionate attention to mango trees, magpies and even to a Christmas pudding (a recent, gorgeous poem, soaked in rum) as well as to global and racial injustice and environmental issues. There are playful, shaped poems here too: an egg about to hatch, a nutmeg charged with history, slanting rain. She is unlofty, humorously humane.

⁹⁴ Kellaway, Kate. “*Hurricane Watch* by Olive Senior review—a champion of inclusion.” *The Guardian*, 18 Jan. 2022. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2022/jan/18/hurricane-watch-by-olive-senior-review-a-champion-of-inclusion>.

In fact, as exemplified by the speaking mollusk in “Gastropoda”, the human and the nonhuman are no longer separated in Senior’s poems. They even seem to merge: in “Pearl”, the poet compares a trophy wife to the captive pearls of her necklace (28); in “Garden Snail”, a mobile home dweller to a snail carrying its shell (23). In fact, as Kate Kellaway points out, Olive Senior’s birth name (“itself nudging toward becoming a poem”) already seems to encapsulate her fascination for the minuscule and the organic. Throughout the anthology, the image of the olive finds an echo in the roundness of the egg-shaped calligram (“Hatch” 19), the peppercorn calligram in “Allspice” (123), the pearl (28), and the grain of rice in “What Could Be Written on a Grain of Rice” (60). Yet, it is the leitmotif of the shell that stands out as the most recurrent imagery throughout the anthology, as it is introduced from the first collection: *Shell* (2007). The collection itself is divided into several parts whose titles are all puns and variations on “shell”: *Shell out*, *Shell Blow*, *Shell Shock*, *Shelter* and *Empty Shell*.

Throughout the poems, the shell is first associated to an envelope, a skin, a protection or something that is meant to be shattered for something to “hatch”—hence the liminary injunction to “shell out”. Drawing on a marine imagery, the shell is also a “shelter”, a house whose ruins remain after its mollusk deserts or dies, as is the case in “Shell” (70):

From the Great House shell, we salvage bricks,
we pick up sticks, we never throw away.

So if in years to come some people
might be mad enough to search for us,
to trace our passing, they would have
to dig deep to find us here, sift ashes,
measure bones and beads and shell discarded.

Drawing on the metaphor of the seashell as a dwelling (forming the compound “Great House shell”), the shell is here associated to the permanence of the Great House⁹⁵. Paradoxically, the shell-house stands both as a ruin that connotes finitude and death (“sift[ing] ashes, / measur[ing] bones and beads and shell discarded”) while also creating a link between the dwellers that

⁹⁵ In the Caribbean, a Great House refers to the main house of a plantation, where the planters lived. In “Ruins of a Great House”, Walcott describes the ruins of a Plantation House: “Marble like Greece, like Faulkner’s South in stone, / Deciduous beauty prospered and is gone, / But where the lawn breaks in a rash of trees / A spade below dead leaves will ring the bone / Of some dead animal or human thing / Fallen from evil days, from evil times”.

succeed one another. The idea of a cycle, of the shell-house inhabited by some, then reappropriated by others, resonates as a nod at the hermit crabs and echoes the mollusk's question in "Gastropod": "You think I stayed home all my life, / sneakily living off / another's labor?"⁹⁶. In fact, as the gastropod morally condemns the theft of "another's labor" ("sneakily"), the poem "Shell" concludes with a homage to "the true landowners" of the Great House:

Just as the men long ago
came across fragments
of the true landowners, the one before us
the one whose bones they buried under fill.
The 'Indian' people that once possessed it,
and possess us still.

As Senior refers to the Indigenous people who used to live in the shell, the title of the poem "Shell" reads as a metaphor for the Caribbean and its ecosystem, reappropriated by exogenous populations after the arrival of the Europeans. The last line of the poem, which is visually isolated, perhaps aims at raising awareness about the cultural legacy of the Indigenous populations in the Caribbean, which survived despite their extermination—the witty shift from "possess[ing the shell]" to "possess[ing] us" metaphorically restores their lost possession of the land. As a matter of fact, in her poems, Senior often resorts to the detail of the "shell" to allude to the broader History of the Caribbean. It is epitomized in the egg-shaped calligram, "Hatch", which introduces the *Shell* collection:

what if
I didn't want out
if happy in here floating
from one end to the other
in this whatchamacallit one day
opened just a peepshow crack
jump back girl back from the
sound of breaking blast from the
light let in once lines get crossed
there's no turning back flood waters
sweep me through the hatch hello
world tap crumbling walls
shell out set me up
for life
for breaking

⁹⁶ Olive Senior, "Gastropoda," *Hurricane Watch*, p. 15.

The words indeed form the shape of a broken egg, with an opening at the bottom of the round shape. As the reader scans the text from left to right and top to bottom, it is as though the poem is put in motion, following the movement of the fetus inside—swinging “from one end to the other” until there goes a “crack” (on the right), “jumping back” (to the left) and eventually “breaking” the “crumbling walls” of the shell.

Although, like “Gastropoda”, the poem itself reads metapoetically as a “hatch” through which the “flood waters sweep” us into the collection, Senior seems to play on the polysemy of “hatch” to indicate a more discreet, historical resonance. Indeed, as the word also refers to an “opening in the deck of a ship”⁹⁷, the poem could in fact read as an allusion to the trauma of the slave ship—or as a cry of emancipation from the hold of the ship. With the History of the Caribbean as a subtext, the poem resonates with the title of the collection: “Shell out”. The image evokes at once the notions of escape and revolt and conjures up the idea of a sonorous outburst, a cry out (with the quasi-homophony between “shell out” and “shout out”) that rises “over the roofs of the world”⁹⁸.

In fact, Senior’s way of exposing postcolonial matters is often through suggestion, and through the mediation of natural elements. Senior conciliates her aesthetic of the seemingly insignificant with postcolonial problematics. Following the gastropod’s injunction to “take [the] *chambered* shell apart”, the poem invites the readers to uncoil the poems to find the “whirlwinds” (or “Hurricanes”?) of a traumatic History that lie beneath the surface. In an echo to Grace Nichols’s pun on “shell” in “Small Questions Asked by a Fat Black Woman”—both the seashell and the shell of a bomb⁹⁹—could the gastropod’s “*chambered* shell” perhaps read as the chamber of a gun? In the next section of poems, Senior takes the shell-pun even further as she uses the “shell” imagery to address the “shellshocks” of slavery.

⁹⁷ “Hatch, *N.* (2.a)” *Merriam-Webster*, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/hatch>. Accessed May 2023.

⁹⁸ This cry of emancipation indeed resonates with the title of the following collection “*Over the Roofs of the World*” drawn from Whitman’s “Song of Myself”: “I sound my barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world”.

⁹⁹ “Will the rains / cleanse the earth of shrapnel / and wasted shells” (Grace Nichols, “Small Questions Asked by a Fat Black Woman,” *I Have Crossed An Ocean*).

b. “Shelling” the marks of History

“The slave ship shell-shock dark
Outside: the Sun has his eye on
the truth that spirals out of ()hell”¹⁰⁰

As they embody a link between the remains of a “former life”¹⁰¹ (their original dwellers) and the birth of a new one, shells are witnesses of the passing of time—and of History. The poems, like shells, are meant to be opened. As we (un)“shell” them, “taking them out of their natural enclosing cover”¹⁰², one discovers that they are haunted by echoes from the past.

For instance, “Sailor’s Valentine” (30) takes on the lyrical topic of the parted lovers, and yet is tinted by a more macabre undertone. The poem first focuses on the opening of a wooden box sent by the eponymous sailor to his lover, in which he has gathered various types of shells:

Long after he is gone, a message
from a further shore arrives, the token
of a love alive. The wooden box
that sailors make for sweethearts
to display the lovingly collected
tribute *shells* in disingenuous array:

Helmets, false tritons, limpets, abalones,
whelks, olives, mitres, marginellas,
nutmeg and heart cockles...

Interestingly, the particular attention to nomenclature, evidenced by the exact names of the shells, points to their great values (“tokens of a love alive”) as substitutes for the traditional precious stones and jewels of a pirate’s treasure. This miscellany of shells “displayed in disingenuous array” is reminiscent of the poems gathered in the collection. Just like the treasure is here opened, the poem is to be opened, uncoiled, to find the hurricane hidden at its heart. In fact, the word “shell” in the poem may read both as a compound noun (“tribute shells”) and as

¹⁰⁰ Olive Senior, “At the Slavery Museum,” *Shell Shocks, Shell, Hurricane Watch*.

¹⁰¹ Olive Senior, “Shelter”: “Growth rings inscribe / inside each shell / the markers of / a former life” (22).

¹⁰² “Shell, V. (1)” *Merriam-Webster*, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/shell>. Accessed May 16, 2023.

the Chinese indentured workers¹⁰⁵ to the sugar cane in “Sweet Bwoy” (52), that orders to the readers: “grind me, juice me, / reduce me, fire me up, refine me, / till I yield what you want: this / shattered white crystal”. It seems that inventing a nonhuman voice might be a way to address human history, as the peppercorn relates its voyage in the hold of the ship during the triangular trade (50):

Torn from the vine in a place of moist
heat and shade where I was growing,
skin once plump and reddish, glowing.
Suddenly, a job lot. Indiscriminately
thrown in, we are jumbled, shaken up,
tumbled into the hold of a ship for forty days
and forty nights (we guess for black
is the fenestration)

Senior thus decenters the history of the triangular trade from a human perspective to the perspective of a peppercorn imported to Europe. And yet, the voyage of the peppercorn bears striking resemblances with the transportation of enslaved human beings from Africa to America as the peppercorns are “thrown in, [...] jumbled, shaken up, / tumbled into the hold of a ship”. As the lines progressively shorten, they seem to imitate the fall into the belly of the ship, through the “hatch” in the deck.

Disgorged, spilled out, shell-shocked
I come parched and dried, and my head
emptied, till shock-still I come to rest,
shelled-out, buck-naked, In the mad ensuing
ensuing scramble, who will come
*who will come sample me,
view me, choose me, sort me out
for grade and quality, drive me home
to crush me, use me?*

¹⁰⁵ In “What Could Be Written on a Grain of Rice” (60), Olive Senior addresses the history of the Chinese indentured workers brought to the Caribbean along with workers from India, to work in the sugar cane after the enslaved Africans were freed. They are “Far from “*Kun-Lun*” which is “the Daoist earthly paradise”, as Senior explains in her “Notes to the Poems” (*Hurricane Watch*, 449).

In this second stanza, the indent throws into relief the rhetorical question (“who will view me, choose me”) which indirectly points at the enslaved Africans’ experience of auction at their arrival in America, and their physical exploitation afterwards (“crush me, use me”— the syntax itself, with me as the object, creates a sense of their objectification).

The poet thus draws a parallel between human and natural exploitation. Interestingly, the analogy between the peppercorn and the enslaved Africans both conveys the idea that the slaves were treated as non-humans—captured, displaced, and sold as objects—and even undoes the distinction between human and nonhuman organic beings. This blurring of the boundaries between the human and non-human finds an interesting echo in the poem “West Indian Cane Piece Rat” (56-58). Instead of a nonhuman lyrical I, this poem surprises the readers with a human voice. Although the title suggests a rat as the central figure—with an echo to the fable by La Fontaine—the “I” turns out to be that of a “slave woman” who in fact complains that she is “lower than a rat”. The poem is built on a chorus variation on the first two lines of the poem: “What is lower than a rat? / I’m lower than that.” While the woman first complains that “While Rat is free, Massa owns me”, she eventually finds something that makes her better than the rat. It is, in fact, her ability to kill herself as a way of escaping her fate: “the minute that I’m dead, I fly straight back to Guinea [...] So what you say now, Mister Rat? / What is better than that!”. Playing on the intertextuality with the Western fables, Senior revisits the 17th century moral tale by bringing into focus the reality of slavery contemporary to La Fontaine and yet never mentioned, as if to pass on the memory and the reality of slavery.

c. “Pass it on”: the shell, memory and the song of History

While the *Shell Shocks* section begins with human voices rising directly from the sugar cane plantations (such as “Quashie’s Song”), the rest of the poems rather reflect on the aftermaths and the legacy of slavery. After depicting the cause of the “shellshocks”, Senior raises the question of the legacy of this traumatic History—for instance in “Canefield Surprised by Emptiness” (58), the deserted cane field leaves the lyrical I with a fear of historical oblivion in the aftermath of slavery:

It is not so much the shell shocks as the questions
we never asked that leave us cowering still
among the dead sugar metaphors.

As the poet is searching for the “ghost mules” and “ghost mills”, the ghost of slavery is referred to through the “dead sugar metaphors” that haunt the descendants of slaves—the phrase is itself a pun on the fixed idiom “dead metaphor” here interspersed with “sugar” to recall the deadly history of the sugar plantations. In an effort to raise “the questions never asked”, the poet “turns the cane stalks into questions, as though bending the cane into a question mark, to ask:

Are cane-cutters’ children destined to rise,
like stalks, bloom like cane tassels, or to sink,
rootwise, into anger ratooning still?

Paradoxically, the poet draws a comparison between the “cane-cutters’ children”, the descendants of slaves, and the cane stalks, perhaps in a will to restore the disrupted link between humans and the environment—just as in “Peppercorn”. Extending the sugar metaphor, Senior condemns the tendencies to linger too much in the past (“rootwise”) in a state of stagnation. In fact, the fear of stagnation is conveyed through the repetition of “still” throughout the poem—always thrown into relief at the end of a line: (“cowering still”, “anger ratooning still”, and with the enjambment “still / expected to pay”). The poet concludes: “This still life could wear us down”.

Yet although Senior advocates “rising / like stalks”, she does not incite her readers to ignore the trauma of slavery, as she makes clear: “it is not so much the shell shocks as the questions / we never asked that leave us cowering still”. Senior encourages her readers to listen to the shellshocks of History: the poem “Shell Blow” invites us to “pick up” the shell full of shocks and look more closely at its whorls¹⁰⁶. The shell itself addresses the readers:

What if one day you accidentally
picked up the right shell – such as I; placed it
to your ear, pressed – by chance – the right

¹⁰⁶ Olive Senior, “Shell Blow,” *Hurricane Watch*, 37: “Every whorl a book of life, / a text, a motion picture, a recording.”

knob, there would pour out not the croak
of song soaked-up in sea-water and salt

but the real thing, a blast-out, everybody's
history: *areito*, *canto histórico*, a full
genealogy of this beach, this island people

Instead of the song of the sea that tourists claim they hear, the shell invites us to listen to “the real thing”—the song of History. Drawing on biblical echoes from the Book of Genesis, the shell transcends time as it has witnessed the “full genealogy of this beach, this island people”. Its blow relates “everybody’s history”: from the first island people, the Taino, and their traditional song (the “areito”), to the arrival of Spanish colonists (symbolized in the poem by the irruption of Spanish—“canto histórico”) and the postlapsarian world that followed. Continuing this humorous subversion of the Bible, the shell is both the serpent and the apple, as it initiates a game of seduction with the Shell-man, eroticizing the shell-blow—while also endowing itself with human attributes (“mouth”, “tongue”):

Let us sit mouth to ear. Let me
put my tongue in, just for practice. There.
Are you scared? Do you find that thrilling?
Disturbing? Titillating? Or simply wet?

In fact, just like the shell-man is seduced into listening to the shell, isn't the poem itself the shell-blow, the blast mentioned in the poem, a song to listen to? Walcott's “Sea is History” is here mediated by the seashell's song. The preceding poem, “The Song That It Sings” (34-35)¹⁰⁷ already announces the shell blow and its “musical notes that are liquid”: “the ocean is endless, the sea has no corners, / no turnings, no doors. *And none can silence this song / that it sings*”. Interestingly, “Shell Blow” continues this musical metaphor through the idea of the “remix”—reminiscent of Isaac Julien's remix aesthetic in film: “We can rib it up, dabble it / rub it, dub it and fracture it. Splice it. Spice / it up”. Despite the telling and retelling of History, with the enjambments that imitate the “fracturing” and the “splicing” of the song, cutting the lines in the middle, the shell concludes: “But like spite, *we still can't find / a way to erase not one word*”.

¹⁰⁷ Olive Senior, “The Song That It Sings,” *Hurricane Watch*, 35.

The conch shell itself is at the core of the History and the cultural legacy of the Caribbean: it was used as a trumpet by the Taíno, to open ceremonies and signal important events in the island peoples' life ("Shell-blow for our mournings, our birthings / To recount genealogies. For alarms / and warnings, for summons to meetings, / for reconnecting with the next hill." ¹⁰⁸). That is why the shell urges today's island people to embrace and "pass on" the Indigenous people's endangered traditions, and "shell it out" as loud as possible:

that is how History stay. Say you bound to
re-live it on and on. Unless you can find
a way to shell it out; pass it on.

PASS IT ON!



Figure 11 - The Unknown Maroon, Haiti

¹⁰⁸ Today, this tradition is taken over by musicians such as the Martinican collective Watabwi who define themselves as an orchestral band of conch shell-blowers". They were present at the Musée d'Orsay in May 2019 on an event organized by the Institut du Tout Monde for the National Day of Remembrance of the slave trade. The conch shell is also a way of addressing the unspeakable, of making the silence of a collective trauma be heard.

B- “So far from the sea I find myself / worldless”¹⁰⁹: reinventing marine life as a shelter

a. “Recovering the land through imagination”¹¹⁰: resisting colonial disruption

Besides the Taíno tradition of shell-blowing, the conch shell is essentially associated to the Haitian Revolution in the Caribbean imaginary. Used as a horn, it served as a rallying cry to organize the slave rebellion against the French in 1791—which eventually led to Haiti’s independence in 1803. Interestingly, Olive Senior places the photograph of *The Unknown Maroon* statue in Port-au-Prince (Figure 11) right before the *Shell Blow* section. The statue of the runaway slave blowing into the shell celebrates resistance against slavery and colonial rule: by placing it before the *Shell Blow* poems, perhaps Olive Senior suggests that “shell blow” reads not only as the song of history, but also as a call for resistance—and nature seems at the core of Senior’s poetic of resistance against colonial rule. In “The Song that it Sings” (34), Senior indeed presents the sea as a shelter:

so far from the sea I find myself
worldless. (Oh, leave it alone, but I meant
to write ‘wordless.’)

And there’s a waterlogged moon getting ready to burst

like the gourd that spilled an ocean when
the seeker, like myself, disobeyed, took it
down from where it hung by a thread,

dropped and broke it. So how were we
to know that from it seas would stream
forth, bringing three ships with our eclipse

From the very first lines, the epanorthosis stages the poet’s lapsus (“I meant to write ‘wordless’”) and establishes the sea, not just a source of inspiration or lyricism (“wordless”), but as a world without which the poet lacks a sense of home and belonging (“world-less”).

¹⁰⁹ Olive Senior, “The Song that it Sings,” *Hurricane Watch*, 34-35.

¹¹⁰ Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 77.

Interestingly, the comparison of the moon to the “gourd that spilled an ocean” reads as an homage to the Taíno creation myth of the “cursed creator”. Indeed, according to this myth, the oceans were created after the spirit Yaya murdered his son Yayael and placed his bones in a gourd. As the bones turned into fish, another of Yaya’s sons dropped the gourd, as it was hanging from the roof, and caused a flood that created the oceans. The fall of the gourd is here imitated by the enjambment— “dropped it and broke it”. Besides, the poet comments on the irony of having created the ocean, which allowed the European colonists to sail to the Caribbean and appropriate Indigenous people’s land: “how were we to know that from it seas would stream / forth, bringing three ships in our eclipse”.

In fact, the “shell blow” of Senior’s poems resonates as an attempt to resist the colonial appropriation of the land, which disrupted Indigenous people’s relation to the sea. This echoes what Edward Said asserts in *Culture and Imperialism*:

If there is anything that radically distinguishes the imagination of anti-imperialism, it is the primacy of the geographical in it. Imperialism after all is *an act of geographical violence* through which virtually every space in the world is explored, charted, and finally brought under control. For the native, the history of colonial servitude is inaugurated by *the loss of locality to the outsider*; its geographical identity must thereafter be searched for and somehow restored. Because of the presence of the colonizing outsider, *the land is recoverable at first only through imagination* (*Culture and Imperialism* 77).

As Said underlines the spatial violence of the appropriation of the land by the Europeans, he points out how it modified the local populations’ relation to geography, applying an imperialist logic to the land—a logic that was not there before. Imagination, and by extension literature, stand as a way to go back to the first relation to the land: by drawing on indigenous tales as a source of inspiration for her poems and her ecopoetics, Senior attempts to “pass on” the Taíno legacy and perhaps to convey their original relation to the land and the sea as “shelters”—before the sea was seen as having facilitated colonization or before the sugar cane were brought to the Caribbean and associated to human exploitation.

In fact, as her poetics reconciles human life and natural life, Senior establishes a sense of continuity between the two, in an attempt to “recover the land through imagination”.

b. Senior's "language of the landscape"¹¹¹: human life as an extension of natural life

"Our landscape is its own monument: its meaning
can only be traced underside. It is all history"

Édouard Glissant¹¹²

In his introduction to the *Caribbean Discourse*, Édouard Glissant retraces the history of Martinique through a thorough depiction of the island's landscape. As he figuratively guides the reader through the island, Glissant points at places where History happened:

Because the [the landscape] is a concentrated whole that offers an intelligible dimension. At the same time, the threshold of heat blocked by rain; deeper yet, those fissures that become visible when *the landscape unfolds*. There were dumped those peoples from India. [...] The ruins of the Dubuc Great House where the slaves disembarked and where slave prisons still lie *hidden underground*. [...] History is spread out *beneath this surface*, from the mountains to the sea, from north to south, from the forest to the beaches.

Interestingly, this "unshelling" of the Caribbean the landscape resonates with Senior's poetic portrayal of nature and the landscape as having an historical "underside"—implied through wordplays and analogies. Yet, instead of Glissant's portrayal of "the mountains", "the sea", "the forests", or "the beaches", Senior focuses on the discreet witnesses of History in nature like the shell, the corn, or the pearl. Through her poems, these minor natural elements emerge as "full characters" no longer "merely decorative or supportive" (in Glissant's words):

The relationship with the land, one that is even more threatened because the community is alienated from the land, becomes so fundamental in this discourse that landscape in the work stops being merely decorative or supportive and emerges as a full character. Describing the landscape is not enough. The individual, the community, the land are inextricable in the process of writing history. Landscape is *a character in this process*. Its deepest meanings need to be understood (*Caribbean Discourse* 105-106).

Through Senior's poems, which grant elements from the landscape human voices, nature figuratively recuperates its function in the "process of writing history" alongside human agency.

¹¹¹ Édouard Glissant, "Cross-Cultural Poetics," *Caribbean Discourse*, 145.

¹¹² Édouard Glissant, "Introductions: From the Landscape," *Caribbean Discourse*, 11.

“Peppercorn” stands as the most striking example of that, as it placed human voices and natural elements on an equal footing through the parallel between the transportation of pepper and human “transplantation” to the Caribbean. Elizabeth DeLoughrey continues this parallel in *Caribbean Literature and the Environment*, as she states that “no other region in the world has been more radically altered in terms of *human and botanic migration, transplantation and settlement* than the Caribbean”¹¹³.

The image of the shell, as a metaphor of the Caribbean marine ecosystem, indeed symbolizes how the nature—after being “radically altered”—still bears the marks of this History. This is exemplified in “Shelter”, where the growth rings of the shell testify to a “former life”:

Growth rings inscribe
inside each shell
the markers of
a former life.

This shell, my skin
outers a life
still stretched
still lived in.

In the poem, it is unclear whether the voice is human or nonhuman. While the parallelism “this shell, my skin” encourages this ambiguity, the “growth rings” of the shell seem to read both, on a symbolic level, as the marks of History (“a former life”) and perhaps also as extending the metaphor between shell and human skin—like stretch marks as the female body changes. The poem thus blurs the boundaries between human and nonhuman while also placing the changes in the female body as a metaphor of the wider context of History.

In “Maize”, Senior brings us one step further in placing human life in the continuity of natural life (20), as the poem is preceded by a quote from *Popol Vuh*, the foundational text of Mayan mythology: “The first humans were created from corn”. Drawing on the Mayan creation

¹¹³ DeLoughrey, Elizabeth, Renée Gosson, and George Handley. *Caribbean Literature and the Environment: Between Nature and Culture*. University of Virginia Press, 2005.

myth, Senior wittily conjures up the voice of a corn-mother complaining that her corn-children do not want to leave the ear of the corn:

Mothers will understand this: The first ones I sent into the
world did alright, turned out to be human. But this lot!

Okay, perhaps I spoil them. Bearing them not solitary
and naked like the first but many together, gift-wrapped

in silky down and swaddling clothes of papery layer.

By means of poetic analogies (“gift-wrapped”), Senior makes it impossible to make out whether the voice in the poem is human or vegetal: do the “silky down and swaddling clothes of papery layer” at the end refer to the shell of the corn?

Senior reconciliates human life and nature against the “alienation from the land” that Edward Said analyzed as a “loss of locality to the outsider”, paying homage to the Indigenous mythology originally associated to it. This is particularly well-illustrated in the poem “Canoe/Ocean” (31), which conjures up a fishing scene:

permit me to skim your surface only line
a little scratch my net a tickle my catch
like mites reaped for some great beast’s hide

down deeper? o no thank you the drowned
gnaw songs of hunger in that kingdom underwater
swallow splinters of gnashed pride wondering
how did they transgress?

i will just humbly take a little fish here
and try not to upset

The poem stages a harmonious relation between the angler and the ocean. The ocean is indeed personified from the first line of the poem through the use of “you” (“permit me to skim *your* surface”), while the surface of the ocean is compared to human skin, in an echo to the poem “Shelter”. After the angler asks the ocean for permission to fish in its waters, Senior

Stevens's poem "Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery" (1935). Interestingly, Senior draws on the marine metaphor to contradict the peacefulness portrayed in Stevens's poem¹¹⁴:

the vivid birds preening
in patios overlooking *a blue*
denial

the graves
outlined in white bleached
coral, the conch shells
splayed like bones

Responding to Stevens's line "birds are singing in the yellow patios", placed as an epigraph, Senior highlights the failure of the birds to face death as they "overlook a *blue / denial*". Full of Walcottian resonances, the marine poetics here meets the theme of death and nothingness, as the color "blue" conjures up the image of the Caribbean Sea. The poem indeed transforms the cemetery into a metaphorical sea of graves, troubling the birds' "blue denial" with a jumble of shells and coral "splayed like bones".

Senior resorts to the same subversive use of epigraph in "Caribbean Basin Initiative" (209). Indeed, she quotes a passage from Mary Kingsley's *Travels in West Africa* (1897): "The canoes being small... the water lapped over the edge in an alarming way. Had any of us sneezed... we must have foundered". Senior's poem first associates the sea with the risk of drowning, as it rewrites the story of the Victorian lady to describe a canoe expedition in the Caribbean Basin through the point of view of a Caribbean local guide:

Like limpets we cling
on craft that ply
in these waters
where our dreams lie.

Afraid to draw breath
lest we stir up

¹¹⁴ Wallace Stevens, "Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery": "The birds are singing in the yellow patios / Pecking at more lascivious rinds than ours / From sheer Gemütlichkeit".

the waves, our faces
might crack but no smile
will spill out

The shortness of the lines and the enjambments convey the tension of the scene, where the travelers “cling” like shells on the canoe that is about to sink. The water appears as threateningly high as the line “the waves, our faces” suggests that it is almost touching their faces, while the watery metaphor “no smile will / spill out” already implies some kind of merging: “we are still in our graves” (in an echo to Walcott’s “grey vault”). The point of view of the local guide is brought into focus, as he comments on the deadly nature of water (in an echo to NourbeSe Philip’s “Wat” in *Zong!*):

Nor sailor am I [...]
What is harder than stone? *Never knew*
at the time
the answer is:
Water.

And yet, through the point of view of the Indigenous guide, Senior restores the mythology of the sea, as the guide invokes the spirit of the sea in Haitian Vodou: “Agué Lord of the Sea / rules over me”. The guide comments on the foreigners’ exteriority to the local traditions, as they try to fell a tree: “Feed the spirits before you feed the children. / Before you make the first / cut, you must pay. / Some rules / cannot be flouted. Some gods / will not uphold / the unconverted.” Senior thus stages the reconciliation with the mythological relationship to the sea disrupted by colonization, yet instead of the original Indigenous myths of the sea, the poet draws on Voodoo mythology “in these waters where our dreams lie”.

In the poem “Fishing in the Waters Where My Dreams Lie” (61), whose title echoes the latter line from “Caribbean Basin Initiative”, Senior imagines the point of view of an enslaved African sent fishing by his master. Interestingly, she stages his relationship to the sea, which he first associates to the crossing of the Atlantic in the belly of the ship: “The sea I found was not the sea that bound / and swallowed me / that brought me hither, delivered me as less / than what I left behind.” At first, the slave seems to have forgotten how to fish “in this new world”:

For here in this new world it is my master

who gives things names and here I am struck dumb, not knowing
how to summon them from the deep, what song to sing them
so they'll leap

This illustrates Said's point about imperialism as inflicting a "loss of locality": how can the relationship to nature be restored after this forced migration? Interestingly, the slave eventually summons water spirits of the Yoruba religion, drawing on his homeland's deities to restore his relation to the sea in the Caribbean: "O keepers of the deep release your catch or let / my master's vengeance fill this empty net. / *By powers of / Yemoja-Oboto / Agbe-Naete / Aizan-Velekete/Avrekete/Gede/Agoué/Olókun*".

Senior's poems thus portray a reconciliation with the ancient traditions and relation to the land. The poet reinvents a Caribbean mythology of the sea which reflects the different spiritual beliefs brought together, both the Taíno myths of the broken gourd, or Voodoo myths common to the African diaspora. Reminiscent of the "drowned [who] gnaw songs of hunger in that *kingdom underwater*" from "Canoe/Ocean" (31)— "how did they transgress"? —Ellen Gallagher's work offers new perspectives to Senior's remythologizing of the sea, as it revisits the Afrofuturistic myth of Drexciya.

C- Ellen Gallagher's "kingdom underwater"¹¹⁵ in dialogue with Olive Senior: reinventing a submarine resistance

a. "It's all subtle and submarine"¹¹⁶ : Ellen Gallagher's fantastic oceanography

In her *Watery Ecstatic* series, African American artist Ellen Gallagher (appointed Honorary member of the British Royal Academy of Arts in 2021) imagines an underwater world which resonates with Olive Senior's constant intertwining of the human and non-human.

Indeed, the series gathers paintings, sculptures and reliefs that draw on the artist's background in marine biology as she used to work as a fisherman¹¹⁷. Gallagher's fascination for the marine creatures which she observed firsthand translates through their central place in

¹¹⁵ Olive Senior, "Canoe/Ocean," *Hurricane Watch*, 31.

¹¹⁶ Derek Walcott, "The Sea is History".

¹¹⁷ McGee, Celia. "Ellen Gallagher; An Artist Who Doesn't Fit in Gets the Perfect Offer: a Solo". *The New York Times*, 1996.

her paintings—the focus on jellyfishes, octopuses and mollusks echo Senior’s marine ecopoetics. Gallagher highlights the fantastic resonances of her creatures: “The symbolic for me is about carrying and the potential to carry—it’s like magic. A character like a jellyfish can be made up of several different bodies, can exist at different times—can be a character that’s symbolic.”¹¹⁸ Interestingly, the 2004 watercolor of a red nautilus (Figure 12) particularly resonates with Senior’s shell. The simple aesthetic of the red-printed shell resonates with Senior’s egg calligram (“Hatch” 19)—in fact, could the poem also be seen as a nautilus shell, with the hatch being the opening for the tentacles? Through the method of impression, the artist throws the rings of the shell into relief, as the white-colored marks contrast with the red of the shell. Just like the mollusk in “Gastropoda” (*Hurricane Watch* 15), Gallagher invites us to examine the “growth rings” of the red-colored “shelter”: “Come / study me. Take my chambered shell apart.” Inviting an almost scientific gaze, the chambered shell is also reminiscent of Anna Atkins’ algae impressions in the 19th century (Figure 13), in between scientific illustrations and works of art—and today exposed at the British Museum.

Yet, despite the artist’s evident interest in the biological study of marine creatures, the *Watery Ecstatic* oceanography is far from a scientific account of marine life: the artist populates the ocean with fantastic human-looking silhouettes. The very title of the series already announces the realm of fantasy, echoing the mystic visions of “Fishing in the Waters Where My Dreams Lie” (*Hurricane Watch* 61). For instance, the *Ecstatic Draught of Fishes* painting (Figure 14) stages the irruption of an African statuette among the coral and seaweed. As though a substitute to the marine animal like the red mollusk from the previous artwork, the statuette is ironically referred to as a “draught of fish”. The title highlights how odd and out of place the statuette is in the marine environment. Gallagher’s discreet figure hiding in the coral mosaics illustrates Walcott’s lines: “It’s all subtle and submarine [...] Bone soldered by coral to bone, / mosaics / mantled by the benediction of the shark’s shadow” (“The Sea is History”). As a response to Walcott’s poem, the fish-like African statuette stands as a tribute to the legacy of African cultures partly lost to the Atlantic Ocean as the slaves drowned. This indeed echoes Nichols’s “I have lost my tongue” and the “shell splayed like bones” in “Misreading Wallace Stevens” (*Hurricane Watch* 130). However, instead of portraying the sea as a mere archive of the past, a vault full of sea-shell bones, the *Watery Ecstatic* series draws on fantasy to imagine

¹¹⁸ Ellen Gallagher, Rue de Ponthieu, Paris, June 5–July 27, 2019, <https://gagosian.com/exhibitions/2019/ellen-gallagher/>.

the afterlives of slavery. Ellen Gallagher revisits the myth of Atlantis to transform the Atlantic Ocean into an underwater kingdom inhabited by the descendants of the drowned slaves.

b. Afrofuturistic visions, the myth of Drexciya as a counter discourse

Through the fantastic world of Drexciya, Ellen Gallagher turns Walcott's "empty" vault into a posthuman realm vibrant with life. Imagined by an electronic band from Detroit, Drexciya, this subaquatic kingdom populates the Atlantic Ocean by the descendants of the pregnant African women that were thrown off of slave ships. In "Further considerations on Afrofuturism"¹¹⁹, British-Ghanaian writer and theorist Kodwo Eshun contextualizes the birth of this Afrofuturistic world in popular culture:

In 1997, Drexciya, the group of enigmatic producers, synthesists, and designers operating from Detroit in the liner notes to their CD *The Quest, Drexciya* (1997) proposed a science-fictional retelling of the Middle Passage. The "Drexciyans" are water-breathing, aquatically mutated descendants of "pregnant America-bound African slaves thrown overboard by the thousands during labour for being sick and disruptive cargo".

Kodwo Eshun's account of the origins of Drexciya powerfully resonates with Gallagher's 2004 watercolor of a whale (Figure 15). At first, the central figure of the whale, and the choice of watercolor painting, convey a light tone. Yet, by looking more closely, one deciphers small human-like faces below the whale. The heads almost resemble a shoal of fishes, with their mouths emitting a stream of bubbles connecting them to the whale—are these figures drowning or scuba diving? In fact, the painting strangely resonates with the History of the Middle Passage, and the throwing of slaves overboard. In a distant echo to Turner's *Slave ship* (Figure 9), the discreet shape of the ship, hardly identifiable through Turner's dramatic use of colors, is here visually replaced by the innocent-looking, watercolor whale. With the same art of substitution, Gallagher replaces the human limbs in the foreground of Turner's painting with the fish-like heads at the bottom of her watercolor. While Turner's *Slave Ship* evokes the tragedy of the *Zong*—with the horrific detail of a dark leg emerging from the sea in the right corner, with a chain at the ankle, and a swarm of fishes and seagulls about to devour it—Gallagher converts

¹¹⁹ Eshun, Kodwo. "Further Considerations on Afrofuturism," *The New Centennial Review*, vol. 3, no. 2, 2003, pp. 287-302.

the traumatic scene into a much lighter tone. Endowed with fish-like mouths and googly eyes, the human heads seem to have mingled with the fish from Turner's painting. In fact, while the figures' features are reminiscent of minstrel shows' blackface and racist stereotypes, Ellen Gallagher plays with the stigma by adding non-human features. The artist invents a new species of half-fish, half-human people—the Drexciyans? The sunglasses, a substitute for goggles, form an echo to Walcott's invitation to explore the depths of the ocean in "The Sea is History": "strop on these goggles, I'll guide you there myself". Indeed, Ellen Gallagher guides us into the hidden kingdom of Drexciya.

The painting *Bird in Hand* (Figure 16) plunges us into Gallagher's Afrofuturistic underwater world. As opposed to the more naïve aesthetic of the *Watery Ecstatic* series, Ellen Gallagher chooses a larger format (2383 × 3072 mm) and resorts to oil paint and ink rather than watercolor. The impressive aspect of the painting indeed draws on the ominous central figure of a one-legged creature, facing the viewer. Yet, the title draws attention to a detail that could almost go unnoticed: a dark parrot blending in the black hand of the creatures. In an interview with the Tate, the artist explains: "the bird had just been caught; its expression felt in the plasticine eye closed in that way birds do when you hold them a bit too tightly"¹²⁰. In fact, the creature itself has one of its eyes closed: is the bird in the title a metaphor for the sailor himself? As Ellen Gallagher plays on this ambiguity, she conjures up a posthuman world where the categories of human and nonhuman are interchangeable. Besides, the artist's description of the bird/human "held too tightly" highlights the overall morbid atmosphere in the painting. The dead bird, the missing leg, and the creature's suffocating state, all seem to connote death and decay. The underwater creature is surrounded by unclear shapes of floating algae, jellyfish, or fish skeletons (or human limbs), while its clothes are reminiscent of a 19th century ship captain—with his sinister, accusing look, he resembles the ghost of a drowned sailor. The spectral aspect of the Black ship captain conjures up the haunting memory of the slaves who drowned during the Middle Passage.

However, the sailor stands as mythological figure that transcends time, and interweaves multiple cultural references. In line with Afrofuturistic aesthetics, Gallagher's creature draws on elements from both African imaginary and popular culture like comics. While the wooden leg is evocative of Captain Ahab in *Moby Dick* and the figure of the pirate in general, the mask covering the creature's face not only resembles an African mask, but also the forest spirits in

¹²⁰ Sanger, Alice. "Bird in Hand", Ellen Gallagher, 2006." *Tate*, <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/gallagher-bird-in-hand-t12450>. Accessed May 25, 2023.

Hayao Miyazaki's animation film *Princess Mononoke* (1997). Half-human, half-fish, the sailor is at once a marine spirit and an African deity, as the bubbles of his locks of hair are also reminiscent a shoal of fishes. When looking closely, each bubble is made up of collaged vignettes from magazines which illustrates racial stereotypes in beauty ads—with the roots at the bottom and the hair like branches, the creature also reads a family tree, through which Gallagher retraces the genealogy of racism. At once the spectral apparition of a slave and the biblical tree of life, the creature encapsulates the tension between life and death at the core of Gallagher's underwater world. While paying homage to the drowned of the Middle Passage, the artist also invents the alternative, (sub)version of History where the latter survived.

Ellen Gallagher thus remythologizes the sea as her visual exploration of Drexciya renews the ancestral mythologies of the sea passed on by Olive Senior's poems and proposes an "aquatic realm of Afrofuturist becoming"¹²¹. Far from a biological oceanography, Ellen Gallagher reinvents marine life as a watery utopia, a world outside of oppressive systems. The ocean, as an alternative to the terrestrial world, is reinvested and grants the artist the ability to transform History and its legacy. As a way to deal with a history saturated by death and trauma, Gallagher's Afrofuturistic imaginary converts her oceanic world into a "History of Black Futures"¹²²—in an inventive counter discourse or "counter memories"¹²³ to History. As Carole Henderson points out in *Imagining the Black Female Body*, water seems to facilitate this resistance to dominant discourses:

Nunes suggests that, for Gallagher, the aquatic is the ideal setting for transforming African and African American history—thus the use of human and aquatic forms to exemplify the postmodern markers of hybridity, mutability, and fragmentation—requisite elements for *metamorphosis and change*. (21)

Contrary to Walcott's "Sea is History", where the ocean is rooted in the traumatic past ("sinking rootwise", to use Senior's sugarcane metaphor), Gallagher's marine life proposes a hybrid future for the afterlives of slavery. In line with Marlene NourbeSe Philip's textual

¹²¹ Chan, Suzanna. "Alive...again': Unmoored in the Aquafuture of Ellen Gallagher's Watery Ecstatic," *Women's Studies Quarterly*, vol. 45, no. 1, 2017, p. 246.

¹²² The National Museum of African American History & Culture (NMAAHC)'s ongoing exhibit, *Afrofuturism: A History of Black Futures* (March 24, 2023–March 2024) claims to "immerses visitors in a conversation that reimagines, reinterprets and reclaims the past and present for a more empowering future for African Americans", *Smithsonian*, <https://nmaahc.si.edu/explore/exhibitions/afrofuturism#Discovery>.

¹²³ According to Suzanna Chan, Gallagher's paintings form "*counter memories* that reinscribe the historical murder of African women through a myth of their survival and transformation into aquatic beings." ("Alive...again").

fragmentation in *Zong!* and with Isaac Julien's multiscreen format, Ellen Gallagher's *Watery Ecstatic* reappropriates fragmentation as a form of resistance: "the ancestral bodies are no longer confined to the ship's hold [...] rather they are dispersed in the genealogical map of the Americas—fragmented and mutilated"¹²⁴. Instead of a vault, a grave, a sea burial, the Atlantic Ocean figuratively liberates the "ancestral bodies" from the "ship's hold". As "requisite elements for metamorphosis and change" (Henderson 21)¹²⁵, Gallagher's mixing of "human and aquatic forms" resonates with Senior's hybrid ecopoetic as a marine resistance.

¹²⁴ From Ana Nunes's article "Disembodiments: Ellen Gallagher's Watery Metamorphoses" (*Imagining the Black Female Body* 46).

¹²⁵ Henderson, *Imagining the Black Female Body* (21).



Figure 14 – Ellen Gallagher,
Watery Ecstatic (2004)



Figure 12 - Anna Atkins,
Cyanotype Impressions (1843)

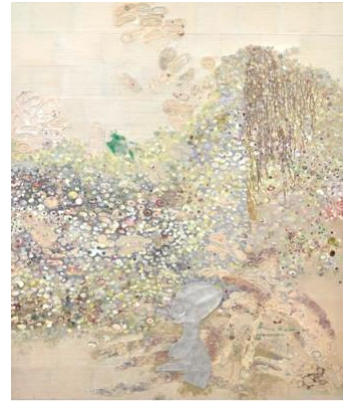


Figure 13 – Ellen Gallagher,
Ecstatic Draught of Fishes (2019)



Figure 15 - Ellen Gallagher, *Watery Ecstatic* (2004)



Figure 16 - Ellen Gallagher, Bird in Hand (2006)

CONCLUSION

This dissertation aimed at exploring literary and artistic representations of the sea through a corpus of Caribbean writers and artists (and Afro-descendant artists such as Howardena Pindell, Ellen Gallagher and Isaac Julien) and sought to attend to the historical echoes at stake in the sea in the context of the Caribbean. Far from the images of turquoise waters which often appeal to Western tourists, documentaries like “Mal de Mer” (2003) by Martinican director Jil Servant have addressed the locals’ conflictual relation to the sea inherited from the traumatic history of slavery. Still today, the sea is regarded as dangerous, as embodying the risk of drowning, in an echo to the fate of many slaves during the Middle Passage — or Isaac Julien’s protagonist who drowns in the transparent waters of Saint Lucia in *Paradise Omeros*. What is the legacy of such a History in today’s Caribbean imaginaries? Caught between Derek Walcott’s image of the sea as a vault in “The Sea is History” and Kamau Brathwaite’s phrase (which opens Édouard Glissant’s *Poetics of Relation*) “The unity is submarine”¹²⁶, the sea evokes both a unifying body through which Caribbean authors and artists find their voices, and a dissimilating body, a void that annihilates History.

This dissertation began with an analysis of how water, as a “fluid archive”¹²⁷, served as a way for Black female figures to establish themselves in relation to History. Jamaica Kincaid’s short story “At the Bottom of the River” and Howardena Pindell’s painting *Autobiography: Water/Ancestors/Middle Passage/Family Ghosts* (Figure 6) both portray a figure emerging from water as a unified self within a broader historical context. Traces from History emerge in the blue paint of Pindell’s *Water*—the white shape of a slave ship and the segregationist motto “separate but equal”; likewise in Kincaid’s short story, the protagonist observes the bottom of a river and gets lost in her thoughts, only to reemerge from her dreams as a more complete individual. For Pindell and Kincaid alike, water works as a space that assembles the self, connects it with one’s ancestors, and makes one more aware of the History of Black people. In keeping with Paul Gilroy’s “Black Atlantic” (according to which the ocean is a metaphorical space where the Black diaspora reunites), these two artworks portray water

¹²⁶ Edward Kamau Brathwaite, *Contradictory Omens: Cultural Diversity and Integration in the Caribbean*. Mona, Jamaica, Savacou Publications, 1974, p. 64.

¹²⁷ Meg Samuelson, “Oceanic Histories and Protean Poetics: The Surge of the Sea in Zoë Wicomb’s Fiction.” *Journal of Southern African Studies*, vol. 36, no. 3, 2010, p. 543-557; p.543.

as a place that gathers not only the self, but also the scattered voices of Black people, into metaphorical choir of “black hearts, black people, and black culture”¹²⁸.

And yet, as explored in the second chapter, water historically was the place that facilitated an uprooting, since it was associated with the forced displacement of enslaved Africans to the Caribbean. In fact, Nichols’s poems about the Windrush generation reactivate the uprooting, this time from the Caribbean to England, as the poet herself addresses her exile from Guyana now that she has settled in the UK. In *I Have Crossed an Ocean*, where the lyrical I laments that she “has lost [her] tongue” during the crossing, the ocean comes to embody a division, a violent separation from one’s origins and homeland. In fact, this metaphorical division of the self, torn between home and exile, resonates richly with the aesthetic of fragmentation at work in NourbeSe Philip’s *Zong!* poems and the filmic discontinuity of Isaac Julien’s three-screen installation *Paradise Omeros*. These works of art address the difficulty of recovering one’s legacy after “the sea has locked them up”¹²⁹: not only does the sea divide and separate, it also becomes a void that engulfed the cultural legacy of the enslaved Africans who drowned during the Middle Passage. At the same time, in keeping with Glissant’s theory of Relation, a new culture is born out of this forced displacement (“from the roots of the old [tongue] / a new one was born”) and from the meeting of Western and African cultures. Indeed, Creole culture was thus created, suggesting that in Caribbean literature the image of the sea can be converted into a space of creation rather than annihilation.

My third and final chapter therefore explored how poets and artists reappropriate this traumatic space of the sea—associated to the holds of the slave ships—playing with this tragic past in order to reinvest it with new imageries. For instance, Ellen Gallagher provides us with a reading of Édouard Glissant’s “belly of the ship” (alluding to the monstrosity of the holds of the slave ship) as she transforms the ship into a whale in her 2004 watercolor series *Watery Ecstatic* (Figure 15). In fact, both she and Olive Senior convert this tragic site into a space full of literary and artistic inventions, humor, and creativity—whether it be Senior’s speaking shells, peppercorns and snails, or Gallagher’s scuba diving comic-like creatures with sunglasses. Rather than displaying a realistic portrayal of nature, both artists resort to imagination and fantasy to reinvest the sea with a new mythology. Revisiting Brathwaite’s “submarine unity”, which Édouard Glissant reads as the unity of the mingled corpses of the slaves paving the depths

¹²⁸ Cornel West, “W.E.B Dubois: An Interpretation”.

¹²⁹ Derek Walcott, “The Sea is History”.

of the ocean, Gallagher's Afrofuturistic world unexpectedly converts the abyss of the sea into a world teeming with life. In fact, by drawing on ancestral marine mythologies (such as the Taino myth of the broken gourd in Senior's poems) and exploring modern myths (such as Drexciya in Gallagher's paintings) both artists reestablish the relationship to the sea and the environment that existed prior to colonization. The sea is thus endowed again with a marine mythology and recovers its spiritual strength after being disrupted by the arrival of Western colonists, which turned it into a vault. Artists and poets find in these fantastic underwater worlds a place from which to counter Western discourses. The ocean hosts imaginary worlds at odds with dominant discourses, where to invent an alternative story to a tragic History.

In other words, my corpus fills the ocean with subversive images and reinvests it as a creative space, even as the sea still carries the marks of History — typically, the segregationist motto in Pindell's water (Figure 6) resonates with the images of African American people cut out of magazines and hidden in the bubbles of the protagonist's Afro in *Bird in Hand* (Figure 16). As theorized by Gilroy, the Atlantic Ocean functions as a network that links the past and present of the Black diaspora, and metaphorically brings together the Black populations from Africa, the Caribbean, America or England. As it abolishes geographical frontiers, the Black Atlantic is characterized by blurry temporal boundaries: the past, the present and a possible "Afro-future" all coexist in the water. This participates in the tension at the core of the image of the sea, caught between an annihilating abyss and an omniscient, saturated space. The sea is indeed History, because it is a vault where lie the roots from Africa—like the Yoruba marine divinities in Olive Senior's poems, or the African masks hidden among the corals of Gallagher's paintings (Figure 7 or Figure 12). But the sea is also History *in the making*, as it opens a potential for rebirth for those artists, who draw on marine mythology to invent new artistic futures.

To answer my original research question (is the sea an isolating or unifying body?) it seems that, throughout my literary and artistic corpus, the sea comes to embody paradoxical movements of forgetting and recalling, of unifying and disseminating. In fact, these contradictory movements of the sea, at once dividing and unifying the diaspora and the cultural legacy of Africa, reflect the paradoxes of Creolization itself. Defined as a unifying fragmentation ("the disparate and the diasporization of the unified—a gathering in scattering"¹³⁰), creolization follows this double movement of assembling and dispersing of

¹³⁰ Ian Baucom, "'The Sea is History': On Temporal Accumulation," *Specters of the Atlantic*, 329.

people, languages and cultures. Barbadian poet Kamau Brathwaite's image of a "tidalectics" helps us understand and transcend this apparent paradox of Creolization: understood as "a cyclical model, invoking the continual movement and rhythm of the ocean"¹³¹, the tidalectics of the sea goes back and forth between assembling and "diasporizing", following the movements of the waves on the beach.

Ultimately, the topic of the sea—that is so central to the Caribbean because of its specific history—resonates with a new surge of critical interest in oceanic studies and "blue humanities"¹³². Contrary to the land, that is static, the sea embodies movement, is constantly linking places (what Glissant calls a "mise en relation") and characterized by mobility and migrations. Today, the marine imagery of the crossing and drownings in the Middle Passage is reactivated by contemporary issues of borders as topical as the migrant crisis in the Mediterranean Sea—a parallel that Martinican author Patrick Chamoiseau draws in *Frères Migrants* (2017). Although Caribbean texts inherit a specific historical context, they carry resonances outside geographical delimitations: Caribbean paradigms can be used to read literatures outside the boundaries of the Caribbean. For instance, Valérie Magdelaine's article "Is 'The unity submarine'?"¹³³ (2020) draws on Brathwaite's "tidalectics" to explore marine imaginaries in the Indian Ocean. As Markus Vink highlights in "Indian Ocean Studies and the 'new thalassology'" (2007), ocean studies have mainly focused on the Mediterranean, the Atlantic, and the Pacific, but have so far neglected the Indian Ocean, which is located at the crossroads of Eastern Africa, the Middle East, and India—perhaps because it is *not* contiguous with any Western country. Interestingly, however, when looking closely at works from the Indian Ocean such as *Sea of Poppies* (2008) by Amitav Ghosh, or *Silence of the Chagos* (2005) by Mauritian writer Shenaz Patel, one discovers the existence of a Creolized society and a mixture of languages and cultures, whether onboard the schooner in Ghosh's novel (a former slave ship) or among the Creole-speaking Chagossians (descendants of slaves brought from Africa and forced to a second exile in Mauritius)—which calls for a new reading of Indian Ocean literatures through a Caribbean prism.

¹³¹ Elizabeth M. DeLoughrey, *Routes and Roots. Navigating Caribbean and Pacific Island Literatures*, Honolulu, University of Hawai'i Press, 2007, p. 21.

¹³² Steve Mentz, *An Introduction to the Blue Humanities*, Routledge, 2023.

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TABLE OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure 1 - Glissant, Sylvie. "Édouard Glissant at the Anse Caffard Memorial." *Étonnants Voyageurs*, <https://www.etonnants-voyageurs.com/Edouard-Glissant-la-creolisation-du-monde-coll-Empreintes.html>. Accessed Nov. 30, 2023 2

Figure 2 - "Anse Caffard Memorial." *Repeating Islands. News and commentary on Caribbean culture, literature and the arts*, March 17, 2009, <https://repeatingislands.com/2009/03/17/the-anse-caffard-memorial-martinique/>. Accessed Nov. 30, 2023 2

Figure 3 – Henry, Jon. "Howardena Pindell in her studio". *The New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/12/t-magazine/black-abstract-painters.html>..... 28

Figure 4 - Pindell, Howardena. *Autobiography: Oval Memory*. 1980. Garth Greenan Gallery, New York, [https://www.garthgreenan.com/exhibitions/howardena-pindell-autobiography ...](https://www.garthgreenan.com/exhibitions/howardena-pindell-autobiography...) 30

Figure 5 - Pindell, Howardena. *Autobiography: Fire, Suttee*. 1986–1987. Garth Greenan Gallery, New York, <https://www.garthgreenan.com/exhibitions/howardena-pindell-autobiography>..... 31

Figure 6 - Pindell, Howardena. *Autobiography: Water/Ancestors/Middle Passage/Family Ghosts*. 1988. Garth Greenan Gallery, <https://www.garthgreenan.com/exhibitions/howardena-pindell-autobiography> 32

Figure 7 - Gallagher, Ellen. *Ecstatic Draught of Fishes*. 2020. Hauser & Wirth, <https://www.hauserwirth.com/hauser-wirth-exhibitions/25793-ellen-gallagher-ecstatic-draught-of-fishes/> 51

Figure 8 - Philip, M. NourbeSe. "Zong" #1. *Duke Performances Black Atlantic Series*, <https://sites.duke.edu/blackatlantic/2014/02/11/m-nourbese-philips-zong-and-why-we-should-read-it/>. Accessed Nov. 30, 2023. 54

Figure 9 - Turner, Joseph Mallord William. *The Slave Ship*. 1840. *Boston Museum of Fine Arts*, <https://collections.mfa.org/objects/31102/slave-ship-slavers-throwing-overboard-the-dead-and-dying-t> 55

Figure 10 - Julien, Isaac. *Paradise Omeros*. 2002. *Bohen Foundation*, <https://bohen.org/project/isaac-julien-installation> 62

Figure 11 – Mangonès, Albert. *The Unknown Maroon, Haiti*. 1967. *Uncommon Caribbean*, <https://www.uncommoncaribbean.com/haiti/uncommon-attraction-haitis-unbreakable-negre-marron/> 73

Figure 12 - Gallagher, Ellen. *Watery Ecstatic*. 2004. *Gagosian Gallery*, <https://gagosian.com/news/2018/07/11/critical-walk-through-ellen-gallagher-on-evolutionary-possibilities/> 88

Figure 14 – Gallagher, Ellen. *Ecstatic Draught of Fishes*. 2019. *Gagosian Gallery*, <https://gagosian.com/exhibitions/2019/ellen-gallagher/> 88

Figure 13 - Atkins, Anna. *Cyanotype Impressions*. 1843. *Wikipedia*, https://fr.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fichier:Anna_Atkins_algae_cyanotype.jpg. Accessed Nov. 30, 2023 88

Figure 15 - Gallagher, Ellen. *Watery Ecstatic*. 2004. *Artnet*. <http://www.artnet.com/magazine/features/jsaltz/saltz10-20-4.asp> 88

Figure 16 - Gallagher, Ellen. *Bird in Hand*. 2006. *Tate Modern*, <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/gallagher-bird-in-hand-t12450> 89

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