Essay

Headless Horror: Writing Decapitation in the French Caribbean Plantationocene

MAEVE McCUSKER

MAEVE McCUSKER is professor of French and Caribbean studies at Queen's University Belfast. She is the editor of a scholarly edition of Louis de Maynard's 1835 novel *Outre-mer* (L'Harmattan, 2010) and the author of *Patrick Chamoiseau: Recovering Memory* (Liverpool UP, 2007) and *Fictions of Whiteness: Imagining the Planter Caste in the French Caribbean Novel* (U of Virginia P, 2021), which was awarded the annual Gapper Book Prize (2022) by the Society for French Studies for the best book in French studies in the United Kingdom and Ireland. She is the president of the Society for Francophone Postcolonial Studies.

Catalyzed by the resurgent Black Lives Matter movement, the toppling of the statue of the white Creole Joséphine Tascher de la Pagerie in July 2020 obliterated the most prominent and controversial *lieu de mémoire* from the Fort-de-France cityscape. The attack, conducted mid-pandemic, was live streamed on social media by assailants who were defiantly unmasked and cheered by a jubilant crowd. This was not, however, the first attack on the memorial to Martinique's most famous daughter and the first wife of Napoleon Bonaparte. In September 1991, long before the 2013 origins of Black Lives Matter, the statue had been decapitated and daubed in red paint. This earlier assault was arguably the more striking of the two in terms of symbolism, visibility, and the longevity of its reverberations, creating at once a conspicuous icon of black resistance and an impudent marker of white trauma—a powerful visual metonym. For almost thirty years, the headless statue stood, embodying a peculiar confluence of vulnerability and dominance.[1] Yet, in stark contrast to the spectacle of the statue's final removal, the decapitation was conducted under cover of night, and the perpetrators remain unknown. The act was claimed only belatedly, in a 2018 TV interview in which the assailant's anonymity is carefully protected: he is filmed from behind and his voice is disguised (Vincent). The disparity in the execution and reception of these two acts, decollation and annihilation, reflects the growing energetic iconoclasm of Black Lives Matter as the summer of 2020 progressed and registers an acute intensification in attitudes to white power and, specifically, the slave-owning class. Yet the secrecy and speculation surrounding the beheading, and the care taken to conceal the attackers' identities

© 2025 The Author(s). Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of Modern Language Association of America
PMLA 140.1 (2025), doi:10.1632/S0030812924000920

even today, is rooted also in a particular sensitivity attaching to decapitation. The removal of a head—along with its barbarous evil twin, cannibalism—produces a sense of pathos and horror that is deeply enshrined in global culture, from Halloween costumes to zombie horror movies, and that finds its most extreme contemporary expression in staged propaganda spectacles of Islamist terror.

Decapitation has enthralled artists, writers, and filmmakers, from Homer and Virgil to Joseph Conrad, Georges Bataille, Damien Hirst, and Francis Ford Coppola. Psychoanalysts and philosophers, too, have gravitated toward its horrific power. Sigmund Freud, in a notorious discussion of the Medusa's head, is to the point: "to decapitate = to castrate" (273). Subsequent theorists have nuanced and challenged Freud's laconic statement. For Hélène Cixous, if masculinity is "culturally ordered by the castration complex," then "the backlash, the return, on women of this castration anxiety, is its displacement as decapitation, execution, of woman, as loss of her head" ("Castration" 43). Cixous concludes that women keep their heads only by losing them: by remaining silent in the phallogocentric language of the master. Yet theirs can also be a radical, defiant, and liberating position; in the more jubilant "The Laugh of the Medusa," Cixous mocks the "trembling Perseuses" confronted with the unrepresentability of death and the feminine sex: "Unlike man, who holds so dearly to his title and his titles, his pouches of value, his cap, crown, and everything connected with his head, woman couldn't care less about the fear of decapitation (or castration)" (885, 888). Julia Kristeva's *The Severed Head* takes as its starting point our "obsession with the head as symbol of the thinking living being" (4) and discusses paintings of such subjects as David and Goliath, Judith and Holofernes, John the Baptist and Salomé, and the Medusa. For Kristeva, the figure of decapitation is rooted in the moment of individuation—specifically, in the ambivalence of the mother-child separation. Adriana Cavarero, developing work by Kristeva and Cixous, reflects on the Medusa in the context of social and political terror, arguing that decapitation destroys "the uniqueness of the body, tearing at its constitutive vulnerability" (4). That uniqueness is inscribed primarily on the head, where "a 'singular face' bespeaks the subject's humanity" (7). For Regina Janes, meanwhile, the severed head is "the first sign that hominids are thinking in symbols" (9). Janes argues that the head carries particular power as "the locus of four of the five senses" and as the vector of "many species' social identity" (11).

These theorists, however varied their readings, all start from the conviction that decapitation is always about more than the loss of a head, a conviction that is also a guiding premise for this article. Their focus, however, is resolutely European; colonial contexts are marginal, the plantationocene entirely absent. Yet, for writers emerging from traumatized cultures founded on slavery, the severed head acts as a polysemous trope with a particularly disarming affective power. Heads, after all, act as a "metaphor for hierarchy and metonymy for wholeness" (Janes 178). Slavery rejected such wholeness, depending rather on an imagined severance of head from body and a structural association of the head with whiteness, civilization, and power and of the body with blackness and debasement. Severed heads, both black and white, speak, therefore, in especially powerful ways in the plantation imaginary, as both spectacle and taboo, as a limit point in the narrative of human bloodshed and suffering on which the regime was founded, and as symbols of insurgency against the master. The decapitation of the enslaved is a primal scene of white barbarism: the trope finds powerful visual expression in Woodrow Nash's sixty-three ceramic heads mounted on rods outside the Whitney Plantation museum, a disturbing memorial of an 1811 slave revolt (fig. 1). Conversely, in a white imaginary perennially anxious about its own vulnerability, the severed head of the master or mistress is the terrifying imago of the revenge of the enslaved. Such anxieties are encapsulated in the jagged edges of the decapitated Joséphine's neck, jutting out from the classical perfection of her body and the flowing lines of her Empire dress. In a different context, the abundance of uncanny heads with which Alejo Carpentier's *The Kingdom of This World* opens—barber shop

Fig. 1. Woodrow Nash, *1811 Slave Revolt Memorial*. Photo by T.O.D. Photography. Used with permission of the Whitney Plantation, Edgard, LA.

dummies, calves' heads in butcher shops, the king's head on Parisian stamps—are ghoulish craniums that register the ebbing power of the white elite in prerevolutionary Saint-Domingue. American plantation fiction is similarly haunted by scenes of decapitation, often rooted in the psychosexual dynamics of the relationships between white women and black slaves or workers: to take but two examples, Joe Christmas severs the head of Joanna Burden with a razor in William Faulkner's *Light in August* (1932), and in Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940), Bigger Thomas sends "the blade of the hatchet into the bone of the throat [of Mary Dalton] with all the strength of his body. The head rolled off" (106). The trope also appears in the mother-child plot of Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), which has at its core Sethe's near beheading of her baby, a gesture of revenge on the master—the mother fears they will both be returned to the plantation—perhaps best understood by the formerly enslaved character Stamp Paid: "She was trying to out-hurt the hurter" (234).

In the Shadow of the Guillotine

Severed heads speak powerfully, if not with a single voice, in a plantation imaginary, but they have a particular expressive capacity in the francophone Caribbean. As well as emerging, like all postslavery cultures, from a history defined and defiled by the barbarism of conquest, deportation, and chattel slavery, French Caribbean literature was born in the immediate shadow of two revolutions, the French and the Haitian.[2] The decapitation of Louis XVI saw the divinely appointed monarch and father of the nation "transformed . . . into a monstrosity" (Kristeva 93). The Terror, moreover, made a radical demographic imprint in Guadeloupe, where the guillotine was shipped by Victor Hugues (whose cruelty earned him the moniker Robespierre of the Antilles), killing hundreds of planters in the 1790s.[3] If the Terror was spectacularly symbolized by the severed head, so too was the Haitian Revolution and its aftermath. Jean-Jacques Dessalines, whose notorious battle cry "Koupe tete, brule kay" ("cut off their heads, burn their homes") ripped through revolutionary Saint-Domingue, was responsible for innumerable decapitations, notably in the notorious massacre of Moca (1805), during which forty children were beheaded. Decapitation was weaponized as an instrument of terror by the French, too, most emblematically in the beheading of the rebel slave leader Dutty Boukman in 1791.[4]

Given these multiple and often intersecting historical contexts, it is unsurprising that writing from the French Caribbean is punctuated by motifs of cranial injury, decollation, and decapitation. Instead of forming a continuous through line, though, the severed head tends to be mobilized, in Antillean literature, in moments of anxiety and instability, exemplifying Kristeva's dictum that "where there is a head there is a crisis" (104): specifically, a crisis of (white) power, patriarchy, revolution, and castration anxiety. For the slave-owning class, the king's decapitated body, an abject signifier of the decimation of authority, paternity, and law, above all foreshadowed the end of the plantocracy, a system similarly built around absolutism and entitlement, although founded on acquisitiveness rather than birthright. Small wonder that the white male head receives such brutal treatment in texts from the turbulent first half of the nineteenth century. Creoles like the diarist Pierre Dessalles and the novelist Louis de Maynard returned obsessively to the primal scene of Louis XVI's decapitation.

Dessalles opens each journal entry for 21 January, over many years, by remembering the king on the guillotine and frequently retires to bed ill on this day. He writes, "La France cherche en vain ce qui peut remplacer l'autorité paternelle des anciens rois" ("France seeks, in vain, something that might replace the paternal authority of former kings"; 17).[5] Maynard's *Outre-mer* (1835) is suffused with the various literal and metaphorical "égorgements" ("throat slittings"; e.g., 1: 43) to which the oligarchy has succumbed; the father of the planter-patriarch has been guillotined in revolutionary France, while the decapitation by the Gauls of "ces sublimes sénateurs romains" is invoked as a metaphor for the slow and tortuous draining away of white power, and indeed of pure white blood (2: 80). Such motifs are spectacularly reprised in Victor Séjour's "Le mulâtre" ("The Mulatto"; 1837), set during the Haitian Revolution. The trope recedes in the period following the abolition of slavery in 1848. And yet it resurfaces in two novels written in the wake of the cataclysmic riots of 2009, which are discussed here as contemporary responses to profound political instability: Henri Micaux's *De nègres et de békés: Une journée de chien* (*Of Blacks and White Creoles: A Hell of a Day*; 2011) and Raphaël Confiant's *Bal masqué à Békéland* (*Masquerade Ball in Békéland*; 2014). However distinct their contexts of production, all these male-authored narratives originate in moments of historical emergency, when the security of the plantocracy—and the privilege of the white elite—is under particular pressure.

Antillean women writers also explore decapitation, though to strikingly different effect. In Gisèle Pineau's *L'espérence-macadam* (*Macadam Dreams*; 1995), the foundational crime that marks the community of Ti-Ghetto is the decapitation and dismemberment of Hortense by her jealous partner, Régis, to the refrain "fendre, hacher, couper" ("split, hack, cut"; 99, 100, 101, 102). The episode, an example of the "radical silencing and reification of women" (Milne 203), gives disturbingly literal expression to the psychic processes explored in Cixous's "Castration or Decapitation?" The revenge attack on the eponymous heroine of Myriam Warner-Vieyra's "Sidonie" also speaks to this nexus of sexual oppression, patriarchy, and the loss of the head: when Sidonie castrates her abusive husband, he strangles her. As Françoise Lionnet remarks, "[T]he text clearly uses [decapitation] as a form of punishment or retaliation for Bernard's castration" (142). And yet the final text discussed here, Maryse Condé's *Célanire cou-coupé* (*Who Slashed Célanire's Throat?*; 2000), provides an alternative perspective on the trope of decapitation, whether as an avatar of castration anxiety, as in the male authors discussed, or of female silencing, as in women writers. Condé, rewriting Medusa, has her (anti)heroine survive; the anarchical Célanire's de- and recapitation is the beginning rather than the end of her story and, if the narrative is irreducible to any singular reading, it at the very least suggests, in line with Cixous, a libidinal economy based not on lack and loss (of penis-head-power) but on profusion, multiplicity, and mischief.

Paternity, the Slit Throat, and the Severed Head: "Le mulâtre"

A gothic melodrama set in Saint-Domingue during the early days of the Haitian Revolution, Séjour's "Le mulâtre" puts the severed head center stage.[6] The hero, Georges, is conceived through the rape of the Senegalese slave Laïssa by the plantation owner, Alfred; Séjour's curious lexical side-step—Laïssa was "presque violée" ("virtually raped"; 380; "Mulatto" 290)—only emphasizes the crime. Alfred refuses to acknowledge his son, who grows up enslaved but devoted to his cruel master. On her deathbed, Laïssa bequeaths to Georges a pouch containing his father's portrait, not to be opened until his twenty-fifth birthday. When Georges's virtuous wife, Zélie, rejects Alfred's advances, she is executed on the scaffold. Georges flees the plantation vowing vengeance; he returns only when Alfred has a wife and son of his own, poisons Alfred's wife, and takes an ax to his father's neck. In the denouement, the father addresses—and finally acknowledges—his son, as he breathes his last:

> —Frappe, bourreau . . . frappe . . . après l'avoir empoisonnée, tu peux bien tuer ton pè . . . La hache s'abaissa, et la tête d'Alfred roula sur le plancher, mais la tête en roulant murmura distinctement le dernier syllabe *re* . . . Georges croyait avoir mal entendu, mais le mot *père*, comme le glas funèbre, tintait à son oreille; or pour s'en assurer, il ouvrit le sac fatal . . . ah! s'écria-t-il, je suis maudit . . . une détonation se fit entendre; et le lendemain on trouva près du cadavre d'Alfred celui du malheureux Georges . . . (392; ellipses in source)

> "Strike, executioner . . . strike . . . after poisoning her, you might as well kill your own fa—." The ax fell, and Alfred's head rolled across the floor, but, as it rolled, the head distinctly pronounced the final syllable, "—ther . . ." Georges at first believed he had misheard, but the word *father*, like a funeral knell, rang in his ears. To be certain, he opened the fateful pouch. . . . "Ah!" he cried out, "I'm cursed. . . ." An explosion was heard; and the next day, near the corpse of Alfred, was discovered the corpse of the unhappy Georges. . . . (299)

The ellipsis, or *points de suspension*, that sunders the word *père*, instead of creating tension (the reader knows the secret of Georges's paternity, even if Georges does not), gives visual form to the melodrama of the revelation, registering, as Werner Sollors argues, the severing of the relationship between the two men (185). This interruptive marker stands for slavery itself, the abominable history that associates and separates father and son. The three dots might also stand for drops of blood, connecting and violently rupturing the paternal signifier and patrilineality. In the English translation this internal caesura is rendered as bifurcating dashes; unlike the hyphen of conjoining, so powerfully explored by Jacques Derrida in relation to Franco-Maghrebi identity, these marks act as hieroglyphics, the dashes connoting slashes, sharp blades visually and violently dissecting the word. In both versions, punctuation relays alienation and violation.

If this belated scene of recognition has received some critical attention, the density of references to the head has been neglected. Séjour frequently, indeed almost obsessively, zeroes in on the heads of the five key characters (Alfred; Alfred's unnamed wife; Georges; Georges's mother, Laïssa; and Georges's wife, Zélie) regardless of their race. He thus stresses the individuality, affective life, and emotional responses of nonwhite as well as white characters, a strong political gesture given the whitewashing of much nineteenth-century fiction. For example, Laïssa's modesty is suggested by her reluctance to raise her head, and the African woman's death is conveyed by her head falling back on her pillow. Alfred's final demise is directly foreshadowed early in the story when Georges, defending his master, finds himself confronted by thieves who threaten to decapitate him, their ax suspended above his head. The planter's joy at the birth of his son, as well as his sense of impending doom, is rendered through references to the head rather than the heart: "il s'assit la tête entre les deux mains, comme un homme qui ne peut croire à un bonheur inattendu" ("he sat down and put his head between his hands, like a man who can't believe his unexpected good fortune"; 389; 296). And although it is not explicitly stated, the reader assumes that the gunshot with which Georges kills himself has been directed to the head.

But, beyond the final decapitation(s), references to the head are especially concentrated in two episodes: Alfred's attempted seduction of Zélie and the revelation of the contents of the pouch containing the miniature portrait of Georges's father. When Zélie rejects her master, Alfred "perdit l'équilibre et se fracassa la tête en tombant. [Zélie] avait compris, la malheureuse, que la mort l'attendait pour avoir fait couler le sang d'un être aussi vil" ("lost his balance and struck his head as he fell. . . . [Zélie] understood perfectly, the unhappy girl, that death was her fate for having drawn the blood of a being so vile"; 384; 293). So, while Zélie is often understood to have been hanged as punishment for spurning her master (see, e.g., Heintz 239), Séjour makes it clear that it is for having caused the master's blood to spill, even inadvertently, that she cannot survive. The gash to the head of the aroused white man, whose "brûlant baiser" ("burning kiss"; 384; 293) as he drags her to his bed repulses rather than seduces

the young woman, is at once a proxy for castration and the ultimate symbolic challenge (a young enslaved woman rejecting a white planter) to the plantationary order. Freud argues that fear of castration is connected to punishment for illicit sexual desire; the vehemence of Alfred's response to cranial injury, rooted in an abusive desire for the son's enslaved wife, a desire that reenacts his rape of Georges's mother, takes on a further, incestuous intensity if, as several critics have argued, Zélie can be suspected to be his daughter, too (see Sollors 167; Brickhouse 124). When he fails to persuade Alfred to commute Zélie's sentence, the desolate Georges declares, "Mais tu ne sais pas que ta tête ne tiendra sur tes épaules qu'autant qu'elle vivra [. . .] mais tu ne sais pas que je te tuerai . . . que je boirai ton sang si jamais on arrache un cheveu de sa tête" ("You should know that your head will remain on your shoulders only so long as she lives. [. . .] You should know that I will kill you, that I'll drink your blood, if even a hair on her head is harmed"; 387; 291). Georges's plea mobilizes the head in several ways. The exhortation not to harm a hair on his beloved's head ironically recalls Jesus's reassurance to his disciples that "the very hairs of your head are all numbered" (*Holy Bible*, Matt. 10.30, Luke 12.7); such a statement of divine providence contrasts with the master's abusiveness but also with the mulatto's chilling vow to drink the master's blood, alluding to a rite of human sacrifice often associated with the slitting of the throat or with decapitation. Moreover, Georges challenges the master's moral authority through an appeal to the head—the curious double negative, neutered in the English translation, suggesting either that Alfred will no longer be able to "hold his head on his shoulders," so weakened will his authority be, if he kills Zélie (this is the sense of the English translation) or, more literally, that he cannot know that he would be *unable* to continue to rule (to keep his head up) should he allow her to live. In both alternatives, the erect head is synonymous with (a now profoundly threatened) power, legitimacy, and pride.

If the severed head is at the center of the story's denouement, it finds a curious parallel in the miniature paternal portrait that Georges opens in the final scene. The painting's cut-off head is an uncanny mise en abyme that foreshadows and accompanies Alfred's final decapitation. Plantation fiction features a plethora of head shots; the houses of white Creole literature are lined with the portraits of male ancestors that reinscribe patrilinearity and emphasize the association of whiteness, mastery, and the cerebral (McCusker 68). But this portrait is in miniature, a talisman concealed rather than displayed, whose revelation is deferred. Such miniatures are common in fiction of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and, as Madeline Zehnder argues, generally "mediate social ties and signal emotional connection"; here they mark "alienation not affiliation" (167). Zehnder associates the pouch with African gris-gris, folk charms used to protect and curse, that allow Séjour, she argues, to "gesture to life beyond the colonial order" (183). My reading suggests rather that the "sac fatal," containing as it does the sole clue to the mulatto's paternal genetic origins, functions as a metaphor for the father's reproductive system, specifically the scrotal sac, source of life and, here, death. In the story's gory resolution, then, the decapitation of the father, immediately followed by the sensational slitting of the pouch, doubly invokes castration; indeed, the scene stages, in graphic mode, the annihilation of the "pouches of value, his cap, crown, and everything connected with his head" identified by Cixous as propping up masculinity. Kristeva, in *The Severed Head*, briefly considers the miniature, linking it to the Byzantine icons of the Holy Face and then to the *mandylion* and the *veronika* (a term held, through a now discredited etymology, to derive from *vera ikon*). For Kristeva, such icons are meant to stand as "absolute proof" of Christ's existence (37): what she calls "the fiction of the imprint" distinguishes it from any secondary representation painted by the hand of man (42). In Séjour's story this "absolute proof" is presented in an analogous fashion; the father's picture is not described, its very existence simply absorbed as a genetic trace, the *sac vital* also a "sac fatal," ultimately the cause of death of father and son. That the father, whose erect head symbolizes power—

associations of the head with hierarchy, as Janes notes, survive in Latinate terms such as *caput*, *chief*, *chef*, and *capital* (8)—is thus felled heralds the end of the line, too, for the egregious racial hierarchies of slavery, an institution already spectacularly overthrown in Haiti by the time of the story's publication and which would be brought down across the French empire within a decade.

"Le mulâtre" stages an oedipal honor killing of the white father by his mulatto son. The miniature's uncanny resonance with Alfred's rolling head, emplotted at "a moment of bloodshed, not sentiment," rewrites the sentimental plot, as Zehnder argues, emphasizing "the material violence that undergirds white colonial definitions of the family" (169). But Séjour goes further, pointing the way to an aesthetics of horror with the castrative associations of the sac containing the miniature head being slit open, its contents spilled, and the head that continues to talk beyond its severance: such an aesthetic has been taken up by more recent writers reflecting on the continuing egregious inequalities of Antillean society, one hundred fifty years after Séjour.

Abject Masculinity: Micaux and Confiant

If early-nineteenth-century fictions locate anxieties around paternity at the core of the family—or plantationocene—drama, a similar network of associations emerges in more recent fiction from the French Caribbean. These novels, as melodramatic, and every bit as bloody, as their 1830s predecessors, originated in another moment of profound instability—the general strikes of 2009, when, over forty-four days, Guadeloupe and Martinique came to a standstill as locals protested an exorbitant cost of living (*la vie cher*) and ongoing economic exploitation (*pwofitayzon*). This was an unprecedented episode of popular revolt, led by forty-eight different organizations (Murdoch 2), that generated "formidable hope" (Vété-Congolo 176). The movement appeared to have especially profound implications for the white elite: for the first time, the existence within the republic of a group whose privilege is based on strict racial endogamy was acknowledged: "a taboo [was] lifted, the enduring weight of colonialism and slavery made manifest" (Chivallon 9). Tensions ran especially high in Guadeloupe, where some white Creole families fled the island and where the guillotine of the 1790s was explicitly invoked by the leader of the protest, Eli Domota (Angele).

The two novels considered here—Micaux's *De nègres et de békés* and Confiant's *Bal masqué à Békéland*—revolve around the death, through cranial trauma, of the white father.[7] Both explore whiteness laid low, signaling not only a general malaise in white Creole society but also, as I argue elsewhere, a profoundly self-destructive tendency. In both novels the threat to this patriarchal and capitalistic order, for all the paranoid fear of the (nonwhite) other, comes from within the caste itself, and the fatal blow is delivered by the planter's own possessions (McCusker 160–87). I develop my earlier argument here, suggesting that, through a chain of dispersed connotations, the references to decapitation, decollation, and, by implication, castration not only register a pronounced predisposition for self-harm and debasement but also suggest an equivalence between whiteness, horror, and the grotesque.

De nègres et de békés was published in 2011 but is set in a time of black resistance in the 1940s; undoubtedly, the tension surrounding the 2009 strikes encouraged the author to displace the story historically. A disaffected laborer, Amédée, visits the *grand'case* ("big house") to intercede, on behalf of his fellow workers, with the planter, hoping to secure improvements in their harsh working conditions. The boss, Blanière, taken unawares, trips and sustains a bleeding gash at the base of the skull, causing Amédée to flee. When Blanière's wife, Denise, happens upon the scene and sees the wound, she imagines that her "crétin" husband must have stumbled, causing him to "se fracasser le crâne" ("shatter his skull"; Micaux 134). Seizing the opportunity to finish her husband off, she pummels his head with a bottle of rum: "Elle asséna un premier bon coup sur la nuque. . . . Elle prit cette fois la bouteille de ses deux mains, la leva au-dessus de sa tête, comme un bûcheron balance sa cognée et

vlan! Elle la fit exploser sur le crâne de Michel. Il y eut un affreux bruit d'os qui casse. . . . Le crâne fracassé lui donnait de la nausée" ("She struck him hard on the nape of the neck. . . . She took the bottle in her two hands, lifted it high above his head, like a woodcutter swings his ax, and slash! She made it explode on Michel's skull. A dreadful sound of breaking bones followed. . . . Michel's shattered skull was beginning to turn her stomach"; 137–38). References to the *crâne*, the skull, as Kristeva suggests, both arouse and sublimate our fear of death (9–11). Moreover, here the term dehumanizes the victim, conveying spousal contempt: instead of being viewed through the personalizing features of the face or associated with the cognitive capacities of the brain, he is reduced to a set of bones and cartilage. The brutality of cranial trauma is underlined by the repeated reflexive *se fracasser*, "to shatter" (the same verb used in "Le mulâtre" when Alfred is rejected by Zélie, and one whose onomatopoeic force strikes with more violence than *se casser*, "to break"). The phallic wife, explicitly compared to a woodcutter, brings her ax (in fact a rum bottle, source and product of this economic supersystem) down on the nape of her husband's neck. This lurid *vagina dentata* is the agent of both decapitation and castration, and the phrasing conjures the guillotine—also, historically, called *la veuve* ("the widow"), the status to which Denise aspires. Her "précision brutale et méthodique" ("brutal and methodical precision"; Micaux 138) directly recalls the language of early observers of the device, who commended its cool efficiency over prior, more drawn-out methods of execution.

Blanière is the epitome of abjection, emasculated by his handicap (he is generally confined to a wheelchair) and by his humiliating, ultimately murderous treatment at the hands of his monstrous wife. Indeed, both wife and daughter pose a threat to the plantation: Denise has a penchant for black men, while Emmanuelle fraternizes with nonwhites and reads only black literature. Given his wife's proclivities and his daughter's affinities, there is a suggestion that she may not be his daughter at all. He has no son, and therefore the patronymic, itself connoting whiteness, will disappear with him. He is insistently associated with liquid or wetness: he is bloated and obese, drools, pours himself into his chair—which he fills like a "fluide visqueux" ("viscous liquid"; 49)—and is said to resemble "une excroissance obscène" ("an obscene growth"; 49–50) and jelly, all of which prefigures the blood and brains spilt in the murder scene. At one point he is compared to a cephalopod leaving behind a sticky trace (49). The comparison, in this context, is especially revealing: the cephalopod is a marine invertebrate with a bulbous and completely merged head and foot. Cephalopod-type monsters, "boneless, bloodless, fleshless creature[s] . . . with a unique orifice equivocally and disquietingly serving as both mouth and anus," are staples of horror and fantasy (Weiss 151). Such animals "touch on the limits of monstrosity, evoking worldly fears and unconscious anguish" (150). The octopus represents "the equivocation of the formless, the horror of ungraspable monstrosity." This lack of rigidity and uprightness (the cephalopod has no backbone), as well as the absence of boundaries between extremities (the foot is famously identified by Freud as a penis substitute), undermines any distinction between the cerebral and the corporeal, a distinction fundamental to the plantation order. The sticky bodily fluid Blanière produces, then, is less the result of phallic jouissance than a debased residue, a leak, or even a lack.

The physical decrepitude and sexual inadequacy of the white man conjure more profound anxieties regarding the legitimacy and longevity of white mastery, questions taken up in Confiant's novel, published several years after Micaux's. *Bal masqué à Békéland* is a murder mystery in which a bumbling detective investigates the disappearance of the eighteen-year-old daughter of a *béké* businessman, Dupin. Through a series of frenetic, often ludicrous plot twists, it transpires that Dupin is himself responsible for her death; his refusal to pay ransom to a Colombian drug cartel with whom he has been involved results in her murder. Dupin is also revealed to have hidden away this daughter's cognitively infirm twin, who has spent her life concealed, in a knowing nod to Bertha

Mason in *Jane Eyre*, in the attic. The Dupin parents are cousins, Confiant thus emphasizing the devastating genetic results of the caste's notorious endogamy. In the final scene the patriarch shoots himself in the head, in front of the detective, policemen, his wife, and his surviving daughter:

> La grande carcasse du vieux béké s'effondra comme une masse sur le plancher de la véranda tandis que sa cervelle se répandait partout, non sans avoir éclaboussé les deux flics. . . . [Mme Dupin] se tenait catatonique devant nous, fixant hagarde le corps acéphale de son mari, dont le gros calibre avait tout bonnement fait exploser la boîte crânienne. . . . [Du corps] jaillissaient encore des jets de sang. (261)
>
> The old béké's carcass collapsed in a heap on the veranda floor while his brains spilled all around, spattering the two cops. . . . Mme Dupin stood catatonic before us, eyeing the acephalous corpse of her husband, whose large pistol had well and truly blown the cranium up. Blood continued to spurt in jets from the body.

If Blanière is figured as a cephalopod, a monstrous marine invertebrate, Dupin is here described as *acephalous*. The term (Greek for "headless") denotes in anthropology a nonstratified society based on horizontal and polycentric forms of power; such an egalitarian structure is diametrically opposed to the patriarchal, vertical, and hierarchical modes of the Dupin family, Békéland, and white Creole society generally. Heads, after all, give shape to and symbolize power; or as Roger Luckhurst puts it, referencing Bataille's journal *Acéphale*, "acephaly means not just losing your head but losing your head of state" (212). The father, an energetic, creative, and corrupt businessman, is unambiguously the "brains" behind the family's success; his acephalous corpse is the abject symbol of a superstructure felled, a synecdoche for the collapse of the plantationocene.

Confiant, like Micaux, points toward the grotesque. The white male, until now associated with accoutrements that symbolize cerebral activity, such as the Mont Blanc pen, becomes the locus of a spectacular spilling of blood and brains. As Dupin's brain spurts from his skull and spatters the investigating officers (*éclaboussé* and *jaillissaient* are onomatopoeic sibilants that register both liquidity and volume), the text graphically enacts the unravelling of white patriarchal supremacy, historically upheld through the discursive as well as material control of black bodies. The scene conjures gothic horror and indeed the figure of the zombie, who can be killed only by a gunshot or a blow to the head. Dupin's self-inflicted decapitation is all the more dramatic against the pathetic familial tableau of his intellectually impaired, aphonic daughter (her handicap, unlike Blanière's, is congenital and not the result of misadventure, and therefore "in the blood") and his reclusive, speechless, and "catatonic" spouse, to say nothing of his dead daughter. This final apocalyptic tableau is of an acephalous corpse, then, but also a decapitated zombie family, and the white family always stands as a synecdoche for white society more generally. Whiteness not only has turned on itself but in so doing has created a headless familial and societal monster, suggesting that the collapse of a monstrous system of entitlement is imminent. If the cephalopod stands for an abject white masculinity, the acephalous corpse points to a capacity for grotesque self-consumption and even depravity.

Célanire cou-coupé: Undercutting the Cut

The male-authored narratives discussed above, although located in the specific codes and hierarchies of the plantation, crystalize around tropes of power, revolution, and an established order in crisis. They explore the associations between decapitation and castration in recognizably Freudian ways, positing not just a version of moribund white masculinity but one that is conveyed through motifs of horror and the grotesque. I have suggested, too, that decapitation, in the hands of women writers, speaks to themes of female disempowerment and silencing. Condé's *Célanire cou-coupé*, which stages a female experience of (near) decapitation, sits therefore at something of a jagged angle to all of these.[8] Set in the early twentieth century, the novel's eponymous protagonist has her throat slashed as a

newborn in a botched decapitation: this sacrificial ritual is carried out, in a convoluted set of circumstances, by a *béké* seeking to protect his political career. Abandoned on a trash heap, her head dangling by a thread, she is discovered by Dr. Pinceau, who stitches her back together in a seven-hour surgery and adopts her. His surname, taken by Célanire, means paintbrush; the doctor is a fan of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, and the novel plays with the idea that Célanire is his creation and with the monstrosity of its eponymous antiheroine.[9] Célanire, arriving as an oblate in Côte d'Ivoire in 1901, opens a refuge for young girls. She then marries Thomas de Brabant, a colonial governor, and sets up cultural and artistic centers there and in her native Guadeloupe. Meanwhile, her rescuer-father (whom she has accused of sexual abuse) and Hakim, a gay man who has rebuffed Célanire's sexual advances, end their days exiled to a penal colony in Guyana, sharing stories of her. Over the course of the novel Célanire methodically takes her revenge by destroying (or at least she is suspected of killing) a range of characters implicated in her trauma, in a complicated and blood-sodden narrative that ranges from France to Côte d'Ivoire, Cayenne, Guadeloupe, and Peru. Like all the male writers discussed above, then, Condé mobilizes the horror playbook; but her fiction works in altogether more troubling and certainly less *readable* ways.

Although claiming to be based on true events, the novel quickly reveals itself as a supernatural horror story that breaks the codes of realism and flouts verisimilitude.[10] Like Séjour's, this decapitation story is a mulatto revenge plot, also motivated by a decades-long quest for origins and truth; Célanire declares several times, as Georges might have done in "Le mulâtre," that "la vengeance est un plat qui se mange froid" ("revenge is a dish best served cold"; Condé, *Célanire*, e.g., 18; *Who* 6). But *Célanire* rewrites Séjour's short story as a parodic picaresque: the quest narrative is bifurcated around both parents (fictional mulattos typically seek clarity on paternity only); instead of the tragic denouement of Séjour's story, the novel ends with a character on the brink of maternity, and it defies verisimilitude in, for example, the protagonist's smooth international mobility, her anachronistically liberal views, and her references to neocolonialism and feminism. But the most spectacularly implausible revision is the infant's survival and recapitation. The thread that holds head and bloodless body together can thus be read as a metaphor for the stretched credulity of the reader. If the severing of a female infant's head resonates with the diegetic crux of Morrison's *Beloved*, the irreverence of Condé's novel could not be further from the somber tone of her US peer's. Rather, the horror of the attempted decapitation is undercut by the parodic tone of the narrative and by the fact that Célanire is an enigmatic, often entirely alienating figure for the reader, sexually ambiguous, promiscuous, and even predatory, manipulative, and cruel. Her dress fluctuates between African and Western attire, and she is said to shed her skin like a snake at night, leaving behind a pile of soft flesh; she remains slippery and unknowable to the end. The clue to her identity, though, is repeatedly located in the scar left by the attempted decapitation, a mnemonic trace of blood lost, as well as a bloodline unknown, the search for which is, apparently at least, the central question of the novel. This punctum, hidden by multifarious scarves and assorted jewelry, provokes unbridled curiosity in all she meets.

The scar is first uncovered and described as Célanire forces herself on Hakim. When he grabs her by the neck in self-defense, removing her ruff, Hakim is rendered speechless before "ce qu'il avait mis à nu" ("what he had uncovered"; 71; 61):

> Une monstrueuse cicatrice. Un garrot de caoutchouc violacé, épais comme un bourrelet, repoussé, ravaudé, tavelé, enserrait le cou. On aurait dit que celui-ci avait été coupe en deux parties égales, puis rafistolé tant bien que mal, les chairs rapprochées par force et bourgeonnant dans tous les sens comme elles le voulaient. (72)

> A monstrous scar. A purplish, rubberlike tourniquet, thick as a roll of flesh, repoussé, stitched and pockmarked, wound around her neck. It was as if her neck had been slashed on both sides, then

> patched up and the flesh pulled together by force, oozing lumps all the way around. (61)

If the noun *caoutchouc* ("rubber") suggests layers of hardened tissue, *violacé*, as well as naming a purplish color, connotes violation and violence. Hakim associates the scar with the vagina in registering the shock of nakedness caused by the scarf's removal and in observing, in the French original at least, that the neck is split into equal halves; as critics have noted, Célanire's status as "slashee" makes her an almost caricatural figure of Freudian feminine monstrosity and castration (Yoshioka-Maxwell 6). But here the wound/vagina is subjected to a surfeit of terms indicating a very particular kind of brutality (*garrot*, *force*) and shoddy repair (*ravaudé*, *tavelé*, *rafistolé*, *rapprochées*), which conjure the conventional imagery of female genital mutilation (FGM). The analogy is expressed more directly by her adoptive father: "Moi, comme Frankenstein, je n'avais pas tardé à prendre ma créature en horreur. . . . Surtout je ne pouvais pas regarder sa cicatrice, obscène, violacée *comme un sexe infibulé*, qui me rappelait à chaque instant ce que j'avais fait!" ("Like Frankenstein, I soon came to loathe the creature I had created. . . . Above all, I couldn't bear to look at her obscene scar, purplish *as an infibulated labium*, which was a constant reminder of what I had done!"; Condé, *Célanire* 119; *Who* 108–09; my emphasis). The neck wound, once more described as *violacée*, is now obscene, the reference to infibulation explicit.

Such imagined linkages between severed head and excised vagina are supplemented by Célanire's explicit criticisms of infibulation. For example, she steers a conversation with Hakim to discussion of FGM. Only the treatment of women in Africa, she argues, detracts from its otherwise admirable civilization: "Savait-il que les peuples africains mutilaient le sexe féminin? Ils en coupaient le clitoris et les grandes lèvres. Ensuite ils en cousaient le restant, ne ménageant qu'un étroit orifice pour laisser passer l'urine et le sang menstruel" ("Was he aware that the Africans mutilated the female genitals? They excised the clitoris and the labia. Then they sewed up the folds, leaving a narrow passage for the urine and the menstrual blood"). When an embarrassed Hakim mutters that the practice is the equivalent of male circumcision, Célanire counters that it is "une intolérable agression perpétrée contre les femmes pour contrôler leur sexualité" ("an intolerable aggression . . . perpetrated against women in order to control their sexuality"; 34; 24). Célanire's shelter is at once a brothel and a haven for girls at risk of FGM; when six-year-old Marie-Angélique is excised and nearly dies from hemorrhage while visiting her family, Célanire restricts family contact for all her charges (41). And threaded throughout the novel are references by her to the practice: she notes that Africans mutilate their women, while the French teach them only to handle a needle and thread (51), and she regrets that African men reject her view on FGM (89).

It would be tempting, given the coherence of the male-authored texts discussed above, to read recapitation in the novel, at least in part, as a feminist critique of FGM, often erroneously described as female castration. Such a reading would position Célanire as *porte-parole* for Condé and interpret Célanire's near decapitation and messy repair, as well as her allegorized wound, as a female doubling of the famous Freudian equation but also as a political intervention in one of the most culturally sensitive of contemporary issues. But, if such stable interpretations generally prove inadequate in the Condéan fictional universe, they seem especially so here. The novel repeatedly undercuts any unified reading that might seek to position it as an exposé of Condé's view on the subject. For example, the definitions of FGM proffered by Célanire are encyclopedic, earnestly factual explanations of anatomical trauma, bolted onto the story and jarring, in their prosaic solemnity, with the language of the text generally. Moreover, Célanire's pronouncements on the matter tend to simplify and generalize, to the point of offensiveness, what "Africans" believe, while dutifully invoking the lack of opportunity for French women, too. Such interventions are lifted from an anachronistic playbook of Western feminism and strike the reader as uncharacteristically pat, predictable, or even hackneyed feminist responses. As the novel progresses,

moreover, references to FGM disappear, as does Célanire's investment in the girls in her charge: once married, she casually hands the shelter over to another woman. Is it, therefore, a red herring in a novel that inserts the subject awkwardly, self-consciously, and, above all, incongruously?

If readers seeking a political intervention around FGM are teased but ultimately frustrated, what meaning can be assigned to the novel, which seems to refute any stable reading at all? In the primal scene of discovery by Pinceau, he unwraps her bloodstained blanket to uncover

> [l]e corps dodu, sa jolie amande fendue entre les cuisses, le cordon ombilical correctement coupé sous la croûte de sang. Mais horreur, sans faire des jeu, sa tête ne tenait qu'à un fil. Un instrument contondant, machette, coupe-coupe, couteau de boucher, sécateur de jardinier, l'avait pratiquement séparée du tronc. Par cette effroyable blessure, le bébé s'était complètement vidé de son sang. (116)

> [a] plump little body, her tiny almond split between her thighs, her umbilical cord neatly cut under a scab of blood. But horrors, I'm not kidding, her head was hanging by a thread. A blunt instrument—a machete, a cutlass, a butcher's knife, or garden secateurs—had virtually sectioned it from her body. The baby had completely drained itself of blood through this hideous wound. (106)

Even in the first, traumatized hours of Célanire's life, then, the male gaze is drawn obsessively to anatomical incisions, descriptions of which veer from admiration (the "jolie amande fendue" of her vagina) to scientific objectivity (the correctly cut umbilicus) to horror and fear at her severed head. These references, taken with the surfeit of overlapping terms that imagine the tool used to inflict the wound (in the original, a dense and staccato litany of hard *c*'s—*corps*, *cuisse*, *cordon*, and *croûte* giving way to *contondant*, *coupe-coupe*, *couteau*, *sécateur*—register a frenetic focus on the cut), suggest a violent, voyeuristic, even scopophilic response to her traumatized state. Later, when Pinceau can no longer look at the scar, which reminds him of an infibulated sex, but also "à chaque instant *ce que j'avais fait*" ("at every second of *what I had done*!"; 91; 109; my emphasis), the reader already knows of the trial in which Célanire accused her adoptive father of sexual abuse, the outcome of which sees him banished to the penal colony. Pinceau claims that *she* attempted to seduce *him*, a version lent credence not only by Célanire's prodigious sexual appetite but also by the doctor's honorable and altruistic actions. While the thrust of the narrative works to exculpate Pinceau, the progressive physician, reflective parent, and loving spouse, and to inculpate the insatiable Célanire, the reference to "ce que j'avais fait" is at the very least ambiguous, an incongruous response to the evidence of his life-saving surgery. Indeed, Pinceau himself wonders, in his dialogues with Hakim in Guyana, whether he might have misremembered.

It would be as foolhardy to suggest that *Célanire cou-coupé* is a critique of the victim shaming of a problematic heroine as it would be to claim that it is about FGM. More than any other Condé novel, it has divided critics. Kathleen Gyssels, while appreciating the novel's ludic strategies and the author's attempts to engage the reader in deciphering an overwhelming narrative, concludes that *Célanire* is a dysfunctional gothic novel (69). For Christiane Makward, in contrast, *Célanire* is "the freest, wittiest, and most entertaining of all Condé's novels" (405), while Joan Dayan declares herself "*possessed*" by the text (430). At the very least, though, the portrayal of the male father/savior figure, Pinceau (whose name derives directly from *pénis* and who is playfully—or disturbingly—known as Papa Doc), warrants pause. For all that Célanire's unsympathetic nature blocks readerly identification, and although the father-doctor practices medicine with enlightened self-abnegation and empathy, the narrative stages a primal scene of discovery in which the male gaze is drawn to lacerated tissue, bodily openings, and the "amande fendue" of the newborn's vagina. In the interval between this scopophilic discovery and the later scene in which he can no longer bear to look at her, ostensibly because of his own actions, Condé opens up space for the male salvific hero to be brought low; playing, as Shelley herself had done,

with the reader's fluctuating sympathy for both the creator and his "hideous progeny" (10), she enables the voice of the unruly daughter to be heard.

As Dawn Fulton shows, the protagonist "parallels the disorder subtended by her unknown origins, her unnatural re-creation, and her hideous scar with a deliberate and lucid transgression in her acts" (103). Although Fulton does not mention Cixous, her version of feminine disorder and laughter resonates with the unruly female of both "Castration or Decapitation?" and "The Laugh of the Medusa." If the decapitation of women, for Cixous, operates by silencing, Célanire (and Condé) rewrite the script of castration anxiety; they propose a radical alternative to both female silence and female passivity, and to the monstrous *vagina dentata*, by positing a femininity unapologetically associated with speech, power, overflowing desires, and the ebullient drives of the female body. The masculine order "that works by inculcation, by education" (Cixous, "Castration" 42) and seeks to regulate and constrain female sexuality is here defiantly unsettled in much the same way as the reader's search for a coherent narrative and a plausible heroine is thwarted in the profusion of this woman-authored textuality and by what Gyssels calls the "overdose" of characters and plots (68n2). Thus, Célanire's final, surprising declaration that she wishes to become a good mother does not signify a regressive embrace of gender stereotypes but points to her flouting of *all* codes and discourses, even, or perhaps especially, the predictable positionality of the "good feminist" that she has apparently espoused throughout the novel, most vocally in her stance on infibulation. For Janes, the Freudian equation of decapitation with castration is a "magician's trick"; "once the interpretation is easy it is no longer interesting" (xiii); Condé refuses all facile equivalence—she plays with but ultimately rejects the overdetermined (female) head shot, undercutting our attempts to read the cut, the wound, or the scar of decollation.

"Without symbolism," Janes writes, "human heads would be safe from human hands" (9). Although the French Caribbean plantationocene has been multiply marked by histories of beheading, its literature encodes the practice in very specific symbolic, allegorical, and historically located ways. The patricide of "Le mulâtre," a full frontal assault on white power by a victim of its excess, is firmly located in its revolutionary context. As Marlene Daut observes, "[T]he idea that miscegenation might make 'black' sons want to kill their 'white' fathers constitutes one of the primary metaphors of the Haitian Revolution in the nineteenth century" (5). The cut-off miniature head concealed in the "sac fatal," moreover, is an avatar of shameful paternity, while the twist in the tale, the mulatto son's suicide (by a presumed gunshot to the head), points to the tragic afterlives of the Haitian Revolution. In the aesthetic of horror that animates the text (the displaced castration of the slit sac and the speaking severed head), the white male body is besieged and overspills its limits. What Hortense Spillers has famously characterized as the "seared, divided ripped apartness" of the black body is here rerouted through white male corporeality (67). In later texts, the grotesque quality of white supremacy is even more pronounced. The mariticide of the husband-cephalopod in *De nègres et de békés* points to an abject formlessness, the lack of distinction between head and body signifying an acute castration anxiety. Meanwhile Confiant's acephalous family, standing in mute horror at the end of *Bal masqué* after the father's suicide, draws on the repertoire of gothic horror to posit white masculinity as not just fatally compromised but horrific, in physical and moral terms. The patriarchs of Séjour, Micaux, and Confiant (all epitomizing Cixous's "man," invested in "cap, crown, and everything connected with his head") bleed out from cranial injury. Their power is definitively neutralized, and the paranoid script of the white oligarchy, whose fictions of mastery required that black bodies be held as macabre, revolting, and abject, is rewritten.

These male-authored scenes of decapitation occur in or at the master's house, and they grapple with the overdetermined sets of meanings that this space seems to impose; meanwhile, such motifs, in works by women, posit a familiar enough version of hypermasculinity and female victimhood. All the

texts, whether authored by men or women, explore what Cixous identifies as a "masculine sexuality" that "gravitates around the penis, engendering that centralized body (in political anatomy) under the dictatorship of its parts": Cixous's concentrationary vision, linking the corporeal to the political, resonates with the closed and often incestuous space of the plantation ("Laugh" 889). *Célanire cou-coupé* stands apart, not only from the texts written by Condé's *confrères*, but also from the woman-authored narratives discussed here. While claiming to be based on true events, the novel is apparently unmotivated by historical crisis, just as the act of decapitation is neither an act of spousal, familial, or political revenge nor a gesture of self-destruction; the attempted infanticide thus departs, in an important way, from *Beloved*, too.[11] Moreover, the plot explodes beyond the geographic confines of the French plantationocene and from its associated structures and hierarchies. The *béké* who decapitates Célanire does not know her, the event takes place at a crossroads, and the plot moves from Guadeloupe to Africa and South America. The novel, as anatopic as it is anachronistic, explores instead the empowerment of female creativity, mobility, voice, and sexuality. Célanire, unlike other female characters in Antillean fiction, defies the "regionalization which serves the couple head/genitals and which is inscribed only within boundaries. Her libido is cosmic, just as her unconscious is worldwide" (Cixous, "Laugh" 889). This nomadic novel of de- and recapitation, whose references to FGM in the end amount to a series of trite truisms, leaves the certainty-seeking reader perplexed. But the infant girl's unlikely survival (of the attempted beheading but also, the text suggests, of sexual assault by her adoptive father), as well as her outrageous behavior as an adult, recalls Cixous's rebellious Gorgon: "You only have to look at the Medusa head-on to see her. And she's not deadly. She's beautiful and she's laughing" (885). In the novel's unexpected excipit, with its nod to future motherhood, the heroine has the last laugh.

Notes

I wish to thank Dawn Fulton for her generous comments on an early draft of this article.

1. For a discussion of the statue's removal, see McCusker 1–6. For excellent analyses of its decapitation that predate its demolition, see Gosson; Curtius; and Sago.

2. The first Antillean novel, Auguste Prévost de Sansac de Traversay's *Les amours de Zémédare et Carina*, was published in 1806, in the immediate aftermath of Haitian independence (1804).

3. In 1802 Napoleon reintroduced slavery to Guadeloupe; it had never been abolished in Martinique.

4. Metropolitan and colonial contexts overlap and converge. Victor Hugo's *Bug-Jargal*, whose Citizen C has fifty slave heads planted along his avenue and an aspiration to encircle the city of Cap Français with five hundred more, mobilizes the severed head as the imago of the torture of enslaved peoples. As Bongie notes, this is Hugo's "indirect way of voicing his distaste for the French Revolution by parodically representing its transatlantic double" (14). Meanwhile, the horror generated by the decapitation of Joséphine's statue was linked to the fact that the empress herself had narrowly escaped the guillotine in Paris.

5. Translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

6. Séjour was born in New Orleans to a Haitian father and an "octoroon" mother from Louisiana. Although published in French (1837), "Le mulâtre" has often been dubbed, since its translation into English and inclusion in the *Norton Anthology of African American Literature* (1996), the earliest known work of African American fiction.

7. The term *béké* designates the descendants of the planter caste in Martinique and Guadeloupe. *Békéland* refers to Cap Est, an area of northeastern Martinique where the richest oligarchs live in a highly segregated community.

8. The title is an echo of an echo, referencing Aimé Césaire's *Soleil cou coupé*, whose title derives from Guillaume Apollinaire's "Zone."

9. *Victoire, les saveurs et les mots* (2006) reveals in closing that Célanire Pinceau is the name of Condé's paternal grandmother, who was burned alive when her shack went up in flames (318).

10. Indeed, the novel rewrites one of those "spooky stories" "of the woman who always wore a red (or green or black) ribbon around her neck. . . . The woman refuses to comply with the repeated requests of her persistent lover . . . to tell him why she will never take the ribbon off" (Miller 1). At the point of death, he is allowed to remove the ribbon, and the woman's head falls off.

11. Critics have accepted Condé's claim in a prefatory verse that the story was inspired by a *fait divers*, but none to my knowledge has located a possible journalistic source.

Works Cited

Angele, Willy. "Communiqué du MEDEF-Guadeloupe." *Le scrutateur*, 11 May 2009, www.lescrutateur.com/article-28901989.html.

Bongie, Chris. Introduction. *Bug-Jargal*, by Victor Hugo, translated and edited by Bongie, Broadview Press, 2004, pp. 9–47.

Brickhouse, Anna. *Transamerican Literary Relations and the Nineteenth-Century Public Sphere*. Cambridge UP, 2015.

Carpentier, Alejo. *The Kingdom of This World*. Translated by Pablo Medina, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2017.

Cavarero, Adriana. *Horrorism: Naming Contemporary Violence*. Columbia UP, 2009.

Chivallon, Christine. "Guadeloupe and Martinique and the Fight against 'Profitation': A New Twist to an Old Story in the French Caribbean." *Espace et Justice / Space and Justice*, no. 1, 2009, pp. 1–13, www.jssj.org/issue/septembre-2009-espace-public/?lang=en.

Cixous, Hélène. "Castration or Decapitation?" 1976. Translated by Annette Kuhn. *Signs*, vol. 7, no. 1, 1981, pp. 41–55.

———. "The Laugh of the Medusa." 1975. Translated by Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen. *Signs*, vol. 1, no. 4, 1976, pp. 875–93.

Condé, Maryse. *Célanire cou-coupé*. Robert Laffont, 2000.

———. *Victoire, les saveurs et les mots*. Mercure de France, 2006.

———. *Who Slashed Célanire's Throat? A Fantastical Tale*. Translated by Richard Philcox, Washington Square Press, 2002.

Confiant, Raphaël. *Bal masqué à Békéland*. Editions Caribéennes, 2013.

Curtius, Anny-Dominique. "Of Naked Body and Beheaded Statue: Performing Conflicting History in Fort-de-France." *Critical Perspectives on Conflict in Caribbean Societies of the Late Twentieth and Early Twenty-First Centuries*, edited by Patricia Donatien and Rodolphe Solbiac, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015, pp. 9–30.

Daut, Marlene L. "'Sons of White Fathers': Mulatto Vengeance and the Haitian Revolution in Victor Séjour's 'The Mulatto.'" *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, vol. 65, no. 1, 2010, pp. 1–37.

Dayan, Joan. "Condé's Trials of the Spirits." *Romanic Review*, vol. 94, nos. 3–4, 2003, pp. 429–36.

Derrida, Jacques. *The Monolingualism of the Other; or, The Prosthesis of Origin*. Translated by Patrick Mensah, Stanford UP, 1998.

Dessalles, Pierre. *La vie d'un colon à la Martinique au XIXe siècle: Journal I, 1837–1841*. Désormeaux, 1984.

Faulkner, William. *Light in August*. Garland, 1987.

Freud, Sigmund. "Medusa's Head." *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, edited and translated by J. Strachey, vol. 18, 1955, Hogarth Press, pp. 273–74.

Fulton, Dawn. *Signs of Dissent: Maryse Condé and Postcolonial Criticism*. U of Virginia P, 2008.

Gosson, René. "What Lies Beneath? Cultural Excavation in Neocolonial Martinique." *Echoes from the Poisoned Well: Global Memories of Environmental Injustice*, edited by Sylvia Hood Washington et al., Rowman and Littlefield / Lexington Books, 2006, pp. 225–43.

Gyssels, Kathleen. *Passes et impasses dans le comparatisme postcolonial caribéen: Cinq traverses*. Champion, 2010.

Heintz, Lauren. "The Crisis of Kinship." *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, vol. 23, no. 2, 2017, pp. 221–46.

The Holy Bible. New International Version. Hodder and Stoughton, 1987.

Janes, Regina. *Losing Our Heads: Beheadings in Literature and Culture*. New York UP, 2005.

Kristeva, Julia. *The Severed Head: Capital Visions*. Translated by Jody Gladding, Columbia UP, 2012.

Lionnet, Françoise. "Geographies of Pain: Captive Bodies and Violent Acts in the Fictions of Myriam Warner-Vieyra, Gayl Jones, and Bessie Head." *Callaloo*, vol. 16, no. 1, 1993, pp. 132–52.

Luckhurst, Roger. "Acephalous Times: The Severed Head in Contemporary Fiction and Film." *Haunted Europe: Continental Connections in English-Language Gothic Writing, Film and New Media*, edited by Michael Newton and Evert Jan van Leeuwen, Routledge, 2020, pp. 207–25.

Makward, Christiane. "Cut-Throat or Mocking-Bird: Of Condé's Renewals." *Romanic Review*, vol. 94, nos. 3–4, 2003, pp. 405–20.

Maynard, Louis de. *Outre-mer*. Edited by Maeve McCusker, L'Harmattan, 2010. 2 vols.

McCusker, Maeve. *Fictions of Whiteness: Imagining the Planter Caste in the French Caribbean Novel*. U of Virginia P, 2021.

Micaux, Henri. *De nègres et de békés: Une journée de chien*. Mon Petit Éditeur, 2011.

Miller, Elaine P. *Head Cases: Julia Kristeva on Philosophy and Art in Depressed Times*. Columbia UP, 2014.

Milne, Lorna. "Sex, Violence and Cultural Identity in the Work of Gisèle Pineau." *Postcolonial Violence, Culture and Identity in Francophone Africa and the Antilles*, edited by Milne, Peter Lang, 2007, pp. 191–212.

Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. Vintage Books, 2005.

Murdoch, H. Adlai. Introduction. *The Struggle of Non-sovereign Caribbean Territories: Neoliberalism since the French Antillean Uprisings of 2009*, edited by Murdoch, Rutgers UP, 2021, pp. 1–49.

Pineau, Gisèle. *L'espérence-macadam*. Stock, 1995.

Sago, Kylie. "Beyond the Headless Empress: Gabriel Vital Dubray's Statues of Joséphine, Édouard Glissant's *Tout-monde*, and Contested Monuments of French Empire." *Nineteenth-Century Contexts*, vol. 41, no. 5, 2019, pp. 501–19.

Séjour, Victor. "Le mulâtre." *Revue des colonies*, Mar. 1837, pp. 376–92.

———. "The Mulatto." Translated by Philip Barnard. *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, edited by Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and Nellie Y. McKay, W. W. Norton, 1996, pp. 286–99.

Shelley, Mary. *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus*. Oxford UP, 1971.

Sollors, Werner. *Neither Black nor White yet Both: Thematic Explorations of Interracial Literature*. Harvard UP, 1999.

Spillers, Hortense J. "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book." *Diacritics*, vol. 17, no. 2, 1997, pp. 65–81.

Vété-Congolo, Hanétha. "Martinique; or, The Greatness and Weakness of Spontaneity." *The Struggle of Non-sovereign Caribbean Territories: Neoliberalism since the French Antillean Uprisings of 2009*, edited by H. Adlai Murdoch, Rutgers UP, 2021, pp. 137–81.

Vincent, Swann. "'Enlever la tête de Joséphine fut très simple.'" *France Info*, 25 Aug. 2017, la1ere.francetvinfo.fr/martinique/enlever-tete-josephine-fut-tres-simple-505015.html.

Weiss, Allen S. "The Epic of the Cephalopod." *Discourse*, vol. 24, no. 1, 2002, pp. 150–59.

Wright, Richard. *Native Son*, Vintage Books, 2000.

Yoshioka-Maxwell, Livi. "The Power to (Dis)Please: Supernatural Horror and History in *Célanire cou-coupé*." *Studies in Twentieth and Twenty-First Century Literature*, vol. 46, no. 1, 2022, pp. 1–20.

Zehnder, Madeline. "Colonial Relations in Miniature: Affective Networks, Race, and the Portrait in Victor Séjour's 'Le mulâtre.'" *American Literature*, vol. 93, no. 2, 2021, pp. 167–94.

Abstract: Decapitation has captivated artists and writers since antiquity and has been generously theorized, notably in a European framework. As a less analyzed trope of plantation fiction, decapitation conjures both the torture and the revenge of the enslaved. The French Caribbean literary tradition, emerging in the shadow of the French and the Haitian revolutions, is especially haunted by the severed head. Beyond the revolutionary context, decapitation represents crisis—a threat to the plantationocene. Victor Séjour's "Le mulâtre" (1837), Henri Micaux's *De nègres et de békés* (2011), and Raphaël Confiant's *Bal masqué à Békéland* (2013)—published more than 175 years after Séjour's short story—cohere in the castrative associations of (white paternal) decapitation. Maryse Condé's *Célanire cou-coupé* (2000), in contrast, stages a picaresque parody of this Freudian paradigm; this story of recapitation and female survival is fundamentally enabled by the nomadic novel's departure from the plantation and the overdetermined associations imposed by that chronotope.