

December 2015

History into Story: Suzanne Césaire, Lafcadio Hearn, and Representations of the 1848 Martinique Slave Revolts

Kara M. Rabbitt

William Paterson University of New Jersey, rabbittk@wpunj.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarlyrepository.miami.edu/anthurium>

Recommended Citation

Rabbitt, Kara M. (2015) "History into Story: Suzanne Césaire, Lafcadio Hearn, and Representations of the 1848 Martinique Slave Revolts," *Anthurium: A Caribbean Studies Journal*: Vol. 12 : Iss. 2 , Article 3.
Available at: <http://scholarlyrepository.miami.edu/anthurium/vol12/iss2/3>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Scholarly Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Anthurium: A Caribbean Studies Journal* by an authorized editor of Scholarly Repository. For more information, please contact repository.library@miami.edu.

History into Story: Suzanne Césaire, Lafcadio Hearn, and Representations of the 1848 Martinique Slave Revolts

Cover Page Acknowledgments

This project developed from a paper presented at the Association of Caribbean Women Writer's and Scholars through input from the William Paterson University's Professional Writing Group. The author is grateful to her colleagues in both collectives.



Public Archive Photo

In 1952 Suzanne Roussi Césaire, Martinican theoretician, erstwhile essayist, and wife of National Assemblyman and cultural leader Aimé Césaire, wrote and helped produce a play titled *Aurore de la liberté* (“The Dawn of Liberty”). This production, which took place just a few years after the centennial commemoration of the abolition of slavery in the French colonies in 1948, told the story of the 1848 freeing of the slaves in Martinique. Césaire’s play, the text of which remains unpublished and appears to have been lost, focused not on French abolition, however, but on the Martinican slave revolts that resulted in the end to slavery on the island on May 23, 1848, prior to the arrival in Martinique of the official abolition decree from Paris. Having access to no historical

account of these events,¹ Suzanne Césaire made liberal use of an 1890 novel by the Irish writer Lafcadio Hearn—*Youma: The Story of a West-Indian Slave*. In different eras, for different audiences, in different genres and languages, both Hearn and Césaire thus used the power of literary representation to bring history alive for markedly different intents.

This article proposes both an investigation of these representations of the May 1848 slave rebellions and an inquiry into the question of absence: the absence of the May 1848 dates for over 100 years from official history; the absence of the text of Suzanne Césaire’s 1952 play referencing these events; the absence and importance of its writer, wife of Martinique’s most-famous citizen, during a half a century of Martinican literary history; and the temporary absence and refound significance of an inspirational source text by Lafcadio Hearn, out of print following its original English publication in 1890 and its French translation in 1923 until recently reprinted. We will also examine the ways in which these literary texts—both Hearn’s and Césaire’s—reappropriate the historico-political act of slaves revolting against a system whose caution withheld from them their desired freedom and, we will study the contexts of the production of these literary representations—in 1890 and 1952—in relation to the events they describe.

We will begin with the first absence: that of suppression and archival silence in over a century of official historic accounts of the events of the slave revolt. This absence speaks volumes to the colonial constructs of the emerging state. It is

¹ Historical consideration of the May 1848 slave revolution would come to popular awareness a decade later with the publication of Armand Nicolas’s “La Révolution Antiesclavagiste de Mai 1848 à la Martinique” (Fort-de-France: Les Editions Justice, 1960).

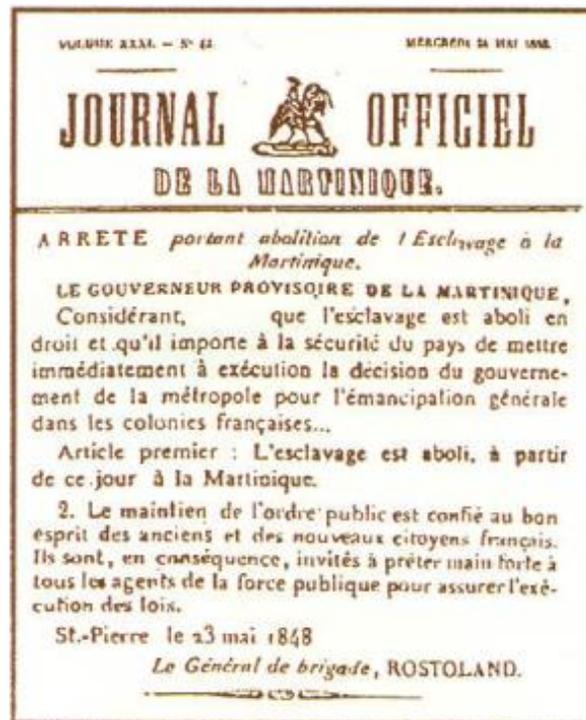
telling, for example, that the Martinican slave revolts of May 22 and 23, 1848 were only recuperated as official history in the lead-up to the 150th anniversary of their occurrence in 1998. The 1948 centennial, on the other hand, focused on the April 27, 1848 French proclamation of emancipation—a text whose existence was not announced on the island until June 1848 and thus after slavery had actually ended in Martinique. What was present until relatively recently in the official narrative, then, was French legacy rather than Martinican agency. While the actions of members of the French revolutionary government of 1848 were significant, it can be argued that the actualization of abolition depended historically not on the will of the government, but on the actions of its distant, future subjects who would wait until 1946 to join the French nation as full citizens.

The self-liberation of Martinican slaves began, in effect, with the arrival on March 25, 1848 of a French ship into the bay of Fort-de-France, Martinique. The vessel carried interim representatives of the freshly-minted Second Republic, the new revolutionary French government. They, in turn, carried word of the Republic's provisional proclamation for the imminent abolition of slavery in all French colonies, a proclamation made in Paris on March 4, 1848 and leading to the appointment of Victor Schoelcher, active abolitionist, as under-secretary of state in charge of the question of slavery. The following day after the representatives' arrival, Sunday March 26, the colonial government of Martinique published an announcement titled "Freedom is Coming" ("La liberté est en route") to be posted in churches and gathering places throughout the island. This document, by all accounts the first and only official Martinican publication of that era to be printed in both French and Creole, stirred immediate interest. Already actively resisting the oppressive system through work slow-downs and isolated acts of rebellion, the enslaved were emboldened toward stronger expressions of impatience, anger, and calls for freedom.

Tensions on the island mounted throughout April and culminated into verbal calls for violence during the Easter holidays, which afforded the slaves unusual opportunities for gathering and interaction. The rising impatience came to a head a month later on Saturday, May 20, when slaveholder fears led them to forbid traditional Saturday night drums and gatherings. The arrest of Romain, a slave who refused to obey these restrictions, incited public demonstrations on Monday, May 22 in St. Pierre: work stopped, the streets filled with up to 20,000 people, and the *békés* felt fear.² To avoid violent reaction, the court quickly released Romain, but too late to calm the uprising. Demonstrators poured into the city from the surrounding hills, and police intervention—firing into the crowd, killing and wounding random victims—escalated the situation. In Precheur, a

² For a full description of these events see Gilbert Pago (108).

family member of the mayor was killed. In St. Pierre, the crowds gathered in angry retribution to attack the homes of Whites, particularly one house rumored to be serving as arsenal for future attacks against slaves. Thirty-five people, mostly *békés* but also enslaved domestic servants, were burned to death. These acts of frustration and rebellion prompted the colonial governor to proclaim the emancipation of Martinican slaves on May 23, 1848, prior to official word from the French government. Guadeloupe's governor followed suite four days later.



Public Archive Photo

Abolition, of course, had been also been previously decreed in the French colonies by the First Republic in 1794, only to be overturned when Napoleon reestablished slavery in 1802. Thus, official French promulgation of abolition on April 27, 1848, in a declaration that termed slavery “an attack on human dignity” and “a flagrant violation of republican dogma,” was a logical next step to the March 4 call for slavery’s end by the Second Republic, but not necessarily a guaranteed conclusion to the debate. In France, in fact, despite the quickly-voiced revolutionary goal of freeing all slaves, it was only the genius and audacity of Victor Schoelcher that made official abolition possible in the unlikely and

unstable context of the provisional government.³ The national assembly, once elected, might not have passed abolition into law, and the Second Republic itself barely survived in recognizable form over the ensuing few months. Had not Schoelcher forced this decree of abolition within two months of promulgation to each French colony, the slaves' freedom could have even been delayed by decades. But even with Schoelcher's decree, emancipation would likely have taken months or even years in intricate resolution of the slaveholders' concerns had not the slaves of the French West Indies taken matters into their own hands.⁴

An understanding of this historical background makes the absence of any official recognition of these actions a hundred years later all the more intriguing. Suzanne Césaire's choice in her 1952 *Aurore de la liberté* to focus on the undocumented events of May 1848 demonstrated to her audience that the slaves—forefathers and foremothers of the new French citizens of the *département* of Martinique—liberated themselves. But this text, absent though it may be to us today, also served to underscore the very absence of this story in the centennial commemorations just a few years before the play's production. Given that the 1940s and early 1950s, as historian Kristen Stromberg Childers argues, was a time when “slavery on the plantations was not a distant memory but seemed ever-present in political and social conflicts” (286), the question of agency of the Martinican Blacks was not an academic one for Césaire and her audience. If the “commemoration of 1948 was sure to be an emotionally and politically charged event in a context in which the inequalities engendered by the slave system remained relevant” (Stromberg Childers 286-87), Césaire's 1952 representation of the events of 1848 were as much a commentary on the implications of the recent 1946 vote for departmentalization and on the erasure from official narrative of the agency of the Martinicans in the 1948 commemorative events as they were a historical depiction of an unwritten history.⁵

This point became more evident leading up to and following the 150th anniversary of emancipation in 1998, when the question became whether to celebrate, as decreed by France, the official French abolition of slavery on April 27, 1848, or, as permitted by a 1983 law, an individually chosen date for each overseas department. Martinique has chosen May 22 for official commemoration—neither the April abolition date nor the official date of the end

³ As Aimé Césaire argued in *Victor Schoelcher et l'abolition de l'esclavage* (11-12 and passim in the essay on Schoelcher, see also 72-73 in Aimé Césaire's April 1948 speech to the National Assembly).

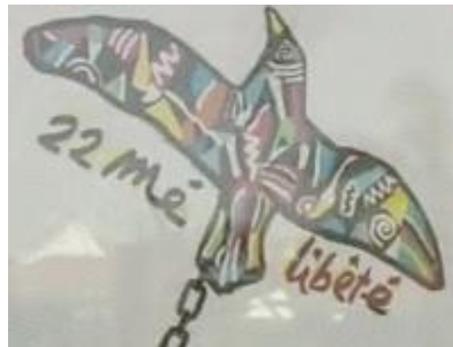
⁴ It should be noted, for example, that emancipation did not occur in the French colony of Réunion until December of that year.

⁵ See also Saada and Wilder for in-depth discussions of the tensions regarding the status of the new “French citizens” in relation to the longstanding colonial distinctions between “blood” nationality and governmentally-defined subjects of the state.

of slavery (May 23, 1848), but the date of the Saint-Pierre riots that brought about that end. As Edouard de Lépine noted at the 150th anniversary mark,

Ce qui a été commémoré, ici, ce n'est pas l'abolition de l'esclavage dans les colonies françaises par la France, c'est la libération de la France du fardeau de la servitude par la Martinique. En se libérant 'tout seuls' le 22 mai, les esclaves martiniquais révoltés ont fait d'une pierre deux coups : ils ont évité à la France d'avoir à abolir ce qu'elle avait établi et l'ont privée de l'honneur de se laver elle-même de sa honte. (5)

What has been commemorated here is not the abolition of slavery in the French colonies by France, but Martinique's liberation of France from its burden of servitude. By liberating themselves 'all by themselves' on May 22, in revolt the Martinican slaves killed two birds with one stone: they kept France from having to abolish what she had established and deprived her of the honor of cleansing herself of her shame. (my translation)



Public Archive Photo

At the centennial mark in 1948, however, falling as it did only two short years into the life of the new French *département* of Martinique within the likewise new Fourth Republic, it was not the revolts of May 1848 that were commemorated, but the Republican decree.⁶ Centennial events focused on April 27, 1848, on the words of Victor Schoelcher, and on the emancipation of the

⁶ Stromberg Childers, in a well-researched study of the timeframe, has argued that the 1948 centennial celebrations in Martinique were in many ways a forum on the 1946 vote to become a department: "In Martinique, the celebrations of 1948 took on a resonance and scope that involved participants of all political parties, skin colors, and social classes in a discussion about the legacy of the past, the meaning of French citizenship, and the prospects for assimilation in the future. Saturated with ambiguity and conflicting aspirations, the commemoration of the abolition was a microcosm of the experience of departmentalization and its inherent contradictions" (282).

slaves by France. Aimé Césaire, in an address to the National Assembly on April 27, 1948, for example, made no reference to the events of May 1848; he spoke instead to the “currentness” of Schoelcher as France addressed its colonial problem (70-71). In reference to the abolition of slavery, Césaire deemed the April 27, 1848 decree,

C’était le passé réparé, l’avenir préparé, c’était la reconnaissance du nègre jusque-là bête de somme dans la famille humaine, c’était à lui conférés, tous les droits arrachés à cette condition d’homme, et c’était aussi plus hardiment, sans transition humiliante, sans marchandage, comme devait le prouver immédiatement la participation des ‘nouveaux libres’ aux élections de la Constituante, tous les droits du citoyen moderne (73-74).

the past repaired, the future prepared, the recognition of the Negro, hitherto beast of burden, as member of the human family. It conferred upon him all the rights inherent in his new status of man and granted him, audaciously and without humiliating transition or dickerings, all the rights of a modern citizen, as immediately evidenced by the participation of newly freed men in the constitutional elections. (my translation)

In this tenuous political period of post-departmentalization, rife with French fears of Black revolt, Césaire chose to focus on the relation of France with Martinique, rather than on the violent overthrow of French slavery on the island by the Martinicans.⁷ Officially and publicly celebrating the “luminous path” of April 27, 1848 as gleaming still before them, his speech to the National Assembly makes clear his political goals. He called upon France to uphold its own century-old law and to recognize the French citizens of its new overseas department as full “equal and fraternal” members of its nation; he called upon the people of Martinique to remember that, “true emancipation is not decreed but conquered by man himself, that it is not behind them, but before them, and for them to build in communion with the people of France following the luminous path of 1848.” (76).⁸ Facing the

⁷ In her study of US National Archive consul dispatches from the period, Stromberg Childers notes that attention was being paid by the U.S. to the question of race tensions in Martinique, specifically to Aimé Césaire’s astute addresses to the electorate regarding racial discrimination. An angry mob in Guadeloupe had murdered a White citizen in 1946 and a group of irate workers hacked a sugar mill manager to death in Martinique in 1948. If the Black electorate now held political power by numbers, the White *békés* maintained economic control of the island by long-standing concentrated wealth, and tensions were high (Stromberg Childers, 285-286).

⁸ “[L]a vraie émancipation n’est pas celle qui se décrète, mais celle que l’homme conquiert sur lui-même, qu’elle n’est pas derrière eux, mais qu’elle est devant eux, et que c’est à eux qu’il

newly-formed governmental structure in which he now played part, Aimé Césaire made use during the 1948 Centennial of the best text at his disposal to address the current political contexts of the island and of its relation to the *metropole*.⁹

Suzanne Césaire’s quiet, unofficial choice to write a play a few short years later commemorating the self-emanicipatory acts of May 1848 seems, in this context, almost revolutionary. While Aimé the husband-politician officially and publicly celebrated the French abolition of slavery in order to recall to France its duties towards its overseas subjects and to recall to Martinique its allegiance to France in a functional forging of a new political relationship, Suzanne the wife-radical separately and unofficially commemorated Martinique’s self-liberation. With no access to the play she wrote, we are left with the Suzanne Césaire’s choices—both of source text and of event—to consider. And we can analyze what we know—the context, the players, the title—to begin to understand the significance of this missing work.

But the absence, too, of this text seems important to study. Suzanne Dracius recounts questioning Aimé Césaire about this absence, particularly in light of the poet’s extensive publications from the same time and his connection to a publishing house:

I reproached the great poet for never having published what his wife had written, even if only at the publishing house *Présence africaine* where, rather, it existed—a play by Suzanne Césaire of which only the title remains: *Youma, aurore de la liberté*. The great man had no memory of it. I put the question to him frankly: What happened to the text of that play? Why wasn’t it published? In a very small voice, the great man told me that at the time, it was very difficult, for a woman, to be published. [...]

When I evoked that play, its title, *Youma, aurore de la liberté*, Césaire was beset by punctilious memories. For his part, he remembered, not Suzanne Césaire, as one might have expected and as I had wished, but Lafcadio Hearn, since the play by Suzanne, his wife, was a theatrical adaptation of the novel by Hearn entitled *Youma* (1890) [...]. The conversation continued about Lacadio Hearn’s *Youma*, losing sight of *Youma, aurore de la liberté*, Suzanne Césaire’s play that I wanted information on because it

appartient de la préparer en communion avec le peuple de France, dans le sillage lumineux de 1848”

⁹ See Wilder (31-32) for further study of the significance of this speech, specifically its “immanent critique of republicanism and a counterhistory of abolition that identified racism, colonial violence, and the legal order as complicit with each other.”

intrigued me. How did Suzanne renew that theme [the story of a *da* during the time of the slave revolts of May 1848] with respect to the master/slave, and, in this case, the specific relationship joining the black nanny to the white child? What new contributions did she make? If you go by the title, the addition of “aurore de la liberté” to Suzanne Césaire’s play to the simple eponymous title promises to emphasize the beginnings of the emancipation of slaves more than the servile devotion of the “da” saving a little *béké* from the fire. That is what I was burning to know. Césaire didn’t remember. (156-157)

“Césaire didn’t remember.” With both Suzanne and Aimé now gone, passed into unwritten history are the argument of the play, the author’s interpretation of her source text, the use of this story to address the audience’s contexts. We can imagine much, as Dracius points out, by the title itself; “The Dawn of Freedom” seems to imply that the Martinican ancestors of those Fort-de-France players had liberated themselves, since in this story “dawn” came not by official French decree, but through the voices and actions of the oppressed. What power this concept must have provided its audience in 1952. Four years prior, Martinicans had listened to French politicians applaud France’s abolition of slavery. Now their own *co-citadins* could witness events many of them had not even known of—not a French/White granting of liberty, but a Martinican/Black demanding of it.

It should be noted that the context was swiftly changing during this midcentury period in Martinique. If 1948 was a period of freshly-minted French nationality for the island, by 1950 Aimé Césaire was ever-more directly confronting the vestiges of colonialism in his “Discourse on Colonialism,” and 1952 would see the publication of Franz Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks*. If departmentalization had represented the hope of “a sort of natural conclusion to the declaration of the abolition of slavery” (Perina 524)¹⁰, its potential was already being placed in doubt within its first decade, even by its strongest proponents.

Presenting her interpretation of the May 1848 events within this enunciative framework, Suzanne Césaire worked with young and inexperienced actors. As Michel Léiris briefly describes in his 1955 *Contacts de civilisations en Martinique et en Guadeloupe*, the play was apparently performed by adult students in Fort-de-France who “staged in 1952, conscientiously and tastefully, a drama by Mrs. Suzanne Césaire very freely inspired by Lafcadio Hearn’s *Youma*” (88).¹¹ This was a popular, not a professional, production. But that choice, too,

¹⁰ “une forme d’achèvement de la déclaration d’abolition de l’esclavage”

¹¹ “a monté en 1952 avec beaucoup de conscience et de gout un drame de Mme Suzanne Césaire très librement inspiré par la *Youma* de Lafcadio Hearn”

could be argued to be political: the voices of the city depicted the voices of the rebelling slaves in a polyvocal, interactive celebration of self-liberation.

The source of Suzanne Césaire’s play, the 1890 romantic novel by Lafcadio Hearn, *Youma: The Story of a West-Indian Slave*, is itself a bizarre, compelling, and oddly logical choice in this context. We know that the Césaires were familiar with the writings of Lafcadio Hearn, which dated from his two years spent on Martinique in 1887 and 1888. In addition to the allegedly historical novel *Youma*, written after his return to New York, Hearn also published a series of portraits and folklore in *Harpers Magazine*, collected in 1900 in the book *Two Years in the French West Indies*. Both of these works had been published in French translation in the first two decades of the century.¹² The Césaires had chosen one of Hearn’s “Contes creoles” for the 1942 edition of *Tropiques* dedicated to the “introduction” of Martinican folklore to their Martinican readers. Aimé Césaire and René Ménil reference Hearn’s analyses of the folkloric tradition, as well as the Creole story included in the novel *Youma*, in their preface to that issue of the review. The editors, which included Suzanne Césaire, also selected Hearn’s “Conte Colibri” (“Tale of the Hummingbird”)—translated into French from his English rendition of the Creole story—as the review’s first offering of Martinican folklore.¹³ As a folklorist, Hearn listened to the oral histories of those who had lived through the slave revolts forty years earlier, and these stories formed the basis of his novel *Youma*.

Lafcadio Hearn would appear, nevertheless, an odd choice as source for a story of Martinican liberation. A man between countries, languages, and literary genres, Hearn lived for two years in Martinique as a free-lancing journalist, attempting without success to earn an income from *Harpers Magazine*. He brought to his time there his own history of displacement as a Greek-born Irish national schooled in France who had been cast penniless on the States as a young man. He carried, too, his status as White man, but one who had witnessed the injustices and inequalities of the post-Civil War era as an outsider to North American histories and prejudices. Having spent time in both the industrialized northern city of Cincinnati and the creolized city of New Orleans, Hearn brought

¹² Hearn’s *Youma: The Story of a West-Indian Slave*, originally published in English in 1890, had been translated by Marc Logé and published in French translation first in the *Revue de Paris* in 1915 and then by Mercure de France in 1923. An abbreviated version of his *Two Years in Martinique* was published in Logé’s translation as *Esquisses martiniquaises* by Mercure in 1924.

¹³ I find it intriguing that the editors of *Tropiques* chose the French translation of an English translation of a Creole story by a transplanted Irishman to bring Martinique a sample of its own folklore, and that—as printed text—this may have been all that was available to them. Note that A. James Arnold references the Césaires’ interest in Hearn in the wartime years in his discussion of Hearn as potential literary source for the “Martinican sketches” of the opening section of *Je suis martiniquaise* by “Mayotte Capécia” (162).

to Martinique his ever-outsider's perspective, his journalist's training, his keen ear for languages, his ability to integrate and even ingratiate himself into very diverse classes and cultures, and his firmly romantic bent as a writer.

The novel he composed following his time in Martinique, *Youma: Story of a West Indian Slave*, is likewise a portrait in contradictions. Her own mother having died, the Black heroine Youma is raised as playmate of the slaveholder's daughter, Aimée. The matriarch of the family, Mme Peyronnette, serves as both her godmother and owner. Hearn names Youma "a pet slave" (10), "almost a foster sister" to Aimée and "to some extent her companion" (13). She shares all the pleasures of Aimée's youth, though not her studies, and is dressed well by Mme Peyronnette. As the narrator states, "Youma was denied no pleasure which it was thought she might reasonably wish for, —except liberty" (17).

As the girls reach maturity, Mme Peyronnette twice refuses her daughter's plea to free Youma, in the view that liberty holds moral and sexual dangers for a young girl. She intends "that Youma should be enfranchised so soon as it could render her any happier to be free. For the time being, her slavery was a moral protection: it kept her legally under the control of those who loved her the most; it guarded her against dangers she knew nothing of; —above all it prevented the possibility of her forming a union not approved by her mistress" (18). When Aimée marries, Youma accompanies her former playmate to the new household, as a slave, and ultimately becomes *da* of Aimée's child, Mayotte. When the still-young Aimée dies, leaving the child Mayotte behind, Youma is left to raise the daughter herself and moves with the little girl to the country plantation of the grieving father. Here she encounters a new world hitherto kept separate from her: that of Creole culture and the community of other slaves. On the plantation she meets the "unwritten literature of a people forbidden to read...told with an art impossible to describe [and...] a weird charm which great musicians have confessed" (38-39). Hearn makes use of this encounter to explore the richness of the Creole culture he, too, had come to appreciate; he pulls in Creole stories and gives long and admiring descriptions of the songs and tales Youma hears there.

On the plantation Youma meets, as well, an embodiment of the sexual and moral dangers Mme Peyronnette feared: Gabriel, the handsome *commandeur* of the plantation, is a Black slave who holds no illusions about the slave system. When he asks the planter for permission to marry Youma, her owners' refusal to permit the marriage brings Youma "for the first time the full keen sense of the fact that she was a slave" (84). She nevertheless turns down Gabriel's offer to escape with him to Dominica, upholding instead her promise to the dying Aimée to stay always with her young child and her trust in what Gabriel scoffingly terms "the Bon-Dié of the békés" (115). When Youma states that she cannot hurt the family that has been so good to her, Gabriel bursts out bitterly,

Do you think them good because they do not happen to be bad? [...] You can own nothing; you are a slave; you are naked as a worm before the law! You have no right to anything, —no, not even to what I gave you; —you have no right to become the wife of the man you choose; —you would have no right, if a mother, to care for your own child, —though you give half your life [...]to nursing children of bekes.... No, Youma, you were not brought up like your mistress's daughter. Why were you never taught what white ladies know? —why were you never shown how to read and write? —why were you kept a slave? ...Good to you? It was to their interest, my girl!—it repays them to-day, —since it keeps you with them, —when you could be free with me. (117-18)

To keep her away from the rebellion in the eyes of his young *commandeur*, Youma's owner takes the slave girl back to St. Pierre. Here the narrative catches up with historical accounts as it unfolds against the backdrop of fomenting social unrest in the light of coming emancipation: "For the first time in centuries the slaves might refuse to obey, and the master fear to punish. The Republic had been proclaimed" (137). Hearn explores the historical contexts of this tension—from the English occupation of the island to the flourishing of the *ancien régime* in the colonies long after its fall in France; from the evolution of status of "the free class of color" to the ensuing tensions among diverse color divisions. Speaking of the colonists he states that "they now knew the institution of slavery doomed beyond hope, not by the mere fiat of a convention, but by the opinion of the nineteenth century. And the promise of universal suffrage had been given. There were scarcely twelve thousand whites; —there were one hundred and fifty thousand blacks and half-breeds" (139).

As the novel enters fully into the events of May 1848, referencing directly the incarceration of the slave Romain and the resulting riots, we hear the call for revolt echoed through the hills: "Twenty-four hours later, the whole slave-population was in revolt; and the towns were threatened with a general descent of the *travailleurs*" (143). Hearn writes: "Barricaded within their homes, the whites of the lower city could hear the tumult of the gathering.... Masters and slaves alike were haunted by the dream of blood and fire, —the memory of Hayti" (154). In this historical scene, the fictitious Youma ends up in the very house that was reputed to serve as arsenal. Her owner, sensing the danger, suggests that she leave the family and stay the night with "colored neighbors" (157). She insists that she will remain with Mayotte and thereby meets her end in the fire that consumed 35 settlers and slaves the night of May 22, 1848. Though Gabriel improbably appears at the window with a ladder to save her as the fire burns, Youma refuses to leave her White charge and condemns the rioters below for their cowardice in harming

children. She sacrifices herself ultimately to the White world that raised her and in whose fiery finish she perishes.

Written some forty years after the events it depicts, Hearn's text continually exposes the contradictions of its own production. On the one hand, Hearn wanted to sell his work to a post-civil war, White North American audience with their evident racial prejudices. On the other hand, during the drafting of the work, he lived in a cheap room in a dynamic Creole area of St Pierre, soaking in the language, stories, and generosity of his Black neighbors. The novel produces and deconstructs itself within this tension of perspective, particularly in those sections written about slavery and addressed to a current, post-emancipation, audience. He calls the slave plantation "patriarchal and picturesque" (30). He terms it "a delight for the visitor, especially if a European, to watch even the common incidents of this colonial country life, so full of exotic oddities and unconscious poetry" (32). Yet Hearn also gives voice to the very conscious power of that poetry by including a Creole folktale—"Dame Kélément," recounted by Youma to her young White charge—which implies a colonial fear of slave revolt: its young heroine is taken in by a witch who says to her, "child, you must come to the house with me... You might undo me, unravel me, destroy me if you had a chance" (51). Hearn allows Gabriel to speak to the injustices of slavery, yet also restrains the power of that voice by his depiction of Gabriel as "possessing a rude intelligence above his comrades [but sharing] many savage traits of his race, — traits that three hundred years of colonial servitude could hardly modify: among others, the hatred of all constraint" (120-21). He gives full voice to the anger and rightful impatience of the rioters, yet permits his heroine to condemn their actions and to choose the world of the *békés*.

This tension of perspective is most evident in Hearn's depiction of his main character, Youma, who serves as personification of her author's bifurcated point of view. Goddaughter of the plantation matriarch, Youma is raised as quasi-sister to the slaveholder's daughter Aimée and later serves as quasi-mother of Aimée's daughter Mayotte.¹⁴ And yet, on the one hand, Hearn uses Youma to draw in his presumably White reader, whom he invites to identify with and sympathize with the injustices practiced upon his Black heroine—that she is not allowed to marry, that she is not permitted literacy because "to educate her would only make her dissatisfied with the scope a destiny out of which no effort could elevate her" (13). On the other hand, he maintains a colonial perspective in his portrayal of her by repeatedly infantilizing her and her Black community. Speaking of the figure of the *da* in the colonial household, for example, Hearn states that "the *da* was herself at heart a child" who could better serve her charges than could the White mother because "there was absolute harmony between their

¹⁴ A. James Arnold has argued that this Mayotte served as inspiration for the fictional, "autobiographic" heroine/"writer" of the later *Je suis martiniquaise*.

natures” (2-3). In this same moment of vaunting this product of slavery, however, he also condemns its contexts, terming it “the one creation of slavery perhaps not worthy of regret, —one strange flowering amid all the rank dark growth of that bitter soil” (5).

Jean-Pierre Jardel, examining Hearne’s text from a postcolonial perspective, has pointed out that Hearn, primarily a folklorist and portraitist rather than novelist, does make use in *Youma* of his unique position of being external to both of the ethnic communities he portrays in the novel (58). Despite the many troubling subjective comments in the work that speak to the racist contexts of its production, Jardel argues that Hearn is nevertheless able to underscore effectively the paternalistic viewpoint of even “good” slave-holders, as well as the internalized racism that manifested itself along color lines among the slaves (60-64). Not being French, Hearn is also able to explore early on the internal conflicts and pressures that resulted in emancipation, rather than upholding colonial discourse and viewing slavery’s end as “le don républicain” (Jardel 65). Jardel demonstrates, moreover, that Hearn’s text, with its rich exploration of Creole tales and culture, serves unwittingly as a precursor of Antillanité and that it stresses the active participation of the slaves in their own emancipation, taken rather than granted (65).

Mary Gallagher likewise argues that Hearn appears to have been “driven by a deep vocation for *créolité*, a vocation to which both his own mixed origins and his professional, intellectual, cultural and personal trajectory would seem to bear striking witness” (287), a point that Chris Bongie also explores in *Islands and Exiles* in relation to the theories of Edouard Glissant (126-133). Gallagher notes that Hearn’s own experience as a displaced person and his appreciation for the Creole culture of Louisiana “perhaps explains why Hearn was subsequently attracted, by some linguistic, cultural and perhaps temperamental logic, to Martinique, where he spent two years soaking up Creole life and transmuting what he had absorbed into writing” (287). She adds that despite the troubling racial comments in his work reflecting their contexts of production, one can find in his writing an “admiration, emulation, and, indeed, incarnation of a cultural hybridity strikingly in tune with what is today celebrated by Caribbean writers as *créolité*” (Gallagher 289). Bongie seems less convinced by such a reading, focusing more on Hearn’s racialist perspective that create in *Youma* the tension mentioned above. He does concede, however, that if “Hearn’s work obviously falls short of the fluid, diversal practices of the poetics and politics of creolization argued for by Glissant, it nonetheless provides a vital glimpse of what these practices might be and where they might lead” (Bongie 133).

To return to our question of absence, for Suzanne Césaire, then, Hearn’s text might not be such a surprising source choice for a play: its very presence serves as

slight but real counterpoint to the lack of official account of the events of May 1848. Suzanne Césaire had witnessed the centennial mark of 1948 officially commemorating not May, but April, not the slave revolts, but the republican decree. Her choice in 1952 to dramatize Hearn's narrative of a slave girl thus addresses—albeit indirectly—contemporary questions of self-determinacy, just a few short years into Martinique's life as a French department. *Youma*, the fictitious/historical account, speaks to ways in which the enslaved Martinican ancestors gained their own emancipation, not enacted but appropriated by the Abolition Acts of 1848. Césaire's representation of these events in *Aurore de la liberté* would then seem to invite her public to articulate their own agency and identity in relation to France. In her choices, which are all that remain to us of this absent play, Suzanne Césaire appears to speak as much to contemporary political questions of self-determinacy as to the historic events the play referenced. Moreover, rather than a speech, essay, or novel, her choice to compose a dramatic, plurivocal form of writing—a publicly performed play—also opens up history to its stories. It creates public space for the lost narratives of 19th century slaves, of women making choices and bearing the burden of those decisions. It speaks—we can imagine—to the individual acts and collective refusals of men and women overturning the official story to create their own histories.

And such a message aligns well with the work we *can* read by Suzanne Césaire. In her seven published essays in the wartime journal *Tropiques*, Suzanne Césaire developed, through dialogic exploration of French sources, a new vision of a distinctly Caribbean literature to be grounded in the historical, cultural, even geological particularities of the islands. She refuses in these works the exotic depiction of that space as found in European and Europeanized writers and emphasizes the dynamic interrelationships at play in the Caribbean as vital points of departure for a new literature. In these essays, the themes of which culminate in her highly influential 1945 essay “Le Grand Camouflage,” Suzanne Césaire demands that her readers become participants in a self-creative moment through urgent rhetorical demands. As I've argued elsewhere, in her essays Suzanne Césaire's works rendered Martinique present in writing in a vital new way.¹⁵ And she celebrated and created agency, commanding her readers to engage with her writing through extensive use of the first-person plural so that “we” are present in the world she describes.

The most telling absence, of course, is the story of the writer herself, which remains to be fully written. Suzanne Roussi Césaire's absence from a half-century's worth of history is beginning to be addressed, not just by admiring writers, such as Maryse Condé and Daniel Maximin, but also by critics and

¹⁵ See Rabbitt, “Identity and Geography in Suzanne Césaire's ‘Le Grand Camouflage.’” and “Suzanne Césaire and the Forging of a New Caribbean Literature.”

scholars beyond the islands. The publication of her essays under her own name—*Le Grand Camouflage: Ecrits de dissidence (1941-1945)* published by Seuil in 2009 and in Keith Walker’s English translation as *The Great Camouflage: Writings of Dissent* by Wesleyan University Press in 2012—will continue to move this awareness forward. Suzanne Césaire’s native Martinique is likewise beginning to acknowledge Césaire’s significance: the naming of a Fort-de-France school in her honor in 2010, for example, demonstrates in the words of her daughter Michelle Césaire that, “Les choses commencent enfin à être reconnues, on voit bien son grand talent d’écrivaine, même si elle a arrêté d’écrire très tôt, débordée par la vie, car elle avait six enfants et a toujours travaillé. C’est aussi une femme qui a milité toute sa vie.” (“Things are at last beginning to be recognized. People are finally noting her great talent as a writer, even if she stopped writing very early, overwhelmed by daily life, as she had six children and always worked. She remained nevertheless an activist her whole life.” *France-Antilles*).¹⁶

Suzanne Roussi Césaire lived in the shadow of a great man. Just as Martinique has struggled to gain recognition as a small *département* of a powerful country, official histories have given little note to her life until recently in their focus on her powerful husband. That she left this great man three years before her death no doubt likewise added to the silence surrounding her significance. This absence, however, has been noted, and her story, too, is beginning to emerge.¹⁷ To paraphrase the words of Suzanne Césaire: “Ici, aussi, des [femmes] naissent, vivent et meurent ; Ici aussi, se joue le drame entier” (“Here, too, [women] are born, live, and die; here, too, the whole drama plays itself out”).¹⁸

¹⁶ Jeannie Darsières, town councillor, also stressed the significance of this event in a quote in the same article: she notes that the naming of streets and schools “fait partie de la mémoire collective, et permet aux enfants de connaître leur passé. C’est très important qu’ils [...] connaissent [Suzanne Césaire], elle a été une grande militante culturelle.” (“This is part of a collective memory and allows our children to know their past. It is very important that they know who Suzanne Césaire is; she was a great cultural activist.”)

¹⁷ For its brief outlines, see Bellemare’s recent collecting of the known facts of her life.

¹⁸ Suzanne Césaire, writing about Martinique in “Leo Frobenius.” Césaire, however, writes “des hommes”—“men.”

Works Cited

- Arnold, A. James. "Frantz Fanon, Lafcadio Hearn et la supercherie Mayotte Capecia." *Revue de littérature comparée* 302.2 (2002) : 148-66. Print.
- Bellemare, Hugette. "Suzanne Roussi-Césaire, une pionnière méconnue." Union des Femmes de la Martinique. Web.
<http://www.unionfemmesmartinique.com/?article-1185-suzanne-roussi-cesaire-une-pionniere-meconnue>
- Bongie, Chris. *Islands and Exiles: The Creole Identities of Post/Colonial Literature*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998. Print.
- Césaire, Aimé. *Victor Schœlcher et l'abolition de l'esclavage, suivi de trois discours*. Lectoure, France : Capucin, 2004. Print.
- Césaire, Suzanne. *Le Grand camouflage: Ecrits de dissidence (1941-1945)*. Paris: Seuil, 2009.
- . *The Great Camouflage: Writings of Dissent (1941-1945)*. Trans. Keith Walker. Middletown: Wesleyan UP, 2012. Print.
- Childers, Kristen Stromberg. "Citizenship and Assimilation in Postwar Martinique: The Abolition of Slavery and the Politics of Commemoration." *Proceedings of the Western Society for French History* 34 (2006): 282-299. Ann Arbor, MI: Scholarly Publishing House, University of Michigan Library. Web.
<http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.0642292.0034.018>
- Deschè, Emmanuelle. "Regard sur la commémoration de l'esclavage en Martinique," *Pyepimanla* (June 2007). http://www.pyepimanla.com/index_juin_juil_aout.html [link no longer valid 12-15]
- Dracius, Suzanne. "Memorial/Mémoire: In Search of Suzanne Césaire's Garden." *Research in African Literatures* 41.1 (Spring 2010): 155-165. Print.
- France-Antilles. "Une école au nom de Suzanne Roussi." 19 October 2010. Web. <http://www.martinique.franceantilles.fr/regions/centre/une-ecole-au-nom-de-suzanne-roussi-19-10-2010-89406.php>
- Gallagher, Mary. "Circuitous Connections: Ireland and the Francophone Caribbean." In *Ici-là: Place and Displacement in Caribbean Writing in French*. Amsterdam/New York: Rodopi, 2003. 279-292. Print.
- Hearn, Lafcadio. *Two Years in the French West Indies*. New York: Harper, 1900. Print.
- . *Youma: The Story of a West-Indian Slave*. New York: Harper, 1890. Print.
- Jardel, Jean-Pierre. "'Youma, ou la fin de l'oppression esclavagiste aux Antilles: La Conquête d'une dignité.'" *Oppression et expression dans la littérature et le cinéma : Afrique, Amérique, Asie*. Jacqueline Bardolph et al, eds. Paris : Harmattan, 1981. 57-67. Print.
- Léotin, Marie-Hélène. *La Révolution anti-esclavagiste de mai 1848 en Martinique*. Fort de France: Apal, 1991. Print.

- de Lépine, Edouard. *Dix semaines qui ébranlèrent la Martinique : 25 mars – 4 juin 1848*. Paris: Servédit, 1999. Print.
- Léiris, Michel. *Contacts de civilisations en Martinique et en Guadeloupe*. Paris : Gallimard, 1955. Print.
- Pago, Gilbert. *Les Femmes et la liquidation du système esclavagiste à la Martinique 1848 à 1852*. Matoury, Guyane : Ibis Rouge, 1998. Print.
- Périna, Mickaëlla. “Construire une identité politique à partir des vestiges de l’esclavage? Les départements français d’Amérique entre héritage et choix.” *L’Esclavage, la colonisation, et après...: France, Etats-Unis, Grande-Bretagne*. Eds. Patrick Weil and Stéphane Dufoix. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2005. 509-531. Print.
- Rabbitt, Kara. “Identity and Geography in Suzanne Césaire’s ‘Le Grand Camouflage.’” *Research in African Literatures* 39.3 (2008): 121-31. Print.
- . “Suzanne Césaire and the Forging of a New Caribbean Literature.” *The French Review* 79.3 (2006): 538-48. Print.
- Saada, Emmanuelle. “Une nationalité par degré: Civilité et citoyenneté en situation coloniale.” *L’Esclavage, la colonisation, et après...: France, Etats-Unis, Grande-Bretagne*. Eds. Patrick Weil and Stéphane Dufoix. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2005. 193-227. Print.
- Schmidt, Nelly. *Victor Schœlcher et l’abolition de l’esclavage*. Paris: Fayard, 1994. Print.
- Suk, Jeannie. *Postcolonial paradoxes in French Caribbean writing: Césaire, Glissant, Condé*. Oxford: Clarendon, 2001. Print.
- Wilder, Gary. “Race, Reason, Impasse: Césaire, Fanon, and the Legacy of Emancipation.” *Radical History Review* 90 (Fall 2004): 31-61. Print.

Photo Credits

- “Suzanne Césaire”: archival photo, Direction des Archives départementales, Fort-de-France
- “Journal officiel de la Martinique”: Public Archive
- “22 mé libété”: “Regard sur la commémoration de l’esclavage en Martinique,”
Pyepimanla <http://pyepimanla.blogspot.com/2012/05/regard-sur-la-commemoration-de.html>