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“Return and Leave and Return Again”: Pauline Melville’s Historical Entanglements

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The pleasure and the paradox of my own exile is that I belong wherever I am.

—George Lamming, *The Pleasures of Exile*

Guyanese writer Pauline Melville's first collection of stories, *Shape-shifter*, develops the creative as well as subversive potential of the folkloric title figure. Melville uses historical references to return to what Édouard Glissant terms a "point of entanglement" (*Discourse* 26), not simply in order to subvert colonial discourse, but to re-map the constraints produced by historical narratives as both productive *and* limiting. In the story, "Eat Labba and Drink Creek Water," Melville responds to Sir Walter Raleigh's canonical text of European imperialism, *The Discovery of the Large, Rich and Beautiful Empire of Guiana*, from a postcolonial and feminine creole perspective. In the narrative, Melville's protagonist repeatedly crosses the Atlantic, using English and Guyanese reference points to illustrate the perpetuation of patriarchy and racism while also exemplifying the creative responses provoked by them. Always ambivalent in its balance between oppression and empowerment, Melville's story describes a process of working towards new possibilities which explore the creative potential within constraints. Through these returns to moments of historical crisis, Melville's text expresses a feminine perspective within creolization and demonstrates the continuity between colonial and postcolonial histories. As in the epigraph by George Lamming, Melville demonstrates that belonging is always paradoxical and contingent on time and place for the gendered cross-cultural writer.

In a recent autobiographical essay, Melville defines herself as creole and links her personal background to the trickster figure and narrative strategy used in her first story collection:

I also cause confusion. I look completely English. My mother is English . . . from a London family, a tribe of Anglo-Saxons if ever there was one, blonde and blue-eyed. The photographs show St. Augustine's angels in hand-me-down-clothes. My father was born in Guyana . . . The photographs show a genetic bouquet of African, Amerindian and European features, a family gazing out from dark, watchful eyes—all except one, who turned out with the looks of a Dutchman. But then, Berbice, their birthplace, was a Dutch colony in the eighteenth century. I am the whitey in the woodpile. The trickster god now appears in another guise. He has donned the scientific mantle of genetics. ("Essay" 739-40)

"Origins," according to this passage, are never the pure state of being that genealogical fantasies have constructed, but involve a recognition of the multiple entanglements that history, and Guyanese history in particular, entails. A series of genetic departures and returns, "European," "African," and "indigenous," undermine any fixed notion of origin in Melville's version of creole identity. Indeed, although the term creole has been used variously to indicate people of mixed race, people of European origin born in a colony, and Caribbean linguistic processes,

creolization in this context describes a series of cross-cultural exchanges. Within this creole matrix, colonial and postcolonial cultures can no longer be separated, but operate through a complex economy of rupture and connection. Deliberately recalling the original and successive inhabitants of Guyana, Melville applies the dynamic of shape-shifting as both a concept of creolized cultural identity and a fictional device.

Creole identity has traditionally been theorized in celebratory terms and without considering the role of gender in shaping and complicating that subjectivity. Seminal Caribbean theorists Edward Kamau Brathwaite and Wilson Harris, for instance, approach creolization from a transparent gender perspective which assumes a masculine subject. Harris describes Caribbean literature as expressing “an intuitive self that moves endlessly into flexible patterns, arcs or bridges of community,” seeking to consume biases and differences between peoples and cultures (xviii). In a similar sense, Edward Kamau Brathwaite argues for creolization as a mode of cultural interaction, a “socio-cultural continuum” (*Creole Society* 310). Despite this enthusiasm for the fluid potential of creolization, a persistent problem within Caribbean theories has been the return of exclusive identity positions. Even Brathwaite, while overtly embracing the dynamics of creolization, excludes white creoles on the basis of a history of racial oppression (*Contradictory Omens* 38). Other Caribbean writers, such as Jean Bernabé, Patrick Chamoiseau and Raphaël Confiant, the authors of *Éloge de la Creolité*, also claim to welcome unlimited cross-cultural exchange, but ultimately advocate a folkloric, masculine cultural root. As Chris Bongie has noted, creolization theory contains a double bind in which impulses away from identity are inevitably entwined with impulses back to identity (57). The exclusion of gender from these debates further problematizes any creole continuum as it represents still other layers of differential experience.

Édouard Glissant articulates the most suggestive model of creolization in relation to Melville’s notion of multiple identity positions. Rather than attempting to define the characteristics of creoleness or locate the kinds of composite societies produced by creole interactions, Glissant views creolization as an open potential, an “unceasing process of transformation” (*Discourse* 142). For Glissant, creolization is change, movement, endless process rather than a fixed identity position. More specifically, Glissant conceives Caribbean identity as formulated through the interrelation and interdependence of two cultural processes: *Relation*, a state of constant metamorphosis, and *antillanité*, a commitment to self-discovery. *Antillanité* represents for Glissant conscious self-expression, a voicing of multiple Caribbean specificities without claiming finality or “fixing” diversity. Cross-cultural movement, or a *poetics of relation*, is the process by which these different Caribbean realities interrelate. Cross-cultural poetics is a ceaseless dynamic in which, Glissant writes, “We are not prompted solely by the defining of our identities but by their relation to everything possible . . .” (*Poetics* 89). Creolization, then, is a product of these cross-cultural processes, the representation of *Relation* and the hoped for realization of *antillanité*. In other words, creolization is not simply

a validation of chaos for Glissant, but an acknowledgement of the need for direction and awareness within interactive processes.

Ultimately, Glissant expresses his idea of *Relation* in terms of the displacement of authenticity or originality in favour of a relational identity. Recalling Melville's description of her own family history in its "trickster" guises and transatlantic crossings, Glissant deploys the term "errantry" to describe a deliberate wandering between identity positions.¹ Errantry deconstructs the notion of identity as founded upon a single origin or root and instead posits identity as rhizomatic, taking on multiple imaginative and relative forms. Glissant writes, "The notion of the rhizome maintains, therefore, the idea of rootedness but challenges that of a totalitarian root. Rhizomatic thought is the principle behind . . . *Relation*, in which each and every identity is extended through a relationship with the Other" (*Poetics* 11). Points of stasis, in Glissant's model, are subsumed within the infinite transformations and permutations of a continuous becoming. Indeed, Glissant argues against a fixed concept of "Being" to assert that creolization is an infinite mode of questioning and becoming (*Poetics* 160-1).

Glissant initially emphasizes the creative aspects of creolization over what he terms "trickster" strategies or devices of subversive imitation such as Anancy and coyote figures as well as forms of mimicry.² In Glissant's view, these strategies may divert principles of domination, but do not offer "any real potential for development" (*Discourse* 23). However, Glissant's work is itself performative, choosing to focus on certain strategies over others and displacing one with another. This emphasis on change and mutation invites his own theory to be taken in new directions and used expediently to explore the diversity of creolization. In applying Glissant's work to Melville's fiction, I am therefore appropriating and expanding Glissant's attitude toward strategies of "diversion," which is what he terms trickster discourse. While Glissant sees these processes as limited in their focus on negative opposition, he nevertheless acknowledges that strategies of diversion can develop into concrete possibilities, suggesting that the focus must be on creating new forms of being, not simply on undermining extant categories. Indeed, Glissant's point that creolization entails an obligation to change distinguishes his approach from that of postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha, who focuses on the disruption of colonial discourse through an ambivalent and hybrid third space.³

These productive possibilities constitute one aspect of Melville's textual exploration. Although her stories use shape-shifting, diversionary techniques to expose the instability of supposedly distinct, self-evident categories of gender, race, and ethnicity, they also render constraint productive in ingenious ways. Melville acknowledges the resurgence of oppression within *Relation* but also examines the discontinuity between oppression and *Relation*. This fictional approach establishes a new dialogue with Glissant in that Melville recuperates the syncretic and subversive potential elucidated by other theorists of creolization, such as Wilson Harris and Derek Walcott, within the processes of *Relation*. In "The Muse of History," for instance, Walcott envisions poets, in the role of "a second Adam," subversively and selectively constructing new identities from remnants of a colonial past (356). This re-imagination would

not be a naïve forgetting; rather, it would be a new vision articulated through an awareness of past events.⁴ Expanding creolization to see imaginative possibilities in such a subversive repetition and re-connection with elements of a mythic and historical past, Melville revises Glissant's dismissal of Walcott's subversive strategies and appropriates them to her own ends. Deploying Derek Walcott's idea of a selective historical remembering and forgetting, Melville manipulates history as a discourse to be perverted and also imaginatively recycled.

Moreover, in her inclusion of gender as one category for manipulation, Melville expands Glissant's masculine focus to assert women's roles within the dynamics of creolization. Glissant's understanding of creolization as endless process rather than a static category of experience or identity leaves his theory open to the inclusion of gender in ways which other theories of creolization and hybridity are not. "Engendering" the possibilities implicit in Glissant's work, Julia Kristeva's model of identity formation, where genders are constructed for both men and women through the constant fluctuation of identity and difference, neatly overlaps with the processes of a fluid creole subjectivity. Kristeva conceives of the semiotic (presocial and originating with the mother) and Symbolic (social and originating with the father) states as in constant and conflicting process. Kristeva's semiotic cannot be identified as purely female just as the Symbolic is never purely male, but rather both terms are defined and indeed made viable through the interaction between them. Maternally based creative impulses disrupt and inspire the patriarchal linguistic-cultural order so that, as Kristeva writes, "semiotic . . . transgression brings about all the various transformations of the signifying practice that are called 'creation'" (*Revolution* 62). Kristeva's theory of interacting semiotic and symbolic elements deconstructs biologically naturalized binaries of woman and man to emphasize the heterogeneity of all processes of signification and subjectivity. Kristeva, however, theorizes these exchanges as fraught and contradictory rather than a seamless or purely celebratory experience of endless possibility. Identity is structured by abjection, a process which violently rejects the "horror" of difference in a futile attempt to assert sameness (futile because alterity is always already inherent within identity). Kristeva's poetics thus shift the emotional focus of male creolization theories to validate experiences of melancholy, loss and conflict. The term feminine (used here rather than female or feminist) indicates Melville's characters' dissociation from Western feminist movements yet awareness of the social forces which Kristeva reveals as constructing gender difference.

The female protagonist of "Eat Labba and Drink Creek Water" returns a vision of creolization that is more historically fraught and loaded than Glissant's celebration of play and transformation suggests. Racial passing, for instance, structures the narrative both as a legacy of discrimination and as a series of opportunities. The narrator of "Eat Labba and Drink Creek Water" traces a history of passing which has tragically split the narrator's family, but which has also produced the transatlantic life she lives. "Eat Labba and Drink Creek Water" also returns to Raleigh's text of colonial crisis for Guyanese identity in order to articulate a critically dissonant, feminine and creolized viewpoint. Always ambivalent, the departures and returns which structure

this story are never only resistant to established cultural concepts, but they are also never only compliant. Negatively formulated through the shifting definitions of personal and collective Guyanese history, Melville's version of feminine creole identity supplements Glissant's positivity through the articulation of exclusions endemic to creolization.

The story is structured around a series of personal and collective, physical and temporal, journeys. Planning to return to Guyana from London, the narrator introduces the theme of cross-cultural traffic with her statement that, "We do return and leave and return again, criss-crossing the Atlantic, but whichever side of the Atlantic we are on, the dream is always on the other side" (149). These journeys transgress boundaries of time, physical dimension and cultural definition to enact a new form of errantry. Locating her identity somewhere between the two poles of Guyana and London, the narrator assumes and discards a series of cultural perspectives. This narrative movement incorporates a return to the historical point of entanglement between England and Guyana in order to explore possibilities for a different future. Melville's story revisits the past, as Paula Burnett argues, to "provid[e] bearings for the future" (12), yet, as Burnett does not acknowledge, those bearings ambiguously combine positive and negative elements. Past oppressions cannot simply be discarded, but remain to haunt and inspire the present.

Journeys occur in both physical and metaphysical dimensions throughout the story. The speaker leaves and returns to Guyana in a process which she explains through the saying, "Eat labba and drink creek water and you will always return" (148).⁵ Not simply a single and final return, the "always" in this saying implies a continual process of departures and arrivals. Indeed, the speaker has repeated dreams of crossing the Atlantic, once by "a frail spider's thread suspended sixty feet above the Atlantic attached to Big Ben at one end and St. George's Cathedral, Demerara, at the other" (149). Another dream imagines her as a tumbleweed blown across the ocean. Each sequence conveys the double emotional attachments and impermanent resolution of an identity defined not simply as British or Guyanese, but as constantly negotiating or, one might say suspended, between those cultural contexts. Moreover, the stops and balances that a high-wire act involves suggest the non-linear or errant journey that such an identity process represents. Recalling Glissant's description of identity as a shifting space of becoming, Melville's speaker experiences identity as both multiple and impermanent.

The narrator, her friend Lorna, and indeed her father and grandfather all crisscross the Atlantic in a process that reverses and confounds the linear trajectories of sixteenth century explorers. Rather than simply going to a destination and returning, the narrator and her family continually repeat the process of departure and return, altered by each new experience. The narrator's grandfather leaves two fingers in Europe during the Great War and returns to Guyana with a letter from the "Mother Country" which hangs on the wall as a reminder of his journey and of his "service," a term which neatly conflates military duty with colonial servitude. The speaker's father repeats his father's journey out, and, in marrying an English woman, initiates his daughter into a life of continuous transatlantic crossings. Consequently, her childhood recollections include time spent at her aunts', with her Guyanese friend Gail, and in her mother's

English garden. The setting of this story is itself a shifting space, taking the narrator back and forth across the Atlantic and in and out of multiple family, national and emotional entanglements.

This errantry takes on racial as well as physical and cultural meanings as Melville addresses the theme of racial passing. On going to London, the father disguises his “Coloured. Native. Creole” status stated on his birth certificate and effectively passes for white (153). The narrator herself appears white and is even called “ice-cream face” by neighbours in New Amsterdam (156). Yet passing is a painful experience as the narrator feels disparaged both by the neighbours’ comment on her whiteness, and by being ridiculed in London for her father’s racialized features. Passing is a double exclusion, and even a self-directed form of abjection, as ultimately the narrator internalizes white biases and tells her mother: “. . . Keith says Daddy looks like a monkey. And I think so too” (157). Rejecting a part of herself in this rejection of her father, these racial negotiations reveal that the ability to cross racial categories is not always a privilege.

Indeed, these transgressions painfully divide the narrator’s family along generational gender lines. The narrator’s aunts resent their lighter brothers for marrying white women and reject the narrator based on her maternally inherited appearance. As one aunt rages, “Just because you’ve got white skin and blue eyes you think you haven’t got coloured blood in you. But you have. Just like me. It’s in your veins. You can’t escape from it. There’s mental illness in the family too” (162). In conventional racial and racist discourses, women are privileged according to the color of their skin and Rosa’s rant recognizes this. Believing that she and Avril are left behind because of their mixed-race appearance, Aunt Rosa rejects one half of the narrator’s background as complicit with racial oppression. This passage also addresses the discursive fictions which link the transgression of racial boundaries to the “mad creole” as well as to miscegenation. Miscegenation and racial passing both reveal the instability of supposedly discrete identity categories and for creole women, in particular, accusations of madness become ways of discounting and denying those boundary crossings.⁶ On one level, then, Melville’s text recognizes that creolization does not always offer Glissant’s positive identity transformations but can also involve a series of painful, abject divisions and psychological losses. The racial and gender based fictions of colonial discourse persist into the narrator’s supposedly postcolonial present.

Yet, in other ways, racial passing opens up opportunities for both the narrator and her father. In leaving Guyana, her father escapes the “stifling inertia” which he perceives in Guyanese society while encountering economic and employment opportunities in London. To say that passing is only tragic exclusion for the narrator’s father is to ignore the evident wealth he achieves as well as his fascination with English culture which prompts him to marry there eventually. The narrator is also economically privileged, returning to Guyana with money to buy land and bringing technology that is impossible to get in Georgetown. The opening of the story portrays her creatively negotiating her cultural duality in sequences that convey continual

longing only because she can identify with, and travel between London and Guyana. As the opening says, "the dream is always on the other side" (149). The narrator experiences errantry and passing as a sense of double identification as well as double alienation. Passing excludes her in racial terms, just as the fact that she is not fully Guyanese makes her a continual visitor to friends and family there, yet passing also gives her identity within both London and Guyanese social contexts. The narrative registers the costs of racial passing and cultural errantry while also representing the speaker as living Glissant's creolized and creolizing future. Her transatlantic crossings are in one sense the "new and original dimension" of *Relation* which "allow[s] each person to be there and elsewhere, rooted and open . . ." (*Poetics* 34). Yet Melville's fiction follows two trajectories, insisting on the material losses of cross-cultural exchange *as well as* the creative potential.

The context in which the narrator enacts the story's title, "Eat Labba and Drink Creek Water," clearly exemplifies both positive and negative experiences of boundary crossing. The narrator's acts of eating and drinking are accompanied by mixed emotions. Her friend Gail wants her to return both as a symbol of friendship and out of spite, saying: "Now you're bound to come back" (159). Return is at once a positive reconnection and a painful regression, an act of belonging and of oppression. To leave and return subverts rooted concepts of identity in a productive way, yet it is also always the loss of one context for another.

Other journeys in the text similarly conflate past and present, personal and collective, life and death experiences to describe errantry as at once creative and destructive. Wat's travels, for instance, portray a journey which continues beyond death and beyond time. Exploring the labyrinthine tributaries of the Orinoco, Wat and his father's originally linear trajectory becomes diverted into a creolizing pattern of ebbs and flows, of multiple crisscrossing paths. After his death, Wat's body continues this shifting, literally fluid journey, "begin[ning] a quest of its own through the network of creeks and streams and rivers" (160). Defying linear narrative conventions, Wat has also already become myth in a previous section of the text: "They say that the spirit of a pale boy is trapped beneath the waters" (149). Both historical figure and indigenous legend, Wat exemplifies a process of transformation: life become death, European traveler become Amerindian legend, individual become a symbol of the colonizing moment in Guyana's past. His journey as a spirit of the river is a form of errantry which negotiates not only physical but metaphysical dimensions and he vividly exemplifies the continuity between colonial and postcolonial periods. Moreover, in shifting from the female narrator to assume the perspectives of Wat and the male family members, the narrative moves between gender perspectives, embodying another facet of identities in process. Melville's story appears to dramatize Kristeva's concept of gender as the interaction of semiotic and symbolic impulses through its narrative structure of competing male and female, culturally recognized and elided perspectives.

Not only exemplifying the cultural dynamics of creole identity and the fluidity of gender perspectives in this narrative, the figure of Wat also evokes a historical intertextuality. The

mountain of crystal, city of Manoa and palace and gardens of gold that Wat expects to find are all possibilities mentioned by Sir Walter Raleigh in his 1596 travel propaganda, *The Discovery of the Large, Rich and Beautiful Empire of Guiana*. Raleigh's narrative was influential in generating beliefs about Guyana within European society and in encouraging English colonialism. Wat, moreover, was the name of Raleigh's son, who died on his father's final voyage to Guyana in 1618. Used in Melville's text, the historical references quite literally return to an originary point of colonial entanglement to imagine a different future and acknowledge the oppressions of the existing one. Wat and his father (presumably Raleigh) are founding figures in Guyana's history as an English colony and yet the narrative returns to that moment to imagine a series of creolizing possibilities that official history has not retained. Wat's future is imagined as an errant process in which he not only transforms from life to death but from European to Guyanese. Now a spirit of the Orinoco, Wat becomes a figure significant to both cultures, enacting Glissant's concept of creolization as crosscultural transformation and imagining a potential future beyond that recorded by traditional history. The canonical, imperialist perspective repeated through Melville's historical intertextuality is ruptured with this new vision of Wat's future. Moreover, the use of present tense verbs to describe both present and past experiences conflates time periods, breaking down distinctions between a male oriented historical past, a familial past fraught with racial and gender constraints, and the present day, potentially more dynamic and fluid setting described by the female narrator.

This simultaneous use and deconstruction of Raleigh's text is best exemplified by the passage in which European fantasies about Guyana are turned back on themselves to re-present contemporary English society. Conflating London and El Dorado, the passage parodies colonial travel narrative and mocks Raleigh's acceptance of fantasy as truth:

Here dwell men who deal in markets of coffee and sugar and vast numbers of other like commodities. They have eyes in their shoulders, mouths in the middle of their breasts, a long train of hair grows backwards between their shoulders. They sit on finely-made leather cushions and there are also men like porters to carry food to them on magnificent plates of gold and silver. In the uppermost rooms of these towers, which are as we would call palaces, sit stockbrokers, their bodies anointed with white powdered gold blown through hollow canes until they are shining all over. Above their heads hang the skulls of dead company directors, all hung and decked with feathers. Here they sit drinking, hundreds of them together, for as many as six or seven days at a time. (154-55)

This passage applies Raleigh's 1596 exoticized descriptions of Amerindian customs to English capitalists, reversing cultural myths and comically defamiliarizing contemporary business practices. Using italics to suggest the quotation of an older text, this passage, in writing back to English colonizers, subverts the authority of the original text and opens up an enunciative space for a critically dissonant feminine creole perspective. Although reversing the imperial gaze to

mock European men, this passage suggests that colonial attitudes persist in new, particularly economic forms.

The quoted passage is not only *diversion*, however, it is also creative in imagining a different future where the gaze of power is reversed and Europeans are exoticized from a Guyanese perspective. While Melville's text employs trickster strategies of parody and mimicry to deconstruct English authority, the narrative does not simply rest there but returns to this point of entanglement to propose a new future. As Glissant argues, diversion "leads nowhere" unless it encounters the potential for real development (*Discourse* 23). In creating an indigenous myth out of the historical figure of Wat and rewriting Raleigh's text from a perspective of Guyanese authority, Melville sets up a set of new possibilities, possibilities where creolization and errantry are sources of inspiration and where Guyana may have potential beyond its present poverty and isolation. The narrative mocks and subverts Guyana's colonial origins, acknowledging their oppressive legacy, and yet also employs those trickster strategies within a form which creatively combines past and present into something new. As Paula Burnett suggests, this writing back recalls Derek Walcott in the way it collapses linear history to instead mythologize a continuous present, where historical origins and current time are all combined as elements within a dynamic cultural process (Burnett 11-12). Indeed, the present tense verbs used in each episode of this narrative emphasize this temporal continuum: Wat exists in the same continuous present as the narrator, her father and grandfather.

The text not only exposes colonial fantasies but also addresses the neocolonial attitudes of tourists traveling to the Caribbean. The man the narrator encounters at a party conceives of the Caribbean as a paradise of beaches, palm trees and reggae music, and tells the narrator how lucky she is to be returning. Yet the tourist industry presents a stereotype that the narrator knows to be false. "It's not like that at all," she thinks, remembering the realities of Guyana and recognizing the global economic interests behind selling the Caribbean to tourists (149). Stereotyped expectations are not confined to Europeans, however, as the narrator's father and grandfather each set out for London from Guyana with a list of fantasies that parallel those of the early explorers. The grandfather leaves anticipating that:

In England there is a library that contains all the books in the world, a cathedral of knowledge the interior of whose dome shimmers gold from the lettering on the spines of ancient volumes. In England there are theatres and concert halls and galleries hung from ceiling to floor with magnificent gold-framed paintings and all of these are peopled by men in black silk opera hats and women with skins like cream of coconut.

In England there are museums which house the giant skeletons of dinosaurs whose breastbones flute into a rib-cage as lofty and vast as the stone ribs inside Westminster Abbey, which he has seen on a postcard. (151)

Later, her father sets out with a more contemporary set of expectations, including the belief that, “It is impossible to *be* a real man until you have been to London” (153).

Both cultures construct knowledges about the other in a process where, again echoing the story’s opening, the dream is always on the other side. In responding to Raleigh’s propagandist expectations about Guyana with Guyanese stereotypes about London, moreover, Melville is again writing back to the original historical text. At once creative in using imperialist forms to new ends, as well as tragic in the fact that none of these ideals can ever be fulfilled, this narrative strategy articulates the elusive affect of Melville’s version of creolization. As in the section where Raleigh’s party huddle under a waterfall wondering why they are not at the mountain of crystal, while their Amerindian guide believes he has taken them there, Melville’s juxtaposition of colonial, neocolonial and postcolonial fantasies reveals the incommensurable ironies as well as creative potential within crosscultural contact.

This ambivalent experience of creolization contributes to what Mervyn Morris describes as the text’s “dialogue with the past” (81). The narrator’s family heritage and the historical intertextuality expressed through Wat’s journey deconstruct discursive categories and productively re-imagine the past. However, both these processes are accompanied by rejection and loss. The narrator’s errant, feminine creole identity comes with the loss of family unity. While discussing her family’s racial history, the narrator tells her aunts: “We’re in the nineteen-eighties. Nobody cares about that sort of thing any more” (162). Yet Rosa replies that only a crazy person would dismiss the effects of racism and, despite the speaker’s claims, racial legacies continue to divide her family. Indeed, ambivalence defines not only the speaker’s race- and gender-marked personal history in this narrative but also the portrayal of Raleigh’s historic voyage. The incorporation of Raleigh’s text reveals the painful effects of that colonial moment, as well as the individual loss of life and creative potential represented by Wat’s death. Wat (quite literally) embodies the painful repressions of historical discourse in the same moment that he performs the fluid possibilities of a celebratory creolization. Wat transforms the finality of death into a new, living potential while also presenting perhaps the ultimate figure of loss and abjection: a pale body trapped beneath the water.

Paula Burnett reads Melville’s dialogue with history and literary-historical documents, a pervasive theme in both *Shape-shifter* and her subsequent novel, *The Ventriloquist’s Tale*, as establishing a set of landmarks for the future. Although recognizing the violence of past cultural interactions, Burnett reads several contemporary Caribbean texts to conclude that, “. . . the timeless zone of myth, if imaginatively read, can provide landmarks to progress, so that the mythopoetic artist may row the people’s boat steadily towards a more benign future” (35). This forward-looking aspect of Melville’s work, mentioned earlier in relation to her creative revision of trickster myth, is figured in Evelyn at the end of “Eat Labba and Drink Creek Water.” Intent on creating a positive future for Guyana, Evelyn works tirelessly to reform economic corruption and “turn this country around” (164). Evelyn’s practical focus and creative female energy impel a sense of urgency and effectively convey the need for reform. Indeed, “Eve”-lyn imagines a set

of new and self-sufficient identities for Guyanese people, deploying Derek Walcott's idea of a second Adam but in feminine creole terms. However, the text concludes with a sense of uncertainty as the narrator peers out into Evelyn's yard to see both vibrant, indigenous vegetation and the rusted shells of two cars. Can Guyana become the paradise that this new Eve envisions (and indeed one of the trees is a sugar-apple) or is it doomed to the continuing eroding violences represented by the two decomposing cars? Evelyn is a creative force, a "wizard" in her country, but can her transformative powers overcome the negative aspects also present in creolization?

To revise Burnett's positive emphasis, "Eat Labba and Drink Creek Water" advocates the impetus to change through Evelyn, yet also cautions against a naïve dismissal of past violence. Melville's transformation of Raleigh's text into a productive dialogue with the past affirms Glissant's rupture of history, yet the narrator's rejection by her aunts and the disturbing economic situation of the country reveal the continuing effects of a racially hierarchical and colonial past. This text engages with history in order to question whether creolization can be relied upon to create a positive future. "Eat Labba and Drink Creek Water" further inscribes gender as a part of its shifting identity dynamics, a position neglected by many male authors of creolization. Ultimately, Melville's historical dialogue affirms the potential for Glissant's *Relation*, yet also warns against the reproduction of colonial violence within this process and asserts the need for a differential feminine creole vision. "Eat Labba and Drink Creek Water" ends with a statement and a challenge for the future. In re-contextualizing errantry within a late twentieth century, postcolonial process of departures and returns, Melville uncovers feminine creole creativity and acknowledges historical losses and psychic ambivalences without being debilitated by them. The potential of Melville's vision lies in its creative appropriation and persistent questioning of historical legacies. Melville transforms the very figures that have tormented Guyana's past to serve her own mischievous and antagonistic mythic purposes and in the process offers one strategy for understanding creolization not only as loss and violence but also as creative reconfiguration.

Notes

¹Gilles Deleuze elaborates on the political implications of errantry and rhizomatic process in his essay, "Nomad Thought," in David B. Allison (ed) *The New Nietzsche* (146-49). Errantry is also a model for the deconstruction of genealogy in Deleuze and Guattari's work, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi.

²Parody and mimicry are used as part of Melville's trickster narrative strategy in *Shape-shifter*. Although parody and mimicry are also used imaginatively in postmodern texts, Melville deploys the shape-shifter or trickster figure to ground the possibility for creative transformation and subversion in Guyanese culture rather than in the Western context of postmodernism.

³Although postcolonial and creole theories overlap in describing the potential of hybrid identity positions, Glissant's focus on creativity, despite past experiences of oppression, is important in reading Melville's imaginative negotiations with history and distinguishes his approach from, for instance, those of postcolonial critic Homi Bhabha. Indeed, while Melville asserts the existence of painful losses within creolization, her focus remains on its creative potential in ways which Glissant's theory in particular elucidates. Further, the cultural and historical specificity which creole theory demands, and which cosmopolitan postcolonial theories often elide, is vital in understanding the historical entanglements of Melville's story. See Benita Parry, "Problems in Current Theories of Colonial Discourse," for a discussion of the limited creative potential of Bhabha's theory.

⁴In "The Muse of History," Derek Walcott describes the poetic task as one of re-imagining identities in the role of "a second Adam." Although this vision of a second Adam clearly displays the need for a feminine voice within creolization, Walcott nevertheless lends support to Glissant's (and Melville's) vision of the past as a potential source of creative inspiration.

⁵Labba is the meat of a large agouti or South American rodent.

⁶See, for instance, Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* in which Rhys's white creole protagonist transgresses racial and ethnic boundaries only to become inscribed into a pre-existing narrative of female creole madness.

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