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Introduction
The Politics and Aesthetics of *Métissage*

Henry Louis Gates, Jr. recounts an anecdote about the violent fate of a little-known Francophone writer, who refused to continue living in the prison house of a language imposed by historical circumstances beyond his control:

> In 1915, Edmond Laforest, a prominent member of the Haitian literary movement called La Ronde, made his death a symbolic, if ironic, statement of the curious relation of the marginalized writer to the act of writing in a [European] language. Laforest, with an inimitable, if fatal, flair for the grand gesture, stood upon a bridge, calmly tied a Larousse dictionary around his neck, then leapt to his death. While other black writers, before and after Laforest, have been drowned artistically by the weight of various [European] languages, Laforest chose to make his death an emblem of this relation of overwhelming indenture.[1]

The story dramatizes the dilemmas of all those who must survive (and write) in the interval between different cultures and languages. Standard French, as contained within and legitimized by the Larousse dictionary, used to be the only "official" means of literary expression in the Francophone world. Its overpowering and authoritative voice succeeded in suffocating Haitian Creole, the mother tongue of Laforest's childhood, his oral link to a different histor-

[1]Henry L. Gates, Jr., "Writing 'Race' and the Difference it Makes," *Critical Inquiry* 12 (Autumn 1985), 13. I have substituted [European] for "modern" in the original text (in the Haitian context, Creole is a "modern" language).

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ical past. The fluidity and flexibility of creole dialects are enriched by custom, usage, and tradition but rarely sanctioned by written or syntactical rules. Creole is thus easily devalued and ignored as a creative medium by those who would encourage more "classical" modes of expression. Retrieving and revaluing those social idiolects that contribute to the development of heteroglossia and the dialogic imagination[2] has been the task of contemporary writers in all of the Francophone world, from Quebec to Mauritius, from Brittany to Alsace, from Guadeloupe to Senegal.

But in 1915, Laforest did drown from the weight of the book, the Law of the colonial fathers, which prevented him from floating and surviving in the flowing current of a muddy river, that uncanny symbol of a devalued maternal heritage with its supposedly irrational, unfiltered, and mumbled oral traditions. His predicament concretizes the linguistic conflicts resulting from colonialism and its hierarchical ordering of languages and traditions. This Haitian writer is an extreme case of a Creole who resisted identification with white civilization and managed not to internalize its ideology, although he did not succeed in finding alternative solutions to his condition of indentured subject and reduced himself to silence. He was caught in a social conflict not unlike those described by Clifford Geertz as based on a "confusion of tongues."[3]

In the French colonial environment, the forced integration of the blacks and the *métis* into the dominant conceptual systems of the *métropole* began early. Until fairly recently (some twenty-five years ago or so), in the local schools of the Antilles, Guyana, Réunion, and other French territories, schoolchildren learned to repeat phrases like "nos ancêtres, les Gaulois [our ancestors, the Gauls]," reading official French history from standard French textbooks. With just a few such phrases, a certain weltanschauung, a vision of the world as circumscribed by European modes of discourse, would imprint itself on the consciousness of the young, inevitably leading to the kinds of self-denials that Maryse Condé and Marie-Thérèse Humbert dramatize with such intensity in their autobiographical novels, *Heremakhonon* and *A l'autre bout de moi.* These self-denials, I argue, amount to

[2]See Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), especially pp. 259–422.

[3]See Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), pp. 9 and 28.

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forms of suicide, just as surely as Laforest's political gesture did. In the case of marginalized women writers, the situation is compounded by the double stigma of race and gender. This stigma, imposed in a more or less devious way by the social structures of the colony, is then internalized by individuals and groups in their efforts to conform to the idealized images that society upholds as models. Writers who struggled to verbalize these conflicts have in the past often alienated themselves from the community of educated intellectuals, when they did not become the victims of heroic, tragic gestures like Laforest's. Nowadays, others succeed in giving voice to their repressed traditions, initiating a genuine dialogue with the dominant discourses they hope to transform, thus ultimately favoring exchange rather than provoking conflict.

The Cultural Politics of *Métissage*

There is a long Western tradition, from Plato to Maurice Blanchot, including Augustine and Montaigne, which conceives of writing as a system that rigidifies, stultifies, kills because it imprisons meaning in "la rigidité cadavérique de l'écriture [the cadaverous rigidity of the written sign]" instead of allowing a "parole vive [living *logos*]" to adjust fluidly to the constantly changing context of oral communication in which interlocutors influence each other: Derrida has studied how this relation of opposition between *écriture* and *parole* becomes established in Plato, and is thenceforth central to Western discourse.[4] It is worth noting that Montaigne was the first to use the same phrase—"la parole vive et bruyante [a lively and noisy way of speaking]"—in a secular context. He was discussing his efforts to write the way he speaks, instead of using Latin, to use the lively figurative language of his native Gascogne, however hyperbolic, rather than be stifled either by a dead language or by a literal style that follows the "vérité nayfve . . . nue et cruë [the simple truth . . . the naked and unvarnished truth]."[5] These central questions

[4]Jacques Derrida, "La Pharmacie de Platon," in *La Dissémination* (Paris: Seuil, 1972), p. 89, *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), pp. 114–15.

[5]See Michel de Montaigne, *Essais*, "Des boyteux," p. 1005; also "Sur des vers de Virgile," p. 853, in *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris: Gallimard/La Pléiade, 1962). *The Complete Works of Montaigne*, trans. Donald Frame (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1948),

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of orality and literacy, speech and writing, truth and hyperbole, transparency and obscurity have become the cornerstone of the cultural aesthetics of many postcolonial writers. As Edouard Glissant, the Martinican poet, novelist, and theorist, spells it out:

> For us it is a matter of ultimately reconciling the values of literate civilizations and the long repressed traditions of orality. . . .
>
> This practice of cultural creolization [pratique de *métissage*] is not part of some vague humanism, which makes it permissible for us to become one with the other. It establishes a cross-cultural relationship, in an egalitarian and unprecedented way, among histories which we know today in the Caribbean are interrelated. . . . We also know that there is an obscure residue of something unexpressed deep within every spoken word, however far we may push our meaning and however hard we may try to weigh our acts [il est au fond de toute parole . . . la matière obscure d'un informulé].[6]

For Glissant, the *métissage* or braiding, of cultural forms through the simultaneous revalorization of oral traditions and reevaluation of Western concepts has led to the recovery of occulted histories. In the effort to recover their unrecorded past, contemporary writers and critics have come to the realization that opacity and obscurity are necessarily the precious ingredients of all authentic communication: "il est au fond de toute parole . . . la matière obscure d'un informulé."[7] Since history and memory have to be reclaimed either in the absence of hard copy or in full acknowledgment of the ideological distortions that have colored whatever written documents and archival materials do exist, contemporary women writers espe-

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pp. 786 and 667. For a more detailed discussion of this aspect of Montaigne's style, see Claude Blum, "La Peinture du moi et l'écriture inachevée: Sur la pratique de l'addition dans les 'Essais' de Montaigne," *Poétique* 53 (1983), 60–71.

[6]Edouard Glissant, *Le Discours antillais* (Paris: Seuil, 1981), pp. 462–63. All further references are given in the text. The English translation by J. Michael Dash, *Caribbean Discourse*, is forthcoming from the University Press of Virginia (1989). Whenever possible, I have used this translation. But I have frequently had to alter it in order to stress nuances of the French text which are indispensable to my analyses. For example, Dash translates *métissage* by the word "creolization" which is perfectly acceptable when dealing with cultural mixing but not appropriate when referring to the racial context. That is why I shall retain the word *métissage* here. I shall indicate "trans. mod." whenever I alter the English text.

[7]See, for example, Sarah Kofman's stimulating discussion of what can be problematic in "the will to clarity," in "Nietzsche and the Obscurity of Heraclitus," *Diacritics* 17 (Fall 1987).

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cially have been interested in reappropriating the past so as to transform our understanding of ourselves. Their voices echo the submerged or repressed values of our cultures. They rewrite the "feminine" by showing the arbitrary nature of the images and values which Western culture constructs, distorts, and encodes as inferior by feminizing them.[8] All the texts I will be discussing in this book interrogate the sociocultural construction of race and gender and challenge the essentializing tendencies that perpetuate exploitation and subjugation on behalf of those fictive differences created by discourses of power.

For those of us who are natives of the so-called Third World, it has become imperative to understand and to participate fully in the process of re-vision begun by our contemporary writers and theorists. The latter are engaged in an enterprise which converges toward other efforts at economic and political survival but which is unique in its focus on memory—the oral trace of the past—as the instrument for giving us access to our histories. These recovered histories have now become the source of creative explosions for many authors, male and female, who are being nurtured and inspired by the phenomenon applauded by Glissant, the egalitarian interrelations in which binary impasses are deconstructed.

Within the conceptual apparatuses that have governed our labeling of ourselves and others, a space is thus opened where multiplicity and diversity are affirmed. This space is not a territory staked out by exclusionary practices. Rather, it functions as a sheltering site, one that can nurture our differences without encouraging us to withdraw into new dead ends, without enclosing us within facile oppositional practices or sterile denunciations and disavowals. For it is only by imagining nonhierarchical modes of relation among cultures that we can address the crucial issues of indeterminacy and solidarity. These are the issues that compel us in this fin de siècle, for our "green dirt-ball" will survive only if we respect the differences among its peoples.[9] We can be united against hegemonic

[8]Sander Gilman has studied the common denominator shared by negative stereotypes in the West and shown how the "other" is always sexualized and racialized: blacks, Jews, women, the mad are described as inferior because they are the reductive antithesis of what is set up as "normal." *Difference and Pathology: Stereotypes of Sexuality, Race, and Madness* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985).

[9]To use Zora Neale Hurston's humorous phrasing. *Dust Tracks on a Road,* ed. Robert Hemenway, 2d ed. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984), p. 147.

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power only by refusing to engage that power on its own terms, since to do so would mean becoming ourselves a term within that system of power. We have to articulate new visions of ourselves, new concepts that allow us to think *otherwise*, to bypass the ancient symmetries and dichotomies that have governed the ground and the very condition of possibility of thought, of "clarity," in all of Western philosophy. *Métissage* is such a concept and a practice: it is the site of undecidability and indeterminacy, where solidarity becomes the fundamental principle of political action against hegemonic languages.

We who have been oppressed and silenced—especially those of us who suffer from the "traumata of insignificance" (as the Haitian thinker Patrick Bellegarde-Smith recently put it)[10] because we belong to insular "minorities" from some of the smallest countries of our planet—will never be tempted by the illusions of leadership, will never be deluded into thinking that we can represent anyone but ourselves. That is why we have much to contribute to a global understanding of affirmative and egalitarian principles. My country, Mauritius, like a number of small Caribbean nations, has a long history of (neo)colonial encounters. It has the advantage of being farther away from the economic giant that is North America. But its proximity to South Africa and its dependence on multinational conglomerates, which control much of its economy, place it in the problematic zone known as the Third World. Its survival as a small nation is, however, ensured by a political system of checks and balances which allows all the ethnic groups of the island to have a voice in the decision-making process.

As an Indian Ocean island, Mauritius is open to influence from East and West, North and South. It is a true site of *métissage* and creolization, and since its independence in 1968, it has managed to safeguard a measure of freedom for all its citizens without falling prey to authoritarian rulers. It is of course very far from being the "paradise" tourist brochures eulogize, but it is surely a microcosm of the globe. As a Mauritian woman critic who has lived in the antipodes for the last decade—in the United States of America, where

[10]At the Conference on Pan-Africanism Revisited, Pomona College, April 9, 1988. See also the Epilogue in Patrick Bellegarde-Smith, *In the Shadow of Powers: Dantès Bellegarde in Haitian Social Thought* (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press, 1985), p. 176.

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this book was written—I have become increasingly convinced of the urgent necessity of looking at this New World from the perspective of that small island (and others like it). This book articulates that perspective. My purpose is to demonstrate connections and to share some of the views that have guided my cultural production in this hemisphere.

The interdisciplinary nature of my inquiry will become obvious to my reader; however, my choice of texts may at first seem quite incompatible with the perspective I have just outlined: why Augustine and Nietzsche together with twentieth century women writers? To some, this may either seem an artificial combination of autobiographical texts or, much worse, reveal a colonized mind focused on some patriarchal and canonical figures whose presence is meant to give scholarly legitimacy to my enterprise. My answer to such queries is simply that this particular collection of writers happens to exemplify, for me, all the various facets of my own background as a Mauritian critic, born and raised as a cultural Catholic in the second half of this century, the period of gradual decolonization around the world. The works of Augustine and Nietzsche are examined here primarily for their cultural importance and for the hidden dimensions of their scholarly reception. My analysis foregrounds aspects of their texts which confirm the possibility of a different interpretation. By its very breadth, this book may fly in the face of the scholarly conventions we have inherited from the nineteenth century—the need to order and classify the world, to artificially separate into discrete units entities that, if studied together, would teach us far more about the status and function of our own subject positions in the world. But renewed connections to the past can emancipate us, provided they are used to elaborate empowering myths for living in the present and for affirming our belief in the future. The purpose of my work is to put into practice my belief in the interconnectedness of the various traditions I analyze. I hope the textual scrutiny that forms the basis of the following chapters in this book illustrates this commitment.

To establish nonhierarchical connections is to encourage lateral relations: instead of living within the bounds created by a linear view of history and society, we become free to interact on an equal footing with all the traditions that determine our present predicament. On a textual level, we can choose authors across time and

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space and read them together for new insights. Although my book is organized diachronically from Augustine to Marie-Thérèse Humbert, that orderly historical progression is perhaps not the best way to read it. While Chapters 1 and 2, on Augustine and Nietzsche, clearly form a unit and can profitably be read together, each of the following chapters on the women writers can and should be juxtaposed with either chapter of Part I, since each of the women borrows from or revises the earlier, male writers. Part II also forms a unit, but I have purposely interwoven elements of one chapter with those of another, so as to bring out affinities between them. I will introduce each chapter in detail later and suggest concrete sequences my reader might want to follow. For now, let me simply state that for me *métissage* is a praxis and cannot be subsumed under a fully elaborated theoretical system. *Métissage* is a form of *bricolage,* in the sense used by Claude Lévi-Strauss, but as an aesthetic concept it encompasses far more: it brings together biology and history, anthropology and philosophy, linguistics and literature. Above all, it is a reading practice that allows me to bring out the interreferential nature of a particular set of texts, which I believe to be of fundamental importance for the understanding of many postcolonial cultures. If, as Teresa de Lauretis has pointed out, identity is a strategy, then *métissage* is the fertile ground of our heterogeneous and heteronomous identities as postcolonial subjects.[11] The reactionary potential of a separatist search for a unitary and naturalized identity is a well-known danger on which I shall not dwell here. Only a well-understood feminist politics of solidarity can protect us from such a danger.[12]

Solidarity calls for a particular form of resistance with built-in political ambiguities. These ambiguities allow gendered subjects to negotiate a space within the world's dominant cultures in which the "secretive and multiple manifestations of Diversity," in Edouard Glissant's words, will not be anticipated, accommodated, and eventually neutralized.[13] A politics of solidarity thus implies the accep-

[11]Teresa de Lauretis, "Issues, Terms and Contexts," *Feminist Studies/Critical Studies,* ed. de Lauretis (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), p. 9.

[12]See for example Sandra Harding, *The Science Question in Feminism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), chap. 7; and Frantz Fanon's critique of negritude as I discuss it briefly in Chapters 2 and 3.

[13]Glissant, p. 12, trans. mod.

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tance of *métissage* as the only racial ground on which liberation struggles can be fought. For the five women writers discussed here, the possibility of emancipation is indeed linked to an implicit understanding of *métissage* as a concept of solidarity which demystifies all essentialist glorifications of unitary origins, be they racial, sexual, geographic, or cultural.

As Glissant explains, "To advocate *métissage* is to presuppose the negation of *métissage* as a category, while sanctioning it as an absolute fact which the human imagination has always wished to deny or disguise (in Western tradition)."[14] But denial has never prevented symbiotic transcultural exchanges among groups interacting in systematically creative states of tension. Racial and cultural "mixing" has always been a fact of reality, however fearfully unacknowledged, especially by the proponents of "racial purity." It is in large part because of the scientific racism of the nineteenth century that hybridization became coded as a negative category. At that time, science created the idea of the "pure race," an extremely fallacious and aberrant form of human classification, born of the West's monotheistic obsession with the "One" and the "Same." As a result of colonial encounters and confrontations, the troubling question of miscegenation began to feed the European imagination with phantasms of monstrosity and degeneracy. Nineteenth-century scientists firmly believed that the white race had to be kept pure for its own protection, for it might otherwise become "degenerate." As historian of science Nancy Stepan has shown, a wide-ranging literature on the threat of degeneracy expressed "the fervent desire of white physicians and biologists to foreclose a multiracial society . . . and to insist on the necessity of distance" between the races. Identifying race as species, polygenists inferred that crosses between different races—as with different species of animals—would either be infertile or yield infertile hybrids. Monogenists and polygenists alike claimed that "the fate of races when they transgressed their boundaries was a 'degeneration' that could be so extreme as to cause racial extinction."[15] Clearly, experience showed even then that human "races" did not constitute "species," which might fit this scientific

[14]Ibid., p. 251, trans. mod.

[15]Nancy Stepan, "Biological Degeneration: Races and Proper Places," in *Degeneration: The Dark Side of Progress*, ed. J. Edward Chamberlin and Sander Gilman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 100, 99.

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model of "hybridization." But the loathing of nineteenth-century society for interracial mixing or "un-natural unions" led many scientists to conceptualize "hybridization" as monstrosity, decadence, and deterioration: like the mule, the mulatto was believed to be "a degenerate, unnatural offspring, doomed by nature to work out its own destruction."[16] Thus also, as Lévi-Strauss reminds us in *Race et histoire*, for Count Arthur de Gobineau, the father of racist theories, and author of the infamous *Essai sur l'inégalité des races humaines*, "The flaw of degeneracy was linked . . . to the phenomenon of hybridization [*métissage*] rather than to the relative position of each race in a scale of values common to all." If each race remained in its proper place, the deterioration of the species would be minimized.[17]

[16]Josiah C. Nott, "The Mulatto, a Hybrid," *American Journal of Medical Science* 5 1843), 256, cited in Stepan, p. 107.

[17]Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Race et histoire* (Paris: Gonthier, 1961), p. 10, my translation. If we take the most extreme and aberrant case, South Africa, we discover "a crazy game of musical chairs" (*Time* March 9, 1987, p. 54). "Everyone in South Africa is classified by race, placed at birth into one of nine racial categories that determine where he can live and work." But people can also petition to "have their classification changed if they can prove they were put in a wrong group." Every year the Home Affairs Ministry announces by decree who fits into which category subsequent to the petitions filed that year. Thus, the *Time* report says, in 1986 "nine whites became colored, 506 coloreds became white, two whites became Malay, 14 Malays became white, nine Indians became white, seven Chinese became white, one Griqua became white, 40 coloreds became black, 666 blacks became colored, 87 coloreds became Indian, 67 Indians became coloreds, 26 coloreds became Malay, 50 Malays became Indian, 61 Indians became Malay, four coloreds became Griqua, four Griquas became colored, two Griquas became black, 18 blacks became Griquas, twelve coloreds became Chinese, ten blacks became Indian, two blacks became other Asian, two other coloreds became Indian, and one other colored became black." The bottom line is that roughly 1,600 people changed "color," so to speak, were of "indeterminate status" and could thus be said to belong to the gray area where ethnic/racial identity is allowed to be fluid. "According to [Minister Stoffel] Botha," the report adds ironically, "no blacks applied to become white and no whites became black." In other words, at either end of the spectrum, the binary categories are still safely in place, and the established order of apartheid prevails for the majority. One could see the intermediate classifications as so many protective barriers—a kind of cordon sanitaire—aimed at preventing transgressive boundary crossings between the "white" and "black" areas. However absurd and unreal this juridical codification may seem, it serves in effect to legitimate the status quo—the mere fact that one can change one's label undermines the very possibility of according the label any kind of strictly *biological* validity: it simply reinforces the *ideological* presuppositions of apartheid. As Glissant has pointed out, "To assert that all peoples are mixed [*métissés*], that *métissage* has value, is to deconstruct a 'hybrid' [*métis*] category which might exist as a middle ground in its own right between two 'pure' extremes. It is only in those countries where exploitation is barbaric (South Africa for instance) that this intermediate category has been officially recognized" (p. 25, trans. mod.).

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In my view, one of the most misunderstood factors of this nineteenth-century obsession with "races and proper places" has to do with an archaic, unconscious fear of conquest by the other, which is mediated by the female body. The French writer Théophile Gautier unwittingly displays an interesting example of such fears in one of his newspaper columns of 1845. His imagination is busy creating myths of "Orientalism," fueled by the recent conquest of Algeria, and he writes: "How strange! We think we have conquered Algiers, and it is Algiers which has conquered us.—Our women are already wearing gold-threaded and multicolored scarves which used to belong to the slaves of the harems. . . . If this continues, France will soon become Mohamedan and we shall see the white domes of mosques swell up in our cities, and minarets mingle with steeples, just as in Spain under the Moors. We would willingly live until that day, for quite frankly, we prefer Oriental fashions to English ones."[18]

His stated preference for Oriental customs notwithstanding, Gautier was contributing to the European colonial myth about otherness, a myth that still dies hard. Today, conservative political rhetoric in many countries of Western Europe associates multiracialism with the specter of an imminent conquest of Europe by the Third World. The fear that underlies this discourse of "heterophobia," as Albert Memmi puts it, is deeply rooted, linked to some of man's most atavistic beliefs: the need to protect "our women" from being "taken" by the other, from becoming the instruments of miscegenation and *métissage*, perhaps even the willing instruments.[19] In Gautier's remarks, the interesting juxtaposition of "conquered," "our women," and "slaves of the harem" makes it clear that the (white) women's reproductive potential must be protected so as not to become the site of *métissage* inside the *métropole.* It is very easy, and indeed tempting, on a subliminal level to make some substitutions on Gautier's text: "and we shall see the white stomachs of our women swell up in our cities," whereas the phallic imagery, "and the minarets mingle with steeples," would simply seem to point paradigmatically to the ideological transformation of the con-

[18]Théophile Gautier, *La Presse,* Jan. 6, 1845, quoted in Gautier, *Voyage pittoresque en Algérie,* ed. Madeleine Cottin (Geneva: Droz, 1973), p. 19.

[19]Albert Memmi, *Le Racisme: Description, définition, traitement* (Paris: Gallimard, 1982), p. 115. Note also the role played by Jean François Le Pen's National Front party in the 1988 French presidential election.

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tent, but not of the form, of sexual domination.[20] What is at stake in the conservative resistance to *métissage* is clearly a patriarchal desire for self-reproduction, self-duplication, within a representational space—female bodies—uncontaminated by the presence of the other. Control of that space is essential to its enduring "purity," to the continuation of the paternal lineage, and to the safeguarding of patriarchal authority. In such a context, it quickly becomes obvious how subversive the very idea of *métissage*—biological and cultural—can be.

Métissage and Language

It is my suspicion that our common and current perception of what constitutes a "race" can be tested by the terms we use to define various "subcategories" within those races and by the way language responds to and accommodates the fact of *métissage*. There is always a certain cultural relativism at work in those terms; because language is molded by the politics and ideology of a community, it influences—in turn—the way a given community comes to think about the world. I would go so far as to argue that in the absence of scientific or experiential grounding, it is language that conditions our concept of race and that the boundaries of that concept change according to cultural, social, and linguistic realities.[21]

The analysis of French, English, Portuguese, or Spanish terms used to define racial categories reveals that those words do not readily translate into one another because they do not cover the same reality, hence have only local significance and are not interchangeable: their semantic values and connotative fields do not overlap.[22] In the French colonial context, for example, the *métis* con-

[20]In a column written for *Le Moniteur Universel*, June 7, 1861, Gautier himself compared the round domes of the mosques he saw in Algiers to white breasts full of milk. Cited by Cottin, in *Voyage pittoresque*, p. 48.

[21]Twentieth-century science has shown that it is impossible to define with any kind of accuracy the genetic frontiers that might permit the classification of humans into a set of well-defined "races." See for example, Masatoshi Nei and Arun K. Roychoudhury, "Genetic Relationship and Evolution of Human Races," *Evolutionary Biology* 14 (1983); Albert Jacquard, "A la recherche d'un contenu pour le mot 'race': La réponse du généticien," and François Jacob, "Biologie-Racisme-Hiérarchie," both in *Le Racisme: Mythes et sciences*, ed. Maurice Olender (Paris: Complexe, 1981). Both Jacquard and Jacob emphasize that the attempt to classify and hierarchize human beings is the consequence of an *ideological* parti pris.

[22]According to anthropologist Marvin Harris, the comparative study of race relations in Brazil and the United States illuminates important ambiguities in "culturally

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stitutes a distinct but unstable racial category, which varies according to geography: in Canada, the word denotes a "half-breed" of French and Native American descent only. In the late eighteenth century, however, in the capital of the Senegal, St.-Louis, the *métis* were generally persons of French and African descent who then constituted one-fourth of the total population of the town. In the island colonies of the Indian Ocean and the West Indies—as in New Orleans—the *métis* are also called *créoles, mulâtres, cafres* and *cafrines,* although the term may apply indifferently to people who are ostensibly white (*créoles*) or black (*cafres*); the words have even wider semantic ranges in the local creole languages.

The very notion of *métissage,* then, is something culturally specific. The word does not exist in English: one can translate *métis* by "half-breed" or "mixed-blood" but these expressions always carry a negative connotation, precisely because they imply biological abnormality and reduce human reproduction to the level of animal breeding. "Mulatto" is sometimes used, but usually refers to a certain kind of fictional character, the "tragic mulatto," as in William Faulkner's *Go Down Moses* and *Light in August* or Mark Twain's *Puddin' Head Wilson.*[23] But here again, the connotations are totally negative and the referent is the animal world, namely, the generally sterile mule. In English, then, there is no real equivalent for the word *métis* and

controlled systems of 'racial' identity." His inventory of Portuguese lexical terms which define Brazilian "racial" types number 492, and do not correlate with precise usage: which is to say that there is no objective agreement among native Brazilians as to the "racial" status of a given person. Full siblings who look different phenotypically are identified by heterogeneous terms, and there is no such thing as a single "sociocentric racial identity," even within the same community or family. (Some of the 492 Portuguese expressions listed by Harris translate as: white African, white Negro, black Negro, black Indian, Indian mulatto, yellow white, white mulatto, white yellow, blond black, mestizo black, and so on. This highly subjective terminology is by no means static.) And Harris argues that Brazilian ambiguity could allow for a much broader base of support among oppressed groups, unlike the situation in the United States, where racial splits fragment the lower classes. "Referential Ambiguity in the Calculus of Brazilian Racial Identity," *Afro-American Anthropology: Contemporary Perspectives,* ed. Norman E. Whitten and John F. Szwed (New York: Free Press, 1970), 75.

[23]As Sondra O'Neale has argued, the mulatto figure is "the most discussed black female character in American literature." Such women are "perceived as totally Europeanized, not only in facial features but in acculturation, as well." "Inhibiting Midwives, Usurping Creators: The Struggling Emergence of Black Women in American Fiction," in *Feminist Studies/Critical Studies,* pp. 139–156 (147). It should be clear that what I am stressing in my use of the term *métissage* is quite different from the assimilationist tendencies criticized by O'Neale.

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we could infer that for all English-speaking peoples the very concept of race is different from that of the French, Spanish, or Portuguese speakers. Indeed, in the United States, even an "octoroon" is technically supposed to be a "nonwhite," and those who "look" white but have (some) black "blood" were said to be able to "pass" for white. What does this tell us about the social construction of "race" within different linguistic contexts? That language, in effect, can create reality, since certain categories, such as *créole* and *métis,* are not part of any visible racial difference for the average English speaker. The Anglo-American consciousness seems unable to accommodate miscegenation positively through language. It is a serious blind spot of the English language which thus implies that persons of indeterminate "race" are freaks. It is another way of making invisible, of negating, the existence of nonwhites whose racial status remains ambiguous.

When we attempt to understand the full range of connotations of our racial terminologies, we are forced to reexamine the unconscious linguistic roots of racial prejudice and to face the fact that language predetermines perception. This is why a word like *métis* or *mestizo* is most useful: it derives etymologically from the Latin *mixtus,* "mixed," and its primary meaning refers to cloth made of two different fibers, usually cotton for the warp and flax for the woof: it is a neutral term, with no animal or sexual implication. It is not grounded in biological misnomers and has no moral judgments attached to it. It evacuates all connotations of "pedigreed" ascendance, unlike words like *octoroon* or *half-breed.*

Furthermore, its homonym in ancient Greek, *mētis,* is the allegorical "figure of a function or a power," a cunning intelligence like that of Odysseus, which opposes transparency and the metaphysics of identity and is thus closely related, in practice, to the meaning of *métissage* as I understand it here—and as Glissant uses it too. Within the Greek context, the reality of *mētis* as a form of *techne* projects itself on a plurality of practical levels but can never be subsumed under a single, identifiable system of diametric dichotomies. It is a form of savoir faire which resists symbolization within a coherent or homogeneous conceptual system since it is also the power to undo the logic and the clarity of concepts.

And as Marcel Détienne and Jean Pierre Vernant point out, Mētis is also a proper name: that of the wife of Zeus, who swallowed her

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when she was about to give birth to Athena. Mētis is subjugated by Zeus, who appropriates her power of transformation, "thereby guaranteeing his paternal authority for eternity."[24] We may thus appropriate the term for our own feminist pantheon, thanks to the fortuitous nature of this link between the Greek representation of subjugated female power and the elusive semantic field of the French term *métis*: the very polyvalence of the word dictates and legitimates my own heterogeneous approach in this book.

Finally, the use of *métissage* as an analytical tool forces us to re-evaluate certain key concepts of literary history as well, for even Leopold Sédar Senghor, whose name is synonymous with the term *négritude*, also claims to be a defender of *métissage* and considered himself a pan-African *métis*.[25] Negritude has borne the brunt of much criticism because of the essentialistic racial ideology implicit in the term, although both Senghor and Aimé Césaire have argued that the criticism was based in a reductive appropriation of the concept of negritude, which came to be interpreted as a purely reactive gesture against white supremacy, without regard for the polysemic potential intended by its originators.[26]

By contrast, in Cuba, it is the concept of *mestizaje* which has long been used by politicians and poets alike (José Martí or Nicolás Guillén, for example) as an enabling metaphor of transculturation with revolutionary potential because it is capable of generating broad support, of enlisting and encouraging solidarity among different ethnic groups against a common enemy, namely the hegemonic discourse of racialism. As Cuban poet Nancy Morejón explains it, "*Transculturation* means the constant interaction, the transmutation between two or more cultural components with the unconscious goal of creating a third cultural entity—in other words, a culture—that is new and independent even though rooted in the preceding elements. Reciprocal influence is the determining factor here, for no single element superimposes itself on another; on the contrary, each

[24]See Marcel Détienne and Jean Pierre Vernant, *Les Ruses de l'intelligence: La Mētis des grecs* (Paris: Flammarion, 1974); and the review by Richard Klein, "The Mētis of Centaurs," *Diacritics* 16 (Summer 1986), 2–13 (4–5).

[25]See for example Senghor's Preface to Marie-Madeleine Marquet, *Le Métissage dans la poésie de Léopold S. Senghor* (Dakar: Nouvelles Editions Africaines, 1983).

[26]But see also the arguments against monolithic views of race put forth by René Depestre, "*Les Aspects créateurs du métissage culturel*," and Anthony Phelps, "Moi, Nègre d'Amérique . . . ," in *Notre Librairie* 74 (April–June 1984), 61–65 and 53–60.

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one changes into the other so that both can be transformed into a third. Nothing seems immutable."[27]

In this constant and balanced form of interaction, reciprocal relations prevent the ossification of culture and encourage systematic change and exchange. By responding to such mutations, language reinforces a phenomenon of creative instability in which no "pure" or unitary origin can ever be posited. A linguistic and rhetorical approach to the complex question of *métissage* thus points to the ideological and fictional nature of our racial categories while underlining the relationship between language and culture. A linguistic approach shows how and why racial difference is a function of language itself. I suggest that any successful strategy of resistance to the totalizing languages of racism must be based in the attempt to create a counterideology by exposing our rhetorical conventions.

Now, this general strategy points us to Nietzsche and to his critique of monolithic Western modes of knowledge, for he can provide us with some important tools for analyzing the complicated and duplicitous use of language of which the human subject is capable. Indeed it is by positing a Nietzschean perspectivism on reality that we can perhaps focus on a positive—if somewhat utopian—view of writing as an enabling force in the creation of a plural self, one that thrives on ambiguity and multiplicity, on affirmation of differences, not on polarized and polarizing notions of identity, culture, race, or gender. For Zora Neale Hurston, Maya Angelou, Marie Cardinal, and Marie-Thérèse Humbert, it is this plurality of potentialities which eventually helps bring the personal in line with the political—the political understood as the building, rather than the burning (or jumping off), of bridges,—whereas for Maryse Condé, the autobiographical novel is a device for representing the unhappy consciousness at its most delusory. Victim of her own alienations and mimetic illusions, Condé's narrator serves as counterexample, as infertile and sterile hybrid, whose negativity is an insidious form of dependence on the racist discourses the author denounces.

Such a use of Nietzsche qualifies my epistemology as poststructuralist. In recent years that epistemology, and the "postmodern condition" it signals, has come under severe attack from those who defend various good old-fashioned forms of humanism. But it

[27]Nancy Morejón, *Nacion y mestizaje en Nicolás Guillén* (Havana: Unión, 1982), p. 23. My translation.

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seems to me urgent to point out that the criticisms leveled against poststructuralist epistemologies have very disturbing parallels in the nineteenth-century polygenists' discourse of racial purity. In both cases, indeterminacy, hybridization, and fragmentation are feared because of the risks of "degeneration" of the human species, of the race, and of "traditional" literary culture. If *métissage* and *indeterminacy* are indeed synonymous metaphors for our postmodern condition, then the fundamental conservatism of those who fight against both should be obvious.[28]

As Darwin discovered, the more varied the life forms in a given environment, the greater their chances of thriving. Hybrid configurations and diversified descendants of original species have the edge in the struggle for survival. The paradigm of struggle, the *agon*, is thus not the most useful for understanding either the natural world or the process of filiation in literary tradition.[29] The paradigm of diversity is just as important, since, according to Darwin's principle of divergence,

> more living beings can be supported on the same area the more they diverge in structure, habits and constitution, of which we see proof by looking at the inhabitants of any small spot. . . . [D]uring the modification of the descendants of any one species, and during the incessant struggle of all species to increase in numbers, the more diversified these descendants become, the better will be their chance of succeeding in the battle for life. Thus the small differences distinguishing varieties of the same species, will steadily tend to increase till they come to equal the greater differences between species of the same genus, or even of distinct genera.[30]

Variety and heterogeneity lead to richer and more fulfilling lives for all those who share a given environment; multiplicity flourishes

[28]For a recent description of the eleven distinguishing traits of postmodern literary culture, see Ihab Hassan, "Making Sense: The Trials of Postmodern Discourse," *New Literary History* 18 (Winter 1987), 437–59.

[29]Despite Harold Bloom's ethnocentric views on the matter: see *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973) and *Agon: Towards a Theory of Revision* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982).

[30]Charles Darwin, *The Origin of Species* (New York: Penguin Books, 1968), p. 170. For a detailed discussion of the principle of divergence, its history and importance, see David Kohn, "On the Origin of the Principle of Diversity," *Science* 213 (Sept. 4, 1981), 1105–8; and John Langdon Brooks, *Just before the Origin* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984). I am indebted to David Hull for sharing these references and his wide knowledge of Darwin.

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when the shackles of homogeneity and rigidity are broken. By contrast, to internalize patriarchal law is to create mutually exclusive categories of "reality" (male/female; white/black; primitive/civilized; autobiographical/fictional; etc.) and to forget that the production of discourses can function according to Darwinian divergence: that a given space (text) will support more life (generate more meanings) if occupied by diverse forms of life (languages). The authors in this study subvert all binary modes of thought by privileging (more or less explicitly) the intermediary spaces where boundaries become effaced and Manichean categories collapse into each other.

I have credited Darwin for giving scientific validity to the notion of heterogeneity. The United States is a country where grass-roots culture and the politics of small groups often exhibit this kind of Darwinian heterogeneity. Zora Neale Hurston's and Maya Angelou's works are lucid examples of that America, the one "blues critics" are helping to uncover and excavate from the historical myth of the melting pot.[31] Coming as I do from a "small spot," also visited by Darwin during his voyage on the *Beagle*, I have a vested interest in valorizing the principle of divergence. All too often it is excluded by a politics of knowledge, which values power and appropriates Darwinian theories of natural selection because they appear to give legitimacy to the strong. By contrast, and as Détienne and Vernant have shown, the Greek art of *mētis* is an art of transformation and transmutation, an aesthetics of the ruse that allows the weak to survive by escaping through duplicitous means the very system of power intent on destroying them. As I shall point out at the conclusion of my discussion of Maya Angelou's works, the art of *mētis* thus rejoins the signifying practices familiar to all oppressed peoples, in particular to the descendants of slaves in the New World. Such practices had to be learned by the slaves as survival tactics within a hostile environment that kept them subjugated, relegated them to the margins.

Reading the Writers

From Augustine to Marie-Thérèse Humbert, the seven writers in this book are examples of "divergent" individuals, living on bor-

[31]See Houston A. Baker, Jr., *Blues, Ideology and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), pp. 64–66.

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derlines. They use linguistic and rhetorical structures that allow their plural selves to speak from within the straightjackets of borrowed discourses. The five women authors represent specific examples of creative *métissage* grounded in the historical and geopolitical realities that motivate and inspire them. In order to make clear the complex lineage that influences both their writing and my reading of their work, I have—as mentioned previously—found it necessary to go back to Augustine and Nietzsche. My point is not to use them as male paradigms or antimodels to be criticized and refuted: I want to examine how dimensions of their work that might be called feminine tend to be either ignored or coded in reference to a more "masculine" and hierarchical framework, even though these texts explicitly reject the possibility of such unproblematic appropriation by critics blind to the biases of their own disciplines and unreceptive to the subversive rhetorical features of language.

But dealing with Augustine and Nietzsche poses a problem opposite to that of the women writers. Far from being neglected, they have been buried under such a bulk of critical interpretation that it is sometimes difficult to approach their texts without preconceived notions colored by nineteenth-century misreadings of their work. What I have attempted to do in Chapters 1 and 2 amounts to a feminist reappropriation of the covertly maternal elements of both the *Confessions* and *Ecce Homo.* I contrast those with the metaphors of death and disease which permeate the authors' language and structure their narratives. I discuss the problematic status of orality in Augustine's text and the procreative symbolism of Nietzsche's. My reading of Augustine will thus lead to the deconstruction of the notion of gender as we commonly understand it in contemporary terms, and my use of Nietzsche will do the same with regard to the concepts of race and nationality.

Augustine's mother tongue was a North African patois, New Punic, spoken until about A.D. 550 in his hometown of Thagaste, near Carthage, a colony of the western Roman Empire. The classical Latin in which he wrote was a second language, learned in school. Instruction was dispensed by a grammarian who relied on corporal punishment to train his pupils. Augustine also learned Greek, but as he explains in the *Confessions*, that language was odious to him and so hard to understand that "[he] was constantly subjected to violent threats and cruel punishments to make [him] learn" it. Of his

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native language, he says that he learned it simply, without threats of punishments "while my nurses fondled me and everyone laughed and played happily with me."[32] For him, then, the language he would come to use as a writer—Latin—had done violence to his body and to his soul. This pain explains in part the ambiguous relationship he would maintain with all forms of discourse and his search for a silent resting point, a state of total metaphysical communion, where communication transcends language, is not circumscribed by it.

Nietzsche struggles with the languages of reason and unreason, the silences of hysteria and madness within the monologues of what Michel Foucault terms "the merciless language of non-madness."[33] He is acutely aware of the tyranny of rationalism, the conflicts of consciousness, and the symbolic structures that artificially order perception, feelings, selfhood. Nietzsche stages his life as *Ecce Homo,* a text of rupture and fragmentation. Operating in the space between being and becoming and as heir to Heraclitean and Darwinian notions of multiplicity, Nietzsche undercuts all our illusions about self-possession and self-appropriation: his "autobiography" is an interpretive reading of his corpus, a commentary on his linguistic selves. In many ways, Nietzsche reverses Augustine: the *imitatio Christi* collapses into the figure of the Antichrist, self-dissolution in the transcendent other becomes Dionysian metamorphosis. The last line of *Ecce Homo,* "Have I been understood?—*Dionysus versus the Crucified*—" is a proclamation and a promise of life against a Christian redemption in death. It is, however, the point at which writing ceases, since madness can only cancel out all possibilities of pursuing an oeuvre. In Foucault's words, "Nietzsche's last cry . . . is the very annihilation of the work of art, the point where it becomes impossible and where it must fall silent; the hammer has just fallen from the philosopher's hands."[34]

The five women writers also struggle with metaphors of death and disease or madness and silence as the ambivalent foci of their efforts at self-writing. Some of the women—Maya Angelou, Marie

[32]Augustine, *Confessions,* trans. R. S. Pine-Coffin (New York: Penguin Books, 1979), p. 35.

[33]Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason,* trans. Richard Howard (New York: Random House, 1965), p. ix.

[34]Ibid., p. 287.

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Cardinal, and Marie-Thérèse Humbert—ultimately succeed in achieving a reaffirmation of life through the emancipatory potential of writing, with admittedly varying degrees of optimism and triumph. But for Zora Neale Hurston and Maryse Condé, who have experienced the lethal effects of historical contradictions, writing is an unrelenting search for a *different* past, to be exhumed from the rubble of patriarchal and racist obfuscations. The women's narratives thus dramatize relations of overwhelming indenture. As colonized subjects of patriarchy and racism, these authors are also acutely aware of and profoundly ambivalent about the literary and vernacular traditions within which they implicitly situate themselves as writers. This ambivalence is of particular interest to me because it reveals the damaging process of human internalization of negative stereotypes. I will try to uncover and analyze some of the (Nietzschean) dissimulating strategies these writers use to subvert generic or critical canons and to address social or cultural prejudices.

The women belong to widely different cultural backgrounds. Yet they share a profound concern for the rhetoric of selfhood, for the processes of self-reading and self-writing as facilitated or impeded by the styles and languages in which they are compelled to write. Two are Afro-Americans: Zora Neale Hurston and Maya Angelou, both raised in the South. Three are Francophone: Maryse Condé was raised in Guadeloupe, Marie Cardinal in Algeria, and Marie-Thérèse Humbert in Mauritius. But all are cultural *métis, créoles* whose socioideological horizons are marked by the concrete layerings or stratifications of diverse language systems. The textual space where these layers interact and enter into dialogue is the "autobiographical" theme that will be my generic focus in this book.

Because the path of creativity is particularly tortuous for those who must straddle the interval between different and hierarchized cultural universes, each of the writers examined here has a different relationship to his/her chosen means of expression (the language in which s/he writes) as well as to the style and mode of discourse s/he chooses to adopt within the broader generic configurations of "autobiography." In other words, language is problematic for all of them, not simply because no one ever has a transparent relationship to a given linguistic frame of reference but more specifically because their frames of reference are cultural worlds apart. The space of writing in which these frames intersect positions the writing subject

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at the confluence of complex and sometimes conflicting creative impulses, which complicate both the writer's and the implied reader's relations in (and to) the text under scrutiny. Thus the denotative and connotative layers of the text can either undermine, contradict, and sabotage each other or reinforce and strengthen patterns of address which allow the subject to speak the language of the other—the implied reader—without risk of abandoning a privileged position within the semiotic field of the mother tongue. By implication, under the articulated, written, organized surface of the narrative there exists a certain energy that can alternatively disrupt the surface layer (as is the case with Condé, Cardinal, and Humbert) or pull together and unify seemingly contradictory or discontinuous narrative modes (as is the case with Augustine, Hurston and Angelou). Hence, I have chosen texts constituted by multilayered nestings, corresponding to their plural languages. These languages can only enter into dialogue when the interval between the textual layers is allowed to function as "third man," "demon," or "noise" to use Michel Serres's terminology.

For Serres, discourse—in whatever discipline—succeeds in producing meaning by exclusionary binary tactics: "The most profound dialectical problem is not the problem of the Other, who is a variety—or a variation—of the Same, it is the problem of the third man. We might call this third man the *demon*, the prosopopeia of noise." So that if we think of Western history and culture as one long dialogue between interlocutors who are united in one common goal—the search for knowledge or, as Serres has also said, "the hunt" for knowledge and the aggressive appropriation of truth and meaning by two partners in discourse who battle against "noise,"—then this "third man" is more often than not a "she-devil," a figure constructed variously as "woman" or as "*Third* World," the better to negate or abolish the multifarious differences among women, peoples, and countries not aligned with the dominant ideologies and conceptual systems of the West. The progressive historical marginalization of this "third" term is a direct consequence of the paradigm of struggle that Serres's metaphor of the hunt aptly summarizes: "Dialectic makes the two interlocutors play on the same side; they do battle together to produce a truth on which they can agree, that is, to produce a successful communication," and thus to expel or evacuate all interference from "the powers of noise" which be-

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come the excluded middle, the marginalized peoples, the silent but paradoxically "noisy" gender.[35]

In contrast to this dialectic of struggle in the autobiographical texts analyzed here a different kind of dialogue occurs *because* of the "noise" (the unfiltered, mumbled, "demonic" mother tongue) and thanks to interferences between contradictory strategies, not in spite of them. Starting with Augustine's *Confessions*, for example, we discover under the apparent structures of the text a different system of organization: I establish the presence of a form of coherence that belies the initial impression of discontinuity. And in *A l'autre bout de moi*, I show how the autobiographical novel, which seems to foreclose interpretation if we remain in the realm of linguistic coherence and read it as a "French" text, is inhabited by another tongue, which turns it into a palimpsest—a verbal rather than a visual one. Indeed, when a verbal sign hides another, to find the underlying structure of a given work, the most useful procedure is not to "look" for it but rather to "listen" for it, since speech acts are a matter of *parole* and not of static visual signs. Augustine and Nietzsche both offer clues, following which I develop the art of listening for "noise." In my approaches to Angelou and Cardinal, I then analyze the painful process of creativity for women writers who are also mothers and seem to have with words as complicated a relationship as they do with their children, thus reproducing their initial ambivalent relationships to their own parents and to the literary tradition that shapes their access to language. Following Hurston and Condé, I argue that the search for past connections must not be allowed to dissolve into negative mythic identifications but must be a thorough reinterpretation of the texts and of the other "noisy" voices of history. If, as critic, I can attempt to read the textual layers while occupying the interval where this otherness speaks, then perhaps I shall succeed in doing justice to strata that might otherwise go unnoticed, remaining masked under superficial and epidermic structures of address.

[35]See Michel Serres, *Hermes: Literature, Science, Philosophy*, ed. Josué V. Harari and David F. Bell (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), pp. 65–70 (67). In *The Parasite*, trans. Lawrence R. Schehr (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983), Serres also develops the question of noise and the figures it assumes. In "The Algebra of Literature: The Wolf's Game," in *Textual Strategies: Perspectives in Post-Structuralist Criticism*, ed. Josué Harari (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979), p. 276, he speaks of the "hunt" for knowledge.

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The metaphors Marie Cardinal uses in her description of the Algerian civil war graphically summarize the tragedy of clashing colonial monolithic systems in their struggle to eliminate noise and heteroglossia. The hideous consequences of war on the lives of those who are caught under the wheels of history are a function of the abstract, mathematical itinerary traced by the discourses of power in their efforts to silence undesirable, hysterical, or "demonic" elements, that is, blood: "And yet, it was still the shameful agony of French Algeria. The degradation of everything was in the blood of civil war which ran into the gutters and overflowed onto the sidewalks, *following the geometric patterns in the cement of civilization.*"[36] When empirical considerations—such as pain or torture—are geometrically ordered so as not to disturb the intelligence-gathering powers in their search for "truth," war becomes a metaphor for all the great instruments of social codification which, in Deleuze's terms, fight against "nomad thought,"[37] or as Cardinal herself puts it, against the "divagations" that alone can free one from "the yoke of truth" (215). For Cardinal, the path to social self-consciousness is the crooked one of hysteria: only hysteria can transform the dominant codes through and by which we become self-aware as a collective body politic. Because wars need heroes and heroes must die, ancient patterns of honorable conduct and sacrificial victimization are repeated in all patriarchal conflicts. Laforest too was the victim of an unofficial and undeclared war between conflicting ideologies struggling to take possession of the colonized subject, to claim his linguistic soul to the "truths" of monolithic and Manichean points of view. Life, on the other hand, belongs in a different realm from truth, in that intermediate space where distinctions are effaced, divergence occurs, and one's fate can follow an unheroic, muddy, and noisy path: that is ultimately the perspective adopted by Cardinal.

Like Augustine, Angelou and Humbert write a rich and classical prose (English and French respectively) in a language that is not exactly their "mother tongue." Angelou grew up in the American South during the Depression and learned to read and write in a very religious community where the language of the Bible was familiar to

[36]Marie Cardinal, *The Words to Say It,* trans. Pat Goodheart (Cambridge, Mass.: VanVactor and Goodheart, 1984), p. 88, my italics. I have modified the translation.

[37]Gilles Deleuze, "Nomad Thought," in *The New Nietzsche: Contemporary Styles of Interpretation,* ed. David B. Allison (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1985), pp. 142–49.

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all. For her, to acquire a personal style was to combine the English literary tradition with old-fashioned southern idioms, biblical phrases and rural as well as urban dialects. Unlike other black American writers who choose to express themselves in dialect only, Angelou makes a conscious political decision to master "the King's English" in order to reach a wider audience but also, as she recognizes honestly, because "insecurity can make us spurn the persons and traditions we most enjoy."[38] But what she dispenses with on the level of language, she recuperates in the mythic dimensions of her narrative, which becomes a vast historical and allegorical fresco of the lives of black American women. The use of an eighteenth-century picaresque model, which she succeeds in subverting with humor and irony, is a distinctive feature of her style. She appropriates traditional patterns to her own distinctive ends, thus modifying our perception of what constitutes both "autobiography" and "fiction" in black and Anglo-American literatures.

For Humbert, writing is possible in the psychic space where three languages intersect. The Mauritian creole dialect of her native island seldom surfaces as such in the text or in the mouth of the characters, but it is crucial to a full understanding of the narrative layers and of the Nietzschean operation of self-dissimulation that her text performs on itself. Traces of English (the official political language of Mauritius) are frequent in a novel that rewrites Miranda's (and Caliban's and Ariel's) story in Shakespeare's *Tempest*. And finally, there is French, the "literary" language of Mauritius, which the Francophone population prides itself on cultivating and refining, the more so because it is by no means the language of the majority or the official language. On one level, Humbert's novel is a romantic melodrama with two traditional heroines, one tragic and one romantic, whose fates follow the patterns ascribed to such characters in the canonical texts of the genre. But under the surface structure of the narrative is a complex self-portrait that deconstructs the notion of "heroine," allowing the narrator to assume control and to reject the tradition of female passivity inscribed in the dominant scripts of her legacy.

Hurston and Condé are consumed by the need to find their past, to trace lineages that will empower them to live in the present, to

[38]Maya Angelou, *Singin' and Swingin' and Gettin' Merry like Christmas* (New York: Random House, 1976), p. 94.

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rediscover the histories occluded by History. The impasse in which Condé's Véronica finds herself at the end of her stay in Africa is an allegory of the impasse of *départementalisation* in the French West Indies. As a figure for the failure of Antilleans to embrace their fate as *Caribbean* peoples (instead of "French" Antilleans), she epitomizes the cultural problems of her island. As Glissant points out, "The nation is not based on exclusion; it is a form of dis-alienated relationship with the other who in this way becomes our fellow man [qui ainsi devient autrui]."[39] Condé's disturbing pessimism is a reflection of the political morass of her people, who continue to live under the thumb of the *métropole*, thus entertaining an alienated relationship with the French other, who cannot, under those circumstances, become an *autrui*, that is, a peer and an equal.

So, unlike that of the other women writers, Hurston's and Condé's concern for the past remains linked to a certain pessimism about the future. Their narrators are the lost daughters, orphaned offspring, of an imaginary Africa. For Hurston, anthropological field research becomes a way to rediscover and study lost siblings, to learn about the transformations, transculturations, and cultural *métissage*s at work in various areas of the New World. She succeeds in showing the value of "dialect" as a sophisticated means of expression, dispensing once and for all with sentimental or condescending attitudes toward so-called primitivism. But Condé's Véronica makes the trip back to Africa to discover the emptiness within, the false solutions of exile and nomadism. Her narrative presents the most disturbing questions about race and origin, sexuality and domination, intellectual honesty and political engagement. These are questions we must face with great urgency if we believe that intellectual work can have any kind of effect on reality, if we do not want our words to be "dust tracks on a road," aimless detours or strategies of deferral, and would rather choose to have them function as means of transforming our symbolic systems, for the symbolic is real, and in symbols lies our only hope for a better world. To reinterpret the world *is* to change it.

If Nietzsche and Augustine seem to write themselves into silence, the silence of madness or religion, by contrast, Angelou, Cardinal, and Humbert write in an attempt to break out of the prison house of

[39]Glissant, p. 463.

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colonizing languages: writing becomes the only key to the (utopian?) creation of a different, heterogeneous, and multicolored future, a future in which the "principle of divergence" is recognized as valid and functional not only in nature but in all our cultural institutions as well, from language to politics. It is no accident that this emphasis on a life-affirming view of writing and creativity is common to three women who are also mothers but whose articulation of the "maternal," as we shall see, is more problematic than Augustine's search for the kind of elusive plenitude that Julia Kristeva has termed the "Eternal Phallic Mother," although it will remain quite close to Nietzsche's writing of the (pro)creative body.[40] Augustine's search for plenitude and coherence leads him to emphasize wholeness and completeness, whereas for the women writers, it will become clear that the human individual is a fundamentally relational subject whose "autonomy" can only be a myth. In the context of our postcolonial history, this view inevitably implies a critique of the myth of economic and political independence of the so-called Third World nations whose survival depends on the "First" World's understanding of *inter*dependence, of "global relations [la Relation planétaire]."[41]

As the foregoing discussion suggests, permutations of all the chapters of this book are possible. Reading sequences might be the following: Augustine and Nietzsche, Augustine, Angelou, and the second half of Chapter 6, on Humbert; Nietzsche, Hurston, Cardinal and Humbert; Hurston, Angelou, and Condé; or Condé, Cardinal, and Humbert. But the reader should feel absolutely free to let her/himself be guided by the threads that seem most compelling and inspiring, as I have done in my own reading of the texts. Since reading is always appropriative, I should perhaps say a few words about my technique of appropriation, a technique I urge my own reader to employ with regard to my book. I try to derive my interpretive strategies from the texts themselves rather than to adopt a

[40]For a excellent feminist psychoanalytic approach to the issues that concern me here, see Shirley N. Garner et al., eds. *The (M)other Tongue: Essays in Feminist Psychoanalytic Interpretation* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985). I am more interested in the cross-cultural repressive linguistic mechanisms that "colonize" a writer's access to his/her (m)other tongue. I will be analyzing how this repressed linguistic layer resurfaces in the text, creating echoes of another discourse, another sensitivity under the apparent simplicity of the narrative.

[41]Glissant, p. 465.

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single theoretical lens from the vast array of critical approaches available to the contemporary critic. This approach enables me to analyze the ways in which rhetorical structures produce meaning and to elucidate the process whereby text and context can ultimately be derived from the linguistic structures interacting on different levels of textual production. I then draw conclusions or elaborate theories on the basis of this close textual scrutiny. Theoretical commitments are of course indispensable. But I try never to impose a theoretical grid on the text; instead, I draw from it the means of theorizing its own process of production. This technique might be labeled a noncoercive feminist practice of reading, since it allows text and reader to enter a dialogue that does not follow the usual rules of linear, agonistic, and patriarchal discourses. To read noncoercively is to allow my self to be interwoven with the discursive strands of the text, to engage in a form of intercourse wherein I take my interpretive cues from the patterns that emerge as a result of this encounter—in other words, it is to enjoy an erotics of reading somewhat similar to Barthes's in *The Pleasure of the Text*.

Indeed, one does not enter into a fictional world without risk, the risk of being influenced by a specific point of view. Reading is a two-way street and by implicating myself in my reading, I am in turn transformed by that activity. I can never be a neutral observer of the structures of the texts I read, but my perspectives are also shaped, at least in part, by those present in the texts I discuss. Since I strongly believe that our lives are overdetermined by language and ideology, history and geography, my purpose in this book is to try to investigate how that larger context may be present *in* the text, in the interweavings of its languages, but sometimes in such a subtle way as to have been neglected by critical discourses that did not take this context into consideration or that simply tried to eliminate it.[42]

[42]The English version of Marie Cardinal, *Les Mots pour le dire* is an extreme case in point here, as will be shown in Chapter 6. A less extreme but nonetheless disturbing example of a critic who negates historical and geopolitical considerations is Christopher Miller, in *Blank Darkness: Africanist Discourse in French* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985). On p. 120, analyzing Baudelaire's language, Miller speculates at length about whether Baudelaire "invented" the term *cafrine* used in his poem "La Belle Dorothée" because such a term is not to be found in any of the major *French* dictionaries Miller has consulted. The term is a creole neologism, widely used in the islands of Reunion and Mauritius where Baudelaire spent time in 1841 and where he learned some Creole. Baudelaire's use of *cafrine* is a perfect example of the strong

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Throughout my discussions, I rely on *métissage* as an aesthetic concept to illustrate the relationship between historical context and individual circumstances, the sociocultural construction of race and gender and traditional genre theory, the cross-cultural linguistic mechanisms that allow a writer to generate polysemic meanings from deceptively simple or seemingly linear narrative techniques. I thus establish the need for a kind of Geertzian "thick description" of those texts.[43] Indeed, the use women writers make of both Western literary (or religious) traditions and vernacular cultures (or dialects) contributes to a form of intertextual weaving or *mé-tissage* of styles. This, I believe, is a fundamentally emancipatory metaphor for the inevitably relational and interdependent nature of peoples, nations, and countries hoping to enter into a peaceful "Relation planétaire" at the threshold of the twenty-first century.

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presence of that vernacular context *in the text.* Yet that context is ignored by a critic whose interest in discourse theory suffers from lack of historical grounding. As Derrida has put it: "The dialectic of language, of the tongue [*langue*], is dialectophagy." *Glas,* trans. John P. Leavey, Jr., and Richard Rand (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), p. 9.

[43]See Geertz, chap. 1.

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