Ritual and Contemporaneity:
Dismantling the Master's House through Narrative Time Travel

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In the spirit of creolization and the rhythms of oral storytelling, let this essay trouble the form, let the sentences and paragraphs be the bones of an "immense testimony" (Chamoiseau 116), and their potential opacity be celebrations of a shared ritual against the colonial project of brutal ordering within the Master's House. This essay will not seek to prove an origin myth, a monolith, or a modernist structuralism which attempts to entrap us in beliefs of another "capital-h History" (Lee 45). The ritual of a fugitive form is a "nonhistory" (45). As Xavier Lee notes of Glissant in his article "Fugitive Form in Patrick Chamoiseau's *L'esclave vieil homme et le molosse*," fugitive form is "a discontinuity within continuity" (45). *Slave Old Man* is a bone, is a stone. As one example of diasporic literature, it is a ritual of rituals: each chapter, seven narrative arcs, and the complete encircling of the book through the entanglement of "I" and "We". As one example of literature of the African diaspora, it rejects linear stories of freedom that move a subject from free to enslaved back to freedom—because this is colonial in style, form, and spirit. *Slave Old Man* and the Marqueur (scratcher) interpenetrate and co-create each other's existence. They time travel through each other as sites of ritual, sharing in their different realities, freedoms, and opacities. Ritual in *Slave Old Man* is a form of nonhistorical and nonlinear practice. It forms a space of contemporaneity, where past and future can meet through participants in the ritual at any point in time. Here, there is a "simultaneous refusal of origin myths and [a] striving for an alternative means of legitimating a fantasied social bond between individuals

of radically different origin" (Garraway 164). Here, let the reader touch every next letter, word, and sentence with their eyes and become with this essay "neither dream, nor delirium, nor fanciful fiction" (Chamoseau 118) but each, or all, or none. Here, let the structure of this essay call and respond, build with rhythm and repetition, so that we all might share in a dismantling contemporaneity across time and space.

Slave Old Man is a structure of seven chapters like the "seven nths of a second" (27) that Beast and Slave Old Man exchange over months: Matter, Alive, Waters, Lunar, Solar, The Stone, The Bones. *Slave Old Man* is a structure of seven chapters, which seems "a clear allusion to the seven-day creation cycle in Genesis, while the chosen terms evoke the elements in the creation myth of Greek antiquity" (Garraway 153); but the stone and bones trouble a clear ontology, and instead, the symbols and denotations of these titles interpenetrate each other nonlinearly and thus disrupt a linear colonial mythopoesis. There are seven epitaphs which reach outside the text to texts of Edouard Glissant, who with Chamoiseau (and perhaps the Marqueur) "prescribe a 'braid of histories' as a way out of the historiographical project of 'writing in dominated land'" (Lee 45)—both the dominated land of Martinique but also that of the form of the novel itself as directed by a Eurocentric ethos. There are seven brief incitements or "poems" from the Marqueur where he "*persists in the foundation of an awakening*" (Chamoiseau 3). And then seven acts of the Marqueur touching the bones; and then seven acts of marking time by recording folio numbers. Every part of these processes and repetitions across chapters speak to local and global rhythms and rituals. The cyclical process of entry into each chapter is a performance, inviting the reader, the narrator, and the Slave Old Man to join in at the "*vielles*" and perhaps project ourselves into the womb of "a future renaissance" (8).

The first of the seven narrative arcs, which blur across chapter boundaries, provides us with escape as ritual. We learn that Slave Old Man has been wrestling and communing with the *décharge* (a form of escape) for most of his life—a compelling force which sends enslaved folks running uncontrollably from the plantation only to be caught, punished, and often destroyed. At the fireside of the *vielles,* we learn that others do not see his struggle as he operates with a powerful opacity and "he seems inert but manages to decipher undecodable things" (28) and that "he plays the drums without playing them" (28) suggesting there are different modalities of participation. The repeated rising up of *décharge* and the learning to let it live within him becomes a ritual which unleashes a new "uproar" which is "resistant to *decantation* spell-breakings" (31) and which he carries with him beyond the context of the plantation. It is this new uproarious power in his bones that the Marqueur will touch. It will cause in the Marqueur his own *décharge*, but his ritual of escape is one of escaping assumptions about Slave Old Man, about freedom and slavery, about how a subject should be narrativized, and this will co-create a rebirth for both of them, through and within the past, present, and an unnameable future renaissance.

Rebirth often occurs in a symbolic womb. The second narrative arc is that of forest as ritual. The Great Woods is a site of temporal and spatial entanglement across characters, across species, across time and space: "Around him everything shivered shapeless, vulva dark, carnal opacity, odors of weary eternity and famished life" (39). The personified forest catches, yanks, wounds, and troubles his escape. It "wrapped-him-up-tight. Forced him to be still" and "It taught him the nausea of mummies and of people who are brought back to life" (41). Life and death become thresholds in the forest, doorways to other realities, and each doorway is a "vulva" for rebirth. When it dawns on Slave Old Man "that the trees are

truly murmuring" (50) he recognizes the ritual being performed on him. Through the waters of the forest, dripping and pooling and showering, he is impregnated by his own nearing sacrifice and becomes one of "these men, forging a way of speaking that no one understands but which baptizes everyone" (53). He rebirths himself; he is rebirthed by the forest; he births the future; the future is a womb; the past is a womb; the Marqueur is rebirthed into a past to become a new future. Each rebirth is a baptism. Every baptism is a ritual and works toward "a process of 'infinite rebirth,' wherein the found relic indexes the countless lives that could have been and can never speak" (Lee 54)—but every rebirth carries within it the inevitability of death.

Every ritual requires sacrifice. The third narrative arc is death as ritual. Slave Old Man becomes a sacrifice to the whole of the uniquely Caribbean decolonial project going on within the text. As noted by Lee:

> Glissant suggests that the "tormented chronology" of the Caribbean past should nourish a novel historiography that might attend to what persists, despite our ability to make sense of its presence. It is this feeling of haunting and obsession that hailed Chamoiseau to pen a novel whose forms unwrites itself so that the various "howling presences" trapped in the misremembered past might find their way to the surface of public memory and speak. (46)

Slave Old Man haunts the very text just as he is haunted. When he falls into the old wellspring it is as if he arrives at a sacrificial altar within the Great Woods. Here, he accepts his death as a sacrifice in order to take control of his death and use it to propel him into a dismantled future. Dying becomes transpiration. Wellspring becomes a doorway to another

time. Through it, he travels back to the "nightmares of slave-ship holds" (63) and as he accepts that he will drown at the bottom of this spring, like an ocean, he gulps deeper toward death as a transformative otherness. He stretches into "marine fossils" and "iridescent caverns," he travels along "blind roots" and sees "the eye of water" which looks back at him. It is in this "vanquished" state the "old man who had been a slave began to struggle" (64). The old man who "had been," past tense; Slave Old Man dies in this wellspring, and the old man crawls out of his own death like "those torn from tombs" (65) into an uncanny laughter that shudders time and space. It is this laughter born out of this death ritual which cracks open the tormented chronology of the novel's own historiography.

The writer writes the narrator. The narrator writes the story. The story becomes a history of how the writer and narrator co-create; in order for the subjects of a story to find a dismantling non-colonial liberation, a ritual of wresting subjective narrativization from the writer and narrator must be performed—the subject must participate in how they are described. Through the nutritive opacities growing in Slave Old Man, he becomes powerful enough to escape and overthrow Chamoiseau and the Marqueur—both the character and the text. Chamoiseau knows how narratives of marooning can become origin myths used to "perpetuate an ethos of 'unicity' and negate the diversity that is the true origin of human communities" (Garraway 151). He is also haunted by the prospect of "the tenuous boundary between past and present and fact and fiction" where "the slave ship haunts the slave old man in the same way that the slave old man's memories haunt the narrator" (Lee 46). Haunting is another kind of time travel. When the old man says, "I opened my eyes wide to see better" (66) he speaks from both the subjective individual "I" and the split-multivocal

"I" that stretches across writer, narrator, and now the old man—each haunting the other temporally and spatially and narratively. In Lee's essay, he quotes Doris Garraway as describing "this scene as a 'male birthing ritual' that results in the old man's recovery of his subjectivity" (48)—and right here, through Lee invoking Garraway, through my invoking them to sit next to Chamoiseau, Glissant, and the old man, I participate in contemporaneity, just like the act of recreation when the old man begins naming the trees of the Great Woods. The language he uses within the naming is representative of a shared speaking, accessing knowledge and words from past, present, and future others. Here is where we reconstruct our relationship to the opacities of the natural world, and via nature, the beast that pursues.

In the beginning, the master's beast and Slave Old Man shared the dark holds of a strange womb that carried them over the Atlantic. First, a shared torment. Second, a shared opposition. Third, the shared interpenetration of the transmuting of the master's beast as ritual. This narrative arc requires three stages, the last of which actually bleeds into the penultimate ritual which further unsettles any linearity of the text. First, the old man must learn "a different ritual, not running but staying, remaining, waiting" (71) to still himself as he did in the *décharge*. Second, he turns to confront the beast's violence and tells us that he had to "Suggest to it (myself as well) that I did not fear it, that I could take or spare its life. We stayed like that in a time without length. Eyes in eyes" (86). Subjectivities within subjectivities, or the intersubjective. Finally, just before the old man strikes the beast, its opacity overtakes him, swallowing him "into its darkness" (88) while the beast is swallowed by the darkness of the wellspring—the same one that rebirthed Slave Old Man and turned him into the old man; but the beast frees itself to confront the old man's new being. It "crept toward this splendour" (90) where their opacities and transcendences

collide in an impossible fusion through fission, splitting the world by creating a ravine, which allows them to discover the stone at the centre of the universe.

The sixth narrative arc is the stone as ritual for the old man; the seventh narrative arc is bone as ritual for the Marqueur. Transmutation of the beast occurs through the old man touching the stone, the mastiff tenderly licking the stone, and these ritualistic resonances travelling through the site of the contemporaneity of the old man's bones into the Marqueur to be redistributed back throughout the text like seeds in a breeze that blows through time. As the beast approaches the old man, he knows he's at "its mercy" (91) but he proceeds to try and "better resemble" the roots of the trees which stretch out underground in a nonlinear dendritic pattern to "better reach the sky" (95). It is here that the old man is separated from his body and where he finds "A ravine of wonderment. / Regent of eternity. / Center of luminous shades" (97)—the verse here echoes the same three-lined sections of each chapter—which occurs just before he finds "a stone" (99). He goes on to touch it—stone like bone—and is transported through it and haunted by it. This transposition across many sites of touch completes the interpenetrations from every ritual, every layer of text, all narrative actors, and the opening of portals to all temporal and spatial possibilities so that the Master's House is dismantled past, present, and future—because it is being abolished everywhere at all times through the practice and participation in these rituals. When the old man returns from his trip through the stone, from the beginning of time through many stages of evolution, living through different human and more-than-human lives, the ripples of this penultimate ritual produce a surprising transgression in the dismantling of the Master's House.

Chamoiseau's most brilliant and challenging final flourish is in offering the master a chance at redemption. The last narrative arc is unnameable as ritual. Beast like bone like stone works at dismantling the Master's House alongside the dismantled master. The transmuted beast carries back the ripples of what the mastiff and the old man have participated in. These waves wash over the master, where "other spaces were bestirring themselves, spaces where he would never go, perhaps" (109)—and it is in this "perhaps" where opacity is offered even to the master, who in all his unheroic pursuit of the old man, in his quibbling fear and flaccidity in the Great Woods, in his role as a historical brutal slave owner, is hoped for by the narrative actors telling him into this story. But then who is the villain in this folktale, this oral performance scratched into the wooden pages, this ritual that invites all to the fireside? *Slave Old Man* offers up an interesting iconoclasm, to resist the urge to believe any structure to be absolute, and instead, dance in the rhythm of the "Destructions of limitations… *Celebrations! Celebrations!* I am pleased, lord of dances, by this ebullient disharmony" (106).

At the beginning of *Slave Old Man*, there are two mentions of a "we". One which feels "overwhelmed by this knot of memories that sours us with forgettings and shrieking spectres" and one which yearns "with an unquenchable thirst" "as if drawn to a wellspring of still-wavering waters" (3). The "we" and "I" become entangled in the past/present/future and fracture and refract each other to create the text itself, which lacks a knowable point of ontological or teleological origin. This philosophical implication hides at the centre of this book. I believe it rests in what Chamoiseau and Glissant were trying to accomplish—that abolition is not an action accomplished in the past, but it is a persistent reality one must continuously participate in. Like the narrator who can "proceed only in a light rhythm,

floating on those other musics" that produce "tanglements" (4), Chamoiseau rightly cautions the reader and the scholar in the last paragraph of the last chapter:

> We are all, like my runaway old-fellow, pursued by a monster. To escape our old certainties. Our so-careful moorings. Our cherished reflexes clock-timed into systems. Our sumptuous truths. In a heady rush toward the unforeseeable to-be-constructed that opens its dangers to us. Confronting this chaos, tackling this task, understanding this intention and following it through. Such Writing is *raide*. (117-118)

This rushing rhythm flow of incomplete sentences becomes a muddied wellspring easily unseen and just as easily fallen into as we traverse the Great Woods of life, escaping whatever personal monster tracks at our heels as we pursue what might become a transcendent opacity, rather than absolute freedom.

Works Cited

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