



CHAPTER 5

Conclusion... or Alternative Beginnings

“What the Mapmaker Ought to Know”

On this island things fidget.

Even history.

The landscape does not sit

willingly

as if behind an easel

holding pose

waiting on

someone

to pencil

its lines, compose

its best features

or unruly contours.

Landmarks shift,

become unfixd

by earthquake

by landslide

by utter spite.

Whole places will slip

out from your grip.

(From *The Cartographer Tries to Map a Way to Zion* by Kei Miller © Kei Miller, 2014, published by Carcanet Press, reproduced by kind permission by David Higham Associates.)

In this poem from *The Cartographer Tries to Map a Way to Zion* (2014), Kei Miller depicts islands as places of perpetual mobility. The first lines evoke social instability—things and history “fidget”—then the poem shifts to geography as an agent of movement. Nature and culture are intertwined, reminding us that the world always escapes absolute measurement. The poem projects the cartographer’s desire to find a place that passively waits to be discovered and measured, but it counterbalances this desire with the firm knowledge that “whole places will slip / from your grip.” The island is neither empty nor fixed; it is a point of entanglement, where the past is taking place, shaped by natural forces and human interventions. It goes on. It will go on. The cartographer’s attempt to draw lines and delineate space is nothing but an interlude in a longer continuity of alterations.

In the first cycle of poems that opens *The Indies* (2019), Glissant explores similar temporal and spatial layers and overlaps as Miller does by working through a dynamic between imagination and the world. The poem captures colonial temporality as that of a projection forward toward an imaginative object of desire contrasted with the brutality of real events that occur in its wake. In an unexpected turn, Glissant aligns the projection forward with those subjected to the violence of colonization. Turning to that memorable and cruel scene from Labat’s account analyzed in Chap. 4 in this book, Glissant invokes the missionary and the man he tortured after having accused the man of sorcery. However, instead of centering on Labat’s violence, Glissant focuses on the unnamed Black man and portrays him as a prophet. Suddenly it is as if the man held the destiny of brutal global modernity in his hands that fatal night when he came to Fonds Saint-Jacques to help the sick enslaved woman. In the poem, this anonymous person holds the future because he is carrying the memory of a past left in the abyss of the ocean—the experience of the slave ship—and is able to project this into unknown creations and expressions. Questioning Labat, the poem states that the Black man “is forgetful of your chili,” alluding to the hot pepper the missionary put in the wounds left by the three hundred lashes. There is much to say here about strategies of remembrance and of opposition to colonial oppression. What does forgetfulness entail in these lines? Certainly not to forget the violence. But there is more to it. I suggest that the passage implies the possibility of a methodology that will do away with the colonial French measuring of the past. Labat may hold the power but the singular formation of Caribbean culture lies elsewhere: the anonymous man and the things we do not know about him are what matter.

The poem could, in fact, be read in conjunction with the official chronology that Glissant highlights in *Caribbean Discourse*, which ironically

reduces Caribbean history to nine dates, each one of them pertaining to European interventions from Columbus to the imposition of the “Doctrine of assimilation” on Martinique and Guadeloupe after 1975 (1989, 13). The pointing irony is, of course, that this way of measuring history *does* matter: the chronology unveils a process of dispossessions. Precisely for this reason, Glissant concludes, “the whole history of Martinique remains to be unraveled. The whole Caribbean history of Martinique remains to be discovered” (13). Martinique’s past remains obscured by a colonial scale of history established at a distance and not in connection to the island’s immediate surroundings. It is a scale of history that needs to be remembered so that it can be forgotten and leave space for other pasts.

The colonial chronology evoked by Glissant is a testimony of silencing. This book set out to challenge such silences by relocalizing early colonial travel writing to the Caribbean by means of paying attention to textual disjunctions and temporal overlaps. Time is indeed a destabilizing force. As Wai Chee Dimock points out in her seminal article on time and resonance in literature, texts always extend beyond the moment when they were written (1997, 1061). To be sure, there are several temporal and spatial gaps cutting through travel writing: the time-space between the sojourn and the writing, and the temporal-spatial rifts in the events told where history points back to other times (pre-columbian Caribbean deep-time; African times; European mythological time) and places (Europe, the Americas, Africa, and Asia). My aim here has been to actualize that destabilizing force by making use of contemporary concepts, confronting them with dynamics of transformation. In so doing I have teased out another relationship to the past, not in terms of loss nor a search for a site where an alternative subjectivity unsullied by colonial discourse could emerge, but as an unstable moment of entanglement, an amalgamation where power and creative disruptions occurred simultaneously. Textual disturbances cause the texts to “keep [...] vibrating” (1063), not necessarily as expressions of resistance or authenticity but in terms of dynamic productions. In line with what the poems by Miller and Glissant explore, time becomes a factor for renegotiating what early colonial travel writing might mean.

Coming to the conclusion, I would like to put this method of reading and its findings in relation to a larger concern. What I have been teasing out throughout the pages of this book is the possibility of alternative beginnings for (French) Caribbean literature. I am gesturing at a longer tradition of rethinking beginnings pertaining to postcolonial and, later, decolonial theory. According to Simon Gikandi the reason why we want

to break historical silences is precisely because we are looking for alternative beginnings. For sure, the localization of a beginning depends on the ways in which that moment resonates with the contemporary, the moment of reading, so to speak. David Scott reminds us about “the curious, puzzling ways in which, as idea and as activity, beginnings always constitute a sort of paradox: a point of departure that—simultaneously—affirms *and* disavows, acknowledges *and* displaces, creates *and* repeats” (2009, 1). Scott’s reflection, pertaining to the journal for Caribbean thinking *Small Axe* and its relationship to critical thinking and to the construction of history in the region, literary as well as intellectual, naturally owes much to Edward Said’s seminal book on beginnings (1985) as a joining of key issues in critical theory: language, creativity, intention, authority, style, authenticity, and mimesis. Beginnings, Said argues, are creative because they are marked by invention and thereby also introduce their own methodology, producing difference (from other beginnings) by reusing the familiar and recombining the known (1985, xvii). The operative mode of beginnings is thus paradoxically the return and the repetition rather than a “linear accomplishment” (xvii).

However, what more is at stake is the configuration of revisiting beginnings; how much of the past will be distorted so as to fit with our presentist prejudices? Gikandi asks in his article on the archives of enslavement, “Can we isolate literary beginnings that are not mere projections of our own desire for a singular archive and a seamless cannon of letters?” (2015, 81). Central to Gikandi’s discussion is the critical and creative potential in reaching beyond what have been constituted as foundational moments in history in order to engage with the past while, at the same time, avoiding looking for a restorative new beginning. Gikandi’s motivation lay in what he identified as a particularly U.S. American problem of modernity: the search for a “free voice” that could restore the memory of the repressed beyond the discourses and institutions of power that have held and still hold those voices captured. Caribbean intellectuals have long been sensitive to the impossibility and even unnecessary of carving out a space where free voices would emerge, precisely because they think modernity through the Middle Passage and the plantation as spaces of violence and rupture, but also of continuity and creativity. French Caribbean thinkers in particular have mostly theorized identity shaped by that experience in terms of alienation, looking less for expressions of freedom and emancipation than for the creative exploration of entangled sufferings of Caribbean history, leaving them unresolved. Consequently, in French Caribbean literature,

discourses around foundational moments have evolved on a different scale. Here the dilemma is about the *actualization* of an expression that has no form and no means to be heard. So, to the question of what the history of French Caribbean literature is, the answer is negative: *la littérature antillaise n'existe pas*, Antillean literature does not exist. It is as if the absorption of the French Caribbean into the reductive colonial chronology annuls the possibility for literature to emerge. Indeed, negation in itself appears as the foundational moment for French Caribbean literary history.

This is, of course, not an objective description of French Caribbean literature but a diagnosis also created by that literature. If, simply put, a “national” literature emerges as an expression of a sense of community through a creative form of poetics, the birth of Caribbean literature would then indeed be localized to Paris in the 1930s, when writers of African descent began engaging in modernist writing techniques to denounce the colonial order and articulate a black Pan-African identity. The desire to find a literary form that would mirror a Black Caribbean sensibility and sensitivity stemmed from a stark critique of the Black and mulatto local bourgeoisie, assimilated to French culture and cultural values and incapable of self-criticism as well as of criticism of the colonial order. Writers like René Ménil, Suzanne Césaire, and Aimé Césaire constantly reminded their readers in the 1930s and 1940s that Antillean literature is yet to come and that the writers were in the process of making it happen. Somewhat differently, in the 1970s Glissant diagnosed Martinican alienation as a result of having interiorized the other’s gaze to the extent to which he thinks that this external gaze is his own. In the polemical manifesto of *Créolité* from 1989, Jean Bernabé, Patrick Chamoiseau and Raphaël Confiant revise Glissant’s analysis, suggesting that even Césaire, the Négritude movement, and even Glissant himself have not managed to produce a literature that truly captures Caribbean reality and the Caribbean being.

This negation runs deep and is based on the premise that this culture is entirely colonial, forged in the abyss of the Middle Passage but also in the extinction of the Native Caribbeans. Yet the creative force of French Caribbean literature has been to consider that negation while insisting on a kind of fragmented, diffuse continuity. This, I contend, is where travel writing can offer an alternative beginning as an intrusion in that diffuse continuity, which makes the fragments of the past vibrate.

The point of making seventeenth-century travel narratives resonate today is that they make us vigilant for foundational moments. To revisit the past by means of their embedded representations inevitably confronts us with

layers through which we have to work in order to hear echoes from the shadows and margins of the colonial chronology and to trace the intertwined junctures that shaped the articulation of power. Throughout the pages of this book, I have sought to demonstrate that there is an archipelagic sensibility that weaves contemporary Caribbean literature with writings about the islands from the seventeenth century. To be sure, there are formal aspects that seem to define the twentieth as well as the seventeenth centuries that have to do with the exploration of new ways of being in the world. Travel writing, as we have seen, had no model for representing societies-in-the-making and deployed a variety of strategies for representing Caribbean reality and the people living there. Somehow, their eclectic structures find an unexpected echo in the early texts of Caribbean contemporary literature, which navigate a space in a larger, dominating literary canon (literature from France). Travel narratives mold discourses of domination, but while doing this they unveil the confrontation with their own limits, as if writing had to be fragmented, broken and put together again, requiring a work of mixing and layering. So in the gap between the world and its representation, travel writers were forced into invention and creativity. This, contemporary French Caribbean thinking teaches us, is the other side of the Caribbean's brutal trajectory into modernity (Dash 1998). There is something about the plurivocality, the shifting perspectives, the open-endedness in early colonial accounts that suggests that sense of belongings and sense of self is always and always will be entangled and negotiated along a shifting scale. So the messiness that I have sought to work through without resolving may perhaps, as suggested by Gikandi in his reading, pave the way for fiction, "one in which the truth of meanings is to be found not in what is described but in what it cannot, or is unable to say" (97).

I am not suggesting that early colonial travel writing should be categorized *as* Caribbean literature as we understand it today, but that through these texts the deep history of the islands reverberate in ways that speak to our contemporary moment. Surely, it would be problematic to configure a beginning for French Caribbean literature referring to texts deeply involved in the settlement and early colonial projects. No doubt, the travel narratives show in their texture what Kathleen Donegan has characterized as a split between "colonization as an imperial project and becoming colonial as a lived condition" (2016, 4). My readings here have shown how that textual split makes for narratives, which both eulogize the colonial project and tell about lived conditions. A juncture occurs in that long history of instability and crisis, whether in terms of epistemic transitions or

loss of origins, leading not to new beginnings but, on the contrary, to complex ruptures and continuations. Yet I am not convinced that we should configure early colonial travel writing as part of Caribbean literary history by stressing colonial settlement as an act paired with a deep and confusing sensation of “unsettlement” (Donegan 2016, 2). Despite shared concerns about a sensation of loss, the unsettling lived condition of becoming colonial should not be aligned with today’s politics of rethinking the past or with the poetics of re-writing the self and the world, which has preoccupied much of French Caribbean literature through the twentieth century. Moreover, such a configuration of beginnings would repeat that false chronology criticized by Glissant; it would create a linearity of the brutal complexity of the history it was set out to reflect.

In fact, it would be more productive to use the notion of beginnings to do away with that sense of melancholia and nostalgia, which have long loomed over the (post)colonial gaze. Grieving “lost voices” presupposes an event of eradication, propelled by a will to destroy and a moment of extinction, when we know too well that disappearance mostly happens without us noticing; it is in most cases gradual, happening as other new things occur in their wake. Melancholia or nostalgia will not prevent this from happening. Quite to the contrary, it re-enacts the fundamental gesture of erasure; it is “thought committed to the presencing of roots, even in the experience of absence” (2019, 8) as John Drabinski puts it when juxtaposing the thoughts of Glissant to the “continental” thinking of Heidegger. Indeed, as the analysis has demonstrated, the annulment of the other’s language, for instance, presupposes a heterolingual grammar that would configure other languages as lost. Travel writing testifies to another linguistic logic where languages informed one another, changing, not dying. Here the ambivalence is expressed in the translingual rather than in contained differences. The plurilingual echoes that emerge in travel writing express a latent potentiality rather than a loss of an original voice. Throughout this book, I have insisted on impacts and effects, deliberately avoiding speaking about voices coming back to haunt discourses of control, which suppressed them. These are not ghosts, looming over texts. Rather, echoes of past presences are *there* in the texture of the narratives manifest in various disruptions and tremblings; they are not gone but entangled with control. We have to work with and against the embeddedness of these texts to hear them.

This kind of reading clearly does not give the whole story; it does not retrieve the past. All the while, it can prevent us from pretending to be able

to reconstruct lives that cannot be reconstructed, only imagined. But we can follow the undertows and trace a different vitality that operated by disrupting and fragmenting the story. As Drabinski shows in his analysis of what he calls Glissant's philosophy of beginnings, the impression of loss is not objective to the phenomena in itself; rather, it is a forestructure: the past is only experienced as lost "*because we expect connection*" (9, italics in original). In working through overlaps of time with concepts invented by or reinvented by Caribbean twentieth-century thinkers and with a period where the idea of the new was indeed secondary (as compared to its importance in late modernity), the beginning I offer here is that of a continuity, of opening the possibility of further points of entrance that may deepen and widen the investigation of those traces which have long been held as "lost." I am not concerned with origins but with a historicizing project that seeks to situate the writings of Biet, Breton, Pelleprat, and others.

The analysis of interactions with geography and other peoples, of the ways in which travel narratives construct languages through writing, allows the conclusion that, however strange it might appear, the artificiality of the early modern offers another perspective on approaches to the brutal processes of early colonization. These travelogues display no mourning and melancholia of loss. Instead of circumscribing others in a stagnated time, the texts leave space for how brutality lived on and formed narratives and politics. The narratives retell stories of how settlement and early colonization undulated, displaying tensions and ambivalences on a shifting scale of domination. And these very complex and messy movements speak of the effective presence of indigenous and enslaved peoples in the shaping of early colonial society. These dimensions would pass unnoticed as long as we keep seeing these narratives as solely French colonial discourses of control. We would then not only repeat the violence committed; we would also sustain the silence and uphold the displacement of representations coming out of the Caribbean to France.

Saying this, I am not proposing that the writings by Du Tertre, Breton, Labat, the anonymous soldier, and the other travelers constitute an absolute beginning of (French) Caribbean literature; this literature further implies oral literatures of the Caribbean, Africa, and Europe that the travelogues merely hint at. What I am suggesting is that we rethink these texts and use them as instruments of exploring Caribbean literary history as constant violent and creative negotiations between languages, spaces, and times, a zone of resonance where beginnings make sense from the starting point from which we enter into reading. That resonance can only occur by

relocating them to the islands; in France they remain mute or are reduced to documentation. As Saidiya Hartman (2008, 13) reminds us, the most productive way to engage with a complex and violent past is to refrain from filling the gaps and provide closure.

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