

BORN SHE IS THE DIVINE CHRIST CHILD: FEMALE FIGURATIONS OF
CHRIST IN BLACK ATLANTIC LITERATURE, THEATRE, AND CINEMA

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OF CHRIST IN BLACK ATLANTIC LITERATURE, THEATRE, AND CINEMA

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.....To my mother, my grandmother and my grandfather, you
have been and for ever will be my pillars and my inspiration, may God bless your
souls.

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ABSTRACT

In order to support and justify the slave trade and the colonial enterprise, Western powers relied heavily on distorted interpretations of Christian scriptures to justify the oppression of black communities in Africa and beyond. The biblical curse of Canaan and the letters of Paul were often called upon to justify turning millions of human beings into merchandise to serve the Western semi-god of capitalism under the protective cloak of the Christianizing mission.

In my analysis of works, I offer a comparative analysis of the rewriting of the Christ narrative in three novels: Toni Morrison's *Paradise* (1998), Simone Schwarz-Bart's *Pluie et vent sur Télumée miracle* (1972), Marie Vieux-Chauvet's *Amour* (1968), in a play by Koffi Kwahulé *Bintou* (1997), and in a film by Sembène Ousmane, *La Noire de...* (1966). Africa's dialogue with and connections to both the West and the rest of the Black Atlantic need to be reevaluated. I argue that when we consider the Black Atlantic as a cultural matrix that includes Africa and its Diaspora and when we take into account the former's and the latter's extraordinary heterogeneity, we uncover a particularly revealing theoretical framework that allows for a better understanding of the complex flow of cultural exchanges that emerged in and out of this space.

And the sons of Noah, that went forth of the ark, were Shem, and Ham, and Japheth: and Ham is the father of Canaan.

These are the three sons of Noah: and of them was the whole earth overspread.

And Noah began to be an husbandman, and he planted a vineyard:

And he drank of the wine, and was drunken; and he was uncovered within his tent.

And Ham, the father of Canaan, saw the nakedness of his father, and told his two brethren without.

And Shem and Japheth took a garment, and laid it upon both their shoulders, and went backward, and covered the nakedness of their father; and their faces were backward, and they saw not their father's nakedness.

And Noah awoke from his wine, and knew what his younger son had done unto him.

And he said, Cursed be Canaan; a servant of servants shall he be unto his brethren.

And he said, Blessed be the LORD God of Shem; and Canaan shall be his servant.

God shall enlarge Japheth, and he shall dwell in the tents of Shem; and Canaan shall be his servant

(*KJV* Genesis 9:18-27)

Introduction

Because of the influence of Christianity in Western culture, the Bible became a reservoir of potential and diverse representations that could be called upon in order to explain the unknown to Western audiences. Ever since the first exploration of undiscovered spaces, Western travel narrators and ethnographers relied heavily on the biblical imaginary to describe these newly “discovered”¹ lands and their inhabitants. Motifs and images from the Bible became the normative measure to be used in order to label and/or judge the value of the Other. In other words, non-Christian societies were deemed inferior to Christian ones. The name Jesus Christ was consequently endowed with paradoxical connotations: for Christians, it came to resonate as the epitome of love and compassion,² but for others, those exploited in the name of Christianity, it also called to mind the birth of a religion in whose names so many atrocities were committed in the quest to convert “pagans” into Christians. In order to support and justify the slave trade and the colonial enterprise, Western powers relied heavily on distorted interpretations of Christian scriptures to allow for the domination

¹ The term shall of course be put in perspective, for it tends to convey the deceptive notion of terra nullius according to which the West justified the appropriation of foreign lands.

² “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort” (*NIV*, Corinthians 2 :1.3).

and enforced subordination of black people by white people. In so doing, they intended to undermine the self-esteem of black communities all over the world. Specifically, the biblical curse of Canaan and the letters of Paul³ were often called upon to justify turning millions of human beings into merchandise, mere chattel doomed to suffering and exploitation to serve the Western semi-god of capitalism under the protective cloak of the Christianizing mission.

In the pages that follow, I will demonstrate how a group of artists in the Black Atlantic re-appropriated the biblical Christ-figure to make their own political arguments within an aesthetic context. Just as the West used the Bible to deprive slaves of their human rights, these artists re-cast Jesus in their own image, one that is interestingly gender-neutral and non-white. For these writers, the attributes that confer significance on the redeemer figure are linked less to his divine status than to his propensity for healing, his transcendence of suffering, his rebellion against a corrupt and materialistic status quo and the bracketing of bodily violence and redemptive transcendence.

Before moving to a discussion of the specific issues at hand, I must first clarify what I mean by the Black Atlantic. For the purposes of this study, I will use the term in light of Moura's conception of *Atlantique littéraire*, rather than Paul Gilroy's more geographically limited definition of the term. Moura sees the Atlantic world as a hybridized, fluid, and ever-changing cultural space that emerged as a consequence of the encounter between Europe, Africa, and the Americas. Consequently, the exchange involved elements of both masters and slaves, and

³ "Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything; and do it, not only when their eye is on you and to curry their favor, but with sincerity of heart and reverence for the Lord" (*Bible New International Version*, Col. 3.22); "Let each of you remain in the condition in which they were called. Do not be concerned about it. Even if you can gain your freedom, make use of your present condition now more than ever. For whoever was free when he was called in the Lord as a slave is a freed person belonging to the Lord, just as whoever was free when called is a slave of Christ" (*NIV*, 1 Cor. 7.20-21).

included Africa, Europe and the Americas. Gilroy, on the other hand, limited his definition of the Black Atlantic to the experiences of the black slaves and their descendants in the Anglophone West and the consequences therefrom; he barely mentions how Africa might play a role in regard to modernity. Like Moura, I see the Black Atlantic as a space of cultural flux that takes into account the reciprocal influences Africa, Europe and the Americas, had on each other. Although Africa is a distinct and distant entity, it, too was, and continues to be, altered significantly by cultural exchanges with the West. I will therefore refer to the Black Atlantic as a vast global space of exchange, a cultural matrix that includes black communities in Africa, Europe, and the Americas.

I am well aware that in light of Gilroy's original conception of the term, the inclusion of continental Africa, alongside Europe, Aframerica, and the Caribbean in the cultural space of the Black Atlantic might seem inappropriate. In his groundbreaking work *The Black Atlantic. Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993), Gilroy writes:

The specificity of the modern political and cultural formation I want to call the [B]lack⁴ Atlantic can be defined, on one level, through this desire to transcend both the structures of the nation state and the constraints of ethnicity and national particularity. These desires are relevant to understanding political organising and cultural criticism. They have always sat uneasily alongside the strategic choices forced on black movements and individuals embedded in national political cultures and nation states in America, the Caribbean, and Europe. (19)

When reading Gilroy's argument, one cannot help but notice that the African continent is strikingly absent in his conception of the "[B]lack Atlantic." This lacuna did not go unnoticed by scholars, and his definition unleashed a number of opposing

⁴ Lowercase in the original quote

viewpoints. Among other concerns,⁵ this Atlantic “aporia,” to quote Charles Piot, laid the foundation for the controversy that resulted from Gilroy’s path-breaking work:

The ellipsis also suggests, of course, that Africa has played little role in the development of black Atlantic cultural production, other than as provider of raw materials—bodies and cultural templates/origins—that were then processed or elaborated upon by the improvisational cultures of the Americas. (Piot 156)

Deemed irrelevant in the list of potent agents of modernity, Africa seemed once again condemned to oscillate between a glorified mythic past and an equally distorted portrayal as a continent that would be the embodiment of a variety of repressed Western fantasies. A careful analysis of African history nevertheless demonstrates the fallacy of such a discursive marginalization in regard to global modernity. Africa’s dialogue with and connections to both the West and the rest of the Black Atlantic need, in this regard, to be reevaluated. As Piot argues Africa is “a major entity in the [B]lack Atlantic world” (156). Concurring with Piot’s argument, Babacar M’Baye writes that:

By conceptualizing hybridism as a fluidity of ideas and identities occurring mainly in the West, Gilroy somewhat ignores Africa’s contributions to black cosmopolitan and colonial resistances against tyranny between the two world wars. Gilroy could have avoided the dismissal of Africa by including the continent in his theorizing of black transnational spaces. [...] Yet, Gilroy’s [B]lack Atlantic theory should not be

⁵ In her review of Bénédicte Ledent’s and Pilar Cuder-Domínguez’ *New Perspectives on the Black Atlantic: Definitions, Readings, Practices, Dialogues* (2012), Ana Bringas López highlights several of the pitfalls attributed to Gilroy’s theoretical framework, “his ahistorical and metaphoric use of slavery and his celebration of nomadism (Dayan 1996); his privileging of the Anglophone branch of the African diaspora (Zezeza 2005), or his masculinist paradigm that ignores the specific ways in which women have been constrained in the Black Atlantic (DeLoughrey 1998) (161).” In *Black Atlantic Religion. Tradition, Transnationalism and Matriarchy in the Afro-Brazilian Candomblé* (2005), J. Lorand Matory contests Gilroy’s stance according to which cultures in the Black Atlantic would be more influenced by Western cultures than African cultures.

dismissed since it can serve as a starting point exploring the areas of both tension and interconnectedness that characterize black cosmopolitanisms. (5)

In light of both Piot's and M'Baye's stances, I argue that when we consider the Black Atlantic as a cultural matrix that includes Africa and its Diaspora and when we take into account the former's and the latter's extraordinary heterogeneity, we uncover a particularly revealing theoretical framework that allows for a better understanding of the complex flow of cultural exchanges that emerged in and out of this space. Jean-Marc Moura argues that in order to analyze process of culture making in a contemporary world that is increasingly global in nature, we need to maintain:

une perspective interpériphérique, capable de penser les associations transatlantiques dans les « zones de contact » (Pratt 1991), où se jouent des appropriations stylistiques et la naissance d'un langage symbolique dans et entre les marges de l'empire (cf. Thieme 1998). Ces dynamiques traversent les aires, les cultures et les langues. A ce titre, elles n'entrent pas dans des catégories comme « littérature nationale », « littérature de la migration » ou « littérature-monde ». Elles relèvent véritablement d'un « Zwischen Welten Schreiben » (« Ecriture entre les mondes » ; Ette 2005). Il s'agit donc d'envisager des modèles inédits de mouvements transculturels, translinguistiques et traversant les aires régionales, au-delà de la distinction entre la littérature nationale et la littérature mondiale. On peut parler avec Ottmar Ette de « littératures sans domicile fixe » (Literaturen ohne festen Wohnsitz) dont l'étude appelle une « poétique du mouvement » s'intéressant aux formes et aux fonctions du mouvement dans les phénomènes culturels et littéraires (cf. Ette 2005 : 19) caractérisant l'Atlantique contemporain. (218)

My study will thus align itself with Jean-Marc Moura's conception of the Atlantic as an epistemological paradigm that will allow scholars to move beyond the

limitations of world literature, comparative literature and postcolonialism,⁶ in order to better analyze the complex process of culture making in the Black Atlantic.

In my analysis of works, I offer a comparative analysis of the rewriting of the Christ narrative in three novels: Toni Morrison's *Paradise* (1998), Simone Schwarz-Bart's *Pluie et vent sur Télumée miracle* (1972), Marie Vieux-Chauvet's *Amour* (1968), in a play by Koffi Kwahulé *Bintou* (1997), and in a film by Sembène Ousmane, *La Noire de...* (1966). The selection of works reflects my commitment to representing the broad sweep of geographical regions encompassed in my definition of the Black Atlantic. I therefore included an artist who lived in Africa (Sembène in Senegal); an exiled African (Ivory Coast) now living in France (Kwahulé); a writer from the US (Toni Morrison); and two writers from the Caribbean (Chauvet in Haiti, and Schwarz-Bart in Guadeloupe). I believed also that it was important to analyze different genres to get a better understanding of the mythic elements (schemes) that contribute to the persistence of myths surrounding the representations of Christ. Moreover, although most writers intentionally borrowed from the Christ narrative to create their characters, I also intentionally included a Christ figure that was not specifically so drawn (Sembène's heroine in *La Noire de...*) in order to move beyond the realm of the writer's specific viewpoints and make room for the liberating power of interpretation. It will be noted that in each of the works under review, different aspects of the Jesus archetype are brought to the forefront.

Understanding how communities in the Black Atlantic mediate their relation to the Scriptures has been the focus of much interdisciplinary scholarship. Most

⁶ Moura challenges the narrowly national aspects of comparative literary analysis [les aspects étroitement nationaux du comparatisme littéraire]. In his view, postcolonialism lacks convincing analytical tools to study texts written in mainstream, western (former colonizer) spaces [Il lui reste [au postcolonialisme] à développer des méthodes convaincantes pour aborder les oeuvres des centres traditionnels de la littérature, les anciens colonisateurs.] (214)

scholars have however focused either on the broad scope of religious history, or on a single literary author. And while the significance of figurations of Christ in the Black Atlantic has triggered the interest of several contemporary critics (Dathorne, Du Toit, Gates, Callahan, Leroux, to name just a few), their studies usually center around masculine authors and the messianic dimension of their works.

Although contemporary Womanist theology, along with studies such as Newman's *From Virile Woman to Woman Christ in Medieval Religion and Literature* (1994) and Stave's *Toni Morrison and the Bible* (2006)—and most particularly Sharon Jessee's essay titled "The 'Female Revealer' in *Beloved*, Jazz and Paradise. Syncretic Spirituality in Toni Morrison's Trilogy"—reveal an interesting shift of focus, feminine figurations of Christ remain under-examined and/or misinterpreted. This general lack of attention is significant because it imposes a patriarchal straightjacket on literary interpretation and suggests a continuing resistance to changing gender dichotomies that have persisted for centuries. We live in an era where every layer of power need to be interrogated and challenged in order to question its presumed justification. The masculinity of the Jesus, as the Son of God, invites reflection in this regard, since his masculinity would seem to exclude women from the realm of the divine. In order to address this problem, I propose a reading of biblical intertextuality in the Black Atlantic that moves beyond mere dichotomies (male/female, black/white, center/margin), an analysis that takes into account both the ways in which the West used the Bible to subdue Africa and Africans, and the epistemological potential of the biblical myths in regard to the Black women's experiences of modernity. My goal is to provide analyses that bring to the forefront both the alienating potential of biblical myths on the black ethos, and their liberating potential.

In the wake of independence of many Black nations, especially when coupled with the liberation theologies that followed, Biblical studies gradually shifted their approach from Eurocentrism to a more regional perspective that invited voices from the margins to discuss their relationship to Christianity. The fairly recent field of postcolonial biblical studies emerged in early 1990s, notably with R.S. Sugirtharajah's *Voices from the Margin: Interpreting the Bible in the third World* (1991). In his book, Sugirtharajah insists on the square marginality of biblical studies from the margin, marginal within the very limits of the margins, that is to say that both biblical studies and voices from the margin endure a confinement at the periphery of dominant discourse. Sugirtharajah argues for a minority hermeneutics, one that would be representative of the ambivalent nature of the subaltern's relation to the Bible and biblical studies, while also highlighting the ethical task of debunking arbitrary power hierarchy and exposing the realities of power to the powerless. As a collection of essays, *Voices from the Margin* brings to the fore hermeneutical interpretations of the Bible from authors originating from the five different continents, each author focusing on his/her cultural identity. For the Americas, Elsa Tamez suggests a four-stage process: "(1) the Bible and conquest, (2) the rejection of the Bible, (3) the popular reading of the Bible, and (4) Indigenous hermeneutics" (Sugirtharajah 14). Hers is a particularly interesting approach for my purpose in that it focuses on the Black Atlantic's relation to the Bible. In regards to African American women and the Bible, Renita Weems highlights the "ways in which [minorities'] hermeneutics intersects with [their] social and political identities" (Sugirtharajah 27). We shall see in the course of my analysis that the ways in which the myth of Jesus Christ is convoked by the authors is indeed intrinsically linked to a broader reflection

upon the formation of social, political, religious and cultural identities in the Black Atlantic.

Robert Alter published his groundbreaking analysis of the Bible as literature in the 1980s wherein he highlighted the essential literary dimension of the biblical texts and delivered a vibrant and profoundly illuminating close-reading of several major literary texts influenced by the biblical imaginary. However, until recently, the focus was on a very limited group of individual authors. In 1994, Susan Gallagher's *Postcolonial Literature and the Biblical Call for Justice* demonstrated a growing interest in the intersection of postcolonial literature and biblical studies. In this collection of essays, the authors interrogate the possibilities for Christianity to remain relevant and meaningful "outside the Western cultural tradition of which it is so crucial a part" (24) by offering a contemporary approach to biblical hermeneutics. Following the argument of biblical justice, the authors reflect upon the challenge biblical justice poses to poststructuralism, while bringing to the fore the tensions and conflicts that result from the acculturation process in which indigenous and Western cultures collide. They also point out the ethical and aesthetic dilemmas encountered by postcolonial writers in their quest to denounce and debunk injustice.

While a change of orientation in biblical studies emerged in the 1990s in the Anglo-Saxon academic world, it mostly concerned the intersection of politics and religion in postcolonial studies. Very seldom do these comparative critics focus on how the biblical imaginary influences the process of literary creation in postcolonial literatures, as Sylvie Parizet points out. In France, scholars, such as Daniele Chauvin, Sylvie Parizet, Frédérique Leichter-Flack, Véronique Gelly to name just a few, have demonstrated the epistemological wealth of comparative analyses studying the influence of the biblical intertext on the work of mostly mainstream authors, but

Sylvie Parizet's dictionary *La Bible dans les littératures du monde*, published in 2016, demonstrates a growing interest by scholars to study biblical intertextuality in world literatures.

My analysis draws heavily from Pierre Brunel's *Mythocritique* methodology in which he suggests that, rather than seek to discover the origin of a myth, the comparatist should instead pay attention to the mythic schemes that serve to revive the myth:

N'est-il pas tentant, alors, de substituer une perspective synchronique à la traditionnelle perspective diachronique, et de chercher, à la source du mythe, non plus le modèle à partir duquel se constituera la longue série des imitations, mais — J'emploie volontairement un mot neutre— le « schème » qui donne son impulsion au mythe, s'il est vrai que le mythe peut se définir comme « un système dynamique de symboles, d'archétype et de schèmes (...) qui, sous l'impulsion d'un schème, tend à se composer en récit » ? Ce schème peut-être un archétype, au sens jungien du terme, une relation psychanalytique, un conflit sociologique ou religieux, etc. (33)

While my close-reading methodology is indebted to Brunel's heritage, my analyses also owe much to Jean-Marc Moura's conception of *Atlantique littéraire* according to which he highlights the limitations of traditional area studies and advocates a new scope of analysis that would take into account the notions of movement, fluidity and the complexity of the cultural exchanges that took (and still take) place in the Atlantic cultural matrix.

Callahan's analysis of the trope of the Talking Book provided me with a crucial understanding of the ambiguous nature of the relationship between African Americans and the Bible. Joseph Murphy's revision of the concept of "syncretism" also proved to be particularly helpful in examining the tensions at stake in the

exchange process between the Bible and the Black Atlantic. All figurations of Christ in the works under review exemplify Joseph Murphy's concept of "syncretism" as revised in his essay "Santa Barbara Africana: Beyond Syncretism in Cuba":

I believe what is interesting about the phenomenon that we call "syncretism" is not the fact of cultural mixture, which is present in every historical religious expression, but rather the way in which the mixture is organized. [...] First, the syncretism of Shango and Santa Barbara is one of *juxtaposition*: the orisha and saint are placed side by side in thoughtful ways in space and time [...] comment on each other, revealing new meanings of similarity and difference in their placement and structure.. [...]. Second, the syncretism of orisha and saint is characterized by ambivalence: They are both valid ways of accessing the power of lightning, at once the same and different. [...] Third, this juxtaposition and ambivalence has religious implications in the experience of *paradox*. (Lindenfeld & Richardson 161)

Murphy's theorization of syncretism is particularly useful for my reading of the works. Unlike former conceptions of syncretism that defined the process of acculturation as necessarily "socio-determined transitions to a dominant, Western cultural system," Murphy's insists on the "individual creativity and agency" of the members of non-dominant cultures (Lindenfeld & Richardson 161). The characterization of both types of protagonists reflects a conscious juxtaposition of Western Christianity and African religiosity. The black Christ figures present in these works are marked by ambivalence in that, on the one hand, they reject the traditional male-centered perception of Christianity, but on the other, they also draw on the positive characteristics of the biblical Jesus-Christ, thus exploiting the epistemological potential for these characteristics to reveal the multilayered oppression black women are obliged to confront in our contemporary world. Far from being imposed "as is" on

the communities of the Black Atlantic, that is to say, rather than accept cultural submissiveness, Black Atlantic writers intentionally question and revise these Christian concepts so as to debunk Western hegemony while advocating for the right to use biblical archetypes (including the male Jesus) to reflect the black experiences of modernity and beyond.

The theoretical framework that gave birth to these new postcolonial approaches and to my particular focus on the *Atlantique littéraire* derived from the realization that cultural dynamics in the Atlantic world are, as Moura puts it “interwoven, multiple and complex, reinforced by globalization, and yet cannot be fully grasped in using traditional area studies or approaches that favor unidirectional transfer originating in Europe or building exclusively on binary structures (for example, the dichotomy centre/margins)” (1). These epistemological frameworks are particularly revealing when one takes into account the complex flux of cultural exchanges that result from the various ways the Christ narrative is re-written in these works. We shall see that by using the Bible as a source of intertextuality, the authors demonstrate a masterful ability to handle the very weapons that were originally used by Western powers to enslave black peoples, while also pointing out, as Callahan puts it, that: “The figure of Jesus has signified the suffering of black people, and the true significance of Jesus is signified in their suffering” (187).

In the works under review, the various references to the Christ narrative aim at debunking a dominant discourse whose validity is gradually decaying. My contention is that in choosing to rewrite the story of Jesus from a black and female perspective, the authors in my study have managed to (re)create a figure of the Christ that is no longer attached to the white/male tradition but rather becomes a symbol of a cultural

syncretism that represents the complexity of contemporary black female identities. The Christ figure functions in these works as the Revealer who enables a black ethos to emerge from underneath layers and layers of Western biases so as to reveal an “inner truth” lying beneath the surface that thus allows them to make sense of the chaos of their world.

The Christ figure, when considered as a combination of mythical elements, does have the potential to reveal the complexity of contemporary black feminine identities. Understanding the ways in which the mythical substrate can become a powerful revealer of the complexity of feminine identity formation in the Black Atlantic will help us gain a better understanding of the fallacious nature of a dominant discourse that justifies its superiority by rejecting difference, and help pave the way for an alternate means to establish normativity. The analyses will also highlight the need to move beyond mere dichotomies and accept the Other as such, rather than considering difference as a curse.

For Christians, the epitome of suffering is embodied in the crucifixion of Jesus, but the Son’s sacrifice is not interpreted in the same manner by black and white Christians. If, for Western Christianity, Jesus redeems man by absolving him from sin as a consequence of his sacrifice, in Black Theology, God’s earthly incarnation and his crucifixion means that, in sharp contrast with Canaan’s curse, the Creator stands on the side of the oppressed. Jesus’s suffering reflects their own, and his ascension provides them with a sense that the true meaning of life is not to be found within the straightjacket of earthly existence, that:

A Black Jesus who is a hero to the mass of suffering humanity that is the ordinary, commonplace experiences of many, if not most Black people, is a figure who is in his

very identification with us, places us right at the center of God's concern for the whole creation. This Jesus tells us that we matter. That our Black epidermis matters! That the pursuit of life in all its fullness is a cause worth living for and ultimately dying for! These Black Jesus tells us that full life as conceived in John 10:10 is not about mere existence. (Reddie 92)

Jesus's crucifixion thus becomes the medium through which Black Christians find meanings to colonization, the Middle Passage and its aftermaths, but also to their daily lives in a community of faith. In providing in the figure of Christ a heroic potential to suffering, the Blacks' worldly ordeal gains a noble attribute that symbolically weakens the destructive effects of marginalization. The "blackening" (or non-whitening) of Jesus Christ inverts the forces underpinning power struggles between the Western world and the Black Atlantic. Blacks are (ironically) thus able to draw strength from Western attempts to deprive them of any source of power and justify their actions on the scriptures. Black Atlantic Christianity is a complex phenomenon encompassing a variety of approaches, but many have emerged as a common response to white oppression.

The dissertation has four chapters. Chapter one provides an overview of the encounter between the Black Atlantic and the Bible. Focusing on three geographical areas (Africa, the Caribbean, the U.S.), I demonstrate both the heterogeneity of the historical contexts wherein the Bible emerged, and the similarly oppressive ways with which the Bible has been exploited by the dominant culture to subdue the Black Atlantic. The second part of the chapter focuses on the figure of Christ and the various Christologies that emerged from this cultural matrix (Africa, the Caribbean, the U.S.).

Chapter 2 examines the role women played in the religious practices of the Black Atlantic. The first part of the chapter is an analysis of the central role women played in African and African-based religions, while the second part specifically deals with womanist theology and how black women approached Christianity.

Chapter 3 looks at how the authors of three novels under review—*Amour, Pluie et vent sur Télumée Miracle* and *Paradise*—appropriate the Christ narrative to serve their own narrative purpose. I divide each analysis into four different sections. First, following Brunel’s methodology, I bring to the fore the various mythic elements that function as *moteurs de narration* and I outline the Christ like characteristics of the protagonists in question. In the second part, I contextualize these traits within the broader aesthetic goals of the artists and demonstrate how the aesthetic and biblical myths intersect. In the third section, I examine the political dimension of the works. Because the Bible was politicized to serve the agendas of the dominant culture, I point out how these authors turned the tables on the dominant culture by using the biblical intertext to counter the goals of the Western oppression and re-fashion Christ in their own image. The fourth section explores a variety of interconnections between these figurations of Christ and links these figurations to feminine conceptions of contemporary Black Atlantic identities.

Chapter 4 uses this same methodology to examine how the visual arts, a play and a film, re-appropriate the Christ narrative so as to provide a feminist⁷ reading of contemporary reality in the Black Atlantic.

⁷ The feminist stance nevertheless needs to be put in perspective since, as we shall see in the course of my argument, it might actually be the result of a Western reading of the works.

Chapter one: The Black World and the Bible

I.1 The Bible, Christianity and Christian Missions in the Black Atlantic

I.1.a The Birth of Christianity, and Missionary Activities in Sub-Saharan Africa

Christianity first spread in Africa with the expansion of the Roman Empire.⁸ According to Tradition, Saint Mark would be the founder of the oldest Christian church in Africa, the Coptic Church of Alexandria. It is said that he “brought Christianity to Egypt during the reign of the Roman emperor Nero in the first century, a dozen of years after the Lord's ascension.”⁹ Africa's first encounter with Christianity would bring tremendous changes to the African landscape, but Christianity did not spread evenly across the whole continent. As Amanse reminds us:

From the time of its inception to the present day, Christianity has brought tremendous changes in the social, economic, political and religious life of the African peoples. The beginning of Christianity in Africa goes back to the apostolic times long before it was established in Europe and America. The first churches were established in Egypt. There is a general agreement among scholars that Christianity came to Egypt during the first century of our era. (Anum 282)

Egypt would thus play a major role in the development of Christianity in Africa. The cultural influence of Hellenized Jews of Alexandria tremendously

⁸ The ambivalent status of Egypt, as the junction between the Western world and Africa, can be traced back to the expansion of the Roman Empire. As Dominique Arnauld reminds us, “Depuis sa fondation (754 A. C.) Jusqu'aux temps d'Auguste (27 A. C.), Rome passa lentement de la stature d'une cité-état à celle d'une puissance 'mondiale'. Durant cette ascension, Rome rencontra, au fur et à mesure de son extension, l'opposition des états, royaumes et empires qu'elle sut maîtriser un à un et intégrer dans un vaste ensemble unifié autour du bassin méditerranéen. Au-delà de la péninsule italienne, Carthage fut la première puissance maritime à laquelle Rome dut s'affronter. Trois 'guerres puniques' (262-242 ; 218-204 ; 146 A.C.) eurent raison de Carthage et de ses possessions ibériques. Corinthe fut détruite en 146-145 A. C. menant à la soumission des villes grecques puis des provinces grecques d'Asie (129 A. C.). Les victoires de Pompée, César et Octave apportèrent la Syrie, la Gaule et l'Égypte dans le giron de ce qui devenait l'empire romain, transformant tous ses anciens royaumes et empires en autant de provinces romaines” (13).

⁹ On this subject see, <http://www.coptic.net/EncyclopediaCoptica/>, consulted September 29, 2016.

contributed to reinforcing the emerging Christian impact in Africa. But although Egypt was also part of a larger African continent, the place and role assigned to Africa by the Roman Empire already betrayed a form of hierarchy between the West and the Other. In his book *Histoire du Christianisme en Afrique*, Dominique Arnauld highlights the ambiguous status of Africa in the Roman Empire:

Quelle était la place de l'Afrique dans ce monde romain du premier siècle ? A travers l'histoire de l'Égypte, elle a pleinement sa place dans ce monde méditerranéen du premier siècle et y a laissé une marque profonde notamment dans les domaines religieux, scientifique (mathématiques, géométrie, astronomie) et artistique. Cependant l'empire égyptien n'était plus que l'ombre de lui-même. L'Afrique, vue de Rome était largement méconnue et réduite à des régions à exploiter.

“Pour les anciens, le continent dans son ensemble était connu sous le nom de Libye, les peuples au visage basané, littéralement ‘brûlé’, étant désignés sous le générique d’“Éthiopiens”, les Noirs proprement dit sous celui de ‘Nubiens’, référence explicite à la Haute-Égypte et à l’actuel Soudan, le Kush (ou Couch)”. (49)

It is clear from Arnauld's statements that Africa first became part of “Western history” with Egypt. Yet, although it was to later become a part of the Roman Empire,¹⁰ the continent was still, to a large extent, largely unknown in the first century AD. While Africans were to be denied every single ounce of humanity with colonization and slavery, they actually appeared to be an essential element involved in the scientific and cultural evolution of the West. According to Cheikh Anta Diop, the Egyptian civilization had indeed undoubtedly been founded by a black African ruler :

¹⁰ Robert Cornevin accurately sees the inclusion of Africa within the Roman Empire as one of the underlying causes of colonization : “Désormais l'histoire de l'Afrique septentrionale faisait partie de l'histoire romaine. Evidemment, comme le remarque Robert Cornevin, lui ouvrant celle de l'histoire coloniale, c'est-à-dire la projection sur le continent africain d'une part de l'histoire romaine”, (quoted in Arnauld [20]).

“Tera Ntjer, chef de la tribu des Anou venue de l’intérieur de l’Afrique et qui, aux temps premiers [est celui qui] fonda la civilisation égyptienne” (73). As a matter of fact, even while the Egyptian Empire was declining, its cultural influence would leave a crucial mark on the Western world.

During Antiquity, Egypt was thought to be the birthland of an ancestral knowledge, renowned world wide, as suggests Maurice Fargeon, specialist of Jewish History, who writes in the preface of his book *Les Juifs en Égypte: depuis les origines jusqu'à ce jour : histoire générale suivie d'un aperçu documentaire* : “Les Égyptiens, sous le règne de quelques-uns de leurs princes, furent renommés dans les armes ; ils le furent encore plus par la sagesse de leurs lois et l’étendue de leurs connaissances. La plupart des Sciences et des Arts prirent naissance chez eux ; et en civilisant la Grèce, ils ont été les instituteurs de l’Europe” (xx).¹¹ Oddly, the Egyptians’ polytheism did not prevent them from being valorized by the extremely Christian West. Their erudition had reached such a level of mastery that, in the Western imaginary, they had achieved a form of superiority. Benoît de Sagazan, editor in chief of the journal *Le Monde de la Bible*, argues to this extent : “La Bible a fait de nous, des héritiers de l’Égypte. Si la mention de l’Égypte n’a jamais quitté l’Occident, par la Bible et par Alexandrie, mais pour d’autres raisons [...], nous sommes nous Occidentaux des héritiers de l’Égypte aussi” (xx).¹² While today, the Egyptian cultural influence over the West clearly attracts the interest of many thinkers, in Antiquity, the country itself was also the target of fascination. For Herodotus, Egypt contained numerous wonders and mystery : “ XXXV. Je m’étendrai davantage sur ce qui concerne l’Égypte, parce

¹¹ Egyptians, under the reign of several of their princes, were renowned for their fighting skills; they became even more famous for the wisdom inherent to their Laws and the extent of their knowledge. Most of the Arts and Sciences have emerged in Egypt; and in civilizing Greece, they have been the teachers of Europe.

¹² On this topic, see the program *La foi prise au mot* about Egypt and the Bible, telecast on KTOtv, <http://www.monedelabible.com/legypte-bible-ktotv/>, page consulted August 1, 2016.

qu'elle renferme plus de merveilles que nul autre pays, et qu'il n'y a point de contrée où l'on voie tant d'ouvrages admirables et au-dessus de toute expression : par ces raisons, je m'étendrai davantage sur ce pays." In Greek thought, the superiority of Egypt was undeniable for the whole cultural heritage of Greece had derived from the influence of Alexandria. This Western fascination for Egypt was such that it was even considered as the very cradle of civilization. For Champollion-Figeac, the sign that the country was destined to an extraordinary destiny even lied in its geographic location :

L'Égypte est située au centre de l'ancien continent ; elle est arrosée par un des plus grands fleuves connus : placée entre l'Asie et l'Afrique, ce n'est pas sans quelque contradiction que la Géographie moderne l'attribue tantôt à l'une, tantôt à l'autre de ces deux parties du monde ; enfin, communiquant avec l'Europe par une mer facile et de peu d'étendue, elle sembla destinée, par sa position naturelle, à devenir le berceau de la civilisation, à en répandre les premiers essais et les premiers bienfaits sur le reste de la terre. Tout fut singulier ou mystérieux dans cette contrée à jamais célèbre.

(1)

This process of myth-making was made possible by the fact that, as stipulated earlier, during the early Christian era, the African continent was for the most part unknown to the West: "L'Africa des Romains n'allait pas au-delà de la Tunisie actuelle. L'intérieur était terra ignota que les monstres de légendes et un climat insupportable transformaient en une terre redoutable,"¹³ writes Dominique Arnauld (19). Thus, alongside the myth of an ancestral Egypt being the cradle of civilization, developed another myth, that of the Dark Continent.

¹³ Roman Africa did not go beyond the actual Tunisia. The interior was terra incongnita that legendary monsters and an unbearable climate transformed in a dreadful land.

From very early on, Europe did not consider Egypt as a “real” part of Africa for its prestigious aura did not fit well with the idea of a barbarous continent filled with blood-thirsty savages. The development of Western Christianity in Africa and elsewhere gradually contributed to the marginalization of the Black world and Christian theology evolved into a white Christian religious thought that would lead the mainly Christian West to believe that blackness was a curse, and that white culture was the only depository of the right to decide what would be included in a so-called “universal” normativity that was to remain inherently white.

Between the first and the nineteenth century, Christianity slowly spread in Africa, remaining mainly in the Northern part of the continent. Its continuing presence had been ensured by the creation of the Oriental Church in the first century AD. Several schisms—Ephesus council in 431, Chalcedon council in 451— had nevertheless weakened the influence of the Oriental Church. After the council of Chalcedon, the Pope Dioscorus I of Alexandria rejected the idea of Jesus’s two natures, one human, one divine, and argued that his divine nature fully absorbed the human.¹⁴ This schism gave rise to the birth of several Churches in the East: in Egypt, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Nubia, Syria, Iraq, Armenia, and Lebanon. And “[b]y AD 400, Christianity had spread across North Africa and became the religion of most of the population. [B]ut [t]his was to change following the rise and spread of Islam from the 7th century” (Amanse in Anum 282). The development of Christianity in Africa would eventually be partly overshadowed by the spreading of the Muslim religion and, as we shall see, this would have a huge impact on the African biblical imaginary.

In nineteenth-century Africa, there was, along with colonization, a Christian revival on the continent that would be reinforced throughout the 20th century

¹⁴ On this subject, see <http://www.universalis.fr/encyclopedie/concile-de-chalcedoine/>.

with, notably, the emigration of African-Americans to their “African Mother Land.” But although Christianity consequently spread on a great scale, the relationship of Africans to the Bible would remain essentially ambiguous. This reflects the dangerous potential of the Book, a book that was, as Feminist critic Mieke Bal puts it, “of all books,[...] is the most dangerous one, the one that has been endowed with the power to kill” (cited in Cone xii-xiii). The inherent duality of the Bible would remain fixated in the mind of many Africans. The spread of Christianity divided many African communities, a division that reflected the paradoxical status of African Christians. Indeed, beyond the biased interpretation of biblical texts, the colonial empires used religion to assert their authority over colonized peoples. Beyond the Christian Gospel, the evocation of evangelization of the African continent also brings to mind violent images of communities being forced to embrace the values of the Western empires. But while violence and coercion were undeniably parameters within which the evangelization of Africa took place, it is worth noting that the African autochtones did not passively embrace the Word of God, many were those who, risking their lives, resisted and fought for their freedom.¹⁵

But the conversion to Christianity also sometimes constituted an alternative to slavery or poverty. Again, the example of Kenya is particularly revealing. In his article “How Christian Faith Started in Kenya and East Africa”, Shamma Mutuku notes that, “The missionaries in east Africa had always opposed slavery and the slave trade.” (11) The fact that missionaries opposed slavery made their relation to the indigenous peoples more complex than the traditional binary oppositions. They were no longer viewed as mere figures of oppression, but rather as auxiliary agents in the abolitionist movement. And although life in missions was often perceived as a “new

¹⁵ The Mau Mau rebellion that led to the independence of Kenya is one of the most famous examples of African resistance to missionary Christianity.

form of slavery,” (Mutuku 11) freed slaves were promised a better life if they swore to embrace the Christian faith. Displaced, alienated, and uprooted, these former slaves found the Christian baptism to be the only way out of misery—even if it were certain that other torments would necessarily result from the conversion. Bohache reminds us that:

This economic situation is a product of colonialism, which not only dictated that Africans should have an economy based on European capitalism, that also insisted that they become Christian if they were to become “civilized” and “acculturated”. As a result, Africa is (nominally) 46 per cent Christian. Nevertheless this Christianity was imported to Africa by white Western Europeans and North Americans; consequently, the encounter of African with Jesus Christ went hand-in-hand with the process of colonization. Thus, as Africans struggle to become “postcolonial”, many also struggle to become post-Christian or differently Christian. (138)

Colonization and evangelization unsurprisingly created tensions among communities in Kenya and elsewhere in Africa: some resigned to assimilate, while, as we have seen, others chose to resist. Missionaries then picked, among the newly converted, men whom they would train to help preach the Word of God to Indigenous Africans and eventually evangelize them. For African nationalists, these new Christians were perceived as the worse sort of traitors. As Mutuku writes:

The [...] freed slave villages sought to provide a humanitarian service to the freed slaves, to evangelize them, and to train the converts to be evangelists to their own people. The former slaves were provided with protection and the means of survival. They were integrated into a society, provided with religious, literary, and industrial training, and given a plot of land to farm. (9-11)

The socio-economic issues that the population had to deal with sometimes left only a few choices to indigenous peoples. Extreme poverty and distress were, in this regard, among the main factors that contributed to undermining nationalist movements from within.

Even with the 19th and 20th century Christian revival, Christianity did not, of course, spread evenly throughout the whole continent. African countries are populated with a great variety of ethnic groups, the diversity of which probably played a crucial role in the adoption (or rejection) of the Christian faith. Furthermore, Christian missionaries did not simply rely on the Gospels in order to create “good” African Christians. They had to rely on symbols taken from the African folklore that would resonate in their collective imaginary, and thus ease the conversion process. It is because of the extremely rich and varied pre-colonial African mythology whose heroes shared exploits with those of biblical tales that the Christianization process was facilitated. Both African Traditional Religions and Christianity share a belief in a unique demiurge who would be responsible for the creation of the world. Furthermore, in the Yoruba pantheon, Shango (Chango, Xango, Sango) is the Thunder God whose lightning is said to terrify liars and reminds Yahve’s fury towards the stiff-neck Israelites. In his essay, “Neo-Tarzanism: The Poetics of Pseudo-Tradition,” Nigerian writer Wole Soyinka rightly underlines the religious pluralism which characterizes Yoruba society: “Yoruba society is full of people who worship Anglican God on Sundays, sacrifice to Sango on feastday, consult Ifa before any new project” (42). Not only did African shared a set of beliefs that had common values with those of Christianity, they also believed in the fact that the world was ruled by different deities. African animism and its polytheist nature thus greatly contributed to making the process of evangelization smoother.

Among African traditions, certain beliefs also played a major role in the Africans' acceptance of Christianity. Just as Jesus and Lazarus were permitted to return from the dead, the cult of the Ancestors, a major element of African religiosity, does not draw a clear-cut line between life and death, the deceased continue to dialogue with the living in order to guide them and offer them assistance in their personal as well as their social life. Asare Opoku writes:

[...] Life is constant and is not the opposite of death, since the *okra* survives death and continues to live. This is the basis of the relationship between Africans and their ancestors, for there will be no relationship between the ancestors and their relatives if they did not continue to live after their death; and there is such a holistic view of life that death does not destroy that wholeness. The dead do not just fade into nothingness; on the contrary, they retain their identity and continue to hold the social, political and religious status which they held while they lived in this world. (Olupona&Nyang 75)

The belief in an after-life is a common element of both the Christian faith and African religions. It is a central attribute of traditional African folklore and undoubtedly one of the reasons why many Africans have been able to fathom the Good News as a possible manifestation of divine truth. There is also a central notion in African philosophy according to which the creating principle may be contained in everything, although it may be differently labelled. This leaning towards the acceptance of Otherness probably counts among the various factors that allowed Christianity to spread in Africa:

An African proverb says: 'wisdom is like a baobab tree, a single man's hand cannot embrace it.' The tolerant attitude of African traditional religion towards other approaches to the Divine as well as to other interpretations of the origin and destiny

of human being bears out the truth of the proverb, that African traditional religion is like a single person's hand which cannot embrace the totality of the divine wisdom and essence". (Asare Opoku in Olupona&Nyang 67)

Unlike as in Western Christianity, religious wisdom is, in African philosophy, not perceived as the privilege of a happy few (predominantly white and male). Foresight is, however, inaccessible to individuals if they do not take into account the importance of the community. There is no individual path to the Divine that does not include the Other in the process. Religious rituals are to this extent the perfect expression of the intertwining of the self and the community in their dialogue with God(s). The African perception of religion does not hierarchize the various religious faiths; all of them are considered an equally valuable pathway towards a better understanding of the relationship of God(s) with his/her/its creatures. Asare Opoku explains that:

[...] since the divine truth is beyond the reach of a single religious tradition, wisdom recommends an openness to truth which comes from other traditions. "There are no boundaries or bifurcations in truth," as an Akan proverb puts it, and since truth is one and has its source in God, it may be found everywhere God chooses to put it; for truth is not restricted to one religious tradition, whether that particular tradition lays claim to special revelation or not. (Olupona&Nyang 67)

As this Akan proverb suggests, the path to transcendence is not a one-way street. Why would the Divine racialize or hierarchize humanity if it indeed goes far beyond the worldly restraints of human existence? The whole humanity, regardless of one's faith or beliefs, is, in African philosophy, entitled to the status of God(s)'s creation and thus granted the right to a divine form of revelation. This acceptance of Otherness as such transcends mere dichotomies and allows foreign elements to blend

and syncretize within African culture(s). This dimension is crucial to an understanding of how Christianity spread in Africa. This African disposition toward syncretism rapidly led missionaries to understand that if they wanted to impose Christianity on Africans they would have to work with and not against traditional beliefs. Amanse's remarks are very revealing in this regard:

In the first instance, Christian missionaries adopted a negative attitude towards African culture generally and African peoples' religious beliefs and practices in particular. They called for their eradication because, they believed, they were demonic, therefore, contrary to the ideals of Christian teaching and spirituality. And yet, paradoxically, missionaries both in the past and present have been quick to realize that Christianity cannot exist in a vacuum; that African Christians are cultural beings and that they are African first and Christians second. As a result of this awareness, right from the beginning of Christian missions to the present day, attempts have been made to Africanise Christianity in matters of theology, worship, church practice, religious symbols and spirituality. The primary objective for doing this has been to produce a church which is authentically African and genuinely Christian. This, it is argued, is the only way in which Christianity would remain entrenched in the bosom of mother Africa forever. (Anum 281-282)

Once the West understood that one could obviously not be completely stripped off of one's cultural heritage, strategies of evangelization were diversified so as to include African traditional elements rather than categorically reject them. Consequently, a great number of evangelical churches emerged throughout Africa after the independence used African traditional belief and the power of healing — traditionally performed by the Marabout or the sorcerer— to attract believers. This led to the creation of numerous Christian churches such as, the Christ Healing Church of Nigeria, The African Evangelical Presbyterian Church of Kenya, the Evangelical

Lutheran Church in South Africa in Anglophone Africa, and in francophone Africa, the Eglise Evangélique du Congo, The Eglise Evangélique Presbytérienne of Togo, or The Eglise Protestante of Senegal. Other smaller churches proliferated, especially in the poorest neighborhoods, and ministers promised miracles to the newly converted. If the phenomenon has undoubtedly been the focus of media attention in the past decade, we can trace its origin to the beginning of the twentieth century. As French political specialist, Cedric Mayrargue, writes:

[L]a montée en puissance de ces Eglises n'est pas un phénomène nouveau ou inédit, symptôme d'une rupture qui se serait opérée ces dernières années. Leur implantation sur le continent africain, loin de correspondre à un surgissement soudain et récent, remonte à plusieurs décennies. Des missionnaires pentecôtistes y sont arrivés dès la fin des années 1910, soit peu de temps après l'émergence de ces Eglises aux Etats-Unis. Quant aux mouvements évangéliques fortement visibles aujourd'hui, ils prennent souvent racine dans des dynamiques qui remontent aux années 60-70.¹⁶
(cf. Work Cited)

If the phenomenon is indeed not new, the degree of influence of these Christian churches depends on their specific location. Cedric Mayrargue notes that:

[O]n observe une grande diversité de situations à l'échelle du continent. La bande sahélo-saharienne, fortement islamisée, est peu touchée, de même que le Maghreb. Au niveau subsaharien, il faut ensuite distinguer les zones anglophones des zones francophones. Dans les premières, travaillées historiquement par des entreprises missionnaires protestantes, le renouveau évangélique y a été plus précoce que dans

¹⁶ The rise in power of these churches is not a new or unheard of phenomenon, the symptom of a rupture that would have taken place lately. Their imlantation on the African continent, far from reflecting a sudden and recent emergence, appeared several decades ago. Pentecostal missionaries arrived as early as 1910, that is soon after their emergence in the U.S. As for the Evengelical movements that are so visible today, they often take roots in 1960s, 1970s movements.

les secondes, où le poids important de l’Eglise catholique a entraîné de fait une expansion plus tardive de l’évangélisme.¹⁷ (cf. Work Cited)

The “success” of evangelical churches appears to be the result of a complex process of acculturation that not only follows the movements of cultural fluxes in Africa, but also is, to the same extent, deeply anchored in their traditions. Furthermore, Black theology, and more broadly black religiosity, both derive from the Black experience, and unlike Western Christianity, the path to God is never limited to an after-life condition or rare miracles. Rather the Creator is present here and now with its/her/his creation, and everyday life is filled with signs that allow the individuals to feel the benevolent presence of the Divine or its parental warnings. Religiosity infuses every layer of African society. One of the most striking examples of this is the intertwining of religion and politics in the African landscape. In Africa, the influence of Protestantism with its inherent principle of predestination and divine election—assimilating wealth to a divine reward— makes political power a divine remuneration. Considering the intertwining of transcendence and experience in Black religion(s), one could think of politics as a celestial compensation and a pathway to Heaven. Both factors may explain the close relationship between religion and politics on the African continent. As journalist Nicolas Courtin writes:

En Afrique plus qu’ailleurs, la relation entre l’homme de pouvoir et le consultant spirituel se révèle étroite. Pour satisfaire ce besoin de syncrétisme politico-religieux des chefs d’Etat africains, les évangéliques ont su développer des offres sur mesure puisant dans les traditions. Avec habileté, ils proposent de mettre au service des

¹⁷ We observe a great diversity of situations on the whole continent. The Sahel-Sahara band, mostly Muslim, is barely affected, like Maghreb. For the Sub-Saharan part, we need to make a distinction between Anglophone and francophone zones. The former, historically influenced by Protestant missionary enterprises, the evangelical revival appeared sooner than in the latter in which the major influence of Catholicism has, to a certain extent, slow down the spreading of evangelism.

puissants leur influence cultivée dans leurs “mégachurchs”, ces églises évangéliques gigantesques et très rentables qui fleurissent dans les mégalofoles africaines. Des éventuels réservoirs d’électeurs que ces pasteurs pourront mobiliser. (cf. Work Cited)

Because politics and religion are, to a certain extent, interwoven in Africa, the African biblical imaginary is unsurprisingly given a political dimension. Additionally, no matter how Africanized the Bible becomes through the process of acculturation, it will for ever be linked to the West and thus unable to escape the political dimension that derives from the power struggles that opposed the empires to the Black Atlantic population. Because African religions are anchored in the African experience, a Christian African will naturally have a different viewpoint than that of the rest of the Black Atlantic. As Bohache writes:

Black reality is different on the continent of Africa from what it is in America. Africa is huge and diverse; one might even say that there are many ‘Africas’, for the social problems that produce Christological reflection there are different, depending upon what part of Africa one is discussing. Thus, African Christologies are formulated in light of the effects of colonization, AIDS, draught and famine, and apartheid. (75)

We shall see that the Africans’ relation to the figure of Jesus will also reflect the socio-political context of Africa in that African Christianity is not a religion of the Book, but rather a religion of life. This is probably linked to the influence of traditional African religions on African Christianity. As Mercy Amba Oudoyoye points out:

In traditional Africa, that is, Africa when people are being themselves, discounting Christianity, Islam, and Western norms, God is experienced as an all-pervading reality. God is a constant participant in the affairs of human beings, judging by the everyday language of West Africans of my experience. A Muslim never projects into

the future nor talks about the past without the qualifying phrase *insha Allah*, "by the will of Allah." Yoruba Christians will say "DV" ("God willing"), though few can tell you its Latin equivalent, and the Akan will convince you that all is "by the grace of God." Nothing and no situation is without God. The Akan of Ghana say *Nsem nyina ne Onyame* ("all things/affairs pertain to God"). (493)

African Christianity thus naturally derives from these conceptions. This intertwining of life and religion blurs the limits between the secular and the sacred, thus increasing the impact of Christianity over African everyday-life. And "while the membership of individual churches may be limited to a few hundreds or thousands or millions of Christians, the cumulative impact of the membership of all the Christian churches put together is tremendous, making Africa, perhaps, the most Christianized continent in the world" (Amanse in Anum 283). This brief study of the impact of Christianity in Africa will allow us to get a better understanding of why and how the Bible has been used by African artists to reflect upon their human condition. The great variations found in African manifestations of Christianity are reflected in African literature, theatre and films, and the influence of the Bible is to this extent more or less tangible as a function of the place of emergence of the artist. But while variety undeniably appears, biblical imagery and motifs remain a very common feature of African arts. Art is the *modus operandi* used by humans to reflect upon their own experience. The weight of biblical imagery and themes in African literature, theatre and films is therefore not only unsurprising, it is also a particularly revealing indication of the tensions that emerged out of Africa's encounter with the Western world.

I.1.b The Caribbean

Caribbean people of African descent were brought to the New World through the Middle Passage. And even if the umbilical cord to their mother Africa had been severed, slaves had managed to bring along part of their African cultural heritage with them. Although the matter has been highly controversial¹⁸ among academics, it is now widely accepted that African slaves indeed retained a large part of their “Africinity” in the New World. While some believe that the religious syncretism that emerged in the Caribbean offered tangible proof of deculturation, I, along with Murrell, Yorke and others, argue that it is, on the contrary, a form of evolution that does not point only to a loss but rather indicates the persistence of traditional African religious motifs. As Gosnell Yorke argues: “When religions, meaning-systems or world-views meet there is a dialectical exchange of some kind. Syncretism, though frowned upon and passionately denounced by not a few, is both unavoidable and useful in the identity-preservation of people bent on sustaining their sense of self” (West&Dube 133). The syncretic religions that developed in the Caribbean are thus not the mere product of the uprooting, but stand as proof of the extraordinary ability of these displaced people to resist and become resilient. We shall see that these new forms of religion show the highest degree of adaptation human condition can demonstrate. As Murrell puts it: “The robust African religious traditions in the region have muted the voice of academic skeptics who have the ability to prove for certain that African religions survived oppressive conditions of colonialism in the Americas” (1). But before we turn to syncretism, we shall provide a brief study of Christianity in the Caribbean for some of these religions trade the African mask for the Christian mask so as to avoid violent repression from the surrounding white society.

¹⁸ See for example “The provocative Frazier-Herskovits debate, which has raged since the early 1940s, about how much African religion and culture survived among African Americans epitomizes the ripening of the controversy that is almost a century old” (Murrell 1).

The Caribbean has been colonized by the Spanish, Portuguese, Dutch, English and French who were all Christians, but who did not practice the same form of Christianity. Consequently, the Anglophone West Indies have been more influenced by Protestantism while the French Antilles and Haiti are strongly Catholic. The Christian Church was established in the Caribbean very early in the history of colonization. Johannes Meier elaborates on this matter, “As early as 1511-12, the dioceses of Santo Domingo, Concepción de la Vega and Puerto Rico were established with specially chosen bishops and competent cathedral chapters. [...] By 1620, the Caribbean had a fully developed church hierarchy which functioned almost intact until late into the eighteenth century” (1). Given the fact that both Portuguese and Spanish were the first colonizers of this part of the world, Catholicism was the first Christian faith to have had been introduced in the islands, but it is important to note that the Caribbean had been populated by waves of immigration movements which also played a crucial role in the religious history of the Caribbean. For example, in Jamaica, the first Christian religion to have been introduced was Catholicism, brought in by the Spanish in the sixteenth century; Anglicanism was introduced by the English in the eighteenth century. George Liele, a freed African and former slave in the U.S., introduced Baptism in 1783.¹⁹ As Roswith Gerloff points out:

The history of Caribbean Christianity can be divided, with overlaps, into four main periods: the rather monolithic form of Spanish Catholicism from 1492, and of the Church of England from 1620; the arrival of the Evangelicals or non-conformist missionaries, Moravians, Methodists, Congregationists and Presbyterians, from the mid-eighteenth century; the consolidation and growth of various European denominations in the region in uneasy tension with the proliferation of independent

¹⁹ On this subject see Roswith Gerloff, “The African Diaspora in the Caribbean and Europe: From Pre-emancipation to the Present Day” in McLeod (2009).

black Christian groups and African religions in the post-emancipation era from 1833; and the contest for political, economic and religious independence after 1870, including the shift from British imperial intervention and influence to that from North America, and national independence in 1962. (McLeod 219)

Whether the colons were Protestant or Catholic of course had a huge impact on the Christianization of the slave population.²⁰ The Portuguese had the habit of baptizing their slaves on African shores before taking them away on the slave ship. Both Portuguese and Spanish were also careful not to bring Muslim slaves to the island so as to facilitate the evangelization process. As for the French, in the 17th century, Louis XIII and Richelieu agreed to have slaves brought to the Antilles provided, that they would also be Christianized:

C'était pour sauver des âmes païennes que Louis XIII avait accepté l'esclavage sur les terres d'Amérique exploitées par ses sujets. On avait pu finir par le convaincre en lui montrant qu'on ne créait pas l'esclavage, on ne faisait que le déplacer, que le faire glisser de l'Afrique aux îles pour le profit de tous, de celui des esclaves qu'on baptisait, et celui des colons qui les exploitaient. Tout le siècle est marqué aux îles par un souci constant, aussi bien chez les colons que chez les gouverneurs et administrateurs, d'une rapide diffusion du christianisme parmi les esclaves. (Debien 528)

The evangelization of French slaves was such an important matter in the eye of the French government that it was even inscribed in a legal text regulating conditions of slavery in the French Caribbean: *Le Code noir*, an edict of Louis XIV published in 1680. In it, one reads:

²⁰ On this subject, see G. Debien.

ART. 2. — Tous les esclaves qui seront dans nos îles seront baptisés et instruits dans la religion catholique, apostolique et romaine. Enjoignons aux habitants qui achètent des nègres nouvellement arrivés d'en avertir dans huitaine au plus tard les gouverneur et intendant desdites îles, à peine d'amende arbitraire, lesquels donneront les ordres nécessaires pour les faire instruire et baptiser dans le temps convenable.

While the French settlers who dared not baptized their slaves risked serious legal consequences, both the English²¹ and the Dutch, on the other hand, were reluctant to baptize their slaves. As Debien puts it: “L'élan d'évangélisation des Français se plaisait à faire contraste à l'insouciance des Anglais et des Hollandais, leurs voisins, qui à l'ordinaire ne faisaient pas baptiser leurs esclaves et y trouvaient de bonnes raisons” (529). The English and Dutch indeed had trouble reconciling their conception of Christianity with a combined slave condition for both were, in their opinion, mutually exclusive. The evangelization process thus differed according to whether the slaves were in the Spanish, French, English, Danish or Dutch part of the Caribbean. And this, of course, played a crucial role in their retaining or rejecting of biblical themes and imagery.

But it is important to note that even though the French baptized their slaves, they still did not treat them as equals and did not let them have access to priesthood or marriage. As Philippe Delisle points out, it is only after the crucial date of 1848 that Black people in the Antilles began to enjoy “full” Christianity:

Les esclaves noirs, qui constituaient depuis longtemps la majorité de la population en Martinique comme en Guadeloupe, étaient le plus souvent baptisés, mais ils n'avaient

²¹ This refusal of baptism was strikingly revealing of the way slaves were considered in Protestant empires. As Gerloff argues, “Spanish Catholicism, while enslaving indigenous populations and, after their extinction, the imported Africans, at least did not deny them their humanity [...]. In contrast, Protestant powers, in a capitalist economy compelled by new technologies of the sugar complex, the cheap supply of labour, and rivalries with trading competitors, treated African slaves as mere chattels and property” (McLeod 221).

guère accès aux niveaux supérieurs de la vie chrétienne, tels que la communion ou le mariage. L'émancipation générale, proclamée en 1848 bouleverse la donne. On observe en effet, durant les années qui suivent l'événement, une véritable explosion de la pratique catholique. (65)

Only then would Black Christians in the Caribbean be allowed to practice their cult freely. Depending on which empire they formerly belonged to influenced their relation to the Book, its themes and imagery. Their status as former slave dramatically conditioned their interest in salvation and the idea of sin punishable by God. Furthermore, both the Bible and other linguistic factors also greatly influenced the kinship bonds African slaves and their descendants would establish with their Caribbean peers and explained the dynamic of the cultural fluxes that take place in the Caribbean. "Hence the complexity of transmigratory processes must be considered in the light of thin past, especially of Western colonial expansion and the Western missionary movement; and vice-versa" (Gerloff in McLeod 220). But in spite of a dominant Western influence, just as Christianity had been impacted by traditional African religions on the continent, it had been either syncretized with or paralleled by African religious practices in the Caribbean. Gerloff writes in this regard:

Contemporary studies in anthropology and sociology of religion speak of "*religions on the move*", or the process of transmigration and transculturation, as it refers to dynamic, reciprocal, transitory and multi-dimensional creation in shaping a "poly-contextual world". This implies that religions must be regarded as cultural and spiritual phenomena whose "taken-for granted" essence has resulted from transcultural and transnational processes of mutual influence, interaction and continuous adaptation to new environments, developments and encounters. (McLeod 219)

Caribbean Christianities are to this extent similar neither to European Christianity nor to African Christianities and they even differ among one another. All were born out of singular socio-political contexts that deeply shaped how the African slaves and their descendants' regarded the Christian faith. It is important to note that African slaves did not "become" religious after the dreadful crossing of the Middle-Passage, as pointed out earlier, Africans on the continent were already profoundly religious peoples prior to their departure. The Black Slaves did not need to wait for their "so-called" Christian spiritual salvation to gain a sense of being strongly connected to the Divine. They did not need anyone to show them the way to spirituality for they had already been so for centuries, maybe even more so than their Western counterparts.

Although Western culture, as the "dominant" culture, dramatically altered Caribbean religious forms, as Caribbean Christianities, they were influenced not only by the socio-political context in which they were born, but also by the geographical configurations of the landscape. In the French Antilles, called les Petites Antilles because of the small size of the islands, although African cultural remnants are undeniably present, Afro-Caribbean religions are not as important as they are in the greater Antilles because, as Philippe Chanson points out:

L'exiguïté de leur territoire n'a pas favorisé ces grands marronnages (fuites) d'esclaves et donc la création de communautés marronnes dont sont issus les cultes dits « afro-caribes ». Soit ces cultes d'influences africaines dûment reconstitués, voire reproduits [...], se concentrant autour d'un clergé, d'un temple (ou chapelle), d'une iconographie et d'une liturgie, à l'instar de la *santería* à Cuba, de l'*obeahisme* en Jamaïque, du *vodou* en Haïti, du *shango-cult* à Trinidad, ou encore du *winti* et du

kunu en territoires marrons amazoniens de la Guyane et du Surinam.
(Delisle&Prudhomme 27)

However, this does not mean that African religious traditions had been totally wiped out in this part of the world. They remain present in the way the Antilleans approach spirituality. But while in the Greater Antilles and in other parts of the Caribbean one witnessed the emergence of independent religious entities, that we could ironically call “pure syncretism”, in the smaller Antilles it is rather a matter of parallel religious practices that, to a certain extent, accompany Christian worship without ever completely merging with it. Philippe Chanson explains this phenomenon:

Cette capacité innée d’absorption travaillant l’être religieux créole, et qui se manifeste précisément par l’intense circulation entre les différents registres religieux qui se présentent tout en évitant – et c’est très important pour ce qui nous préoccupe – de syncrétiser ces différentes entités et potentialités religieuses. En bref, de ce réflexe naturel à aligner, sans les mélanger, tant de « plus » (un mot fameux aux Antilles) au niveau de la quête religieuse, suivant en cela ce que Christiane Bougerol a très justement appelé une “logique du cumul.” (Delisle&Prudhomme 33)

This cumulative religious logic, although not quite syncretic, nevertheless triggers in the Caribbean writers’ imaginary an appeal for creolization, a form of syncretism in which biblical, African and/or Caribbean folklore heroes merge together so as to aesthetically express the great variety of cultural exchanges that took—and still does— place in this part of the world. In the Anglophone Caribbean, on the other hand, the influence of Protestantism contributes to the creation of a messianic aesthetic which blends with Pan-Africanism. Hence we see the emergence of

Bedwardism and Garveyism, in Jamaica²² and the U.S., movements that advocated for the revolution of Black people so as to achieve social justice and liberation from oppression and, in the case of Garveyism, a return to Africa because only a Black country could be truly beneficial to the Black community and allow for the success and symbolical crowning of the Black ethos.

I.1.c The U.S.

In the U.S., although white Christianity contributed to a reinforcement of the enslavement of African slaves and their descendants, the Bible, read through a Black lens, enabled the Black community to perceive in between the lines a sense that justice would eventually be achieved and that it was worth fighting for:

Evangelical Christian slaves tacitly agreed with their atheist sisters and brothers in bondage that they would have a religion of justice or no religion at all. And they found the condemnation of the religion of their oppressors in the book their oppressors held to be sacred. Justice became a tenet of faith that even the otherwise faithless could hold with zeal. And so African-Americans came to accept the Book of the religion while rejecting the religion of the Book. (Callahan 42)

The reference to the Bible in Black America has a very special significance because after the dreadful crossing of the Black Atlantic, not only were African slaves forced to give up their traditional beliefs, they were also denied the right to literacy and access to the Bible for fear it would instigate in their minds a will to set free from their bondage. In consequence, “In the contradiction between American Evangelicalism’s imperative of literacy and American slavery’s imperative of illiteracy, African-Americans confronted the Bible as a book both open and closed. As

²² Marcus Garvey founded UNIA-ACL in the U.S. but was Jamaican.

the Word of God it spoke to them, but as a written text it greeted its illiterate black readers with silence” (Callahan 12-13). Along with its written nature, the oppressive function the West had assigned to the Bible caused African slaves and their descendants to have an ambiguous relationship with the Book. They would not read the Word as White Christians would, and would indeed not only read but also interrogate it so as to find meanings relevant to their own experience. As James Cone puts it:

The black religious experience in the U.S. has a questioning tradition that goes back to slavery. Black slaves rejected biblical traditions which whites used to justify slavery—such as the so-called curse of Ham (Gen. 9:24-27), the story of Cain (Gen. 4:1-16), and the sayings that admonished slaves to be obedient to their earthly masters (Eph. 6:5-8, Col. 3:22-25, I Pet 18-25, I Tim. 6:1-2, Titus 2:9-10, and Philem). They turned instead to the liberation motif they found in the Exodus, prophets, and the Gospels’ portrayal of Jesus in solidarity with the poor. Both the black church and black theology are products of this tradition. No experience can take precedence over the truth revealed in black people’s struggle for full humanity. The same rule of faith should be used by all oppressed people as they reflect on God in their struggle for wholeness. (Cone xii)

The ellipses and the laconic dimension of biblical narratives were exploited by Blacks in America so as to throw the light on their potential double-meaning and to reveal the extent of the contradictions belied by their own experience, that of being slaves in a land of freedom. To the same extent, Black artists in the United States would also make reference to the Bible while infusing their work with irony and double-meanings to bear witness to the inherent contradiction of two co-existing

American realities, benevolent White Christianity and the barbaric lynching of Black people:

Both lynching and Christianity were so much of part of the daily reality of American society no Black artists could avoid wrestling with their meanings and their symbolic relationship to each other. Christians, both white and black, followed a crucified Savior. What could pose a more blatant contradiction to such a religion than lynching? And yet White Christians were silent in the face of this contradiction. Black poets were not silent. (Cone 2011:96)

The horror of slavery continued and was indeed worsened with the terror imposed by Jim Crow Laws that revealed a tragic reality that went beyond human understanding. How could one justify the extent of sadism, the degree of monstrosity and the absence of humanity Christian worshippers could show towards the Black community? While reason could evidently not find any rational justification to such acts of cruelty, transcendence would be called upon to allow those brutalized to find a deeper meaning to the modern Black experience. The irrationality of this world would thus be countered by a deeper Truth that would help individuals find strategies of resilience as the only way out of the madness of this world. This urge to give meaning to the Black experience of pain and suffering would be reflected in the Black Atlantic Arts by an overwhelming number of biblical references. And if “African-Americans first encountered the Bible as strangers in a strange land of slavery, through the strange language of English letters, and by the strange religion of Evangelical Protestantism. It is at the collision of the Great Awakening and the Peculiar Institution in colonial America that African Americans became literate and, subsequently, literary” (Callahan 2). In this regard, if the Bible had been used by white people to subdue the Black world, Black intellectuals and communities had managed to

appropriate the Word to such an extent that it had become their own. While the Whites used the Pauline letters to justify the domination of Black people, the latter would in return find echoes of their own experience in the biblical narratives:

African slaves and their descendants discerned something in the Bible that was neither at the center of their ancestral cultures nor in evidence in their hostile American home: a warrant for justice in this world. They found woven in the texts of the Bible a crimson thread of divine justice antithetical to the injustice they had come to know all too well. [...] African-Americans were taking texts of the Bible and reaching their own conclusions. The God of holy scripture have made slaves no less than their masters in the divine image and likeness.[...] From the periphery of a hostile world, slavery's children found that justice at the center of the Bible. (Callahan xiv)

The Exodus narrative and Jesus's crucifixion became to this regard the two most important biblical motifs in the Black Atlantic imagination for both revealed that God was on the side of the oppressed, no matter the extent of earthly suffering, He would always be there by their sides to care for and protect them. While Whites tended to read the Bible literally and desperately tried (and still do) to find in the History of the Middle-East justifications for and add credibility to their religious faith, Blacks read it allegorically equating the suffering of Israel or that of Jesus to their own. They were of course tragically aware of the potential danger of biblical narratives as read through Western lenses:

Once the Bible began to speak to them, African-Americans heard it saying some things that were hard for them to hear. It spoke with a voice that sometimes echoed their oppressors. The words of life could deal death, and its text could become noxious. The Talking Book was also poison book. Toxic texts in the Old Testament

seemed to condemn Africans and their descendants to slavery because they were Africans. Toxic texts in the New Testament seemed to condemn Africans and their descendants to slavery because they were slaves. (Callahan 25-26)

But while they knew how the texts had been distorted so as to reflect and serve a logic of oppression in an arbitrarily hierarchized world, they were also able to highlight its inherent contradictions and thus use the biblical themes and imagery to enact their own discursive liberation and thus find ways of empowerment in a desperately oppressive world. The Christ figure was, in this regard, stripped off his Western garments to become one of their own, a suffering soul caught in the grip of arbitrary oppression, a crucified Son who tried to resist oppression but was ultimately crushed by systemic discrimination to become the Anointed One who, in spite of his earthly agony, had a place of honor in the Kingdom of God. When they read the Bible, Africans slaves and their descendants found words to debunk the validity of white oppression and realized that: “The Bible privileges those without privilege and honors those without honor. And so there is a special affinity between the Bible and the rankest of its readership’s rank and file. Its accounts of the exaltation of the humble and humbling of the high and mighty have appealed to people in the humblest of circumstances” (Callahan xiii). Ironically, like their African brothers and sisters, Black people in America discovered a healing potential in the very weapon that had been used to crush and destroy the Black ethos. In hearing and/or reading the Word, they found ways towards a symbolical freedom while fighting for their own real liberation. Black theology naturally reflected upon the dual nature of the Book and argued for a reading of the Bible as seen through the lens of the Black experience. While White theologians insisted on the “so-called” universality of the Christian gospel, Black theologians such as Cone “insisted that there is no universality that is

not particular, no knowledge of God's revelation in the U.S. that did not arise out of the black struggle against white supremacy" (Cone ix-x). In this regard, Black theology emerged out of the same kinds of preoccupations on both sides of the Atlantic. But given the socio-political context and the extent and destructive power of white racism in the U.S., Black theologians would oppose white Christianity more fiercely than their peers on the African continent. And while, "Evangelicalism would make the Bible the most accessible literature in America. African-American Evangelicals would make it the most dangerous" (Callahan 6). The Word would thus be preached so as to give Black people a sense of their own humanity and grant them the right to contest arbitrary discrimination and oppression.

Black theologians and intellectuals were to become masterminds in the Art of rhetoric in order to denounce the fallacy of white superiority and debunk the pseudo-philosophical structures upon which white society had based its discriminatory behavior. To the (phantasmatic) claim of universality, they opposed the scope of individual experience as a valid means to achieve transcendence. If God was on the side of the oppressed, he heard the wail of their own individual suffering without hierarchizing human sorrow. All mattered to the same extent and all were given the possibility of feeling his/her/its Divine presence through the scope of their own individual experience. To the same extent, their vision of Christ would necessarily be shaped by the socio-political context from which it had arisen. As Bohache writes:

Christians of African and Asian descent are colonized people, whose earliest experiences of Christ and Christianity came from the white colonial oppressors, missionaries and slave-traders. Thus, their view of Christ is different from that of mainstream (white) Christology. The defining context of African-American, or

black,²³ Christology is race, while the defining context of African and Asian Christology is culture.

Black Christology has developed within the discipline of black theology, which arose in the 1960s as a religious response to the white racism confronting American Blacks that gave rise to the Civil Rights movement in the United States. (67)

While religion and politics were intrinsically intertwined on the African continent, in the U.S. they become intertwined because the notion of race was such a political matter in America. The overarching connection between race and religion is particularly patent in the U.S. because it stands as a response to the rampant white racism which remains an ongoing issue even more than two centuries after the abolition of slavery. Ironically, Blacks in the U.S. found their way towards an ontological freedom in the very pages of the Book that had been used, along with the whip, by white America to restrain Black bodies and destroy the Black ethos. Unsurprisingly figurations of a Black Jesus are quite preponderant in the United States, because this political stance linked Jesus's suffering with the horrors imposed on the Black community by institutionalized racism and other forms of arbitrary discrimination.

I.2 Overview: Jesus in the Black Atlantic

Because, for Christians, Jesus embodies, through his sacrifice, the epitome of human suffering, the Christ figure has naturally been given a fundamental role in the Black Atlantic rhetoric of liberation. As James Cone puts it: "Faith is born out of suffering, and suffering is faith's most powerful contradiction. This is the Christian dilemma. The only meaningful Christian response is to resist unjust suffering and to

²³ Although of course both African-Americans and Africans are black, the terms 'black theology' and 'black Christology' are usually used to refer to the scholarship of African-Americans, while 'African theology' and 'African Christology' is used to refer to the scholarship of Africans.

accept the painful consequence of that resistance” (Cone x). For the communities of the Black Atlantic, the reference to the biblical Jesus is a powerful symbol in the call for justice and equity in a world that keeps restraining Blacks and relegating them to the margins so as not to share equally the treasured privileges of the center. Aware of these injustices, the Black Atlantic world found in the mythical Jesus the ideal spokesperson who would, if anyone could, lead the West to an understanding that things need to be reevaluated and rebalanced. That is why in order to be truly meaningful to the Black experience, the Black Jesus needs to embody values that are dramatically different from the Western Christian ideals:

The Black Jesus who is a hero to the mass of Black humanity who represent the marginalized, the forgotten, the dispossessed, the destitute and the dying is one who is not a darker reflection of his paler compatriot. Rather, he is a “hero” precisely because he bears no resemblance to the White imperial power broker who both sanctions and condones Black suffering. (Reddie 92)

A Black Jesus who is a true hero implies a complete rejection of all the theories that justify the marginalization of the Other. A true Black Christ transcends every religious dogma and welcomes all humans in the kingdom of God. A real God marches along with the oppressed to let them know that there is more to human existence than pain and suffering. In consequence, unlike the Western Jesus’s whiteness which functioned as a means of discrimination, Jesus’s blackness intends to draw bridges among the oppressed of the world.

I.2.a Jesus Christ, Africa, and African Christology

Although a Western understanding of the Christ figure in the Black Atlantic may lead us to remain puzzled by the hyperbolic interest Africans demonstrate in regard to the biblical Jesus, a close examination of Christ’s attributes ultimately

reveals that the mythical Jesus possesses so many similarities with African deities and other African venerable figures that the biblical hero could very well be African. If we were to summarize Jesus's main functions in the Bible, we could say that He was a Spiritual Leader, a Healer who always kept in mind the importance of community, and had his heart set on defending the marginalized. As Bohache concludes, these were precisely the main attributes of the deities in pre-colonial African religions:

Charles Nyamiti discusses *African traditional (non-Christian) Christology* (similar to Ukpong's principle of functional analogy) by describing how Africans may image Christ as the Chief, the Healer and the Ancestor, categories from pre-Christian African religion. Anselme Sanon adds the category of the Master of Initiation, while François Kabasele notes that Christ can be the Son of the Great Chief (God) and thus the Elder Brother who serves as Mediator. (76)

Thus, although the Bible, as an instrument of oppression, was certainly foreign to Africans, the ideas that were contained within the Book were in fact very similar to traditional African beliefs. And as the Akan proverb cited earlier suggests, what really mattered for Africans was not the way the Divine Truth was conveyed and expressed, but rather its core essence. This essence could be grasped through various means, either by following the Christian faith or embracing African traditional religions. The Christ's resurrection was, in this regard, absolutely not a reason for Africans to reject Christianity for they already believed in the validity of the concept of an after-life. As Asare Opoku notes:

[T]he Akan concept of man is that every human being as an *okra*, the part of *Onyame* (God) in each person which makes a person a living human being. The *okra* links every person directly to God and it has a pre-earthly existence as well as a post-earthly existence. The person is alive when the *okra* is in the body but dies when the

okra departs from the body to go back to its source. Death is therefore, a return and not an annihilation, and the Akan underscored this by saying “Onyame bewu na mawu” – I shall only die if God dies. (Olupona&Nyang 74)

Although contested by the Oriental Church, the dual nature of Christ, both human and divine was very well understood by and integrated into the consciousness of indigenous peoples of Africa for it already was a central element of their conception of the Divine. Furthermore, not only did the death of Jesus provide him with the venerable status of Ancestor, but the manner of his death, recalled them the sacrifice rituals that had been performed in Africa for centuries and thus assigned it a pacificatory function to the troubles encountered by the community. All these inherent qualities established Jesus as the embodiment of an African hero archetype. The Son of God thus became a model of the African Ancestor, who was able to capture the essence of African experience and transcend the limits of earthly bodily manifestation. As Booth writes, Ancestors are indeed highly venerated in several parts of Africa and the role the community assigns them is closely intertwined with religion:

The focus of African religion is the community which is based on tradition. The ancestors are members of the community and provide models for contemporary behaviour. The community has not been static; the ancestors also met new challenges. Society changes, yet remains in essence the same. (Olupona&Nyang 92)

Ancestors are thus consulted when family members and/or the community need their guidance. And in spite of the generation gap, the issues encountered by the community remain the same in essence. That is why the counsel provided by Ancestors is always of great value for the whole community, because even if the socio-political context surrounding them constantly evolves, the human needs and

issues never really change. In Africa, life and death do not form a dichotomy in that both principles are inherently intertwined. As Asare Opoku suggests:

Life is not restricted to bodily or corporeal existence, for that would be a narrow and fragmented view of life. The reality of life is its wholeness and only a denial of this wholeness could lead to the consignment of the dead to an insert in place and there being assigned an inactive role in the society. (Olupona&Nyang 75-76)

The very narrative in the Bible of the life of Jesus thus becomes the symbolic embodiment of the wholeness advocated by Opoku. In African view, everyone is granted the right to an after-life, a dimension that brings Jesus closer to African humanity than the Western view that only promises a relatively peaceful eternity only to those who do not sin. Because life and death, the divine and the human are united within the person of the Messiah, his representation becomes the vehicle through which humans are able to transcend the complexity of the world, the hardships of human life. In our Western, now very much egocentric, world, one of the main inherent difficulties is of having to lead an existence as a social being—although community is also a source of personal enrichment. Interestingly, in Africa, and notably for the Ibo, it is precisely the individual's relationship to the community that will help her or him achieve her/his goals. As Asare Opoku remarks :

It is clear[...] that cooperation and mutual help are essential prerequisites for individual welfare, and moreover, they also make possible the achievement of undertakings which would otherwise be difficult to accomplish. The Ibo underscore the importance of cooperation by saying that “anyone who thinks that to go in pairs (cooperating with each other) is not useful, let him hold his upper lip and see whether the lower one can speak alone.” (Olupona&Nyang 77)

Interestingly, this focus on the importance of community is reflected in the very life of Jesus in the Bible. As Jesus is reported to have said in Matthew 23:8 “But be not ye called Rabbi: for one is your Master, even Christ; and all ye are brethren”, or when he called a little child unto him “And said, Verily I say unto you, Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 18: 3 *KJV*). This reveals that the main concern of Jesus was the community as a whole. Logically, the Black Atlantic figurations of the Messiah also belong to a community. They advocate, heal and help the multitude, thus applying the metonymic principle of inclusion to human life.

His concern for the community led Jesus to become a mediator between God and humanity. In the African folklore, he is, to this extent, a figuration of Elegbà, the Yoruba deity of the crossroads. In their article “Ebó as Healing Mechanism”, Nodal and Ramos provide a thoroughly detailed portrait of the Yoruba Orisha:

Elegbá, the deity of the crossroads, serves as the primary mediator between humankind and the orishas, the ancestors, and the Supreme Being.²⁴ Elegbá is also intrinsically related to divination and sacrifice, as he is the only orisha who knows all that occurs in heaven and earth. It is his function to warn human beings of impending danger, prescribe the proper course of action, including the ebó that should be offered if necessary, and sanction improper conduct and behavior. This he accomplishes through the oracles. Elegbá, in his role as divine messenger, allows for the communication between heaven and earth through divination. (Bellegarde-Smith 169)

A study of Elegbá’s function in the Yoruba pantheon shows the extent of similarities between the figure of Jesus and the Yoruba Orisha. Because Jesus was the earthly incarnation of God, one could argue that he was, in a way, the Mediator par

²⁴ Elegbá is also known as Eshú, Eshú- Elegbá, or Elegbara.

excellence. And it was while practicing this mediating function that Jesus's preaching and parables served as a symbolical warning for the whole community. The Christ was thus assigned, in the Bible, the same role as Elegbá in the Yoruba pantheon. The similarities are such that one could even think of Jesus as the biblical figuration of Elegbá. In the African imaginary, Christ's sacrifice would then be the epitome of the symbolical lineage uniting both deities. But Elegbá is not the only orisha to whom Jesus has been compared. Obatala, as the Son of God—among other representations—, is also considered as an equivalent to Jesus Christ.

The fact that the biblical characterization of Jesus (unknowingly?) recalled archetypes of African deities provided a solid basis for the process of acculturation that was to occur as a result of colonization. Interestingly, on the other hand, African folklore was also deliberately invoked so as to secure the influence and the spreading of Christianity on the continent. Today, more than half a century after independence, Africa is looking for new ways of embracing Christianity, new means of freeing the Christian faith from its colonial remnants. That is why, as Bohache writes, "the major purpose of African Christology [today] is to find a view of Christ based in African reality and not merely taken over from European and North American missionaries" (75). African literature, theatre and cinema all contribute to the (re)creation of this Christ figure that communicates a Christian message, marked by both tradition and modernity, one typically African, but also hybridized because, since its first encounter with the West, Africa has also absorbed, through acculturation, part of Western otherness as the new forms of African Christianities confirm: "The vitality of the new religious movements in Africa as is seen, for example, in the indigenous churches, more popularly called independent churches, is due largely to their being rooted in the traditional religious customs, and in Christianity being given an African expression"

(Asare Opoku in Olupona & Nyang 79-80). Just as Christianity has been Africanized, the biblical Jesus is given an African identity through his numerous aliases that appear in 20th and 21st century literature, theatre, and films of the Black Atlantic. As “a number of black scholars have looked at how the person of Jesus came to be possessed and colonized for the purposes of political and cultural control by the dictates of white European and elite power,” Black Atlantic artists have reshaped the Jesus figure so as to espouse and reflect upon the African experience of humanity. (Reddie 80) There is absolutely no contradiction between Jesus and the Black experience. Of course “if Jesus is understood as the ‘visible image of the invisible God’²⁵ then who [...] Jesus [was and] what he represent[ed] and, of equal importance, what he look[ed] like, all possessed huge political and cultural significance (in addition to theological ones)” (Reddie 79). Because the figurations of the Christ that emanate from Black Arts first have to strip away centuries of Western remnants, willingly or not, these remain inherently political. It is a matter of militating against white normativity, for even now, in the post-independence era, this normativity is still understood by many as oddly “universal”. “Jesus, in this way of thinking becomes the basis for all that we would want to assert as being ‘of God.’ That is, Jesus becomes the template for the basis [of] how we understand what it means to be human” (Reddie 79). Depicting and/or referring to Jesus’s blackness is thus a way of advocating the right to cultural normativity of the Black Atlantic. In Africa, Jesus naturally became the symbol of freedom fighters who fought for independence as Ngugi’s character Kihika, in his novel *A grain of Wheat* suggests, “In Kenya we want deaths which will change things, that is to say, we want true sacrifice.[...] I die for you, you die for me, we become a sacrifice for one another. So I can say that you,

²⁵ See 1 Colossians 1:15.

Karanja, are Christ. I am Christ. Everybody who takes the Oath of Unity to change things in Kenya is a Christ. [...] All those who take up the cross of liberating Kenya are the true Christs for us Kenyan people” (95). As the Ancestor and great Healer of the community, the mythical Christ is thus called upon by African artists who point out injustices, and in so doing they also become, to a certain extent, figurations of Christ themselves. Given the political instability in Africa, being a writer willing to denounce the abuses of political regimes runs the risk of being sacrificed and not just metaphorically (Ngugi and Soyinka have, for example, both been imprisoned for their writings; Ngandu Nakashama has been tortured and the list undoubtedly/unfortunately does not stop there) for the sake of the community. The reference to Jesus is to this extent not a mere narrative device but has a profound ontological meaning that I will explore in my development of the writers’ work.

I.2.b Christology in the Caribbean

Taking into account the extensive métissage of the populations in the Caribbean, the ontological significance of a Black West Indian Jesus, if any, appears to a certain extent problematic. Indeed, one may wonder if such a Black Jesus can convey the same idea found in Africa or in the U.S. that Christ is one with the people, or if His blackness would not marginalize lighter-skinned mulattos and thus move them outside the realm of divine salvation. As Gabriel Malzaire argues: “To talk about Christology and ethnicity in the Caribbean can be a difficult subject given its multi-racial composition and the consequent mixtures that have resulted” (Kindle loc. 422). In this regard, the figure of a black Jesus will necessarily be apprehended differently than in Africa or in the U.S. Of course, one cannot deny that racial tensions also exist in the Caribbean but the creolization of the population makes it even more complex than in other parts of the Black Atlantic. Racial hierarchies gave way to a

concept of colorism that hierarchizes individuals as a function of skin color. In his article “Pigmentocracy: Racial Hierarchies in Latin America and the Caribbean”, Richard Lynn notes that, “The term ‘pigmentocracy’ has recently been adopted by social scientists to describe societies in which wealth and social status are determined by skin color” (44). Caribbean societies demonstrate such hierarchies to the extent that individuals with lighter skin are more privileged than those with dark skin. This dimension however did not hinder the emergence of a Black Jesus in the Caribbean:

In St. Lucia, for example, attempts were made at creating a new consciousness by the use of paintings which depicted ‘Christ as Black.’ Initially, it was resisted by the local people, most of whom were themselves black. [...] However, even when they had come to the level of acceptance there was little movement from the conceptual trappings of the north. Christological images, therefore, were being forced into foreign categories. (Malzaire loc. 444-449)

Because of the impact of its colonial history, the Caribbean remained scarred by Western influence and for a long time, its imaginary had difficulty coming to terms with the idea of a Black Jesus. But with the influence of evangelical movements and the work of West Indian theologians such as Anthony G. Reddie, who migrated to the U.K., not only the image, but also the necessity of a Black Christ gradually entered the Caribbean imaginary. One could, of course, argue against the racialization of the Divine especially in a creolized context, but as in its Black Atlantic counterparts, Caribbean Christology emerged from a context of Western oppression and domination that was “justified” with the help of racial discourse. The Black Jesus of the West Indies is, in this regard, also an answer to white coercion. As Anthony G. Reddie puts it:

As the construction of the overarching doctrinal and creedal building blocks on which much of our Christological understanding of Jesus is based or taking shape, notions of white normativity (white being the assumed norm) and Black being the “other” were already beginning to find their way into the lexicon of Christian thinking. (80)

The call for a Black Christ thus stands as an answer to the “otherization” of blackness, a demand for justice and equity in a world where chaos ironically lies in the very attempt to reorder it through a process of the hierarchization of humanity. And since peaceful patience has not granted Black people of the world the justice and equity they deserve, the Caribbean Christ, like the African and the African American ones, becomes a revolutionary. A powerful and angry Jesus now demands justice and is no longer willing to turn the other cheek. This Christ as Caribbean rebel is embodied in the expression coined by Black British theologian Robert Beckford who called Jesus a “Dread.” As Reddie points out:

[...] this Christological statement of claiming that “Jesus is Dread” is to identify that Jesus is at once iconoclastic, unacceptable, deeply disturbing of polite social conventions, but also “powerful,” “mighty” and “invincible.” This Rasta influenced Jesus is one whose mighty and “dreadful” countenance serves to strike fear and foreboding into the heart of the body politics of white polite, corrupted imperial hegemony. A Jesus who is dread is everything an upper middle-class dominated establishment bound English church cannot conceive or countenance. A Jesus who is dread is an oppositional, Caribbean rebel Jesus who denounces all who sits at the heart of hypercritical imperial power and their commonplace rhetoric of examination, integration and polite conformity. (82)

The Black Jesus of the Caribbean is thus conceived as a non-conformist who intends to debunk all fallacious Western concepts and theories that contribute to

keeping the Black ethos in a position of inferiority. It is a Christ that is no longer willing to freely endure suffering but rather is more than ready to fight back after having been oppressed for so long. It is a figure of empowerment, not only because He welcomes Black people into the kingdom of God, but also because he intends to give them reparation for all the injustices they have endured, and continue to endure, in our contemporary world. As Malzaire puts it, the Caribbean Jesus “is a face that would truly represent the people in their need for liberation. [...] It is the face which represents Caribbean unity, Caribbean ‘pride,’ and finds value in sacrifice for the freedom of Caribbean people. A face which would symbolize any form of oppression or domination would be rejected” (loc. 471). It is also a face that will acknowledge its African heritage so as to draw strength and power from its blackness, and thereby reverse and annihilate the notion of a biblical curse that has been so destructive for Black communities over the world.

In his book, Malzaire stresses the importance of Caribbean Christology, “Caribbean Christology is [important] because the theological endeavour today must address the reality of a people’s life situation. It is not to remain only an intellectual exercise” (loc. 477). The (re)figurations of the Christ figure in the Caribbean are in accordance with this theological trend to the extent that they also reflect the need to address social realities anchored in the lives of the people. As in Africa and in the U.S., “The Christ from within, therefore, energises a people with self-love” (Malzaire loc. 487). That is why its blackness is such an important matter. Indeed, how could Black people ever achieve self-love while worshipping a white God who, if he did make all men in his own image, thus implicitly rejects Black people and puts them outside the realm of humanity? But, as Reddie demonstrates such a dispute is purely a Western conflict for there should be no contradiction in the fact of having a Black

Christ. “Jesus’ ministry, which is the consistent visible form of God’s interaction with humankind, will be found in any place where his followers are in existence” (81). Wherever God interacts with the people, He is present with them. In consequence, we can truly say that Jesus is Black, Jesus is White, Jesus is Yellow, Jesus is Red, Jesus is rainbow-like for beyond the mere question of pseudo-scientific chromatic hierarchy—fantasized to such a point that it even gave way to enormous fallacies such as eugenics or melanin science—lies a Truth that exceeds the limits of human understanding, that surpasses even the name it was given by Christians, a Truth that cannot be fathomed through a dichotomized perception of realities.

Just like the world that God(s) is/are said to have created, the Divine is inclusion rather than exclusion. That is to say that it simultaneously embodies sameness and otherness without hierarchy of any kind. This supra-metonymic²⁶ nature finds its Caribbean expression in the various syncretic Afro-Caribbean religions that emerged in the archipelagos. The Christ figure has thus also been syncretized with African orishas from the Yoruba pantheon. In Santería, Obatalá (also known as Orisa-nla, Oxalá, Ochalá, Orichalá, Orixalá) is the son of the Creator, Olodumare. It “is a male deity who has a multiplicity of functions in African mythology.” He “partakes of the creator God’s essence and work” (Murrell 33). As Murrell points out, “Orisa-nla [...] is represented by the physically challenged, impaired, hunchbacked [...], deformed, and poor. He is patient, kind, playful; he is a lover and defender of children and the god of success and failure, poverty and wealth. He is said to take money from the pockets of the rich to feed the poor and his children” (33). The social focus characterizing Obatalá’s mission and his kindness towards the underprivileged are attributes the Orisha shares with his biblical

²⁶ If we understand metonymy as being part of a whole and the Divine as being in essence the whole containing all the parts, we can conclude its supra-metonymic nature.

counterpart, and which probably triggered the syncretic process. Forbidden to worship their African Ancestors and Deities, African slaves came to accept the idea of Christianity because they were able to relate Christian spiritual concepts to their own.

While Santería can be thought of as a Christianized African religion, there are also opposite forms of syncretism in the Caribbean, that is to say, the Africanized Christian religions such as, for example, the Jamaican Zionists. As a consequence, “Christian symbols and the Bible are [of course] central to the beliefs and rituals of Zionists” (Murrell 272). Jesus is to the same extent placed naturally at the center of their faith. As Murrell writes:

Jesus occupies an important role in Zion as an object of prayer and worship. According to Chevannes, the benevolence of Jesus “earns him the frequently heard appellations ‘father Jesus,’ or ‘Papa Jesus,’ and at times one is unsure whether he is thus being identified as the incarnation of Big Massa. [...] During services, Jesus visits the faithful, who hold a love feasts in his honor and remember deceased members. (272-273)

Like its African counterpart, this Caribbean Jesus is closely related to the cult of the Ancestors, a dimension that is interestingly spectral in Haitian Vodou. While Jesus indeed merges with the loa Papa Legba which functions as intermediary between loas and humanity, there is no actual centrality of the Christ figure whose narrative is not a constitutive element of Haitian Vodou. As Gasner Joint points out,

On constate dans le vaudou pas ou peu de références au Jésus historique. Tout au plus, il est un esprit craint et plus puissant que les loas. L. Petit-Monsieur explique l’absence du Christ ou la déformation de son image par une évangélisation superficielle qui, en enseignant la filiation divine de Jésus, n’a pas su montrer ce qu’il avait de particulier par rapport à la situation des humains, et n’a pas su insister sur la

divinité de Jésus-Christ. En outre, le contexte de conquête coloniale dans lequel le christianisme a été prêché contredisait l'affirmation d'un Christ rédempteur et sauveur du genre humain. Telle que présentée aux esclaves, la figure du Christ ne pouvait que ratifier le système injuste dont ils étaient victimes, et ils ont dû s'en libérer une fois sortis de la domination des Blancs. (267)

This lack of centrality of the Jesus figure in Haiti can be explained by several factors. Among Haitian voodooists, some do not believe in the concept of salvation. As MacAlister notes, "One elder explained to me that 'Lucifer commands the earth. Everybody who is poor on this earth is in hell'" (415). Jesus's sacrifice and resurrection thus do not have meaning in the Haitian imaginary. The extent of the suffering Haitian people have historically endured led them to doubt that God ever came to save them. Furthermore, "Vodou does not assimilate the Christian story of sin, incarnation, and redemption, and this limits the significance of Jesus in it" (MacAlister 414).²⁷ Not only did Haitians not identify as much with Christ as other Black Atlantic constituents, but they also worship other saints whose influence eclipses to a certain extent that of Jesus. As MacAlister writes, "Jesus's image is common in Haiti but far more prevalent are images of the Virgin Mary and the *lwa* (spirits) she represents to creole Catholics" (411). Interestingly, there are not that many Black Jesuses in the Haitian imaginary and Haitian artists mostly represent Jesus as a white person.²⁸ It does not mean, however, that black Christian heroes do not exist. As a possible consequence of the prevalence of Mary²⁹ in the island's

²⁷ It is important to point out that Vaudou rituals and beliefs vary greatly among the various regions of Haiti, MacAlister's argument should therefore be put in perspective.

²⁸ Among the few representations of Jesus as a black person, is a Good Friday tradition on the island, a procession during which "In a striking nonwhite representation, Jesus comes alive during Lent when young Black men take up his cross in Passion plays on Good Friday" (MacAlister 412).

²⁹ MacAlister relates this prevalence to the African Kongo remaining in Haitian culture, "For the Kongolese, the cult of the Virgin Mary and the cult of Saint James the Greater were paramount. Likewise, in Haiti, Saint James is one of the most important of the *lwa* and is associated with Ogou, the patron of iron and warfare" (412).

imaginary, it is particularly revealing to notice that one of the Haitian Black saints is indeed not Jesus Christ,³⁰ but rather a woman figure:

Our Lady of Czestochowa is the Polish saint who was brought to Haiti with Revolutionary War–era soldiers from Poland who came to fight for the French. She is creolized with Vodou spirits differently in various regions of the country, but she is fairly commonly thought to “walk with” or be another face of Ezili Dantò, the Vodou spirit known for her fierce stance as a single mother. Icons of this “Black Madonna” reveal her to be dark-complexioned, with two scars running down her cheek. Sometimes Ezili Dantò is a lesbian, and she is thought to love and protect gays and lesbians. And, in a telling example of the relative deemphasis on Jesus in Vodou, the child that Czestochowa is holding is not the baby Jesus, but it is her daughter, said to be named Anaïs. (MacAlister 412)

But while Jesus’s centrality in Haiti shall indeed be put in perspective, he is still present in the Haitian imaginary. “We know that Jesus was on the minds of some of the revolutionaries: the rebel poisoner and spirit worker Makandal was said to have uttered the name of Jesus Christ (as well as Allah) as he prepared his talismans” (MacAlister 411). Additionally, the Christ is also considered by some practitioners as one of the Vodou loas and if he is not revered for his sacrifice, which did not bring any form of salvation to the Haitian ethos, he is nevertheless respected as being, not exactly an Ancestor, but a very preeminent figure of Caribbean folklore: a *zonbi*, a person who is killed and then brought back from the dead. As MacAlister points out

³⁰ Jesus’s whiteness may not be related to his Western figuration, but rather recall the Kongo’s conception of the Divine, “The word *zonbi* is thought to derive from the Kikongo word *nzambi*, which is a complicated concept for a force that is “the beginning of everything, in the remote past and at a maximum distance[;] . . . he is present everywhere with his laws and punishments. [...] Interestingly, Nzambi Mpungu was white and clean, referencing the *mpemba*, the color of the ancestors in the land of the dead, and not a racial category” (MacAlister 415-416).

According to this particular mythmaking about Jesus, two unscrupulous Haitian soldiers secretly witnessed Jesus's resurrection back in the Holy Land. A self-ascribed sorcerer told me that "when Jehovah gave the password to raise up Jesus from the dead, the soldiers stole the password and sold it. It's been handed down from father to son, which is how I could get it." The sorcerer explained that this is how he knew the techniques of capturing the spirit of the recently dead and ordering the *zombi* to work—work that would go undone had it not been for the presence of these two Haitian soldiers. (415)

Interestingly, Jesus's sacrifice and resurrection appear as central motifs both in the biblical narrative and in this folkloric tale, but while Jesus's suffering brings salvation to the Christian community, the Haitian soldiers exploit this suffering so as to gain a privileged knowledge that could be equated to that of the Knowledge Tree in the Garden of Eden.

This brief survey of the Christ figure in the Caribbean imaginary allows us to understand that Jesus's blackness is not as important as it appears to be in the U.S., probably because of the creolization of the Caribbean population. He nevertheless shares the revolutionary attributes of his counterparts found both in Africa and in the U.S. And while he appears, in most of the Black Atlantic, as an embodiment of the Black experience, the extremely unsteady socio-political context of Haiti prevented the Haitian ethos from positively identifying with Christ in that their daily sacrifices dramatically exceed his.

I.2.c Black Theology, the U.S., and the Image of Christ

Although slavery had a massive impact on the African American imaginary, "The North American mainland played a relatively minor role in the trans-Atlantic slave trade. [...] An intra-American trade in slaves (originating in the Caribbean)

supplied additional slaves, however.”³¹ The first English settlement to have received slaves from Africa was Jamestown, Virginia in 1619 where most slaves came from West Central Africa. However “Nearly three quarters of the Africans disembarking in the lower Chesapeake area (York and Upper James Basin) came from more southerly parts of Africa, from the Bight of Biafra (present day eastern Nigeria) and West Central Africa (then called Kongo and Angola)”. In South Carolina, founded by Barbadian planter John Colleton in 1670, “people migrated [...] not only from Barbados, but also from the Bahamas, Jamaica, Bermuda, England, New England, New York, New Jersey and the entire Chesapeake region,” white Europeans bringing their African slaves along.³² The slaves brought to North America were composed of a great variety of African ethnicities, the diversity of which played a major role in their embracing of Christianity. In the eighteenth century, following the religious fervor of the Great Awakening and answering the evangelical call for “individual spiritual transformation”, many African slaves chose to convert to Christianity. And “Despite the turn away from an explicitly antislavery Christian posture, Baptists and Methodists supported the development of Black Christian leadership, licensing African American men to preach and helping to foster the beginnings of institutional life among black Christians.”³³ But even though they became Christians, African slaves and their descendants did not read the Bible through the lens of white Christianity, and although their various ethnicities certainly weakened the influence of their traditional African beliefs, they still incorporated elements of African folklore in their worship of the Christian God. As Allen Dwight Callahan reminds us:

³¹ On this subject, see the greatly documented website: <http://www.slavevoyages.org/>, page consulted on October 5, 2016.

³² On this subject, see <https://www.nps.gov/ethnography/aah/aaheritage/histContextsD.htm>, page consulted on October 5, 2016.

³³ Judith Weisenfeld, <http://americanhistory.oxfordre.com/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780199329175.001.0001/acrefore-9780199329175-e-24>, page consulted on October 5, 2016.

American slaves did not read the Bible through, or even over and against, the traditions they brought with them from West Africa: they read the Bible as a text into which these traditions were woven. The characters and events of the Bible became the functional equivalent of the ancestors and heroes long celebrated in West Africa. The many ancestral and natural spirits were subsumed in the Holy Spirit, and the mighty acts of God supplanted ancient tales of martial valor. Biblical patriarchs and heroes now sat on the stools of the esteemed ancestors of ages past. (xii)

Jesus was, in this regard, a particularly meaningful figure who, like on the African continent, embodied, for African Americans, the Ancestor, the Healer whose suffering and crucifixion recalled their own. “Jesus’ actual life, suffering and death are important indicators of how God is in solidarity with the plight of suffering Blacks”, thus writes Bohache (74). The importance of the Christ figure in the African American imagination is such that the Son of God dethrones all the other biblical heroes, even Moses, though he is an important figure as well. As Callahan argues:

From the earliest folkloric reflections of the pathos of later belles lettres to the religious lore of hip-hop, the figure of Jesus has signified the suffering of black people, and the true significance of Jesus is signified in their suffering. His humble and momentous birth, his parables and preaching, his shameful execution and glorious resurrection are everywhere in the African-American collective imagination. African Americans have seen Jesus, they had seen themselves in him, as they have no other figure in the Bible. (Callahan 187)

Every step of Jesus’s life is mirrored in the very destiny of Black people in America. And because racism and discrimination towards the Black community in the U.S. remain, pain and suffering consequently became major themes of the African American rhetoric of liberation. Of course, as John Saillant argues, “The black Bible

was interpreted not only for its message of freedom but also for its capacity to make the experience of the slave trade and slavery comprehensible” (Wimbush 236). From this perspective, Jesus is a powerful mythical/historical reference, who represents the embodiment of their tragic lot in white America to such an extent that, “the ubiquitous image of Jesus has been the biblical mirror in which African-American have seen both the history of suffering and their hope of vindication, symbol of both the frustration and fulfillment of their destiny” (Callahan 48). The narrative of Christ has also provided them with a sense of hope, a crucial feature of spiritual survival in the face of systemic oppression. To the same extent, the resurrection motif had a powerful healing power in the African American imaginary for it meant that existence was not limited to its earthly manifestation, that there was more to life than mere suffering, pain and sorrow.

Their Jesus could of course not be the blond blue eyed Jesus of white America. How could a white man become the symbol of liberation for Black America? As Cleage puts it: “Black people cannot build dignity on their knees worshipping a white Christ” (Qtd. in Bohache 69). The pain and sorrow whites had inflicted on the Black ethos was too great to allow any white figure to symbolically reign over the kingdom of the African American dreams of justice and freedom. “The 20th century, as Du Bois famously lamented, was marked by the color line. And so in that century, identification with Jesus became a matter of color as well: Jesus’s blackness was not experiential but literal and historical. Jesus had to have a racial identity in the racist Christianity of the United States, and that racial identity, explicitly or implicitly, was white” (Callahan 231). That is why, to function as a true liberator of the Black ethos, Christ had to be black, Christ could not be anything other than Black to truly express the extent of the wound, the value of sorrow, and the hope

that resulted from the inner sense that freedom and justice would eventually be worth fighting for, that the bars of the prisons—both metaphorical and physical—entrapping black bodies in America were also the result of social constructions that, in a modern and rational world, demanded a complete destruction. Consequently, “Jesus, [...], the central visible figure in Christianity, has been appropriated by people who are marginalized and oppressed as a Black counter-cultural hero ” (Reddie 80). He has also sometimes been characterized as an anti-hero who, although seemingly unfit for the enormity of the Quest (freedom, justice and equity for Blacks in the U.S.), ends up defeating all expectations to become a True hero. A heroic figure that functions like a magnifying glass revealing the injustices endured by African Americans in the U.S.

Although the Black Jesus of African Americans is certainly human AND divine, he is not linked to nor is he a figure of a distant and angry God, but is seen as a friend, someone they can talk to and rely on in times of turmoil. Because Black people in America “do not ask whether Jesus is one with the Father or divine and human, though the orthodox formulations are implied in their language. They ask whether Jesus is walking with them, whether they can call him on the “telephone of prayer” and tell him all about their troubles” (Cone 13). In this regard, Langston Hughes’ Black Christ is a slave whose mother Mary is a Black mammy of the South:

Christ is a nigger,
Beaten and black—
Oh, bare your back.

Mary is His mother,
Mammy of the South,
Silence your mouth.

God is His father—
White master above
Grant Him your love.

Most holy bastard

Of the bleeding mouth,
Nigger Christ
On the cross of the South. (Qtd. in Cone 2011: 114)

Displaying a powerful virtuosity in handling the art of irony, Hughes provides us with a sense of the extent of the ontological sacrifices that took place in the shadow of the slave cabin, behind the backs of the white mistresses, everyday during slavery. Mary's innocence and virginity was stolen and soiled on a daily basis by white self-proclaimed semi-God(s). With Hughes' memorable characterization of a Black Christ, we see the darkest side of slavery, if anything could be worse than the reality of slavery that is being exposed as the whole slave institution, justified by white people with the help of biblical verses, comes crumbling down. The encounter with Black Jesus allows the Black community to regain a sense of self-worth that has been compromised by centuries of arbitrary domination. As

Delores Williams has pointed out [...], for oppressed people, sin often takes the form of personal unworthiness and unknowing collusion with their oppressors by internalizing the message of hatred. This personal unworthiness and self-hatred is overcome by an encounter with Jesus that leads to 'somebodiness'. According to this view, sin is not only systemic but also individual, when the oppressed person participates in her devaluing for silence, invisibility and submission to stereotypes. (Bohache 135)

By referring to Jesus as one of them, Black people achieve the 'somebodiness' which discursively thwarts the pseudo-scientific ineptitudes of efforts such as eugenics, that were the product of decades and decades of white racism. In the mean time, the reference to a Black Christ welcomes the Black ethos into the kingdom of God while grounding the divine in the social community and endowing it with social

implications. The attributes of the biblical Jesus indeed contributed to the idea of a messiah profoundly involved in the matters of the community. As Bohache argues:

In fact, Jesus' preaching generally, and particularly his announcement of the kingdom of God, rarely calls attention explicitly to God, but concentrates on the implication of the presence of the kingdom for people's lives and how people must respond.

This social emphasis, according to Horsley, is what differentiated Jesus from the other messianic figures of his day, who were more interested in political revolution.
(57)

But while Jesus's emphasis on the social dimension of the community is undeniable, the (re)figurations of Christ as a Black hero in America cannot escape its revolutionary dimension. "Interpretations of Jesus are [indeed] shaped by religio-cultural and the socio-political contexts in which they are made" (Cone xiii). A Black Christ emerging in white America can thus not be anything other than absolutely, completely, radically revolutionary for the myth-making process is meant to reflect the extent of the necessity of a radical change. "The Jesus of black people in the 20th century bore the scenes of the world: he was the Crucified One, brutalized, colonized, dehumanized" (Callahan 217). Who else, besides him, has been brutalized, colonized, dehumanized? Black people in the West! Black people have been crucified by Western hegemony and they intend to let the world know about it by using one of the most powerful images of sacrifice: a crucified God that white Christians worship but that is now one of them, a Black God looking over His Black children to let them know that no matter the hardship, He is and will be there for them, standing by their sides, standing chin up in the face of white America. For as Callahan argues, "in the collective imagination of African Americans, Christ is not in heaven[...]. He is present

here, suffering along with black folks the slings and arrows of their outrageous fortune. And he is the arch revolutionary in whose name revolutionary African Americans have been praising the Lord and passing the ammunition since antebellum times” (242). As long as injustice will continue be perpetrated against the Black community in the U.S., the Christ figure will remain inherently revolutionary because change is now more than ever an absolute necessity.

Many Black theologians think that, unlike the white Jesus who extols the virtue of poverty, a “Black Jesus tells us that the material needs of people matter more than fossilized dogmas and religious strictures often controlled and patrolled by those with power. That action matters more than religious observance; for the former gives life and expression to the latter. A prophetic, counter-cultural, “dreadful” Black Jesus is simply a must!” (Reddie 92). Black theologians thus underscore the revolutionary aspect of this new Jesus because it is the white Christ that has kept the Black community waiting for so long by promising them a stairway to Heaven if they obediently stayed in the margins, “Jesus, as the enemy of hypocrisy, was the champion of African-American critics of American Christianity” (Callahan 211). Black Jesuses are therefore more than ever decided to lead a revolution so as to achieve justice in this world and beyond. But these figurations of a Black Christ are not contained within the scope of Black Christianity. Just as the biblical Jesus welcomed everyone, regardless of his/her background, these new figurations of Jesus transcend the borders of religion dogmas. As Callahan puts it:

the Christ of African-American Christians could so easily be a prophet to African-American Muslims because he was a Christ bigger than Christianity, a Jesus who transcended the formulas of doctrine and dogma that Christian tradition has used to talk about him. And so the Jesus of African-American sacred music, folklore, and

popular piety is the Christ neither of the creeds nor of the communions that have historically confessed them. (203-204)

That is why, as we shall see, these (re)figurations of the Black Christ are syncretic cultural symbols that blend with motifs of other religions, whether major, such as Islam, or less influential such as Afro-Caribbean religions. Unlike the white Christ that was erected by the West on unexplainable contradictions, advocating true love and compassion even while rejecting a great part of humanity, Black Christ intends to blur every contradiction so as to let them all eventually disappear and give way to the total acceptance of Otherness. Our human nature stands in sharp contrast with the way Western philosophy conceived it as based on dichotomies, either totally good or totally bad. These supposedly irreconcilable differences create conflicts both within and outside and prevent us from welcoming the Other, not as “separate but equal” but rather as different yet equal. The modern figurations of Black Christ(s) intend to heal humanity of the plague of racism and discrimination that, like a fatal gangrene threatens to putrefy modern societies from within.

Chapter two: Women and Religion(s) in the Black Atlantic

In my analyses of specific works, the underpinning methodology draws heavily from Pierre Brunel's *Mythocritique* and Danielle Chauvin's analysis of the Bible and literature in which she argues that, in order to study the influence of the biblical imaginary, one needs to do:

[...] une étude hypertextuelle³⁴ que les reprises du Livre appellent et légitiment, une mythocritique³⁵, peut-être même une mythanalyse³⁶ de la Bible. Ce qui n'amène pas nécessairement à conclure au statut mythique de la Bible en tant que texte sacré, mais ce qui impose de le traiter, en théorie et en méthode, comme un texte fondateur de notre imaginaire, la source de réflexions et de méditations toujours renouvelées sur l'humanité et sur l'art. (Kindle Loc. 803)

In light of Danièle Chauvin's argument, I would like to begin with what I call "crosswise *mythanalyse* and *mythocritique*." What I mean by this is that instead of starting with how the Bible influenced the social, political and cultural context of the Black Atlantic, I will first bring to light the cultural archetype and mythical schemes that preceded the genesis of the Bible (and that preexisted in pre-colonial Africa), and were then transported to the Americas by African slaves through the Middle Passage. I will then discuss the way in which these ideas potentially allowed and/or facilitated the "adoption" (by adoption, I include any and all oscillations between rejection/interrogation/appropriation) of the Bible as a reservoir of signifiers that expressed the black experience of modernity.

³⁴ Taking into account the variety of texts that display an influence from the biblical imaginary.

³⁵ The study of mythical elements (*mythèmes*) as they appear both in the Bible and in the works under review.

³⁶ A broader analysis that takes into account the context, period, and influence of Biblical myth on a variety of genres and subjects such as politics, commercial uses, popular culture, etc.

For organizational purposes, I will focus on the role played by African women in religious life, both those on the continent and scattered throughout the diaspora. We will see that in both African traditional religions (ATRs) and in Christianity, faith functions as potentially liberating forces for the feminine ethos in the Black Atlantic. In order to fully comprehend the relevance of feminine figurations of Christ in the Black Atlantic, it is essential to first highlight the fundamental role women played in African religious practices. African-based cultures in the Black Atlantic are deeply rooted in their motherland's culture. We will see that far from being mere victims of the patriarchal structures in place, African women constitute essential agents in numerous religious practices that involve them directly in the experience of transcendence. This counters the widespread belief that women were only victims of patriarchal authority, impotent and reified only by almighty male figures. It is important to note that, in numerous pantheons of African traditional religions, we find goddesses mingling among the gods. Furthermore: "The concept of a Goddess Creator, the Mother of all people, is found throughout Africa, though her names vary" (Ebere 485). There are, of course, also a number of African communities that are indeed patriarchal, whether originally or because they have been influenced by their colonial heritage, Islam and/or Christianity, but as a continent, Africa, is the staging ground for a wide variety of cultures and the presumed homogeneity of Africans is a mere product of Western imagination.

I argue further that feminine figurations of Christ in the Black Atlantic are puzzling to the Western eye only because they see all African societies as patriarchal. A closer examination of African traditions and African-based cultures sheds light on the fact that women are actually core elements of African religiosity, whether they function as spiritual leaders or as healers, as mediums, and even as spiritual guides. All these functions underscore their active participation in the religious life of their community.

Interestingly, these various roles embraced by women echo many of the tasks mentioned in the biblical biography of Jesus, and these resemblances pave the way for the Christ-figure to be embraced as a mythical embodiment of African femininity. In the following pages, I will provide a brief survey of feminine leadership in traditional African religions and African-based religions in the Black Atlantic so as to give an overview of the crucial involvement of feminine figures in Black Atlantic religious practices.

II.1 Black Women and Folk Religion(s) in the Black Atlantic

II.1.a Women's roles in ATRs

Although African cultures are generally perceived by Western societies as being drastically patriarchal, several African communities are, on the contrary, organized according to a matriarchal structure. For example:

The Asante constitute one of the principal groups of the matrilineal Akan-speaking people of the modern state of Ghana. An identifying characteristic of the Akan is descent through the female line. Traditionally, such important socio-economic institutions and customary practices such as marriage, ownership of property, and inheritance are based on blood affiliation to the matrilineage. (Donkoh in Goettner-Abendroh 117)

If matriarchal lineages seem, to a certain extent, foreign to Western cultures that tend to keep the feminine figure isolated and in the margins of the political sphere, African women's crucial roles within the sphere of their community is emphasized in Africa, even within largely patriarchal societies. Of course, I do not wish to paint a false paradisiacal picture³⁷ of Africa, but I do want to put in broader perspective images of Africa generally conveyed by the Western imaginary. It bears

³⁷ Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch highlights in this regard that, "Male supremacy was omnipresent, even in matrilineal societies, where transmission of the family's line and goods was *by* women but not *for* women" (16).

noting that the dichotomies that sometimes opposes the West and Africa (especially the distinction between western writings/and African orality) have probably contributed to shaping how the West views the role of women in African religious life. As Asare Opoku writes: “it is pertinent to point out that the religion of Africa does not live in the pages of books on ‘world religions’, rather it lives in the hearts and lives of African people would practice it” (Olupona & Nyang 68). The relative absence of women in written records, such as ethnographic documents or travel narratives, should not be used to conclude they play a minor role in African religious leadership. Those documents are often motivated and imbued with Western ideological preconceptions.

At the center of the Christian faith, Christ has become the archetype of a spiritual leader. In the Bible, Jesus appears as a spiritual leader, a healer³⁸, a prophet³⁹ “and his purpose for being and his teachings take into account the whole gamut of human existence” (Reid-Salmon 76). Many consider him to be even more than that, seeing in him what would arguably be called the Ultimate diviner. While divination is indeed forbidden in Christian doctrine (because Christ’s Revelation – His divination– must be considered as final and unchallenged, nullifying thereby the possibility of further “divinations”), it can’t be argued that the very revelation of Jesus is *per se* a form of divination. In his article “The Dangers of Divination. A Biblical Explanation of Divination and Why It is Forbidden,” Bob DeWaay concurs, “According to Hebrews 1:1, 2, Jesus Christ has spoken to us in these last days in full and final revelation. Going beyond what was given in the Old Testament and spoken by Christ and His apostles in the New Testament is rebellion. It is practicing divination in order

³⁸“Go,” said Jesus, ‘your faith has healed you.’ Immediately, he received his sight and followed Jesus along the road” (*New International Version*, Mk 10.52).

³⁹ Jesus said to them, "A prophet is not without honor except in his own town, among his relatives and in his own home" (*New International Version*, Mk 6.4).

to gain spiritual revelations about things God has not revealed” (cf. Work Cited). The practice of divination is, therefore, according to Christianity, an attempt to know what God refuses to reveal to men, and he places this knowledge in His Son and that only He shall know. Diviners are widespread in many African religious cultures, and although diviners are perceived as being in contact with spirits, these spirits are not always seen as evil and are considered, like Jesus, to be the link between humans and gods. There is then a link between Jesus, as the depository of divine information, and African diviners.

It is interesting to note that Christ’s characteristics, as depicted in the Bible, correspond to features that often duplicate the functions of African women, particularly their role as spiritual healers, both in Africa and throughout the diaspora. The characterization of Christ as a divine healer is indeed not foreign to African cultures; in fact, the healing tradition has always been an essential and integral feature of African religious cultures. As M.G. Mokgobi writes:

The term traditional healer is an umbrella concept that encompasses different types of healers with different types of training and expertise. [...] The different types of traditional healers include, diviners (*‘Ngaka ya ditaola’*), Sanusi (*‘Sedupe’*), traditional surgeons and traditional birth attendants (*‘Babelegisi’*). (29)

The role of traditional healers is thus a fundamental component of African religious cultures. In Africa, their influence in the community is shaped both by synchronic and diachronic elements: one is cultural, the other, practical. The crucial role traditional healers play in their community is indeed shaped by the socio-economic status of the person who seeks health care.

At the household level, those who live in Kaneshie and Kotobabi are less likely to use the services of traditional healers than those who live in James Town, a place occupied predominantly by the indigenous ethnic groups. This observation, coupled with the fact that migrants are less likely to use the services of traditional healers, suggests that many urban residents may not know how and where to obtain such services. [...] Those who have better overall living conditions, as well as those with toilets and pipe-borne water in their homes, tend to use traditional healers more. [...] [I]n view of the diverse reasons why people use traditional healers to prevent or ward off ill health, to seek answers to why they contracted certain illnesses, and to determine who is responsible (Twumasi 1975), it is not surprising that seemingly healthy people still may consult traditional healer. (Fosu 408)

Furthermore, when isolated and days away from the nearest hospital, members of the community necessarily rely on traditional healing practices to maintain and secure their well-being, we may then wonder to what extent, if any, an easy access to “Westernized” health centers influence the role of the traditional healer within the community.

As healing practitioners, women are, rather logically, in charge of the rituals and practices related to childbirth, and this inscribes their function within the broader umbrella of the healing tradition. “Traditional birth attendants are usually older women who have perfected the skill of midwifery over the years through experiencing, witnessing and assisting in many births throughout their adult lives. The skill is transferred from one generation to the other.” (Mokgobi 30) In their ability to assist with birthing children, women are perceived as being in direct contact with the spirit world because in the traditional African belief system, birth and death are

overlapping moments between the spirit world and the material world. In their ability to give life, women naturally become the bridge between the spiritual and the material world and as such, they become a perfect embodiment of Christ who is both cast as a hybridized being, both divine and mortal.

Reproduction is furthermore a *sine qua non* for perpetuating lineage. Their fundamental role in the reproductive process makes women essential elements in ensuring the lineage and survival of the community. As Wilhelmina J. Donkoh writes, “Women in Asante and Akan societies are critically respected, because they have the crucial function of reproduction that ensures the continuity of the lineage and, ultimately, the community.” (Goettner-Abendroth 122) Although Asante and Akan societies are matriarchal, it is important to note that even in patriarchal African communities, women enjoy profound respect for their ability to give life directly and to assist others during the process.

What might be called a “natural” ability to communicate with the spirit world can also be seen in the cult of the ancestors, a core element of African religiosity. In his essay “Religion and Social Control in Igboland”, Ogbu U. Kalu highlights the vital role the Ancestors play in the community:

In the family, the *Diokpala* ‘head of the lineage’ as well as the *paterfamilias* ‘head of the nuclear household’ become quasi-priests, who hold the *ofò, ugu*, and pour libation to the “living-dead” ancestors. [...] The obligation to obey them is not just because of their age, but due to their priestly powers. Age is crucial in African social relations because age, wisdom, proximity to the land of the spirits in closer contact with the ancestors go together. (Olopuna & Nyang 115)

When members of the community depart, their spirit is said to remain among the living where they become the intermediary between God and humans. This relationship between the living members of the family and the spirits of the deceased is one of very close proximity. As John Mbiti writes:

It is [...] a real, active and powerful relationship, especially with the spirits of those who have recently died – whom we have called the living-dead. Various rites are performed to keep this contact, involving the placing of food and other articles, or the pouring of libation of beer, milk, water and even tea or coffee (for the spirits who has been ‘modernized’). [...] Failure to observe these acts means in effect that human beings have completely broken off their links with the departed, and have therefore forgotten the spirits. This is regarded as extremely dangerous and disturbing to the social and individual conscience. (81)

Departed loved ones are consulted on the same kind of issues they would have dealt with when they were alive. Whenever a problem arises, the ancestors are interrogated, and they are believed to be as interested and concerned on matters regarding their family members as they were when present in the physical world. Interestingly, women play a crucial role in this worship of the ancestors. “The Sukuma and Nyamwezi people of Tanzania believe that twins are ancestors because multiple births indicate an excess of fertility. Women retain exclusive rights to direct any rituals related to twin ancestors, perhaps because they are responsible for their physical birth.” (Olupona 9) As we can see from the various examples cited above, women are actively engaged in rituals related to both birth and death, the two key moments of human existence and a moment of overlapping between the spiritual and the physical worlds. This pivotal role assigned to feminine figures contributes, to a certain extent, to their enhanced aura as potential spiritual leaders. Indeed, several

communities in Africa consider women to be among the wisest of the ancestors. For example:

In Ashanti culture, the powerful role of wise women was recognized early in the nation's history. The popular idiom "consult the old women" makes the women the final authority in important decision-making in the community. The woman is the custodian and repository of knowledge in the community. She is regarded as a reputable connoisseur whose verdict may not be widely challenged in her area of specialty. J. W. Tufuo and C. E. Donkor state that however inferior an Ashanti woman may appear, 'she is the final arbiter of what is good or bad for the whole community.' " (Murrell 43)

Interestingly, even when they are submitted to the influence of patriarchal authority, women are still able to navigate through liminal spaces to liberate themselves from the constraining structures of patriarchy. In some communities, there is a balance between matriarchal and patriarchal rule, as amongst the Igbo. Musa Dube writes that in the Igbo culture, "the gender constructions [are] 'dual and flexible,' rather than androcentric. That is, both genders are recognized and given social, economic, political and spiritual powers." (Bongmba 131). Men and women are therefore considered to be equally important, each in his or her own way. Like the Igbo, the Yoruba have a much more fluid understanding of gender than Western societies. Bibi Bakare Yusuf points out in this regard that:

Focusing on the Oyo-Yoruba of southwestern Nigeria, Oyewumi argues that gender distinction is not coded within Yoruba language and social practice and biology do not determine or influence social relations, access to power or participation in institutions. In place of gender, she claims that seniority is a key organising principle in Oyo-Yoruba. (122)

Both men and women are perceived as comprising part of a whole, and both are equally essential to maintaining the equilibrium of the community. It will be noted that even in many matriarchal societies, the community manages to maintain a sense of balance between men and women, neither being intrinsically more “powerful” than the other. Bernedette Muthien reminds us that, in societies such as in the KhoeSan of southern Africa:

[T]he partnership model, peace and respect are fundamental organizing principles, where power is cooperatively shared. In this model, “matriarchy” is not necessarily the opposite of patriarchy. Ancient matriarchal societies were not hierarchical, oppressive, and violent (towards men). Instead, they have been shown to be cooperative and peaceful, in which men and women were equal and equitably shared resources, even as females were key leaders, spiritually and otherwise, of their societies. African history records the matriarchal rule of Amanitare, for example, and other ancient Nubian queens, as well as the rule of Queens of the Akan in North Ghana. (Goettner-Abendroth 150)

The Western conception of woman as being the “opposite” of a man is not reflected in every African culture. Although men and women are indeed seen as different from one another, we have seen that in matrilineal societies as well as in communities like that of the Ashanti, the difference between men and women is not necessarily perceived in terms of pure opposition. The apparently irreconcilable dichotomy between male and female with one gender being seen as vastly superior to the other, may therefore be a function of Western heritage. Of course, I do not mean to suggest that gender inequality does not exist in any African culture,⁴⁰ but it is clear that even so, some female functions enjoy considerable prestige. The inclusiveness

⁴⁰ See for example Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch’s account on Female identity and Culture in Africa (c.f. Work Cited).

and importance of women in African religiosity may be one reason why the absolute borders of gender, an heritage of the Western imaginary, are blurred in a variety of African cultures.

Beyond their role as potent diviners and healers, African women also often take on the role of spiritual leaders in their communities. While we have seen that some women, as a function of their gender, are associated with the healing tradition due to their involvement with the process of childbirth, and their ability to communicate with ancestors and provide a bridge between life and death, others are respected for their abilities in the art of divination. As Musa Dube writes: "...for example, amongst the Nguni and Shona [Bantu] people, Spirit mediums (*Sangoma* and *Wosana*) are primarily women. Even the men who are Spirit mediums have to act as women during their operations/sessions. Spirit mediums are powerful social figures with healing and prophetic powers" (Bongmba 135). Because of their ability to feel extra-sensorial emotions, especially, for example, during pregnancy, women are viewed as experts in the art of channeling. In this regard, Murrell writes that, in African and African-based religions, "most mediums in spirit possession and divination trances are women. Women serve as seers to whom are attributed natural and spiritual powers that allow them to have foresight into events" (44). Although mediums are not necessarily, like Christ, seen as activist leaders of their community, they are often consulted by political leaders who seek their advice. Their role in the community is therefore one of providing guidance:

Some societies have seers, 'prophets' and oracles. [...] It seems that their main duties are to act as ritual elders, to give advice on religious matters (e.g. when particular ceremonies are to be held), to receive messages from divinities and spirits through procession or dreams and to pass on the information to their communities. Oracles are

generally the mouthpieces of divinities and spirits, and tend to be connected with divination. (Mbiti 68)

Consequently, even though mediums may not be actual political leaders, they are nevertheless very influential members of the community to the extent that the chiefs make their decisions in light of the advice provided by the seer. When women occupy this function, they therefore contribute actively to the political organization and well-being of the community.

We can conclude from this brief survey of women's roles in ATRs that women, even when they are part of a broader patriarchal society, fulfill essential functions in African spiritual life. Whether they officiate as healers, provide a conduit to the ancestors, represent a particularly wise ancestor, become political leaders or advisors to one, or whether they function as diviners, women do not see gender as an obstacle to assuming a leadership role in the community. Strikingly, the various functions assigned to women in ATRs have strong similarities with many of the characteristics of the biblical Jesus. Therefore, my focus on the importance of women in African societies is not intended to merely invalidate Western dominant discourses that exploit Christ's masculinity in the Western imaginary, but rather to point out how female figurations of Christ in the Black Atlantic (as defined by Moura in the preceding section) are a natural outcome of the similarities between Christ's functions and those carried out by women in traditional African religious life. We shall see in the following pages that, interestingly, the fundamental importance of women in African religious life is part of the African heritage that slaves managed to bring along with them through the Middle Passage.

II.1.b Women of African Descent and Religion in the Caribbean

Although African slaves were forcedly transported from the Old continent to the New World, they nevertheless did not divest themselves of their native cultural practices when they arrived in the Americas. And while one cannot deny that the conversion to Christianity contributed to a fundamental reshaping of their cultural identities, African slaves managed to maintain a symbolical umbilical cord that linked them to their Motherland. The process of cultural retention by Africans in the New World has been extensively studied. Several cultural elements (religion, dance, music, food) have been favored by scholars to the extent that they present the most obvious forms of African influence. Theoretical frameworks such as acculturation (Powell), enculturation (Mead), deculturation (Bidney), transculturation (Ortiz) and syncretism (Barnet) have been developed by scholars in order to better analyze the various ways in which these fluxes in cultural exchange contributed to the shaping of a distinct Afro-Caribbean identity. In his essay, "Santa Barbara Africana: Beyond Syncretism in Cuba," Joseph Murphy exposes the limitations of each of these concepts when applied to the cultural retention of Africans in the Caribbean:

The religious products of the encounter between African slaves and European that Herskovitz attributed to "the acculturative process" have been seen to imply socio-determined transitions to a dominant, Western cultural system. Beliefs and practices of African origin were therefore seen as cultural "survivals," lingering behind on an inexorable process of Westernization. The acculturative model of a Afro-Latin syncretism was seen to fail to recognize the retention of African traits as active resistance on the part of the enslaved, valorizing African ways of knowing as powerful weapons against the dominating culture. (137-138)

While early theories of acculturation did indeed convey the idea that African cultural elements would gradually and inevitably disappear, destined to be erased under the influence of the dominant culture over the colonized minorities, the notion of transculturation, developed by Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz, insisted on the cultural agency of minorities and argued that the encounter between slaves and native citizens created a dynamic process of cultural exchange. In his view, transplanted Africans consciously borrowed the elements from the dominant culture that suited their needs, or helped them survive and thrive in the new environment. They did not, however, abandon totally their own cultural practices and beliefs. While reflecting upon both the validity and the limitations of these theoretical concepts underpinning Afro-Caribbean syncretism, Murphy offers a revised definition of syncretism that appears particularly revealing for my analyses of how the Christ figure is transformed in Black Atlantic literature, theatre and cinema:

I believe what is interesting about the phenomenon that we call “syncretism” is not the fact of cultural mixture, which is present in every historical religious expression, but rather the way in which the mixture is organized. [...] First, the syncretism of Shango and Santa Barbara is one of *juxtaposition*: the orisha and saint are placed side by side in thoughtful ways in space and time [...] comment on each other, revealing new meanings of similarity and difference in their placement and structure.. [...]. Second, the syncretism of orisha and saint is characterized by ambivalence: They are both valid ways of accessing the power of lightning, at once the same and different. [...] Third, this juxtaposition and ambivalence has religious implications in the experience of *paradox*. (Lindenfeld & Richardson 161)

My reading of the intertwining of African and Christian religious elements in the Black Atlantic draws heavily from Murphy’s revised concept of syncretism. We

shall indeed see in the course of our argument that biblical intertextuality is present in all the works under review and it does not reflect a passive acceptance of white concepts by Black Atlantic cultures in Western hegemonic cultures, but rather reveals a conscious juxtaposition of both African and Western cultural elements. This intertextuality is characterized by a certain ambivalence regarding the superiority of one culture over another. Rather, both cultures, Western and African are interrogated in order to find elements in both that might serve as signifiers in the Black Atlantic and beyond. The influence of Western religious motifs on the authors' aesthetic practices has religious implications for the important construct of *paradox*⁴¹ that reveals the complexity of modern black feminine identities. In this regard, it will be noted that the characteristics of Afro-Caribbean religions highlighted below all echo to a certain extent the characteristics of Jesus-Christ as depicted in the Bible, and thus reveal the validity of Murphy's revised conception of syncretism as a theoretical framework for my study.

While one may indeed find traces of both African and Western religious practices in Afro-Caribbean religions, New World African practitioners were in no way mere passive victims of a cultural uprooting imposed on them by the West. Of course, one cannot certainly deny the violence of Western empires or the destructive power the Middle Passage had on individual Africans, but the process of cultural identity formation in the Black Atlantic remains twofold: African slaves did adapt to the new socio-political and religious configurations imposed upon them, but they also used and transformed western religion into a site of empowerment.

⁴¹ The concept of paradox as it pertains to religion has notably been illustrated in Ramsey and Smart's article, "Paradox in Religion": "In *Reasons and Faiths* my fellow symposiast Mr. Ninian Smart, after quoting a characteristic assertion from the Ia Upanisad: "It is both far and near; It is within all this and It is outside all this," remarks that such "paradoxical pronouncements fulfil such a number of functions that by understanding the gist of them one can penetrate to the heart of the philosophy of religion" (195).

We discussed earlier the fundamental role women played in the spiritual life of several traditional African societies. This influence continues in the Caribbean, even though threatened at various points by the strong patriarchal influence of Orthodox Catholicism. Women thus play, as they did in Africa, a central role in Afro-Caribbean religious life. Women's roles as diviners, cult leaders and/or prophetesses create powerful opportunities for the empowerment of Afro-Caribbean women in their struggle against racism, sexism and class conflict. For example, in Africa and Jamaica:

...in both Akan communities women became the special mediums of the deceased, and in high moments of the funeral celebration they could be possessed by the spirits of the deceased. The spirits, through the possessed women, would offer messages to the bereaved families and/or communities at large. It was also the responsibility of women to prepare foods for the spirits of the deceased in order to help the latter on their long journey to the spirit world. (Aborampah in Bellegarde-Smith 134)

In the Caribbean, as in Africa, ancestors are often consulted when the community needs guidance for issues related to socio-economic and political life, as well as on matters pertaining to the family of the deceased. When community leaders have to make decisions, they rely on advice from the ancestors. As mediums, women are thus able to have a real impact on the political sphere of their community. Their close relation to the ancestors, both on the continent and beyond, thus ensures that, far from remaining within the borders of prescribed liminal spaces, Caribbean women can actually play a fundamental role in the life of their community. In the Americas, one of the religious practices in which women are the most influential is certainly Candomblé.

Candomblé emerged and developed as early as 1549 in Brazil, “the world’s biggest Catholic country and largest African society outside of that continent” (Murrell 159). In this cult, women generally function as religious leaders, although they are often seconded by a man in various rituals. According to Maria Inacia D’Avila Neto, this female leadership interestingly– and almost paradoxically–would not have been possible without the influence of Catholicism in Brazil:

Il nous paraît évident que dans un pays de culture religieuse éminemment protestante, un phénomène mystico-religieux comme le "candomblé" n'aurait jamais survécu. Seulement une tradition catholique, dans laquelle le culte de la Vierge-Mère est mise en évidence, pourrait trouver un écho. (55)

Neto’s argument is interesting for it identifies Madona-ism as the factor that contributed to survival of African feminine religious practices in Brazilian Candomblé. But if Catholicism influenced the development of Brazilian Candomblé in the post-colonial world, it is also quite clear that its roots were already present in traditional African religion. It could indeed be argued that the fundamental role of women as priestesses in Candomblé, also known as *mae-de-santo*, *ialorixá*, or *mother-of-saint*, derives from their function in several African traditional religions. Some scholars, such as Luis Nicolau Pares, argue that the matriarchal orientation of Candomblé is actually the result of a much later development:

Ainsi le fameux “matriarcat” du Candomblé contemporain, si souvent commenté et légitimé dans les années 1940, principalement par Ruth Landes, serait un phénomène relativement récent, la supériorité féminine dans le leadership des congrégations religieuses n’ayant été effective qu’après l’abolition de l’esclavage. L’explication donnée à ce phénomène diverge selon les auteurs. Reis estime que la question du genre n’était pas un facteur déterminant dans la formation du leadership religieux à

Bahia au XIXe siècle. Selon lui, la supériorité numérique initiale des hommes africains serait liée à la supériorité démographique des hommes parmi la population esclave. L'augmentation ultérieure du nombre de femmes au sein du leadership serait donc due à des facteurs d'ordre rituel et sociologique. (129)

I find it to be somewhat incomplete. While Nicolau Pares's study is interesting in terms of demographics—his argument is indeed supported by demographic data presenting the number of Candomblé practitioners in Bahia in the XIXth and XXth centuries—he does not take into account the important role assigned to women in ATRs, leading to misconceptions such as the following:

Il me semble que la sélection des leaders religieux à Bahia au XIXe siècle se faisait plutôt parmi les individus de sexe masculin, ce qui correspondait de fait à un héritage des cultures d'Afrique occidentale et centrale. La supériorité du statut religieux des hommes dans les institutions religieuses africaines s'est perpétuée et maintenue à Bahia tant qu'il y a eu des Africains. L'efficacité attribuée aux pratiques de ces spécialistes religieux africains leur conférait un prestige qui inspirait crainte et respect. Ils ont probablement tiré parti de la réputation du 'pouvoir du sorcier africain' pour conserver leur hégémonie. Ce n'est que lorsque la présence des Africains a diminué, au tournant du XXe siècle, que les femmes créoles, en raison des facteurs exposés par Reis, ont commencé à assumer le leadership de façon majoritaire. (130)

If, as Pares here suggests, *babarixas* (male priests) were indeed larger in number than *ialorixás* (priestesses) in the nineteenth century Bahian Candomblé, his argument fails to recognize the heterogeneity of Western and Central African cultures. Relying on the precarious concept of “the power of the African sorcerer” to explain male hegemony in nineteenth-century Bahian Candomblé, Nicolau Pares—

involuntarily perhaps— reiterates Western misconceptions that regard the African continent as a homogenous entity. Murrell, on the other hand, points out that, “Women’s role in ATRs is paradoxical, diverse, and often equal to that of men. In many parts of Central and West Africa, there are female deities, ancestors, priests, herbalists, healers, workers of witchcraft, mediums, and sorcerers” (43). Following Murrell’s argument, I argue that the fundamental role assigned to women in Brazilian Candomblé reflects, to a certain extent, its African cultural ancestry.

Given the context of its emergence, it is clear that Brazilian Candomblé has been influenced by a plurality of religious practices: Catholicism, West Central African religions, and Amerindian culture. “Characterized by ritual dance, spiritual healing, divinatory science, spirit possession, sacrificial offerings, spiritual powers, and the celebration of living religious memories in Afro-Brazilian communities,” Candomblé is a cult in which practitioners worship a number of divinities, called orixas, that are either male, female or both (Murrell 159). For the purpose of my argument, I shall only focus on the female deities with one exception, Oxala, since this orixa has been syncretized with Jesus Christ and, as Voeks mentions, although male, “Oxala is most intimately associated with female entities, spiritual forces that serve to soothe and cool” (Qtd. in Murrell 173). As the characterization of Oxala suggests, both the concept of gender and of power are rather complex in the practice of Candomblé: deities may have both feminine and masculine attributes, and their divine nature does not preserve them from weaknesses.

In the Candomblé pantheon, each divinity is associated with a natural element, thus highlighting the interaction between gods and nature that is also a core element of African religiosity. Among the numerous female deities, four are “the most popular. Oxum is the goddess of sweet, fresh water as well as sensual love. In Africa

she was associated with the River Niger, so when she emerged in Brazil she became protector of all rivers and streams. [...] Oxum loves riches, material excess, and perfume” (Murrell 173-174). While Oxum is clearly associated with sensuality, she is also sometimes syncretized with Virgin Mary. Interestingly, she “has made her way across the Caribbean Sea to Cuba as the Virgin of Charity. She is usually identified with Oba, the patron of prostitutes and is called Our Lady of Pleasures.[...] Like Yemanjá, Nana, and other feminine deities, Oxum and Oba are cool, earthly, and mild mannered” (Murrell 174). This odd, almost paradoxical, association of Oxum/Oba with both prostitutes and virgins reflects the blurring of epistemological borders, i.e. the absence of dichotomies, that is characteristic of the practice and beliefs in Candomblé. This blurring allows religion to function as a powerful agent of liberation for women practitioners. Yemanjá and Yansan-Oia are two other major orixas. Mother deity, patron of women, Yemanjá is also associated with water and, as such, is, in Porto Alegre, “Our Lady of Navigators and of the Good Journey; in Maranhão, on the other hand, she is Our Lady of Good Childbirth” (Murrell 174). Yansan-Oia is associated with the mystery surrounding the dead, but also with thunder and lightning and has, to this extent, been associated with war and syncretized with Saint Barbara.

While these female orixas do indeed have feminine attributes, they are marked by ambivalence in that they also display characteristics traditionally perceived as male, such as sexual freedom and a penchant for violence. Sexual freedom also characterizes another Afro-Brazilian deity, Pomba Gira (in Umbanda) and Quimbanda—two Afro-Caribbean religious practices of Brazil. Pomba Gira evokes Oxum, patron of prostitutes. She is associated with soul possession and witchcraft and represents female sexuality, beauty and desire. Although her overpowering sensuality

makes her an anti-feminine ideal according to the Brazilian traditional view of women, she is also a potential source of empowerment. As Stephania Capone writes:

Ainsi l'image de Pomba Gira est-elle la négation même du modèle féminin dominant dans la société brésilienne : elle est la prostituée, la femme de mauvaise vie. Elle ne se définit pas de façon complémentaire aux hommes : Pomba Gira abandonne son mari, tue ses enfants, utilise les hommes pour son plaisir. Sa sexualité n'est pas au service de la reproduction : elle nie donc le rôle idéal de la femme. Le champ d'action principal de Pomba Gira est la sexualité, mais une sexualité qui ne se définit pas par rapport à l'homme et à son plaisir. [...] L'alliance avec Pomba Gira n'entraîne pas la soumission de la femme à un modèle dominant masculin, mais l'affirmation d'un espace de liberté et de pouvoir, qui est exclusivement féminin. (200)

We can see from the example of Pomba Gira, that female deities are a source of empowerment in that they reverse the traditional gender hierarchy conveyed by patriarchal religious ideologies, but additionally, they also draw their power from sources that are, to a certain extent, taboo in our contemporary societies. That is to say, their power derives from their sexuality, their violence and their emotional extremism (anger, etc...).

To the same extent that Orixas may have, in Candomblé, both feminine and masculine attributes, the priests and priestesses blur gender limitations through their practice of Candomblé. Men may dress in feminine clothing; women may be possessed by female orixas that are endowed with masculine attributes (eg. Pomba Gira). During possession rituals, the babarixa or ialorixa is mounted by the Orixá. Although it evokes copulation and thus suggests the feminine role attributed to the priest/priestess, Candomblé constantly play with boundaries and thus rejects constricted notions of identity. In this regard, Wafer suggests that Candomblé plays

with and across social, spiritual, and physical boundaries. And it resists formal analysis, for one can never stand outside its game; it is “an interplay of identities that are constantly being tested, circulated, transformed” (Boddy 424). With Candomblé, women are able to occupy a space that is, in the West, generally reserved for male individuals alone. Being able to blur the limits of gender and identity offers a formidable path to empowerment for women in the Black Atlantic; they are thus no longer confined to the domestic sphere (the space to which women are confined in patriarchal societies), but are rather able to navigate between the private and the public sphere.

This interplay of identities is a common feature of many Afro-Caribbean religions. Isabel Castellanos writes that: “the Afro-Cuban orishas– and Ochún is not an exception– are far from being simple, monolithic entities. On the contrary, they are multi-vocal, polysemic categories that express a multiplicity of often contradictory meanings” (Murphy & Sanford 34). In Cuba, every orisha therefore has multiple identities that are not called identities, but *caminos*, paths, that are said to represent the complexity of human existence and the different stages all individuals are called upon to pass through throughout their lives. But while this complexity may suggest a debunking of traditional hierarchies:

...despite the diversity of the *caminos*, the faithful insist that there is but one Ochún. They recognized unity in diversity. The set of entities acknowledged as Ochún exhibits a prototypical structure, as is also the case of other orishas. In an abstract, decontextualized sense, Ochún⁴² is understood as a young, beautiful, light-skinned

⁴² Not to be confused with Osun/Ozun who is a male deity, part of a group called The Warriors with Elegua, Oggún and Oshosi, and is syncretized with St. John the Baptist. As Natalia Bolívar Aróstegui points out, “Se le representa como una mulata bella, simpática, buena bailadora, fiestera y eternamente alegre, con el persistente tintineo de sus campanillas.” (167) Ochún is syncretized with the Virgin

black female oricha who has many lovers and is extremely fond of perfumes, fans, mirrors, jewelry, and all kinds of finery she loves music, dancing, and celebrates the joy of living. She is also skilled in the arts of seduction and lovemaking. (Castellanos in Murphy & Sanford 35)

The Cuban Ochún is the Brazilian Oxum's alter ego and, like Pomba Gira, all these deities embody liberation through the shameless embracing of female sexuality. Female sexuality, and especially women's erotic pleasure, is still taboo in numerous contemporary societies. It can be argued that, to a certain extent, in regard to sexuality, many women lack agency in that they are expected to procreate and fulfill men's desire with no or little regard for their own desires. According to Natalia Bolívar Aróstegui, Ochún (not to be confused with Osun-Ozun, a male deity and a warrior syncretized with St. John the Baptist) is indeed, "Dueña, de la femineidad y del río. Es el símbolo de la coquetería, la gracia y la sexualidad femeninas" (167).⁴³ Ochún, like Pomba Gira, is thus revered, one could say "in spite" of being sexually liberated. The potentially restraining concept of feminine sexuality is, in this regard, turned to women's advantage since these deities draw their "power" from the very elements that supposedly characterize "the weaker" and more sexually submissive/subdued sex. Such deities potentially become in the collective imaginary cultural advocates of a femininity that could be fully embraced and deprived of shame. The traditional patriarchal archetype is thus reversed and revised so as to set free the feminine ethos.

To the same extent, feminine beauty that, in the West, tends to reify women and thus imprison them in the realm of appearances appears to be, in Afro-Caribbean

Mary, or more specifically, "la Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre" and was declared Patron of Cuba in 1916 by Pope Benedict XV. (178)

⁴³ River deity of femininity. Symbol of elegance/vanity, grace and female sexuality.

religions, a divine attribute. “In Ochún, Olodumare (God) created beauty in such excess that, like her element, the river, she overflows with power and magnificence” (Flores-Penã in Murphy & Sanford 113). Instead of being a potential source of limitation (physical beauty being a trait of physical valuation only, precluding success in any other sphere), beauty provides a path towards empowerment. Reversing Western traditional conceptions, the cult of orishas emerged as a way for practitioners to find spiritual sustenance at a time when they endured the brutality of slavery. This religion provided a way to re-connect with an African ancestral past that had been denigrated by the West.

In Cuban Santería, an androgynous orisha is nothing less than the creator of the world: “Obatala, or Oddua walks many paths: the creator of the world, source of all beginnings, supreme judge, principal messenger, husband and wife” (Murrell 112). The denial of gender limitations at stake in Afro-Caribbean religions exposes a conceptual paradox that the West has difficulty sorting out: how could God with his/her divine nature be either male or female? As Elizabeth Tracy puts it: “The Christian dilemma is that it ignores and sacrifices the identity of women to that of the male ‘God’” (2). One may indeed wonder why divinities would be subject to the constricting categories of a gender identity that is, in essence, intrinsically linked to physical characteristics. By assigning God a masculine identity, to a certain extent, we annul his divinity.

Santería, like its sister religions, matches each practitioner with a particular orisha. In so doing, devotees are given a sense of self that transcends the orthodox Christian understanding of individuality. And this is especially true for women who cannot identify with a male savior. Elizabeth Tracy writes in this regard that: “There is no Christian ceremony that allows women to understand a divine persona mirroring

their female humanity. This clarity, which arises from the understanding of oneself in relation to an intricate and anthropomorphic divinity, serves as a strong orienting force in the cosmos” (1). This path towards women’s liberation in Santeria is, of course, more complex than it seems. Although orishas may be male, female or both, Cuban women are still victims of a broader patriarchal structure. As Tracy suggests:

Santeria is far from being a perfect religion with any real gender equality. Men still maintain the most powerful positions in the religion and Santeria is part of a misogynistic culture. Cuban culture, although maintaining a fascination of women, is still male dominated. However, Cuban and Cuban-American media shows that culturally, the Santeria is highly regarded and respected. The woman in tune with her santo is an integral, respected and inspirational part of Cuban and Cuban-American society. (37)

In Afro-Caribbean religions, the path towards women’s empowerment does not only derive from the hierarchical structure of the various pantheons that intermingle women among the gods; “godlike powers” and their ability to generate revenue streams also contribute to the rehabilitation of the feminine ethos. Experts in the craft of magic, Obeah-women arouse both fear and excitement. Obeah is a syncretic practice blending Christian and African influences. “Obeah practitioners ‘Africanize’ and reinterpret Christian scriptures with the help of other religious experiences that speak to Afro-Caribbean spirituality” (Murrell 238). Although it is not restricted to black magic, Obeah is very often associated with sorcery and the casting of evil spells. Unlike other forms of Afro-Caribbean syncretic religious practices,

Obeah is not an organized religion. It lacks a more or less unified system of beliefs and practices involving, for example, deities or gods, communal or public rituals and

ceremonies and the physical spaces or sites where they occur, or spiritual leaders of congregations/congregants, as in Haitian Vodun/Voodoo, Brazilian Candomblé, Cuban Santería, or the Orisha religion (formerly known as Shango) in Trinidad. (Bilby & Handler 153-154)

The absence of an organized structure and of a pantheon of divinities paved the way for popular myth-making and Obeah, in its close association with supernatural forces and taking roots in Ashanti Obayifo, became synonymous of black magic. In this regard, African slaves would have used Obeah against European slaveowners. As Kenneth Chelst points out, “Poisoning and murderous attacks acted as two powerful modes of resistance [...]. The art of poisoning was a skill Africans brought with them from the old country and often had an association with the supernatural, magic, and sorcery” (121). Significantly, both men and women can be masters of Obeah (Obeah-man or Obeah-woman). As in many other Afro-Caribbean religious practices, Obeah blurs the borders of assigned gender identities. As Murrell writes, “As a religious practice, Obeah has an ethos that cuts across creed as much as it does race and class.” (237) And while it is perceived by Western eyes as pure evil, people of African descent have a more ambiguous relationship with Obeah, using it in times of need, but rejecting it at other times. As Bilby and Handler point out, although Obeah is commonly perceived as a form of sorcery associating with evil forces during rituals, it is mostly used as a healing and divination practice:

Although the specific beliefs embraced by this term varied from place to place, obeah everywhere shared at least two fundamental characteristics: (1) its practice involved the manipulation and control of supernatural forces, usually through the use of material objects and recitation of spells; and (2) it was primarily concerned with divination (e.g., foretelling, finding lost or stolen goods, ascertaining the cause of

illness), healing and bringing good fortune and protection from harm – although it was sometimes used malevolently to harm others. (154)

In the Caribbean, Obeah practitioners are often feared and consequently have a shady reputation. In Jamaica, for example, the fracture between Obeah practitioners and the rest of the population was such that Obeah was criminalized and outlawed by the 1898 Obeah Law⁴⁴ and, as a result, gave way to a veritable witch hunt. An illustration of this community divide is to be found in Sylvia Wynter's *Hills of Hebron* in which the description of Obeah is undoubtedly negatively charged, "These voodooos followers of the 'obeahman', Ambrose, believed in the malevolent, cruel spirits opposed to man. Theirs was a lost god of Africa, who, for their sins, had abandoned them" (Kindle loc. 3033-3042). Although Obeahmen are more often referred to, women also happen to be Obeah practitioners. "Women have always featured prominently in Obeah rituals, leadership, magic, herbal medicine, and they have used the system to their economic and social advantage" (Murrell 241). As a practical matter, in societies in opportunity depressed regions like the Caribbean Islands, where unemployment and underemployment are rampant, the practice of magic also represents a non-negligible source of income and, as such, provides women with a way to become economically self-sufficient and thus gain autonomy. "In this art, women create their own religious space and identity, demand respect, provide a source of revenue, and attempt to control their own social and political destiny and spirituality" (Murrell 241). In this regard, spiritual leadership can give women an opportunity for social emancipation.

⁴⁴ On this subject, see <https://obeahhistories.org/1898-jamaica-law/>.

II.1.c Black Women and Religion in the US

Similar to the study of Afro-Caribbean religions, the study of African American religious life has been the focus of much scholarly attention, especially in regard to how cultural influences (African, Native American, European) have intersected and shaped African American culture. The earliest studies tended to revolve around assimilationist theories, according to which African slaves had been – like their continent itself, considered a *tabula rasa*–categorized as *cultura nullius* individuals who would thus be eager to embrace, totally and completely, white culture and its values. Black slaves, it was believed, were like pristine pages upon which the glorious lexemes of Western culture could be forever imprinted. More recent studies, however, have evolved, and now question how absolute the power of the master actually was, particularly on the mindset of Africans. And as Timothy Ruppel, Jessica Neuwirth, Mark Leone and Gladys-Marie Fry argue:

As a result of this shift in interpretation, we now see that Africans and African Americans did not derive their identity solely from masters, nor did they heedlessly internalise the values of the dominant culture. Instead, they refashioned social practices within spaces to accommodate two cultures, African and European, in one environment, including its landscape. (322)

Given Christianity's strong influence in the U.S., the spread of Afro-Caribbean religious practices among the black population was, at first, more limited. In the Caribbean islands, a combination of favorable geological features (mountains, isolated regions) and the weakness of the Church made it much more possible for African-based religions to blend with the Christianity being imposed on them. In the British Caribbean, for example, Christianity was unable to make much progress:

A major problem with the Church of England in the Caribbean was that it had too few clergymen, who numbered only about fifty in the early 1800s. Many parishes had neither rectors nor churches. Add to these issues the scattered nature of the settlements and the primitive means of transportation, and even if there were rectors for all the parishes, they could not have effectively ministered to all their far-flung parishioners. But even where there were rectors and priests, church morale and interest in spiritual matters among the parishioners were very low. (Edmonds & Gonzalez 74)

The Caribbean context was a favorable environment for solidifying Afro-Caribbean religious practices. In the U.S., though the influence of the Black Christian Church is extremely important, and to a certain extent, a prevalent and unifying feature of black society, other African-based religions did manage to emerge naturally or were brought in by various immigrant communities of the African diaspora. Waves of slaves, and later of political exiles and immigrants, brought elements of their African culture along with them. Several distinct movements then took root in North America among African American slave populations, these generally brought in by African slaves from the continent or the West Indies. But while the early period may see only scattered pockets of African religious cultural practices, “[t]he Black cultural-nationalist movement of the late nineteenth-sixties and early nineteenth-seventies was an important context for the development of African religious consciousness” (Brandon in Murphy & Sanford 173). The Harlem Renaissance movement and the historical context of the Civil Rights movement laid the groundwork for a revival of pan-Africanist religiosity in the U.S. It was consequently within this framework that Afro-Caribbean religions were transposed to the North American continent. In black communities in the U.S., spirituality has always been a quintessential component of resistance and resilience in countering white America.

And while public attention has, until quite recently, focused primarily on important male religious leaders, it bears noting that women were also a core element in both African-based religions and African American Christianity in the U.S. As Bell Hooks argues in her groundbreaking *Sisters of the Yam. Black women and self-recovery*:

Throughout our history in this country, black women have relied on spirituality to sustain us, to renew our hope, to strengthen our faith. This spirituality has often had a narrow dimension where online we have internalized without question dogmatic views of religious life informed by intense participation in patriarchal religious institutions. (184)

While it is indeed undeniable that Christianity was and is a vital component in the life of many black women in the U.S., and that in the U.S. as in many other communities, fundamentalist beliefs are clearly imbued with patriarchal ideologies, we can still maintain that African American women's religiosity is not limited to one narrow approach to spirituality. As we will see in the following pages and chapters, African-based religions also deeply influenced the religious practices of black women in this country. And while African practices are more obvious in Afro-Caribbean religions, we can still find that, despite the apparent orthodoxy of African American Christianity, there remain traces African religiosity present.

Among the many African-derived cults in the U.S., one of the most important/influential is most certainly Louisiana Vodoun, also called New Orleans Vodoun.

At the turn of the 19th century, in the midst of the Haitian revolution,⁴⁵ African descendants arrived in the U.S. in search of a safe haven in North America:

Beginning in 1793, a large contingent of refugees from Cape François and Saint-Domingue, including whites and mulattos along with some of their slaves, sought asylum in America. Port cities such as New Orleans, Charleston, and Baltimore attracted a large portion of the émigrés. [...] As early as 1760, slaves were being imported from the islands of Martinique, Guadeloupe, and Saint-Domingue. In America, the émigrés actively engage in their religious beliefs and participated in Vodou rituals, which attracted slaves and free Blacks. Vodou practitioners, including priests and priestesses, presided over the cult. (Collier-Thomas 15)

Both slaves and free people of color immigrated to the U.S. in the midst of the violence of the Haitian revolution, and although they had been displaced, these individuals nevertheless managed to find alternative spaces where they could practice their religious rituals. New Orleans was one such place. The multicultural nature of the city made it a more welcoming territory for foreign faiths. New Orleans Vodoun should not to be confused with Haitian Vodou, since Louisiana Voodoo beliefs and practices are, as Justin Garcia point out, quite distinct from Haitian Vodou. It will be noted that the term *Voodoo* has a negative connotation :

Le mot Voodoo, pure création anglo-saxonne, renvoie à une image déformée de la religion qu'accompagnent sacrifices sanglants et orgies. [...] Aux Etats-Unis, le mot Voodoo est utilisé couramment pour qualifier de façon désobligeante quelque chose de magique ou miraculeux ou quelque chose de trompeur, voire de diabolique.” (Michel 81)

⁴⁵ The first Haitian uprising took place in 1791 and Haitian became the first black republic in 1804.

To distinguish between the two, I will thus use Vodou when referring to the Haitian practice, and Vodoun to refer to the New Orleans practice. Originating from the kingdom of Dahomey, in what is now parts of the actual Benin, Togo and Nigeria, New Orleans Vodoun has benefited from a great variety of cultural influences (African, French, Hispanic, and Native American).

As in other Afro-Caribbean religions, women may officiate as spiritual leaders. Called Mambo in Haitian Vodou, they are called Vodoun [Voodoo] Queens in the U.S. As priestesses, they perform religious rituals, and make potions and/or charms that are believed to protect the devotees from a variety of ailments. Healing rituals, divination, magic and gris-gris making are important sources of income for Vodoun Queens and facilitate a woman's social advancement and economic independence.

Like their Afro-Caribbean peers, Vodoun Queens intrigue the local populace and give rise to all sort of fantasies related to feminine sensuality and sexuality. The example of Marie Laveau a 19th century Vodoun priestess, certainly one of the most famous of the Vodoun queens, illustrates the kind of fascination the public had for these feminine figures. "Voudou was perceived as irresistibly scary and enticingly erotic, and Marie Laveau, a tempting combination of black magic with beauty and sexuality, was an ideal subject" (Long 265). Exploiting the public's growing interest with these religious practices –the American counterpart to the European thirst for exoticism that developed in the Western imaginary through travel narratives, colonial exhibitions, and anthropology–, Marie Laveau was able to make a living by exploiting her magical power at a time when the status of women of color in the U.S. remained very precarious. Others would follow in her footsteps. In 20th century Brooklyn, Vodou priestess Mama Lola, a Haitian emigrant living in New York, managed to

divest this religious practice of its link to black magic and present this African-based religion in a whole new light– thanks also to the publication of a book written by her friend Karen McCarthy Brown. As a result :

La réputation de Mama Lola s'étend bien au-delà des limites de la communauté haïtienne. Elle a réalisé des traitements aux Etats-Unis, au Canada et dans plusieurs endroits dans les Caraïbes, en Amérique Centrale et en Afrique. L'impact international de son ministère est inhabituel même si de nombreux prêtres du Vodou partagent son intérêt pour tous les peuples et toutes les cultures du monde. (Michel 104)

The syncretic nature of Haitian Vodou most certainly contributed to shaping the inclusive philosophy that characterizes this religious practice. It also without doubt contributed to the spreading of Mama Lola's popularity worldwide. For black women, then, the African religious heritage embraced by these feminine spiritual leaders allows them to move beyond the alienating borders of an imposed identity, and it becomes instead a way for them to find fulfillment and defy issues related to what theorist Kimberly Crenshaw describes as “intersectionality.” The concept of intersectionality was coined to expose the multiple layers of oppression imposed on the Black feminine ethos:

Black women are sometimes excluded from feminist theory and antiracist policy discourse because both are predicated on a discrete set of experiences that often does not accurately reflect the interaction of race and gender. These problems of exclusion cannot be solved simply by including Black women within an already established analytical structure. Because the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism, any analysis that does not take intersectionality into account cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which Black women are

subordinated. Thus, for feminist theory and antiracist policy discourse to embrace the experiences and concerns of Black women, the entire framework that has been used as a basis for translating "women's experience" or "the Black experience" into concrete policy demands must be rethought and recast. (140)

Transcending the barriers of race, gender, and social status, these feminine religious leaders used spirituality to destroy the limitations imposed on them by their predominantly white and male centered environment. Interestingly, their position as spiritual leaders gave them the means (social, political, and economic) to move beyond the restrictive borders of alienating identities imposed on their ethos either by white America or by male figures in general.

Likewise, Òsun priestesses and devotees in the U.S. found in their religion not only a way to maintain their African identity and femininity, but to go a step further and embrace their cultural heritage and become an advocate for it. Thus, almost paradoxically, they found a way to step outside the identity imposed on them by white America. When questioned about her relation to the African-based deity, Marcia, priestess of Òsun, Rachel Elizabeth Harding responds:

For me, Òsun represents healing... Because she transforms you, in a way. She transforms your soul in a way that's a marvel. Òsun marked a transition for me."

The sentiments of the orisha's rescuing presence in times of adversity are amplified and complemented by other assertions relating to Òsun's aesthetic, artistic, and sensual energies and to the interpretations of womanhood she engenders in her devotees. (Murphy & Sanford 169)

The coupling of an individual with a specific orisha takes place during a divination reading. During this process, the priestess announces to each devotee that

they are connected to a distinct divinity. Usually, devotees share common characteristics with the orisha and feel, even before the official announcement, that they are somehow connected to a specific orisha. Some, however, may “[remain] perplexed about the pronouncement of [their specific] connection,” (Murphy & Sanford 167) and feel fundamentally different than their spirit alter ego. But quite often, they realize in retrospect that their connection to the orisha was actually not as far-fetched as it seemed for it did reflect a specific stage in their life in the past or some aspect of their present existence. Although at first “Majile [another Òsun’s devotee] expressed dissatisfaction with the image of Òsun as “sex goddess” [...], [She] also could see the maternal influence the river deity had on her own life as a mother to eight children” (Harding in Murphy & Sanford 168-169). Their link to an orisha is for many women a source of empowerment. They are granted divine qualities through their religious practice, and are thus able to gain the strength and self-assurance to allows them to embrace their whole identity and assume, in a positive manner, those feminine characteristics they believe best define who they are as women.

Throughout the U.S., a number of African-based religions have developed as a result of multiple factors. For the purpose of my argument and in the interest of conciseness, I will limit my discussion of Afro-Caribbean religions in the U.S. to those mentioned above. It is nevertheless important to know that Vodoun and Osun are just two of a great number and variety of African derived religious practices that create an extraordinary rainbow of black religiosity in the U.S.

No doubt one of the factors that contributed to the emergence and persistence of African-based religions in America was the color-line that continues to divide this country. Prejudice and racism forced African slaves and their descendants to find

alternative, often spiritual, paths to escape the debasing tenets of white Christianity that discriminated against Black people. It is essential to note that although earlier scholarship suggested that the assimilation process was an inexorable eventuality, African-inspired spirituality sought to ensure, though seemingly deprived of agency, African-Americans would be able to retain elements of their cultural past, creating a palimpsest of African memories in their collective cultural unconscious. African-inspired spirituality thus found ways to deliberately exploit imposed cultural identities and resist assimilation into a society where they remained alienated and degraded. Because some of this alienation resulted from biblical tenets, blacks developed a positive, creolized religion that was as African-based as it was American.

Within the slave population:

women assumed various religious leadership roles in the slave community. Slave testimony suggests that most of the shouting and mourning that occurred during religious services was done by women shouting as a vocal testimony to preaching, personal testimony, or an expression of one's own spirit. Shouting was a religious role, and that shouters' participation in a meeting had the effect of transforming the service, moving a congregation, or gathering it to an emotional climax. This was most evident at baptisms and during funerals, where women were the chief mourners. (Collier-Thomas 13)

As we will see in the following pages, African American Christianity emerged from a variety of influences, Protestantism, Native American culture, African-based religions, to name but a few.

Shaped and modified by a new environment, elements of African folklore, music, language, and religion were transplanted in the New World by the African diaspora. Influenced by colonial European and indigenous native American cultures, aspects of

the African heritage have contributed, in greater or lesser degree, to the formation of various Afro-American cultures in the New World. (Raboteau 21)

And while orthodox Christianity and the constrictive structure of patriarchal America might have prevented black women from officiating as religious leaders, the creolization of their religious practices allowed them to find ways to escape the straitjacket of imposed identities on the black feminine ethos.

II.2 Womanist Discourse, Creolized Christianity and Female Leadership in the Black Atlantic

In spite of undeniable progress and improvement regarding the status of women in our contemporary world, women continue to suffer from patriarchal prejudices. In spite of undeniable progress and improvement regarding the status of women in our contemporary world, women continue to suffer from patriarchal prejudices. Whether we think of the Victorian feminine ideal according to which the woman was expected to be “the angel of the home”⁴⁶—an ideal, notably reflected in Conventry Patmore’s 1854 poem “The Angel in the House”, which influenced the Anglo-Saxon conception of femininity— or her ambivalent status today, certainly more emancipated but not fully “liberated” in that she is still deemed the primary care-giver for children, even while working full time. Women remain, to a certain extent, trapped in the margins. Some of this lingering entrapment can be traced back to the Bible. The Western world drew its judicial system, cultural values and philosophy out of laws and values taken from the Bible. These biblical values thus penetrate every layer of society and contribute to the hierarchization of humanity. In this regard, and quite ironically, Jesus’s marginal status makes him an especially

⁴⁶ On this topic, see Burstyn, Joan N. *Victorian Education and the Ideal of Womanhood*. Rowman & Littlefield, 1980.

significant figure when it comes to battling oppression of women in the contemporary world.

Christianity has a long history of oppression against women. Brenda Richardson Vance rightly argues that:

Conventional Christology disempowers women. [...]When Christ's divinity, thought of as a largely disembodied intellectuality, was given primacy over his humanity, even in the human Jesus, his manhood in incarnation, taken as suggesting that the male form, seen as permanently intellectual, was closer to the Godhead than the female form, seen as primarily physical, seems to reinforce man's claim to dominate women. (84)

Female figures in the New Testament thus tend either toward veneration, like the Virgin Mary, or deprecation, like Mary Magdalene. In the biblical imaginary, women are categorized in a very limited way and are left with very few options: they are either virgins, concubines, prostitutes or, worst of all, temptresses and traitors like Eve. But the discrimination does not stop there. Indeed, the Divine Trinity excludes women from Heaven's court since whether one talks about the Father, the Son or the Holy Spirit, all evoke images of masculinity, thus relegating women, both semantically and symbolically, to a secondary status in the cosmology sphere, depriving them, in a way, of the full possibility of Divine Salvation. Yet, Jesus's sacrifice is relevant only in so far as it could ensure salvation for all of humanity. As Bohache argues:

Only if there is *in all human beings* a possibility for transcendence and a capacity for God, can there be such a possibility and capacity in the man Jesus; and only if God makes himself present and known in and through the creation generally can there be a particular point at which he is present and known in a single way. Jesus Christ could

not be a revelation if it was only an anomaly in the creation. He is revelation because it sums up and makes clear presence that is obscurely communicated throughout the cosmos. (39)

Consequently, a racialized and gendered Jesus is problematic in that it suggests God, of whom Jesus is the image, is masculine, and a gendered conception of God runs counter to the concept of Divine Revelation in that the divine becomes wholly constrained by the physical limits of earthly existence. It is for this reason that female figurations of Christ seem almost heretical. Yet, one might argue that if Jesus is divested of his masculinity, what remains is his suffering and this allows all victims of oppression to empathize with him, whether male or female. Jesus's suffering stands as the symbol for the oppression of all humanity, and, as Vance notes, "it is not the Incarnation itself that dis-empowers women but what a patriarchal church has made of the Incarnation" (85). The Christian attributes of love and compassion are, after all, qualities that are also traditionally assigned to women, even in Western society. In this regard, it could be argued that Jesus is as much female as male in that He incarnates primarily female virtues, these housed in a man's body. This allows for a reconciliation of the man/woman dichotomy, just as his earthly form reunited in one person both the Divine and the human. It is noteworthy to point out that Jesus Christ has also been perceived by many as the androgynous archetype, thus linking him to many of the Afro-Caribbean religious figures who incarnated both masculine and feminine traits. Christ's androgyny thus makes him/her a mythic element standing at the intersection of both genders. Bobbi Hopkins writes in this regard that:

To the androgyne, society is basically devoid of gender hierarchies and subsequently more fraternal (Hopkins, Phillips, & Samuels, under review; Bell, 1932). In sum, the androgyny hypothesis proposes that androgyny facilitates situationally appropriate

behavior which in turn fosters better adaption to life which may in turn provide abundant psychological health and well-being, surely a personal philosophy that the Biblical Jesus would support in his quest for "harmony, unity, and service in a fraternal society" (Gardner, 1996). This may be possible by considering that Jesus' early ministry stood for the re-uniting of agency and communion, which is an androgynous principle in accordance with the androgyny hypothesis. (79)

When we consider the mythical archetype out of which the biblical myth of Jesus Christ emerged, it can be argued that Christ embodied both female and male attributes. Thus "being 'Christ-like' did not involve being male: it involved accepting the call to take on roles of moral leadership, of prophets, teachers, ultimately martyrs" (Vance 86). Moreover, because Christ's martyrdom constitutes the epitome of suffering, this component of the biblical text effectively communicates issues of intersectionality that black women have to face in our contemporary world.

Feminine figurations of the Christ figure in Black Atlantic literature and art are able to reflect the complexity of contemporary black women's identities, as well as their struggle to denounce prejudices, thus providing them with a powerful Christian advocate in a world theater that remains pre-dominantly white and male-oriented. By inserting elements of the Christ figure into their narratives, women can regain a measure of symbolic power that has been lost over centuries of patriarchal domination. The merging of both feminine and Divine attributes puts them at the forefront of God's celestial vision and thus discredits a fallacious and discriminatory hierarchy that was arbitrarily imposed by a dominant class eager to maintain its privileged status. "[A]n important element of womanist theology is restoring to black women an appreciation of their status as the *imago dei* ('image of God')," writes Bohache (131). Black Atlantic artists thus turn to the very instrument of their

oppression in order to destroy the foundational basis on which Whites rely to keep Blacks on the margins of society. Jesus's assurance that he represents humanity as a whole makes him an ideal advocate for the emancipation of Black women:

Just as black women share races suffering with black men, sexist suffering with non-black women, and economic travail with people of every color and gender, in the same way Jesus of Nazareth is able to share each of these burdens because of his ability to empathize across borders: 'likewise, with Jesus, there was an implied universality which made him identify with others.' (Bohache 134)

But while one can clearly understand the empowering potential of feminine Christ figures in Black Atlantic literature and art, there are some black writers who believe that this reliance on an image so often seen as "White" leaves them vulnerable to the threat of deculturation. Minority writers are often obliged to become political spokespersons as well, and in consequence, they often see themselves as guardians of the cultural patrimony. This often leads a debate opposing race and aesthetics. Harlem Renaissance writers, for example, advocated a "Negro Art," one anchored in their cultural (African) heritage. Langston Hughes was one of those who believed that any Black Art should be typically "African" so as to counter the debasing effects of white cultural domination:

One of the most promising of the young Negro poets said to me once, "I want to be a poet--not a Negro poet," meaning, I believe, "I want to write like a white poet"; meaning subconsciously, "I would like to be a white poet"; meaning behind that, "I would like to be white." And I was sorry the young man said that, for no great poet has ever been afraid of being himself. And I doubted then that, with his desire to run away spiritually from his race, this boy would ever be a great poet. But this is the mountain standing in the way of any true Negro art in America--this urge within the

race toward whiteness, the desire to pour racial individuality into the mold of American standardization, and to be as little Negro and as much American as possible. (31)

For Hughes **and** many other black writers, refusing to be called a Negro artist meant rejecting one's blackness and, in the context of America under Jim Crow Laws, this amounted to an unforgivable betrayal of one's race. The re-writing of the Christ narrative, one of the founding narratives of Western culture, could thus appear to be an attempt to deny one's black cultural identity, to erase components of black culture rather than keep them alive. We will see, however, that the re-imagining and or feminization of the Christ figure actually provides an opportunity to inject elements of black folklore into aesthetic creations, suggesting that the conflict is less dramatic than it seems. As Anthony Pinn suggests, in Black theology, "Christology remained central [in Black theology], but transformed. Jesus the Christ is presented as a revolutionary (sometimes physically Black, but always identified with the suffering masses" (21). In fictional accounts where the focus is on some sort of power struggle, the figure of Christ is able to represent both dominant and dominated entities. Art thus becomes a way to hyphen-ize or hybridize oppositions, to combine within the space of the fictional narrative, theatrical performance or filmic production, the depiction of both the oppressors and the oppressed, both the material world and the spiritual realm. In creating Black Feminine figurations of Christ, artists in the Black Atlantic shed light on the fact that:

[...] God can become a human without being some kind of human! For God to leave the category of the Eternal and enter into a time-space continuum means that God has to become Asian if entering time through the continent and the people of Asia. God has to become European if entering time through the continent and the people of

Europe; and God has to become African if entering time through the continent and the people of Africa. God cannot become a “universal” human being. God has to become some specific human being if God is to become Incarnate. (Mosley vii)

If we understand Christ as being God Incarnate, there is indeed an ontological contradiction in his being cast as white and his claim to be universal. If Jesus is white, the “universal claim” is a rhetorical fallacy. In order to counter this domination, black writers use language (French, English, etc.) and the Bible to create their own fictional accounts, masterfully wielding the very weapons that were originally used to enslave black peoples against their oppressors. In doing so, they not only re-write a white founding narrative, but they also discredit the power hierarchy upon which slavery and colonization were based. In light of this view, Wilkinson argues that:

Writing is one of the weapons belonging to whites, and to read is to invite white voices into the reader’s head. Intertextuality, in the sense of an echoing between written texts, is in these novels not perceived as a strengthening resource, but as the next inextricable relationship with the self-perpetuating past. Representing not only the white men’s religion, but in its cold writtenness his very thought processes, and the forcible imposition of both, the Bible in these novels is handed on unread. (Qtd. in Stave 121)

Although Wilkinson’s argument exposes one of the primary uses black writers made of language and the Bible in their work, it is too narrow to fully reveal the complexity of the black creation process. To consider writing and the Bible as nothing other than tools used by whites to dominate blacks leads inevitably to a “white” reading of black texts. In other words, it suggests that Blacks can only counter white texts in their aesthetic creations. From this perspective, critics are

following a centripetal movement that brings everything back to the white center and thus suggests that black texts cannot be read outside their relation to the white world.

II.2.a Women and Christology in Africa

A clear understanding of the various implications of feminine figurations of Jesus by black writers first demands an analyses of the ways in which the Christ figure is viewed in the Black Atlantic. Just as the Christian God and saints possess attributes similar to those in the pantheon of traditional African and Afro-Caribbean deities, Jesus's role in the Bible recalls, as we have discussed earlier, roles traditionally assigned to women in Africa. "As primary actors in the movement of life and death, women have the ability to reach the apex of spiritual leadership as diviners who have contact with the ancestral spirits," writes Ngubane (qtd. in Holland 30). The function of a spiritual leader, a role paradoxically denied to women in Orthodox Christianity, is, on the contrary, is not a gendered role in many African cultures. Women's life-giving ability, as well as their inherent capacity for extra-sensorial communication—the ability to communicate with the fetus before birth, for example—grant them access to the world of the non-living, that is to say, to an ethereal dimension that links them to the realm of the Divine, thus making them natural diviners, as "in tribal religion [where] women preside at the important rites of passage (birth, puberty, Marriage, birthing, death and mourning), and [...] seek to bring this same presence to Christian ritual" (Bohache 138). Their function as spiritual leaders during tribal rituals reflects the functions fulfilled by religious leaders during Christian rites, and this gives rise to a form of creolized/syncretized Christianity which allows Jesus to retain a central, but not exclusive role: Jesus at its center, his exclusive centeredness is de-stabilized because he allows those in the margins to occupy that same center.

This crucial function assigned to women in traditional African cultures is a reflection of the important role they play in the family unit. As Dube argues, “as children, girls and boys, our mothers shaped our faith. Our spirituality was nourished by their faith and life. Often they were the first teachers of religion at home and in faith communities but *the words of the chronicles hide them*. They appear unannounced as footnotes and appendixes to men’s stories (emphasis mine)” (Anum 318). Following Dube’s stance, it can be argued that while the importance of the feminine figure may clearly be perceived within the family unit, in the public sphere, men often have a more dominant and visible presence. As historian Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch points out in her book *African Women. A Modern History* (1997), “Individual accounts passed down by women themselves are rare. They exist, as we have seen, especially among slave women, less subject to patriarchal ideology than others, but even these tend to celebrate the great deeds of male heroes” (45). In this regard, it might appear that the role of African women is less prominent. Furthermore, women are also relegated to the margins of written Western history⁴⁷—not only because they are Africans, but also because they are women. As a result, in popular opinion, the importance of African women is often overlooked.⁴⁸ Excised from the written text, women are in our contemporary world and in the Bible, still symbolically marginalized, but, as Musa Dube writes, “They have found ways to create and operate in another space, outside the boundaries and by the margins of both written history and culture” (Omenyo & Anum 318). African women’s Christology naturally reflects

⁴⁷ The patriarchal focus of Western history has been notably brought to light by feminist scholarship and is nowadays called into question.

⁴⁸ In the wake of Women’s studies, more and more works highlight the essential role African women play in their respective community. In this topic, see Patricia W. Romero’s enthralling book: *African Women. A Historical Panorama* (2015) offering a survey of leading roles women have played in sub-Saharan Africa.

upon these issues of oppression and exclusion, and in consequence, is quite different from its African American counterpart. Indeed:

When one turns to the Christology of women living on the continent of Africa, one finds a vastly different situation. Majority of black Africans, except for those who reside in South Africa, do not have to go with racism, as they are African-American sisters and brothers do. Some African women insist that sexism is a problem that merits attention; however, African women must deal with poverty on a scale unknown in the United States, and thus it is primarily the struggle for economic well-being that informs their Christology. (Bohache 137)

Of course, Bohache's arguments need to be put in perspective for it would be misleading to suggest that the African continent is exempt from issues related to racism.⁴⁹ Of course, racism does not take the same form in Africa as it does in white America. To begin with, institutionalized racism is undoubtedly more prevalent in the U.S. However, even in Africa, individuals may still face discrimination based on their ethnicity, culture and/or religion, all features that are subsumed under the concept of race. Interestingly, although African women deal with a variety of issues that their African American sisters do not, the Christology of both groups reveals the same preoccupation with socio-political issues, thus suggesting that a common thread runs through Black theologies worldwide. The Word of the Christian God was used by Western powers to justify their arbitrary domination of a specific segment of humanity. African theologies, on the other hand, emerged from a critical reading of this same Bible, and thus remain political in nature. It is important to stress that "Africa and Africans existed a long time before historical Christianity came into being, but Christianity, since its beginning has been present in Africa" (Verstraelen

⁴⁹ Understood here as a discrimination of people based on their ethnicity.

171). But even so, the reaction of the Bakwena to the conversion of their king Sechele I (1831-1892) to Christianity is particularly revealing of their ambivalent approach to Christianity: “The import of Sechele’s decision in favour of Christianity was fully comprehended by the Bakwena. It is reported that on the day of his baptism the Bakwena men cried, loudly mourning for what they perceived as a major loss” (Nkomazana in West & Dube 225). Aware of the fact that a Christian conversion implied the rejection of polygamy, the Bakwena mourned the loss of an essential element of their cultural tradition. Among the Africans who were weary of Christianity were those who understood that Christian conversion could be a potential threat to their cultural traditions. Interestingly the contemporary religious revival on the African continent results, as Koffi Asare Opoku points out, from the ability of modern African Christianity to also incorporate elements of ATRs:

The vitality of the new religious movements in Africa as is seen, for example, in the indigenous churches, more popularly called independent churches, is due largely to their being rooted in the traditional religious customs, and in Christianity being given an African expression. Thus, a Christianity which was presented as a religion of mental culture has been transformed into a religion of being and doing. Islam’s “success” is also due to its meeting the enduring needs of African traditional religion. (Olupona & Nyang 79-80)

While the African dimension of African Christianity must necessarily not be overlooked, the Western elements that pertain to the figuration of Christ in African Christology remain, to a certain extent, problematic. As Vhumani and Christopher Magezi argue:

The perceived foreignness of Christ in African Christianity is an ongoing challenge that is captured in various pieces of African theological literature. This problem partly

arises from some early Western missionaries' presentation of the gospel to Africans from a predominantly Western perspective, which caused many Africans to perceive Christ as a Western Saviour with a Western identity. The problem of the foreignness of Christ in African Christianity is further intensified by the traditional African ancestral world view that requires a blood-related ancestor to address the African contextual needs. Therefore, many African Christians do not like to view Christ as identifying with them. (1)

The position of Christ at the intersection of three geographical spaces (Africa, Europe and the Americas) and his centrality in Christian discourse make him a particularly powerful symbol of emancipation in the Black Atlantic. Conventional Christianity, on the other hand, cannot conceive of a Christ who is not cast as the son of a patriarchal God; someone who might embrace values that are not fundamentally those of the white, male world. For some Black feminists, this masculine dimension is so deeply anchored in the characterization of Jesus that it would be foolish to imagine a Christology that does not have a patriarchal nature:

For these post-Christians [revolutionary feminists], it is impossible to articulate a feminist Christology because Christ is the central symbol of the Christian faith: Christ's maleness is inextricable from both his person and the theology that has developed around him; moreover, Christ is Christianity's central symbol precisely because of the Christian belief that Christ is God, which reinscribes worship of a male deity. (Bohache 114)

However, we shall see in the works under review that, almost ironically, Black women's Christology, as well as Black Atlantic arts, have managed to liberate Jesus from his western patriarchal straightjacket and elevate his status to one that is a more perfect embodiment of the Divine.

In Black thought, Jesus's centrality as a Christian symbol is not the fact that he is the son of God but that he is a liberator. He is thus no longer an exclusive figure, but a representative of oppressed people everywhere. In sacrificing himself, he calls upon all those marginalized peoples in the margins to join him at the visible center. Even though he was the Son of God, he was willing to suffer on behalf of the oppressed and disenfranchised, thus providing the masses with a means of empowerment. Because of Jesus's sacrifice, their plight is center-staged and they become active agents in the struggle for freedom and thus are in alliance with the central figure of Christianity. Jesus's inclusive theology is particularly significant for African women, as Mitchem concurs:

It is important for all Africans, but especially women, that this person, born in someone else's backyard, has lived the life of God on earth and continues to accompany all in similar circumstances to live their full humanity so that they too might reflect the God in whose image they are created. It was important to believe that Jesus is the anointed one of God, empowered and sent by God to show humanity what it means to live fully the image in which we are made. Living fully has come to mean resisting oppression, transforming potential death into life and believing that the resurrection happens every time we defeat death and begin a new life. This is the good news and the good experiences realized or hoped for, that give African women joy in Jesus. (64)

The worship of Jesus, heir to a patriarchal God, ironically allows women to transcend the borders of gender dichotomy in order to claim a share of power that denied to them by an overarching Western patriarchy. In the light of the Christ narrative, each ordeal African women were obliged to confront is envisioned through the lens of a possible resurrection.

Interestingly, the Bible has both a destructive and a healing potential for those in the Black Atlantic:

African-Americans from the Bible to be both healing balm and poison book. They could not lay claim to the balm without braving the poison. The same book was both medicine and malediction. [...] Their cure for the toxicity of pernicious scripture was more scripture. The antidote hostile texts of the Bible was more Bible, homeopathically administered to counteract the toxins of the text.[..] As both curse and cure, slavery's children would distill antidotes for the toxic texts of the Bible and make those texts their own. (Callahan 40)

In similar fashion, Africans on the continent also interrogated these texts and managed to find a way out of spiritual bondage. For African women, the capacity of religion to heal provided them with a way to Africanize the Holy Book, giving way to new interpretations and understandings. These views not only served the needs of African women, but also provided a way to insert contemporary African realities into their readings of Christian texts:

Alongside this recognition that the earliest Christian mission was a diverse, egalitarian endeavour is the realization that in the religiously pluralistic Africa of today there needs to be room for many Christs. The images of 'Christ the King' and 'the Coming One' preached by African male Christology do not suit women's needs as they struggle for basic humanity, for this Christ was brought by the conquerors. Rather, the Christ who is a refugee from Europe and America and craves hospitality as a guest of Africa. African women inmates Christ as their personal savior and personal friend, one who embodies the Spirit and the power of God rather than the colonial overlords; this Jesus is an iconoclastic prophet who restores to women their sense of self amid the changing landscape of Africa. (Bohache 139)

Because Black female Christologies, like Black theology in general, emerged out of a specific socio-political context, they are, to a certain extent, a reflection of particular experiences. At the same time, however, they reflect the broader collective experience of oppression that was imposed upon the Black ethos by a large segment of the Western world eager to maintain its privileged status. The Africanized Jesus represents all types of suffering in one being, and thus grants to all the possibility of overcoming whatever suffering they encounter. As the metonymic symbol of all humanity, Jesus can thus be seen as Black, African, or even as a woman. He is no less likely to be cast as African or a woman than to be categorized as a White male. Endowing Jesus with African characteristics provides African women with the assurance that He will support them in their daily struggles, that He cares what happens to them, that he opposes their oppression and that they matter, regardless of what the dominant discourse might lead them otherwise to believe:

Seeped in African Religion and believing in Jesus, women are able to proclaim the Jesus who breaks the chain of evil. Jesus feeds the hungry and sets free the victims of patriarchy: he is therefore the Christ for African women who know all too well the bondage of both. African women who have known Jesus, however, no longer fatalistically accept the given conditions. They refuse the Cross, as the end of their life's experience, for Jesus beckons them to endure the Cross, but promises fullness of life as the final outcome of their discipleship. To see Christianity grow out of the religion of Jesus the suffering servant, is what keeps African women attached to Jesus. (Mitchem 64)

It is, paradoxically, while contemplating the mirror image of their own suffering in Jesus that African women find strength to resist oppression. Jesus, viewed as an ancestral fore-runner, communicates the message that pain and sorrow are not

merely the lot of sinners; the virtuous, too, often suffer. The suffering of the righteous is intended to demonstrate that the true meaning of human existence is not to be found in its earthly manifestation but rather lies beyond the limits of the corporeal body. This message persuasively counters and discredits the biblical curse of Ham that was so instrumental in shattering the Black ethos and that was so often used maintain the supremacy of the West and the inferiority of Africans. The notion of Jesus as healer also suggests that as long as pain does not result in death, there is always the possibility of redemption, resurrection and liberation, and consequently, suffering thus becomes a means by which to gain inner strength to resist whatever atrocities one encounters in life.

But even if African women found ways to achieve a symbolic liberation in their re-configuring of Christ to resemble themselves, their ability to officiate as leaders of the Christian faith was hampered. Two contradictory dynamics were at play here: on the one hand, African spirituality contained, at its very core, archetypes that embraced feminine figures as spiritual leaders. On the other hand, however, Christian churches of a variety of denominations –mostly Catholic and Orthodox–,tended to perpetuate patriarchal tendencies of the West, and women were thus confined to minor and insignificant roles within the church.

The degree of women's inclusion or exclusion in Christian churches is of course quite varied and differs greatly among the different Christian traditions. Pirjo Markkola writes that: "today, the ordination issue divides the Orthodox churches and the Catholic church, which do not ordain women, from many churches of the Anglican and Protestant traditions, which ordain women as ministers and, in some cases, as bishops" (McLeod 560). Women in Africa are barred from ordination within the hierarchical structure of the Church, but they have nevertheless managed to find

alternative spaces wherein they might navigate as spiritual leaders within their communities. As Markkola points out, “African churches have [...] relied on women’s contributions – both material and spiritual. Women’s organisations in many parts of Africa have been powerful and relatively independent. The prophetic churches, in particular, give space for revivalist meetings or prayer and faith healings organized by women’s organisations” (McLeod 565) In many Christian churches, African women play an active and vital role, though admittedly it is more behind the scene than center-staged.

Yet, although the Orthodox and the Catholic churches are indeed more reticent to accept women as spiritual leaders, African Independent Churches and Revivalist Movements seem to offer a much more welcoming space for women who receive the Call. In his essay “God Never Opened the Bible to Me. Women Church Leaders in Botswana.” Musa W. Dube shares the story of several African women who have been ordained ministers and concludes that, “women of Botswana have a history of leadership in the church. Undoubtedly, they face many constraints in a patriarchal world and they still have many hurdles to overcome, but they have also utilized many alternative spaces, opportunities and strategies to take up leadership in the church” (Omenyo & Anum 335). Even though many women continue to occupy liminal spaces and remain at the margins of both written scriptures and documented history, African women have nevertheless managed to exploit their African heritage and traditions and use their ancient knowledge of prophecy and healing legacy to destroy the barriers of patriarchy, and in so doing, offer new ways to understand the human existence and its relation to transcendence.

II.2.b Women, Christinity and Christology in the Caribbean

The Caribbean archipelagos have, from the 15th century on, been the stage for an extremely diverse religious landscape. As Edmond and Gonzalez point out, what they called (if not ironically, somewhat tactlessly) the “successful transatlantic crossing of Columbus and his crew in 1492,” created a space where the vibrant cultural flux of populations would allow for the merging, chaffing and ultimately blending together of mixed social groups that were always evolving and moving, as if powered by the forceful movement of the Atlantic out of which Afro-Caribbean cultures emerged:

This colonial experiment spawned the diversity of peoples, languages, and cultures that is the present reality of the Caribbean. An important part of this cultural mix is its variety of religious traditions. As these traditions and counted one another in their new environment, a process of accommodation, adaptation, and transformation began that has resulted in the character and diversity of religious beliefs and practices in the Caribbean today. (1)

As a result of their geographical context, Afro-Caribbean Christianity and Christology were strongly influenced by the Caribbean cultural landscape out of which they were born. Here, it was no less necessary for Christian discourse to reflect the reality of the black experience, than to take into account the specificity, the distinctiveness, of black life within the space of the Caribbean archipelagoes. Yet, as Delroy Reid-Salmon points out, black theologians have never actually considered the specificity of Caribbean Christianity when developing their discourse:

The Caribbean diaspora is a constitutive element both in Euro-American society and the African American community but African American theology has never before used the Caribbean diasporan experience as a source for theological discourse. Put

differently, African American theology neither considers the Caribbean diasporan experience as an appropriate starting point for theological inquiry nor does it address the issues and concerns of the Caribbean diaspora despite the Caribbean diaspora being in existence in America for just over a little more than one hundred years. (15)

Of course, poverty, discrimination and patriarchy are confronted by many black communities throughout the Atlantic world. Consequently, issues of oppression and discrimination, as well as the emancipatory characteristics of Black Atlantic theologies, are common motifs in Christian discourses throughout the Black Atlantic. The narrative of Jesus's suffering remains, in this regard, a meaningful symbol of empowerment. And just as Africans on the continent or throughout the diaspora read the Bible critically, using biblical narratives as a means to interrogate the human condition as it exists in the black, contemporary world, Black Atlantic theologians developed their arguments in a contextual arena dominated by Euro-American theologies and world theologies of liberation. Religious discourses developed in this manner are therefore profoundly polyphonic, continuously questioning their relation to space, culture, history and identity formation.

In this regard, Reid-Salmon writes that: "Caribbean diasporan women constitute a vital aspect of the constituency of Womanist theology and share the same context with African American women although their experiences differ" (21). And whereas, given its grounding in an African American context, Womanist theology has been criticized by some scholars for its inadequacy to reflect the black women's experience on a global scale, I concur with Baptist pastor Kate Coleman who argues that it is "a valid theoretical point of departure from which to address issues related to Black Atlantic women's Christianities" (Qtd. in Reid-Salmon 21). Contemporary theorists are at the crossroad of prior liberation theologies and womanist theology.

They counter Western Orthodox Christianity by arguing that the figure of Jesus can become a valid signifier for the black feminine experience of modernity in the Caribbean. Given the fact that it is so strongly anchored in a variety of Black Atlantic religious discourses, Afro-Caribbean theology is logically articulated around themes of freedom and liberation, we will note that despite many similarities, Caribbean Christ figures reflect a more profoundly syncretized nature than the theology of their African counter-parts, a reflection perhaps of the religious pluralism found in the Caribbean.

The figure of Jesus remains, rather logically, at the core of Afro-Caribbean Christian identity. “The Caribbean diasporan church premises its existence on this faith in Jesus Christ as the emancipator who comes to fulfill God’s promises on earth and in human lives, as evidenced primarily through the testimony of faith” (Reid-Salmon 77). But although allegiance to Christ appears as a common thread that runs through Christian faiths all over the world, the ways in which Jesus is envisioned and worshiped differ drastically between traditional Western Christianity and Christianity in the Black Atlantic. In the Americas, “What European Christians did not realize was the incorporation of elements of African cosmology in Caribbean Christianity” (Reid-Salmon 84). The case of Jamaica’s Revival Zion best exemplifies this argument. In spite of its unmistakable Christian foundation, the Revival Zion Church in Jamaica clearly reveals an African-based influence. “Revival Zion and Spiritual Baptists may be considered as Afro-Christian (or African-Christian) because, while the adherents of these traditions unambiguously identify themselves as Christians, they retain African orientations and aesthetics in the way in which they understand and deploy their faith to deal with the exigencies of life” (Edmonds & Gonzalez 121). As Christians, Revival Zion devotees have abandoned the African pantheon of orishas and maintain

belief in a unique God. However, Jesus and the Holy Spirit are placed on the same level as the orishas and ancestors because they all function as intermediaries between God and humans:

The Father, while acknowledged as the creator and all-powerful sovereign of the universe, is not the central focus of ritual attention. He is somewhat transcendent and removed from the milieu of everyday life. Jesus and the Holy Spirit are the vital presences that are believed to empower and sustain the lives of adherents as they struggle to sustain themselves spiritually, socially, and materially in this world. In addition, a host benevolent and malevolent spirits, including the spirits of dead, inhabit the world of Revival Zion and Spiritual Baptists. (Edmonds & Gonzalez 121-122)

Far from being a distinctive feature of Revival Zion and Spiritual Baptists, this approach to Christianity actually reflects the African-based heritage of religion in general. Whether the practice is an obvious form of syncretism, as are many Afro-Caribbean cults, or a more subtle blending of Christianity and African-based religious practices, African religiosity remains visibly present, a kind of palimpsest, in the spiritual life of individuals in the Black Atlantic. The traditional patriarchal structure of Christianity nevertheless plays an influential role in the shaping of West Indies Christian practices. Women leaders tend to be, no less numerous than in other parts of the Black Atlantic, but less visible and/or less studied.

In the chapters that follow, I will consider examples of Christianity as they are more broadly understood, that is to say, I will refer to Christians not only in the orthodox acceptance of the word, but also as the term applies to a variety of religious movements that worship a Judeo-Christian God. The Rastafari, for example, worship a Judeo-Christian God whom they call Jah and, consequently, I refer to them as

Christians in my analyses. The example of Rastafari best exemplifies how the weight of patriarchal traditions affects the Caribbean feminine ethos. As Michael Barnett writes:

There can be no denying the fact that Rastafari is a patriarchal movement. The male is at the head, having responsibility for conducting rituals, for interpreting events of significance to the community, and for the care and protection of the family as well as the community. Rastafari is based on the Bible; it therefore follows that its structure in philosophy would pattern that which unfolds in the Bible. (178)

The Rastafari conception of womanhood draws heavily from the practitioners' interpretation of the Bible. The woman, in the Rastafari imaginary, is thus perceived as an agent of evil, like Eve, and as such is a threat to the men's righteousness. To become a daughter, Jah's female devotee, a woman must first be introduced by a man. No woman can become Rastafari unless a man agrees to allow her to become part of the movement. Men are the head of the spiritual movement. Women must refer and defer to men when it comes to their religious practice: "If the female can only "sight" Rastafari through the male, it follows that her legitimacy within the movement would be dependent on him," writes Barnett (183). Yet, although one cannot deny the strong patriarchal straitjacket within which Rastafari women are constrained, their role within the movement has evolved over time. Women have become more and more aware of their subservient role in the movement and started reflecting upon the status of females within Rastafarianism.

As a consequence of the Pan-African revival that resulted from the Civil Rights movement, Rastafari spread rapidly both within Jamaica and beyond. But it is in the mid-seventies that the women's emancipation process became visible in the movement. Some chose to embrace the movement, even though they had not been

previously accepted into the faith by a man. “November 2, 1980, was the fiftieth anniversary of the coronation of Haile Selassie. For all Rastafarians this was the golden jubilee year. Several activities were organized to mark this year, which turned out to be significant for daughters. During at least one binghi the issue of daughters and their abilities and place in Rastafari was raised” (Barnett 187). And although this did not necessarily challenge the original patriarchal structure of the movement, it was a sign that things were beginning to change.

Women began to be considered less and less as second-class devotees, and they began to speak publicly during religious meetings about their role and their understanding of their status in the movement. They challenged the obligation to cover their hair and started to let their dreadlocks appear. Their skirts became shorter. And by the 1980s, three Rastafari-affiliated groups composed of women revealed that, even within the most patriarchal organizations, women were able to function as agents in their religious role within the broader community:

As confirmation that more and more daughters are becoming increasingly aware of what they are dealing with, three groups of daughters came into being in 1980: King Alpha and Queen Omega’s Theocracy Daughters, a group of elder daughters from the theocracy; International Twelve, among the twelve tribes; and Dawtas United Working Towards Africa (DAWTAS). This last group defined itself as a working group committed to addressing the educational needs of Rastafari youths, the need for social services within the Rastafari community, and self-development activities. (Barnett 188)

This focus on the Rastafari movement is, in my opinion, particularly revealing in that this cult is generally perceived as one of the most patriarchal of Christian-based practices. Being able to demonstrate that even in this environment, women can

avoid being victims of male domination and claim a more active role and visible presence in the religious hierarchy of such a patriarchal structure, offers proof that the biblical archetype of Jesus Christ can serve as a magnifying mirror that reflects the experience of black women in the Caribbean. Moreover, even more traditional Christian religions in the Caribbean are questioning women's relationship to the community, as well as theological discourses related to their concerns. Having emerged from theologies of liberation and women's theologies, the discursive power and reach of women in Caribbean religious life is making progress. Male theologians are now calling for a revision of the patriarchal foundations of the church in the Caribbean. Reid-Salmon writes in this regard that: "If the Caribbean diasporan church will embrace the centrality of women in the church, then it will be more effective in offering a prophetic critique of human oppression, an agent of social emancipation and an approximation of divine justice" (167). The invisibility of women in the Caribbean church is therefore more subjective than factual. Like their Black Atlantic sisters, Christian women in the Caribbean are now active agents of the spiritual community, even though the occasionally overwhelmingly patriarchal slant of scholarship continues to relegate them to the margins of their religious communities. I shall now turn to the role of black Christian women in the U.S. and discuss their role as potential religious leaders within the community.

II.2.c African American Women, Womanist Discourse and Christology in the US

To fully grasp the potential of biblical myths to produce an episteme for humanity as a whole, it is essential to detach ourselves from both orthodox Christianity and the western conception of universality. In the African American tradition, the Bible has always been a book that was called into questions rather than one that provided answers. As Allen Dwight Callahan points out:

For African Americans, the Bible has not been a book that answered questions. Indeed, it was precisely the answers provided in the Bible that African-American readers called into question. Their encounter with the Bible provoked the development of a critical sensibility, a penchant for interrogating themselves and others in light of Christian tenets. The Bible has thus been the book that caused them to call things into question rather than one that provided truth and enlightenment. (242)

The study of the influence of the biblical imaginary in Black Atlantic literature, theatre and cinema thus implies to constantly interrogate both the myths and their interpretations so as to throw the light on the flows disseminated throughout dominant discourse. In other words, we need to refrain from seeing the Bible as a reflection of a Eurocentric and patriarchal points of view, and analyze the biblical intertext as a social mirror that is able to reflect the common humanity of mankind in general. As Koffi Kwahulé confided to me during an interview where I asked about the influence of myths on his work:

Je ne cherche pas à imaginer des histoires nouvelles. Je pars du principe que dès l'instant où le monde a été créé, toutes les histoires étaient déjà à notre portée et que, ce qui pose une marge à cette totalité déjà close, c'est ma capacité à donner l'illusion à l'autre que je lui confie un secret alors même que c'est quelque chose qu'il connaît déjà. (Mouzet 190)

Whether we are discussing the biblical myth of Moses and the Promised Land or the myth of Jesus Christ, both these mythical archetypes contain, at their very core, motifs that are common to traditional African religions, Afro-Caribbean religions, and Christianity. These commonalities include the fundamental role of the ancestors in cultural life and practices, the ability to heal, and the prophetic tradition. These

archetypes are what Kwahulé designates as “histoires déjà-là” that writers turn into secrets. These similarities also explain how biblical myths have the potential to function as signifiers both in the Black Atlantic and beyond. It is therefore not surprising to see that Jesus Christ became a core element in African American women’s religiosity. As Collier-Thomas argues:

Drawing on the west African religious traditions, women were “totally receptive to the person of Jesus.” Given the African background and their belief in God as a divine mediator, it was not difficult for black women to accept Jesus as their personal savior and assigned the deity virtual powers. (12)

But, like the Christ of their masculine peers, the African American’s Christ is also a racialized figure. The North American context indeed prevented the black feminine ethos from escaping the borders of ethnicity. To function as a liberating figure, their Jesus would have to be something other than the blonde blue-eyed version of the Western imaginary. “[A] black Jesus who is for us, has to be one who is then actually, *truly for us*, and not a mere imitative model of the White Christ that still seeks to echo the paternalistic and patrician constraints of White power. This Jesus I am advocating is not only black; he is also not bound by conservative religio-cultural morals,” writes Black theologian Anthony Reddie (83). In order to remain relevant for women in the Black Atlantic, the biblical narrative must be critically engaged and read through the lens of the black experience of modernity. James Cone insists in this regard:

I am *black* first– and everything else comes after that. This means that I read the Bible through the lens of a black tradition of struggle and not as the objective Word of God. The Bible therefore is one witness to God’s empowering presence in human affairs, along with other important testimonies. [...] I believe that the Bible is a

liberating word for many people but not the *only* word of liberation. God speaks not just one Word in only one Story but many liberating words in many sacred stories.

(xi)

Interestingly, while the black males' Christ figure is openly involved in the public/political sphere, black females' Christ figures, though equally involved in politically inspired causes, generally operate at the level of the local community or within the family unit. Feminist perspectives of Christ highlight the intricate necessity of reflecting upon the black feminine experience of modernity as a whole. Rather than being restrained within the discursive borders of gender dichotomies, the study of the Christ figure in relation to black women implies the need to take into account the various levels of marginalization the black feminine ethos has had to face in our contemporary world. As Bohache points out, the feminist Christ problematic is threefold:

First, feminists are unwilling to see Christ as a vicarious savior who bears salvation to humanity for them and without their participation, for this renders women powerless and is an impediment to their human becoming. Second, feminists believe that Jesus was a model for how one may live in relationship with the Divine. They are reluctant, however, to see Jesus himself as divine, for this suggests the dangerous corollary that, because Jesus is male, God is male and that only men are created in God's image. Third, feminists do not see the death of Jesus as salvific because of the implication that suffering is redemptive in and of itself, thus validating women's unjust suffering. They prefer to see Jesus' death as one more example of the systemic sin of the world that thwarts the efforts of good people and oppresses the innocent. (127)

In reflecting upon their relation to Jesus Christ, African American women grasp the full measure of these various potential problematics. Their Jesus is no longer

a theoretical savior removed from every day experience, but rather walks beside them along the path of suffering so as to assure them that no matter the hardship, God always sides with the oppressed. As James Cone points out: “Blacks do not ask whether Jesus is one with the Father or divine and human, though the orthodox formulations are implied in their language. They ask whether Jesus is walking with them, whether they can call him on the ‘telephone of prayer’ and tell him all about their troubles” (13). They have a close relationship to the divine because they see the divine as being anchored in their experience of physical existence. In womanist theology, Christ’s masculinity is of minimal import because it is put into perspective by the fact that, in the African American imaginary, he is not a unique representative of the Divine world but rather accompanied by a number of other divinities, both male and female. These deities inhabit a collective unconscious that is imbued with a vast African heritage. No longer alone in the center, but still occupying a central focus (along with Afro-Caribbean orishas and African gods and goddesses), Jesus Christ is no longer imprisoned in his masculinity and is therefore able to provide a more meaningful spiritual sustenance to African American women.

In moving beyond the barriers of epistemological contradictions, and by blurring the borders between the Other and the Self, between male and female identities, a revised version of a de-gendered Christ emerges and this newly configured Christ figure erases some of the contradictions upon which the white Christian American discourse had based its hierarchy of humanity. In so doing, the Christian message of preaching love and compassion as a universal divine gesture becomes ontologically relevant. Only then can the Word of God reflect its truly divine nature, for, as Bohache writes, “Only a Christianity that sees itself in the context of the world religions will make sense in the twenty-first century” (41). We

shall see that the figurations of Christ in the works under review all escape the alienating borders of imposed identities, whether these be related to gender, race, religion, and/or social status because, given the configuration of our contemporary world, it has become impossible to draw meaning from fixed identities relying on a fantastical human essence that is unable to scientifically reveal anything about our societies.

Just as they did and continue to do in African-based religions, women have been, through their practice of Christianity, able to find ways of embracing the Word of the Christian God while pushing the boundaries of what a gendered identity might entail. I shall now bring to light several examples of female leadership roles within the frame of African American Christianity.

As it has been noted earlier, African American Christianity has been shaped by a great variety of influences. But while “slave control was based on the eradication of all forms of African culture because of their power to unify the slaves and thus enable them to resist or rebel. Nevertheless, African beliefs and customs persisted and were transmitted by slaves to their descendants” (Raboteau 21). Of course, the impact of white orthodox Christianity was so prevalent in slave states that the role of women as spiritual leaders of the community was limited, due in part to the straitjacket of patriarchy. It is worth pointing out that despite his thorough research on slave religions, Raboteau barely mentions the role of women, thus demonstrating their liminal position in the collective imaginary, regardless of factual evidence to the contrary. The scholar acknowledges criticism in this regard and writes:

Another criticism to which I must respond “*mea culpa*” is my failure to deal explicitly with the religious lives of slave women. Were I to have revisited the sources with this

question in mind, I might have perceived and described more fully slave women as midwives and healers, as conjurors, and as spiritual mothers in the process of seeking, and the social and spiritual importance they gave to quilting, to name only a few topics suggested by students and colleagues. (349)

Despite the scant attention scholars have given female slaves' role as spiritual leaders, and while it is true that they were indeed less numerous than their male counterparts, they undeniably contributed to the religious life of Afro-America. In her essay, "'Marsa never sot Aunt Rebecca Down': Enslaved Women, Religion, and Social Power in the Antebellum South," Brenda Stevenson highlights the role religion played in the black feminine liberation movement in the United States. Highlighting the personal experience of a slave named Aunt Rebecca [who] "had been a slave of Robert Coles of Powhatan County, Virginia, during the antebellum era," (345) Stevenson insists that although the public space in which slave women were allowed to navigate was at the time very restricted, Aunt Rebecca nevertheless found in religion a way to move beyond the restrictions that her social status, gender and race might have imposed:

While praying, neither slaveholders nor slaves responded to her as a social inferior. Traditionally, a southern enslaved woman's race, gender, and certainly her slave status would have isolated her fundamentally from this type of social reception among slaveholding whites. Yet, Master Coles clearly was moved by Rebecca's passionate expression of her Christian faith—he and his family enjoyed hearing her pray. They also, no doubt, wanted her acceptance of "their religion" to be an example to their other slaves. (345-346)

In this case, Aunt Rebecca was not an actual spiritual leader in the traditional sense of the term, but nevertheless officiated as such during brief moments dedicated

to prayer, thus finding the spiritual oxygen to allow her to breathe in the stifling depths of American racism and gender oppression. While the context of slavery in white America was both spiritually and physically imprisoning, Rebecca managed to use religion to achieve not only spiritual liberation, the implied promise of the biblical narrative, but also a physical liberation of a limited sort. As Stevenson writes:

In many instances, Rebecca's gender would have limited her accessibility to public power within her slave community, particularly in slave communities where women were not in the majority. Yet, her advanced age, her obvious knowledge of religious text, and perhaps both the "memory" and contemporary "practice" of female "leaders" in traditional African religions allowed social space for female religious leadership in slave communities, even in those communities where their masters did not order them to attend worship services. (346)

Interestingly, the example of Rebecca reflects both the creolization of religions in the Black Atlantic and their function as potent agents of emancipation for black women in Africa and its Diaspora. She becomes the embodiment of the ancestors' cult, as well as a reflection of the traditional role embraced by women in the context of African religiosity. Of course, the liberating power of a leadership in a religious context needs to be put in perspective within the broader historical context of slavery in America. Although Rebecca indeed enjoyed a greater social status than her peers: "This unique role meant that she experienced a heightened social presence and status, a kind of social power, albeit situationally bound, that was rare for enslaved women. 'Social power' within this context means merely the ability of enslaved women to have a social presence and influence that was recognized beyond traditional boundaries" (Stevenson 346). This means that her influence extended beyond the confines of the family unit to reach the broader slave community and even

part of her white counterparts. But the context of slavery prevented her from gaining real independence and power. Women like Rebecca nevertheless paved the way for other black women to exploit the arguably paradoxical emancipating potential of religious life in America.

By taking on the same roles women of African descent had embraced during slavery – as midwives, healers, conjurors healers, and as spiritual mothers, functions that also provided evidence of the strong African heritage of their practices– several African American women in the nineteenth century, officiated as preachers. Traveling miles and miles around to the country to spread the word of God, they very often dealt with issues such as racism, sexism, and chauvinism. In this regard, Chanta M. Haywood notes that:

As descendants of “slaves,” or as former “slave girls” themselves, many black religious women, such as Jareena Lee, Julia Foote, Maria Stewart and Frances Gaudet, strongly believed that they were indeed these “prophesying the orders.” As such, they traveled all over the country, sometimes even abroad to preach or do God’s work. Whenever they could they would ride on trains, or in stages, but the majority of the times they were forced to ride on the decks of boats, in mail coaches or to rely on other forms of transportation because of, what Julia Foote called “indignities on the account of color.” Many times they walked. When they reached their destinations in both free and slave states they preached to men, women and children from various races, denominations and classes, extending to them their own interpretations of the Bible. (Wimbush 355)

Leaving the potentially restrictive walls of the family unit behind, women preachers often enjoyed greater independence. Of course, my intention is not to suggest that this was achieved easily and fully, but their role as religious leaders

allowed women to escape the symbolic imprisonment of the black feminine ethos within the constraints of the Victorian ideal of femininity. Even here, they often occupied liminal spaces in the religious landscape, “When they were denied the pulpit or podium because of prejudices against women they preached in tents, bush clearings, meeting halls, private homes and other marginal spaces” (Haywood in Winbush 355). Again, we see that the emancipatory potential of religion was overshadowed by the socio-political context of 19th century America. Rather than consider their status as an inevitable and unchangeable, black women gradually forced the doors of Western patriarchy open in order to forge new meanings to their existence, both in the material world and beyond.

Although there were not that many women who officiated as ministers, they remained extremely active within the life of their congregation. As Evelyne Brooks Higginbotham argues, “women were crucial to broadening the public arm of the church and making it the most powerful institution of racial self-help in the African-American community” (Fulop & Raboteau 203). In so doing, they undoubtedly paved the way for a contemporary womanist Christ that is “a prophet who not only challenges the black community to become more Christ-like and attuned to human wholeness, but also challenges womanist theologians themselves to break the silence regarding such issues as economic justice and heterosexism” (Bohache 137). Today, black women’s relation to Christ moves beyond the potentially restrictive borders of religion to infiltrate every layer of their lives. The importance of Christ figures in African American women’s imaginary exemplifies this relation to Jesus as a close friend walking along with them as they make their way through life. But this Jesus, in navigating outside the religious realm, has been creolized and reflects the extraordinary heterogeneity of African-based religiosity.

Chapter three: Feminine Figurations of the Christ in the Black Atlantic

III.1 Myth-Criticism: Hypotextuality of the Christ's Narrative Interrogated

III.1.A Jesus Christ in the Biblical Narrative

In the Bible, the narrative of the life of Christ is told in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. The gospels of Matthew, Luke and Mark are referred to as the Synoptic Gospels because they all relate the same events, whereas the gospel of John stands in stark contrast to the other three. For the purpose of this study, I will first highlight the mythic elements (*mythèmes*) present in biblical texts that have bounced from imaginary to imaginary in the West, the Black Atlantic and beyond. Jesus Christ's biography could be, schematically, summarized as such: 1) The Annunciation to the Virgin Mary by the angel Gabriel; 2) Jesus's miraculous birth; 3) The warning by the angel of the Lord announcing Herod's intention regarding their child: the flight of the family to Egypt; 4) The death of Herod; 5) The return of Joseph, Mary and Jesus to Bethlehem; 6) The Early teachings: Unbeknownst to his parents, Jesus, then twelve years old, stays in the temple of Jerusalem to engage in dialogue with the faithful, "And it came to pass, that after three days they found him in the temple, sitting in the midst of the doctors, both hearing them, and asking them questions. And all that heard him were astonished at his understanding and answers" (*KJV*, Lk 2.46-47); 7) Jesus's baptism: About twenty years later, Jesus is baptized by John the Baptist. "Then cometh Jesus from Galilee to Jordan unto John, to be baptized of him. But John forbad him, saying, I have need to be baptized of thee, and comest thou to me? And Jesus answering said unto him, Suffer *it to be so* now: for thus it becometh us to fulfil all righteousness. Then he suffered him" (*KJV*, Mt 3.13-15), God then descends on earth and recognizes His Son; 8) The selection of twelve

disciples; 9) Jesus's first miracle: the turning of water into wine. "Jesus said to the servants, "Fill the jars with water"; so they filled them to the brim. Then he told them, 'Now draw some out and take it to the master of the banquet.' They did so, and the master of the banquet tasted the water that had been turned into wine. He did not realize where it had come from, though the servants who had drawn the water knew." (*NIV*, John 2.7-9); 10) Jesus throws the money changers out of the temple. "And Jesus went into the temple of God, and cast out all them that sold and bought in the temple, and overthrew the tables of the moneychangers, and the seats of them that sold doves." (*KJV*, Mt 21.12); 11) Mary Magdalene anoints Jesus with her tears; 12) Touching the hem of Jesus's Garment "And a woman was there who had been subject to bleeding for twelve years, but no one could heal her. She came up behind him and touched the edge of his cloak, and immediately her bleeding stopped" (*NIV*, Lk. 8.43-44); 13) The raising of Lazarus: "When he had said these things, he cried out with a loud voice, 'Lazarus, come out.' The man who had died came out, his hands and feet bound with linen strips, and his face wrapped with a cloth. Jesus said to them, 'Unbind him, and let him go'" (*ESV* Jn 11.43-44); 14) The feeding of the multitude: "And he commanded the multitude to sit down on the grass, and took the five loaves, and the two fishes, and looking up to heaven, he blessed, and brake, and gave the loaves to *his* disciples, and the disciples to the multitude. And they did all eat, and were filled: and they took up of the fragments that remained twelve baskets full. And they that had eaten were about five thousand men, beside women and children" (*ESV*, Mt 14.19-21); 15) The arrest, sentencing and crucifixion; 16) The Resurrection and ascension of Jesus.

While this summary of events may seem, to a certain extent, schematic, it will prove to be a valuable tool for analyzing the works under review. It will indeed allow

me to determine the “quality,” i.e. the value of each rewriting of a biblical myth linked to Jesus. Pierre Brunel writes in this regard that, “La valeur d'une version littéraire du mythe se jugera d'après son ‘authenticité’, c'est-à-dire la qualité de sa référence à cet archétype” (34). In this regard, each contrast, each omission, each axiological reversal from the mythical scheme constitute, at their very core, a signifying potential for the purpose of literary analysis.

My reading of the Christ narrative as an archetype for black women’s experience(s) of modernity will draw heavily from Jung’s concept of the collective unconscious. We shall see that the mythic scheme revealed by the Christ narrative exposes multiple layers of oppression communally faced by black women in the contemporary world. In his groundbreaking work, *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, C.G. Jung explores the various meanings the child archetype takes in the collective unconscious. Highlighting both its futuristic component, i.e. the manner in which the very motif conveys hope, as well as its ability to personify the primitive “real but unconscious roots of consciousness,” Jung posits the child figure at the strategic intersection of past, present, and future, thus magnifying its potential to function as a trope of revelation. Using a structuralist approach, Jung brings to light elements of the child-god archetype that will be particularly revealing for my study of the Christ narrative:

Common to both types [the child god and the child hero] is the miraculous birth and the adversities of early childhood—abandonment and danger through persecution. The god is by nature wholly supernatural; the hero’s nature is human but raised to the limit of the supernatural—he is “semi-divine.” While the god, especially in his close affinity with the symbolic animal, personifies the collective unconscious which is not yet integrated into a human being, the hero’s supernaturalness includes human nature

and thus represents a synthesis of the (“divine,” i.e. not yet humanized) unconscious and human consciousness. Consequently he signifies the potential anticipation of an individuation process which is approaching wholeness. (165-166)

Both archetypes—the *child god* and *child hero*— interestingly merge in the figure of Jesus Christ, suggesting that one may find, in the image of Christ, the resolution of a divided psyche as well as a representation of the dichotomies besetting human existence. While Jesus is never literally abandoned, the Bible narrative exposes Him to danger through the persecution of Herod. He also leaves his home, deliberately choosing exile. Leaving the protective confines of his family leads him to grow spiritually and consequently appears as a sort of *sine qua non* on the path to spiritual initiation. The child needs to leave the home in order to become an adult, but also to achieve a form of transcendence through hardship.

In the collective imaginary, the figure of Christ can be seen as a crystallization of Jung’s dialectical thought process in that Jesus undergoes both divine and human ordeals. It can thus be argued that, in regard to transcendence, earthly suffering may be more critical than an uncertain after life. My argument here departs from Western interpretations of Jesus’s suffering as a way to persuade black people to accept submissively their tragic lot. I argue instead that for Christ’s suffering to have meaning for black people, it is more appropriate to follow Callahan’s argument who states that:

[I]n the collective imagination of African Americans, Christ is not in heaven, waiting in the wings for his curtain call at the end of time. He is present here, suffering along with black folks the slings and arrows of their outrageous misfortune. And he is the arch revolutionary in whose name revolutionary African Americans have been praising the Lord and passing the ammunition since antebellum times. (242)

In the works under review, every figuration of Christ retains, interestingly enough, some revolutionary potential, although, as we shall see, not all of these representations constitute messianic figures. Schwarz-Bart's and Morrison's novels are *bildungsroman*, in that the reader is made to witness the formation (spiritual growth) of the protagonist throughout the narrative. Chauvet's *Amour*, on the other hand, could be perceived as a counter-*bildungsroman*⁵⁰ to the extent that Claire's spiritual growth is, to a certain extent, prevented by the extent of her alienation. Alienation that is such that Claire has no means to transcend it so as to grow spiritually. All three protagonists have lost their parents, and have therefore either physically or symbolically left "home." Moreover, Claire's and Bintou's family unit is far from being a protective cocoon. Bintou's departure from the house is, in this regard, the key to her spiritual survival. To the same extent, it can be argued that Claire's forced stay in her home is the very cause of her spiritual death.

The three women are embodiment of the notion of intersection: Claire as black in a white-mulatto family, Bintou as a French/African, Consolata as a South American/American. While their characters differ on many points, all are nevertheless shaped by the metaphor of exile that, as a result of their history and the crossing of the Middle Passage, infuse the process of identity construction in the Black Atlantic with fluidity, movement and instability.

III.1.b Claire as a Figuration of Christ in *Amour* by Marie Vieux-Chauvet

In Marie Vieux-Chauvet's *Amour*, Claire, the protagonist who is silenced by suffering and turns to writing to share her tormented feelings with an imaginary reader, appears in the narrative as a figuration of Christ. Although *Amour* cannot be considered as a rewriting of the biblical myth— Claire's life narrative does not mirror

⁵⁰ Rather than as a formation novel, *Amour* could be read as a destruction novella.

that of Christ, and the biblical references are too succinct to suggest an actual rewriting— the protagonist nevertheless shares several characteristics with her biblical alter ego. We shall see that as Claire’s life unfolds, the extent of her suffering is revealed poignantly to the reader and ultimately drives the protagonist to madness, transforming Claire’s whole life into a symbolical figuration of the martyrdom of Christ on the cross. And while crucial elements of the Christ narrative are indeed omitted in Chauvet’s text, Claire’s characterization is clearly reminiscent of Christ. Her sympathy for the marginalized; her martyrdom; the reification of her body; the ways in which she rebels against society and her solitude/alienation⁵¹ are all dimensions that reinforce my reading of Claire as a Christ figure.

As a Christ figure, Claire communicates, very early in life, sympathy for the marginalized, but unlike her biblical alter ego, she is unable to act on her sympathies because of her parents’ insistence on isolating her from those who do not belong to the Haitian mulatto-aristocracy. Interestingly, like Jesus who, at twelve, stayed in the Jerusalem temple where he received his first spiritual awakening, Claire, too, has a spiritual epiphany at the age of twelve. But for Claire, unlike Christ, the experience is not fulfilling, ultimately splitting Claire’s consciousness, thus foreshadowing her descent into madness.

En l’année 1912, j’avais tout juste douze ans quand je devins l’amie de Térésa Aboud, une petite Syrienne très douce aux longs cheveux noirs qui ne parlait que créole. Je ne la fréquentais qu’à l’école en me cachant de la supérieure. (Chauvet 92)

Although Claire would like to befriend those outcasts alienated as a result of the hierarchical structure of Haitian society, she is torn between the social restrictions

⁵¹ Although Jesus Christ was not really a solitary figure, being without sin among sinners symbolically doomed him to a form of solitary alienation. Away from home, he was also to a certain extent an exiled figure.

that keep her trapped within her aristocrat upbringing, and her genuine desire to befriend a soft-spoken Syrian girl. In the end, the influence of the parental prohibition proves too overwhelming and Claire breaks off the friendship. After a discussion with her parents, she decides to cut all ties with Térésa:

De retour à l'école, j'évitai d'adresser la parole à Térésa et refusai d'accepter les bonbons qu'elle m'offrait quotidiennement.

— Pourquoi ? me demanda-t-elle.

— Vous avez ruiné les parents de ma mère, retournez donc dans votre pays. (92)

The oldest of three daughters, the darkest in her Haitian mulatto-aristocrat family, Claire has been symbolically marked by destiny to be an outcast. Isolated from the outside world by her parents, she is no less lonely in the family unit. Claire's social upbringing indeed prevents her from being able to embrace her blackness. In rejecting Térésa, Claire expresses her desperate yearning to belong and she thus surrenders to her parents dictating hoping that this renunciation will finally give her a sense of belonging. But because she has grown up in a mulatto household, raised by parents who openly despise and/or look down on black people, Claire is trapped in a body she, eventually learns to despise. As Munro argues:

The shame that her dark skin represents for her family creates a double form of alienation whereby she is set apart from the light-skinned bourgeoisie (by her dark skin) and separated from the dark-skinned lower classes (by her social class). (Glover & Benedicty-Kokken 49-50)

Mirroring her parents' rejection of blackness even though black herself, Claire is therefore doomed to alienation, unable to ever get the sense of belonging she so desperately seeks. Claire was born in 1900, at a time when Haitian society was organized according to the principle of colorism. Until Duvaliers' regime (1957-

1986), this society valued, those with the fairest skin and keep those who were darker at the lowest level of the social hierarchy. Claire spends her youth trying to please her abusive parents, ashamed of the black blood running through their veins. She desperately tries to fulfill her social responsibilities in the hope she will finally feel accepted in her family. She takes charge of the coffee plantation after her father's passing, and takes care of her younger sisters when their mother falls ill and eventually dies of languor.

From a very young age, Claire's body, like Christ's on the cross, is reified. Hers is the visible remnant of a black ancestry that her parents wish they could dismiss, a heritage that her father wishes would fade away under the influence of his education, his money, his power and the white blood that raises his social status. When the doctor wonders if the way Clamont "educates" his daughter (making liberal use of his belt) is a reflection of his white heritage, he replies: "Dites-moi, croiriez-vous, si vous ne me connaissiez pas de longue date, que j'ai du sang noir dans les veines? Cela signifie que mon sang noir à moi est en voie de régression et que j'ai hérité certaines qualités qui vont lui faire défaut à elle, si je ne la corrige pas" (Chauvet 96). Drawing from both Haiti's social hierarchy, eugenics and other fantasist pseudo-scientific reasoning according to which Blacks are less evolved than Whites, Clamont tries to negate his daughter's blackness because it does not allow him to reconcile both sides of his mulatto identity. Her blackness cancels out his whiteness. As a result, Claire's dark color is perceived in her family and surrounding as a genetic defect, thus warranting violence and corporal punishment. As Walcott-Hackshaw argues, Clamont's beating of his daughter reveals tragically his inability to make peace with the fact that he too is a half-breed:

Claire represents everything he would like to suppress; her dark color is a symbol of contamination and regression. She is a metaphor for “une race indisciplinée” (an undisciplined race), a symbol of his own self-hatred and an inheritance he does not want to accept. The extent to which he has internalized racial self-hatred is shown in the abuse he inflicts on his own daughter; he literally wants to beat the blackness out of her to try to correct this regression. (48)

Suffering and caring for the others, like Christ did before her, Claire is also a rebel who passionately revolts against the social expectations of her upbringing. Courted by Frantz Camuse, a young white man, Claire is too filled with self-hatred to accept the courtship, “De longues discussions familiales auxquelles s’étaient jointes Mme Bavière et Mme Soubiran m’avait complexée au point que je ne pouvais plus lever les yeux sur le visage rosé et blond de Frantz Camuse” (103). Rather than agree to marry her pretender because she is convinced he woos her only because she is an aristocrat, she boldly tells her mother that she would be alone than marry a man who wanted her only for her dowry:

Des larmes de rage et de dépit coulaient sur mes joues et quand ma mère, ouvrant la porte, entra, je lui criai:

- Pourquoi suis-je noire ? Pourquoi ?
- Ton père fera de toi une riche héritière.
- Je ne veux pas que l’on m’épouse pour mon argent, je ne me mariera jamais, jamais.

(104)

Claire’s Christ-like dimension is indeed alienating rather than transcending. Unable to voice the extent of her alienation and revolt, the protagonist transcribes the tumultuous wanderings of her mentally ill self in a diary. And although her devotion to her family is reminiscent of a Christ-like sacrifice in that it seems to emerge from

an extraordinary compassion and a radical self-denial that puts the well-being of others before one's own, this sacrifice does not lead to any form of positive outcome or redemptive consequence. While Christ's solitude served a spiritual purpose, Claire's functions as a precursor to madness.

Claire in fact anticipates that the revelation of an impossible love story with her brother-in-law will bring redemption. After years of loving him in silence, while plotting the murder of her sister Félicia, she resolves to confess her love, "Ce soir, je l'accueillerai dans ma chambre et je lui avouerai mon amour. Il faut qu'il me révèle à moi-même" (Chauvet 153). Claire's lack of self-esteem is such that she thinks she cannot find her true self, i.e. be revealed to herself through her own agency. She feels that she cannot exist, cannot be a person if she is not loved by a man. But the extent of her alienation is so strong that she believes any love affair is necessarily doomed to failure and, consciously or not, passionately love a man that will, most probably, never love her in return. She therefore condemns herself to a living death. Every time she realizes her brother-in-law Jean Luze is escaping her, she turns into a zombie, a figure of the living-dead:

Vide en moi. Fosses, ravins et précipices sont trop peu profonds pour m'ensevelir. Je suis enfouie dans la dernière couche terrestre, à la fois morte et vivante. Non, morte, vraiment morte. Une sorte d'automate. Je n'ai plus d'âme. Est-ce ça le désespoir ? Je ne peux plus me tromper. Si jamais je commets l'imprudence de me jeter à sa tête, je sais ce qui m'attend. Il nous a jugés. (Chauvet 71)

Unlike Christ whose resurrection brought the Good News, Claire's multiple deaths and rebirths throughout the narrative bring only more and more suffering, more and more pain that eventually lead her to a breaking point and she snaps. Unlike Christ, Claire Clamont is not depicted as a hero but rather as an anti-hero, a woman

who becomes a political hero after (almost unwillingly) killing the city's persecutor Calédu. The original plan, however, was to kill her sister, and later to commit suicide after she realized she would not be able to carry out her diabolic plan. But as Valerie Kaussen suggests: "In *Amour*, life and death do indeed depend on 'mere chance,' yet, as the rest of the narrative has borne out, chance is never only that. The random and the contingent are part of a totality, connected in complex ways to intersecting social, individual, and historical contexts" (179).

The killing of Calédu, while embodying the success of the people's revolt, is also the metaphorical deflowering of Claire. After Jean Luze gives her a dagger, Claire develops an erotic attachment to the gift, projecting the desire she feels for her brother-in-law onto the object, "Me voilà assise sur mon lit, le poignard dans les mains. Je le contemple et le caresse. Il a la pointe acérée et son manche finement ciselé se recourbe légèrement" (157). As a gift from Jean Luze, the phallic shape of the knife arouses in the spinster's consciousness a sadomasochistic linking of the knife with erotic arousal.

Almost ironically, for the first time in the narrative, the very last sentence of the novel seems to suggest a positive outcome to Claire's symbolic death and the possibility of a renewal: "Me voilà assise sur mon lit, contemplant ce sang sur mes mains, ce sang sur ma robe, ce sang sur le poignard... J'aperçois par la fenêtre les torches qui vacillent dans le vent. Les portes des maisons sont ouvertes et la ville entière, debout" (Chauvet 161). As Stéphanie Bérard (and Kaussen) suggest, this messianic hope is clearly evocative of the Négritude movement: the reference to a whole city, standing, in all likelihood, a "probable réminiscence intertextuelle à la négritude césairienne" (57). Sitting on her bed, a bloody Claire, half Christ-like, half deflowered Virgin, observes her surroundings and realizes that her actions have

finally brought about change. Of course, it could be argued that the murder of Calédu, on the contrary, renders her the opposite of a Christ-like figure in that it stands as a rejection of Jesus's "turn the other cheek" doctrine. However, the extreme violence inherent to Christ's crucifixion cannot be dismissed. Although Jesus himself did not himself resort to violence, divine salvation was "achieved" through the performance of an act of extreme violence, His crucifixion, therefore symbolically links violence and salvation. In this regard, Heather Gregg writes that, "[certain] religious groups come to believe that violence is a necessary means of attaining salvation, either in this world or the next, and that salvation is more important than upholding the moral and ethical imperative of love and peace" (18). Interestingly, the motif of sacrifice as a means to restore the balance of the community is also common to both ATRs and Afro-Caribbean religions.

[John S. Mbiti argues] that in African societies, life is closely associated with blood. So, when blood is shed in a sacrificial context, it implies that human or animal life is being given back to God who is, in fact, the ultimate source of all life. According to Mbiti (1975: 55-56), common routines like "good health ,healing, protection from danger, safety in traveling or some other undertaking, security, prosperity, preservation of life, peace and various benefits for individuals" have religious connotations. (Bukuluki & Mpyangu 13)

Following this view, Claire's murder of Calédu can be read as a sacrifice rather than a murder. A necessary shedding of blood that will eventually (maybe?) bring peace to the community. Going from being the martyr to being the executioner, Claire is symbolically reborn through Calédu's murder and this act has also brought about the rebirth of the whole community. For the first time in her life, Claire is the agent of change, and she finally seems to feel like she belongs.

As can be seen from this brief review of Claire's Christ-like characteristics, the messianic figure depicted by Chauvet is caught up in an alienating landscape that gradually plunges the protagonist into madness. But in a narrative twist, the author seems to suggest that Claire may escape the prison of alienation if we look beyond the limits of the book. While Claire's characterization serves as a magnifying glass that brings to light the multilayered issues encountered in post-independence Haitian society, the first black republic in the New World, Chauvet's characterization of her protagonist also reflects the writer's refusal to state and her insistence on questioning. As Glover points out:

Chauvet's work is very rarely considered alongside that of more politically visible figures such as Jacques Roumain, Jacques-Stephen Alexis, and René Depestre. This exceptionalized status has much to do with the fact of her nonparticipation in the gender-bound political culture of her time. While her narratives offer terrifically scathing portraits of Haitian society, they identify no clear "good" and "bad" guys, and her biography suggests a real wariness with respect to activism and practical engagement. (7-8)

If the open-ended nature of the novel may suggest a messianic hope, Chauvet nevertheless refrains from providing her readers with any form of certainty regarding the dénouement. Oscillating between alienation and revelation, Claire's suffering while clearly deadly for her psyche, like Christ's sacrifice, will nevertheless eventually result in some form of revelation. Uncertain in the diegetic world, Claire's fate nevertheless pushed to the forefront the perverse repercussions of colonial violence in Haiti and beyond. "In this sense, Chauvet's work resonates with the project of Frantz Fanon in his 1952 *Peau noire, masques blancs*, in which he emphasizes the causal role of slavery and colonialism in the genesis and persistence

of a specifically black Caribbean psychopathology,” writes Garraway (204). Interestingly enough, this theme is a common thread that permeates all the works under review in my study.

III.1.c Télumée as a Figuration of Christ in *Pluie et Vent sur Télumée Miracle* by Simone Schwarz-Bart

Pluie et vent sur Télumée miracle is the fictional autobiography of Télumée, a black peasant living in Guadeloupe. Three generations separate the protagonist from slavery and, as she recalls her life and that of the women in her family, she uncovers layers of embedded traumas that all appear to be the tragic consequence of the destruction of the black ethos by the Western world. Télumée’s characterization is reminiscent of Christ’s in the cycle of birth/rebirth the reader is made to witness throughout the narrative; in the ways the protagonist eases the suffering of others; and her demonstration of selflessness, suffering of self to benefit others. While Jesus was not abandoned by his family, Télumée, like Claire—and as we shall see like Consolata—was. We shall see that although Schwarz-Bart’s Télumée’s fate might to a certain extent seem less tragic than Claire’s (although alienated, like Claire, Télumée does not actually plot and commit murder), the author also in this work provides a reflection upon the effects the Middle Passage had on the *Antillais* ethos. The beginning of the novel can be read as a key to the Christ-like dimension of the protagonist:

Le pays dépend bien souvent du cœur de l’homme : il est minuscule si le cœur est petit, et immense si le cœur est grand. Je n’ai jamais souffert de l’exiguïté de mon pays, sans pour autant prétendre que j’aie un grand cœur. Si on m’en donnait le pouvoir, c’est ici même, en Guadeloupe, que je choiserais de renaître, souffrir et mourir. (Schwarz-Bart 11)

The first-person narrative is told retrospectively and the cycle of life (rebirth, suffering and death) highlighted by *Télumée* does not yet have a Christ-like dimension, but as the narrative unfolds, the reader gradually perceives in *Télumée* a figuration of Christ. Karen Smyley Wallace interestingly links this cycle of birth, death and rebirth to nature, understanding the land as a metaphor for the Caribbean woman:

Since the novel is written in a cyclical literary mode, it becomes essential to consider the symbolic significance of the three verbes “renaître,” “souffrir,” and “mourir.” The first reference in the paragraph is to the notion of fertility of the land which also symbolizes woman. Both the land and woman have been granted the power to produce life. While each must endure the vagaries of existence (*souffrir*) and ultimately die (*mourir*), each has the power to begin the process once again (*renaître*). The three verbs fuse into one another and highlight the theme of endurance: endurance of the land and of the island of Guadeloupe, but more important, endurance of the spirit of the Caribbean and of its people. The author refers to this endurance as “la permanence de l’être antillais.” (430)

While Wallace’s argument is particularly revealing regarding how influential the island is in process of identity formation in the French Antilles, I contend that the tryptic notion of birth, death, rebirth also suggests that *Télumée* is to become a metaphorical embodiment of Christ. Indeed, throughout the narrative, Schwarz-Bart disseminates clues that eventually lead the reader, the primary agent in the process of meaning-making, to conclude that *Télumée* is a figuration of Christ.

Schwarz-Bart’s *Télumée* is a representation of those silent heroes who work in the shadows, quietly committed to easing the suffering around them. Silenced by the institutionalized apparatus of patriarchal society, she eventually dedicates her life to

healing her community, and in so doing, causes readers to reflect upon the true meaning of heroism. Abandoned by her mother who feared her 10-year-old would eventually betray her and steal her second husband, Télumée is raised by her grandmother. She is raped by her white employer, beaten by her husband, and she eventually loses all those she loves: her grand-mother, her second husband, her foster child and man Cia, her mentor in the craft of healing and magic. Like a resurrected Christ, Télumée becomes a figure both living and dead. Crucified (metaphorically) in life, she eventually finds the strength to turn suffering into healing. After losing all those whom she loved, the pain becomes so excruciating that she becomes numb, unable to feel anything. Ironically, only when pain and sorrow reach their epitome, when it seems that she can no longer endure further suffering do Télumée's healing abilities become efficient:

Mes yeux étaient deux miroirs dépolis qui ne reflétaient plus rien. Mais lorsqu'on m'amena des vaches écumantes, le garrot gonflé de croûtes noires, je fis les gestes que m'avaient enseignés man Cia et l'une d'abord et puis l'autre, les bêtes reprirent goût à la vie. (Schwarz-Bart 232)

The experience of suffering leads Télumée down the path of spiritual evolution. Misery and misfortune allow her to take a crucial step that eventually leads her to feel true compassion for others, and she thus become a true Christ. At the end of the novel, when the people come to see her to be healed, she confesses : "Je les regardais venir avec ennui, lassitude, encore prisonnière de mon propre chagrin, et puis leurs yeux m'intriguaient, leurs voix m'éveillaient de mon sommeil, leurs souffrances me tiraient à eux comme un cerf-volant qu'on décroche des hautes branches" (Schwarz-Bart 232). The metaphor of the kite trapped in the high branches of a tree recalls Telumée's Christ-like dimension. Like God's incarnation through

Christ, she watches humanity from above. And like God Incarnate, she cannot bear to witness passively the extent of human pain and sorrow, and therefore decides to dedicate her life to help ease the suffering of the black people in her community.

III.1.d Consolata as a Figuration of Christ in *Paradise* by Toni Morrison

Paradise recounts the attempt by “New Fathers” to establish the town of Ruby as a kind of new Eden, a community where seclusion is intended to help its inhabitants escape from the ills of society. To achieve their goal, the men do not hesitate to destroy the Convent community, a group of women whom they perceived as a threat. In charge of the Convent, Consolata does not immediately appear in the narrative as the Savior. She is religious; listens to the word of God; and is a healer; she will symbolically die several times before being reborn as a true Christ. At first, she takes on the figure of a disciple who worships Mary Magna: “For thirty years Consolata worked hard to become and remain Mary Magna’s pride” (Morrison 224). Rescued from the streets of a South-American city, Consolata is taken to the hospital, and appears to be symbolically reborn when she experiences true compassion for the first time: “It was worth getting sick, dying, even, to see that kind of concern in an adult’s eyes”(Morisson 224). She then becomes a disciple figure taking “nothing for the journey [...]—no bread, no bag, no money in [her] belt” (*KJV*, Mk 6.8):

Straight from the hospital, Consolata, in a clean brown dress that reached her ankles, accompanied the nuns to a ship called *Atenas*. After the Panama call they disembarked in New Orleans and from there traveled in an automobile, a train, a bus, another automobile. And the magic that started with the hospital needles piled up and up: toilets that swirled water clear enough to drink; soft white bread already sliced in its wrapper; milk in glass bottles; and all through the day ever day the gorgeous language made especially for talking to heaven. (Morrison 224-225)

Like Jesus's apostles, Consolata religiously listens to the Word of God. Like them, she is also provided for. Mirroring *Télumée's*, Consolata's path towards Christhood follows the structure of a bildungsroman. She has to leave her original "home" to find her true self. An orphan, rescued from the streets of a South-American city and taken to "Christ the King School for Native Girls," she also undergoes a series of initiations, and experiences different kinds of pain before being able to fully embrace her role as spiritual leader. Morrison's literary project was to explore the various significations of love in the black experience. In the same manner, Consolata fully experiences the ability to feel and show true love and compassion only after having experienced physical love with Deacon Morgan. It is as if the spiritual experience could not be complete unless it found its material expression in the sensual world:

For thirty years she offered her body and her soul to God's son and His Mother as completely as if she had taken the veil herself. To her of the bleeding heart and bottomless love.[...] To her whose way was narrow but scented with the sweetness of thyme. To Him whose love was so perfectly available it dumbfounded wise men and the damned. He who had become human so we could know Him touch Him see Him in the littlest ways. Become human so His suffering would mirror ours, that His death throes, His doubt, despair, His failure, would speak for and absorb throughout earthtime what we were vulnerable to. And those thirty years of surrender to the living God cracked like a pullet's egg when she met the living man. (Morrison 225)

Through Consolata's perception of Jesus as a human able to fail, Morrison reverses the Christian orthodox ideology according to which Jesus became a human without sin, "To save us, the Son of God assumed our humanity, and being without sin, 'He condemned sin in the flesh'" (Romans 8.3). She suffers, like Jesus did before her, not because she has sinned, but because she has loved, and Consolata thus

gradually becomes a figure of the living God. Endowed finally with the ability to fully grasp the meaning of suffering and failure, she is able to surrender herself for the good of the community. Interestingly, in a metaphoric transubstantiation move, Consolata becomes a Jesus figure once she has drunk the blood of her living man. Her revelation takes place when, as Sharon Jesse puts it, “she has fallen spiritually” (Stave 150):

Consolata virtually crawled back to the little chapel (wishing fervently that He could be there, glowing red in the dim light. Scuttled back, as women do, as into arms understanding where the body, like a muscle spam, has no memory of its cringe. No beseeching prayer emerged. No Domine, non sum dingus. She simply bent the knees she had been so happy to open and said, “Dear Lord, I didn’t want to eat him, I just wanted to go home. (Morrison 240)

Consolata’s body language reflects her spiritual fall and she literally surrenders to the pain and suffering when she crawls back to the chapel and wishes that He who knows what suffering feels like will be there for her. Similarly, Deacon Morgan also becomes a Christ figure through the play of rhetoric: the syllogism underlying Consolata’s perception of Jesus makes him her living God, “Romance stretched to the breaking point broke, exposing a simple mindless transfer. From Christ, to whom one gave total surrender and then swallowed the idea of His flesh, to a living man. Shame. Shame without blame” (Morrison 240). And while she feels shame, Consolata cannot believe she deserves blame for she perceives physical love as being the material expression of her spiritual love for God. She also realizes that the opposition between His flesh and his flesh is a contradiction if we accept the idea that Jesus became human. In her mind Love and love are one and the same and are only expressed differently.

Consolata therefore appears caught between two opposite conceptions of the Scriptures. In becoming, like Jesus, a healer, she has difficulty dealing with her abilities without feeling shameful: “Scout opened his eyes, groaned and sat up. [...] Lone went with them, leaving Consolata half exhilarated by and half ashamed of what she had done. Practiced” (Morrison 245). The contradictory feelings experienced by Consolata reveal her inability to make sense of the paradoxical nature of magic as depicted in the Bible, whether this magic be the result of witchcraft or a miracle. Although she is exhilarated by being able to heal, Consolata also links her altruistic acts with shame and evil, and thereby tarnishes the notion of the divine. Even if Consolata’s revival of Scout is clearly reminiscent of Lazarus’ in the Bible, the protagonist’s contradictory feelings points to Morrison’s intent to deliver a subtle critique of white Christianity while inverting the traditional western hierarchy that valorizes Christianity over African religions.

In fictions so deeply involved with power struggles, the figure of Christ is able to embody at once both dominating and dominated bodies. This thus allows for the hyphen-ization of oppositions, the reunion within the space of the novel, of both oppressors and oppressed people, both the material world and the spiritual realm. In using the colonizers’ language and the Bible to create their fictions, black writers demonstrate mastery in their handling of the same weapons that were originally used to enslave black peoples. In doing so, they not only write a whole new narrative, but also debunk the power hierarchy upon which slavery and colonization were based.

This brief summary of the characterization of Christ figures in the novels under review brings to light extensive epistemological potential of the biblical myth to reveal the complexity of the experience of modernity in the Black Atlantic, i.e. the

great variety of experiences that emerged out of the encounter between the Black Atlantic and the West and led, as Edouard Glissant puts it, to “The awareness of our awareness (the double, the second degree) [that] is our source of strength and our torment” (Qtd. in Gilroy 1). In providing new meanings to Black Atlantic women’s sacrifice and suffering, Chauvet’s, Schwarz-Bart’s and Morrison’s narratives all point to the intertwining of memory and spiritual rebirth, thus suggesting that far from being reduced to mere victims of colonial history, Black Atlantic communities also, first and foremost, are exemplary for their capacity of resistance and resilience. I shall now turn to the study of the influence of the Christ figure on the aesthetics of these authors.

III.2 Aesthetic Figurations of Christ in Black Atlantic Fiction

In this section, I will analyze the ways in which elements of the Christ narrative reflect the aesthetic perspective of their authors. Literary aesthetic has as much to do with the genre, the motifs chosen by the artist as with his/her artistic influences, interests. I will therefore study the interconnection of the biblical intertext with these various parameters in the three novels under review.

III.2.a *Amour*: A Case Study

A central figure in the New Testament, Christ is also a symbol of choice for writers as the one in whom the Verb became flesh. He therefore metaphorically incarnates a convergence of sensation, emotion and interpretation. For Black Atlantic writers, reference to the Christ figure allows the expression of an unspeakable suffering that can only be expressed through the use of poetic images. In regard to *Amour*, my study of Chauvet’s aesthetic will focus on the motifs of suffering; her

alienation/madness; Claire/Christ as an ancestor; and the black body as a site of revelation.

Suffering (as a corollary to the black experiences of modernity) is, rather logically, one of the common motifs chosen by the writers of my corpus. I will therefore start with a study of alienation as a common feature of both Christ and Claire in *Amour*. While Jesus's suffering reaches its paroxysm through the crucifixion motif, Claire slowly sinks into madness as a result of her multilayered traumas. Hers is therefore a slow crucifixion process that evolves and expands throughout the whole narrative until it reaches its apex, the killing of Calédu which functions, paradoxically, as a form of liberation.

In *Amour*, the unspeakable suffering of the protagonist is expressed via an aesthetic of madness⁵² which ironically turns the unsaid into a verbal logorrhea that remains paradoxically unsaid: Claire's loquacity appears only in her personal diary. Renée Larrier defines the paradoxical nature of speech in *Amour* as, "[a] narrative [that] carefully inscribe[s] women's voices who have virtually no access to speech" (88). Chauvet's aesthetic of madness contributes to the elaboration of a postmodern dynamic that underpins the whole narrative: "Indeed, in postmodern fashion, Chauvet represents her protagonist's subjectivity as fragmented and shifting, rendering inauthentic and impossible her forming any essential identifications or solidarities based on race, gender, nation, or any other category" (Kaussen 159-160). Although Claire's confessions to the reader betray a certain volubility, it is nevertheless an oxymoronic kind of verbosity for it is actually the protagonist's stream of consciousness unfolding before the reader's very eyes:

⁵² Claire's madness is reflected in the rhythm of Chauvet's sentences and the Claire's verbal logorrhea on her diary that strikingly contrasts with her mutism in social settings.

J'assiste au drame, scène après scène, effacée comme une ombre. Je suis la seule lucide, la seule dangereuse et personne autour de moi ne le soupçonne. La vieille fille ! Celle qui n'a pas trouvé de mari, qui ne connaît pas l'amour, qui n'a jamais vécu dans le bon sens du terme. Ils se trompent. Je savoure en tout cas ma vengeance en silence. C'est mon silence, ma vengeance. (Chauvet 9)

The protagonist's muteness is a distinguishing feature, and while the reader is granted a privileged access to Claire's psyche, the character herself remains silent within her surroundings. Outraged by Mme Camuze's gossiping regarding her friend, the prostitute Violette, Claire wants to let the old woman know what she really thinks, but her lips remain sealed: "Comme l'habitude est puissante ! Je n'arrive pas à desserrer les dents pour lui dire ma façon de penser" (Chauvet 74). Because of her upbringing, Claire has built a wall between herself and the rest of the world. As her brother-in-law Jean Luze puts it, "Elle ne répond jamais quand on l'interroge, [...] c'est une tactique pour décourager les curieux" (Chauvet 144). The extensive trauma, the consequence of so many years of abuse, along with the shame, hate and rejection that she received from parents (rather than the unconditional love to which she aspire) destroyed Claire's ability to interact healthily with those around her. Refusing to share any part of her internal feelings with those around her, she even wonders, "Vais-je jusqu'à la fin de ma vie porter ce masque étouffant ?" (Chauvet 152). It will be noted that the mask motif interestingly links Claire to the broader Black Atlantic and to her African heritage, making her an ancestor figure, a link suggested by the primary function of African mask. As we noted earlier, masks are indeed often used in ceremonies to represent the spirits of ancestors. Individuals wearing the masks are believed to be possessed by the spirits of the departed they represent. It should also be noted also, that, Christ, too, is considered in many African religions to be one of the

greatest ancestors, thereby linking the protagonist to her biblical alter ego. Kwame Bediako writes in this regard that, “John Pobee suggests that we ‘look on Jesus as the Great and Greatest ancestor’, since ‘in Akan society the Supreme Being and the ancestors provide the sanctions for the good life, and the ancestors hold that authority as ministers of the Supreme Being’” (24).

While Claire’s ability to “provide the sanctions for the good life” may rightly be questioned, as Sandin-Fremaint points out: “Claire, who is not light-skinned (claire), is unable to see clearly,” but nevertheless ironically appears in the narrative as an ancestor figure who provides guidance (although somewhat perversely) to her peers (233). Mirroring the psyche of its bearer, Claire’s mask is also marked by ambiguity: on the one hand, it represents her alienation and her inability to be true to herself and others, but on the other hand, it allows Claire to crystallize her African heritage thereby as both the source and the result of the trauma. In this regard, the metaphor of the mask provides the reader with another key to reading Claire’s biography as a rewriting of the biblical myth of Jesus-Christ. Words are once again insufficient to provide the full measure of her suffering or its meaning, and the biblical trope is therefore exploited by Schwarz-Bart to take over and reveal the myth-making process at stake, the “histoires déjà-là” (to quote Kwahulé) that writers choose to turn into secrets.

Given the nature of the narrative, Claire’s confessions in her personal diary give the reader an opportunity to witness firsthand the protagonist’s fall into madness. Although the reliability of a delusional narrator may certainly be called into question, especially because “the reader’s access to the world is mediated by her problematic ‘je,’ Chauvet’s writing nevertheless opens the doors to the protagonist’s fractured psyche thus turning the whole book into an psychic observatory allowing the reader

insight into how mental illness is often a consequence in the critical aftermath of colonial history” (Sandin-Fremaint 233). On this aspect of Chauvet’s writing, Munro writes:

[O]ne finds a presentiment of the Haitian literary present, what one might call the “writing of disaster.” She offers what is one of the first expressions of the visceral emotion that has come to characterize contemporary Haitian writing. In her critique of Haitian nationalism, Chauvet also prepares the way for the post-or even transnational writing of today, the radical reinterpretation of the collective and individual relationship with the land, and the fascination with the body as a site of social and historical conflict. (Glover & Benedicty-Kokken 44)

Interestingly, in sharp contrast to Claire’s mutism, her body speaks volumes, and thus become the site where the social and historical conflicts affecting Haiti are recorded. This focus on the body and physical matters has led scholars to perceive Chauvet’s writing as crude. In this regard, Dayan argues:

Reading Chauvet demands a radical change in perspective. She sets out to test the limits of decency, common sense, and even good writing. Words no longer mean what we assume. The feeling she demands is not sympathy or sentiment. Instead, it remains much less conforming, more acute and unsettling: a way into the crud, not out of it. (Glover & Benedicty-Kokken 93)

Although I do not necessarily agree with Dayan’s argument regarding Chauvet’s “good” writing – something far too subjective to be used as a valid tool for critical analysis– her comments on decency, commonsense and crudity are interesting in regard to my reading of the text. Testing the limits of commonsense does in fact contribute to the aesthetics of madness at stake in the novel. Pushing the limits of

decency and crudity are not only characteristic of the aesthetic process, but reveal reveals the author's reflection upon the nature of violence in a postcolonial state.

The centrality of Claire's physical body in the narrative metaphorically links the protagonist to her biblical alter ego whose body became a site of revelation in the Bible and for the world at large. But while Jesus's sacrifice and suffering had a redeeming function (rescuing humanity from sin), Claire's follows an opposite dynamic. Christ, even reified, remains to a certain extent an agent in the redemptive process, but Claire is completely objectified. Claire's suffering is the result of the sins of humanity (colonial history, violence, abuse in the family and/or society), and this causes her to commit to a kind of passive self-sacrifice for the sake of her family and, as a result of this sacrifice, she gradually sinks into madness. And while Christ's death on the cross encapsulates a promise of renewal, Claire's descent into hell remains, until the very last moment, ambiguous as to whether it will bring a positive change or not.

III.2.b *Pluie et vent* : A Case Study

Like Marie Vieux-Chauvet, Simone Schwarz-Bart connects her protagonist to Christ through the representation of suffering, a fundamental theme in the narrative. I shall discuss in the following pages how Schwarz-Bart chooses to aesthetically represent/convey the unspeakable through the Christ metaphor. To this extent, my analysis will more precisely focus on the motifs of suffering/alienation; the zombie; the black body as a site of revelation; the revelatory function of music in regard to the black experience of modernity; the ancestors.

Throughout the narrative, Télumée deals with numerous hardships which constitutes the rungs of the ladder toward spiritual enlightenment. Télumée's

suffering is the result of various forms of violence. The focus on violence and its effects on feminine identity is intrinsically linked to the postcolonial temporality of the text. Indeed, as Lora Milne writes, “Systemic violence, then, is an integral factor in any colonial landscape, and the cultural products of postcolonial societies necessarily engage with it as a them in conjunction with various other staple preoccupations, such as memory, culture and identity” (9). Interestingly, just as Claire’s body becomes, in Chauvet’s depiction, a site of revelation providing the reader with a diffracted perspective on the multilayered types of oppression imposed on the Haitian feminine ethos, Télumée’s body and her consciousness of it, function in the narrative as loci of signification while remaining spaces of thingification.

In the novel, the male characters are all spectral, shadowy figures whose ethos and identity have been destroyed by poverty, unemployment, and the ever-bloody memory of slavery. McKinney writes in this regard: “They reflect but never transcend the drama of the Displaced One” (652). The female characters are thus obliged to endure the lingering and painful consequences of male suffering. Télumée, the protagonist, silently bears the beating and shaming of her husband who became an alcoholic after he lost his job:

Ma lassitude devint extrême et je me sentis rassasiée de vivre, saouïe et enflée de malheur. Elie me frappait maintenant sans aucune parole, sans aucun regard. [...] Je restais assise à l’ombre de mon prunier de Chine, inexistante et alanguie. [...] je m’étais transformée en zombie que les chiens reconnaissaient. (Schwarz-Bart 155-156)

As a consequence of her suffering, Télumée gradually emerges as a Christ-like figure who is reborn when she goes to live with her grand-mother in the Guadeloupian village of Fond-Zombi. Interestingly, as we noted in chapter 2, in a certain trend of

the Haitian Voodoo imaginary, Jesus is not necessarily revered for his bodily sacrifice, which did not bring any form of salvation to the Haitian ethos, but rather for the wisdom and guidance he can provide as a function of being, if not exactly an Ancestor, a very preeminent figure of Caribbean folklore. He is regarded as a zombie, someone who was killed and then brought back from the dead. It is important to note, however, that in Haitian mythology, the zombie is entirely subdued to the will of the *bokor* (sorcier) who deprives him of his free-will and makes of him a slave. The figure of the zombie became, in the Caribbean collective imaginary, a metaphor for slavery. But while the zombie's liminal state between life and death is a condemnation for the zombie, it is, on the contrary, a liberating state for Télumée in that it constitutes a fundamental step in her spiritual initiation. The suffering she endures is indeed a *sine qua non* if she is to symbolically return to life like a true Christ and be able to heal the multitudes.

Télumée is not the only one to suffer in *Pluie et vent*. As the narrative unfolds, the reader realizes that Télumée's self-sacrifice strikingly reflects the sacrifice of her whole community. In the novel, poverty and the rigorousness of field labor turn the peasants into mere puppets in the game of life. This misfortune, under Schwarz-Bart's pen, is represented as a kind of anthropomorphic supra-power that crushes human beings as if they were vulgar insects:

Malheur à celui qui rit une fois et s'y habitue, car la scélératesse de la vie est sans limites et lorsqu'elle vous comble d'une main, c'est pour vous piétiner des deux pieds, lancer à vos trousses cette femme folle, la déveine, qui vous happe et vous déchire et voltige les lambeaux de votre chair aux corbeaux. (24)

Reified to the point of paroxysm, black bodies are reduced, through the metaphor, to shreds of flesh that serve merely to feed the crows, thus suggesting the

living-death nature of the peasants' existence/survival, and therefore making the figure of zombie/Christ a potent symbolical signifier for the community at large. As McKinney rightly suggests, happiness and good fortune appear, in the narrative, as but the bitter promise of more hardships to come. Like zombies, the peasants are depicted as liminal beings oscillating between life and death:

Their disjointed shreds of existence are too used, too worn, too faded to be drawn together or otherwise composed. When good fortune and happiness arrive in a household, it is only a matter of time until fate reveals its cruel game of reversal [...] The torn garment is at one with the self and that self is pursued by a bestial Fury eager to destroy the shreds that time and fatigue have not already worn away. (59)

While I find McKinney's analyses enlightening in regard to the relation she draws between suffering and the construction of the self in *Pluie et vent*, I find it important to stress that in spite of this uncompromising view of the difficulties of peasant life in Guadeloupe, Schwarz-Bart also insists that resistance and resilience are constitutive elements of the black ethos, thus pointing a way to move beyond misery, a potentially positive outcome resulting from the postcolonial dialectic. As Télumée confesses : "La vie est vraiment, vraiment surprenante... vous avez tiré votre barque sur la grève, l'avez enlisée en plein sable et si tombe un rayon de soleil, vous ressentez de la chaleur, et si l'on pique ce vieux bout de bois sec, du sang perle encore" (Schwarz-Bart 251). Consequently, while Télumée's biography undoubtedly appears as a tragic but a stretch of alternations between a life filled mostly with sufferings alleviated on occasion by glimmers of happiness, Schwarz-Bart refuses to depict life in Guadeloupe as nothing but pathetic misery. No matter how harsh Télumée's life, she stands tall and refuses to surrender, "une vaillante petite négresse, un vrai tambour à deux faces, [qui] laisse la vie frapper, cogner, mais conserve

toujours intacte la face du dessous” (Schwarz-Bart 64-65). The body is once again reified, but unlike the shreds of flesh that metaphorized the life of the slaves and evoked complete destruction, Télumée becomes a kind of musical instrument that can express, through her song, the suffering of her whole community. And while Jesus’s body becomes the sheet music upon which the notes of human suffering are written, Télumée’s body becomes the bard for her whole community, “Parfois, un chant s’élevait quelque part, une musique douloureuse venait à ma poitrine et c’était comme si un nuage s’interposait entre ciel et terre, recouvrant le vert des arbres, le jaune des chemins, le noir des peaux humaines d’une couche légère de poussière grise” (Schwarz-Bart 50). The unfathomable suffering that resulted from the Middle Passage and the paroxysmal violence of colonial empires caused language to lose its ability to communicate with the world. Words are indeed mere successions of euphemisms, unable to convey the extent of human suffering contained within the black experience of modernity. When words fail, music becomes the only effective medium to express the horror of the world.

It will be noted that music has always played a vital role in the black experience. As Yemisi Jimoh puts it: “music presents the life—or, in other words, the joys, prayers, and complaints—of black people” (6). In Schwarz-Bart’s novel, the protagonist’s body thus becomes the musical instrument that communicates the pain and sorrow of her entire community. Transcending the barriers of space and time, Télumée sings of slavery, resilience and resistance, successively lending her voice to that of her ancestors, her family and her fellow villagers.

Alone in her hut, now an old woman, Télumée remembers. According to McKinney:

Since slaves were “not allowed freely to integrate the experience of their ancestors into their lives, to inform their understanding of social reality with the inherited meanings of their natural forebears, or to anchor the living present in any conscious community of meaning,” the past becomes a confused and painful memory, almost but not quite subject to cultural amnesia. (60)

Although I concur with McKinney, I also argue that, in the case of Black Atlantic novels such as *Paradise* or *Pluie et vent*, the memory of the past, although extremely painful, is also the first essential step toward spiritual healing. And just as musical expression became the voice for slaves who had been silenced by oppression, Télumée’s music brings to light the memory of those forgotten, those whose stories have been deliberately erased from the history of the Western world. “Quelque part, depuis le fond de la nuit, s’élèvent des notes discordantes, toujours les mêmes, d’une flûte et qui bientôt s’éloignent et s’apaisent” (250). And as the memories unfold, the cacophonous melody turns into a soothing tune, thus suggesting the potentially healing power of remembrance for the children of slavery. Like Christ, whose crucifixion not only embodies the suffering of human existence, but also encapsulates its epistemological opposite, i.e. the promise of salvation that provides hope through God’s promise that: “[His] grace is sufficient for you, for [His] power is made perfect in weakness” (*NIV*, 2 Cor. 12.9). Télumée’s suffering through memory therefore functions as the promise of renewal.

Télumée then remembers man Cia, her grandmother Toussine and all those she never met but nevertheless made her who she is. At the twilight of her life, Télumée is now an ancestor figure, and as such, she (re)connects with a past that is both individual and collective, seemingly distant and yet so close:

Alors je me lève, j'allume ma lanterne de clair de lune et je regarde à travers les ténèbres du passé, le marché, le marché où ils se tiennent, et je soulève la lanterne pour chercher le visage de mon ancêtre, et tous les visages sont les mêmes et ils sont tous miens, et je continue à chercher et je tourne autour d'eux jusqu'à ce qu'ils soient tous achetés, saignants, écartelés, seuls. (Schwarz-Bart 251)

Here, the trope of light and darkness metaphorizes the representation of Télumée as a figuration of Christ. Télumée is the divine light, and like the Revealer, she brings to light the suffering of the marginalized. But the light she is holding is an oxymoronic one, a glimmer of light in the depths of the deepest darkness of humanity, a moonbeam glowing in the night, shining through the dark memory of a slave market that turned each and every slave into a crucified Christ, bloodied, quartered, and lonely beings who were sacrificed to quench the deadly thirst of imperialist monsters. Like Christ, Télumée also provides her audience (the reader) with a revelation:

Je promène ma lanterne dans chaque coin d'ombre, je fais le tour de ce singulier marché, et je vois que nous avons reçu comme don du ciel d'avoir eu la tête plongée dans l'eau trouble du mépris, de la cruauté, de la mesquinerie et de la délation. Mais je vois aussi, je vois que nous ne nous y sommes pas noyés...nous avons lutté pour naître, et nous avons lutté pour renaître... (Schwarz-Bart 251)

Now an ancestor, Télumée is wiser and has gained insight into the human mind by using "words [that] become powerful and wise enough to restore peace and identity to the dispossessed" (McKinney 63). And far from imprisoning the black ethos in a stranglehold of mere suffering, Télumée's testimony, while revealing the paroxysmal suffering of the children of slavery, also offers a promise of renewal, thus suggesting that in spite of all the hardships, and although they have all seemingly been crucified by colonial history, communities of the Black Atlantic have not been

completely destroyed. They remain standing on both feet and, in this regard, hold in their hands the power of being, and like Christ, they, too, can be reborn by gaining strength from their suffering.

Through the characterization of her heroine, Schwarz-Bart suggests that the healing process, a *sine qua non* for the ability to find a path to renewal, implies, first and foremost, acknowledging the painful memories of slavery, accepting the past in order to be able to confront the present and prepare for the future. Schwarz-Bart interestingly echoes Toni Morrison's remarks regarding the memory of slavery. As the author of *Paradise* said in an interview that she gave to Marsha Darling in 1988:

The gap between Africa and Afro-America and the gap between the living and the dead and the gap between the past and present does not exist. It's bridged for us by our assuming responsibility for people no one's ever assumed responsibility for. [...] I think Afro-Americans in rushing away from slavery, which was important to do— it meant rushing out of bondage into freedom— also rushed away from the slaves because it was painful to dwell there, and they may have abandoned some responsibilities in so doing. It was a double-edged sword, if you understand me. There is a necessity for remembering the horror, but of course there is a necessity for remembering it in a manner in which it can be digested, in a manner in which the memory is not destructive. The act of writing the book, in a way, is a way of confronting it and making it possible to remember. (Taylor-Guthrie 247-248)

In using the Bible as a source of intertextuality, Schwarz-Bart and the other authors in my study, bridge, through aesthetics, the gap between past and present, the living and the dead, Africans, Antilleans, West Indians, African Americans and the Western component of their cultural life. Despite the traumas that resulted from colonial history and its aftermath, the authors' figurations of Christ suggest the

possibility of a rebirth and renewal for the black ethos, provided that the act of remembering becomes a source of empowerment rather than a source of alienation.

III.2.c *Paradise* : A Case Study

The porous cultural matrix that resulted from the encounter between Africa, Europe and the Americas is such that many contemporary black identities can no longer be confined to one or the other of the three continents that compose the Atlantic triangle. David Murphy and Charles Forsdick talk in this regard of the space of :

The Atlantic world that had been forged by centuries of slavery, colonisation, and other types of voluntary or forced cultural exchange—consequently creating, in their hemispheric diversity, the often unpredictable formations and connections generated by the displacements of peoples and goods between Europe, Sub-Saharan Africa and the Americas. (Moura 143)

At times a geographical locus of unification, at others, a source of diffraction, this tricontinental space is marked by ambivalence and fluidity. The aesthetics of Black Atlantic writers are thus infused with a plurality of cultural influences. My analysis of the intertwining of the Christ narrative and Morrison's literary aesthetic will focus on the motifs of the ancestors; the call and response; syncretism; and jazz as characteristic of her writing.

In Toni Morrison's fiction, there is a palpable pan-Africanist surge in her writing that, among other motivations, constitutes the aesthetic expression fueled by the desire to establish a close relation with ancestor figures. In *What Moves at the Margin*, the author states:

[Writing] is also awe and reverence and mystery and magic. I suppose I could dispense with [that] if I were not so deadly serious about fidelity to the milieu out of which I write and in which my ancestors actually lived. Infidelity to that milieu—the absence of the interior life, the deliberate excising of it from the records that the slaves themselves told—is precisely the problem in the discourse that proceeded without us. (Morrison 2008: 71)

For the author of *Paradise*, black writers not only need, but must re-connect with the spiritual umbilical cord that bonds them, as children of slavery, to mother Africa. Denying this heritage not only demonstrates an excessive assimilation to Western culture, but it also erases the black component from their African cultural ancestry. In her opinion, this results in texts that are nothing but a pure mimicry of Western narratives, and as such, constitute a betrayal of their race. In her writing, Morrison therefore brings to the forefront components of her African cultural heritage via her aesthetic choices and a variety of other literary strategies. One of her literary strategies of choice is the “call and response” technique that refers to the interaction between speaker and audience. Examples of the “call and response” technique can be found in the African story-telling tradition, the preaching style found in Black ministries, the ring shout, etc... As Roynon points out:

Morrison’s work [is] firmly [placed] within the African-American tradition of “call and response.” Morrison has spoken of her aim to create an author/reader relationship analogous to the protagonist/chorus relationship in Greek tragedy, to the preacher/congregation relationship in church, and to the soloist/group relationship in jazz. (14)

The call and response strategy informs both the style and the narrative structure of *Paradise*. The novel is organized according to this principle. Rather than

narrate events in a linear fashion, Morrison chooses to tell the same event from different perspectives, thus bringing to the forefront a plurality of marginalized voices. Roynon highlights in this regard that:

It is Morrison's attention to the voices of the marginalized, of the "disremembered and unaccounted for," that gives rise to the narrative structures of her novels [...]. Rather than presenting a conventional chronological version of events told from a single standpoint, she combines multiple viewpoints or voices with disruptive chronologies and strategy withholding of information so that the picture is always evolving, always revealing something new. (14)

The novel therefore becomes a locus of emancipation for black feminine identities. Outcasts, those who have been banned from a supposedly respectable society, share their stories with Consolata. And as the narrative unfolds, all the reader's certitudes begin to fall like a house of cards. The wicked are in the end not that bad; the good are actually not all that good, and the axiological reversal the novel works through eventually leads us to question the validity of a dominant discourse that keeps essentializing the Other in order to better divide humanity into irreconcilable dichotomies.

The blurring of epistemological borders is a main characteristic of Morrison's writing. As a writer and an African American woman, she has always been suspicious of labels, believing this to be a favorite activity of the white world. Consolata is, in this regard, the embodiment of a Black Atlantic identity marked by movement and fluidity. A South-American orphan, rescued by catholic nuns, and brought to the U.S. in a convent surrounded by Black protestant communities, Connie becomes a spiritual leader and practices Candomblé inspired rituals. "Morrison not only works with slave religion and African American Christian traditions [...] but her novel also

invokes heretical Gnostic texts from the second and third centuries.” (Jessee qtd. in Stave 130) Far from being confined to a restrictive idea of Christianity, her Consolata/Christ-figure paves the way for new understandings of the conception of Christianity in the Black Atlantic while highlighting the validity of syncretic practices that stand at the intersection of both Western and African religiosities. Agnes Suranyi points out that: “[*Paradise*] is a grand vision of what true Christian love should be like, a critique of the distortions of the original tenets of Christianity in the Western world. False Christianity, its relentlessness in judging the other, is transferred onto the black community of Ruby, causing its decay” (Stave 126). Through her figuration of Consolata as a Christ-figure, an Afro-Caribbean feminine embodiment of love and compassion, Morrison argues for a conception of Christianity that would not rest upon irreconcilable dichotomies, but rather, would be able to embrace the diversity of the world.

But while Morrison’s work on the mythic substrate indeed aims at transcending the geographical barriers separating the various communities of the Black Atlantic, her reshaping of the biblical intertext also attests to a proud and strongly grounded African heritage. In his groundbreaking study, *God of the Oppressed*, theologian James Cone highlights the uttermost importance of taking into account the color line while reflecting upon notions of the divine in the Black Atlantic:

Black theologians are living in a period in which we must investigate anew “the problem of the color-line,” as that problem is reflected in the social existence of African peoples. [...] Our theology must emerge consciously from an investigation of the socioreligious experience of black people, as that experience is reflected in *black* stories of God’s dealing with black people in the struggle of freedom. (15)

Morrison's characterization of Consolata results, in this regard, from the author's own investigation into the socio-religious experiences of her community. Unwilling to provide definite answers, Morrison makes a point of involving the reader in the process of meaning-making. Hence, although the author is openly critical of the phenomenon of all-black towns that started to emerge after the Civil War, her depiction of the Convent community is far from being utterly positive. And even if Consolata is a figuration of Christ, she nevertheless has to fight her own demons: "In the good clean darkness of the cellar, Consolata woke to the wrenching disappointment of not having died the night before. Each morning, her hopes dashed, she lay on a cot belowground, repelled by her sluglike existence, each hour of which she managed to get through by sipping from black bottles with handsome names" (Morrison 221). Connie seems indeed unable to embrace her role as a spiritual leader unless she is inebriated by the constant sipping of French wine—perhaps an ironic reference to the biblical episode in which Jesus turns water into wine—, "Sipping from dusty bottles with handsome names—Jarnac, Médoc, Haut-Brion and Saint-Émilion—made it possible to listen to them, even answer sometimes" (Morrison 221). Jesus's suffering, we will remember, results from his inability to reconcile God's plan (redemption) with the sorry state of humanity. As theologian Serge Soulie writes :

Pour le disciple du Christ, l'affliction vient de l'opposition entre l'idéal auquel il s'efforce de se conformer et la réalité du monde. En voulant servir son maître, il se heurte à l'opposition des hommes. [...] N'est-ce pas pour la même raison que Jésus a été dans la douleur ? Il vit pleinement le projet de Dieu pour l'homme. [...] Jésus ne souffre pas comme un héros ou comme un martyr ; il souffre parce qu'il ose aller jusqu'aux limites de l'humain ; il ne refuse pas ces limites puisqu'elles lui ont été demandées par son père. (Le sens de la souffrance, par.8)

Interestingly, Consolata's suffering, like Jesus's, results from a full understanding of the extent of humans' atrocities. The motif of the wine Consolata constantly sips clearly links her to Christ (an important part of the Christian mass), but may here seem somewhat ambiguous in that she is using it to dull her senses rather than to make a spiritual connection. In her criticism of Orthodox Christianity, Morrison brings to light the inherent contradictions of biblical narratives. One could, perhaps, read Connie's alcoholism as a sign of weakness: "Prisoner wine helped until it didn't and she found herself, full of drinker's malice, wishing she had the strength to beat the life out of the women freeloading her house" (Morrison 248). It remains nevertheless true that in the Bible, wine also symbolizes messianic hope, and the transformation of water into wine is the first miracle performed by Jesus, and therefore has enormous significance. In his exegesis of the biblical episode, "Marriage at Cana", theologian Georges Daras writes:

Il s'agit, dans le récit qui nous occupe, du bon vin que Jésus donne en abondance. Cette abondance de vin au temps de la moisson (à la fin de l'année) symbolise la « joie de la fin »; l'image du vin qui coule à flot a été utilisée par les prophètes « pour symboliser la joie des 'derniers jours', lorsque Yhwh métamorphosera la condition pécheresse et misérable de son peuple ». (4b)

The French wine sipped in abundance by Consolata could thus symbolically point to her future rebirth as figuration of Christ in the Convent community. Like Christ as well, Consolata also tires of the never-ending litany of women's narratives filled with pain and suffering. At one point their voices become inaudible: "What she knew of them she had mostly forgotten, and it seemed less and less important to remember any of it, because of the timbre of each of their voices told the same tale: disorder, deception and, what Sister Roberta warned the Indian girls against, drift"

(Morrison 221-222). Jesus's inability to perform miracles in Nazareth is explained by the lack of faith of the people around him, "Jesus said to them: 'A prophet is not without honor except in his own town, among his relatives and in his home'. He could not do any miracles there., except lay his hands on a few sick people and heal them. He was amazed at their lack of faith" (*NIV*, Mk 6.4-5). Jesus needed the people's faith in order to become an effective healer; in the same manner, Connie's inability to tolerate the women's suffering signals that she is not yet quite ready for her spiritual mission: "On her worst day, when the maw of depression soiled the clean darkness, she wanted to kill them all" (Morrison 223). But gradually, after having experienced suffering herself, the loss of Mary Magna and having been abandoned by her lover Deacon Morgan, Connie emerges as a true Christ: "Access to this under garment life kept her own eyes dry, inducing a serenity rocked only by crying women, the sight of which touched of a pain so wildly triumphant she would do anything to kill it" (Morrison 261).

Jesus relied on parables to convey his message and was, at times, annoyed by the fact that his disciples did not fully understand what he meant, "Peter said, 'Explain the parable to us.' 'Are you still so dull?' Jesus asked them" (*NIV*, Mt 15.15-16). To convey meaning and escape the imprecise nature of language, Jesus relied on images. Christ thus had to rely on a literary strategy, primarily metaphor, to convey what language could not. Similarly, in Morrison's novel, when words fail to provide meaning, when language ironically becomes unable to fulfill its primary function, she, too, has access to non-literal forms, music in this case, is able to express the unspeakable. In Toni Morrison's fiction, jazz appears as the perfect medium to convey unspoken truths. As Yemisi Jimoh argues: "In fiction [jazz's] multivocal expressions reveal a space for infinite options, radical change, resistance, and

revolution” (35). Jazz is, in essence, polyphonic, and as such, it invites voices from the margin to the center, while at the same time blurring the very idea of what constitutes a center in that every voice is given the chance to lead at some point. These characteristics, and the fact that music is a fundamentally black art make it the perfect medium to represent Morrison’s aesthetic posture.

Listening to the women’s narratives is, surprisingly, not what causes the most pain for Consolata who is actually yearning for love: “Consolata listened to these babygirl dreams with padded, wine-dampened indulgence, for they did not infuriate her as much as their whispers of love which lingered long after the women had gone” (Morrison 222). Morrison thus uses jazz to express the inner contradictions against which individuals have to fight. When Consolata admits her desire to love and be loved, the only way she can express her physical attraction to Deek Morgan is via a riff of jazz. Whereas Jesus Christ exploited images in the form of parables because of their potential to convey meaning beyond ordinary language, Consolata, the new Christ, uses the jazzy riff as the only parable able to provide meaning:

It was while Consolata waited on the steps that she saw him for the first time. Sha sha sha. Sha sha sha. A lean young man astride one horse. His hips were rocking in the saddle, back and forth, back and forth. Sha sha sha. Sha sha sha. Consolata saw his profile, and the wing of a feathered thing, undead, fluttered in her stomach. (Morrison 226)

The rolling moves of the young man on his horse become the musical notes his body plays in Consolata’s ear who, as a Christian, cannot express her attraction in discursive terms. Unable to express her attraction with words, it is the Sha Sha Sha. Sha Sha sha, jazzy riff that is used to underline Connie’s confusion, thus highlighting the goal of reshaping the world dramaturgy from a black perspective. In *What moves*

at the Margin, Morrison points out that, “the crucial distinction for [her] is not the difference between fact and fiction, but the distinction between fact and truth. Because facts can exist without human intelligence, but truth cannot” (2008 : 73). Jazz, and her syncretic feminine figuration of Christ, therefore become efficient mediums to convey a form of truth that moves beyond the dichotomy black/white for, as Koffi Kwahulé argues, even though it emerged as a black art, jazz is first and foremost a way to take part in the narrative of the world:

Le jazz est pour moi l’art noir qui est parvenu à se convaincre que le monde lui appartient aussi et qu’il peut, qu’il doit le raconter à son tour. [...] Ce n’est pas pour prendre la place de l’Occident, mais pour enrichir un récit devenu par trop unilatéral et univoque, donc dangereux à la fois pour l’Occident et pour les autres. (Mouëllic 70)

Jazz is, interestingly enough, Morrison’s medium of choice in trying to bridge the gap between aesthetics and politics. We will see in the following pages that her conception of fiction writing is interestingly one that combines engagement with a concern for aesthetics.

III.3 Biblical Intertext and Politics in Black Atlantic Fiction

The marginalization and the destruction of the black ethos by Western empires went hand in hand with violence on the body—that of colonized peoples, slaves, black men, women, and children, all reified in the hands of imperial powers. In spite of the decolonization and the abolition of slavery, certain forms of injustice and discrimination continue to linger in the black world and confer, by their very existence, a political dimension to the most intimate part of Black individuality, the restricted space of their physical body. The metaphorical rape of Africa by Western powers gave way to a marginalized view of their humanity, and a targeting of the

body for physical violence. This corporeal violence is reflected, in a paroxysmal manner, in the Bible through the sacrifice of Christ, thus making Jesus an emblematic figure of the black condition in our contemporary world.

III.3.a *Amour*: Claire an Anti(Messianic)-Hero

Given the fact that colonial violence was primarily imposed on the black body, the motif of the body rather logically became a core focus of attention and political reflection in Black Atlantic imaginaries. For Walcott-Hackshaw, “Chauvet’s fictions at once literalize the idealized Haitian history of heroes and martyrs through the bodies of women and also question the consequences of this idealized matriarchy” (45). I concur with Walcott-Hackshaw in that I perceive the body as being, in Chauvet’s work, the receptacle of a complex thread of violent tendencies that reveals the multilayered oppression that Black women are obliged to confront in our contemporary world. “In her article ‘The Body of the Woman in the Body of the Text: The Novels of Erna Brodber,’ Denise de Caires Narain explores how the woman’s body has increasingly become the site of a series of contested inscriptions and readings; the woman’s body is a dramatic and contradictory site of patriarchal struggles” (Walcott-Hackshaw 47). In this regard, feminine Christ figurations become particularly revealing images because they are able to embody issues related to patriarchal struggles as well as express the complexities surrounding (post)colonial violence and its aftermath.

The history of Haitian heroes and martyrs takes on universal dimensions by merging with Christian history through the biblical intertext: Christ thus becomes the metaphoric representation of violence and suffering found in Haiti and beyond. According to Spear:

There is no doubt that the increasing strength and omniscient power of the Duvalier régime inspired Chauvet; it is clear that the specific disappearances, rapes, incarcerations, assassinations, and exiles of close friends and family are the very foundations of our fiction. The force of her pen is enhanced by her capacity to denounce injustice and its perpetrators not only via precise associations with the realities of Duvalier's Haiti, but also in a manner that lends universality to her narratives of violent oppression. (Glover & Benedicty-Kokken 13)

Yet, although the novella is situated in Haiti, the issues at stake in Claire Clamont's drama move far beyond the geographical borders of the Caribbean island of Hispaniola. In *Amour*, (post)colonial violence becomes one of the many symptoms of a transnational weave of multilayered oppressions resulting from power struggles that lie beyond the scale of individual and national identities. As Valerie Kaussen writes :

Amour uncovers and critiques the larger geopolitical context for the rise of extreme race nationalisms on the island of Hispaniola in the thirties by writing against the purely nationalist model. She situates the development of Duvalier in the context of post-World War II U.S. hegemony, and by doing so, her trilogy critiques the local manifestation (exploitation/dictatorship) of a colonial project whose reach was global and international. (152)

Weaving her plot around a complex set of alliances (the French Jean Luze working for the American M. Long, Calédu, a figure of the Noiriste regime, helping Long obtain wood from Haitian peasants to sell it to the U.S.; the Haitian poet Joel Marti and Jean Luze etc.) and misalliances (Claire/Calédu, Claire/Félicia/Annette, Luze/Calédu, Claire/Farmers, Claire/her parents etc.), Chauvet infuses her narrative with a political undertone that portrays the island as a microcosm that is permeated with the macrocosm of the world dramaturgy. In a postmodern fashion, Chauvet

intertwines the individual and the collective, the national and transnational so as to debunk the epistemological borders of fixed categories. In Chauvet's writing, the restricted space of the physical body thus becomes, like a crystal under a ray of light, a locus of diffraction that reveals a heterogeneous array of oppressions. According to Garraway:

By theorizing the irreducibly social and historical basis of psychic trauma as well as libidinal fixations in Duvalier's Haiti, Chauvet suggests not only that race and class, together with gender and sexuality, are determining factors in the formation of individual subjectivity in Haiti, but that the very enforcement of the symbolic order of racial, social, and sexual identity occurs more often than not via the repetition of colonial violence. (204)

While Garraway's argument is particularly insightful when we read the narrative from a nationalist perspective, it nevertheless fails to recognize the inherently transnational nature of Chauvet's political reflection. Far from being limited to the scope of colonial violence and its aftermath in Haiti, as I noted earlier, the author lays the groundwork for a criticism of global Violence (capital V) that is not restricted within the limits of hermetic categories such as race, class, gender, skin color, nationality, but rather pervades humanity as a whole. For Walcott-Hackshaw, "One of Chauvet's primary aims is to expose the psychological and physical effects of this culture of terror. Fear and violence work their way into every aspect of the lives of Chauvet's characters" (43). Christ made a point of defending the weak and was emotionally involved when witnessing the fate of the underprivileged, as his reaction toward children suggests:

People were bringing little children to Jesus for him to place his hands on them, but the disciples rebuked them. When Jesus saw this, he was indignant. He said to them,

‘Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these.’ . . . And he took the children in his arms, placed his hands on them and blessed them” (*NIV*, Mk 10.13-16)

Claire’s emotional involvement, on the other hand, has been negated by her parents who deliberately isolated her from the lower class society. Abused by her father at home, the place that should be a safe haven where children can healthily escape the harshness of the outside world, Claire witnessed and was subjected to an alienating model of social relationships. In lieu of a culture of love, Claire’s, from a very young age, was a culture of terror. Through the act of writing, the protagonist revives the pivotal point of her fractured identity, and she consequently reveals a schizophrenic sense of self when the writing “I” observes the written “I” and wonders:

Est-ce moi cette petite fille qui saute à cloche-pied dans l’escalier, les yeux brillants, la joie au cœur ? Quel âge ai-je ? Six, sept ans ? Avant je n’existais pas. C’est avec la révélation de la souffrance qu’on prend conscience de soi. Cet âge devait avoir pour mes parents une importance extraordinaire car ils devinrent envers moi subitement sévères et soupçonneux. (Chauvet 90)

For Jesus, the revelation of suffering followed a centrifugal movement; it was indeed the witnessing of human suffering that triggered the revelation setting him on the path to being a messianic leader. Jesus left the centeredness of the self to reach the margins of alterity. Jesus Christ’s revelation triggered a self-consciousness that was marked by empathy, prompting him to become a healer. In the case of Claire, healing is rendered impossible because her initial moment of self-consciousness is marked by self-denial: her parents’ abuse negates Claire as a person. As a result, instead of allowing a positive sense of self to emerge that would allow her to

transform suffering into profound empathy, Claire's revelation of suffering engenders more affliction. Sandin-Fremaint discusses Claire's rebellion as "a revolt of the senses. [...] a selfish revolt" (239). Unable to escape the self and move beyond to embrace her humanity as part of a whole, Claire remains trapped in an unhealthy self-centered martyrdom:

Me voilà brûlante. Ai-je de la fièvre ? Tant mieux ! J'appelle le délire. Il m'aidera à vivre ma mort par anticipation. J'ai l'habitude de m'enterrer moi-même. C'est consolant, ces plongées dans le néant. Elles m'épargneront, je l'espère, les affres de la réalité. Je me suis familiarisée, grâce à elles, à l'idée de la mort. Elle ne m'effraye pas. Ma cotte de maille à moi, ma carapace, mon tissu isolant, c'est mon imagination.
(Chauvet 158)

Claire's egocentric mania is mirrored in her syntax by multiple occurrences of the pronouns *je* and *me*, the possessive, and the emphasis created by the anteposition of the disjunctive pronoun. Paradoxically, it is precisely Claire's disturbed psyche—a state that could be characterized as an internal revolt stemming from being socially constrained—that will lead her to become the agent of the outer revolution, thus, almost inadvertently, invading the public sphere. Indeed as Kaussen puts it:

Chauvet creates a female protagonist whose subjectivity is fragmented, and she indeed represents this protagonist appropriating the signs of modern political struggle (in her case, "emancipation," "revolution," and "liberation") as analogies for her personal/political demands, a process that presents the possibilities of unexpected collusions and coalitions. (156)

The most spectacular and unexpected collusion comes at the end of the narrative and is illustrated by the murder of Calédu. It is indeed the fever of delirium that will eventually lead Claire to act out and commit murder. Lost in a state of semi-

consciousness, Claire becomes an agent of Haiti's political destiny, thus turning the I object into an I subject. For Stéphanie Bérard :

Les prises de position des personnages (résignation, soumission ou action, résistance) rendent compte de la relation ambiguë du peuple haïtien au pouvoir et confirment l'engagement politique de Vieux-Chauvet dans sa lutte souterraine contre l'oppression et l'injustice.⁵³ (57)

I would add that in Claire's narrative, the ambiguous relation to power likewise becomes a relation to an ambiguous power. It is interestingly in the very act of murder that this ambiguity is the most striking for it is Claire's yearning for death that leads her to murder rather than die, thus restoring a messianic hope for rebirth in the Haitian city. Munro does not necessarily see a sense of hope in the excerpt of *Amour*. He argues instead that in Chauvet's writing, "the prophetic paradox is therefore that through language and the ability to name, Chauvet wields a certain power; that power is not necessarily liberatory and can suggest a fatalistic conception of future time" (Glover & Benedicty-Kokken 45). I, on the contrary, read the open-endedness as being voluntarily ambiguous, thus leaving room for a sense of hope that was, almost ironically, non-existent throughout the whole narrative. Claire's psyche becomes a topographic depiction of violence and power struggles both in Haiti and beyond, therefore linking, in a postmodern fashion, through the poetic image, the individual and the collective, the familial and the political, the national and the transnational so as to escape every possible constricting borders, even those of optimism/fatalism.

⁵³ The characters' stances (resignation, submission or action, resistance) reveal the ambiguous relationship between the Haitian people and power, and confirm Chauvet's political engagement in her clandestine struggle against oppression and injustice.

III.3.b *Pluie et vent*: Women, Healing, Community and Empowerment

Schwarz-Bart situates her novel in postcolonial Guadeloupe which allows her to reflect upon the multilayered forms of oppression imposed on the black Antillean feminine ethos. Schwarz-Bart's novel is, like Chauvet's, concerned with the fate of the feminine ethos in the Caribbean. The very nature of the text, the fictional autobiography of a Guadeloupean woman, suggests to the reader the possibility of a feminine rewriting of *history* that would turn the space of diegesis into a locus of women's emancipation so as to counter the effects of patriarchal domination on the black Antillean feminine ethos. Gil Hochberg writes in this regard that: "By assigning mother (or the maternal ancestor) the role of a 'medium' through which an alternative narrative emerges as a direct confrontation with history, 'woman' (as mother) is aligned with memory as an alternative to *history*" (2). And from the incipit of the novel on, Télumée's confessions indeed achieve Schwarz-Bart's goal of offering a counter-narrative to the traditionally male-centered postcolonial narrative of history. The author brings feminine figures to the center of her narrative so as to bring to light the agency of black women (a reality far too often contested) in Antillean rural communities. In doing so, Schwarz-Bart advocates that women reassert a central role within the sphere of the community and encourages their active participation in the making of history, the narrative of which remains far too often male-centered:

Dans mon enfance, ma mère Victoire me parlait souvent de mon aïeule, la négresse Toussine. Elle en parlait avec ferveur et vénération, car, disait-elle, tout éclairée par son évocation, Toussine était une femme qui vous aidait à ne pas baisser la tête devant la vie, et rares sont les personnes à posséder ce don. Ma mère la vénérât tant que j'en étais venue à considérer Toussine, ma grand-mère, comme un être mythique,

habitant ailleurs que sur terre, si bien que toute vivante elle était entrée, pour moi, dans la légende. (Schwarz-Bart 11)

Interestingly, from the start, *Télumée* does not draw a clear border between fact and fiction as her evocation of Toussine suggests. As we following the trajectory of the narrative voice, we note that history intermingles with legend to underscore the essential role story-telling plays in the process both of history-making in the Black Atlantic and the liberation of the black Antillean feminine ethos. History is of crucial importance in human development because it contributes to the emergence of cultural identities and also serves as a potential safeguard against the excesses of nations' power struggles. In his essay, "History: The Meaning and Role of History in Human Development," Bill Nasson writes:

...the diverse and rich social foundations of life, whether language, material culture, national identity, or the organization of work and politics, are the palpable inheritance of a resilient human past, and if humanity is to plot a realizable future, we need to understand through history how it has achieved its present. The usefulness of history, therefore, is not only that it constantly offers new ways of viewing and understanding the grip of the past: it is also a means of generating the confidence about, and absorption of, critical knowledge, to produce a changing consciousness. (216)

But, in the Black Atlantic, history cannot fulfill its function as common root of cultural identity, nor can it offer the possibility of a realizable future unless the memories of a tragic past are given the chance to unfold in the collective unconscious. Remembrance is indeed all the more crucial for communities of the Black Atlantic because of the specific nature of their encounter with modernity. For the purpose of imperialism, Western powers negated their very humanity, assigning the black ethos an essentialism that fixed individuals in an eternal present, depriving them from their

past while also denying them a potential future. Moreover, it is essential to keep in mind that history is first and foremost a Western narrative, thus conveying a distorted picture of colonial history and its aftermaths. History, after all, is written by the victors; story-telling is the province of everyone. Story-(re)telling thus rather logically became a core element of the (re)making of history in the Black Atlantic for two main reasons: it brings to the fore an essential component of African cultural heritage and it calls into question the validity of Western history that claims to be factual, although the subjectivity of historians drastically undermines the process. In this regard, Schwarz-Bart's novel contributes to a rewriting of history from below, allowing the silenced voices of the marginalized, those that have been muted in/by colonial history, to speak.

The voices heard in *Pluie et vent* are *voix de mémoire*, bringing to light tragic memories of slavery, thus highlighting the crucial role black women play as *passseurs de culture*. In her article, "Mother, Memory, History: Maternal Genealogies in Gayl Jones's *Corregidora* and Simone Schwarz-Bart's *Pluie et vent sur Télumée Miracle*", Gil Hochberg argues that:

Very little attention has been given to the manner by which *both* novels unsettle the facile distinctions between these two categories (history and memory), pointing at the fact that the 'maternal' (private, familial) memory is often subordinated to, and manipulated by, the master's history. (3)

While Hochberg's analysis is interesting in regards to its opposition to previous scholarship—her reading of the novel as one that counterbalances history and memory was first introduced by Pierre Nora, who offers a perspective that is particularly enlightening. I do not necessarily agree with her main argument that seems focus on women's lack of agency, thereby depriving the novel of its optimistic

undertones. In my opinion, the story of Télumée shows that, in spite of the subordination to, and manipulation by the master's history, black women are still able to navigate in liminal spaces that, although they may seem constricted by a dominant patriarchal discourse or even non-existent, provide women with a means of empowerment within the very structures of what may at first appear to be a potentially alienating society intent on disempowering the feminine figure.

“Having learned to look for organic threads, Telumée sees her community as a necessary construct, a network of synecdoche linking Self to Other and to nature” (McKinney 63). Télumée's devotion to her peers makes her the metonymic representation of the broader black community. Her fate becomes the microcosm, a magnifying glass through which is enlarged the destiny of every black women living the harshness of peasant life in Guadeloupe and beyond.

Télumée's love story with Amboise, her second husband, allows Schwarz-Bart to develop her reflections regarding the dichotomy black/white in a postcolonial context and beyond. When Télumée recalls Amboise's narrative of his time in prison, she states : “Son compagnon de cellule lui avait expliqué le monde, disant gravement...mon cher, un Blanc est blanc et rose, le bon Dieu est blanc et rose et où se trouve un Blanc, c'est là que se tient la lumière” (Schwarz-Bart 222). Through Amboise's characterization, Schwarz-Bart explores the effects of colonial racism on the black psyche. When, as a young man, Amboise decided to leave for France, a place perceived by many Antilleans as “the Tabernacle,” to quote Fanon's words, the trip unfortunately brought disillusion after disillusion:

Il avait eu beau aplatir ses cheveux, les séparer d'une raie sur le côté, acheter un complet et un chapeau, ouvrir les yeux tout grands pour recevoir la lumière, il

marchait sous une avalanche de coups invisibles, dans la rue, à son travail, au restaurant, les gens ne voyaient pas tous ses efforts et qu'il lui fallait tout changer, tout remplacer, car quelle pièce est bonne dans un nègre ? (Schwarz-Bart 223)

Amboise's stay in the metropole tragically exemplifies what Fanon ironically denounced in *Peau noire, Masques Blancs*, that is "pour le Noir, il n'y a qu'un destin. Et il est blanc" (8). Although to remain pertinent, this statement must be re-placed in the historical context from which it emerged. Believing he was unable to fit in because of his appearance, the young man embraces gets the whole white European panoply of desirable traits: straightened hair, a three-piece-suit and a hat. Nevertheless, he remains in the eyes of the French, a black man. The gaze, the smirks, the stare, all seemingly invisible blows, reveal to Amboise that no matter how hard he tries, no matter how "white" he behaves, he will for ever be perceived as a black man in Western eyes. Doomed by the West to perpetually question the value of their own skin color, of their whole being, some individuals in the Black Atlantic have, as a result of historical oppression, developed an inferiority complex. As Fanon brings to light:

Le professeur Westermann dans *The African to-day*, écrit qu'il existe un sentiment d'infériorité des Noirs qu'éprouvent surtout les évolués et qu'ils s'efforcent sans cesse de dominer. La manière employée pour cela, ajoute-t-il, est souvent naïve : "Porter des vêtements européens ou des guenilles à la dernière mode, adopter les choses dont l'Européen fait usage, ses formes extérieures de civilité, fleurir le langage indigène d'expressions européennes, user de phrases ampoulées en parlant ou en écrivant dans une langue européenne, tout cela est mis en œuvre pour tenter de parvenir à un sentiment d'égalité avec l'Européen et son mode d'existence." (19-20)

But Amboise's impossibility to fit in also reveals the complexity of (post)colonial violence that transcends the dichotomy master/slave in that it also threatens the black communities from within. According to Musgrave, "Télumée's path through adulthood is a collapsed history of slavery" (73). I concur with Musgrave, but would add that the biblical intertext also supports a dialectical dynamic that allows the whole narrative to move beyond the scope of slavery by suggesting that, on the one hand, violence is not a monolithic process that applies only to the master/slave relation. In the novel, Amboise is among those who suffered the most blatant form of racism, and yet he is also the one who highlights the perverse nature of violence in the Black Atlantic: "Il disait que des mains ennemies s'étaient emparées de notre âme et l'avaient modelée afin qu'elle se dresse contre elle-même" (Schwarz-Bart 226). On the other hand, Télumée's Christ-like dimension also suggests the possibility of a healing process for the community in spite of the tragic memories of the Middle Passage and its aftermath. As the protagonist beautifully concludes: "J'ai transporté ma case à l'orient et je l'ai transportée à l'occident, les vents d'est, du nord, les tempêtes m'ont assaillies et les averse m'ont délavée, mais je reste une femme sur mes deux pieds, et je sais que le nègre n'est pas une statue de sel que dissolvent les pluies" (254-255). Being the concluding words of the novel, they demonstrate Schwarz-Bart's refusal to confine the black ethos to a state of perpetual suffering and thus escape the victimization stance that is often imposed like a straightjacket on the Black Atlantic world.

III.3.c *Paradise*: Rewriting Foundation Narratives

La littérature vous jette dans la bataille;
écrire c'est une certaine façon de vouloir se libérer;
si vous avez commencé de gré ou de force vous êtes engagés.
Sartre, *Qu'est-ce que la littérature ?*, 1948

Echoing Sartre's conception of literature, Morrison's view of literature is also one that is profoundly committed to a denunciation of political issues concerning the African American community in the U.S. and beyond. But her work also reveals a careful crafting of her art, one that intertwines both aesthetic maturity and political engagement. In an interview given in 1974 to the journal *Black Creation*, she states: "I think all good art has always been political. None of the best writing, the best thoughts have been anything other than that. [...] Black people who are writing must concentrate on the political plight of Black people" (Taylor-Guthrie 3). Art and political engagement are thus intrinsically linked in the work of Toni Morrison. As an African American woman writer, writing about women, her fiction has rather logically been labeled feminist, but the author remains very wary of these kinds of labels. Her thought regarding the women's liberation movement is indeed unequivocal, "What do black women feel about Women's lib? Distrust. It is white, therefore suspect" (2008:20). Yet, while reading *Paradise*, the reader cannot help but noting, if not a feminist stance, at least a strong criticism of patriarchy, as revealed by the conversation between Deek Morgan and his wife:

"I don't understand, Deek."

"I do." He smiled up at her. "You don't need to."

She had not meant that she didn't understand what he was talking about. She'd meant she didn't understand why he wasn't worried enough by their friends' money problems to help them out. [...] But Soane didn't try to explain; she just looked closely at his face. Smooth, still handsome after twenty-six years and beaming, now, with satisfaction. (Morrison 107)

Unable to conceive that his wife could reason, think and take a somewhat active role in issues beyond the domestic sphere, Deek Morgan shuts down any

possibility of communication. Persuaded that as a male, he is superior to women, he chooses miscommunication over real understanding. As Jan Furman writes, the women of Ruby are “Idealized by the men, they are imagined as passive, pious, and innocent like the mothers and grandmothers” (100). But although the characterization of the Morgan brothers serves Morrison’s criticism of patriarchy and its effects on the community, the political issues at stake in *Paradise* move far beyond the scope of the family unit. It is important to note, however, that the author feels, “a very strong sense of place, not in terms of the country or the state, but in terms of the details, the feeling, the mood of the community, of the town” (Taylor-Guthrie 10). She therefore uses the locus of the community as a microcosm, a perspective that allows her to dissect the consequences of global/national policies on African American individuals. As Roynon argues, in *Paradise*:

Morrison figures a racially transposed allegory or inverted microcosm of the defining flow of America’s founding principles: the restriction of its opportunities and rewards to a carefully demarcated few. The fact that the massacre takes place in July 1976 (the bicentennial of the Declaration of Independence) and the names of citizens (such as *Jefferson* Fleetwood) testify to the ever present interactions between the dominant culture of Ruby and that of the nation as a whole. (65)

Morrison’s characterization of Consolata as a Christ-like figure is in this regard particularly revealing for the biblical intertext allows the author to transcend the barriers between nation and community, the individual and the collective. The mythic substrate indeed allows the unifying of opposite principles via the poetic image that reconciles through Art the supposedly irreconcilable dichotomies of this world. Consolata’s body and soul are transformed into allegorical spaces of meanings in which power struggles opposing nation/community, men/women, black/white find

their hyperbolic expression. As Wunenburger argues in his essay, “Mythe et création littéraire” : “L’histoire mythique nous fait assister à l’émergence d’un ordre, d’un monde, d’une série d’évènements, d’un enchaînement de faits. [...] Faire retour au mythe, c’est donc, corollairement et symboliquement, re-devenir contemporain d’une première création” (Chauvin loc. 1305). In fiction, the use of mythic substrates therefore takes both author and reader on a journey toward a primordial act of creation, a (re)creation that moves beyond the conception of the world as a racialized entity to the extent that the quest for origins is something that we share as humans regardless of our skin color. And while the biblical intertext could, to a certain extent, suggest a reservoir of meanings that would be restricted to the narrow scope of white Christianity, the work of Black Atlantic writers demonstrates that although biblical myths are seen as an essential component of Western heritage, they can still produce significance beyond the global North.

In *Paradise*, the mythic intertext also supports Morrison’s views upon foundation narratives. Roynon writes that:

The author constructs an implicit dialogue between Ruby’s founding myth and the historical and mythological narratives of quest and utopian settlement that enjoy hallowed status in American culture: Moses leading the Israelites to the Promised Land, the Pilgrim Fathers at Plymouth Plantation, the Puritans of Massachusetts Bay, the Mormons in Utah, and so on. While she attributes to Ruby “the characteristics, the features of the Old Testament” (DC 157), she constructs *Paradise* as a kind of countertestament.” (66)

Through her depiction of Ruby as a decaying community in which children are dying, women are sterile, and where men are obsessed with money and power, Morrison delivers a subtle critique of the dangers associated with any foundation

myth, suggesting that although one may find inspiration in the stories of the past, these narratives can become powerful destructive forces for both the present and future when they prevent individuals from taking into account the new parameters of a world in constant evolution. Furman argues that:

The novel portrays a youthful vision of a race-conscious community in solidarity with emergent black power against a backdrop of social tradition and hostility to change. Morrison pays respect to tradition, but she sees social agility as the more essential human asset." *Paradise* is in this regard also the result of the author's reflection upon the "limitations of utopian societies [that] are seductively safe but dangerously cloistered. (93)

Consolata's Christ-like dimension reflects to this extent the author's criticism of foundation myths. Being black, female and practicing a form of Christianity infused with Afro-Caribbean religiosity, Morrison's Christ-figure might be seen as the reverse image of the biblical Jesus. Connie refuses to split the feminine ethos in two antithetical components, virgin and sinner: "Hear me, listen. Never break them in two. Never put one over the other. Eve is Mary's mother. Mary is the daughter of Eve" (Morrison 263). Her refusal echoes the novel's final message of mercy—highlighted by the name of Piedade, the mysterious black goddess— that stands as a powerful counter-discourse to the traditional shaming stance provided by orthodox Christianity which puts the figure of the sinner at the center of its narrative. Moreover, the combination of Consolata's blackness and her divinity calls into question the validity of an American culture that rhetorically maintains that the black ethos lies at the margin of humanity:

This is race talk, the explicit insertion into everyday life of racial signs and symbols that have no meaning other than pressing African Americans to the lowest level of the

racial hierarchy. Popular culture, shaped by film, theater, advertising, the press, television, and literature is heavily engaged in race talk. It participates freely in this most enduring and efficient rite of passage into American culture: negative appraisals of the native-born black population. Only when the lesson of racial estrangement is learned is assimilation complete. Whatever the lived experience of immigrants with African Americans [...] the rhetorical experience renders blacks as noncitizens, already discredited outlaws. (2008:145-146)

Morrison's radical stance regarding the black/white dichotomy is mirrored in her treatment of the biblical myth to the extent that although her figuration of Christ allows for the potential to transcend geographical barriers and to welcome the Black Atlantic region as a global entity, in order to benefit from Consolata's role in the Revelation, the white world is doomed to become and remain an outsider, a mere bystander, condemned to the margin of the narrative revelation. This uncompromising stance regarding the white world is only one of the consequences of the tragic lot African slaves and their descendants were—and still are— obliged to bear in America. As Callahan points out:

African-Americans have held fast to the Bible only by holding fast to its contradictions. Indeed, the contradiction suited their condition, for African Americans themselves incarnated America's greatest contradiction. They were slaves in the land of the free. As slaves, they were at the same time persons and property. As people of African descent, they were heirs to a noble ancient history and an ignoble modern legacy. On the margins of American society, they remained at the center of its most bitter conflicts. Long after the fall of the slave regime, slavery's children bear the indelible marks of these contradictions. (25)

Morrison is undoubtedly right to lament the rhetorical curse that has been placed upon the black ethos in America. Maybe the very history of the nation has, to a certain extent, condemned Blacks and Whites in America to remain imprisoned within the constricted borders of their respective discursive categories, ironically reflecting the fallacious squares one is supposed to tick when asked to define one's identity. Maybe also is it a white privilege to be willing to keep faith in humanity and the possibility of change, but as we shall see in the next chapters, other Black Atlantic artists demonstrate a radically different approach in regard to the race question. Just as Africans' reading of race discussions has undoubtedly been shaped by African colonial history, Morrison's reading is the result of American history. Given the continuing struggles of Blacks in America, the reading could certainly not have been different. But while I concur with Morrison in her criticism of mainstream American culture, my only regret is that while it may be true that African Americans are in a sense doomed to discursively remain noncitizens and outlaws, the Whites – as an essentialized entity– are also condemned to its rhetorical depiction as oppressor, thus negating the potential validity of a dialectical evolution.

III.4 Religion(s) and Beyond: Christ as a Metaphor for the Complexity of Contemporary Black Feminine Identities

Given the fact that the historical Jesus was a man, and that the myth surrounding him had also emerged from a patriarchal tradition, feminine figurations of the Christ might appear to a certain extent paradoxical, even contradictory. Indeed, how could a male figure be of any use in the Black women's liberation rhetoric? Gallagher writes in this regard that:

Norman R. Cary, "Indigenous religions were regarded as idolatrous, devilish, or at best preparatory to the superior revelation of Christ. It is hardly surprising that the

Europeans and their early converts suppressed or marginalized the “heathenish” alternatives to their revelation and authority. Christianity thus often helped in the creation of Others. (170-171)

On the other hand, one could argue that Jesus’s suffering also stands as a genderless symbol of the oppression of humanity as a whole. We shall see that Chauvet, Schwarz-Bart and Morrison found ways to expose that the potentially inherent contradiction inherent in the idea of a female Christ figure is in fact just a product of Western biases that needs to be debunked in our contemporary world. The figurations of Christ in this corpus all naturally become the embodiment of the multilayered suffering imposed on the black feminine ethos and the poetic image becomes the ideal medium to express the extent of suffering without the constraints of the aporetic nature of language.

III.4.a *Amour* : The Haitian Feminine Ethos in Question

In *Amour*, Claire’s Christ-like sacrifice is a function of gender. On the verge of crucifixion, the figure of Jesus, dressed in a purple robe, blurs the limits of gender, oscillating between masculine and feminine figurations: “And the soldiers platted a crown of thorns, and put *it* on his head, and they put on him a purple robe” (*NIV*, John 19.2) when Claire’s psychotic episode reaches its apex, the protagonist imagines herself in a purple garment: “J’ai le poignard dans la main. Je me prépare à la mort. [...] Est-ce moi qui marche extatique et drapée de pourpre vers cet étrange pays d’ombres ? La fièvre monte” (Chauvet 159). Through the Christ-like characterization of her protagonist, Chauvet brings to light the multilayered oppressions that black women have to face in Haitian society and beyond. The body as testimonial site transforms her spiritual crucifixion into a visceral revelation of the complex nature of

the power struggles at stake, and how these struggles influenced the process of feminine identity formation in the Black Atlantic.

Ironically, the author's female figuration of Christ neither believes in the Haitian *loas* nor in the Christian God. She became "a rebel against God, began to lose her faith after a hurricane, when she saw a heap of children's bodies" (Sandin-Fremaint 264). Chauvet's Christ thus serves to advance the author's criticism that religion is the *opium du peuple*. She even goes a step further in that she weaves together notions of race, class, gender, skin color and marital status in order to highlight the extent to which (post)colonial violence can lead to the fracture of the psyche. Given the extent of Claire's psychosis, it is difficult for the reader to foresee any positive metaphorical rebirth which could emerge out of Claire's sacrifice.

In regard to my reading of Claire as a figuration of Christ, it is essential to analyze the meaning of Claire's sacrifice, for it is indeed within the interstices of the text that one may find the philosophical and/or religious hidden message hidden beneath the biblical intertext, messages that are not generally included in the broader philosophical reflection of themes. As Dayan argues:

The "sorcery of law"— or, conversely, the "rules of the Haitian *lwa*" (the gods or spirits of Vodou)— depends on the reinforcement of control while giving the appearance of channeling the docility and obedience that are always fictive. But resistance is never shattered— it is only put away or forgotten, just as the gods for Chauvet are never gone, but shut up in a trunk and held tight in the mind. (Glover & Benedicty-Kokken 94)

Via the process of internal focalization, Chauvet gives a representation of the clergy and the devotees that reflects her critical stance regarding Christianity. Her

protagonist, Claire, indeed complains about the paradoxical absurdity that resides in the fact that every week, Père Paul puts a Holy Host on the most diabolical tongue in the community, that of the slanderous Mme Audier:

Je ferai plutôt la leçon à cette hypocrite de Mme Audier. Personne n'a jamais trouvé grâce devant elle. Elle possède une langue de vipère qui n'a fait que s'acérer avec l'âge et sur laquelle le Père Paul dépose pieusement, chaque fois, l'Hostie Sainte. Vrais pilier de l'église, toujours vouée à la Sainte Vierge ou à Saint Jude, elle colporte les faits et gestes des autres ou en invente tout bonnement pour faire aller la conversation. Elle a toujours été un danger public, une sorte de monstre d'apparence inoffensive très recherché dans les milieux d'oisifs. (Chauvet 62)

In quest of absoluteness, Claire is unable to fathom the inherent contradiction that lays in the combination of Christian devotion and malice that seem to characterize the milieu in which the protagonist evolves. Rather than being liberating, religion in fact appears in the narrative as another tool to oppress Haitian women. After learning about Claire's education, Père Paul blames her for having self-poisoned her soul:

Aux dires du Père Paul, je me suis empoisonnée l'esprit en instruisant. Mon intelligence sommeillait je l'ai réveillée, voilà la vérité. De là l'idée de ce journal. Je me suis découvert des dons insoupçonnés. Je crois pouvoir écrire. Je crois pouvoir penser. Je suis devenue arrogante. J'ai pris conscience de moi. Réduire ma vie intérieure à la mesure de l'œil, voilà mon but. (Chauvet 10)

Interestingly, the negative self-revelation Claire had as a child is here replaced by a positive one that exploits the value of writing as a means to self-empowerment. And while the community destroys Claire's sense of self, her writing restores it—even if this “restoration” clearly needs to be put in perspective as being an alienating

manifestation of her psychosis. Through the writing of her diary, Claire manages to replace powerlessness by agency, but the very nature of her narrative restricts the power of agency to the inner sphere of the self, and thus engenders a destructive self-centered dynamic that plunges her into the abyss of mania.

[A]ux confins de la conscience et de l'inconscient, entre rêve et réalité, dans un entre-deux, un monde aux frontières floues et incertaines, celui de la psyché trouble et insaisissable de ce personnage féminin énigmatique au prénom si ironique de Claire [...] la dualité est bien au cœur de Claire qui n'est pas celle qu'elle prétend être et se livre au spectateur dans ce monologue intime qui frôle l'indécence. (Bérard 59-60)

Claire's duality is best exemplified in her dream about Calédu, that I read as a rewriting of the crucifixion of Christ. In a dream, Claire finds herself naked, facing a screaming crowd asking for her execution. The setting of Claire's dream is clearly reminiscent of Jesus's execution in front of a crowd surrounding Christ and clamoring for Pilate to execute the "King of Jews." A naked Jesus was consequently put on the cross and, afterward, his torturers "divided up his clothes by casting lots" (*NIV*, Lk 23.34). On the cross, Jesus became the scapegoat whose agony became a source of perverse pleasure for the crowd. For the purpose of my argument, Claire's dream deserves to be quoted in full:

Mon rêve d'hier soir me bouleverse encore : j'étais seule, de bout en pleine lumière, au milieu d'une arène immense surmontée de gradins où gesticulait une foule terrifiante. Elle hurlait et m'interpellait en me montrant du doigt. De quoi m'accusait-t-elle ? Je courais, honteuse de ma nudité, cherchant en vain un coin obscur pour me cacher, quand, tout à coup, je vis se dresser devant moi une statue de pierre. À cet instant, les clameurs de la foule devinrent assourdissantes. La statue pourvue d'un phallus énorme tendu dans un spasme de voluptueuse souffrance était

celle de Calédu. La statue s'anima et le phallus s'agita, fiévreusement. Je me jetai à ses pieds, à la fois soumise et révoltée, osant à peine lever les yeux, les cuisses serrées. J'entendis crier « à mort, à mort ». C'était la foule qui poussait Calédu à m'assassiner. Le froid d'un métal me caressa la peau du cou en même temps qu'un éclat de rire féroce succédait seul aux cris de l'assistance, tout à coup silencieuse. L'arme s'enfonça doucement, profondément dans ma chair. Je restais un long moment immobile, figée d'horreur. Puis, me relevant, je marchais dans une brume épaisse, les mains en avant, décapitée, avec ma tête qui se balançait sur ma poitrine. Morte et vivant ma mort... (Chauvet 125-126)

Several motifs are of critical importance here for my reading of Claire as a feminine figuration of Christ. By becoming a zombie, “morte et vivant [s]a mort”, Claire is indeed erected as a figuration of Christ, reflecting the association of Jesus and the zombie in the Caribbean imaginary. Sandin-Fremaint even suggests, “that the space of *Claire* in this novel is the space of *zombification*, of the loss of the *marron*'s soul” (246). Like Claire, Calédu also becomes a Christ-like figure. The black commandant can indeed be seen as both a foil and a double of Claire. The dichotomy attraction/rejection that characterizes their relationship functions as a clue to their narrative complementarity. Like Claire's, Calédu's blackness engendered a form of psychosis. As a representative of the Noiriste movement, the complex set of racial relationships dividing the Haitian landscape laid the groundwork for Calédu's psychological trauma which, unlike Claire's, does not take the form of a self-destruction but is rather expressed instead via an excessive yearn for power, coupled with sadistic tendencies that led to the development of a culture of terror targeting the Mulatto community.

Calédu's depicting as a statue with a gigantic phallus is, in this regard, particularly revealing. The metaphor indeed clearly evokes the Yoruba god, Eshu-Legba, who has been syncretized in Haiti and became Papa Legba. Papa Legba is often identified with St. Peter and is said to retain the keys to Heaven and Hell. But he is also identified with Christ for he is the God of intersection, the intermediary between the lwas and humanity. Interestingly, when identified with Christ, Papa Legba is "a mulatto man born of the sun and moon." The mulatto nature of Legba therefore links, through the poetic image, Calédu and Claire and both characters seem to merge into one another almost to the point of fusion.

The metaphoric association of Calédu/Papa Legba's phallic oneiric representation makes the Haitian commandant a Christ-like figure: Claire and Calédu's struggle thus may reflect the struggle of Haitian Vodou and Christianity on the island. Both Christ and Papa Legba, being considered intermediary deities, serve perfectly Chauvet's postmodern aesthetic that is, rather logically, marked by indetermination. We may also wonder if Calédu's victory would not suggest that it would be impossible to completely erase all vestiges of Vodou from the Haitian cultural landscape.

It will also be noted that Claire's dream constitutes a pivotal point in the narrative. The oneiric narrative is indeed a key moment in the rise of Claire's political consciousness. Preceding the narrative of the dream, Calédu spits on Claire, "Calédu a craché dernièrement sur mes pas," thus reviving Claire's antagonism toward the Noiriste régime (Chauvet 125). Following the dream, Claire identifies and socializes more and more with her mulatto single friends, and even takes a growing interest in Jean Luze and Joel Marti's conversations: "Je m'étonne de l'intérêt que suscitent en moi les causeries de Jean Luze et de Joël Marti" (Chauvet 138). Papa Legba's

apparition to Claire could thus be read as a prophetic sign heralding the political murder to come and her active role in the process.

Through her characterization of Claire as a feminine figuration of Christ, Chauvet intertwines mythic substrate and politics so as to give a sense of the prophetic potential of writing. Chauvet's Christ-like figure then is rife with ambiguity: ironically silent within the space of diegesis, Claire functions as a Revealer beyond the limits of the narrative. As Munro suggests:

The works of Marie Chauvet, and *Love, Anger, Madness* in particular, are prophetic in the following sense: they are of their time yet predictive, foreseeing times to come and, indeed, determining in some respects the future. [...] There is further paradox in that any prophet writes with an acute understanding of the past, and in that the future s/he envisages may involve a return to the past, or at least to a certain version of the past. (Glover & Benedicty-Kokken 44-45)

In light of Munro's argument, I argue that Chauvet's characterization of Claire as Christ constitutes a form of prophecy in that it reflects an acute understanding of the effects of colonial violence on the Haitian feminine ethos, while serving as a catalyst for the author's reflection upon the transnational nature of violence, and allowing both author and reader to catch a glimpse at a future that will necessarily need to acknowledge the past in order to become productive and not merely destructive.

III.4.b *Pluie et vent* : A Redemption of the Guadeloupean Peasant Woman

As a fictional autobiography, the time frame of *Pluie et vent sur Télumée Miracle* rather logically follows Télumée's path from beginning to end, but her strong connection with the community—past and present— allows the transcending of time

barriers so that her life, “during which [she] experiences enslavement, poverty, violence, and meager financial independence— symbolically replicates the island’s history of colonization and its aftermath” (Slemon qtd. in Musgrave 69). Strikingly, T elum ee’s life experiences mirror the biblical story of Jesus making her path a (re)vision of the Christ narrative. But the gendered nature of T elum ee’s self narrative adds an interesting extra layer of signification in that it intertwines the private and the public spheres, the individual and the collective so that both the narrated “I” and the narrating “I,” while serving as speakers of the unspeakable, also become, in the process, core vehicles of healing in the Guadeloupian community and beyond. In the text, T elum ee’s Christ-like dimension is a corollary of her African heritage. As Harding rightly suggests, the memory of slavery informs religious practices in the Black Atlantic:

For the religions of the Afro-Atlantic diaspora, whose roots are in the trials and traumas of the creation of the New World, the experience of slavery is a foundational element, embedded in the structure and meaning of these traditions and present in their contemporary expressions.[...] In so many ways, the experience and memory of slavery continue to inform the practice and meaning of black religion in the Americas. (Griffith & Savage 3)

Like myths, religion serves an explanatory function in regards to human existence. It is therefore not surprising that theological reflections in the Black Atlantic reflect the necessity to explain the experience of slavery and colonization and how these relate to the divine. T elum ee’s Christ-like dimension is therefore intrinsically linked to the notion of suffering both of the self and others. Her extreme compassion is both a blessing and a curse for, as her grand-mother Toussine, tells  Elie, T elum ee’s first husband, “Si tu fais naufrage, mon n egre, elle sombrera avec

toi...” (Schwarz-Bart 124). Télumée’s love is so selfless that she may indeed forget her own well-being for the sake of the other. Battered by her husband, her skin turned purple, Télumée goes to her grand-mother’s to get a little comfort:

— C’est une abomination, soupirait-elle en me frottant les membres, il devrait te renvoyer plutôt que de t’abîmer ainsi ; mais ce sont des choses qui ne restent jamais impunies, et je suis sûre qu’il trouvera son dû...

— Son ton d’oracle me faisait frissonner. Ne le maudis pas, bonne-maman, l’homme se noie et si tu le maudis, il n’en réchappera pas. (Schwarz-Bart 153)

But even when reaching the apex of physical and moral suffering, Télumée remains extraordinarily compassionate. Blind to her own pain and sorrow, she is unable to blame Élie. Selfless, she loves him to the core and is willing to endure moral and physical abuse and focus only on the extent of her husband’s suffering. Almost ironically, Télumée’s portrayal as a figuration of Christ allows Schwarz-Bart to reflect upon a variety of potentially liberating paths open to black women that will allow them to escape the alienating borders of patriarchy, racism, class conflict and so on. While Télumée’s life story can, to a certain extent, be perceived as an oxymoron of women’s liberation, the protagonist nevertheless displays qualities that make her Christ-like; moreover, she is a survivor rather than a victim. As such, she finds ways to navigate beyond the alienating borders of patriarchy, racism, and class conflict.

Being an extremely compassionate figuration of Christ, Télumée naturally excels in the practice of healing, reflecting in this way, the roles of many women in ATRs and Afro-Caribbean religions. As a future healer, Télumée is initiated to magic by man Cia, her grand-mother’s best friend.

[N]ous nous promenions dans la forêt où man Cia m’initiait aux secrets des plantes. Elle m’apprenait également le corps humain, ses nœuds et ses faiblesses, comment le froter, chasser malaises et crispations, démissures. Je sus délivrer bêtes et gens, et lever les envoûtements, renvoyer tous leurs maléfices à ceux-là mêmes qui les avaient largués. (Schwarz-Bart 194)

Healing practices are intrinsically linked to both magic and religion in the Black Atlantic, for illnesses are not perceived as being the result of chance or destiny. Often, they are to be a curse placed on the individual by somebody else. As Mbiti points out, “Suffering, misfortune, disease and accident, are all ‘caused’ mystically, as far as African peoples are concerned. To combat the misfortune or ailment the cause must also be found, and either counteracted, uprooted or punished” (165). Mbiti’s comments need of course to be put in perspective for a generalization that applies to each and every African is, in my opinion, unscientific, but his argument nevertheless does highlight the strong intertwining between magic and healing in Black Atlantic cultures. This dimension of black magic is interestingly an element African slaves and their descendants brought with them through the Middle Passage:

Throughout their history, African Americans have retained distinctive ideas concerning sickness, its causes, and cures. [...] Disease could be physiological, or it could reflect the onslaught of malign spiritual forces. [...] African Americans viewed healing as an integral part of the ongoing struggle of good against the evil that plagued humankind. (Chireau 92)

Just as Vodou “is concomitant with the Haitian revolution and is a symbol of the Haitian struggle,” for black women in the Antilles, the craft of magic is also both reminiscent of their African heritage and a ritual of resistance to colonial domination (Murrell 59). Schwarz-Bart’s narrative uses the motif of magic and healing to deliver

a narrative of resistance against the confinement of the Guadeloupien feminine ethos within a stance of alienation. In her article “Phenomenal Women: The Shape-Shifter Archetype in Postcolonial Magical Realist Fiction,” Megane Musgrave convincingly argues that *Pluie et vent sur Télumée Miracle* follows Slemon’s tripartite structure of magical realist narrative in that “the site of the text is ‘metonymic of the postcolonial culture as a whole’ so that Télumée’s personal quest for selfhood acts as a ‘collective autobiography and parable’ for Guadeloupe as a whole” (Garane 32). Télumée’s personal quest once again merges with that of Christ for Jesus’s biography can, to the same extent, be considered as a parable for humanity as a whole. Télumée’s Christ-like suffering then becomes the embodiment of the enduring (post)colonial violence suffered by the black feminine ethos. Working as a maid in the Desaragne household, the young woman endures in silence the mockery of her employers: “Ah, continuait-elle, du ton et de l’air de quelqu’un qui regarde le ciel et dit : il va faire beau, ah, savez-vous au juste qui vous êtes, vous les nègres d’ici ? ... vous mangez, vous buvez, vous faites les mauvais, et puis vous dormez... un point c’est tout” (Schwarz-Bart 96). The contrast between Mme Desaragne’s trivial air indifference and the brutality of her racist slurs highlights in dramatic fashion the ways in which, in a postcolonial context, violence takes on a variety of pernicious forms and is tragically banalized by the members of the dominant society. The Whites’ radical denigration of Blacks becomes, under Schwarz-Bart’s pen, as commonplace as talk about the weather. Télumée’s personal narrative, a microcosm of the Desaragne’s household, emerges as a reflection on the macrocosm of postcolonial violence that opposes Blacks and Whites in the Black Atlantic.

To the same extent, when Télumée is sexually assaulted by M. Desaragne, her ordeal transcends the limits of her personal narrative to emblemize a historical reality:

Il avait à la main une robe de soie qu'il me jeta en souriant, comme si la chose eût été convenue entre nous. Puis venant à moi, il posa ses mains sous ma jupe, marmotta d'une voix nasillarde... on dirait que tu es sans culottes, ma fille. La misère est surprenante, c'est une tique qui vous saute dessus et vous suce jusqu'au dernier sang.
(Schwarz-Bart 112-113)

Desaragne's attitude toward Télumée reflects that of many colonial empires toward Africa. Télumée's rape is no less than the illustration of the metaphorical rape of the motherland by European powers. Desaragne reifies his black maid in the same manner that colonial powers reified Africa and Africans, obliging them to submit the black ethos to their yoke. In Desaragne's eyes, Télumée is nothing more than a mere object he wants to possess, something that will allow him to slake his twisted sexual fantasies and quench his thirst for exoticism : "J'ai besoin d'une petite négresse qui chante dans la vie et plus vive qu'un éclair, j'ai besoin d'une petite négresse si noire que bleue, c'est ce que j'aime..." (Schwarz-Bart 113). Desaragne exemplifies countless white masters unable to accept their sexual attraction to black women in any other ways than within the master/slave dichotomy. Again, Télumée's personal story intertwines with the collective story of the children of slavery, thus demonstrating the revealing and liberating potential for the Christ figure in the Black Atlantic.

III.4.c *Paradise* : For a Revision of Christianity

Morrison's Christ-like figure is also characterized by an extraordinary compassion. Listening to the confessions of the women she has welcomed in the Convent, Consolata/Christ becomes a catalyst for giving voice to the disremembered.

During Save-Marie's funeral, the youngest child of Ruby's inhabitants Sweet and Jefferson Fleetwood, Billie Delia recalls the kindness of the women in the Convent in laudatory fashion:

More on her mind was the absence of the women she had liked. They had treated her so well, had not embarrassed her with sympathy, had just given her sunny kindness. Looking at her bruised face and swollen eyes, they sliced cucumber for her lids after making her drink a glass of wine. No one insisted on hearing what drove her there, but she could tell they would listen if she wanted them to. (Morrison 308)

Consolata/Connie's and the other women's benevolence restores their humanity to these outcast that come to seek refuge behind the walls of the Convent. They also provides them with a new self-assertiveness that gives voice to the voiceless. Through her syncretic performance as a Christian emancipator, Consolata not only appears as a female liberator, she also allows the author to question the validity of a traditionally male-centered religious discourse that paradoxically imposes arbitrary and exclusionist principles, while at the same time advocating love and compassion for all humanity. Furman writes in this regard that:

The Convent is Ruby's opposite. It is women's space, holistic, healing and compassionate. As community devolves in Ruby, it evolves in the Convent. Broken, inchoate girls, always at odds with each other, take up residence over the years, but by the July morning when the men arrive, weak girls have transformed themselves into authentic, composed women. (97)

The Convent is for these women a place of healing, but ironically, it does not look anything like the traditional picture of Christian haven, and suggests instead an epicurean earthly paradise. While searching for the house after the first killing, the murder of a white woman, Ruby's men discover that:

The kitchen is bigger than the house in which either man was born. The ceiling barn-rafter high. [...] At one end a full pitcher of milk stands near four bowls of shredded wheat. At the other end vegetable chopping has been interrupted: scallion piled like a handful confetti nestles brilliant disk of carrot, and the potatoes peeled and whole, are bone white, wet and crisp. Stock simmers on the stove. It is restaurant size with eight burners and on a shelf beneath the great steel hood a dozen loaves of bread swell. (Morrison 5)

Morrison's food imagery allows the author to highlight the extraordinary sense of sisterhood that unites these women behind the curtains of the Convent community. Although marginalized by the surrounding society, these women find under Consolata's leadership a place to heal their wounds, a new home, while also acquiring a sense of belonging they so desperately lacked as Ruby's outcasts. In the Bible, the episode of Jesus multiplying the bread to feed the multitude has a double meaning in that the action of feeding is understood to be both spiritual and physical. To the same extent, Consolata provides these women with food for their body and soul. Like Jesus Christ, Consolata becomes a teacher, sometimes even unknowingly, at times ironically, as when the women look to her to learn the pros and cons of a love relationship, "[Penny and Clarissa] liked [Consolata] because she was stolen, as they had been, and felt sorry for her too. They regarded her behavior as serious instruction about the limits and possibilities of love and imprisonment, and took the lesson with them for the balance of their lives" (Morrison 238). In the Convent, the very act of eating becomes a communal experience that serves a spiritual purpose. It allows the women to understand the connections between the physical and the spiritual worlds in a way that reconcile the orthodox Christian dichotomy of body and soul: both being equally potent vehicles for moving from the human to the divine.

Morrison's emphasis on sisterhood also highlights her central concern regarding the role African American women play within the community and beyond, "They are not merely the glue that binds the people together; they are the tar—a holy element" (Taylor-Guthrie xii). Many critics have argued that this gendered version of Christ serves primarily as a sharp criticism of patriarchal ideology (Jessee, Terry, Weese). I argue rather, in accordance with Terry's argument, that *Paradise* is also "a positive model of New World creolization" (Stave 192) and that the role of Consolata as a spiritual leader not only challenges Western patriarchal ideology, but also confirms the traditional and positive role assigned to women in African folklore and Afro-Caribbean religions.

As Sharon Jessee points out: "throughout her depictions of the diasporic migrations of African Americans from slavery period through the twentieth century, Toni Morrison has been concerned with what sustains people in a spiritual sense" (Stave 130). The characterization of Consolata as a figuration of Christ allows the author to reflect on the relation between African American women within the community and outside it, as well as their roles as black women forced to deal with issues of racism, patriarchy and drastically gendered notions that attach to the divine. According to Maha Marouan, "The novel uses the Afro-Brazilian Candomblé and Gnostic mysticism in order to make room for an African American consciousness and a sense of identity that stands in opposition to the exclusionary politics of Christianity" (111). Morrison thus offers her readers an alternative to the orthodox Christian paradise by insisting on a haven of peace that is readily available on earth, and not reserved to only a happy-few in the kingdom of heaven :

Then, in words clearer than her introductory speech (which none of them understood), she told them of a place where white sidewalks met the sea and fish the

color of plums swam alongside children. She spoke of fruit that tasted the way sapphires look and boys using rubies for dice. Of scented cathedrals made of gold where gods and goddesses sat in the pews with the congregation. Of carnations tall as trees. Dwarfs with diamonds for teeth. Snakes aroused by poetry and bells. Then she told them about a woman named Piedade, who sang but never said a word. (Morrison 263-264)

Drawing on both Afro-Caribbean and African religions, Morrison's paradise represents a different approach to Christianity. Transatlantic in nature, this paradise results from a reflection on a concept of Christianity that is, in its Western acceptance, irrelevant to the black experience and unable to reflect its modernity, yet it can become particularly meaningful once we manage to go beyond the binary shaping of the orthodox Christian thought process. Biblical archetypes then become a reservoir of potential meanings that can be used to shed light on our human condition, both as individuals and members of the collectivity. As Bohache puts it:

In order for the Black Christ to be effective and prophetic in relationship to the contemporary Black quest for freedom, it must have meaning in relation to issues beyond White racism. [...] [A] truly black Christ must empower Blacks not only to throw off white racist oppression but to end the self-destructive attitudes and activities of blacks against other blacks: "A vital and effective Black Christ must reflect the complexity of black reality." (74-75)

The novelists in my study all created versions of Christ that enabled the black feminine ethos to find symbolic sources of empowerment as women, as blacks, but also as potentially divine beings, thus counteracting the alienating restrictions imposed on black women by the dominant dramaturgy. Through their (re)figurations of Christ, all three authors highlighted the multilayered oppression black women have

to face in our contemporary world while providing a new meaning to human suffering. This new meaning transcends the limits of the physical body, demonstrating that pain and sorrow are not an end, but rather a divine stance suggesting the possibility of renewal. Their figurations of Christ allow the authors to reflect upon the limits and possibilities a black theology of liberation can provide to the black feminine ethos. As feminine black Christs, Claire, Télumée and Consolata thus beautifully illustrate Albert Cone's understanding of suffering:

When one resists evil, suffering is an inevitable consequence of that resistance. To avoid suffering is to avoid resistance, and that leaves evil unchallenged. [...] King's suffering, and that of freedom fighters around the world, is redemptive when, like Jesus' cross, it inspires us to resist evil, knowing that suffering is the consequence. (xviii)

The great variety of cultures and talents that emerged from the Black Atlantic demonstrate that although the extent of black suffering must be acknowledged, there is much more to Blackness than mere sorrow and suffering. These new Jesus figures provide a fictional answer to the theological call for a Black Christ envisioned by many black theologians, such as Anthony Reddie who claims that:

The Jesus who refashions the world is one who enables ordinary Black people to see themselves in another light. This entails seeing oneself as God sees us, that is, as unique, interconnected and transformed beings whose ontological and existential vistas are more enhanced and nuanced than the tragi-comic distortions of fixed identity in the present world order. (86)

Resistance and resilience are ontologically stronger than suffering itself. To the status of "non-person," Chauvet, Morrison and Schwarz-Bart oppose profoundly

human versions of Christ as a living god/human and thus lead their white readership to question its own perception of the world as a hierarchized entity.

Chapter four: Feminist Figurations Of Christ In Black Atlantic Visual Arts: Sembène Ousmane's *La Noire de...* and Kwahulé's *Bintou*

IV.1 Myth-Criticism

IV.1.a Diouana as a Figuration of Christ in *La Noire de...* by Sembène Ousmane

Unlike the other authors in my study, it is not likely that Sembène Ousmane intentionally cast his protagonist Diouana as a Christ figure. Ousmane was indeed quite wary of both Christianity and Islam, both of which he perceived as being instruments of colonization of the African mind. As Amadou Fofana writes:

Throughout his career as a filmmaker, [Sembène] consistently portrayed Islam and Christianity as alienating and divisive forces that have the potential to foment destructive social tensions. Although Sembène himself was born a Muslim and was educated in the Koran, after the war, he became as disillusioned with the religious leaders who were instrumental in rallying support for the French colonialists as he was disenchanted with the early postcolonial political elite, which he considered corrupt and self-serving. (128-129)

In *La Noire de...*, the biblical intertext is thus not used by the author as a deliberate narrative device. The film cannot in this regard be considered as an actual rewriting of the biblical myth of Jesus Christ, but the manner in which Diouana is portrayed nevertheless hints at a Christ-like dimension, and it can be argued that in moving from the pole of creation to the pole of reception, the protagonist of *La Noire de...* reveals Christ-like attributes that make her a potential figuration of Christ in the eyes of the audience. In the following pages, I shall show how Diouana's

alienation/solitude, her martyrdom, the reification of her body and her rebellion against society all contribute to making the protagonist a figuration of Christ. Regarding the subject of Jesus's alienation, while it is true that Jesus "is never a solitary figure [for] [i]n each gospel he calls followers and challenges them to learn from him as his disciples," it remains nevertheless also true that, in a very human sense, Jesus can, be perceived as the very embodiment of alienation (Moloney Ch. 7). As Jon Blooms suggests: "Jesus's loneliness reached its apex the moment he became sin for us (2 Corinthians 5:21) on the cross and was 'forsaken' by his Father (Matthew 27:46). First he was estranged by sinlessness and then from being sin. Jesus knew supreme rejection and loneliness" (cf. Work Cited). Jesus indeed experienced misunderstanding and rejection in numerous ways. Although he was never abandoned by his parents, he was obliged to leave his home to accomplish his mission and, in this regard, he experienced solitude in that he had to sever his family ties. There is, then, a parallel between the unbridgeable gap between Jesus's Godliness and the sinful status of those he is trying to serve and the unbridgeable breach separates Diouana and her employers.

Diouana's alienation and martyrdom is intrinsically linked to her status as colonial citizen. Living in Senegal in the wake of independence, she is, like many of her peers, condemned to a life of poverty and unemployment. After having unsuccessfully tried to find a position as a maid in a white household, she is advised by her boyfriend to go to the downtown square where female candidates sit and wait for hours under the glaring sun in the hope that they will be offered a job. In the scene depicting this square, the women's powerlessness/immobility is strikingly highlighted by the contrast between their static position on the pavement, and the movement of a passing car on this street of Dakar. The dichotomies between immobility/movement

and collectivity/individuality metaphorically depict the gap created by Western materialism and greed in Africa, a concept that imprisons the masses in poverty while restricting opportunities to a small elite.

Et comme les autres filles, je pris place sur la pierre et attendit. Le soleil passa plusieurs fois sur nos têtes, mais... Comme les autres, je venais tous les jours, matin et soir. Comme tous les matins, ce matin-là j'arrivais sur la place. Déjà les filles attendaient. Et moi, je pris place sur le trottoir attendant comme tous les jours la providence. (Sembène 00:14:45-00:15:13)

Powerless, the Senegalese women try to seize Madame's arms in the hope they will be chosen. Madame, on the other hand, who holds the women's fate in the palm of her hand, decides to choose Diouana because she is the one who appears to be the most submissive. Indeed, unlike the other women, she did not move and waited patiently on the pavement while the others were rushing toward and around Madame. In a bitter irony, Diouana's anticipated providence will lead to a living hell; what appeared to be a blessing will eventually become a curse. Morel writes in this regard that:

À Antibes, où ce ménage séjourne, Diouana [...] se retrouve esseulée, cloîtrée dans un monde hostile, traitée avec dureté et mépris froid par "Missié," "Madame," et leur fils aîné. Voilà le triste sort qui attendait la jeune analphabète pour qui la France était un paradis où il fait bon vivre ! Tout se révélera illusion dans cet univers plutôt antipathique, étriqué et repoussant. La nostalgie la gagne. [...] Analphabète, Diouana ne peut écrire à ses parents, à ses soeurs, à ses oncles, pour leur retracer son séjour de calvaire à Antibes. (37-38)

Once in France Diouana's martyrdom increases, eventually reaching a point of no return due in large part to her inability to communicate. Not only does Diouana not speak French, she is also illiterate. In this regard, she is doubly doomed to suffer in

silence: unable to express her despair to her white employers, she is also completely isolated from her family in Senegal who thinks that Diouana is living the good life, but refuses to send them the money they need to survive. As Bush and Annas write, “‘La Noire de...’ is not an intellectual. She is illiterate. She speaks little with her entourage because she finds herself confined in an apathetic and limited universe. She locks herself in a defensive dumbness. In ruminating only on her misfortune, she hardens her position of refusal” (14). Although I concur with Bush and Annas’ characterization of Diouana’s universe in France, I would add that it is not only her environment that causes her to be so incommunicative, but both her actual inability to communicate—not because she is not “an intellectual” (I find this choice of word to be slightly tendentious for it seems to betray a value judgment on the part of the critics), but because she cannot speak French, and they cannot speak her dialect—and her rebellion. The heroine and her employers do not speak the same language, both figuratively and in point of fact.

Diouana’s silence links her to Christ in that neither engaged in dialogue with their persecutors. However, Jesus chose silence in order to fulfill his destiny to be sacrificed in order save humanity from its sins. For Diouana, silence is not exactly a deliberated choice. Her silence is in a sense imposed upon her as a result of circumstances. And because they cannot communicate with their maid, Madame and Monsieur base their interpretation of her actions and her change of behavior on their vast repertory of colonial stereotypes. Jesus’s actions, too, were interpreted by others as a consequence of his refusal to communicate (“That’s who you say I am”). The lack of verbal communication invariably leads to misunderstandings for Diouana and idle speculation such as in the following frame:

Madame: Tu n’as rien remarqué chez Diouana?

Monsieur: Non.

Madame: Regarde, on dirait qu'elle dépérit.

Monsieur : Hmm, peut-être que c'est le climat. Après tout...

Madame : Quel climat ? Elle est fainéante, c'est tout. (Sembène 00 :22 :23-00 :22 :44)

It is clear from this dialogue that her employers attempt to make sense of Diouana's behavior by speaking about rather than to her, thus compounding the extent of her alienation. Her fate in France thus becomes the symbol of colonial blindness and violence toward Africa and the African ethos. Moreover, "In light of Diouana's desire to explore the West, her labeling as 'the black girl of' more 'the black girl from' makes her the other, the person who comes from outside of the white world and belongs elsewhere" (Kalisa 63). In the absence of communication—a communication rendered impossible given the fact that the French couple expects the illiterate Diouana to understand French while they make no attempt to speak her language, illustrates once again that the relationship between Diouana and her employers, presented under the guise of a personal history, can be interpreted more broadly as an allegory of colonial history—Madame attributes Diouana's distress to laziness which betrays the colonial gaze to which Diouana is subjected in the household. Imprisoned within a straightjacket of stereotypes, Diouana slowly suffocates as she comes to terms with her complete loss of agency. The distance between Diouana and her employers, like the distance that separates Jesus from his persecutors, is too great to be bridged by language alone.

Adding to her sense of martyrdom and alienation, Diouana's powerlessness is also mirrored in the reification of her body. The mask motif is, in this regard, particularly significant. When Diouana first enters her employers' apartment in

Antibes, she puts down her suitcase and fixes her gaze on an African mask hanging on the wall. Delighted to have been given a job in France, Diouana initially offered the African mask as a gift to her white employers. The manner with which the French couple receives and treats the gift prefigures how they will treat their African maid. Diouana's identification with the mask is suggested by Sembène in the close-up frame that follows her arrival in the apartment. The scene that focuses on Diouana looking at the mask is followed by a second close-up wherein the mask becomes the central black character in the scene, offering a chromatic contrast with the white wall. A blackness (the mask) is surrounded by an overwhelming and overpowering whiteness. After having received Diouana's gift, Madame puts it on a shelf along with other African artefacts. Her husband's comment, "Il a l'air authentique, dis donc!" (Sembène 00:18:03) underscores the fact that, unlike Diouana, who perceived her gift as a gesture of reciprocity and equality, the family evaluates the gift, along with their relationship to the maid, and on a larger scale to Africa itself, in light of its materialistic value. The mask is thus transformed from a gift into an ostentatious object of display, a symbol that helps quench the family's and their friends' thirst for exoticism. After Diouana's death, the mask becomes an object of contention. As Langston writes, "[the mask's] location speaks as a misrecognition of its identity : the mask is perceived by the white family only as an art object, and their entire behaviour towards Diouana shows their (wilful ?) ignorance of the mask's standing as a gift implying reciprocity and equality of relations" (17). Under the Western gaze, the African mask evokes the mystery, savagery, and tribal primitivism they see as essential attributes of all Africans. As McGill argues:

Back at their home in France, as Diouana finds herself treated with increasing contempt, the mask becomes emblematic of her africanness : a matter of little concern

to her before, in her freedom, but more and more significant as her sense of self is deliberately diminished. The African object is fetishised by being placed on the wall, just as the mistress's white dinner guests coo over exotic African food; but the humanity of the real African in the room, Diouana is disregarded. Her response—resistance, anger, surrender and finally death—represents the most tragic trajectory available to a colonised nation. (11)

By affixing the mask to the wall, Diouana's employers not only highlight their ignorance of African customs, but they also demonstrate their inability to consider the Other as an equal. The gift sits in the middle of the living room, the room where the couple repeatedly exhibit their African maid before their friends. The food they are eating is, "De la vraie cuisine africaine préparée par la bonne," (Sembène 00:09:33-00:09:35) Monsieur asserts with pride in front of his guests. But Diouana's ordeal as an exotic possession does not stop here. Once she is transformed into an object of exotic curiosity, her woman's body also becomes a potential possession when one of the male family friends casts a long, perverse stare at Diouana's body. He even goes so far as to grab her in his arms and kiss her on the cheeks while joyfully saying, "Je n'ai jamais embrassé de négresse." (00:10:42-00:10:46) Madame's comment, "J'ai l'impression qu'elle n'est pas contente" (00:10:46-00:10:47) once again underscores the unbalanced nature of the relationship between Diouana and her French employers who, like Western empires before them, feel entitled to possess Africa and Africans and interpret their feelings.

When Diouana realizes that she will never be treated as an equal in the household, she makes several attempts at resisting her isolation and alienation in a somewhat passive-aggressive manner. She gets out of bed later and later each day. When Madame tells her that if she does not work she will not be given food, Diouana

goes on strike and decides to stop taking care of the children. She takes back the mask when she realizes that her relation to her white employers is built around values that are economic and amoral, if not immoral. Madame's and Diouana's physical battle over who has the right to own the mask symbolizes the unbalanced nature of the relationship between the West and Africa. The former takes from the latter without really giving anything in return.

IV.1.b Bintou as a Figuration of Christ in *Bintou* by Koffi Kwahulé

Unlike Sembène, Kwahulé has deliberately chosen to integrate biblical intertextuality in his work. As I wrote in II.2.c, Kwahulé's writing is strongly influenced by myths. The latter explains the influence of myths on his work in that he believed all stories were already present at the beginning of humanity. Myths contain archetypes that are turned into secrets by writers to give the reader the illusion that s/he is being told a new story. In this regard, the Bible represents, for him, a reservoir of ideas that trigger his inspiration. As he confided to me in an interview:

La Bible, c'est le livre que je lis le plus. Oui, la Bible m'inspire autant que le jazz. Souvent quand j'ai une impasse, j'ouvre la Bible, je lis un passage au hasard et je me dis: "J'ai trouvé!" D'autres fois, j'écoute du jazz. Je mets mon iPod, je mets de la musique jazz et peu à peu, les choses se mettent en place. Donc, les deux jouent le même rôle. J'ai besoin de ça quand je suis dans une impasse, ce qui me permet de me dire ensuite: "C'est évident, c'est ça!" (191)

When Kwahulé decided to tell a story of excision, an act of extreme violence on the woman's body, there is a clear link between that suffering and the violence Christ endured on the cross. As part of a broader reflection upon physical violence, he indicated that Bintou was deliberately cast as a Christ-figure. We shall see in the following pages that the biblical intertext at work in the play has political, aesthetic

and philosophical implications. Several characteristics identify Bintou as a figuration of Christ: her rebellion against a corrupt society; her martyrdom; her sympathy for the marginalized; her solitude/alienation; the reification of her body and the ways in which she is perceived by others all contribute to the characterization of this teenager as a feminine figuration of the biblical Jesus. There are, of course, characteristics of Bintou that are not Christ-like to the extent that the teenager is not Christ himself, but only a figuration of Christ, that is to say that literary creation also comes into play and explains the divergences. I nevertheless find it useful to succinctly present Bintou to the reader before bringing to light her Christ-like attributes.

Kwahulé's protagonist is symbolically sandwiched between French and African cultures. Rebellious, the teenage heroine rejects the patriarchal straightjacket of cultural traditions. Despite her African heritage, she grew up in France : "Petite fleur sauvage/poussée envers et contre tous/poussée sur le froid béton/d'une cité où même les flics n'osaient pas aller" (Kwahulé 5). The housing project where she lived shaped her cultural references, and her dream of becoming, at age 13, a belly dancer. Bintou, a teenager trapped between two cultures, decides to rebel and to completely reject her African roots, along with her father, who has been locked in his room ever since he lost his job, her uncle, her aunt and any other form of authority that she perceives as a threat to her freedom to be whomever she wants to be. Like Christ, Bintou is revered by her disciple/followers. She becomes the leader of a boys' gang, and in this capacity she shows her fellow gang members what it means to live fully, even if this implies going against the tide, all the while demonstrating the power of unconditional love.

Bintou's rebellion in the play is intrinsically bound up with her age. Like Christ before her, she is willing to do what it takes to follow her ideal. As a teenager,

she has not yet had the time to become jaded and complacent, like the adults around her. Like all teenagers, she naturally pushes back against the limits imposed on her by authority figures. But the intensity of her revolt reveals that there is more than teenage angst at work here. Her violent rebellion results from a combination of factors: her cultural alienation, an absent father figure and, interestingly, the fact that she is a woman. According to Koffi Kwahulé, when it comes to rebellion, women are indeed more likely to commit themselves fully to the cause:

Je ne sais pas si c'est de l'impétuosité, de l'inconscience, mais j'ai l'impression qu'une femme, dès qu'elle se décide à faire quelque chose, surtout quelque chose d'extrême, elle va aller au bout de la chose, surtout si c'est une adolescente. C'est pour cela que souvent mes personnages sont des femmes et des adolescentes, parce que c'est l'âge où on a tendance à aller au bout des choses, parce qu'on se provoque soi-même aussi, pour voir jusqu'où on peut aller. (Mouzet 188)

Whether we think of the hero archetype or of the structure of bildungsromans, heroes need to leave the comfort of their home in order to grow spiritually. Just as Christ had to leave his home at a young age in order to carry out his mission and redeem humanity (at about the same as the heroine), Bintou's rebellion causes her to leave her home in order to have the freedom to achieve her ideals and create a community that is not built on corruption. The exposition scene of the play reveals to the reader/audience a portrait of a teenager at war with parental authority. Bintou wants to go out with her friends and refuses to be told by her parents what she can or cannot do. As a result, there is a violent confrontation with her entire family. The more they try to stop her, the more she becomes defiant, and at one point even threatens her aunt with physical abuse when the latter verbally provokes her:

La tante: Ta seule chance, c'est de ne pas être ma fille. Moi, je t'aurais montré depuis longtemps à partir de quel mois on sème le riz.

Bintou : Que ton petit doigt touche le plus petit duvet de Bintou, et mes Lycaons – comme tu dis – viendront te traîner par la tignasse jusque dans la rue et exposeront ta nudité pour que chacun voie la gueule de la bête que tu caches sous tes pagnes.
(Kwahulé 7)

In Kwahulé's play, and in opposition to the Biblical narrative, violence and revolt are intrinsically linked. Interestingly, both intermingle with the motif of the body, thus pointing once again to similarities between Bintou and the figure of Christ. For both, the price of rebellion is physical violence and mutilation. Jesus's rebellion was primarily cultural and passive; for Bintou, however, rebellion manifests itself physically, in the clothing she wears. Her manner of dress is the means by which she advocates for liberation. The teenager has indeed turned her whole body into the primary site of her rebellion. She stopped wearing panties and chooses to wear only short skirts, with "cet habit qui [lui] couvre à peine le corps [...], [le] nombril [...] au vent" (Kwahulé 13). Although she is still very young, Bintou learned quickly that a woman's body can be both a prison and a locus of liberation. Conscious of the effect her clothes has on her uncle, she consciously provokes him so as to reveal his perversion: "Toi, oncle Drissa, je parie que tu as un truc qui te zigzague dans tous les coins de ta tête comme une bille de flipper. Et que tu voudrais que Bintou t'aide à l'arrêter, n'est-ce pas ?" (10). When the latter wants to become even more sexually aggressive and tries to physically abuse his 13-year-old niece, Bintou does not hesitate to confront him : "Recommence ce que tu viens de faire et je te vide de ton sang comme un porc d'abattoir. Allez, sors !" (Kwahulé 10). Confronted with perverse violence within the family unit, a place that should on the contrary be a safe haven,

Bintou cannot achieve liberation without resorting to violence. Ironically, extreme violence is her ticket to spiritual freedom as well.

Like Christ, Bintou is, both a victim of social constraints and a leader of fellow social outcasts. She heads a group of rebels, disciples who stand ready to die for their beliefs. Though silenced by the institutionalized apparatus of a patriarchal society, she is yet unwilling to surrender. Jesus's man/God antithesis is replaced by Bintou's identify crisis involving her African past and her French reality. Her Christ-like martyrdom derives from her inability to reconcile the opposing components of her identity. Her family believes the teenager's desire to embrace French culture (and her concomitant rejection of her African roots) must be the result of sorcery. Consequently, they conspire together and determine to have her genitalia excised so as to restore the natural order of things:

L'oncle: Ne voyez-vous donc pas que le temps presse? Il n'y a plus de doute: Bintou est malade de l'âme. Mais elle est jeune, et l'arbre peut encore être redressé. Nous devons dès maintenant appliquer ce que nous avons convenu, car il n'y a qu'à cette condition qu'elle peut être sauvée. (Kwahulé 13)

The man who holds Bintou's fate in his hands is her uncle. When she is accused of blasphemy after denouncing his actions to her mother and aunt, Bintou leaves shome. Unwilling to accept the alienating borders of an imposed identity, she recreates a home outside her home where her sense of alienation is replaced by absolute freedom. The three boys in Bintou's gang, called "les rois mages fous" by Petit Jean, a high school acquaintance, appear in the play as modern-day apostles. Scene after scene, they offer their respective account of their encounters with Bintou, thus transforming the play into a succession of modernized gospels:

Kelkhal: Samiagamal ne fait rien par haine; tout ce qu'elle fait, elle le fait par amour. Pour le lycée, c'était bien elle, même si elle ne l'a pas dit, et personne n'a vraiment cherché à savoir. On le savait, c'est tout: lorsqu'elle accomplit une bonne action – enfin ce que nous les Lycaons appelons une bonne action-, Samiagamal ne laisse pas transparaître la moindre étincelle de contentement. (Kwahulé 18)

The act of love performed by Bintou is ironically a decision to set the high school on fire in order to take revenge on the principal who reported to Kelkhal's parents that their son had skipped school. This unorthodox and violent vision of unconditional love reflects Kwahulé's own distinctive aesthetic posture which seeks to always move beyond traditional representations so as to free the black ethos from the alienating and constricting borders of imposed identities. It is perhaps akin to Jesus's ejection of the money-changers from the temple.

Bintou's sympathy for the marginalized also reflects Kwahulé's commitment to bringing the marginalized back to the center. Bintou's sympathy for the marginalized reflects Kwahulé's position and, her compassion for and friendship with outcasts enhances her portrayal as a Christ figure. Here, Kwahulé is perhaps taking his inspiration from Jesus's relationship with Mary Magdalene. As indicated above, however, her compassion, unlike Jesus's, condones violence when necessary. She reacts with childlike enthusiasm in front of the Christmas tree, when her friend Okoumé, kills a man just for having disrespected her:

Bintou n'arrêtait pas de se jeter à mon cou. Quand Bintou est contente, elle se jette à ton cou et tu te rappelles soudain que ce n'est qu'une gamine. Elle était tout excitée, je la sentais fière de moi. Elle caressait le neuf millimètres encore chaud en disant : Maintenant tu es devenu un homme, Okoumé, un vrai. (Kwahulé 20)

For Christ, self-sacrifice was necessary to bring salvation to the entire humanity. According to Christian doctrine, Jesus accepted that his sacrifice would result in redemption for sinners. Bintou, on the other hand, does not envision self-sacrifice in quite the same manner. She believes that extreme and externalized violence is the only way social revolt can be effectively accomplished. Disgusted with the values held by most of the adult society around her, the rebellious teen advocates resorting to violence. In fact, the rite of passage for acceptance into her gang involves beatings and murder. P'tit Jean, who desperately wanted to be part of the group, refuses to kill someone arguing that: "J'ai pas assez de haine en moi pour buter un type sans..." (Kwahulé 23). For Bintou, P'tit Jean's refusal provides proof that the boy is not rebellious enough to join their cohort:

Et tu veux devenir un Lycaon? Écoute-moi bien, P'tit Jean : on se découvre Lycaon quand on se réveille un matin avec, scotchée au fond de la gorge, la honte d'être un humain et l'envie de tout envoyer valdinguer, de brûler la cervelle au monde entier. Pour rien !... On se réveille Lycaon, on ne le devient pas. (Kwahulé 23)

As she moves toward adulthood, Bintou realizes that she is in fact completely alienated from the adult society that she despises. Adults lie, adults do not keep their promise, adults rape children; armed with these reasons, Bintou confronts them. She trained for months to become a belly dancer in Nenesse's bar, believing she would be fairly considered for the position. However, Nenesse later admits that he is afraid to hire her for fear of trouble with the law, and never really considered hiring her at all. An angry Bintou therefore decides to destroy his bar:

Nenesse : Déconne pas, Bintou ! Je me suis toujours comporté comme un père avec toi.

Bintou (*laissant tomber la bouteille*): Ne me parle plus jamais d'une telle débilité, Nenesse! Je n'ai plus besoin de père. Je n'ai plus besoin de père. Ecoute bien. Bintou a horreur de trois choses: qu'on lui parle de père, qu'on lui fasse perdre son temps et qu'on ne tienne pas ses promesses. Or, je me suis crevé le cul en déhanchements et tu n'as pas respecté ta parole. (Kwahulé 38-39)

Like the other authors in my study, Kwahulé engages his readers in the process of meaning-making, and it is only after the final scene, when the teenager dies during the excision ritual, that all the pieces in this gigantic jigsaw puzzle come together. It is at this moment that Bintou is finally revealed to the reader/audience as a figuration of Christ. As she lay dying from this botched ritual, she becomes, through the ritualized sacrifice of her body, the spokesperson for all victims silenced by patriarchal authority.⁵⁴ Her uncompromising rebellion against her corrupt society and the manner of her death cause readers and audience members to sympathize with the heroine and condemn those who sacrificed her in order to maintain the status quo. The representation of Bintou as a mutilated Christ figure reflects the aesthetic views of the author in that a core element of his artistic vision is the focus on the physical body. For Kwahulé, violence on the body (whether crucifixion, excision, rape, battering) is a central core of his aesthetic reflection. As he shared with me in an interview:

Peut-être aussi est-ce parce que j'ai tendance à penser que ce que j'écris, c'est d'abord le corps, et que le corps qui est vraiment en question, c'est le corps de la femme. Le théâtre, c'est d'abord une affaire de corps, et le corps de la femme a toujours été un enjeu. Aussi peut-être parce que je suis noir, et que la question noire, c'est d'abord une question de corps. Du coup, peut-être même que je comprends

⁵⁴ Patriarchy is defined by feminist theory as an unjust social system that enforces gender roles and may be oppressive to both men and women. In the case of Bintou, excision, although technically performed by a woman, is imposed on her because she acts like a man. It therefore reveals the enforcing of gender roles on Bintou and thus justifies my qualification of Bintou as a victim silenced by patriarchy.

mieux les femmes par ce biais-là. Je ne dis pas que les Noirs comprennent mieux, mais moi, en tant que Noir, je comprends mieux ce que vivent dans leur chair et leur esprit, les femmes, parce que c'est le même type de violence. (Personal interview)⁵⁵

A Christ-like figure, Bintou sees beyond appearances and is tragically aware of the reification of the body imposed on women by patriarchal authorities. While she managed for the most part to use her body to her advantage, the weight of patriarchy proved too strong for her to resist, and in the end she is unable to avoid being sacrificed by the very forces she opposed. This focus on the feminine also serves to feminize the Christ figure with whom Kwahulé chose to compare her.

IV.2 Aesthetic Figurations of Christ in Black Atlantic Visual Arts

IV.2.a *La Noire de*: An Aesthetic Analysis

I shall now turn my attention to a review of the film's aesthetic strategies. In the following pages, I will analyze the ways in which Sembène exploits the cinematic medium to metaphorically reveal to the audience Diouana's alienation, her martyrdom, her rebellion and her ultimate self-sacrifice, traits that I consider to be Christ-like attributes. Additionally, a strong focus on the ancestor motif provides an aesthetic link between Diouana's path and Christ's, a link established by some African and Caribbean (Haiti in particular) interpretations of Jesus's significance in their culture.

In *La Noire de*... the protagonist's cultural alienation is communicated by the opening/closure antinomy that constitutes a cinematic aesthetic on the part of Sembène. Diouana's life in Senegal is visually clarified with an alternating pattern of extreme long shots and long shots that suggest the author's desire to focus on the

⁵⁵ The author views excision as just another form of violence on the body and the choice of this motif further explains his characterization of Bintou as a Christ figure.

notion of open space in Africa , this in contrast to the protagonist's "enfermement" in France. In Antibes, at twilight, while everyone else is sleeping, Diouana finally has a few minutes to herself and she can be seen looking out the window at the darkness of the night. It is clear she bitterly realizes how inextricable is the trap into which she has been lured: "Madame me disait: 'Tu verras Diouana, il y a de beaux magasins en France.' Est-ce ce trou noir qui est la France?", she wonders (Sembène 00:25:35-00:25:45). Here, the landscape metaphorically reflects Diouana's despair: a travelling long shot captures the street lights and the city of Antibes now plunged in darkness. The internal focalization intensifies the audience's identification with Diouana. Seeing the landscape through her eyes, we see nothing but a black hole framed within the open window. We are thus able to grasp the extent of the protagonist's alienation. Moreover, rather than fulfill its typical function as an opening onto the world outside, the window here tragically becomes a suffocating feature that offers nothing but blackness and nothingness before the eyes.

Like Christ who became a symbol for humanity as a whole, Diouana is an allegorical representation of African slavery and colonial history. Sembène uses space effectively in the film as a metaphor that symbolically links his protagonist to her motherland (Africa) and its history. She thus becomes a symbol for all Africans affected by the effects of colonization. Again, my focus here is not on similarities between Diouana and the historical figure of Jesus but rather on commonly shared attributes that make her a Christ-like figure. The opening shot of the film, an extreme long shot, captures both the Senegalese coast of Dakar and the island of Gorée. Sembène draws upon metonymy to link Diouana's fate to that of Africa's citizens in general. The focus on Gorée links Diouana's ordeal to the collective experience of slavery. In this regard, Thomas writes:

Through the invocation of the island of Gorée, Sembène offers the reader an ominous metaphor that foreshadows Diouana's experience in France, but also engages in the sort of meditation I alluded to earlier as a mechanism for establishing a transhistorical connection to the question of slavery. [...] Diouana has secured the "legal" documents necessary to make the crossing—undertaken by sea rather than air, thus duplicating the mode of transportation of her slave ancestors. (127)

While in light of the Christian doctrine, "Jesus' death [is to be understood] as offering penal substitutionary atonement" for the sins of all humanity, Diouana's suicide/sacrifice functions as a revelation of the deadly exploitation of Africa and Africans by Western powers, an exploitation that started with slavery and unfortunately did not end with either the abolition of slavery or the independence of African nations (Taylor 1). Both executions are intended to silence oppositional voices critical of the status quo. Unlike Jesus Christ's martyrdom that takes place in public, in the open-air, Diouana's ordeal follows an opposite dynamic: her agony has no witnesses and results from and takes place in a private, enclosed space that gradually suffocates her.

Diouana's spiritual/physical imprisonment is notably brought to light by Sembène through her clothing. Her striped dress almost fuses with the interior of the apartment, rendering her imprisonment even more emphatic in that it renders her all but invisible. It almost seems that the protagonist is just part and parcel of the apartment's interior decoration.⁵⁶

Diouana's striped dress, which she wears proudly in Dakar, further emphasizes her confinement in France. [...] Diouana becomes "(con)fused with the house," as

⁵⁶ It is worth noting that the mask, a symbolic figuration of Diouana, is also considered by the French couple as a mere element of decoration. Sembène's identification of Diouana with the mask thus functions as a metaphor to illustrate Diouana's objectification in the white world.

Mireille Rosello cleverly suggests. Diouana's dress alternates between white and dark stripes and in this way she is nearly identical to the white and black tiled floor in the apartment's central room. (Rofheart 30)

Christ's suffering and martyrdom on the cross can be in some sense considered a suicide in that he chose deliberately not to defend himself or resist the punishment his enemies ordered because only by his death could humanity attain salvation. His silent suffering was essential for the salvation of others. Diouana's ordeal, like Christ's, reaches its apex with her death, in her case, by suicide. By killing herself in her mistress's bathtub, Diouana reclaims ownership of her physical body in a paroxysmal way. Her suicide demonstrates to her white employers that despite their ardent efforts, they were in the end unable to subdue or take control of her black body. Hers is a self-imposed death and therefore, unlike Christ's subservience to the will of God, her suicide, in contrast, is an act of rebellion.⁵⁷

With the characterization of Diouana, Sembène turns the African woman's body into a particularly efficient means of resistance. The Western reification of the black body is an attempt to transform physicality into a site of conquest and imprisonment for black individuals. Here, however, the very site of their oppression, the physical body, becomes, ironically, the locus of their ultimate freedom and their ability to debunk Western stereotypes regarding the black ethos. Indeed, one of the the persistent Western stereotypes imposed on black women is that of hypersexuality. In *La Noire de...*, this clichéd prejudice is thwarted by the motif of self-destruction and, in a sarcastic wink to her white employers, Diouana is able to imprison her nude

⁵⁷ Considering suicide as an act of rebellion is of course very controversial. I will, in this regard, refer to Igbo landing as an element of analogy. In 1803, on St Simons Island, a group Igbo slaves committed mass suicide to escape slavery and chose to drown in the sea rather than be forced to live as slaves. This mass suicide of Igbo captives is for many African Americans perceived as the ultimate act of resistance. In the same manner, I read Diouana's suicide as the ultimate act of resistance of someone who viscerally refused to be enslaved.

image in the eyes of her persecutors. The death of this nude Venus constitutes the death of the stereotype as well in that she chose self-denial over sexual gratification. Their voyeuristic gaze of her nude body renders them culpable of the very perversions they imposed on Africans.

Although Diouana is undoubtedly a victim of (post)colonial exploitation, she is ultimately a rebel. Rather than passively accept her tragic fate, she deploys a wealth of imaginative strategies to combat her alienation and express her discontent with the way she is being treated by her white employers. Kalisa writes that:

As Diouana's awareness of race and gender develops, the descent toward self-destruction intensifies, as does the conflict between Diouana and Madame. Diouana starts to show signs of mental withdrawal, but Madame still refuses to let her go outside. She goes as far as to starve Diouana, who, in return, passively resists her bosses' domination by refusing to perform her work. The more Diouana understands her position as a black maid, the more she strips of Western clothes and objects. Eventually, she refuses to eat, and during this hunger strike, she goes back to her African close and natural hair. Right before she commits suicide, Diouana takes off all her clothes and puts the wig and European clothes away. [...] As the story unfolds, Diouana's complex psychological alienation grows to the point of self-erasure. (64)

The protagonist's complete alienation is illustrated by Sembène through the trope of silence that is in striking contrast with the verbal logorrhea of her inner voice. The more Diouana plunges into voluntary mutism, the more frantic her inner voice becomes. Just before her suicide, the anaphora *jamais plus* hammered out by Diouana's inner-voice contributes to implanting in the audience's mind an anxious premonition of something dreadful to come:

Plus jamais Madame me dira quelque chose. Jamais plus Madame me dira : “Diouana, fais du café !” Jamais plus : “Diouana, prépare-nous du riz !” Jamais plus : “Diouana, enlève tes chaussures !” Jamais plus : “Diouana, lave la chemise de Monsieur.” Jamais plus : « Diouana, tu es une fainéante.” Jamais je ne serai esclave. J’étais pas venue en France pour le tablier et l’argent. Jamais plus Madame ne me verra. Jamais plus elle ne me dira quelque chose. Jamais plus de Diouana. Jamais plus je ne les verrai moi aussi. (Sembène 00:47:06-00:48:03)

The suicide scene that follows contains an alternation of cut-in shots that symbolically highlight Diouana’s reification/alienation. The cut-in alternatively focuses on the bathroom door, the bathroom wall, Diouana’s nightgown, the bathtub and Diouana’s hand that can be seen dropping the razor, the bloody razor, a glimpse of Diouana’s bloody, lifeless body and her packed suitcase. These objects in question move quickly in and out of view, and never appear completely on the screen, thus conveying Sembène’s strategy of telling Diouana’s story through the use of symbols, as might a modern-day griot. The bathroom door and wall underscore Diouana’s imprisonment; her nightgown is an ironic jab at Madame who wanted Diouana to hide her body because she was “only” a maid; the bloody bathtub constitutes a final act of hyperbolic rebellion in that it is Madame who will now be left with the task of cleaning the bathtub, effecting a role reversal in that now the master will be forced to be a maid to the maid; the razor and Diouana’s lifeless body communicate the metonymic image of the colonizer and the concomitant colonial violence; Diouana’s suitcase points to the uprooting (both physical or spiritual) that resulted from the encounter between Europe and Africa. The cinematic images exploited by Sembène become metaphors that deliver to the audience subtle hints of the author’s argument. Just as in a typical storytelling episode, the audience is invited to be an active participant of the meaning-making process. The proliferation of symbols also adds to

the dreamlike atmosphere that characterizes *La Noire de...* A. O. Scott writes in this regard that:

Mr. Sembène, working with the French cinematographer Christian Lacoste and a small, nonprofessional cast, had the ingenuity -- the vision -- to turn material limitations to artistic advantage. The unsynchronized dialogue, which seems to float above the heads of the characters rather than emerging from their mouths, gives the action a dreamlike quality and infuses an objectively grim, realistic story with poetry and longing. (cf. Work Cited)

Sembène's focus on inanimate objects contribute to an enhancement of the film's poetic qualities. The motif of the mask is, to this extent, particularly revealing. Upon the realization that she has become Madame's slave, Diouana looks into the mask's eyes and the object takes her on a spiritual journey back to Africa as she wonders, "Que doit-on penser de moi à Dakar? Diouana est heureuse en France... que je vis bien?" (Sembène 00:25:10-00:25:17). The mask indicates her displacement, her inability to help her people, analogous to Jesus's inability to perform miracles once his people had lost their faith.

The object metaphorically links Diouana to her African origins. The more she misses Africa, the more she becomes attached to the object. The African mask also evokes the "veil" invoked by W.E.B. Du Bois, "The Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world,—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets see himself through the revelation of the other world" (7). Alone in France, Diouana's self-consciousness becomes distorted, and she sees herself with a truncated second-sight that can only allow her to see herself through the eyes of the Other. Throughout the alienation process, her

identity gradually fuses with that of the mask, an African artefact displaced into an alienating white world, affixed to the wall, immobilized and surrounded by whiteness.

The fusion between Diouana and the mask functions in *La Noire de...* as an extended metaphor. The last scene of the movie in fact provides the final element of this metaphor. When Diouana dies, Monsieur brings the mask back to Senegal. As Barlet points out:

Le patron vient rendre le masque à sa famille. Le frère de Diouana se l'applique sur le visage et poursuit le patron pour le faire fuir du quartier. Devenu le symbole de l'africanité de Diouana, il revêt, comme l'indique Sembène, "une valeur de protestation politique et de résistance culturelle." (170)

Through her death, Diouana has become an ancestor figure. As Simeon Abiodun Ige writes:

Generally speaking, the ancestors are the deceased who were once members of the social group of a clan. As J.S. Mbiti rightly suggested, there are two categories of the dead: those who are still within memory or the departed of up to five generations called the living –dead, and those who can hardly be remembered again by the living. This distinction we must say does not apply to all Africans an ancestor is an ancestor whether within memory or not. For instance, Nigerians use the same word to include all the dead. They believe that they belong to the same group and are all relevant in the affairs of the living. Hence, the Yoruba call them Baba – nla meaning (the great fathers) the Igalas call them Okwoikwo meaning the great parents (males and females) the Igbo call them ndicie, meaning those of old, the Urhobo call them Eriwi meaning the dead fathers and mothers. (26-27)

It should be noted that, as Igor Kopytoff points out, "not all but only certain dead with particular structural positions are worshipped as ancestors" (129). Diouana

is therefore not an “ancestor” who is worshipped. But as a deceased, she nevertheless, following Ige’s and Mbiti’s definition of the living-dead, becomes a living-dead, thereby aligning her with some African and Afro-Caribbean conceptions of Jesus. In African folklore, masks are said to carry the spirits of the ancestors, and thus when the mask returns to Senegal, Diouana also metaphorically returns to Africa. When Diouana’s brother chases after Monsieur with the mask, it could indeed be argued that the mask is a figuration of Diouana haunting her former employer. Diouana’s symbolic return to Senegal makes her a mythic figuration of the flying African, but rather than exemplify shape-shifting as a bird, she was transformed into a mask. Katherine Thorsteinson writes that:

Traditionally, the Flying African myth has reflected the desire for freedom and cross-Atlantic return shared by generations of African descendants who inherited the trauma of forced displacement and enslavement throughout the Americas. Stories about New World slaves who could fly back to Africa over the encumbering sea and escape slavery have permeated black popular culture and sacred ritual. This myth was created under the painful conditions of the New World, reflecting the desires for freedom, cross-Atlantic return, and even death shared by enslaved Africans and their descendants. (259)

Although it may be argued that the reading of Diouana as a flying African is irrelevant to the extent that the protagonist is Senegalese and has never set foot in Americas, several elements are of crucial importance here: first, through the motif of the island of Gorée and Diouana’s claim, “Jamais je ne serai une esclave”, both indicate that Sembène clearly linked Diouana’s fate to that of African slaves, second in light of the definition of the Black Atlantic I follow and given the complexity of cultural exchanges that took place in this space, Black Atlantic mythical archetypes

could help us throw a new light on our understanding of the process of culture making in this cultural matrix (Sembène 00:47:39-00:47:40). This ironic reversal of the trope of the flying African is perhaps a reflection of Sembène's weariness of African religious practices that he considered to be as dangerous as Christianity and Islam. Although the protagonist's suicide might not be deemed Christ-like sacrifice if it is seen as a gesture of self-liberation rather than one intended to redeem others, when we examine the impact of her death (an exemplary gesture of African resistance), she can indeed be characterized as a Savior-figure for her people.

Through Diouana's narrative, Sembène suggests that, contrary to what Western stereotypes may lead us to believe (that slaves did little to oppose their victimization status), Africans were clearly more than just passive victims of white aggression, and in fact, they found numerous ways to resist their oppression and enslavement. The film offers evidence of their ability to find ways to overcome the silence of their muted voices, to fight for their right to choose inaction or passive aggression as a political stance, and to ironically liberate themselves within the very constricting borders of their imposed identities.

IV.2.b *Bintou*: An Aesthetic Analysis

I shall now turn to my study of the play's aesthetic strategies. In the following pages, I will analyze the ways in which Kwahulé exploits the theatrical genre to metaphorically reveal to the audience Bintou's Christ-like characterization. I will study the strategies used by the author to convey Bintou's sense of alienation, rebellion, martyrdom, and her ultimate sacrifice through the writing process.

From the exposition scene, we are provided with a sense of Bintou's extreme alienation. The teenager is initially spoken of, rather than spoken to. The very first

word of the play is interestingly “Bintou!” and it is shouted out by her mother. The chorus then enters the stage, followed by Bintou herself who remains silent. The chorus is composed of three teenage girls holding a mirror and a make-up case; they present an image of Bintou to the reader/audience:

Bintou
 Bintou Bintou
 Bintou tête de gang
 Petite amazone de cité
 La cité je n’aimais pas
 L’école je n’aimais pas
 La loi du père je n’aimais pas
 Bintou
 Bintou Bintou
 Bintou n’aimait que trois choses au monde
 Son gang
 Que sa tante appelait “les Lycaons”
 Son nombril autour duquel elle dansait
 Son couteau
 Que lui avait offert Manu (Kwahulé 5)

Here, the anaphora “Bintou” hammered out by the chorus hints at Bintou’s reification. She is the object of other people’s discourse/projections. Language turns the eponymous heroine into an object and although the reader/audience is still unaware of it at this stage of the narrative, the syntax in the exposition scene serves as a metaphor for Bintou’s estrangement. In this exposition scene, the alternation between third and first person narrative already hints at her fragmented identity. Unable to be the “I” she would like to be, and refusing to be the “she” they want her

to be, Bintou is condemned to oscillate within an agonizing in-between. The multiple voices of the chorus who chant Bintou's narrative become the symbolic embodiment of the teenager's fragmented identity.

Bintou's discursive rendering also align her with the Christ figure. Like Christ whose life we know only because of testimonials, Bintou does not tell her own story. Her story is instead told by the other characters of the play. Bintou is therefore successively "othered :"

Bintou qui était "bonne à rien"

Comme disait sa mère

Bintou qui n'était "bonne qu'à blasphémer"

Comme disait son oncle

Bintou "la dépravée"

Comme disait sa tante (Kwahulé 6)

Like Christ, Bintou recruits and baptizes her followers, "'Désormais, tu t'appelleras Kelkhal. Suis-nous.' C'est ainsi que je suis devenu Lycaon," confesses Kader (Kwahulé 17). Okoumé has earned the nickname Blackout after murdering someone, and Manu, Bintou's boyfriend is her "envoûtement." Like modern apostles, the three boys consecutively recount their gospels, i.e. the story of their encounter with Bintou. Okoumé recalls his first encounter with Bintou. She was his younger sister's friend and, one day, followed him in the street because she wanted to see his gun:

Blakout: Je l'ai pas sur moi, que je lui dis. Et puis, j'aime pas les petites filles qui me suivent. Et la voilà qui s'emballe, qui parle, qui parle, qui parle... blablablablaba...blablablablaba... que des paroles de grandes personnes. A la fin, elle

me dit – et ça, ça m'a fait rigoler, tu vois – elle me dit : Bintou ne suit personne, c'est toi qui suis Bintou. (Kwahulé 16)

Kwahulé gives us a hint of Bintou's regal/Messianic dimension in the language used by the protagonist to talk about herself. She interestingly never talks about herself using the pronoun "I", but uses the third person instead. Blackout's comment on the way she expresses herself is an indication that Bintou is like no other, that there is something special about her. But this third person referentiality could also be read as a proof of her alienation/reification. Her very first statement regarding her identity is, surprisingly, cast in the negative, "C'est que je ne suis pas mon père" (Kwahulé 7). Instead of asserting who she is, Bintou feels the need to deny being someone else. This suggests that the teenager's martyrdom results from the desire to fight against a series of imposed identities, thus linking Bintou's narrative to that of individuals in the Black Atlantic and beyond. All nations that historically struggled against oppressive western powers had to deal with the same fragmentary process in regard to identity formation. Postcolonial beings come to self-understanding through the negation of Western stereotypes that have been imposed on them as a result of colonial history. Becoming the agent "I" implies the necessity of leaving behind the third person "Other."

In *Bintou*, when violence reaches its paroxysm, language loses its ability to communicate with the world. When words fail, music thus becomes the only efficient medium to express the horror of the world. It will be noted that music has always played a vital role in the black experience. As Yemisi Jimoh puts it, "music presents the life—or, in other words, the joys, prayers, and complaints—of black people" (6). For Kwahulé, improvisation, syncopated rhythms and the unlimited variety of possibilities that Jazz offers make it the ideal language to express the fragmented

nature of contemporary identities, whether black or white. After Bintou dies during the excision ritual, Kwahulé's syncopated writing reflects the alienation of individuals and the precariousness of human life: "Tout ce sang. Je ne savais pas que j'avais autant de sang en moi... [...] Oiseau...cercle...ligne...point...Je suis...je suis...je suis..." (Kwahulé 45-46). Like Christ who, through metonymy, is linked inextricably to the blood he shed on the cross, Bintou, on the verge of death, links her identity to blood; she becomes blood. Both a source of life and death, both a source of empowerment and disempowerment, the blood motif metaphorizes, in Kwahulé's writing, the violence of modernity and the complexity of modern identities threatened with cultural alienation because of the ontological impossibility of reconciling the dichotomies of their existence.

Like many artists in the Black Atlantic, Koffi Kwahulé perceives the black experience as a collective experience. Kwahulé's aesthetic is a mixture of writing back (to the former Empire) and of the concept of "signifying" coined by African American scholar Ralph Ellison Jr. According to Ellison, black works of art dialogue with one another following a principle of "repetition with revision." He notes, "Jazz is the classical music of the twentieth-century American culture, and as I state in this book, it is based on the art of riffing, on repetition and revision, the very definition of signifying in the tradition" (xxx). For Kwahulé, this signifying includes his interaction with American culture. Because of the role American films and music had on Kwahulé, his work can be read as an illustration of Ellison's signifying concept. He grew up watching Hollywood movies in movie theatres in Africa. It is worth noting that American music was also a fundamental component in his upbringing. A taste for blues, and later jazz, profoundly influenced his writing. American culture therefore

significantly shaped Kwahulé's aesthetic. In the interview he gave me in Paris, he said:

Avant, j'écrivais lentement, mais après *Bintou*, je me suis demandé pourquoi je faisais des plans. J'ai voulu faire comme les musiciens de jazz qui arrivent sans même avoir répété: ils se mettent au travail, ils se trompent et se reprennent, mais la chose doit se passer. Comme je suis paresseux, la chose me convenait mieux parce que je n'avais plus à faire de plans. Auparavant, mon plan était là et, à la limite, je le remplissais. Par la suite, je me suis rendu compte que l'improvisation correspondait mieux ma personnalité.[...] Je veux me mettre dans l'énergie dans laquelle se met un musicien de jazz quand il joue. Il a très peu de temps, encore moins de temps que moi, mais ça doit être prêt. En ce qui me concerne, évidemment ce n'est pas d'un trait, mais je me laisse moins de possibilités pour revenir sur les choses. Le premier jet pourrait être joué comme ça dès qu'il est fait, mais il y a aussi un plaisir à retravailler, à affiner les choses. (Mouzet 191-192)

The jazzy tones of his aesthetic contribute to the elaboration of a transnational theatre that moves beyond the restricting borders of conventional labels, such as African, black, francophone, postcolonial etc. Labels which the author considers far too restrictive to be able to convey the complexity of contemporary identities. Throughout his work, Kwahulé therefore "signifies" his belonging to the dramaturgy of the whole world; references to American culture serve as symbols of the cultural ties that unite him with his *frères de son*. While this interculturality is expressed through language, black American culture also shapes his aesthetic beyond the use of rhetoric. When words are unable to communicate his point, music makes up for the aporetic nature of language. For Kwahulé, jazz audibly renders the splitting of contemporary identities: "le jazz comme une résonance, celle de cette pluralité des voix qui participe du chaos de l'expérience migratoire," writes Sylvie Chalaye

(2009 :8). Beyond constituting a mere aesthetic artifice, music has always played a fundamental role for the communities of the Black Atlantic:

Historically, among the many African oral cultures, the ancient tradition of singing the lives of the people was given a special and valued designation [...] The way in which the Spirituals articulate this lived reality is consistent with Douglass's statement that music presents the life—or, in other words, the joys, prayers, and complaints—of black people. (Jimoh 6)

In *Bintou*, when the teenager dies from an excision ritual, the syncopated rhythm of Kwahulé's writing reflects the destruction of the individual and the fragility that characterizes human life:

Il est enfin venu
 Mon grand oiseau écarlate aux ailes d'or
 Mon sang est un grand oiseau
 Qui me porte et m'emporte sur ses ailes de feu
 Je suis le grand oiseau
 Qui s'enfonce dans l'attente sanglante du ciel
 S'engouffre en moi l'impatience bandée du vide
 Je suis le grand oiseau rouge
 Oiseau...cercle...ligne...point...
 Je suis...je suis...je suis... (Kwahulé 46)

Through the intermediary of repetition, the great bird becomes a riff jazzy, the variations of which allow the author to depict a sense of the multiple faces of death via a language that is both verbal and non-verbal. The great journey becomes, under Kwahulé's quill, the copulation of a majestic bird with the sky, a coitus that eventually pierces and possesses Bintou. At first referred to in the grammatical third

person, the big bird semantically reflects alterity. But when death takes possession of Bintou, the first-person “I” evicts and supplants the third person usage because Bintou and death are now one. As her blood drips from her body, Bintou, who was essentially always spoken of, regains, through death, the ability to express herself by the repetition of her assertion of identity that closes the play. While Descartes claimed, “Cogito ergo sum” (I think therefore I am), Bintou becomes the poetic illustration of the ironic reversal to this claim: “I die therefore I am.”

IV.3 The Political Dimension of Black Atlantic Visual Arts

IV.3.a *La Noire de* and its socio-political dimensions

Sembène Ousmane’s professional career is extraordinarily eclectic. “Tirailleur sénégalais” in 1942 at age 19, he worked as a docker in Marseille, started his artistic career as a writer, and became a filmmaker at 40 after having studied cinema in Moscow. Sembène’s itinerary and personal upbringing in colonial Senegal undoubtedly contributed to the inherently political dimension of his work. *La Noire de...* is an adaptation of a short-story bearing the same title and published in Sembène’s short-story volume *Voltaïque* in 1962. It was the first full-length feature film realized by an African. Sembène is, in this regard, considered as being the “father of African cinema.” Sembène’s change of career was motivated by his perception of art as being an educational platform for the masses. As Olivier Barlet points out:

[C]onscient du peu d’impact de la littérature en Afrique, Sembène se tourne, lorsque le Sénégal accède à l’indépendance, vers le cinéma : “Il constitue un moyen d’action politique, mais je tiens à ajouter que, d’une part, je ne veux pas faire un cinéma de pancartes et que, d’autre part, je ne pense pas qu’il soit possible de changer une

situation donnée avec un seul film. (...) J'aime Brecht et j'essaie de m'inspirer de son exemple." (28)

Aware of the fact that his books would not reach his desired audience (the poor and the illiterate in Senegal), Sembène decided to turn to cinema and clearly embraced the idea that the primary role of filmmaker to educate his people. "Sembène famously referred to film as an *école du soir* [night school] that could educate the (illiterate) Senegalese populace" (Rofheart 23). Yet, in regard to *La Noire de...*, his didactic motivation to help his people was called into question by critics because the film was in French, and consequently, it limited the comprehension of most Senegalese people. In response to this criticism, it is important to note that Sembène had little choice concerning the language of the film since it was produced by French producers and shooting it in French was a condition of its very existence. Furthermore, although language represents a hermetic barrier preventing the comprehension of books, cinema's power of suggestion is such that it can transcend by the suggestive power of the image most linguistic obstacles. That is why:

From the inception of African cinema, the continent's filmmakers viewed the motion picture industry as a vital component of the social, political, economic, and cultural development of their societies as they emerged from the yoke of colonial rule. Film became central to the thinking of cultural activists when they were seeking a vehicle that could help overcome decades of negative cultural representations of Africa and Africans and thereby instill a new, positive identity among their people in a multilingual environment where most the population was illiterate. Beyond being attracted to the aesthetic imprimatur of film, the earliest African filmmakers viewed the establishment of an African cinema as an essential means to assist in the material regeneration of their societies. (Genova 2-3)

Sembène's later works, realized in Wolof with subtitles in French or English, demonstrate his active involvement in trying to bring African cinema closer to his people. In *La Noire de...*, on her way back home, Diouana crosses paths with several people, all socio-economic victims of a colonial regime that is based on inequality. The wait and the immobility of poor workers is a major motif of Sembène's political reflections.⁵⁸ Every morning, Diouana, along with a dozen other women, sits on the square pavements "waiting for providence" as she depicts it. In the film, the Whites enjoy all the things denied to the masses: they are employed and live lavishly in modern apartment buildings while the vast majority of Senegalese people struggle with unemployment or underemployment and live in shabby houses with tin roofs. Waiting reveals a sense of tragic hope. While people wait in the streets in hopes of being hired, they are still doing something. Their immobility is a paradoxical one for the wait takes place in the public sphere and therefore communicates an inner will to be active in their job hunt. Poor workers spend their days waiting in the hopes of finding a job. They wait in the hopes of being able to replace a worker who might have been injured, or they wait to help the fishermen who return from the sea. Traditionally, these *travailleurs bénévoles* help the fishermen unload their boats in exchange for a fish or a portion of fish.

In *La Noire de...*, the mass's immobility is a foil for Diouana's French employer. The people's lack of movement is a tragic consequence of their socio-economic struggle; it is not a deliberate choice, but rather something to be endured. The white couple's immobility—Madame smoking her cigarette on the couch while Diouana cleans the apartment or Monsieur taking an afternoon nap after having had too much wine for lunch—is also a reflection of their socio-economic situation. But

⁵⁸ On this subject, see his documentary *Dakar* realized in 1969. www.youtube.com/watch?v=TCwIeORtI1Y&t=531s

instead of being the result of a struggle, it is the expression of a middle-class European's idleness that reveals the exploitation of third-world poor workers who enable their lavish and leisurely lifestyle.

Several scenes are shot in real time thus conveying an impression of *lenteur* that adds to the extent of Diouana's Christ-like martyrdom. Diouana's cleaning of the Antibes apartment is shot in real time. When she does the bed, the dishes, and the laundry, the whole ordeal is shot in real time. The African music playing in the background underscores her muteness. An alternation of close-ups focusing on the dishes or the hanging laundry emphasizes the alienating nature of her chores. Long shots and close-ups of Diouana cleaning the house become the symbolic embodiment of her alienation: never-ending manual labor and a complete lack of communication. The only sense of self she manages to maintain is related to her chores: when she cleans the bathroom mirror, a reverse close-up of her face metaphorizes Diouana's progressive loss of identity. The more time she spends cleaning and polishing the furniture, the more she becomes a mirror image of herself, an empty shell that resembles Diouana physically but who internally dying.

Although Sembène drew his inspiration from an actual *fait divers*, he weaves Diouana's story within the larger colonial history of Africa. In this regard, the evocation of the island of Gorée clearly links the protagonist's fate to that of the slaves that were taken from the West African coasts to be forcibly brought in the New World. In choosing to narrate the story of an African migrant in search of a promised land, ironically interpreted as the colonizer's nation, Sembène makes Diouana the emblematic victim of a new form of slavery: exploited migrant workers. As Thomas suggests:

While the slave crossing is of course forced, Diouana's is not entirely "voluntary," given economic imperatives and the power of the lure toward France that has resulted from colonial indoctrination and that is recuperated and embraced by colonial subjects. Furthermore, Diouana's capacity to arrive at a carefully formulated decision is voided by the illusionary nature of her representation of France. (128)

The powerful lure of the colonizing country is indeed one of the major characteristics of both colonialism and neocolonialism and it is the central motif in *La Noire de...* Sembène uses both aesthetic and linguistic strategies to underscore this critical motif. Madame arrives on the square from behind those waiting for employment: "Elle était venue par derrière, elle passa devant nous, personne ne pouvait voir ses yeux. Elle nous regarda à tour de rôle. Nous avons compris qu'elle cherchait une bonne" (Sembène 00:15:19-00:15:36). Madame, wearing a work suit, her eyes hidden behind dark sunglasses, appears as a metaphoric embodiment of the colonial enterprise. Her sneak arrival suggests deception. She does not say a word while looking for someone to be her next maid. The lack of communication turns the women into mere objects of consumption, thus reflecting Sembène's criticism of the West's exploitation of Africa. Wearing high heels, her standing position contrasts significantly with the sitting position of the Senegalese women. Refusing to engage in any form of peer-to-peer communication, Madame almost looks as if she were window-shopping. Madame's air of disdain and superiority is a foil to the women's excitement, thus suggesting the unbalanced nature of the power struggle between Africa and the West. Through the narrative of Diouana's life and death, Sembène articulates his criticism of neocolonial forms of domination that continued to alienate Africa after the independence.

IV.3.b *Bintou* and Socio-Political reality

Born in the Ivory Coast, Koffi Kwahulé nevertheless rejects the label of “African author.” As he underscores in his interview with Gilles Mouëllic:

Ce que les gens croient être un théâtre africain est une chose déjà morte. C’est une manière de réduire le Noir à l’épaisseur de ses propres fantasmes, de le fixer dans l’être, de lui refuser le devenir. Mon écriture n’est pas africaine, elle ne porte que ma propre expérience, et elle est irremplaçable. Je ne peux témoigner que de mon histoire, avec ses failles et ses faiblesses. [...] On ne peut pas figer les Noirs en général et les Africains en particulier dans une manifestation passée d’eux-mêmes. (67)

The opposition being/becoming highlighted by Kwahulé’s arguments is essential for an understanding of the paradox that underpins the black experience of modernity. W.E.B Dubois evoked this sense of “double-consciousness: or the impossibility for individuals in the Black Atlantic to exist without always taking into account the destructive gaze of the Other:

Dans son mouvement vers l’ailleurs, Koffi Kwahulé revêt l’image d’un auteur transdisciplinaire qui ne se laisse pas circonscrire. Son identité artistique passe ainsi du dramaturge romancier essayiste à un écrivain “Jazzman.” L’Ivoirien et son écriture franchissent à travers l’altérité, les barrières dressées par le regard de l’autre de même que les limites imposées par la codification des genres littéraires. (Gbouablé 6)

Just like the word “Negro”—a denigrating term used by the West to imprison black individuals in an alienating identity—, Africa and African arts have been the object of a variety of Western fantasies, alternatively suggesting savagery, exoticism, hyper-sexualization and all sorts of other impulses that were repressed in Western societies. As Achille Mbembe writes : “L’Afrique est cette médiation grâce à laquelle

l'Occident accède à son propre inconscient et rend publiquement compte de sa subjectivité" (11). Following Mbembe's argument, it could be stated that Africa (as a singular and uniform entity) is also a Western fantasy. It is precisely this (false) idea of Africa and Africans that Kwahulé intends to challenge throughout his work. As Dominique Traoré writes:

C'est dire que l'Afrique avec laquelle l'auteur rompt par le canal du théâtre est l'« Afrique des évidences », celle des stéréotypes. Cette rupture ne saurait se lire uniquement à travers l'exil de l'écrivain en Europe, notamment en France. Elle est d'abord et avant tout philosophique et psychologique, car elle appelle nécessairement une véritable introspection. Quitter l'Afrique, celle des colonies, des épopées et des désillusions pour en réinventer une autre qui prendrait rendez-vous avec l'avenir en allant à la rencontre des autres continents, tel semble être le leitmotiv chez Koffi Kwahulé. (20)

Writing and politics are consequently logically linked in Kwahulé's work. The biblical intertextuality is, in his work, part of a broader project that aims at debunking a variety of Western stereotypes in order to invite literary otherness and *ailleurs* into the sphere of the known, to create an in-between that is both unsettling and welcoming, a space in which readers, audience and author are certain of only one thing: that nothing can be taken for granted, that nothing is what it seems and that there is no truth beside the abstract Truth that we, mere humans, may never reach.

Kwahulé's refusal to be labelled an "African" writer is intended to counter the West's multiple attempts to circumscribe black identities within a false and fixed immutability. This, of course, has nothing to do with the rejection of his Africanity, of which he is quite proud : "Je sais au plus profond de moi que ce que j'écris, quelle que soit la forme que ça prend, est africain. Moi je me revendique d'abord de l'Afrique.

Parce que je sais qu'on a des différences, mais nos ressemblances sont plus profondes" (Kokonbo 1036). If he argues against the ideological imprisonment of imposed identities, it is first and foremost to advocate his right to not be defined by anyone else. Although he is and feels African, he simply refuses to be imprisoned in a circumscribed identity whether it be African, or Francophone, or Black etc., he advocates for humanity above and beyond fixed conceptions of identity. Kwahulé sees himself first and foremost a human being:

On te pose une limite : tu commences là et tu finis là, mais il faut comprendre que tu n'es pas une limite. Il y a eu un moment comme ça où les gens voulaient que je parle des Noirs, et puis ces gens-là se sont fatigués avant moi. Ils ont vu que je ne changerai pas, que je continuerai à écrire du théâtre comme ça et ils ont fini par l'accepter. Tu peux parler de ce que tu as envie de faire autrement qu'en exhibant des Noirs ou des Blancs : exhibe des êtres humains, point. Le danger, c'est de s'enfermer dans une identité circonscrite. (Mouzet, 193)

This principle results in the need to blur all certitudes that can isolate and alienate individuals, especially when these certitudes are used to justify a power hierarchy based on differences. For Kwahulé, danger and an encounter with the unexpected are the surest means to effect change:

A la limite, je veux quelque chose de dangereux. Le danger, c'est de brouiller les limites que l'on essaye de fabriquer autour de toi. Brouiller les limites, c'est faire peur. Mais, si on délimite clairement en disant : « Moi, voilà mon espace. Je suis Noir et je fais ceci cela. », c'est du gâteau, parce que c'est justement ce qu'on attend de toi. L'attitude dangereuse, c'est de mélanger tellement les choses qu'à un moment donné chacun ne sache plus ni où il commence ni où il finit. [...] Les Noirs, d'une manière

générale, sont obligés de faire des actes dangereux. Il leur faut trouver le moyen de trouver comment bousculer les choses. (Mouzet, personal interview)

For artists in the Black Atlantic, writing necessarily implies rewriting, because the walls of identity imprisoning them must be knocked down. It is therefore essential for these writers to insist on the fantastic and erroneous nature of any form of essentialism, but also to reappropriate a space in history that the West has stolen. For Sylvie Chalaye, the exchanges between Africa and the Western world were marked by thievery; with the slave trade, it might be argued that the first global space was the human body. This intrinsic dimension of the black experience(s) of modernity puts corporeality at the center of Kwahulé's political reflection, "Le corps noir, dans l'écartèlement symbolique du commerce triangulaire, est le premier espace mondialisé. Un corps prémoderne. La dispersion ontologique du corps noir annonce la fragmentation du corps de l'homme contemporain" (Chalaye 2004 :13).

Given Kwahulé's interest in the motif of the body, it is not surprising to discover that the figure of Christ triggers an artistic interest. In *Bintou*, the physical body establishes the locus of the protagonist's ordeal. Like Jesus's, Bintou's body becomes a site of revelation, revealing her spiritual exile, the external sign of an inner expatriation that eventually results in her complete alienation. Bintou is the collateral victim of an exile she has not chosen. Raised within the cold concrete walls of the projects, she wants to be free to embrace the multiculturalism that flourishes in *banlieue* culture, but her African family perceives her assimilation goal to be the work of the devil. In order to restore what they perceive as "the natural order of things," they will subject the teenager to an "initiatory journey," to quote Fanny Le Guen, a spiritual journey that will culminate not with her "conversion" but with a ritual sacrifice, the fate reserved for all those who speak truth to power. Killed and buried in

the family's apartment so as to not attract the neighbors' attention, Bintou is erased from the surface of the earth. Because the teenager has been rendered voiceless and invisible by the sharp edges of an excising patriarchy, it is the chorus, a dramaturgical illustration of Bintou's fragmented identity, who is left in charge of *le devoir de mémoire*. And just as in in *La Noire de...*, when Diouana's brother's wearing of the African mask functions as a metaphor for the guilt of her white employer and the truncated nature of imposed identities, in *Bintou*, the chorus is endowed with the same revelatory function. In the closing scene, the chorus chases Bintou's uncle from the scene, thus metaphorizing through the heaviness of silence his guilty consciousness:

L'oncle: Qui êtes vous? (*Silence*) Depuis quand êtes-vous entrées? (*Silence*)
 Qu'avez-vous vu? (*Silence*) Qui êtes-vous? Des amies de Bintou? (*Comme pris de panique devant le silence du choeur*) Si vous êtes des amies de Bintou, Bintou n'est plus là. Elle est retournée au pays. Chez nous. Mais elle reviendra. Un mois. Le temps de connaître toute la famille et elle sera de retour. (*Silence*) Mais parlez, dites quelque chose! Qui êtes-vous et que me voulez-vous? (*Silence*) [...] Mais cessez donc de me suivre! (Kwahulé 46-47)

Just like jazz and music become agents in the process of meaning-making when words fail to fulfill their function of telling the world, silence is here more powerful than language. The revelation that takes place is one of visual presence, "une présence au monde," that is perfectly illustrated through the theatrical medium. Through Bintou's death, language loses all its explanatory functions, and words lost their revelatory purpose for what is at stake here goes far beyond the relation between signifier and signified. Seemingly voiceless and invisible, Bintou paradoxically remains precisely because of the silence her death generates. Muted by death, Bintou's memory becomes the very site of a more potent revelation. Furthermore,

Bintou's fate suggests that, in spite of the fact that the victims of slavery and colonization have seemingly been silenced by Western history, the remembrance of this past is a way to let the voiceless speak. Under Kwahulé's writing, ironically no words are needed to give voice to the voiceless. The author indeed turns the visual body into a site of revelation, a locus that has meaning *per se*. There is then no discrimination between literate and illiterate when it comes to understanding this revelation; the visual reality blatantly reveals the potentially tragic downward spiral of cultural alienation.

Bintou's fate exemplifies the fate of numerous exiles. Her inability to reconcile both sides of her identity (African/European) echoes the author's personal story whose exile was also imposed on him rather than freely chosen. This establishes a connection between Kwahulé and his character who were both marginalized by circumstances beyond their control. In many ways also, Kwahulé felt condemned to exile. Chalaye writes in this regard that:

De retour en Côte d'Ivoire pour les vacances, [Kwahulé] présente en 1981 *Le Grand Serpent*, mais il est convoqué au ministère des affaires culturelles, tandis que la pièce, jugée dangereuse, est interdite et sa bourse retirée. [...] [L]es empêchements administratifs et le sentiment qu'il sent le soufre, ont convaincu Kwahulé qu'il ne pourra pas faire en Côte d'Ivoire le théâtre qu'il souhaite. Il rentre à Paris et mène une carrière de comédien. (2009 :1)

As an illustration of one of these passionate rebels ready to die for their beliefs, the Bintou/Christ figure also reflects one of Kwahulé's aesthetic principles that is imbued with spirituality. The image of violence that permeates his work is an attempt to guide his readers/audience toward a better understanding of what it means to be human. As Soubrier argues, "s'il y a une spiritualité, elle ne serait alors pas à

chercher dans un ailleurs abstrait, dans un au-delà improbable, mais au sein même de cet espace commun, dans la *relation à autrui*. Dieu, c'est l'autre : mon frère" (21). It is indeed by observing the flaws of the others that we are given an opportunity to reflect upon our own weaknesses, and learn to love rather than judge. This spiritual dimension is characteristic of Kwahulé's work, and reflects his artistic brotherhood with John Coltrane:

[À] la fermeture de Miles Davis sur lui-même, qu'il cite d'ailleurs très peu dans ses entretiens, il préfère la musique de John Coltrane et la recherche spirituelle qu'elle représente. Kwahulé et Coltrane se rencontrent en effet dans une quête identique de fraternité, c'est-à-dire dans la recherche d'un *espace commun*.⁵⁹ (Soubrier 3)

Kwahulé's Christ is a brother/sister-figure⁶⁰ who does not discriminate against those marginalized by society; he functions, in this regard, as a potential revealer for humanity as a whole. Bintou/Christ brings to light the flaws of humanity while yet revealing the good that lies in each and every outcast. But Bintou is also a woman and, as such, she also metaphorizes the feminine condition in a patriarchal world.

IV.4 Religion(s) and Beyond: Christ as a Metaphor for the Complexity of Contemporary Black Feminine Identities

IV.4.a *La Noire de*: A Case Study

The analysis of Diouana's Christ-like suffering confirms that the Jesus figure functions as a metaphor of the multilayered oppression imposed on black women in our contemporary world. Sembène turned Diouana's trajectory into an allegory for

⁵⁹ To Miles Davis's self-closure, whom in fact he barely refers to in his interviews, Kwahulé prefers John Coltrane's music and the spiritual quest it symbolizes. Kwahulé and Coltrane indeed meet in their similar quest of fraternity, that is the quest of a common space.

⁶⁰ Soubrier used the term "brother," as corollary to the noun "homme," not referring to male but to human in French. Brotherhood thus means in her words both sisterhood and brotherhood, "fraternité" that is not necessarily gendered in French but is in English.

displaced Africans' destiny as a whole. The protagonist's martyrdom therefore reflects the exploitation of Africa and Africans by Western powers. But in addition to being a symbol for Africa, Diouana also has to deal with issues that are a consequence of her status as a poor and a woman:

Since the 1930s work in service to the white settlers has become feminized. [...] Young Diola girls from Casamance, between fourteen and twenty-five, leave their villages during the dry season to work as domestics in the city, usually seasonally. During their stay in town, they usually live with a relative, often male, who is working in the city. Six to eight years later, they return permanently to their village to marry. Young women's migration also plays a more and more important role in the survival of the countrysides. (Coquery-Vidrovitch 113)

It is worth noting that, in Africa, domestic work was at first the "privilege" of men, "Early on, working for whites in their homes was both a sign of prestige and a salaried job reserved for men" (Coquery-Vidrovitch 109). Diouana's ordeal in *La Noire de...* is, in this regard, as much a consequence of her social class as it reflects the patriarchal structure of Western society. Along with the power hierarchy that resulted from colonial history, the African female ethos was often confined to the private sphere wherein women's nurturing skills were exploited in order to ensure the well-being of white families. "Women were seldom employed in colonial industries. The colonizer's rationale for this was based on both tradition (which forbade women's leaving their villages) and on their belief in women's inability to understand things modern" (Coquery-Vidrovitch 129). When working as maid or caretaker, African women were often treated like post-slavery slaves.

A film by Sembène Ousmane, *La Noire de...* (The Black Girl of...) is a protest against the exploitation of these young women by white colonial families, who might think

nothing of moving servants to European cities for several months of colonial holidays—servants who could be loaded down with work at will and traumatized by their ignorance of a language and country they might have dreamed of visiting. (Coquery-Vidrovitch 113)

Diouana's martyrdom appears in this regard as an illustration of the master/slave dialectic (not in the Hegelian acceptation, but rather following Kojève's reading of Hegel). On this subject, Margaret Kohn's article, "Frederick Douglass's Master-Slave Dialectic" is particularly revealing:

Forty years [after Hegel] Frederick Douglass told another version of the story of the struggle for recognition between master and slave. This time the medium was not the abstract language of German idealism but rather the powerful idiom of autobiography. Like Hegel, Douglass suggested that the "struggle to the death" was not simply about material comfort or physical domination but instead involved a transformative existential encounter. In a language quite similar to Hegel's, Douglass identified freedom as a kind of self-consciousness that is achieved when the individual chooses to risk death rather than endure bondage. (497)

Diouana's suicide indeed constitutes the ultimate act of resistance. She achieves a paroxysmal self-consciousness the moment she decides to take her own life rather than accept a life in bondage. However, according to Kalisa, Diouana's suicide cannot be perceived as a victory:

In Diouana's case, her continued physical and mental incarceration and torture – name-calling and starvation – add to her alienation and push her over the edge. Some critics have considered the suicide a victory, a conscious act of refusal to become a physical and mental prisoner in the Métropole. At least two scenes of the book's end contradict this interpretation of Diouana's suicide as a victorious act. In the first, her

death seems to be particularly unimportant, as people in the Métropole continue to tan on the beach, paying no attention to the news item that announces the suicide of the nameless and homeless young “Négresse.” After his sister’s death, however, Diouana’s brother puts on a mask and starts hunting his sister’s French employer. [...] The second scene, as Vieyra and Pfaff have noticed, implies not only the white man’s guilt but also the lack of resolution and reconciliation between the two parties. (68)

Although Kalisa’s analysis of *La Noire de...* is thoroughly documented and generally persuasive, for the most part, I do not agree with the fact that these targeted scenes contradict the interpretation that Diouana’s suicide is a conscious act of refusal to become a slave in France. It is indeed essential to keep in mind that just before killing herself Diouana claims, “Jamais je ne serai une esclave.” Her decision to end her life is, in this regard, the only option available to her to escape a modern form of slavery. She also returns the money Monsieur gave her claiming: “Je ne suis pas venue en France pour l’argent.” This underscores her complete refusal to be transformed into a mere commodity in the materialist world of her French employers.

Of course, Diouana’s suicide/victory is not a national victory—one that could potentially attract the attention of people we see on the beach— it is rather a bitter-sweet victory that takes place within the private sphere of the home. Monsieur’s guilt is also, in my opinion, a sign of Diouana’s victory. When we take into consideration the last scene of the film, we can infer that Diouana’s employer will, in all probability, not likely forget the consequences of his (in)action.

Diouana’s suicide is a tragic form of triumph because it involves her death, but unlike Kalisa, I think Sembène gives this death an ironic meaningfulness. Diouana’s suicide is the ultimate act of rebellion and suggests that Madame was unable to completely render her African maid wholly submissive and compliant. But while

Diouana's destiny metaphorizes that of many Africans on the continent, she is also a woman. Her Christ-like suffering is in this regard also a gendered suffering. The fact that Sembène's protagonists of choice are very often women led critics to consider the writer/filmmaker a feminist. Amadou Fofana writes in this regard that:

Sembène believed African women were often silenced and that they lacked public venues in which to voice their views in the same way that he considered the working classes disenfranchised and exploited. His cinema, therefore, served as a forum for debating women's issues as much as it served as a voice for the poor and the marginalized. (165)

But the feminist orientation of his work needs to be put in perspective and analyzed beyond the binary oppositions that characterize traditional Western thought. What can be perceived as a feminist stance in the West may not be so in non-Western productions. Numerous traditional African societies are indeed matriarchal and, consequently, a focus on women protagonists is not enough to argue for Sembène's feminism. In this regard, Petty indeed highlights that:

However, as Oyeřwu`mō´ underscores, other cultures may not, and do not, construct social categories on the basis of gendered binarisms: Yoru`ba´ society, for example, derives social relations from social facts rather than biology (p. 12). This suggests, then, that Western feminism's 'either/or' constructions of patriarchy fail to encompass other cultural experiences and may, in fact, misrepresent non-western representations of women by imposing western categories, thus intervening in the meaning making process. (306)

Petty's argument serves as a warning against a certain trend of film criticism that relies purely on Western epistemological concepts to study third world cinema and literature. Scholars of postcolonial studies must indeed always keep in mind the

diversity of cultural experiences so as to avoid creating a form of criticism that would run the risk, at worst, of reproducing the biases derived from colonial imaginary. Moreover, we must also be wary of creating a neocolonial form of critical analysis. In light of this view, Sembène's feminism could actually be attributed to his upbringing. Sembène's parents were Cap-Verdean parents, and he grew up in Casamance. As Amadou Fofana points out, "in the Casamance, women still have the reputation of being strong and hard-working and of shouldering as much responsibility in providing for their families as do the men" (201). One could of course see Diouana, the protagonist of *La Noire de...*, as an emblematic example of these strong and hard-working Senegalese women, but she is actually as much a woman as she is African. "In the case of *Black Girl*, it is therefore necessary to consider the full context of Diouana's experience as both African and female without artificially disconnecting one from the other," writes Petty (308). Just like Christ functioned as a revealer for the sins of humanity as a whole, Diouana's fate allows Sembène to shed light on the difficulties encountered by Africans on a larger scale: whether colonial or postcolonial subjects, living on the continent or in the Diaspora.

Of course, it could be argued that the reading of Diouana as a Christ figure is in fact an illustration of the neocolonial trend of criticism I oppose, but we shall see that with a careful analysis of the African context, the biblical intertext becomes a very efficient tool for a critical analysis of Black Atlantic artistic expression. Conscious of being exploited, Diouana claims : "Je comprends tout: Madame voulait une bonne à tout faire. Pourquoi suis-je ici ? Pour les enfants ou pour être une bonne à tout faire ?" (Sembène 00:21:52-00:21:57) When she comes to the full realization that her white employers treat her like a modern slave and that, unable to communicate with her

family, there seems to be no way out of her tragic fate, Diouana loses all sense of her identity. She has become what the Other made of her:

“La Noire de...” literally means the “black girl of” or “the black girl from.” Regarding Diouana, the cineaste Sembène Ousmane explains that “once she left the country, she lost her identity as Diouana. She became someone’s black maid. She became an object belonging to a white family– their trophy.” (Pfaff qtd. in Kalisa 62)

Like Christ, Diouana is also a social rebel. From the beginning, her silence contrasts strikingly with the volubility of her white employers. To the multiple questions of Monsieur and Madame, she sporadically answers “Vi, Monsieur”, “Vi, Madame.” Her mutism gives way to a variety of paradoxical interpretations. At first, it could be perceived as evidence of political subjugation, a reflection of the myth of the “good savage” stereotype that was in vogue in the colonial imaginary and that portrayed Blacks as docile and silent. Yet, as Langston underlines, Diouana’s silence is first and foremost a form of resistance that she uses to counter the (neo)colonial oppression of her white employers. A rebellion that the audience is made to perceive in hearing Diouana’s voice-over:

Although Malkmus and Armes argue (1991 :1971) that the use of voice-over in *La noire de...* colludes in the colonial silencing of the African by depicting a passive Diouana unable to speak on her own behalf, I would argue that it forms a vital challenge to such silencing. Firstly, it bears witness to the film’s contestatory reversal of the narrative paradigms legitimating colonialism, because it allows a neo-colonized African ‘I’ to frame a travelogue-memoir. It thus allows the audience privileged access to Diouana ‘for intérieur’, her innermost being, while highlighting the extent to which her French employers tacitly deny that she possesses such interior. And secondly, it foregrounds the extent to which Diouana chooses to present herself to the

white world as solely as an indelible and unadministrable ‘foreign body’, as a strategy of resistance. (15)

Madame robs Diouana of her feminine identity in forcing her to wear an apron, the visible sign of her domesticity. In doing so, she aims to imprint upon Diouana’s mind that she is her boss (master) and wants complete control over Diouana’s existence: “Diouana, tu n’es pas à la noce. Ça fait trois semaines que tu es habillée comme ça. Enfin, change de tenue !” (Sembène 00:07:20-00:07:27) Deprived of self-determination over her own body, it is through death that Diouana ironically can finally reappropriate her physical body. As I noted earlier, Diouana fuses with the mask after her death. In doing so, she becomes a symbol of African resistance and this fusion transforms her suicide into a self sacrifice for the collective good of her people. In the process, she becomes a “true” Christ. When her brother eventually removes the mask, he, like Diouana, becomes a metaphor for the African continent and all the communities of the Black Atlantic over whom colonization has imposed the mask of childishness, inferiority and savagery, but who, in spite of Western attempts at fixating them within the straightjacket of imposed identities, have managed to choose to maintain their own singular identity.

IV.4.b *Bintou*: A Revised Revelation

While it can be argued that Christ was, to a certain extent, an exile, we may wonder to what extent the biblical intertext allows Kwahulé to better illustrate the complexity of black contemporary identities. Bintou’s destiny and the role her spiritual exile plays in her life link her martyrdom to the notion of displacement. As I noted earlier, because he was without sin in the midst of sinners, Christ was also the victim of spiritual rather than physical exile. It is precisely this kind of exile that is at the core of Kwahulé’s artistic reflection:

Or cet exil du dedans, cette expérience de solitude et d'impossible partage, cette épreuve du voyage sans retour que représente toute immigration, définit sa façon de penser le monde et d'écrire aujourd'hui. Elle construit ce qu'il appelle une "conscience diasporique" et qu'il rapproche de "cette sensation, qu'ont sans doute les Africains-américains qui se sentent Africains, mais qui ont aussi conscience qu'il n'y a pas de retour possible." L'expérience vertigineuse de l'altérité : "On n'est plus complètement ce que l'on était quand on était en Afrique et on n'est pas non plus tout à fait d'ici. On est devenu irrémédiablement et absolument autre." (Chalaye 2009: 3)

In *Bintou*, this impossible return is metaphorized by the eponymous heroine's sacrifice that should not be interpreted purely as a sacrifice, but rather as ritualized sacrifice that is performed in the hope that it will restore the natural order of things. But as the closing scene suggests, the order of things is to remain for ever unsettled for the presumed order is nothing other than an illusion. Bintou thus becomes a revealer who brings to the forefront the illusions that blind the adult society around her. Although she is revealed to the reader/audience as a Christ-figure as a result of her ultimate sacrifice, a second reading of the play allows us to understand the almost messianic role Bintou plays throughout the course of the drama. Bintou tells P'tit Jean, the drug dealer who wants to join the gang:

Bintou :

Deale comme ils dealent

L'innocence du monde

Deale comme ils dealent

La virginité de leurs enfants

Le choeur :

Deale comme ils dealent

Leur dignité comme leur bassesse

La vérité comme le mensonge (Kwahulé 25)

Bintou's logic is that it is acceptable to deal drugs, because adults have demonstrated that they are willing to sell anything, even the innocence of their children. But taking drugs allows one to enter that very world of illusions that is precisely what Bintou despises about society. Her *mal-être* functions in the play as a site of revelation that establishes her as a figuration of Christ that brings to light the sins of adult society. Dominique Traoré writes:

En effet, Bintou n'est pas que le prototype du jeune délinquant d'aujourd'hui. En se dressant contre ses parents qui essaient à travers l'excision — un autre masque de la pièce *Bintou* — de la ramener sur ce qu'ils veulent bien présenter comme le droit chemin, cette fanatique de la "danse du ventre" apparaît également comme le modèle d'une jeunesse lucide qui défie toute forme d'autorité malfaisante. (22)

Othered by the patriarchal apparatus of her society, culturally alienated by the interdiction to freely embrace a culture she is nevertheless part of, Bintou refuses to compromise and leaves the house:

Maman, je m'en vais. Je reviendrai de temps en temps te voir. Quant à eux, si je les rencontre ici, qu'ils ne m'adressent plus la parole. Qu'ils sachent que je ne leur répondrai pas, je ne leur ferai même pas l'honneur d'une insulte. Une dernière chose, maman : le jour où j'aurai besoin de pardon, je demanderai le tien, et non celui de Dieu ! (Kwahulé 12)

Questing a truth that neither her African family nor God can provide, Bintou chooses absolute freedom in the streets of a French banlieue where she feels free to be who she is without feeling a need to conform or fit in, without being forced to mindlessly accept a conformity based on some fictitious and socially constructed

idea of womanhood. It is worth noting that Bintou places her possible redemption not in the hands of God, but in her mother's hands, thus suggesting her awareness of symbolically failing as a woman rather than as a human. Bintou's symbolic failure is the tragic result of her not being able to embrace the values of patriarchy while remaining true to herself. Bintou's familial expectations regarding her womanhood are strikingly revealed by Moussoba, the woman that will perform the excision:

Moussoba: Est-ce un hasard si, pourtant si jeune, Bintou tient tête à des hommes, à commencer par son propre père ? Bintou ignore l'autorité masculine... Il faut de la clarté. Autrement, elle vivra sans époux, les hommes qui s'accoupleront avec elle seront tôt ou tard piqués par son dard et mourront. Si la stérilité ne se referme pas sur elle, le nouveau-né lors du grand passage, sera également tué par le dard. Il faut de la clarté et mon couteau tranchera la confusion qui célèbre l'Inachevé. (Kwahulé 34)

The practice of excision seems for her family to be the only solution to tame Bintou's rebellion. In revolting, Bintou is at war with society and her gender and thus starts behaving like a man, "Je suis prête à toutes les guerres...pourvu que l'enjeu en vaille le coup" (Kwahulé 11). Unable to subdue her, her parents hope the ritual will help restore the natural order of things. Bintou must become a woman, with all the potential social limitations her womanhood implies; the ritual of female circumcision will allow her to leave childhood ideas behind, along with all uncertainty. As John Akon-Schultz points out in his article "Meaning-Making of Female Genital Mutilation":

Several ethnic groups perceive children as being born "unfinished". For instance, in Mali, Sudan, and Egypt, circumcision is performed to complete the social or spiritual definition of a child's gender by removing anatomical traces of ambiguity. The Sudanese remove the girl's "masculine" clitoris and labia, and the "feminine"

foreskin of boys. In girls, excision of the clitoris is followed by infibulations designed to “cover” and protect the female reproductive tract, whereas the male’s organ is “opened” or “unveiled.” (165)

Within traditional societies, rituals function to regulate society to the extent that they validate and seek to continue the structural organization of the community. Yet, for those of the African Diaspora, attempts to maintain traditions are sometimes subject to cultural, sociological and political tensions in the host country. Bintou’s refusal to embrace African tradition is perceived by her parents as a form of madness. But how can one belong to a country that is on the other side of the ocean from her current location? The true madness may be the one that maintains the ocean does not separate the emigrant from his home country.

Bintou’s alienation is the result of multiple attempts to make her somebody else, “other,” an ordeal that was at the core of the black experience of modernity. Although she tries to make the most of the liminal space in which she is confined, estrangement lurks in the corners of her altered identity. Her desperate attempts to being herself while remaining other illustrate Kwahulé’s reflection on the notion of alterity:

Il en résulte que les figures de l’altérité chez Koffi Kwahulé sont à rechercher dans la complexité de la forme dramatique ainsi que dans son altération ou peut-être son enrichissement par d’autres genres. Si l’idée, en effet, de ce qui est autre peut renvoyer à des personnes et à des espaces culturels, elle apparaît surtout comme une source d’interaction d’où émergent de « nouveaux » phénomènes textuels et esthétiques. L’altérité est dès lors un lieu de compromis qui favorise la mixité des identités ; mais également leur remise en question. (Gbouablé 5)

In *Bintou*, Africa, Europe and the Americas constitute a metaphorical meeting place where identities meet, collide, intermingle, fuse and oppose each other in order to expose the extraordinary complexity of our contemporary world. The parents came from Africa, they settled in Paris, but American influences (particularly crime movies imported from America) shaped many of Bintou's identity. Likewise, Kwahulé's aesthetic and the characterization of his characters are shaped by a variety of influences that illustrate the complex flux of cultural exchanges in the Black Atlantic. An African writing in France, Kwahulé nevertheless feels a strong kinship with African Americans, a kinship that is reflected in his artistic influences (jazz, Hollywood movies). Likewise, his characters' cultural references come from Africa, Europe and America. The Atlantic triangle becomes, under Kwahulé's quill, a bountiful cultural matrix that argues against hierarchization to argue instead for a horizontal understanding of the Other as someone who is equal, yet different. "*Bintou* traite de la fatalité des violences urbaines : jeunesse délinquante, violence familiale dans un milieu où différentes cultures se mêlent et s'entrechoquent. Bintou est une déesse du multiculturalisme que la coutume fait asseoir sur le couteau de l'excision" (Le Guen 2005 :6). But the liminal space of the margins wherein Bintou is confined also becomes beneficial to the extent that it becomes a site of potential revelation. Just as Christ, an intermediary between God and humanity, gains insight into the human condition as a consequence of his distinctiveness, Bintou's alienation grants her the ability to foresee what lies ahead. Far from being only a source of weakness, this in-betweenness provides her a strength that those who constitute "insiders" are deprived of. Sylvie Chalaye writes in this regard that:

Mais pour Koffi Kwahulé l'entre-deux enseigne la marge, un territoire de suspension entre le vide et le plein, l'espace du doute et du rêve [...]cette souplesse d'âme, cette

élasticité identitaire que suppose l'espace d'entre-deux, ce vide qui permet d'aller et venir entre deux cultures, entre deux modes de vie, entre deux conceptions du monde. Or cet espace de jeu est celui qui autorise la création, c'est l'espace de l'espoir et de l'imaginaire [...] C'est l'espoir de la réussite, de la richesse, du bonheur à atteindre... (2009 :7)

Bintou illustrates the inner struggle every migrant potentially encounters. The parallel with the Christ narrative intends to show that multiculturalism should be embraced as a blessing rather than a curse. Kwahulé's Christ-like figure reveals to humanity the amazing potential that lies in the acceptance of diversity and the numerous paths toward happiness that a global world has to offer.

It will be noted that Kwahulé's embrace of multiculturalism does not imply the rejection of Africa or his African roots, but by displacing Africa, he is in a better position to then reappropriate it :

Or l'hybridation n'est possible que par la démarche qu'adopte Koffi Kwahulé et qui consiste à déplacer l'Afrique pour mieux se l'approprier. Pour sortir de la schizophrénie que provoque "le mal développement," l'écrivain ivoirien semble inviter les Africains à devenir continûment autre sans cesser d'être soi. (Traoré 22)

Traoré's argument brings to light Kwahulé's profound attachment to his africanity. And although he indeed takes a sharp look at the potential flaws of Africa, *Bintou's* ultimate sacrifice should not to be read merely as a rejection of African patriarchal traditions, but rather as an invitation to reflect upon the dangers of fixing identities within an immutable context, and upon the destructive potential of essentialization. The eponymous heroine can therefore be characterized as an embodiment of paradox:

À la fois enfant et adulte, douceur et violence, Bintou et Samiagamal, Madone de Cité à la tête d'un gang, l'ambiguïté de l'adolescente de 13 ans déstabilise sa famille, comme l'impertinence de son hybridation culturelle face à l'autorité de la tradition. Bintou dit une société du mélange, « *petite fleur sauvage née sur le béton* », elle est une fleur d'une essence nouvelle. Or la tragédie naîtra de la volonté de la famille de retrouver la pureté impossible, et cela aboutira à l'excision de Bintou et à sa disparition au fond la cave, mort enfouie sous le béton de la cité devenue cette tombe urbaine où l'on ne peut construire un avenir d'amour et de compréhension et où les fleurs et la vie font place à la brûlure et à la cendre. (Chalaye 2009 :6)

In light of Chalaye's eloquent summary of the character of Bintou, the heroine's assimilation with the Christ within the locus of our imaginary is both reinforced and cast in a new light. Jesus Christ is, like Bintou, androgynous, a cultural hybrid who advocates for a mixed, pluralistic society, and just like his death paradoxically gave birth to a community advocating love and compassion,⁶¹ Bintou's leads us to a better understanding of the destructive potential of imposed identities, thus sending a message of love and compassion for humanity as a whole. For Fanny Le Guen, it is precisely Bintou's womanhood that functions as a metaphor for the Christ-like love that opens the possibility of redemption:

À travers ces figures de femmes sacrifiées il est aussi question d'une eucharistie africaine, c'est-à-dire d'un sacrement christique qui commémore et perpétue le sacrifice du Christ à la manière des phénomènes de transe. Ces femmes croient en la liberté comme d'autres croient en Dieu. Ce sont des allégories de l'amour, de la beauté et de l'art. Dans ce monde de décomposition sociale, d'arrivisme effréné et de froid égoïsme que dépeint l'œuvre de Koffi Kwahulé, la femme incarne et sublime

⁶¹ Keeping in mind that the Bible as a text and its putting into practice may drastically contrast.

l'amour humain par sa générosité, sa bravoure, son abnégation et sa détermination. (2005: 17-18)

Kwahulé confided to me that he felt that being a black man gave him an insight to the kind of oppression women may feel as physical beings, because the same kind of violence was imposed on the black body. In *Bintou*, the Christ-like sacrifice the reader/audience is made to witness is the result of an attempt to silence victims of a fallacious power hierarchy, one that draws its strength from the marginalization of difference. Under Kwahulé's quill, women must advocate for ultimate freedom as an answer to the cultural imprisonment society imposes on them. As freedom-fighters, they are granted god-like attributes to reveal the complexity of a contemporary world that is both plagued by hate and violence, while demonstrating that the antidote is well within reach: the healing potential of love and compassion.

Conclusion

For centuries, humanity and their cultures have been hierarchized using a set of standards originally established by the West and by white males. The inferiority of women, children, non-western cultures and their religions has been taken for granted by the dominant discourse, and the superiority of Western white males has only quite recently been called into question. In the wake of the independence of colonized nations and the civil rights movements that followed, however, numerous counter-discourses emerged to protest against the validity of a dominant discourse that justified its superiority by marginalizing the Other. These voices "from the margin" bring to light crucial viewpoints and perspectives that successfully destroyed pyramidal hierarchies based on pure alterity. The multiplicity of voices allows us to replace our hierarchical viewpoint with a horizontal understanding of the Other as

someone who embodies both difference and “sameness with revision” to paraphrase Gates.

However, prejudiced viewpoints remain, even among authors. Writers in the Black Atlantic are quite often expected to accept their “moral responsibility” for an entire race. As Derek Walcott writes: “A writer dies inside when he betrays, like a paid spy, the rhythm of his race” (Qtd. in Thelwell, 218). Following this line of thinking, black writers are tasked with the responsibility of being cultural saviors. Both the Négritude and the Harlem Renaissance movements are strikingly representative of this artistic debate in which Black intellectuals advocated for the need for black artists to rehabilitate African art forms and motifs in their writing. Because of this imperative, the opportunity to re-write a founding narrative of Western culture was deemed less important than communicating an African-based viewpoint. Because of the Bible’s link to Western culture, it could indeed be argued that a focus on its influence in the Black Atlantic might serve to further minimize traditional African cultures and their contribution, rather than focusing on their centrality and essential contributions. I believe that my study of feminine figurations of Christ in the Black Atlantic proved, on the contrary, that, paradoxically or not, the use of biblical sources reinforces the vital role of the black community and its ability to transform oppression into liberation.

Of course, the biblical intertext at stake in Black Atlantic arts also stands as a counter to the negation of a black consciousness by Western powers. But far from limiting themselves to art forms that constitute primarily texts of protest, artists in the Black Atlantic claim the right to move beyond established dichotomies to reflect upon what it means to be human in our contemporary world. References to the Bible

interestingly become powerful tools of signifying by offering repetitions with variations of founding narratives, thus demonstrating that beyond biased interpretations and subjectivities, we humans nevertheless share common cosmogonic worldviews. The religious references that permeate the works from authors in the Black Atlantic function as revealers of a form of transcendence that refuses to discriminate between gender, culture, race or religion but is rather able to embrace humanity as a whole in all its diversity.

The figure of Jesus is, in this regard, particularly revealing for He appears in the Bible as an advocate of inclusion. “In the New testament, Jesus, ‘the prince of peace,’ issues a [...] command to care for the poor and the oppressed. In his ministry, he embraced the Others of the Hebrew world: women, simple fishermen, those with mental illnesses or leprosy, and the ethnically alienated Samaritans” (Gallagher 23). Moreover, as both the Son of God and God’s Incarnation, there is no higher authority who can defend the marginalized, making the figure of Jesus an extraordinarily cathartic image for communities struggling to come to terms with the destructive power of both discursive and physical marginalization.

For women in the Black Atlantic race, gender, class and religion are intrinsically linked: all are potential factors of oppression; but are also provided a means to liberate the self from the alienating borders of arbitrary (and flawed) justice. In regard to the U.S., Collier-Thomas writes that:

More than any others, black women historically have embraced Jesus Christ. Enslaved women discovered the Jesus who seem to speak directly to them and to the painful and protracted struggle for freedom. They saw in their condition a parallel to the suffering and persecution that Jesus had endured— Jesus was crucified, and many

enslaved African were beaten, maimed, and killed. In the depths of their pain they called upon and fervently worshiped Jesus. [...] However, Jesus was accessible: he had walked the earth, he had been in the world – but he was not of the world. Belief in Jesus and his biblical promises engendered in enslaved women and men a deep and unfathomable faith. (10)

The Christ narrative was perceived as a mirror reflection of the experiences of many black women in America, perhaps to a greater degree than that of the black experiences of modernity in the Black Atlantic. Like them, Jesus had suffered, and his rebirth after unfathomable suffering conveyed the message to the black communities that there was more to their existence than mere suffering, that liberation was at hand. If the Son of God was one of them, as the Bible implies, it implied that they too, were one of His. Following a Black Atlantic perspective, the suffering of Jesus, a mirror image of the suffering in black communities, was articulated around two main motifs: the notion of exile, and violence toward the body. The motif of exile and its influence on the formation of cultural identities in the Black Atlantic is essential for a fuller understanding of the persistence of the biblical imaginary in Black Atlantic literature, theatre and cinema. As Alison Donnell argues:

The violence of the Middle Passage, enslavement, and the plantation system did not simply occasion historical ruptures for peoples of African descent in the Caribbean, but unspeakable and unknowable catastrophes. The legacies of this loss, displacement, and violence were subsequently compounded by the forced erasure of African cultural retentions in the Caribbean under the colonial rule that persisted over halfway into the twentieth century. To think toward Africa, beyond and in defiance of this injury and forfeiture, has properly been one of the central ongoing concerns and predicaments of Caribbean cultural and literary criticism. (35-36)

The metaphorical retracing of the umbilical cord linking African slaves to their descendants in the Motherland is, rather logically, a common feature of both African American and Afro-Caribbean art. And while the metaphor of exile is not expressed in the same manner in all African arts produced on the continent, the notion of displacement is nevertheless a major motif of the African imaginary. Treated as foreigners in their homeland during colonization, having been dispossessed of their right to a homeland as a result of colonial history, African artists have been, from colonial times on, reflecting upon the notion of exile, whether physical or spiritual, and its relation to Africanity. Space and the notion of *ailleurs* are therefore central motifs of Black Atlantic imaginary literature. Both central and ambiguous, these motifs reflect the complex relationship of the African ethos to the surroundings, and they enter an exchange with the mythic intertext so as to debunk all certainties and expose the capriciousness of existence. In his essay, “L’espace du voyageur à l’envers,” Romuald-Blaise Fonkoua highlights this ambiguous relation between the African ethos and the *ailleurs* (in this case Europe):

L’Ailleurs n’est pas un espace étranger, situé véritablement en dehors du voyageur, parce que celui-ci ne peut entretenir avec cet espace une distance irréductible. L’Ailleurs est en dedans. Dans le même temps, l’Ailleurs ne peut être perçu comme un espace familier, en dedans, parce qu’il est géographiquement un espace en dehors avec qui le voyageur n’entretient aucune espèce de légitimité. D’ailleurs pour cet autre voyageur à l’envers, les deux termes « étranger » et « familier » qui permettraient de situer la position du voyageur à l’envers par rapport à l’espace de la découverte paraissent incongrus tant ils sont interchangeables et ne désignent pas deux réalités radicalement opposées. (Bessière & Moura 104)

In Black Atlantic arts, space as a conceptual reality is infused ambiguity: sometimes reassuring, sometimes alienating, but always questioned in regard to its relationship to the individual and/or the community. As a result of history, exile, physical or spiritual, or a combination of both, dramatically shaped the process of identity formation in the Black Atlantic. Given the centrality of the motif of displacement in the history of the Black Atlantic, artists in Africa and its diaspora naturally used the metaphor of exile to reflect upon religious, socio-political issues as well as a component of their aesthetic principles.

In my corpus, the figurations of Christ all embody, to a certain extent, this metaphor of exile while making the biblical Jesus an archetype that reveals the complexity of contemporary black identities. In the works under review, the protagonists are all subject to some sort of displacement. Chauvet's Claire experience not displacement but a sense of emotional exile, the tragic feeling of having never belonged, in Sembène's film, the motif of exile—whether spiritual or physical—becomes a metaphor for Africa as a whole:

The central character in *La Noire de...*, Diouana, is a pioneer of sorts and an emblem of the waves of migration following the economic crisis that hit the continent in the 1970s and thereafter. [...] The images offer viewers a poignant visual representation of the classic push-and-pull that have long motivated Africans to leave their home countries: the strong pull of Europe's economic prosperity and the push coming from the poor living conditions and lack of opportunities at home. *La Noire de...* is like a harbinger for the widespread phenomenon of younger Africans attempting to reach Europe at all cost and the potentially deadly consequences of such adventures as they risked their lives walking across the Sahara desert or traversing the Atlantic Ocean in makeshift boats. (Fofana 217-218)

In their attempt to escape the alienating borders of fixed identities, the authors' Jesus figures are able to reveal the fallacy of essentialist concepts such as race, ethnicity and blackness, and to argue for a humanity that would no longer be restrained by the constricting borders of imposed identities. But while the metaphor of exile could certainly not have been dismissed as a critical tool for the analyses of the works under review, it was also essential to take into account its potential limitations. In this regard, Jean-Marc Moura's conception of the *Atlantique littéraire* proves particularly useful. The theoretical framework that gave birth to these new postcolonial approaches and the new focus on the *Atlantique littéraire* derived from the realization that cultural dynamics in the Atlantic world are, as Moura puts it : "des développements entrecroisés, multiples et complexes, favorisés par la mondialisation, [qui] ne sont entièrement saisissables ni par les traditionnelles area studies ni par des approches privilégiant les transferts unidirectionnels originaires d'Europe ou s'appuyant exclusivement sur des structures binaires (par exemple, le dualisme centre/périphérie)" (1). These epistemological frameworks are particularly significant when one takes into account the complex flow of cultural exchanges that result from the various ways the Christ narrative is re-written in these works.

"Jesus, [...], The central visible figure in Christianity, has been appropriated by people who are marginalized and oppressed as a Black counter-cultural hero" (Reddie 81). And while the tragic fate of the protagonists may seem to suggest that there is, in these works, no room for a possible redemption, there is no need for redemption for what the authors contest is actually the very notion of sin. In the works under review, Consolata and Bintou are free to embrace female sexuality. The idea of blackness being a curse is also debunked, implying that there were no original sins, therefore no need for redemption.

In lieu of departure, exile implies the idea of both departure and return, each allowing for the possibility of new departures and new returns as well as new destinations. As a result, in the works under review, the center is decentralized, and those on the margins are then invited to play a central role in this reconstituted center. The goal is not to create new centers but rather to weave those from the margins into the fabric of Western imaginary that has been, until recently, unanimously perceived as a hermetically sealed, self-sufficient totality.

In a contemporary world that is characterized by fluidity, it is essential to understand religion(s) as a living process, one that is constantly changing and adapting to the new configurations that individuals have to confront. Art, religions and myths are vehicles we, as humans, have from the beginning of time used to find answers to our existential interrogations and make sense of our existence as living/thinking beings. Regarding the Black Atlantic, it is important to note that race and religion are intrinsically interwoven:

Race was one of modernity's epistemological categories that materialized into white, black, and other identity formations. But, since the category of race presupposes an entire world view concerning how the cosmos or world is and ought to be ordered it is not isolated from what we call "religion." (Noel ix)

Following Noel's argument, and given this interconnection between the concepts of race and religion, the Black Atlantic artists' profound interest in biblical intertextuality is therefore not surprising. Considering the context wherein the works under review were created, it can be argued that the overwhelming influence of Western culture logically led artists in the Black Atlantic, those discursively othered by the West, to interrogate their relation to both their native and Western cultures.

Following a seemingly contradictory movement that oscillated between centrifugal and centripetal forces, artistic creation in the Black Atlantic is characterized by this in-betweenness that is both a possible source of insight and/or alienation. Far from decreasing over time, this dynamic seems to be strengthened by the state of our contemporary world. The 21st century has been the stage of increasing tensions between what are now called “the global North” and the “Global South,” conflicts that have turned deadly, thus suggesting the inescapable need to reflect upon the issues at stake regarding power relations between the West and the rest of the world. Artists in the Black Atlantic are thus eager to interrogate the process of culture-making in contemporary societies. Without completely rejecting their partial assimilation to Western culture, they call its presumed supremacy into question so as to throw light on the fluidity that characterizes global modern identities.

The figurations of Jesus discussed in this work highlight the political argument of their creators. This biblical dimension is common to the five works under review, logically so, because as members of the Black Atlantic, the multilayered oppression imposed on the black ethos by Western societies is both undeniable and unavoidable. While Sembène clearly identified cinema as a powerful tool for the education of the masses, considering that, in the context of the production of his films, he was necessarily making a political commitment, Kwahulé and Morrison are wary of allowing the political stance to obscure the aesthetic aims of the artist. For Morrison, aesthetics and politics are part and parcel of fiction writing especially for black writers, but although Kwahulé is also profoundly engaged, he refuses to allow the conflict between Blacks and Whites to become the central element of his work. For him, this would allow art to drift toward a victimization stance that he radically rejects:

De mon point de vue, c'est inefficace. C'est de la variété, ça ne fait pas peur. On s'attend à ce qu'un Noir revendique quelque chose. Tant mieux qu'il y ait aussi cela, mais, je pense que ça participe un peu de ce qu'on a fait du spectacle. Comme ce qu'on a fait du rap qui est devenu une matière à publicité. La meilleure façon de le domestiquer. Ce n'est pas un discours qui me met, en tant que Noir, en crise: c'est trop tourné vers l'extérieur. Bien sûr, ce sont des problèmes dont il faut parler, mais ça installe trop dans le victimaire. Il faut trouver des moyens plus sophistiqués pour aborder la même question. À la limite, je n'ai pas à demander l'avis de l'autre. Là, dans le discours victimaire, paradoxalement, je demande votre avis. Moi, je pose un truc et c'est comme ça: je n'ai pas à demander un avis. (Mouzet 193)

Kwahulé therefore transposes the oppression of the black ethos to that of women, regardless of their "race. " In a patriarchal world, women constitute the perfect metaphor for oppression, causing him to follow a dynamic opposite to that of Sembène who, used the oppression of women to reflect upon the arbitrary domination of Africa and Africans. Schwarz-Bart's, Chauvet's, and Morrison's political stances are also a result of their reflection upon the nature of oppression imposed on black women in our contemporary world. Although Kwahulé's heroine dies from a ritual of excision, his political reflection moves beyond the concept of race; while Sembène's, on the other hand, moves beyond the gendered nature of oppression. While not linked specifically to women's issues, the political argument of the three feminine authors in this study is undoubtedly gendered.

Beyond their representations of Jesus as a human first, and a white male only incidentally, Chauvet, Schwarz-Bart, Morrison, Sembène and Kwahulé rewrite the notion of sacrifice so as to give new meaning to the suffering of black women in the Black Atlantic. When Bintou's boyfriend claims: "Elle est comme le soleil: plus on

s'en rapproche moins on la voit," Kwahulé is warning his readers/audience against the suffocating potential of imposed identities (15). The danger is that the more we try to define the other, the less we understand what is really at stake.

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