Reassembling the Novel: Kinlessness and the Novel of the Haitian Revolution

ELIZABETH MADDOCK DILLON

To make use of the polylingualism of one’s own language, to make a minor or intensive use of it, to oppose the oppressed quality of this language to its oppressive quality, to find points of nonculture or underdevelopment, linguistic Third World zones by which a language can escape, an animal enters into things, an assemblage comes into play.

—Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, “What Is a Minor Literature?”

If the novel is democratic, it is so because of its capacity to link the experience of the individual to the collectivity of the “demos.” The democratic novel, one might say, enacts a scene of mutual recognition in which the novelistic individual gains subjectivity by way of becoming a member of the people of a nation or state: the subject recognizes the nation as its own; the nation recognizes the subject as its own. Theories of the novel have placed a great deal of emphasis on the way in which the genre enables the emergence of a newly individuated, modern subject in the eighteenth century; but this subject has also primarily existed—whether implicitly or explicitly across various theories of the novel—as framed (held, made legible as a subject) by the horizon of the nation. In this essay, however, I begin by asserting that a geography of nationalism is, in fact, insufficient for accounting for the complexity of the formation not just of the subject but of the demos in the eighteenth-century Atlantic world.

The familiar story of nation and novel, and the democratic Bildung embedded therein, erases the colony from the map of the eighteenth century. As I suggest in what follows, not only might we want to include the colony in our account of the origins of the eighteenth-century novel, but we might, further, grant the colony a central role in that account. Indeed, I argue that we might productively view eighteenth-century Atlantic colonial geographies as constitutive of the novel as a genre rather than as marginal, dilatory, or inessential. This is in part a geographic claim—one that asks that we shift our spatial understanding of the history of the novel. But it is also a claim concerning aesthetics and politics: in the eighteenth century it is the demos—the collectivity and the geography of that collectivity, the defining of a people—that requires constituting by way of the genre of the novel as much as it is the novelistic subject. Moreover, turned in that light, the genre of the novel can be seen as one that marshals aesthetic resources toward generating horizontal collectivities (democratic structures, for instance) that are distinct from, and in tension with, vertically oriented genealogical kinship structures. In this essay, then, I argue that the aesthetics at play in the novel as a genre are instrumental in creating and defining the demos and its limits; moreover, it is precisely at
the site of the limit (figured within, say, the liminal space of the colony) that the more radical possibilities of democracy come into focus. The novel set in the extranational space of the colony—including a number concerning the Haitian Revolution that I examine here—opens the possibility of modes of postgenealogical assemblage that far exceed that of liberal nationalism.

The End of the Line: The Haitian Revolution and Genealogical Rupture

In Benedict Anderson’s influential formulation, the novel gives substance to the imagined community of the nation. Yet it is worth remembering that the alliterative and critically enduring coupling of nation and novel is one that arises, on Anderson’s account, from a colonial geography: creole functionaries of empire located in the Americas turn to the novel and the newspaper to imagine participation in the community of the nation precisely because they are absent from the physical site of the nation. What then of the community in which such creoles and colonials are physically present—namely, the colony? How, one might ask, in counterpoint to Anderson’s claims, are the physical intimacies and social ligatures of this non-national collectivity unimagined in the European novel? In eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century novels of the West Indies, the colony is both imagined and unimagined: the colony appears in such novels, but it is figured as a location where social reproduction fails. More specifically, as I argue below, the colony is often associated with a trope I call “the end of the line”—a trope in which white genealogical lineage is ruptured, and the European patrilineal family meets its reproductive demise.

Why is the Caribbean figured as the “end of the line”? And is there not an irony in the fact that the colonial Caribbean—the site of coerced and stolen African labor and unconstrained resource extraction—is also the source of massive capital accumulation for middle-class Europeans in the eighteenth century? Fortunes accumulated in the Caribbean were precisely the beginning of the line for the economic rise of many a bourgeois family, not the end. I would suggest that the apparent contradiction here—between economic beginnings and genealogical endings—is rooted in the peculiar geography of capitalist modernity as it emerged in the eighteenth-century Atlantic world. In this geography, centered on the Caribbean and the first factories of the new world—namely, the sugar plantations of St. Domingue, Jamaica, and other islands in the archipelago—a distinction was drawn according to which the Caribbean was understood as the site of commodity production, and the metropole was viewed as the site of (legitimate) social reproduction.1 Social reproduction in the colony, conversely, was construed as illegitimate: creole

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1 On the sugar plantations of the Caribbean as the first factories of modernity, see Sidney Wilfred Mintz. On social reproduction under capitalism, see Leopoldina Fortunati and Cindi Katz, respectively. Katz succinctly defines social reproduction as “the material social practices through which people reproduce themselves on a daily and generational basis and through which the social relations and material bases of capitalism are renewed” (709). For further discussion of the separation of social reproduction and production in the eighteenth-century Atlantic world, see Elizabeth Maddock Dillon, “The Secret History of the Early American Novel” 84–88.
subjects born in the colony, whether black or white, were viewed as defiled and disqualified for modes of political and cultural belonging to the nation by the geographic location of their birth.

For many individuals, both black and white, the colonial Caribbean was, indeed, the end of the line: rates of mortality were staggering for both slaves and white colonials in the eighteenth century. Given the large number of white immigrants who lived for only a brief period of time after arriving in eighteenth-century Jamaica, for instance, the island earned the sobriquet “grave of the Europeans” (Brown, Reaper’s Garden 2); and for Africans, the colonial Caribbean was—to a degree that we both know and cannot quite comprehend—a site of shocking morbidity. As a result of the brutality of the labor regime and living conditions to which slaves were subject, the slave population in a colony such as Jamaica was not only unable to sustain itself by means of reproduction during the eighteenth century but declined even in the face of continued massive importation of slaves from Africa.2 Slaves were literally worked to death; the production of commodities such as sugar and coffee occurred at the expense of the sustenance and reproduction of human life. But despite the structural violence written into an economy designed to facilitate production at the cost of reproduction, human reproduction did occur in the colony, and creoles were the result.

And yet, if biological reproduction in the colony was not structurally enabled by the new geography of capitalist modernity, social reproduction was perhaps even less so. For black creoles—New World Africans who did survive and have children in the colony—social relations were constructed and sustained in the shadow of a plantocratic regime of “social death” imposed upon slaves—a regime according to which slaves were systematically deprived of genealogical identity, including the capacity to sustain legal relations of marriage and kinship, natal identity, and property ownership.3 White creoles, in turn, were viewed as less than full citizen-subjects of the European nations to which their ancestry and political identity as colonists might seem to entitle them. White creoles were typically viewed as having imbibed a sort of infection from their colonial birth—one that might be eradicated if sufficient time were spent in the metropole. Their birth in the colony, however, infused them “with a degree of supineness and indolence” that “frequently hurts their fortune and family” (Long 2:265). Good at dancing, bad at working; good at extramarital sex, bad at fidelity; “fickle and desultory” white creoles (male and female) were viewed as unsuited for the work of furthering

2 Jamaica, for instance, imported as many as 750,000 slaves between the late seventeenth and early nineteenth centuries, but in 1838, on the eve of emancipation, the slave population was only 300,000. Citing these numbers, Vincent Brown concludes, “Until the end of the transatlantic slave trade, Jamaican planters essentially externalized the costs of raising children to villages in Africa” (Reaper’s Garden 56).

3 The term “social death” derives from the work of Orlando Patterson, who describes the new mode of race-based slavery that took shape in the Atlantic world as one that uniquely sought to eradicate the social identity and resources of enslaved individuals. Patterson’s work on slavery and social death has been widely cited and debated; for an astute recent assessment of critical use of the concept, see Brown, “Social Death and Political Life in the Study of Slavery.”
European empire precisely because of their intimacy with the extranational space of the colony (265).4

If normative national forms of social reproduction were not accessible to creoles, it is nonetheless the case that social reproduction occurred in the colony among both blacks and whites: creoles born in the colony constructed forms of social identity, living, and belonging even as these modes of social identity remained illegitimate and unsanctioned with respect to metropolitan law and culture. In short, forms of culture arose based on precisely the structural violence embedded within the relation of production and reproduction in the colony: one might say that social reproduction occurred in the colony under the sign of its own erasure. Thus, for instance, as Vincent Brown compellingly argues, high mortality rates in colonial Jamaica helped to shape a culture in which collective rituals, forms of knowledge, and social life were crafted around death itself. “Death was as generative as it was destructive,” writes Brown. “In a society characterized by movement and uncertainty . . . the activities surrounding death gave the volatile world a reliable axis” (Reaper’s Garden 4). And in related terms, I argue that a distinct sexual culture arose in relation to a world in which reproduction was structurally unimagined, unsupported, and/or erased in favor of commodity production.

Ideologically speaking, then—to follow the spatial logic of capitalist modernity—sex in the colonial Caribbean is nonreproductive. Two corollary assumptions derive from this premise that, in turn, shape European discourses concerning sex in the colonies. First, sex in the tropics is torrid: it is oriented around pleasure rather than procreation. As the writings of European travelers to the West Indies habitually indicate, the presumed sexual licentiousness of life in the colony was one of its most striking features. Creole women (white and black) were viewed by visitors both as hypersexual beings—“fervent priestesses of the American Venus” [les plus ferventes prêtres de la Vénus américaine]—and as reproductively sterile, marked by an “incapacity to reproduce” or the ability to bear only “feeble and debilitated offspring” (Wimpffen 120).5 And thus, second, sex in the tropics is nongenealogical; it does not further the descent of European identity through the paternal line. Let me emphasize again that reproduction, including children born by white mothers to white fathers as well as mixed-race children born out of a range of relations from rape to marriage and children born to slave mothers and fathers, did occur in the colony; rather, what I suggest here is that despite this reality, reproduction in the colony was unimagined as socially reproductive of European identity—hence the feeble and febrile white creole and the licentious mulatta serve as iconic figures populating the imagined colony.

Productive of commodities, nonreproductive of persons: the West Indies that appears in the eighteenth-century novel is thus a space defined as the end of the genealogical line even as it serves, outside the world of the novel, as an economic lifeline to the bourgeoisie. In novels concerning the Haitian Revolution, the “end of

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4 For further discussion of metropolitan views of white creole degeneracy, see David Lambert, Erin Skye Mackie, and Christer Petley.

5 For further discussion of the hypersexuality and sterility of the creole, see Doris Lorraine Garraway and Joan Dayan, respectively.
the "end of the line" trope is particularly pronounced: without fail in this small corpus of novels, the white family meets its genealogical demise in the flames of slave revolt. Indeed, one specific scene appears in virtually every novel touching on the Haitian Revolution: that of slaves dancing in the flames of the burning plantation. In E. D. E. N. Southworth’s *Retribution*, for instance, this scene appears in the guise of a memory that the central character, Juliet Summer, holds from childhood and suddenly recalls at the close of her own life: “A burning homestead, smoke, flames, falling roofs, glowing beams, and blazing rafters hurled through the air before the furious blast, and hundreds of dark demons leaping, capering, and exulting in frantic orgies through the scene. . . . That scene of night, and storm, and fire, and carnage—lost to memory for thirty years—again and ever lives before me—fit opening for such a stormy life as mine—fit close” (277).

Here (as is typical in instances of this scene), slaves cavort at the site of the demise of white reproduction and dominance—the home of the planter and his family. Notably, Southworth uses this memory to frame the birth and death of her central character, indicating the centrality of the “end of the line” trope to her novel as a whole. Thus even when, as is typically the case in such novels, the white colonial protagonists (heroically or miraculously) survive the revolution (as does Juliet in Southworth’s novel), they become tragically uncoupled, sterile, or barren by the close of the novel: even when life continues past the site of the colony, lineage has already ended there. And St. Domingue in particular is figured as a sort of ground zero of genealogical rupture and death; revolutionary Haiti is the place where the end of white lineage is propagated, even when white men and women survive.

The archive of novels I refer to here is relatively small and obscure, but the consistency and prominence of the “end of the line” trope that animates much of the narrative of these novels is marked. Novels that fit this pattern include *Secret History; or, The Horrors of St. Domingo*, by Leonora Sansay (Philadelphia, 1808); *Bug-Jargal*, by Victor Hugo (Paris, 1820 and 1826); *The Slave-King*, by Leitch Ritchie (Philadelphia, 1833); *Retribution*, by Southworth (New York, 1849); *La Belle Zoa; or, The Insurrection of Hayti*, by Frances Hammond Pratt (Albany, 1854); and *The History of the Mademoiselles Janvier: The Last Two White Women in St. Domingue*, by Mlle. de Palaiseau (Paris, 1812). The last of these novels offers something of a condensed version of this trope, and I turn to it now to sketch in more detail the lineaments of the narrative that run through all of these novels in one form or another. The subtitle of the novel, *The Last Two White Women in St. Domingue*, itself foregrounds the thematics of the “last,” announcing that the topic of the narrative is the threatened end of whiteness itself in revolutionary Haiti. Moreover, it is typical that the

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7 Originally published in the *Journal de l’Empire* in Paris in 1812; Mlle. de Palaiseau is “otherwise unknown,” according to Popkin. Popkin reports that there is historical evidence indicating that a number of individuals mentioned in the narrative did exist, including the black military officer Diakue and the French dressmaker, Mme. Beuze in New York. See Popkin 363.
central surviving figure is a white woman—in this case, two young sisters who survive the massacre of all the whites on the island of St. Domingue at the close of the Haitian Revolution. The sisters are able to survive with the help of a number of former slaves whom they treated well before the revolution, and this, too, is a common trope: it is often the case that a white daughter survives only because she has been a “good” white, so to speak—a benevolent slave owner—and therefore a grateful slave protects her, or warns of the coming of violence, enabling her to escape. In this novel, two young girls escape with the help of several loving slaves and are later entrusted to the care of an unsavory white woman, who takes them to New York, forces them to sign papers of indenture, and uses them, in effect, as slaves. Ultimately, a legal case ensues in which the girls are able to be released from the terms of their servitude because they are able to prove that they are French, not English, and thus not subject to the terms of the papers they signed. They then return to France to narrate the story of their escape from massacre in Haiti and from slavery in New York.

In invoking the whiteness of the two sisters as an aspect of their “lastness,” or terminal status in Haiti, the novel implicitly gestures toward a rape narrative—namely, toward the widely propagated notion that the rape of white women by black men would be the result of racial revolution. In this racial imaginary, saving the body of the white woman constitutes saving the womb of whiteness, so to speak. And yet, in this novel as in others, saving the body of the white woman from rape—from the newly established blackness of Haiti—does not result in white reproduction but in a set of lateral relations that generate no offspring. Notably, then, the core relations that provide social sustenance and enable survival in the novel are horizontal, primarily that between siblings. Vertical—that is, generational—relations, however, prove to be impossible (the girls’ parents are killed at the outset of the novel) and/or toxic (the seemingly maternal white woman who assists the sisters ultimately enslaves them). In sum, it is a lateral, not a vertical whiteness that survives—it is that of siblings, not that of reproductive parentage.

The novel titled La Belle Zoa; or, The Insurrection of Hayti, by Pratt, offers a more complex instance of the “end of the line” narrative. In this case, the novel directly engages the central contradiction of the novel of the West Indies: namely, the difficulty of bending a genre such as the novel—a genre that is centrally concerned with social reproduction—to a site at which social reproduction is ideologically contravened. The central character in the novel, a young white woman named Zoa who is the daughter of an evil planter in St. Domingue, is saved from a burning house during the Haitian Revolution by a loving slave named Adelle—who, as we later learn, is her mixed-race half-sister. Zoa is ultimately able to escape to Boston with Pallette, her enervated and effeminate French amour who emigrated to Haiti as a child.8 In Boston they marry and have a daughter, whom Zoa wants to name after her half-sister, Adelle. In postrevolutionary Haiti, Adelle has married a mulatto leader who is slated to inherit a fortune. Pallette—the vitiated creole/French husband—sees Zoa’s desire to name their child after the mixed-race sister as an effort

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8 Although Pallette is not technically a creole in the novel—he was born in France—he instantiates all of the stereotypes of the creole: feeble, unfaithful, indolent.
to acquire the half-sister’s fortune. And while he expresses a distaste for the racial
genealogy associated with the name, he endorses the heritable economic possi-
bilities he imputes to the naming strategy. Thus when his wife proposes the name
Adelle for their child, Pallette replies, “It sounds rather too much like the yellow
skin; but no matter for that—Il est un grand poison [sic] at the end of the line” (73).
The French phrase here would seem to indicate that “there is a big fish” at the end
of the line—the fish being the fortune that would be conveyed through claiming
a mixed-race genealogy for their daughter. But interestingly, poisson is apparently
misspelled in the text, with one s rather than two, such that it reads as “poison” in
English (as well as French). There is thus a shifting quality to the word as it appears
in the text: at the end of the line there is either a big French fish, poisson, or a poison
that has appeared where one would expect a fish. As it turns out in the novel, there
is, literally, poison at the end of the line. Pallette is, in creole fashion, ultimately
unfaithful to Zoa, and she in turn poisons herself and her daughter, Adelle, to
death. At the end of the line in La Belle Zoa, then, there is a big mixed-race fish and/
or poison; there is an end to genealogy and the reproductive possibilities of white
womanhood that Zoa, in her rescued state, seemingly embodied. And although
there is a fortune to be extracted from the site of the colony (one that Pallette would
like to confer to his daughter), it remains associated with a fatal toxin—that is, with
the end of white familial lineage.

Kinship and the Genre of the Novel

Given the contours of the “end of the line” sketched here, what might this trope tell
us about the colonial nature and geography of the novel as a genre? We might also
ask how (and why) the novel of the West Indies seeks to imagine that which must
be unimagined. To answer these questions requires considering the relationship
between genealogical narrative and the genre of the novel. One way to understand
the novel, in fact, is to see it as a genre that is formally determined by a historical
shift away from narratives of lineage and genealogically determined identity and
toward narratives of self-formation or Bildung. As Nancy Armstrong’s foundational
work, Desire and Domestic Fiction, argues, the novel gives body to a set of ideas about
the value of characterological identity over and against that of lineage, in particular
in relation to the emergent figure of the new ideal bourgeois woman in the eigh-
teenth century—the first “modern subject.” Indeed, according to Armstrong, the
novel creates the “individual” who is defined not by birth or social position but by
acts of self-making—by “surmount[ing] the limits of an assigned social position”—
and it is the unfolding of this self-making that constitutes the matter of the novel
(How Novels Think 8).

In place of the narrative of genealogical essence conveyed and realized, for
instance, in the epic, we find instead the story of individual Bildung in the novel.
But as Joseph R. Slaughter emphasizes in his account of the bildungsroman, the
development of the novelistic individual necessarily takes place in relation to the
horizon of the social—so much so, indeed, that we might understand Bildung as
involving less the flourishing of the idiosyncratic individual than the “free” con-
formity of the liberal subject to the implicit rules of social normativity and collective
belonging. As Slaughter writes, “The idealist Bildungsroman envisions a dialectical relation between the individual and society in which the two achieve a mutual accord in the consensual, conventional forms of the social texture and the public sphere” (180). Slaughter’s modification of Armstrong is useful because it points to the fact that the modern subject must be legible within a given horizon in order to become a subject—within the horizon of social normativity. As such, then, we might conclude that two new bodies are being formed within the novel: that of the horizontally articulated social collectivity (the demos) and that of the subject.

With this framework in mind, two points emerge that are germane to the novels of the West Indies that I have been discussing. First, the end of genealogy is also potentially the beginning of the modern subject. As such, the “end of the line” novels I describe here would seem to narrate the end of premodern forms of subjectification in the space of the colony in a mode congruent with a novelistic paradigm that replaces genealogy with Bildung. However, what these novels make evident is that this apparent movement from genealogy to Bildung has a distinct spatial element, such that Bildung—the creation of viable subjects—occurs in the metropole by way of contrast with the colony. Thus, second, it becomes clear that the demos of the European novel is one that marginalizes creole subjects, because social normativity is elaborated in terms of an idealized subject and national collective body situated in, and emanating from, the metropole.

Given this, then, one might read these novels as introducing—in the guise of genealogical language—a horizon of racialization that underpins the imagined community of the nation. The big “yellow-skinned” fish at the end of the line in La Belle Zoa, for instance, is both a potential fortune that will underwrite the reproduction of whiteness in Boston with wealth from the colony and a potential poison that stands to eradicate the possibility of the reproduction of whiteness by way of the excessive proximity of black and white bodies—by way of (ideologically unthinkable) interracial colonial sex that is reproductive and generative of social relations rather than written off the map as a failed and illegible history. Ending the line in the colony, as these novels so efficiently and repeatedly do, effects a dehumanization of the black labor that produces colonial wealth and eradicates the threat posed by black and white intimacy that is required to generate that wealth. By unimagining the colony, such a narrative effects the racial whitening of the metropole and cements Bildung as a national narrative of progress in which the space of the colony has no discernible role. In this sense, the European and/or early US novel generates a horizon of the social that is deeply encoded by race.

And yet, while the reading of racialization in the novel that I propose here is not incorrect, I nonetheless want to argue that there is something more at stake within the small canon of novels of the West Indies that I identify here that bears on the novel as a genre: something more, that is, than the production of a racialized metropolitan nationalism emerging from the colonial geography of an Atlantic capitalist modernity. What these novels bring to the fore, I would suggest, is not just that Bildung hardwires a whitened, postgenealogical subject to the horizon of the

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9 A canonical and exemplary instance of such a narrative might be traced in William Faulkner’s Absalom, Absalom!
social—the collective demos—defined by erasing the history of colonialism and the production of wealth in the colonies. Rather, in more complex terms, these novels also open the possibility of modes of postgenealogical “kinlessness” (Bentley) other than that of liberal nationalism. For, indeed, if the novel is precisely not about genealogy but about social reproduction, then the narrative of self-formation and demos formation within the novel contains an important aesthetic dimension. To follow a line of thought concerning the aesthetic proposed by Jacques Rancière, we might understand the aesthetic as defined by its capacity to create sensus communis—that is, shared sense or sensibility held in common by a collective. Rancière’s definition of the aesthetic concerns what he calls the “partage du sensible,” or the “distribution of the sensible,” as one of his translators has rendered this phrase. One might also render this phrase as the “distribution of sense making,” because what Rancière pursues in his account of the aesthetic is the claim that politics is embedded in the differential ability to create shared meaning. Rancière states, “I call the distribution of the sensible the system of self-evident facts of sense perception that simultaneously discloses the existence of something in common and the delimitations that define the respective parts and positions within it” (12). Rancière thus indicates that the sensus communis of aesthetic judgment is grounded not in universality but in a dialectic of meaning making that operates in the direction of both inclusion and exclusion. As such, the aesthetic is always a resource for the production not just of the subject but of the demos; and perhaps more important, in such a formulation, the aesthetic becomes instrumental in tracing the line between those within and those without the collectivity that ratifies the subject as a subject. Here I would propose something of a modification, then, of Slaughter’s account of Bildung: Slaughter, in emphasizing the disciplinary nature of Bildung in aligning the subject with social normativity, tends to overlook the aesthetic possibilities and even necessity within the novel of the aesthetic for generating the demos and its outside.

For an alternative account, then, of the politics of the novel that are attuned to the aesthetic dimension of the genre, we might turn to the work of Nancy Bentley and, specifically, to her compelling recent account of kinlessness in relation to the novel. As Hortense J. Spillers has argued, race slavery in the Atlantic world operated by means of a brutal imposition of the condition of kinlessness on those individuals kidnapped from Africa and brought to the New World. An “enforced state of breach” from the “patronymic, patrifocal, patrilineal, and patriarchal order” placed the enslaved in a liminal state with respect to “human and familial status”: slaves were violently amputated from the kinship systems and genealogical structures that conveyed identity and social status to both Africans and Europeans (Spillers 218). Following Spillers, Bentley defines the kinlessness produced by race slavery as a world historical event of biopolitical dimensions: “Kinlessness . . . [was] a pivotal modern event, a historical innovation designed to separate genetic reproduction from forms of human being and thus a ‘biopolitical fracture’ to be variously exploited, rationalized, and put to work” (Bentley 271). As Bentley underscores here, kinlessness, as produced by the economic dictates of the slave trade, becomes a force of dehumanization—a regime of social death, a mode of removing Africans and their descendants from the collective demos of the modern nation.
and, in turn, she suggests, from the novel as well. And indeed, this production of kinlessness—of blackness as generative of the end of genealogical identity—is what I have traced above as a standard trope in the novels of the West Indies.

However, Bentley suggests that literature is uniquely positioned to enable a rethinking of kinship for those who have been excluded from its purviews—namely, for those consigned to “subsovereign” forms of biopolitical life and kinlessness. Given that kinship relations for such persons are rendered unspeakable by a legal and cultural regime that enjoins kinlessness upon New World Africans, literature—and catachresis in particular, on Bentley’s account—offers an opening for speaking the unspeakable. To invoke the terms of my argument in this essay, then, we might say that literature is a resource for imagining that which must be unimagined according to a logic of capitalist modernity. For Bentley, however, making use of the aesthetic possibilities inherent in literature in this regard requires moving outside the confines of the genre of the novel. Given the nature of the novel as a genre “shaped . . . by the very architecture of middle-class kinship from which African peoples have been excluded” (277), Bentley suggests that the writing of a “counterhistory of kinlessness” will necessarily “express meanings that exceed the constricted familism of the genre” of the novel and require writing at a “narrative distance” from the formal constraints of the novelistic genre (278).

Bentley’s argument thus raises the following question for me: to what extent is the kinlessness produced by the slave trade and modernity one that is written into the form of the novel? Does the novel exclude the aesthetic representation of radical kinlessness or, alternatively, is this its condition of possibility? As the work of both Nancy Armstrong and Leonard Tennenhouse on the early American novel has suggested, the genre of the novel is one that lends itself to the reimagining of kinship structures. Indeed, one might say that this is the very point of the genre—namely, to reframe kinship away from genealogy and toward alternative configurations such as newly dominant forms of nationalism and familism. That nationalism and familism impose the kinds of representational constraints that Bentley invokes is undoubtedly true, but the genre of the novel might be the very resource for thinking beyond such constraints rather than the locus of their imposition.

In contrast to Bentley’s suggestion that the novel is implicated in the history of kinlessness, let me propose, then, that we consider the extent to which kinlessness is the condition of the possibility of the novel itself. In other words, if the novel is concerned with a postgenealogical mode of existence, then perhaps it is precisely the condition of kinlessness that generates the formal possibilities of the novel. And if so, we could ask what the novel makes aesthetically possible that moves beyond genealogy—or, differently put, that slides into varied kinship structures, or what I will call alternative assemblages that do not necessarily register as human, assemblages that exceed what we tend to imagine as the demos (in national or familial terms) but that nonetheless have collective representational force.

10 See Armstrong and Tennenhouse, The Imaginary Puritan, and Tennenhouse, The Importance of Feeling English.
Let me propose three forms of such alternative assemblages that regularly appear in the novels of the West Indies that I have introduced above: the animal, the sororal, and the Obi. In what follows, I explore each of these alternative assemblages as it appears in The Slave-King (1833), Ritchie’s expanded English rendition of Victor Hugo’s early novel about the Haitian Revolution, Bug-Jargal.11 The novel centers around three characters: Lieutenant Leopold D’Auverney, the Frenchman; Bug-Jargal, the slave king; and Maria, the white creole love interest. We initially meet D’Auverney as an officer in the French Revolutionary army fighting in England, in the framing apparatus of the narrative, which begins as a military camp tale in which D’Auverney relates his sad history in St. Domingue to his fellow soldiers. D’Auverney moved from France to his uncle’s plantation on St. Domingue at a young age and was betrothed to his cousin, Maria, with whom he lived in idyllic happiness prior to the date of his anticipated wedding: the night of 22 August 1791. D’Auverney does indeed wed Maria, but given the outbreak of a slave revolt between the recitation of vows in the church and the performance of marital relations in the plantation bedroom, the anticipated consummation, in fact, never arrives. Before D’Auverney is able to return to the nuptial chamber from the altar, he is called to arms by the attack of black revolutionaries. As D’Auverney laments, “It may be imagined with what unwillingness I complied; and with what irritation I found myself on my wedding-night, marching away from my expectant bride, the flash of steel in my eyes, the fires of war brightening the heavens around me, and the thunder of the fusillade in my ear” (51). Indeed, one could say that the whole novel takes place in the space of a perpetually deferred desire to have marital sex. As such, then, Hugo’s novel is consistent with the colonial geography of sex I outlined above—a geography according to which reproductive, marital sex does not occur in the Caribbean.

As D’Auverney’s wife, Maria, waits for him in the “nuptial chamber,” the plantation is attacked by black insurgents; the house is burned in the standard fashion—with flames reaching to the sky against the ruins of the doomed plantation, surrounded by an orgy of black demons—and Maria is carried away to safety in the

11 The full title of Ritchie’s novel is The Slave-King: From the Bug-Jargal of Victor Hugo, published in London and Philadelphia in 1833 as volume 6 of the Library of Romance. Hugo published a short story titled “Bug-Jargal” in serial form in 1820 in the journal Conservateur littéraire. A separate edition of the novel first appeared in French in 1826 with the title Bug Jargal. A second edition appeared in 1829, and a third edition in 1832 with a new preface by Hugo; the title of the 1832 edition was Bug Jargal, 1791. Chris Bongie has recently published an English translation of Hugo’s novel with an excellent introduction detailing the history of the book’s publication and translation. As Bongie notes, the novel was translated (often with significant revisions) into English in four different versions before 1866. Ritchie’s edition was the most popular English-language version of Hugo’s novel; however, Ritchie also significantly expanded and revised Hugo’s novel—often in such a way as to emphasize the “end of the line” trope and the alternative assemblages that concern me in this essay. For discussion of Ritchie’s translation and redaction of Hugo’s novel and its marketing, see Bongie, Friends and Enemies 121. For further discussion of Hugo’s and Ritchie’s novels in the context of American literature and in relation to issues of translation, see Susan Gillman and Kirsten Silva Gruesz.
arms of a faithful slave. The faithful slave, in this case, is named Pierrot, and we later learn that he has a second name: Bug-Jargal. Pierrot, a regal, “gigantic black” (67), is in love with Maria, but out of loyalty to her, he has foresworn to act on his desire and seeks only to aid her in reuniting with her new husband, D’Auverney. The novel thus sketches a triangular relation among Bug-Jargal, D’Auverney, and Maria, given that both men are in love with Maria. But in true “between men”/Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick fashion, it becomes clear that the real intimacy at stake in the novel is that between Bug-Jargal and D’Auverney rather than that between Maria and either Bug-Jargal or D’Auverney.

By the close of novel, only D’Auverney has survived the conflagration of the Haitian Revolution. Bug-Jargal goes to heroic ends to simultaneously lead the slave revolt in the right direction (against the machinations of a competing, far less heroic slave leader, Biassou) and to save D’Auverney from Biassou so that he can be reunited with Maria. However, when Bug-Jargal is killed at the end of the novel, Maria dies of consumption over grief at the loss of his noble and heroic life. On the one hand, then, the novel rather perfectly articulates the standard contours of the “end of the line” trope, in which white reproduction fails and genealogy is arrested in the colony: while D’Auverney survives to return to the metropole, he is ultimately uncoupled and nonreproductive, dying in military service to the French Republic. On the other hand, the novel is replete with alternative kinships or alternative assemblages that tend to overtake the end-of-line narrative within the novel.

The first of these is an assemblage of the human and nonhuman—an instance of kinship mediated by the animal. Within the novel, we first meet D’Auverney by way of meeting his dog, Hero, who appears at the campfire with the French soldiers who listen to D’Auverney’s tale. Subsequently, we learn that Hero was originally Bug-Jargal’s dog. Thus the unfigurable kinship of Bug-Jargal and D’Auverney has a material embodiment in Hero—in a nonhuman figure. Within the novel, Hero first appears in association with Bug-Jargal when Bug-Jargal has been imprisoned for insulting Maria’s uncle and is awaiting execution. Hero not only brings Bug-Jargal food in prison but also ultimately facilitates his escape by bringing him palm leaves on which are written directions from a compatriot that help him to escape. As the novel indicates, the relation between Bug-Jargal and Hero is one that exceeds even intimate association: we might rather call it anamorphic insofar as one depends upon the other for survival and existence. As the novel has it, when Bug-Jargal escapes from prison, the guard “saw no possible mode by which Pierrot could have escaped, or Hero entered; and he was under the necessity therefore of coming to the conclusion, that the negro had been metamorphosed into a dog” (48). It is the lateral assemblage of “dog” and “negro,” in this sentence, that unaccountably (even when under watchful imperial guard) produces a free man. And later in the novel, as D’Auverney, in turn, is about to face death in a struggle with the evil dwarf, Habibrah, Hero again arrives and literally drags D’Auverney from the abyss into which he is about to fall, thereby sustaining his life as well. Thus while the novel proposes a triangular relationship among Maria, Bug-Jargal, and D’Auverney, there is perhaps a stronger triangulation linking D’Auverney, Bug-Jargal, and Hero—a cross-species assemblage that literally gives life to both Bug-Jargal and D’Auverney in a landscape of racial struggle unto the death. What makes this
assemblage possible, then, as a form of life-sustaining demos is the fact that it is not a demos: Hero is not a person but a dog, and it is his nonhumanness that makes possible a living assemblage/collectivity that would otherwise be a deadly binary opposition between white and black.

A second lateral genealogy that appears repeatedly across novels of the West Indies is that of the sororal—a set of relations between sisters or siblings that is distinctly horizontal in opposition to the vertical structure of genealogical reproduction. In The Slave-King and Bug-Jargal, the sibling relation is that of brothers rather than sisters, but as in other instances of this trope, the sibling relation is notably cross-racial. Bug-Jargal and D’Auverney repeatedly fashion their intimacy as that of brothers despite the racial divide that places them on opposite sides of a violent revolution. “May I now call thee brother?” asks Bug-Jargal. “My answer was,” D’Auverney relates, “to throw myself upon his breast” (172). However, D’Auverney and Bug-Jargal are decidedly not brothers in arms, given their opposing military allegiances, and it is partially for this reason that the sibling relation between them is congruent with the sororal relation that appears more explicitly in many of the other novels concerning the Haitian Revolution. Sansay’s epistolary novel Secret History; or, the Horrors of St. Domingo concerns the experiences of two white sisters from Philadelphia, Clara and Mary, in St. Domingue during the revolution. Southworth’s Retribution features the continued sororal twinning and contrasting of the two central female protagonists; The History of the Mademoiselles Janvier: The Last Two White Women in St. Domingue, as we have seen, also concerns the fate of two white sisters during the Haitian Revolution, and La Belle Zoa features a pair of mixed-race sisters, Zoa and Adelle. In each case, the strength and centrality of a lateral relation between sisters serve to displace an Oedipal verticality that obtains between fathers and sons or parents and children. Moreover, the fact that the sororal relation has cross-racial dimensions in many of these novels is indicative of what might be defined as a serial (rather than binary) account of difference that produces a mode of kinship—an alternative assemblage—quite distinct from that of the white reproductive family.

The third form of alternative assemblage in the novel of the West Indies—the Obi—is quite central to Ritchie’s The Slave-King and Hugo’s Bug-Jargal. Obi (short for Obeah) is the name of a Jamaican spiritual and medical practice associated with colonial slave culture and the African diaspora. In Hugo’s novel, the evil dwarf Habibrah is an Obi—a sort of a Vodun priest—who becomes the chief lieutenant of the bloodthirsty black general Biassou in the novel.12 Obi might be understood as a form of knowledge that relies upon acts of assemblage: the Obi fetish created by the Obi priest is assembled from scraps and fragments—of hair, grave dirt, glass

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12 Importantly, Ritchie changes Habibrah’s identity from “Obi” to “Ouanga.” The Obi Priest (the term used by Hugo) is associated with Obeah, which was largely practiced in Jamaica, not St. Domingue. In St. Domingue, “Ouanga” was the term for the Vodun priest. Ritchie notes that Hugo’s use of the term Obi is incorrect and thus changes it to “Ouanga” throughout. Nonetheless, the practices described in Hugo’s and Ritchie’s novels are those of Obeah. Accordingly, I use the term Obi to refer to Habibrah’s role in both texts.
shards, nails, and teeth, among other objects. Significantly, the Obi fetish blurs lines of agency and formal coherence between human subjects and objects such that objects exhibit agency and subjects exhibit porous and shape-shifting characteristics. An 1844 traveler’s account of an Obi seeking to cure a man with a leg injury in Antigua points to this unusual morphology:

The Obeah man agreed to cure [the injured man], provided he received ten dollars for his pains. This the infirm man was unable to do, but said he had a surtout and a pair of black trousers at home, and if he would take them in place of the money, he would go and fetch them. The offer was accepted by the conjuror, the surtout and trousers were put into his hands, and the ceremony commenced. The diseased man was ordered to seat himself upon the ground, while Mr. Conjuror took a calabash of some liquid, and poured it upon his head, rubbed it very hard, and then putting his mouth to that part called the “crown of the head,” sucked it for some time, and producing a tooth, said he had extracted it by those means, and that his leg would soon get well. (Antigua and the Antiguans 52)

The English observer and critic of Obeah begins her account by relating the substitution of clothes for money as a form of payment: rather than abstract exchange, the relation of injured man and Obi is materialized in a “surtout and trousers.” And this strangely material, metamorphic substitution continues as the Obi sucks a tooth from the head of the suffering man, as if materializing and extracting the injury itself. Later in the same account of Obeah, the author relates a scene in which an Obi extracts pieces of a woman’s missing gown from her flesh and she concludes, “The negroes, with but few exceptions, firmly believe the Obeah people can insert different articles, such as pieces of glass bottles, old rags, nails, stones, &c., into the flesh of those they dislike, and that the afflicted are obliged to get one of the same craft to relieve them” (54). Notably, then, Obi violates European epistemological assumptions concerning the boundaries between subject and object, as well as between animate and inanimate objects, and assembles subjects and objects without regard for categorical differences between the two.

British colonizers in Jamaica responded to Obeah in contradictory fashion: although European writers typically derided the practice of Obi as a form of primitive superstition, the British also moved to outlaw Obi following Tacky’s Rebellion in 1760. Ostensibly powerless as a medical and/or spiritual practice, Obeah nonetheless seemed to wield too much power as a mobilizing political and military force: the British put hundreds of enslaved blacks to death on charges of practicing Obeah. Accordingly, Obi represented something of a category crisis for imperialists: its status was simultaneously medical, religious, and political, and yet it also did not constitute a legitimate form of knowledge within any of these fields. Obi, one might say, generated a knowledge crisis with respect to colonialism: by reassembling subjects and objects, Obi evaded colonial knowledge regimes in such a way as to threaten colonial power.13

13 See Toni Wall Jaudon for a particularly insightful account of the relation between Obeah and non-Western ontologies. For historical scholarship on Obeah, see Maarit Forde and Diana
Like the traveler’s account cited above, Ritchie’s novel tends to participate in a general derision of Obi, representing it as a sort of naive category violation. However, the accounts of Obi within the novel are also particularly evocative in their capacity to challenge epistemic colonial frames in the text. Thus, for instance, Biassou orders that a religious mass be celebrated by Habibrah; during the mass, a stolen sugar chest is transformed into an altar, and the tabernacle and pyx (which holds the host) that belonged to the church where D’Auverney and Maria were married appear as well. The objects that carried the ritual weight of performing the union of D’Auverney and Maria are here repurposed, inserted into a different set of relations among people and objects such that a new assemblage (one that directly overwrites that of the married, reproductive white couple) emerges. As the Obeah mass begins, we see Habibrah orchestrating this new assemblage: “He then, without removing either his penitential veil, or Ouanga bonnet, threw over his back and naked breast the cope which formerly belonged to the prior of Acul, opened the silver clasps of the missal in which had been recorded the prayers of my fatal marriage, and announced, by a bow to the chief . . . that all was ready for the commencement of the ceremony” (93). D’Auverney and presumably Ritchie have nothing but contempt for what appears, on one level, to be a poor imitation of Catholic ritual. However, the “mock service” has two clear functions: it dismantles the ritual of marriage that would have enabled a white, reproductive genealogy, and, as we will see, it articulates in its stead an alternative kinship that animates the revolutionary black army.

Following Habibrah’s ritual preparations, Biassou delivers a rousing “soldierly sermon,” in which a refigured kinship is explicitly at stake: “Blacks, Creoles and Congos,” Biassou states to his soldiers,

*vengeance and liberty! Sang-melés, I conjure you to be faithful to us: let not the plausibility, de los diablos blancos, win you to their side. Your fathers, to be sure, were Europeans; but remember, your mothers were Africans! Besides, would you, O hermanos de mi alma, cringe to those, who never treated you as children, but trampled over you and treated you as slaves. . . . Should you, therefore, encounter your father in battle, remember you must say one to another, Touye papa moê, ma touye quena toué! (97)*

White, patrilineal kinship is thus explicitly exposed within the colony as productive of kinlessness, not of genealogical descent. Biassou, in turn, constructs a mixed-race, linguistically creole assemblage of brothers by way of an Obi mass that puts to new use the objects of European ritual in order to create a new demos—a new assemblage within which kinless subjects achieve representational presence

Paton, and for discussion of Obeah in literature and performance see Srinivas Aravamudan. I discuss Obeah and subject/object relations further in Dillon, “Obi, Assemblage, Enchantment.”

14 Ritchie includes a footnote translating the last phrase in this passage as “Kill my father, and I will kill yours.” In the same note he remarks that “many mulattoes juggled in this manner with the crime of parricide, and were heard to pronounce the execrable words” (110). For an illuminating discussion of the use of multiple languages in the novel in passages such as this, see Gillman and Gruesz.
and force. Thus the Obi assemblage that Ritchie seemingly derides is also one that has creative and analytical force within the novel, particularly with regard to colonial structures of kinship.

By way of conclusion, it may be helpful to consider more closely the concept of *assemblage*—a term I borrow from the theorist Bruno Latour (who in turn borrows it from Gilles Deleuze); more specifically, I cite the term in the title of this essay to invoke Latour’s model of “reassembling the social.” According to Latour’s actor-network theory, agency resides in networks of subjects and objects (rather than in agential subjects—such as democratic citizen-subjects—alone), and these networks (assemblages) constitute the social world. Further, our understanding of social meaning emerges from these assemblages rather than vice versa. Latour writes, for instance:

> While the most common experience we have of the social world is of being simultaneously seized by several possible and contradictory calls for regroupings, it seems the most important decision to make before becoming a social scientist is to decide first which ingredients are already there in society. While it is fairly obvious that we are enrolled in a group by a series of interventions that renders visible those who argue for the relevance of one grouping and the irrelevance of others, everything happens as if social scientists had to claim that there exists “out there” one type that is real, whereas the other sets are really inauthentic, obsolete, irrelevant, or artificial. (28)

Latour’s commentary, in this case, is directed toward a critique of the standard methods of social science: he contends that there are no preexisting categories or groupings into which social life falls but rather only a series of competing enrollments—a series of competing calls to see one category or set as meaningful and another as invisible. We might apply a similar analysis to the novel: if the novel enrolls the subject or produces the subject in relation to a social horizon (a collectivity, a demos such as the nation), that demos need not preexist the novel itself. This, then, is the aesthetic possibility of kinlessness—that of reassembling the social. To reassemble the social entails rendering visible and meaningful a set of relations—an epistemology—that has been previously regarded as inauthentic, artificial, untruthful, or meaningless—off the map, one might say. In this essay, I have proposed that we read some of these alternative assemblages in novels concerning the Haitian Revolution—not as fictions made of whole cloth but as embedded historical and social relations that assume meaning through the structure of narrative. Is the novel, then, democratic? Perhaps it is insofar as it allows us to imagine that the demos is not a demos and the subject is not a subject. Perhaps the novel is most democratic at the point where it engages in an aesthetic process of assembling and reassembling the social.
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