

PLEASURE AND JOUISSANCE: THE MARTINICAN LIVED EXPERIENCE A TRANSLATION OF AND COMMENTARY ON ÉDOUARD GLISSANT'S ESSAY, "PLAISIR ET JOUISSANCE: LE VÉCU MARTINICAISS"

Rachel A. Rothendler

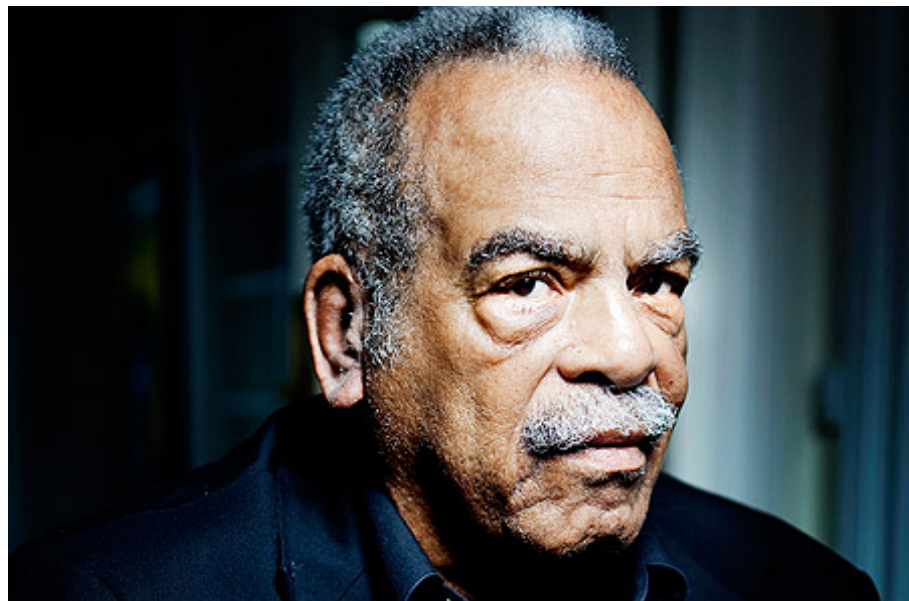
J.D. / Ph.D. Student, Duke University

In her translation of Édouard Glissant's essay, "Plaisir et jouissance: le vécu martiniquais", Rachel Rothendler critiques his delimiting reading of Martinican female pleasure and sexuality.

INTRODUCTION

When I first approached the title of this essay, I toyed with the idea of translating the concept of "jouissance" into English, as translations of other works sometimes do. At one point, I considered translating jouissance as "pleasurable possession" to highlight this dual connection to pleasure ("plaisir") and property. But jouissance cannot really be signified by one or even five words in English. In addition, because I believe Glissant's understandings of jouissance to diverge from those Jacques Lacan, it seemed particularly important, for the sake of clarity, to stick with the original term. I will note here, as Bruce Fink so pointedly does in his translation of Lacan, that "jouir de means to enjoy, take advantage of, benefit from, get off on, and so on. Jouir also means 'to come' in the sexual sense: 'to reach orgasm'" (3). To that I will add that jouissance (and "jouir de") can refer to possession and the use of property, reinforcing its link to a notion of economy. I will discuss Glissant's views on jouissance, and their relation to those of Lacan, in greater depth as the text progresses.

With regards to the word "vécu," simply translating it as "experience" did not seem to embody the idea stressed throughout Glissant's text that the Martinicans have been subjected to their own history and to its impact on their sexual lives. I wanted to convey the sense of living through something (the verb "vivre," from which "vécu" is derived, can actually mean "to live through"), without always having the ability of control. "Experience" seems to imply either an event or a period from which one can take away or gain something: a skill-set, a knowledge, a feeling, etc. The term "lived experience" is also frequently used in reference to minority or oppressed groups, and Glissant certainly emphasizes the Martinicans' economic and global inferiority and "irresponsibility."



Édouard Glissant. Barcello/Glissant Conference. Palais des Nations. UN Geneva. (UN Photo/Jean-Marc Ferre). 2009.

In short, what I hope to illustrate through my interweaving commentaries, both on the choices I made in my translations as well on the text itself, is that Glissant's theorizing of this "Martinican lived reality" unravels when encountered by the figure of the contemporary Martinican woman and by the notion of sexual difference.

Any researcher attempting to shed light on the complexities of the social formation and behaviors of Martinicans would need to emphasize the continuing ripple effects caused by the historical circumstances surrounding their emergence as a people. But he would also need to acknowledge the extent to which, both on the individual level and collectively, Martinicans were unable to truly grasp, and therefore, control these circumstances in any real way. In essence, one of the striking elements of Martinican life, but one to which the Martinican people are forever subjected unconsciously, is the impact force of historical experience on the general mentality of the population. These pieces of history, unabsorbed in the collective memory and left unanalyzed, reverberate dully as traces, made all the more difficult to decipher by their skillful camouflaging of their own intensity and meaning.

Hence, one cannot really consider the general sexual demeanor of the Martinicans, nor even determine if there exists a specific sexual demeanor, if one does not refer to a certain point zero, namely, that of the Martinican people's sexual life at the time of their formation. [1] A task made all the more difficult by the number of dissenting voices that at once arise, not one of them able to accept even the vague idea that their sexual activity could have any small link to an ancestor-slave, an ancestor not fully recognized as such. These resistances force one to study the link more closely.

I must first examine a hypothesis concerning African cultural traces related to the matter at hand. Yet the deportation of Africans functioned in such a way that one must consider the slaves' passage across the Atlantic as an immense erasure directed at the elimination of the basic aspects of sexual behavior, which had before been differentiated by the deportees' region of origin. Consequently, these individuals were left singularly free, that is to say, without the stability of an expressible tradition, confronted with this new situation. [2] Sexual behavior as cultural trace cannot, in this regard, be assimilated into, for example, the "residual traces" of religious behavior nor into the socio-cultural automatism triggered by their common origin. It is part of that which, in the case of the transplanted individual, disappears as a tradition, as a collective reflex, and as an atavism. [3]

In the context of the slave regime, when the Antillean man, subjected to the relentless constraint of the system, first discovers something which he can call his own *jouissance*, he hides it away from the master, steals it from his power. [4] We know that in this case, concerns over return and capital gain determine the practices, if not the politics, of the slave-possessing colonizers. This is a permanent feature of the entire Black Diaspora in the Americas. The master believes that the slave belongs to him entirely, right down to the slave's reproductive function. Like an animal made for breeding, neither the slave's pleasure nor his *jouissance* are taken into account. His margin for sexual maneuver is restricted to the profit margin of the master. [5] His *jouissance* is thus never a discovery, never a drive; it is certainly never a newly developed hunger. It is, each time that he experiences it without his master's permission, that which is literally deleted at the authoritative hands of the latter. *Jouissance* is neither an acquirement nor an intention; it is a theft. It is not an extension of the self; it is that which is derived from the Other, the ever-present Other, the invisible and repressing voyeur. [6]

COMMENTARY

[1] Glissant opens by claiming that there exists a relationship of convergence and causation between history and sexuality in the case of the Martinican people. Is this a universal characteristic? I find such an unqualified assertion to be problematic on several levels which I will develop throughout my commentaries. Suffice it to say at this point that the claim rests on the assumption that these reverberating historical "traces" have the power to transform, undo, even erase an individual's sexuality, or the specific type of sexuality they have known. Such an assumption suggests that sexuality is, above all else, historically or situationally determined.

What makes Glissant's assertion more problematic, and, as we shall see, somewhat contradictory, is that he locates both the "point zero" of Martinicans' history and of their sexuality at the supposed start of their formation as a people, namely their capture and transportation across the Atlantic, the Middle (or, maybe for Glissant, "Beginning") Passage. In Glissant's mind, writes Alexandre Leupin, "the slave trade fabricates a tabula rasa from which all the past history of the individual and the community, including their sexual histories and practices, has been annihilated" (893). As we shall see in a moment, the problem lies in his absolutist claim to the erasure of the individuals' history, their sexuality, and, therefore, their sexual difference. [Let me note that I understand **sexual difference** as something fluid – after all, sex and sexuality are both fluid – fluidity implying a multiplicity in identification and experience.] As such, I would actually disagree with Max Hantel's statement that Glissant "describes the middle passage as a constitutive abyss transforming fragmented African groups into the people of the Caribbean." (11, my emphasis added). It is entirely possible, likely even, that the Middle Passage "transformed" sexuality. Glissant, though, claims that the Middle Passage erased their sexual lives, rather than simply transforming them. I hope to show that Glissant does not successfully develop this claim and that he provides contradictory evidence for it.

[2] It would follow from Glissant's assertion that the voyage across the Atlantic represented "an immense erasure" of the slaves' "basic aspects of sexual behavior," that the slave ships also existed as locations devoid of sexual difference. Hortense Spillers makes a similar argument that while "gendering" takes place within the confines of the domestic... The human cargo of a slave vessel... offers a counter-narrative to notions of the domestic. Those African persons in 'Middle Passage' were literally suspended in the 'oceanic,' if we think of the latter in its Freudian orientation as an analogy for **undifferentiated identity**... but they were also nowhere at all... Under these conditions, **one is neither female, nor male**, as both subjects are taken into 'account' as quantities" (72, my emphasis added).

The problem with these arguments, in the case of this essay, is that if the point in time in question was indeed the beginning of what now constitutes the sexual life of Martinicans, it does not seem logical that a significant portion of Glissant's subsequent discussion relies so

heavily on the distinction between the Martinican man and woman. I am not attempting to claim that historical circumstances have no bearing on sexuality, but I do not accept that they can map as perfectly onto sexual formation as Glissant maintains. Moreover, to the extent that these historical circumstances do influence sexuality over the course of time, it would have strengthened Glissant's arguments to have included potential consequences of this original lack of gender differentiation, particularly on the development of the sexual lives of men and women in Martinique.

[3] Glissant's descriptions of sexual behavior and "traces" are similar to those of Lacan, yet the two scholars diverge somewhat in their conclusions. Lacan connects the idea of "traces," to the concept of *l'amour*, which he defines as "what appears in the form of bizarre signs on the body. They are the sexual characteristics that come from beyond, from that place we believed we could eye under the microscope in the form of the germ cell... It is thus false to say that there is a separation of the soma from the germ because, since it harbors this germ, the body bears its traces. There are traces on *l'amour*. But they are only traces. The body's being (*l'être du corps*) is of course sexed (*sexué*), but it is secondary, as they say" (4-5). Under Glissant's "microscope," instead of sexual "traces" as those of sexual difference, they are conceived of as "cultural traces." Whereas Lacan's statements, seem to imply a permanence to these traces (whether or not they are significant), Glissant claims that they "disappear" from the slave's individual identity.

[4] Where the concept of *jouissance* is concerned, it would appear that Glissant and Lacan again diverge in their lines of thinking. Lacan maintains that "the body's *jouissance*, insofar as that body symbolizes the Other, does not depend on those traces" (5), while Glissant suggests that such traces, or rather, their absence, have continuing ripple effects ("retentissements") on social structures in Martinique, particularly with regard to sexual activity and *jouissance* (as Glissant associates *jouissance* directly with sexual activity). Glissant also parallels Lacan's use of a One/Other rhetoric; however, rather than the One as man and the Other as woman, he tends to draw that binary between the master/White man and the slave/Martinican man.

[5] This assertion represents an even clearer break with Lacan's understanding of *jouissance*. Unlike Lacan, who distinguishes between utility and *jouissance*, Glissant, as I think will become clearer, appears to conflate the two in his interweaving of economic theories and those pertaining to sexuality. For Lacan, this distinction lies in "the relationship between law (*droit*) and *jouissance*," embodied in the legal concept of usufruct, which "brings together... the difference between utility [literally, 'the useful,' writes Fink] and *jouissance*. What purpose does utility serve? This has never been well defined... '*Usufruct*' means that you can enjoy (*jouir de*) your means, but must not waste them... This is clearly the essence of law... What is *jouissance*? Here it amounts to no more than a negative instance (instance). *Jouissance* is what serves no purpose (*ne sert à rien*)" (3). The French word "instance," as Fink points out, also conveys a sense of **agency, power, or authority**. In this passage, on the other hand (again, taking the Martinican as the

Other in relation to the white slave master), Glissant endows *jouissance*, or rather the restriction of *jouissance*, with a certain purpose in the context of slavery, that of establishing the master's "profit margin" at the expense of the male slave. Restriction of the black man's *jouissance* means control for the white man.

Although, for Glissant, *jouissance* is somewhat wasted ("a negative instance") by the Martinican man, as he cannot "take his pleasure" from it, at the same time, it is a very real and tangible form of property, of possession; hence, his description of it as being "stolen" from the master. Rather than standing in contradistinction to the notions of utility and usufruct, *jouissance* becomes, on a certain level, assimilated into them. According to Glissant, as we shall see, the same can be said of this distinction in Martinique today, particularly where women are concerned.

[6] It is interesting to note here that, whereas we are generally accustomed to seeing "Other" in reference to the subjugated/Third-World/non-Western/developing nation, it is here used in reference to the colonizer ("the invisible and repressing voyeur"), positioning him outside, or simply on the opposite side. Glissant uses this binary in a consistently ambiguous manner, in this essay and elsewhere, himself both a Western-educated academic and a native of Martinique, both the One and the Other. As noted by Leupin, in this particular chapter of *Le discours antillais*, "Glissant entirely escapes any identification either with the slaves' descendants, the practitioners of Martinican *jouissance*, or the masters..." (895). In this case, at least, rather than outside and gazing in, the white man is outside and controlling what is inside: the black man and his *jouissance*. Indeed, many scholars believe that the organization of slavery in the Caribbean colonies was entirely premised on this control of sexuality. Arlette Gautier, in *Les sœurs de Solitude*, describes this lens on colonialism:

Dans ce but [de l'extorsion du travail gratuit] sont mis en place en une cinquantaine d'années le système répressif et l'organisation du travail, fondée sur le sexe tout autant que sur le statut juridique... Cette division sexuelle du travail a servi à assurer la production selon les traditions patriarcales africaines et européennes et donc à ménager les susceptibilités masculines... [L]e véritable socle de l'esclavage [c'est] la division sexuelle du travail qui favorise les hommes... (260)

As Gautier demonstrates throughout her book, this sexual division of labor came to have particularly important consequences on the lives of female slaves, whose work and positions within the hierarchy of the plantation were far more limited than those of men. As a result, this division also affected women's decisions regarding their sexuality, sexuality being a distinct aspect of the Martinican woman's life, and one which, I will continue to argue, she could, and can, control, in apparent contrast to her male counterpart.

Sexual activity is thus organized around furtive, snatched encounters amidst the sugar cane fields, [7] calling to mind a Creole proverb recorded at the end of the last century by Lafcadio Hearn in his collection *Gombo Zheb*, the words of which have never been translated into French: “*Si savann’ té ka palé, nous sé con-net trop’ sicré.*” The theft of *jouissance* therefore drives a sort of hunger for, or obsession with, *jouissance*, a violent and uncontrollable need for a decisive realization of the act, which diminishes and annihilates the pleasure inherent in *jouissance*. Hence, a short-circuiting is established through which we see that the hunger for *jouissance* nullifies and voids the pleasure of *jouissance*, and in which the two dimensions of pleasure and *jouissance* are no longer placed in opposition to one another (which would be a manner of coexistence), but in a way such that they ignore and exclude one another. Moreover, it is quite certain that the stealing of *jouissance* imprisons the individual in the endless pursuit of his quest, of his theft, and leaves him all the more impervious to the pleasure or to the *jouissance* of a female partner. Impervious but not indifferent, for the Martinican man will demand evidence of the woman’s *jouissance*, not in the sense of belonging to the woman, but in the sense of sanctioning the legitimacy of his own theft. [8] Hence, the theft of the master’s power is linked to the rape of the woman, a latent but permanent rape. A large part of the Martinicans’ sexual demeanor arises from such an original conditioning, although naturally not perceived as such nor elucidated in any way. [9]

This short-circuit between the hunger of *jouissance* and the profit of pleasure is nothing more and nothing less than a temporal short-circuit. Due to its tacit recognition as a non-given, as something discontinuous and stolen from the master, the slave’s *jouissance*, abrupt in this threatened moment, inhibits a development of the pleasure which would have implied continuity, a sense of purpose for purpose’s sake [*l’en-soi*], and duration. *Jouissance* is thus nothing but an ultimate game of “catch-up” [*rattrapage*] to make up for the irresponsibility¹ in the economic processes of production and for the irresponsibility in the physiological process of reproduction. The profit of pleasure is evacuated. The time of profit is the master’s time. In this respect, as in many others, the Martinican, dramatically, *does not possess time*. It is astonishing how, at any moment, language illustrates this obsession with the stolen moment, this hunger for *jouissance* which drives the being outside any process of fulfillment. There is a Creole saying, “*Avan i cho i tchuit*,”² which really underlines the momentum of the collective drive, that which claims to

[7] This seemingly trivial observation represents the start of Glissant’s ambivalent attitude towards the position of the Martinican woman, both during the time of slavery and in the years since its abolition in 1848. It is easy to overlook here his predication of the male slave’s *jouissance* on the existence of an unnamed object of that *jouissance*, presumably the existence of the woman.

In fact, nowhere in this essay does Glissant explicitly mention the Martinican woman’s *jouissance* (except in the sense of her orgasm). This is consistent with Lacan’s theories of “jouissance of the Other” (the Other being woman) as “a question, because the answer it may constitute is not necessary” (4), and as a “non-whole” (24). Thus, the woman’s *jouissance*, if we can even speak of such a thing, is irrelevant. For, according to Lacan, “woman does not exist, woman is not whole (pas toute) – woman’s sexual organ is of no interest (ne lui dit rien) except via the body’s *jouissance*... *Jouissance*, qua sexual, is phallic – in other words, it is not related to the Other as such” (7-9). Glissant, however, comes to vacillate between, on the one hand, this incompleteness and relative anonymity of the woman in relation to sexuality, and, on the other, a far more poignant, detailed characterization of her sexuality as part of the current landscape of Martinican sexual life.

[8] In this passage, Glissant moves away from his earlier indications of woman’s anonymity in relation to the man’s *jouissance* and diverges from Lacan’s view of the Other (woman) as irrelevant to *jouissance*. Glissant implies here that during these moments of the man’s *jouissance*, already not belonging to him because “stolen” and “hidden away” from the master, he seeks “evidence of the woman’s *jouissance*,” which I here take to mean simply her orgasm (rather than her *jouissance* in the complete Lacanian sense of the word, of which the woman does not possess the capability). The male slave requires the woman’s orgasm as validation of his own *jouissance*, which, of course, is not even his own, affirming Glissant’s illustration of his position as pathetic and out of his control.

[9] Again, Glissant claims that historical circumstances dictated, and continue to dictate, Martinicans’ sexuality. This “original conditioning,” based on the man’s *jouissance* as relative to the presence of the woman, has serious implications for the woman’s sexuality (or lack thereof). Although her position between master and male slave holds some level of inherent power, we are presented with a paradox: while the man’s *jouissance* depends on the woman (and her supposed “*jouissance*”), this need for legitimization also somehow results in her rape, a circumstance under which one would assume there could be no *jouissance* on the part of the woman to legitimize the man’s.

While Glissant makes a generalization concerning “the Martinicans’ sexual demeanor,” nowhere in these initial remarks does he mention the sexual demeanor specific to the Martinican woman, only that specific to her male counterpart. He implies, as before, that the Martinican woman has no agency in her own sexuality, a thing apart from her, predicated entirely on the sexual activity of the man. Is this a result of the original “point zero” rape which, in effect, becomes a “permanent rape” in the present? Does this reiterated rape, an act *done to* the woman, then take away whatever control she would have had to shape and define her own sexuality as independent from the man’s, or even to create her own *jouissance*?

extract the result before having implemented the means to do so. Moreover, this obsession with immediate *jouissance* disrupts virtually every field of human activity. A client desires his merchandise immediately and fully; he will not have the patience to verify its suitability for a particular use; a newly established merchant desires to collect fully and immediately on his investments; he will not have the patience to articulate his sales techniques, to spread the profits proportionally, even if he figures out that his clientele would increase proportionally from this calculated spread. Herein lies an irresistible call that makes of the Martinican one who *does not take the time*. In other words, one who does not take his pleasure. [10]

One may object to my reasoning, claiming that such considerations are of the past, that what I am analyzing here does not take into account the evolution of Martinican society, that, within these social categories, little by little, former mulattoes have appeared as members of the elite, that such ripple effects cannot truly be detected. I would respond that in making such objections, one remains gravely ignorant of the world's general tendency to alienate the social body of Martinique. The temporal short-circuiting previously discussed is the result of a technique of deprivation which, no matter what innocent pleasure the Martinicans may take in handling machines or gadgets, nonetheless remains a constant negative in our history. And if one were to tell me that we have passed beyond all that, I would ask that we evaluate the time that separates us from the following anecdote – whether it is invented or not makes little difference (though it would be all the more significant were it invented): It is about a young Antillean man who makes love to a French woman and, at the moment of orgasm [*jouir*], cries out, “Long live Schœlcher!” Or maybe it is about a real-life Antillean boy who was kissing a young white woman on the Paris metro, fist in the air like a Black Panther! These stories are not old, they testify to the continued presence of the great, invisible, repressing Voyeur, who was the slave master. These stories demonstrate that in establishing so artlessly the liaison between a supposed sexual power and a so-called political liberation, the Antillean, unconsciously and in the most pathetic and derisive way, confirms the merciless and persistent connection between the economy of global responsibility and the economy belonging to sexual activity. [11] I will now examine the modern implications of such a connection.

In regards to these stories, it should be noted at this point that the short-circuiting of *jouissance*- pleasure, which is likely to throw the being into a state

[10] Incorporating the notions of time and temporality here, Glissant attempts to apply theories he has developed elsewhere in his writings, regarding the economy of slavery, to sexual life within slavery, specifically *jouissance* and pleasure and the supposed “short-circuit” that is created between them. Sexuality becomes the object of consumer culture, a sort of **consumption** in and of itself. *Jouissance* and pleasure cannot coexist in the life of the slave, since he is constantly hungering for *jouissance* but is forever unable to obtain any sort of profit from his pleasure. In other words, in the eyes of Glissant, *jouissance* is used as an attempt to make up for the lack of pleasure's profit which can never be achieved without the time denied the Martinican man. *Jouissance* and pleasure become the commodities at stake (although this commodity could also be the woman upon whose “*jouissance*” (orgasm) the man relies for validation). In this manner, Martinican sexuality is explained in terms of economy, conforming to the ways of consumerism, which, as Glissant illustrates, are always in a condition of non-fulfillment or non-production, inferior to and controlled by those of Western society.

[11] Again, Glissant draws a causal relationship between historically grounded and constructed ideas (“global responsibility” and “economy”) and a far more a-historical, even universal, idea (“sexual activity”). And let me be careful here to explain that any particular modern conceptualizations of sexuality, femininity, masculinity, sexual norms, etc. are of course historical; nevertheless, we are by nature sexual beings, characterized by various attractions, desires, and so on. I maintain that this more a-historical, generalized nature of sexuality signals the impossibility of drawing a causal relationship between sexuality and theories of globalization or economy. Now, I do not refuse the possibility of a **correlation** between these ideas, but correlation does not equal **causation**. Economy and global status cannot be directly mapped onto sexuality.

Glissant premises this claim of causation on his preliminary description of the founding historical moment in the lives of the Martinicans – the journey across the Atlantic in the bowels of the slave ship – causing the “erasure” of the slaves' sexuality, a claim that begins to unravel here. He seems to struggle between his use of these invented (Western) concepts and the notion of sexuality, an innate characteristic of human beings. This struggle is expressed in his dismissal of **sexual difference**. In Hantel's words, “[T]here is a risk Glissant's cultural turbulence still depends on the solidification and reduction of feminine desire when he fails to address sexual difference” (10). I will argue that Glissant actually contradicts his own suggestion of the Martinican woman's “invisibilization” (Hantel 14) through his descriptions of her position in slave society and of her current reaction to male chauvinism.

“He implies, as before, that the Martinican woman has no agency in her own sexuality, a thing apart from her, predicated entirely on the sexual activity of the man”.

of ceaseless transience beginning again each time with that irresponsibility, is reinforced here when encountered with the absence of collective memory. Even so, the Martinican jumps to any apparently favorable conclusion, whatever the issue, without envisaging the paths taken to these understandings, nor the paths he will take as a result (it is the pattern of technical disinterest). He likewise rushes to claim any apparent victory without asking himself what the real defeats are that will leave holes in their wake. So goes the history of our community, which progressively advanced towards the pale agony we think of today as community, beyond the satisfactory attainment of our particular *jouissances* or the silent miseries of our irresponsibilities. [12]

I would now like to give due consideration to several undue analogies. One cannot deduce, from the short-circuiting of hunger for *jouissance* – non-profit of pleasure, an axiom according to which the Martinican would be functionally related to the premature ejaculator. We have already seen that the imprisonment in discontinuity and the theft of *jouissance* have nothing to do with a temporal rhythm associated with a given norm, but, on the contrary, trigger a non-taking of time into account. The premature ejaculator is unhappy, conscious of his unhappiness. Generally speaking, the least one can say of the Martinican is that he scarcely questions his unhappiness over his *jouissance*.

In the same way, one cannot reduce the dimensions of pleasure and of *jouissance* to narrowly somatic norms, from which one would have been able to affirm that, all things considered, pleasure and *jouissance* blend together in the physiological ardor of youth. The globalizing link that I just highlighted makes it so that, under the circumstances, the youth are the most threatened of all the age categories of the Martinican social formation. In the disarray caused by the short-circuiting, they have not yet learned to oppose the force of cynicism, nor the calculated ruses. And the collective irresponsibility profoundly impacts the young boys of today, who, according to educators and therapists, are far more immature than the young girls.

This is the point at which we must ask ourselves how the Antillean woman reacted to this history. In the completely deranged atmosphere of the slave ship, where the deported men are physically annihilated, the African woman endures the greatest of aggressions, that is, the daily repeated rape by a crew of marines left demented by the practice of their trade. After such an ordeal, upon landing in the New World, the woman possesses an immeasurable advantage over the man: she already knows the master. (Hence, there is not a single Martinican who cannot count at least one woman among his ancestors who was raped.) [13]

[12] Throughout this essay, Glissant makes pleasure and *jouissance* themselves into commodities because he implies that they are global, or universal, measures. But they are **subjective, epistemological** categories; they cannot be measured. *Jouissance*, in particular, is a category very clearly developed by Western intellectuals, especially post-structural theorists and, more recently, feminist theorists. Even at the time that Glissant was writing, the term had already come to connote an immense range of ideas. It has never resembled a universally understood and widely used term of evaluation or measurement.

It is problematic that he uses these concepts solely in an abstract, global way to discuss the specific Martinican context, since by doing so, he actually fails to contextualize them as “our particular *jouissances*,” pleasures, etc. For Glissant, these concepts are always relative to the White man or to the Western world. But these ideas cannot be quantifiable like commodities, nor can they be assigned a specific value, except if one is coming from a one-sided (in this case, Western) perspective.

Moreover, Glissant only considers *jouissance*, pleasure, and sexuality within the Martinican **collective**. As his own text comes to demonstrate, these concepts are neither universal, nor do they refer solely to a collective; they are, to a large extent, both **culturally** and **individually** determined.

[13] We are presented here with a major contradiction to Glissant’s earlier claim that the slaves’ sexual lives were erased during the Middle Passage. Once again, I argue that an erasure of sexuality would imply an erasure of sexual difference. Yet it is clear from this passage that sexual difference was actually pronounced during the voyage to the New World; for it was the woman who endured rape at the hands of her captors, distinguishing her particular “ordeal” from that of the male slave. And it is the woman who, after her ordeal, “**possesses**” the knowledge of the master. The female slave’s lived experience and possession are different from, arguably even independent of, those of the male slave. It is no longer a possibility to argue for the Middle Passage as a “point zero” or deletion of sexuality. Sexual difference is in fact (re) affirmed through the rape of the woman.

Secondly, it is interesting to note the distinction Glissant makes between the Martinican and the premature ejaculator, with regards to his *jouissance*. Yet again, this represents a divergence from the thinking of Lacan who states, “In the end, if this *jouissance* comes to someone (*celui*) who speaks, and not by accident, it is because it is a bit premature” (61), thereby drawing a link between the premature ejaculator and the (male) someone – “*celui*.”

It is she who, cursing her fertility, coins the famous saying: “*Manjé tè, pa fè ich pou lesclavaj.*” It is she who endures the wrath of the white colonists under the slave regime, violent explosions which gave way to a very curious libertine literature in the 18th century, and which barely left a mark on the collective mentality of the country. And it is she who bears the male slaves’ hunger for *jouissance*. Favored as a mulatress, she normalized her relationship to the Other. [14] Before the age of thirty, an aberrantly premature age undoubtedly explained by the miserable conditions of under-development, she would enter into sexual indifference, the standardized form of sexual misery. After the so-called liberation of the slaves, while the Martinican man, believing himself to be free, erects physiological reproduction as a dramatic and compensatory surrogate for economic non-production, the Martinican woman crystallizes everything in her sons, the eldest son in particular, adopting in an almost vengeful manner the former slave’s hunger for *jouissance* and transferring it onto this son: “*Cok moin derô mare poul zot.*” I claim that within this general landscape, the Martinican woman is the greatest victim, though she camouflages this condition under the cover of matriarchal power. I maintain that it is not the most spectacular pathological forms of female sexuality, like vaginismus or frigidity, that best attest to this historical misery, but the most normalized, the most absolutely mundane form, namely, sexual indifference. Moreover, it is this apparently “normal” sexuality, set in however many quotation marks one desires, that seems to me here to signify the deviation within this situation. The customs are more intriguing to explore than the pathology indicates, for they orient the entire investigation of it.

It is not surprising that the women in Martinique have better resisted the processes of immaturation, nor that they have taken better advantage of the possibilities that the windows of modernization and the changes in mentality have presented. They have done the best at filling certain job posts and at developing attitudes of responsibility that allow them what are still known as deviances or singularities (homosexuality, status as a single woman, community attitudes), which contribute all the more to their liberation from the ambient male chauvinism. [15] It is insofar as this liberation develops within intense psychic conflicts, that the sexual indifference of the Martinican woman today replaces the more dramatically acute forms of sexual pathology.

This Antillean male chauvinism is of a very particular nature, and the following discussion will perhaps determine whether it persists today or is

[14] Glissant further denies the Martinican slave woman agency in her sexual life. Fertility is presumed an involuntary fact, one entirely out of the control of the woman. Her inability to succeed in this economy of sexuality leads to “indifference.” Glissant does not even consider the possibility of the woman’s capacity to use her fertility or her position within the sexual economy of the plantation. Gautier criticizes this major oversight:

Glissant peut écrire... « [L]es femmes s’étant habituées à vivre entre elles, sans autre contrainte que la terrible mécanique du travail et sans autre inconvénient (dans ce domaine) que celui de satisfaire, un jour l’un un jour l’autre, les deux géreurs et les quatre commandeurs de la plantation ». Sans autre inconvénient ! Ainsi les esclaves femmes seraient « montées » par les géreurs, les commandeurs (c’est-à-dire des esclaves contremaîtres), des esclaves loués, mais sans rien ressentir ?... [F]aut-il en conclure qu’il fait partie de la « nature » des femmes d’être fécondées et de recevoir le mâle quel qu’il soit ? Un discours aussi naïvement naturaliste surprend de la part d’un intellectuel sophistiqué comme Glissant... Rappelons à M. Glissant que l’humanité est composée d’animaux sociaux... Il semble que l’organisation des rapports sexuels est plus compliquée et que l’on ne peut pas évacuer aussi vite la question de la contrainte, même si c’est se fermer la porte du paradoxe brillant. (60-61)

In fact, it appears that the Martinican woman was able and did use her position, in relation both to the male slave and to the master, to her own advantage. Hence the culture of libertinage which flowered in the Caribbean colonies. Again, whether or not she was forced by circumstances to adopt a certain form of indifference in relation to her sexuality, she *chose* to use her sexuality in that way. Writes Gautier: “L’enjeu sexuel rend plus aigu cette question pour les femmes. Elles peuvent attendre de leurs rapports avec les hommes libres des avantages matériels, leur liberté surtout, ce qui représente un enjeu considérable. Pour ces femmes, comme pour les esclaves à talents, devenir libre n’implique pas une lutte collective mais l’utilisation rationnelle de *leurs possibilités individuelles*... La liberté comme motif du désir pour l’homme blanc...” (178, my emphasis added).

Karol Weaver also discusses the Antillean woman’s use of her position within the colonial system: “In the minds of the French, the African woman and her Creole descendants were nothing more than beasts of burden.” Because, in general, they performed jobs that were less valuable than those of the male slaves, “[t]he positions occupied by the hospitalières, infirmières, and midwives were significant and rather unique opportunities for women to gain power on plantations” (42). Weaver goes on to describe how these women successfully used their power to manipulate elements of the plantation landscape. As a further example, Doris Garraway, in her remarks on the mulatto woman’s status, argues that “[a]s an *independent sexual agent* and colonial border figure, the mulatto woman was credited with the power to dominate her lovers, when she did not dispose of

in a state of decline. It seems to me that every instance of male chauvinism, which is based in a true social domination, self-managed by a male collective, is particularly adept at cultivating the projection of a transcendence of the feminine. Let us take the symbol of the virgin sister, for example, which represents the preservation of honor at the cost of one's life, of her own life of course, without any consideration for her perspective. The responsible male chauvinist always makes the woman into an inaccessible deity. Antillean chauvinism is not rooted in the self-management of a male domination, but instead rests upon charades by which the Antillean man gives himself the illusion of a certain power; it could not have developed from such transcendences. It is a chauvinism without sublimation, if one excludes the sublimation of the protective mother. Furthermore, it propagates various mannerisms of unthinkable brutality. One should really study, in comparison to other languages, the range of aggressive expressions through which the Creole language has allowed a man to brag about having made love to a woman. "*Coupé famm' la*," "*batt famm' la*," "*raché famm' la*" ("to cut the woman," "to beat the woman," "to chop up the woman"): the mutilating transitivity of these verbs affirms the impossibility of making any hypocritical claims of transcendence in regards to the feminine.

Likewise, one should study the techniques of traditional approaches to these issues. An Antillean tale could never have imagined a one-hundred-year-long engagement, sanctified by a kiss that chastely wakes. On the contrary, it is said, "All that gets dragged out becomes soiled." And it seems here that the Martinican woman – whether out of actual indifference, a greater maturity, or the desire to find some sort of common ground with the Martinican man – was willing to reduce the inter-sexual relations of the almost always hypocritical pageantry with which Western cultures have surrounded them. The same story is recounted in so many different ways: the young girl who interrupts the young, poeticizing man and suggests they do the deed. Let me note that in the area surrounding the main square [*la Savane*] of Fort-de-France, and no doubt in those surrounding some of the promenades in the communes, there existed a tradition of courting displays among the youth, most often associated with the appearance and development of a small elite class, more smoothly mimetic of European behaviors. It is true that all of this had been standardized by the modern uses of flirtation, which are universal. However, I want to draw attention to the widespread practice of *charroi*, a word at once vivid and fluid, as a prime example of temporal short-circuiting.

them entirely. With the colony's men at her feet, the stereotyped mulatto courtesan extracted their resources for her own adornment, arrogating to herself an empire of consumption as well as *pleasure*" (234, my emphasis added).

Thus, contrary to characterizations that reduce these historical conditions to "a theft of the body – a willful and violent... severing of the captive body from its motive will, its active desire," and under which "we lose at least gender difference in the outcome, and the female body and the male body become a territory of cultural and political maneuver, not at all gender-related, gender-specific" (Spillers 67), both the woman's victimization (as a result of being a woman), as well as the agency she was still able to wield, prove otherwise. In fact, it appears that the Martinican woman was just as much an agent as the Martinican man in the colonial economy, if not a more successful one since she possessed a certain level of control in regards to the desires of both master and slave men. This is not to detract from the atrocious bodily and emotional mutilation to which she was subjected at the hands of men on both sides. But to emphasize this violence at the expense of female agency would be doing a serious injustice to the Martinican woman as valid player within colonial and contemporary society and would be to repeat this violence against her. Contrary to Spillers' reasoning that under the slave system, "sexuality,' as a term of implied relationship and desire, is dubiously appropriate, manageable, or accurate..." (76), I argue that the realm of sexuality cannot be **limited to** specific situational conditions, nor can it be solely premised on relationships to, or desire for, others.

Finally, to refer to the Martinican woman's sexual attitude as "indifference" suggests that she adopted a passive stance towards her sexuality. But it was an active choice. In reality, this so-called "indifference" (although I would argue that it was more of a strategic acceptance of the situation at hand) was the only advantageous response possible on the part of the woman. Furthermore, this "sexual (in)difference" is in relation to men; it does not encompass her particular feminine sexuality as a whole which allows for "deviances or singularities," in Glissant's own following words.

[15] Rather abruptly, Glissant swings to the other side of the pendulum, acknowledging the Martinican woman's superior capacity to maneuver within the modern world of globalization and market competition. Men are left behind in the depths of their "immaturation" and "irresponsibility," while women seemingly hold the reigns in attitude as well as in occupations. We are given a glimpse here into Glissant's conflicting perceptions of Martinican women: on the one hand, he claims that they "acquiesced" to a male-dominated economy of sexuality (which he will also claim they continue to do today, sometimes to an even greater extent); on the other hand, he suggests that they are the greater masters of the market economy of consumption. Yet market consumption also appears in his discussion as inextricably

The Carnival tradition of burlesque marriages is an occasion in Martinique where men and women come together to give a performance representative of their relationships; it is a critique of the family structure. In these performances, the man takes on the role of the wife (usually pregnant), and the woman takes on that of the husband. An adult takes on the role of a child in a crib. There are in this tradition all the signs of a keen science of the real-life relationships. Bruno Bettelheim writes in *Symbolic Wounds*: “We are hardly in need of proof that men stand in awe of the procreative power of women, that they wish to participate in it...” It could also be said that we are hardly in need of proof, in this case, that the awe [terror], which he attempts to ward off through the cross-dressing masquerade, is affirmed by the unconscious perception of the actual social roles within Martinican society. [16] It is here that the man’s reaction to femininity encounters the woman’s reaction to male chauvinism. It is not surprising that the burlesque marriage is one of the few remaining displays of this major public and collective questioning, which once was, and can no longer be, the Martinican carnival.

I have thus moved on from the distortion between the Martinican man’s hunger for, or obsession with, *jouissance* and his practice of, or profit from, pleasure. And I have tried to show how the Martinican woman has, in turn, responded, first by sexual indifference, and then (today) by both an increased acquiescence to this chauvinism and (in the social classes most privileged by schooling and culture) by a strong and responsible reaction to this same chauvinism. In closing, I would like to illustrate how this reflection’s approach differentiates between the Martinican sensibility and the Western libido, in substance if not in the methods adopted.

Where, in the West, eroticism as a practice of seeking out pleasure was above all (and particularly in the works of Sade) an incitement towards a difficult or impossible *jouissance*, it was understood that in Martinique, the obsession with *jouissance* (whether or not achieved) had for a long time rendered useless the practice of pleasure, whether or not shared. It is this that explains the little value place on eroticism in former times, the lack of traditional “deviance” in sexual practices, and, by illustration, the relatively small number of cases or trials involving sexual mores.

One could say that eroticism as technique had been evacuated from Martinican sexual life, that which is, by nature, never held accountable, and which is, for example, replaced by more passive practices, like recourse to magic formulas, to alternate scenarios (*dorliss*), to irrational expedients (*le pont*), and to miracle remedies, the generalization of which is quite apparent here.

linked to a certain sexual consumption, which, according to Glissant, does not fall within the woman’s control.

Sexual difference is the missing piece here within Glissant’s theories of the economy of (feminine) sexuality. Hantel sums up this omission:

If theories of creolization only take place within the parameters of a phallic economy of counting—or more simply, if creolization is always articulated in a patriarchal grammar—it becomes the most banal form of multiculturalism celebrating the entry of a new group of men into the global elite. Cultural mixing can be exchanged on the global market by way of women’s bodies as well... The chaos-monde starts with irreducible sexual difference. (15)

Glissant’s use of economic mercantilist theories continues to break down in its application to Martinicans’ sexual behavior across time (or a lack of time), at least in the case of the Martinican woman. While I do not dispute that feminine sexuality can be described **in terms of economics**, Glissant fails to acknowledge both its **driving** of this economics – in the form of the female body, which, although abhorrently treated, is still an **independent presence** rather than an **absence/deletion** or a presence predicated on the existence of the male body – and its existence outside the economy paradigm.

As before, his economic perspective treats notions like *jouissance* and pleasure as global, uniform categories without consideration for their particular cultural, sexual, or gendered dimensions. What is more, the very fact of the female body as object of exchange confirms a sexual difference unrecognized by Glissant in the central claims of his text.

[16] Once more, we are given the sense that women hold some sort of power within the domain of sexuality, or at least in that of social relations, manifested in a perpetual fear of the Martinican woman on the part of the Martinican man. According to Glissant, this fear is due to the woman’s “procreative power.” It would follow, then, as Glissant notes, that the man makes certain attempts to compensate for such feelings of inferiority, through blanket displays of sexual or social dominance and control. What is unclear, however, is the accuracy of Glissant’s underlying absolutist implication that the Martinican woman’s fertility and reproduction are entirely distinct and disconnected from her own sexuality, that they are **only** a sort of economic strategy or technique.

“The problem with these arguments, in the case of this essay, is that if the point in time in question was indeed the beginning of what now constitutes the sexual life of Martinicans, it does not seem logical that a significant portion of Glissant’s subsequent discussion relies so heavily on the distinction between the Martinican man and woman”.

Thus continues the tragic sexist illusion of the Martinican. The objective of this text is neither to outline any courses of treatment, nor to propose any remedies, but to open up a debate. As such, rather than conclude by declaring maxims, I prefer to present for your consideration the observation of two real-life phenomena.

First, the relatively frequent occurrence, at least to my knowledge, of rapes or attempts at rape by young people in the inner-cities and in the housing projects. It is as though the latent rapist of the past, incapable then of imposing the illusion of his power (itself a substitute for an unobtainable authority), had no other way out than to become an actual rapist in the present day. The concentration of this phenomenon in the inner-cities and in the projects leads to its interpretation as a “display of personal assets,” just like what happens with the goods for consumption in the big-box stores. I am deliberately using a marketing language here, as it ties into my second observation. [17]

In my opinion, it is a question of an enormous collective surrogate fantasy. Martinicans have convinced themselves that droves of tourists of the female sex disembark there in anticipation of a sexual consumption. Whatever one thinks of the actual grounds for such a contention, one can only remain perplexed by the speed at which it has entrenched itself in the collective mentality, and especially by the immense satisfaction it induces, to say nothing, naturally, of the “chases” it triggers, whether or not they prove profitable. I would like to offer for discussion the notion that there exists here an outrageous phenomenon of self-thingification, through which one offers oneself and boasts of oneself as though one were consumer merchandise. It does not appear to me that the necessity of earning a living is a determining factor in this case. But rather, it is the connection I have already pointed out, reappearing again at the end of the journey, between a global irresponsibility here in his very country and the derisory temptation to try to increase his value on a market that is in a perpetual state of catching-up. It would not be a far leap for me to suggest that such collective fantasies also signal, by their surrogate function, that the Martinican man is becoming quickly aware that the Martinican woman is gazing at him and that she finds him to be insignificant. [18]

The collectivization and publicity of the critique will surely lead the domain of sexuality to be drained of a magical and fantasmatic content tied up with the history to which the community was subjected. But in this matter, let us be careful not to turn “sexology” into an object for consumption, like imported grapes and yogurt. It seems that the vital courses of treatment will need to be preceded by a collective effort at

[17] Without a doubt, this is the passage I find to be the most problematic of the entire essay. Suddenly, modern occurrences of sexual violence against women (although let us note that neither women nor their bodies are mentioned here), which reflect past violences, have also been attributed to the formative historical circumstances surrounding the beginning of slavery in Martinique. It would appear that history is to blame for the horrific actions of these young men, since, as Glissant has already remarked, history has conditioned the specific sexuality and sexual economy of modern-day Martinique. I hardly need to explain why such a notion would strike one as appalling, to say the least. I argue yet again that Glissant’s theorizing in terms of economy and commoditization breaks down when mapped onto the sexual lives of the Martinican populace, both past and present.

In a sense, Glissant’s analysis of the modern Martinican individual’s sexuality, and the woman’s sexuality in particular, serves to reiterate the former white colonists’ attempts to exert total control over the black population, to regulate every aspect of their lives, and to reduce their behaviors and feelings to objects of a strict mercantilism. Garraway’s reflections on interracial relationships in the Caribbean colonies provides us with a fitting illustration: “In every instance, the libidinal was politicized, as colonial authorities attempted to manage interracial libertinage and, as importantly, its reproductive consequences.” Free and slave women of color “were positioned by economies and rhetorics of desire...” (196-198).

Indeed, the push to establish the Code Noir back in 1685 was grounded in this constant “anxiety surrounding the sexual desires and reproductive aims of slave women” (Garraway 204). Sexuality is not an economy. To attempt to make it into one is to force desire, pleasure, and jouissance into some sort of logic to which they do not always, and maybe rarely, conform. In the case of the Martinican woman, whether or not her body was and is considered and used as a commodity does not necessarily have a direct bearing on her individual sexuality, on her own ability to derive pleasure, nor on her own capacity to achieve jouissance.

[18] In Glissant’s concluding remarks, the reader is faced once more with the latent and nuanced binary between the One and the Other, here appearing in the notion of the gaze (“la femme martiniquaise le regarde”). The dialectic, though, has again shifted, this time with the Martinican woman positioned as the One and the Martinican man as the Other. She is *doing the action*; she is endowed at this moment with an unequivocal, direct *agency*, independent of the man’s existence. What is more, according to Glissant, she has come to consider the man as “insignificant” (“de peu de poids,” literally, “of little weight”).

Whether or not she chooses to “acquiesce” to or adopt certain (sexual) behaviors and attitudes, it is, let me reiterate, *her choice*. Thus, contrary to Glissant’s previous implications of the invisibility and muting of the feminine, of the woman’s pleasure, and of her jouissance, he directly attests here to the agency she has in her own sexuality (and in her position in

elucidation, and that it will be in the methodological interest of specialists in the area to listen to the multidisciplinary voice and synthesizing hypotheses of the researchers.

In this exchange, for example, will we be certain not to once again collectively transfer an entire magic content on the heads of our specialist friends because they have come from abroad and are invested with an absolute power of knowledge? Alas, it is the usual temptation of the Martinican people, even under the most seemingly “technical” of circumstances. Are we not waiting, once more apathetically, for the recipes, solutions, remedies, and miracles that might be offered up by the Other? Such an attitude on our part would be an insult to the true knowledge and epistemological ethic of this symposium’s guests, who would leave unsatisfied. After having experienced the Other as the Great Repressing Voyeur, let us not establish him now, against his will, as the Great Guru Healer. The specialist helps those who help themselves. Take charge of your problems; you carry within yourself the *concerted* solution to them, which must here orient the research of individually balanced treatments.

CONCLUSION

With the exception of his closing lines, containing direct appeals to his Martinican community, Glissant neglects to fully adopt the viewpoint of the Martinican. In this essay, he generally speaks only as a Westerner gazing upon the Martinican outsider. He arguably succeeds to some degree in positioning and defining the ideas of *jouissance*, pleasure, and sexual activity within the historical context of the plantation society run through slavery (at least from a male perspective). He fails, however, to adequately and consistently develop these concepts as the Martinican narrative moves “towards the pale agony” of the present-day community, and his earlier definitions cannot accommodate the perspective of the Martinican woman. Sexual difference is left virtually unacknowledged in the bulk of his arguments. On a larger scale, he fails to see these notions (pleasure, *jouissance*, sexuality, sexual behavior/activity, even (un)happiness) for what they are: unmeasurable, epistemological categories, that, even when contextualized to the greatest extent and considered from all angles, will never be able to encompass an individual’s subjective view of the surrounding world. Indeed, as I have tried to convey over the course of my commentaries, sexual life, more particularly, pleasure and *jouissance*, should be about a specific understanding of one’s own reality. One cannot compare different “pleasures” or “*jouissances*.” They are about a specific lived **experience** that needs to be considered on multiple levels: both global and cultural, both collective and individual.

Martinican society). She has taken possession or ownership of her sexuality. Perhaps we can even say that she has reclaimed (control of) her own *jouissance*. In the end, it appears as though it is the Martinican man who is positioned relative to the woman. Perhaps it is only **his** *jouissance* which “serves no purpose.” And perhaps the existence of a sexual difference, one that is not erased but transformed and affirmed by the forces of historical circumstances, indicates a greater need for new theories of sexuality that do not begin their discussion of the woman or the feminine at the “point zero” of the man or the masculine. And finally, if there is a sexual difference beyond the reductionist binaries of absence/presence, purpose/no-purpose, One/Other, perhaps *jouissance* must also be considered outside of these confines, as something, like sexuality, that is characterized by difference(s) and fluidity.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Translator’s note: “Irresponsabilité(s)” could also be translated as “foolishness,” but I chose to use the term “irresponsibility,” in both the singular and the plural, as I felt that it better conveyed this sense of “non-taking” (of responsibility) also mentioned by Glissant in relation to time and pleasure.
- 2 “If it’s barely warm, it’s cooked” [my translation of Glissant’s French translation]. It is remarkable how this instance of short-circuiting brings us back to what the European always said of the Negro: that he is a brute, without manners, without concern for women, and incapable of understanding the civilized intricacies of pleasure.

WORKS CITED

- Garraway, Doris L. *The Libertine Colony: Creolization in the Early French Caribbean*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2005. Print.
- Gautier, Arlette. *Les sœurs de Solitude: la condition féminine dans l’esclavage aux Antilles du XVIIe au XIXe siècle*. Paris: **Éditions** Caribéennes, 1985. Print.
- Hantel, Max. “Toward a Sexual Difference Theory of Creolization.” *Journal of French and Francophone Philosophy* 22.1 (2014): 1-18. Web.
- Lacan, Jacques. *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: On Feminine Sexuality: The Limits of Love and Knowledge*. 1975. Ed. Jacques-Alain Miller. Trans. Bruce Fink. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1998. Print.
- Leupin, Alexandre. “The Slave’s *Jouissance*.” *Callaloo* 36.4 (2013): 891-901. Web.
- Spillers, Hortense J. “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book.” *Diacritics* 17.2 (1987): 64-81. Web.
- Weaver, Karol K. *Medical Revolutionaries: The Enslaved Healers of Eighteenth-Century Saint Domingue*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006. Print.