

The background of the cover is an abstract, fluid, and wavy pattern. It features a mix of deep blue, teal, and brownish-gold colors, creating a sense of movement and depth, reminiscent of water or a liquid surface reflecting light.

Women, Theory, Praxis, and Performativities

Transoceanic Entanglements
in Francophone Settings

edited by Jacqueline Couiti and
Anny-Dominique Curtius

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CHAPTER TEN

Tidalectical Bodies

Reclaiming Skeletons, Liana~Hips,¹ and Feet with Nathalie Hermine, Suzanne Césaire, and Kamau Brathwaite

Anny-Dominique Curtius

“We need to start walking on water if we are to truly understand the time and space of globalization.”² This claim by historian Dilip Menon sparks my interest in several ways: his allegorical and theoretical call to walk on water necessary because of the “dispersed sense of space” that must be prioritized over “the local, the sovereign and the archival” and because of the “multiplicity of connections across non-contiguous spaces.”³ I seek to examine walking on the ocean, dancing with the dire sociopolitical aftermaths of the history that emerged from the ocean, working through the trauma that resurfaces from the ocean, and rerouting the Middle Passage and other transoceanic slave routes through various transoceanic and sandy situations that Nathalie Hermine, Suzanne Césaire, and Kamau Brathwaite have creatively and critically molded through four women’s embodied experiences.

The analytical trajectory first follows Réunionnais writer, journalist, high-school teacher, and school principal Hermine’s allegorical encounter between a Réunionnais female archeologist and the skeleton

¹ Here and in previous publications, I use the tilde as a conceptual pictogram to engage with critical ocean studies.

² Dilip M. Menon, “Oceanic Histories: From the Terrestrial to the Maritime,” in Dilip M. Menon et al., *Ocean as Method: Thinking with the Maritime* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2022), 21.

³ Menon, “Oceanic Histories,” 20.

of an enslaved woman excavated after a hurricane. The allegorical swell that characterizes this narrative allows me to put it in conversation with two other pivotal theoretical allegories by Martinican cultural theorist Césaire and Barbadian poet and historian Brathwaite. The Indian and Atlantic Oceans intersect in the entanglements generated by enslavement, post-slavery disenfranchisement, colonial structures of power, and postcolonial structures of oppression reproducing a colonial mentality in the Caribbean and Indian Oceans. The oceanic, cataclysmic, volcanic dance of a peasant woman, Bergilde, in Césaire's poetics of total insight and her oceanic surrealism, which I call a *lianedialectique*,⁴ and a Jamaican peasant matriarch performing the ritual of sweeping her sandy yard and walking on the ocean in Brathwaite's oceanic philosophical reasoning he has named tidalectic⁵ are embodied experiences that profoundly resonate with Hermine's narrative. Césaire's *lianedialectique* is also an emancipatory grammar and a multi-subjectivity that encompass nature and oceanic consciousness, historical and socio-economic affects, and a gendered corporeality that disrupt colonial patriarchy and the subalternity of colonized people. Bringing this three-fold performative framework into play, I argue that Hermine's, Césaire's, and Brathwaite's critical constructions of women in conversation with and connecting to the ocean to reclaim their bones, hips, and feet are a political and performative intertwining of theory, poetry, praxis, and oceanscape that unsettles the global mechanics of Black women's subalternity. Brathwaite's and Césaire's gendered oceanic theories allow us to fruitfully explore how Hermine carves out a counternarrative to remember the ocean as a historical marker and creatively and critically unsettle the matrix of colonial violence. Their concepts constitute an epistemology of women's disobedience that generates a tentacular theorization suitable to explore Hermine's thought-provoking narration, fill the gaps of the official archives, and rethink what Césaire calls the "ancestral anxiety"⁶ of people of African descent. They unpack how oceans can be

4 For more on this concept, see Anny-Dominique Curtius, *Suzanne Césaire: Archéologie littéraire et artistique d'une mémoire empêchée* (Paris: Karthala, 2020), 297–366.

5 Kamau Brathwaite, *ConVERSations with Nathaniel Mackey* (Staten Island, NY: We Press & Xcp, 1999), 34.

6 Suzanne Césaire, *The Great Camouflage: Writings of Dissent (1941–1945)*, ed. Daniel Maximin, trans. Keith L. Walker (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2012), 28.

viewed “as aqueous modes of thinking and as interconnected archives.”⁷ I have previously used the term anarchives⁸ to engage with scholarly conversations about the need to rethink the power dynamics of the archives as site, institution and object. In this chapter, I depart from this term to forge instead the notion of tidalectical archives, because of the endless critical fluidity it provides to replenish colonial archives detailing transactions of enslaved people. This notion constructively benefits from Brathwaite’s tidalectical outlook, as subaltern women are empowered to allegorically remap the Middle Passage, intersect tides of the ocean with tides of historical consciousness, and supplement official archives in a context chartered by forgetting, suppressing, remembering, and resurfacing. Considering the thought-provoking rhetorical dynamics used by the three authors, I prioritize allegory over metaphor because, as Fredric Jameson observes, “it models a relationship of breaks, gaps, discontinuities and inner distances and incommensurabilities of all kinds. It can therefore better serve as a figure for the incommensurabilities of the world today.”⁹ I argue that the allegories that stem from these narratives have a generative ability of palimpsesting the official archives with the entanglements of history.

Archeology of Slavery, Communities, and Poetics of Healing

Hermine insightfully unsettles archival silences in “Le Verbe se fit chair” [“The Verb Became Flesh”] (hereafter *LVFC*),¹⁰ where the protagonist,

7 Renisa Mawani, “Oceans as Method: Law, Violence, and Climate Catastrophe,” *Funambulist*, no. 39 (January–February 2022), para. 5, <https://thefunambulist.net/magazine/the-ocean/oceans-as-method-law-violence-and-climate-catastrophe>. Also see ead., *Across Oceans of Law: The Komagata Maru and Jurisdiction in the Time of Empire* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018).

8 Curtius, *Suzanne Césaire*, 261–364.

9 Fredric Jameson, “From Metaphor to Allegory,” in *Anything*, ed. Cynthia C. Davidson (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001), 25.

10 Nathalie Hermine, “Le Verbe se fit chair,” in *Ma plus grande douleur sera de ne pouvoir te secourir* (Sainte-Clotilde: Editions Poisson Rouge.oi, 2021), 113–28. The title of this collection of short stories [*My Greatest Heartache Is to Not Be Able to Help You*] is a quote from Évariste de Parny’s *Chansons madécasses* (Paris: Éditions de la Nouvelle Revue française, 1920), where a daughter speaks to her mother, who sold her into slavery.

Tahina Bellon, gives a talk at a conference on the archeology of colonial slavery held at the Quai Branly Museum in Paris on May 11, 2012. Tahina explains how, on February 25, 2007, Hurricane Gamède had raged across the island of Réunion, ravaging everything including Saint-Paul's marine cemetery and brutally excavating skeletons of enslaved people.

Batterie de langues géantes, la houle cogna et creusa. Remua et bouleversa jusqu'à former une coupe quasi verticale d'où s'exhibaient les ossements. Soit en désordre, soit encore liés les uns aux autres. L'océan Indien avait extrait des entrailles Saint-Pauloises ces vestiges humains qu'il laissa à l'air, sur le sable. Au vu et au su de tous. Cadavres, dépouilles, os reliques, restes. Vienne voir qui voulait.¹¹

[Giant battering waves, the swell struck and dug. Stirred and shook until it formed a near-vertical bowl in which the bones were displayed. Either in disarray, or still linked together. The Indian Ocean had extracted these human remains from the bowels of Saint-Paul, leaving them in the air, on the sand. In plain sight. Corpses, bones, relics, remains. Come and see for yourself.]¹²

She subsequently recounts the process of the archeological excavations that occurred from June 15 to June 24, 2011 and involved archeologists, historians, and students, the excavations' conclusions, the communities' interventions. She then focuses on her own excavation of the skeleton of a young female, her discovery of her mutilated teeth, and how she started developing a close relationship with the skeleton. She ultimately weighs up her presence at the Quai Branly, her connection to death and her ancestors, and her work as an archeologist. It is interesting to note that Hermine's text draws from real events, as the conference at the Quai Branly actually occurred on May 11, 2012, and Hurricane Gamède blasted through Réunion on February 25, 2007, severely impacting the island with record tidal waves, rainfall, and flooding. Hermine also accurately recounts various events surrounding the excavations, repurposing them to locate her short story at the intersection of fiction and reality, as she warns the reader in a note preceding the text. While this hurricane remains in collective memory among the most damaging in the Indian Ocean, and while the trauma it generated is cyclically reactivated every time island populations grapple with the lasting effects of all hurricanes, massive soil erosion did expose slave burial grounds on

11 Hermine, *LVFC*, 116–17.

12 Translations mine unless otherwise noted.

the beach and human bones fell off the embankment dug by the winds. Climate change and a devastating storm certainly stand as *deus ex machina* that gave visibility to what was camouflaged. Indeed, before the discoveries of these burial grounds, descendants of the African diaspora in Réunion had no resting places for their enslaved ancestors, no tangible grave sites to mourn and spiritually cradle. Hence, Hermine's text interweaves complex layers of memory, agency, and historical modalities to memorialize the haunted presences embodied by the skeletons of the enslaved Africans fortuitously uncovered on these seashores.

After Gamède, the French Institut national de recherches archéologiques préventives [National Institute for Preventive Archeological Research] started to carry out groundbreaking studies on enslaved populations in Réunion, which allowed archeologists¹³ to shift from the notion of archeology of absence and silence (namely, an over-reliance on writings by missionaries, travelers, and slave traders and owners), to an archeology of slavery. In 2011, the researchers confirmed that the remains found after Gamède were indeed skeletons of enslaved populations. Furthermore, the research refuted the general belief reinforced by the Code Noir that slaves who were not baptized were commonly interred in unconsecrated mass graveyards located on backshore dunes. The research on these burial grounds revealed that the enslaved individuals had been buried in coffins after some funeral rites had been performed.

Il s'agissait de sépultures disposées selon une orientation est-ouest. La présence de cercueils, le fait que les tombes semblaient parfois regroupées ainsi que la découverte de réductions de corps associées à certaines sépultures démontraient que ces vestiges prenaient place dans un cimetière organisé et ne résultaient en aucun cas d'inhumations réalisées à la hâte lors de naufrages ou épidémies, comme cela fut un temps envisagé.¹⁴

[The graves were oriented east–west. The presence of coffins, the fact that the graves sometimes appeared to be grouped together, and the discovery of bodily desiccations associated with certain burials, demonstrated that

13 For analyses of these studies, see André Delpuech and Jean-Paul Jacob, eds., *Archéologie de l'esclavage colonial* (Paris: La Découverte, 2014). Articles in the volume discuss absence and presence as key paradigms for future research on the archeology of slavery.

14 Bruno Bizot, Anne-Laure Dijoux, and Sudel Fuma, *Saint-Paul, Cimetière marin: Diagnostic archéologique* (Ville de Saint-Paul: Ministère de la Culture et de la Communication, Direction des affaires culturelles de l'océan Indien, and Département des recherches archéologiques subaquatiques et sous-marines, 2011), 1.

these remains were part of an organized cemetery, and were by no means the result of hasty burials after shipwrecks or epidemics, as was once believed.]

Nonetheless, given the plantation hierarchy separating whites, freed individuals, baptized, and non-baptized enslaved, the fact that the skeletons were found in the sand, near the ocean, indicates that the layout of the graves in the organized cemetery did not follow funeral regulations implemented in 1820¹⁵ and evidently reflected the carceral, dehumanizing, entangled ideology prevailing on the plantation from 1810 to 1863, when the skeletons allegedly date to.

From another critical perspective, this surge of skeletons reveals that the seascape and landscape stand as intangible witnesses to a camouflaged archive. The hurricane unsettled an archeology of silence, triggered a resurgence of traumas, and channeled symbolic commemoration practices by grassroots communities. Thus, the findings of this much-needed scientific research and the commemorative practices are necessarily connected as intertwined layers of a framework where encounters, narratives, and scientific evidence reflect the knotted dimension of collective memory. Similarly, several forms of agency should be considered. The agency of scientists supported by the state (in this case, regional and national French institutions), the agency of grassroots communities galvanized by an embodied memory of slavery, which pondered whether these popular beaches should be repurposed and permanently transformed into sacred memory sites. The agency of the dead can also be considered, as Alexandra Affidou of the Réunionnais association *Rasin Kaf* [African Roots]¹⁶ argues: “nos ancêtres ‘qui se sont mis à découvrir’ pour ainsi dire qu’ils étaient là et permettre qu’un travail de recherche et d’identification des dépouilles soit entrepris. Comme s’ils avaient compris que le moment était venu pour nous de savoir. [...] Ce retour de l’Histoire, nous l’attendions tous” [“our ancestors ‘exposed themselves’ so to speak to allow scientists to conduct research on their remains, as if they had understood that time had come for us to know. [...] This is a return of History that we all expected”].¹⁷

15 Bizot et al., *Saint-Paul*, 22–26.

16 This association seeks to reaffirm the right to speech, memory, identity, and culture of enslaved individuals’ descendants; to restore and establish memorial sites; and to protect the environment and heritage-related sites.

17 Alexandra Affidou, “Un Cimetière d’esclaves découvert à Saint-Paul,”

Performances disseminate restorative meaning and culminate in a poetics of healing. For instance, a group of religious leaders in Réunion organized ecumenical ceremonies in 2011, and the *Cimetière des esclaves oubliés* [Cemetery of the Forgotten Slaves] was inaugurated in Saint-Paul on May 10, 2019, on the location of the burial grounds discovered in 2007. Affidou enthusiastically welcomes the work done by local and national scientists and speaks of “cette catharsis que nous attendons déjà depuis des décennies, pouvoir réparer en soi quelque chose qui a été déchirée, et qui, aujourd’hui, peut être ‘pensée’” [“a catharsis long overdue that repairs what has been torn apart and which today can be ‘thought’”].¹⁸ She further observes that Réunionnais people should come to terms with the past “en révélant ses traces, en honorant nos ancêtres, en ouvrant le dialogue réparateur” [“by revealing its traces, honoring our ancestors, and opening up a restorative dialogue”].¹⁹ The site includes the nearby landscape and seascape and the *Mémorial aux ancêtres fondateurs. Zetwal la Souvenans* [Memorial to the Founding Ancestors. Stars for Remembrance], created by Réunionnais sculptor Jack Beng-Thi and erected in December 2013. The memorial²⁰ is made up of twenty stone blocks, symbolizing the graves of the skeletons exhumed in 2007, and a large commemorative iron portico that seems to swell like a ship’s sail. The side of the memorial facing the ocean depicts enslaved people on a ship, and the side facing the mountains shows a text by Beng-Thi paying homage to “ceux qui ont traversé l’océan. Après le rapt et le viol des corps entassés dans le ventre obscur des navires prédateurs” [“those who crossed the ocean and whose bodies were abducted, raped and stacked in the dark belly of predator slave ships”].²¹

Témoignages, June 25, 2011, <https://www.temoignages.re/chroniques/di-sak-na-pou-di/un-cimetiere-d-esclaves-decouvert-a-saint-paul,50573>.

¹⁸ Affidou, “Cimetière.”

¹⁹ Affidou, “Cimetière.”

²⁰ This site reminds us of the Cap 110, Memory and Fraternity Memorial in Anse Caffard, Martinique that equally fills the holes in the history of the transatlantic slave trade.

²¹ Excerpt from Beng-Thi’s text. Since its creation, this memorial has become the venue for the local commemoration of the abolition of slavery for the town of Saint-Paul, which takes place every December 20. “Lieux de mémoire: Mémorial aux ancêtres fondateurs *Zetwal la Souvenans*,” Société de plantation, histoire & mémoires de l’esclavage à la Réunion, <https://www.portail-esclavage-reunion.fr/lieux-de-memoire/memorial-aux-ancetres-fondateurs-zetwal-la-souvenans/>.

“Sable insaisissable”²²: Sanding through Memory

“Sanding through” draws from Dominick La Capra’s appraisal of his notion of “working through” as a countervailing force which, in the case of *LVFC*, becomes useful in measuring how Hermine occupies entangled archives to carve out new memorializing grammars when climate change, a hurricane, and the ocean excavate additional layers of trauma. La Capra sees working through

as a kind of countervailing force ([...] not even something leading to a cure) [...] In working through, the person tries to gain critical distance on a problem and to distinguish between past, present and future. [...] It’s via the working through that one acquires the possibility of being an ethical and political agent.²³

La Capra’s approach to psychoanalysis in ethical and political directions, the ideas of balance, counterbalance, and distance attached to “working through” appeal to me, as Hermine does not look for definitive answers in *LVFC* but for the multiple layers of entanglement and instability contained in Tahina’s experiences digging through the sand and “sanding through.” The idea of smoothing by grinding or rubbing that the verb “to sand” evokes is deeply appropriate, as it captures her meticulous ancestral quest. Sanding through history, grinding down the sharp layers of memory means smoothing the trauma for access to ancestral knowledge.

Brûlant sable noir. Celui de Saint-Paul comme celui de L’Étang-Salé [...] À elle le plaisir du charnel et l’émotion de côtoyer des personnes enterrées là jadis. Ses mains allaient et venaient autour de son premier squelette, plénitude qu’elle ne pouvait confier à personne, ni dans l’instant présent ni plus tard. Remuer patiemment la terre, à l’épreuve de sa résistance physique. [...]. Travail rigoureux et exigence scientifique: ils avaient fouillé, lu, recoupé, fixé. Et œuvré pour une mémoire douloureuse. Pas de morbide, rien de violent ni de scandaleux. Au contraire, dévoiler cette humanité-là dans ce qu’elle avait de sacré.²⁴

[Burning black sand. From Saint-Paul to L’Étang-Salé [...] Hers, the carnal pleasure and the emotion of rubbing shoulders with people buried

22 Hermine, *LVFC*, 120.

23 Dominick La Capra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 143.

24 Hermine, *LVFC*, 118–19.

there long ago. Her hands went back and forth around her first skeleton, a fullness she couldn't entrust to anyone, neither now nor later. Patiently stirring the earth, testing its physical resistance [...]. Rigorous work and scientific standards: they had searched, read, cross-checked, fixed. And worked for a painful memory. No morbidity, nothing violent or scandalous. To the contrary, to reveal this humanity in all its sacredness.]

The sudden appearance of the young woman's skeleton in the black sand, Tahina's discovery of her mutilated, file-sharpened teeth, the assumption that the enslaved woman was from Africa, and the scrutinizing, suspicious attitude of the local population toward the archeological work had all generated the unspeakable, enthralling excitement of being involved in a team of scientists uncovering this burial ground on her home island, and that history, science, memory, and trauma were suddenly intertwined. Most importantly, Tahina not only unveils that she developed a close ancestral relationship with the female skeleton, but readers discover that this intimacy ultimately materializes into the sudden swell of the skeleton's voice in the narrative. Hermine's choice of a third-person narrator invites the reader, at this moment in the story, to ponder whether the skeleton's words are meant to surge from an omniscient narrator, from Tahina's mouth, or both. I propose that this sudden irruption of the skeleton's voice unsettles the principles of an established narratology, fractures the unshakable layers of infinite knowledge of the omniscient voice while repositioning Tahina, as a first-person narrator, at the center of the tale and joining her voice to the skeleton's. The skeleton becomes human, interweaving sand-skeleton-voice and drawing flesh from the earth, hence the short story's fascinating title, "Le Verbe se fit chair." Unsettling archeological research and iconic French cultural sites such as the Quai Branly, perturbing a stunned and embarrassed audience as well as the deeply moved young archeologist, the dead female ancestor can be heard in the museum speaking out in Réunionnais Creole²⁵ to reclaim her bones and her agency and request a return to the ocean.

Zot l'a trouve à nous, astèr écoute à nous. Oublie pas nous, oublie pas chemin. Magine à nous, pioche dans nout' main, i faut nous obéit la cloche. La houle l'a tire à nous dan' sab', l'a mêt' à nous en l'air. Nous-mêmes le sab', mais laisse à nous artourne dans la mer. À nous-mêmes de moune debout' comme filaos.

25 Creole is only used twice in the text, to quote a Réunionnais proverb and to describe the intensity of the burning sand.

Puisque vous avez trouvé nos corps, vous pouvez entendre nos voix. Souvenez-vous de nous, vous qui foulez ce bord de mer. Imaginez-nous, munis d'une pioche et soumis aux ordres de la cloche. La houle nous a exhibés. Vous palpez notre humilité mais nous ne voulons que retourner à l'océan. C'est notre façon à nous d'être hommes.²⁶

[Now that you've found our bodies, you can hear our voices. Remember us, you who walk this seashore. Imagine us carrying a pickaxe and obeying the summons of the bell. The swell has exposed us. You can feel our humility, but all we expect is to return to the ocean. It's our way of being human.]²⁷

Hermine's French translation, provided in a footnote in *LVFC*, departs at times from the Creole, especially toward the end of the skeleton's words, thus providing the readers with two texts that complement each other and stand as a manifestation of Hermine's praxis of memory. The skeleton deconstructs her enslavement and her vulnerability and reclaims her humanity by connecting to nature, comparing herself to a filaos (a tree commonly found on beaches in Réunion), which does not appear in the French translation. "À nous-mêmes de moune debout' comme filaos" ["We are humans standing as filaos"] is an ecopolitical declaration of existence, where the filaos serve as guardians of memory and intangible witnesses of human exploitation, survival, and a camouflaged archive. Hermine's thought-provoking imagined scientific and ancestral encounter between life and death, slavery and decoloniality, is further amplified when the skeleton chooses the pickaxe, a key tool for archeological excavations, to retell the horrors of the carceral habitus of the plantation. The archeological pick and the pickaxe of enslavement are connected in this unique moment where the skeleton and Tahina overlap temporally, geographically, and historically. As for the bell, signaling the time and rhythm of forced labor, it becomes the mourning tool calling for rituals of re-ontologization,²⁸ namely cultural and spiritual awakening and allegorical unsilencing of the enslaved defying the dehumanizing order of the plantation. Similarly, the sand comprises an entangled geo-materiality in the sense that, as the skeleton

26 Hermine's French translation from the Creole. One might also imagine that Hermine creatively attributes this translation to the museum's interpreter, whom she elliptically mentions toward the end of the text.

27 My translation of Hermine's French.

28 Anny-Dominique Curtius, *Symbioses d'une mémoire: Manifestations religieuses et littératures de la Caraïbe* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2006).

states, it is the space of origin: “Nous-mêmes le sab” [“we are the sand”], but also the space where the “art of the unrutual,” namely aesthetic works “reritualizing” the enslaved and the disenfranchised, operates to strike back at “slavery’s excessive and arbitrary segregation into categories, even in death.”²⁹

Transoceanic Allegorical Rememowriting

To further unpack the meaning of land, filaos, black sand, corals, coastline, salt, and ocean as witnesses to memory in Hermine’s unsubalternization of a skeleton who can speak,³⁰ it is germane to put Hermine into conversation with Césaire and Brathwaite, as their counternarratives to unsilence the dead and reclaim their flesh and bones interrogate the ethics of historical representation while opening the hold of the slave ship and rememowriting the archive.

In “Venus in Two Acts,” Saidiya Hartman tells us that she needed “to revisit and revise [her] own account of Venus’s death” in *Lose Your Mother*,³¹ and that “the two acts announce the inevitable return of Venus as both ‘haint’ that is, one who haunts the present, and as disposable life.”³² It is precisely this double movement of the consciousness impacting the aesthetic work that operates in this ritual of writing that oscillates between the haunted presence of the dead and the knowledge of their exploitation. Thus, my construction of the term rememowriting draws from Hartman’s term “critical fabulation,” her practice-aesthetics of revisiting-revising, and Toni Morrison’s practice-aesthetics of rememory,³³ remembering memory. To that end, I seek not “to subject the dead to new dangers and a second order of violence,”³⁴ as Hartman writes, but to perturb instead a matrix of violence, and reclaim feet, hips, and bones as the new grammar for oceanic archives and rituals. Ultimately,

29 Valérie Loichot, *Water Graves: The Art of the Unrutual in the Greater Caribbean* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2020), 13, 68.

30 Here I offer a rhetorical nod to Gayatri Spivak’s iconic article “Can the Subaltern Speak?” in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (London: Macmillan, 1988), 271–313.

31 Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2007).

32 Saidiya Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts,” *Small Axe* 12, no. 2 (2008): 5.

33 Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1987).

34 Hartman, “Venus,” 5.

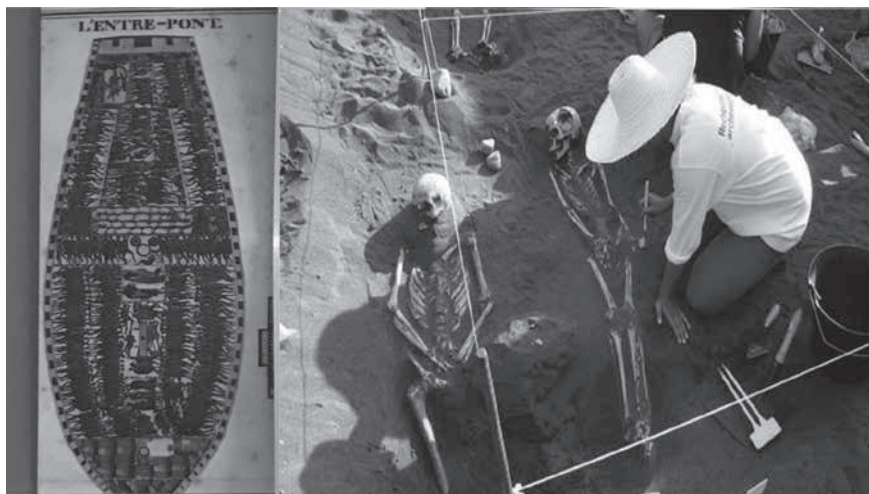


Figure 10.1: Left, the hold of the slave ship. Right, the archeology of slavery. Left: Public domain image from Wikipedia. Right: Image from “Découverte de squelettes d’esclaves à Saint-Paul,” *Zinfos974*, June 22, 2011, <https://www.zinfos974.com/decouverte-de-squelettes-desclaves-a-saint-paul/>. Image courtesy of *Zinfos974*.

as multifaceted narrative palpitations, rememory, critical fabulation, and rememowriting converge to *remember* and *see* enslaved people and construct a repertoire that topples the master narrative and excavates the voices of the subaltern. By constructing a transoceanic conversation between Hermine’s female skeleton, Césaire’s Bergilde, and Brathwaite’s old peasant woman, I offer another mode of theorizing and ritualizing the ocean and critically intersecting tidalectical archives.

Images of shackled bodies confined head-to-foot in the hold of a slave ship (Fig. 10.1, left) have become a familiar iconography of the dehumanization of Africans during the transatlantic slave trade. Nevertheless, when archeologists study skeletons unearthed by the ocean, hurricanes, and climate change (Fig. 10.1, right), a different type of visibility of enslavement, mourning, and ancestral anxiety is imposed on us. This visibility, I argue, will become familiar as more burial grounds are exposed over time because of stronger hurricanes. Considering the multiple critical positionalities that these two images trigger, I contend that the images of excavations stand as an important counternarrative and counter-archive³⁵ to the official, dehumanizing iconography of the

35 With time, the image on the right, which now pertains to the archeology of

Middle Passage that appears on the left and that filled the pages of captains' logbooks and circulated across times.

I chose these two images because they synthesize the transoceanic mode of theorizing and ritualizing the ocean that I propose, which intersects with women's construction of a tentacular, aqueous grammar for political agency. Hermine's skeleton protagonist claiming that her humanity is in the sand, and that "sand is history"³⁶; Césaire's female dancer connecting Africa to the Caribbean with her cataclysmic, volcanic, and oceanic hips; and Brathwaite's old peasant woman's humble, repetitive ritual of walking on the Atlantic and rerouting the Middle Passage with her sand-covered toes, unfold a new spatial relationship across the ocean. This transoceanic geometry is not that of the triangular slave trade. Rather, it has the shape of a wave descending and ascending through the various aqueous geographies these female protagonists travel: Eastern Africa, the Indian Ocean, West Africa, and the Caribbean.

Bergilde³⁷

Césaire's process of rememowriting which I have termed *lianedialectique* takes its source from the uncanny image of the dazzling beauty of the Caribbean landscape shrouding enslaved bodies moldering in the soil of the violent space of the plantation. These bodies are no longer the ghosts of history or the furniture of the Code Noir, but a grammar of memory that can be deciphered with a poetics of "total insight" she has theoretically assessed as such: "If my Antilles are so beautiful, it is because the great game of hide-and-seek has succeeded, it is then because, on that day, the weather is most certainly too blindingly bright and beautiful to see clearly therein."³⁸ A *lianedialectique* foregrounds Césaire's multidimensional thought process that interrelates anthropology, philosophy,

slavery, is doomed to become another type of official archive. Once the bones are classified, catalogued, stored, exhibited, digitized, and studied, they will provide new information on the material culture and living conditions of enslaved populations.

36 I am using a subtitle from Vanessa Agard-Jones's article "What the Sands Remember," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 18, no. 2–3 (2012): 339.

37 For detailed analysis of Bergilde's key role in Césaire's "Le grand camouflage," see Curtius, *Suzanne Césaire*, 307–15.

38 Césaire, "Great Camouflage," in *Great Camouflage*, 45.

geography, history, art, and poetry to compose an epistemological framework and an aesthetic consciousness where subaltern bodies occupying spaces of oppression speak and dance. The liana, an essential, flexible climbing stem in the tropical forest, rooted in the ground with endless dangling branches, is a crucial allegory in Césaire's thoughts on geography and geography of thought. As she poetically expounds, "the tropical vines rocking vertiginously, take on ethereal poses to charm the precipices, with their trembling fingertips they latch onto the ungraspable cosmic flurry rising all throughout the drum-filled nights."³⁹ To unsettle the harmful dynamics of the camouflage of history, Césaire wants artists and writers to harmonize nature's power with the power of the mind, to "seiz[e] and admir[e] a new art [...] which opens up to the artist unsuspected possibilities [...] in the very spectacle of things ignored and silenced."⁴⁰ Césaire's protagonist, Bergilde, is constructed as a text-body-performance crafting a cathartic method. In her *bèlè* (a traditional Martinican drum-dance and historical, land and community consciousness), Bergilde's hips allegorically reproduce the lithe, climbing movements of the lianas to occupy spaces of oppression and obliterate iconic imagery of tortured enslaved women hung by their feet. Bergilde's body politics is a radical performance that supplements the layers of an official archive with knots of memory.

And when, abruptly, in the Caribbean night, all decked out in love and quiet, there bursts forth the call of drums, the Blacks ready themselves to respond to the desire of the earth, and of the dance, but the landowners lock themselves up in their mansions, and behind their metallic spiderweb curtains, they are, under the electric light, so like the pale and entrapped moths.

Around them, the tropical night swells with rhythms, Bergilde's hips have taken their cataclysmic speed from the heaving rising from the depths to the flanks of the volcanoes, and it is Africa herself who, from across the Atlantic and the centuries pre-dating the slave-ships, dedicates to her Antillean children the gaze of sun-filled desire that the dancers exchange.⁴¹

Bergilde is a peasant woman connected with the struggles of her community, which does not own "these small restricted lands surrounded

39 Césaire, "Great Camouflage," 45.

40 Césaire, "Alain and Esthetics," in *Great Camouflage*, 17.

41 Césaire, "Great Camouflage," 44.

by water”⁴² even though they are theirs, as Césaire points out. Thus, her liana~hips are not the manifestation of an idyllic tropical setting, instead subverting the mechanics of dispossession. Like Hermine’s skeleton who stands stiff as a tree and claims a filao ontology, Bergilde’s liana~hips stem from a bamboo ontology, the strong, versatile reed that is so fundamental in Césaire’s iconic assertion: “stiff and stout bamboos [...] we decree the death of sappy, sentimental, folkloric literature.”⁴³ Bamboo, liana vines, and filaos, the ingredients that galvanized surrealist⁴⁴ reflections and Parnassian⁴⁵ exotic poetry, are cannibalized by women’s imperative and the oceanic surrealism where Bergilde’s cataclysmic dance and a skeleton’s voice emerging from sandy abysses sustain what Césaire calls “the massive army of negations.”⁴⁶ Interestingly, a hurricane serves in both narratives to un-camouflage and unearth history, dislocating the colonial outlooks of a Shakespearian tempest. Bergilde’s dance exorcises a stormy, volcanic colonization whose traces and wounds can be seen on her body and in her community. With her liana~hips, Bergilde occupies the entangled geography between Africa and the Caribbean and disrupts the mechanics of her subalternity. She proclaims her right to opacity, reclaims her land, her seascape, and the cluster of energy nestled in her inner chaos and her magmatic trance.

Tidalectical Matriarch

In a philosophical conversation with poet Nathaniel Mackey, Brathwaite undertook the tangled task of defining the Caribbean and elaborated his question as follows:

What is Caribbean/the Caribbean?

What is this—this archipelago, these beautiful islands—yes—which are contrasted in their beauty with extreme poverty and a sense—a

42 Césaire, “Great Camouflage,” 45.

43 Césaire, “Poetic Destitution,” in *Great Camouflage*, 27.

44 André Breton and André Masson, *Martinique, charmeuse de serpents* (Paris: Sagittaire, 1948).

45 Léon Dierx, “Les Filaos,” in *Œuvres complètes* (Paris: Alphonse Lemerre, 1925), 155–57. A French poet, Dierx was born in Réunion and is a major figure of the Parnassian poetic movement.

46 Césaire, “1943: Surrealism and Us,” in *Great Camouflage*, 37.

*memory—of catastrophe What is the origin of this... this paradoxical and pluraradial situation?*⁴⁷

Brathwaite finds an answer in a sandy oceanic ritual he observes from a cliff overlooking the Atlantic. It's a morning ritual performed by a Jamaican peasant woman who tirelessly sweeps her sand-covered yard. "*Traditional early morning old woman of Caribbean history. She's going on like this every morning, sweeping this sand of all things! away from... sand from sand, seen?...*" (30). This woman is the head of a poverty-stricken family, and Brathwaite insists that it is imperative to discard any idyllic, touristic perception of this yard, this woman, her ritual, her labor whose meaning he is trying to decipher.

And then one morning, I see her body silhouetting against the sparkling light that hits the Caribbean at that early dawn and it seems as if her feet, which all along I thought were walking on the sand... were really... walking on the water... and she was travelling across that middlepass age, constantly coming from where she had come from—in her case Africa—to this spot in North Coast Jamaica where she now lives.

That was the "answer" to my quest/ion. The "meaning" of the Caribbean was in that humble repetitive ritual actio(n) which this peasant was performing [...] walking on the steps of sunlit water, coming out of a continent which she didn't fully know how to understand, to a set of islands which we only now barely coming to respect, cherish and understand. (34)

The vision of this humble female body transcending the chaotic tides of the transatlantic slave trade, moving at dawn across the waters of the Atlantic, is highly symbolic and certainly reminds us of Moses parting the sea, and Jesus walking on water. It is this vision of the body "always on this journey, walking on the steps of sunlit water," linked to the ritual of sweeping her sandy yard, that reveals to Brathwaite the critical mindset for constructing his aesthetic consciousness and oceanic philosophy that he calls *tidalectic*.

What is the origin of the Caribbean? How do we come from? Where do we come from? [...] Why is our psychology not dialectical—successfully dialectical—in the way that Western philosophy has assumed people's lives should be, but *tidalectic*, like our grandmother's—our nanna's—action, like the movement of the ocean she's walking on, coming from one

47 Brathwaite, *ConVERSations*, 29. Unless indicated otherwise, all italics are Brathwaite's. Henceforth quoted parenthetically in-text.

continent/continuum, touching another, and then receding (“reading”) from the island(s) into the perhaps creative chaos of the(ir) future... (34)

With her mo(u)rning ritual and broom and her limitless oceanic walk, the grandmother occupies and purifies the historical chaos of the ocean, communes with the skeletons in the ocean, unlocks a violent history to write a counternarrative to the Middle Passage. Brathwaite’s matriarch is not drowned, she is not thrown overboard. She moves around as she pleases, unlike the captives of the slave trade, between Africa and the Caribbean. With “grace and terror,” she “walk[s] on water *and* in light” (35), emerging like Hermine’s skeleton, sanding through with her sand-covered toes. Whereas Édouard Glissant proposes the paradigms *détour-retour* [detour-return] to conceptualize the entangled essentialization of the ancestors’ land (return) and the productive tactics of restoration of the locus of entanglement (detour), Brathwaite and Césaire construct a feminist oceanic genealogy rethinking the entanglements of ancestry through the unsilenced corporeality of ageless mothers. Brathwaite bestows the Black matriarch with the magical powers of Mami Wata, Yemaya, Manman Dlo, or La Sirènn to sand through the trauma of slavery by a resemantization of a geohistorical materiality comprised of islands, continents, coastlines, sand, salt, and sunlit ocean tides. Elizabeth DeLoughrey accurately observes that “tidalectics provides a methodological tool to foreground islands in history and in modernity, rendering a dynamic model of geography for exploring the complex and shifting entanglements between sea and land, between routes and roots.”⁴⁸ Brathwaite’s matriarch carves out a unique choreography where the ocean is given a multiplicity of meanings and the mission of safeguarding it in a completely different archival mindset. While her broom is a marker of her precarious living conditions and her vulnerability, it is also the pen, the brush to write with and trace on the sand her ancestral anxiety and most importantly, her resilience and agency. Her broom and her feet heal historical wounds and recreate a palimpsestic repertoire of memories. The old woman’s enduring walk and re-enacted ritual are a subjective, polycentric, feminist, performative allegory allowing her to unearth the skeletons of history. Her poetic assemblage of feet, sand, and ocean are performative memorials that

48 Elizabeth M. DeLoughrey, “Revisiting Tidalectics: Irma/José/Maria 2017,” in *Tidalectics: Imagining an Oceanic Worldview through Art and Science*, ed. Stephanie Hessler (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2018), 98.

filter the inconsistencies and silences of the official archives, not to purify them, but to ritualistically replenish them with the thickness of history.

Oceanic Apertures

How do we assess the significance of the allegorical swell that gave birth to this subversive female corporeality? Brathwaite offers the term “submerged mothers” to ponder on the “submerged/invisible presence and force”⁴⁹ of Black women in literature, producing a pertinent oxymoron to measure the critical awareness that can emanate from women’s subalternity in Caribbean history. Given how Blackness, women, archives, archeology, ancestry, land, violence, and ocean are interweaved in this chapter, is submersion the appropriate term to define the female corporeal praxes explored here? Are the protagonists submerged mothers? “Mère/mer,” they reflect the sea, as DeLoughrey and Tatiana Flores write in their analysis of visual arts representing underwater gendered bodies.⁵⁰ Submersion is obviously a two-fold movement occurring in two spaces, the surface of the ocean where an ontological force and visibility unfurl, the abyss of the sea where a violent history is camouflaged. Thus, from an allegorical perspective, would submersion be the suitable metaphor to encompass the diverse oceanic expressions of historical vulnerability and decolonial re-ontologization that the subversive yet still subaltern female protagonists have mapped out? Césaire, Brathwaite, and Hermine anticipated and amplified Gayatri Spivak’s entangled question, “Can the subaltern speak?” along with her multifaceted interpretations of her own constellation of answers to her question.⁵¹ Creating spaces of speech for women navigating between worlds and temporal matrices, the three authors thickened the allegories with poecepts⁵² such as sand, skeleton,

49 Kamau Brathwaite, “Submerged Mothers,” *Jamaica Journal* 9, no. 2–3 (1975): 48.

50 Elizabeth M. DeLoughrey and Tatiana Flores, “Submerged Bodies. The Tidalectics of Representability and the Sea in Caribbean Art,” *Environmental Humanities* 12, no. 1 (2020): 144, <https://doi.org/10.1215/22011919-8142242>.

51 Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak.”

52 Patrick Chamoiseau forged this term, which interweaves poetry, concept, theory, and the sensitive, to decipher Glissantian Relation. “Conférence 934: ‘Quand les murs tombent,’ réflexion transatlantique sur la créolisation du monde,” Consulate General of France in New York, April 8, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fg5HE7-Wx_g.

filao, Bergilde, broom that unpack historically tortured geography, precarity, and agency. Hence my preference for “emerged” instead of “submerged,” and for the term tidalectical, with the suffix “al” describing the crosspollination of *lianedialectique* and tidalectics, land and sea, emergence, and the multiplicity of rationalities, unresolved positionalities, and ontologies that these emerged women protagonists force us to see with a vertiginous insight.

DeLoughrey reminds us that “for all of its engagement with history (as master narrative), allegory is also deeply anachronistic.”⁵³ However, I want to offer the notion of uchronia to foreground this emerging female corporeality crisscrossing temporalities, remapping waterscapes and landscapes as intangible witnesses of a cataclysmic history. These women’s allegorical swells interweave praxis and theory, creating an epistemological circularity where woman-centered consciousness, precarity, and solidarity intersect with sand, land, ocean, tides that meet with toes, bones, and liana~hips. Hermine, Césaire, and Brathwaite create a palimpsestic repertoire animated by multiple layers of memory grammars and consciousness that unsettle our critical methodologies. They rememowrite historical trauma and proclaim that tidalectical bodies can walk on the ocean, return to the abyss, and dance with the ocean.

53 Elizabeth M. DeLoughrey, *Allegories of the Anthropocene* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019), 166.

