Plotting the Plantationocene with *The History of Mary Prince*

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Plotting the Plantationocene with *The History of Mary Prince*

**Abstract**

In this essay, I consider how *The History of Mary Prince, A West Indian Slave, Related by Herself* (1831) extends vital affordances for assembling a literary history of ecological rupture, settler colonialism, and transatlantic slavery. These insights arise from my experiences teaching Prince in "Plotting the Plantationocene in Early Atlantic Literature" (Fall 2021), a course which took up what it means to orient to historical formations of climate change as co-emergent with plantation systems. I argue that my students explored how figures like Prince open politically vibrant pathways for being in the world *otherwise* to plantation modernity.

**Keywords**

Mary Prince, plantation, Plantationocene, pedagogy, salt industries

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**Cover Page Footnote**

I am so grateful to Kristina Huang, Jeremy Chow, Sam Plascencia, Carrie Shanafelt, and Sari Carter for reading drafts of this essay. I also want to extended my appreciation to Carrie Shanafelt for visiting my class in Fall 2021, and Kelly Wisecup for sharing work from Assembled for Use prior to its publication, which has shaped so much of my perspective on teaching Samson Occom and Indigenous archives. And finally, my deepest thanks to Kerry Sinanan for facilitating this important forum on Prince and for modeling a vital practice of what it can look like to unlearn racial capitalism when she guest lectured in my class in Fall 2021.
My new master was one of the owners or holders of the salt ponds, and he received a certain sum for every slave that worked upon his premises, whether they were young or old. This sum was allowed him out of the profits arising from the salt works. I was immediately sent to work in the salt water with the rest of the slaves.

—Mary Prince, *The History of Mary Prince*

Let us sum up in a few connected phrases what we know of the Plantation. It is an organization formed in a social pyramid, confined within an enclosure, functioning apparently as an autarky, but actually dependent, and with a technical mode of production that cannot evolve because it is based on a slave structure.

—Édouard Glissant, *The Poetics of Relation*

In recent years, I have turned to *The History of Mary Prince* (1831) in the classroom to make visible the long histories of racialized extraction shaping our current climate emergency. Having taught in South Florida for several years and now in Oklahoma, I am always aware of ecological fragility—escalating drought and extreme weather on the Plains, with accelerating risks from hurricanes, floods, and rising sea levels along the Atlantic coast. Many of my students come from or have relatives in the Caribbean and the Plains regions, where climate precarity and neoliberal policies palpably shape their everyday lives. To paraphrase Stuart Hall, global warming is a structure they *live* (488). Because of this, many students arrive at my courses on early American literature with a visceral sense that our planetary future is circumscribed by a lack of meaningful political action or economic shifts towards sustainable life. That this foreclosure is the ongoing legacy of the plantation is what my courses seek to illuminate. I open with these reflections on my institutional location because one way to teach the long history of plantation capitalism is to move from the local to the global. For me, this means acknowledging that the plantation has formed the world we move within, as monocultural industries continue to distort Caribbean economies and as Indigenous nations were displaced west of the Mississippi River during the era of the Indian Removal Act (1830) to expand cotton economies in the United States/American South. Teaching the plantation as an extractive system rooted in interconnected histories of Indigenous land theft, chattel slavery, and plantation monoculture in an era of climate catastrophe provokes urgent questions: How do early American literary texts bear witness to the relations between plantation violences and global warming? And how should we approach early American literature under the weight of contemporary climate crises, which overwhelmingly shape the institutional spaces many of us think and teach within?
In this essay, I consider how *The History of Mary Prince, A West Indian Slave, Related by Herself* (1831) extends vital affordances for assembling a literary history of ecological rupture, settler colonialism, and transatlantic slavery. These insights arise from my experiences teaching Prince in a Fall 2020 undergraduate course, “Ecologies of Power in Colonial Literature”, and in a Fall 2021 graduate course, “Plotting the Plantationocene in the Atlantic World”. Both courses took up what it means to orient to formations of climate change as co-emergent with plantation systems. For the conversation on Prince in my graduate course, Kerry Sinanan joined us and discussed *The History’s* afterlives in recent remembrance projects for the Abolition of the Slave Trade (1807) in Britain, which coopted Prince within “a cultural arena that refuses adequately to acknowledge its slave-owning and imperial past” (“The ‘Slave,’” 76). Drawing on her recent work on Prince as a trenchant critic of capitalism, Sinanan urged us to approach *The History* as an intervention in theorizing what Cedric Robinson has named racial capitalism (Sinanan, “Seeing”). As defined by Robinson, this term makes visible the historical emergence of industrial capitalism with the resources extracted from Black labor within plantation regimes (Robinson 9-28). Inspired by this conversation, in this essay I offer a meditation on how reading Prince with these touchpoints—plantation time, racial capitalism, and remembrance projects—enables us to chart the past and present legacies of the monocultural industries in texts that bear witness to these processes as they are unfolding.

Toward this end, Sinanan took us through a set of harrowing passages on Prince’s work in the salt industries on Turk’s Island, where she labored for over ten years (Sinanan, “Critique”). Prince describes this industry as brutally corrosive: “Our feet and legs, from standing in the salt water for so many hours, soon became full of dreadful boils, which eat down in some cases to the very bone” (71-2). We considered how Prince coordinates the salt ponds as sites of resource accumulation and coerced labor implicated in environmental injustice and anti-Black violence. Our conversations were also influenced by criticism on *The History’s* Turk’s Island scenes, which my graduate students read for class, and which I provided in a handout of selected passages for my undergraduate students. These critics examine how Prince’s attention to the salt ponds’ corrosiveness implicates an entire onto-epistemic regime, where abjected and exploited Black flesh enables capital modernity. Michele Speitz argues that Prince represents “a forced merger of labor, body, and mind” that is “a horrific contortion of being,” and Matthew Rowney adds that extractive salt economies thus marshal “the conditions of the modern” (Speitz 3; Rowney 357-8). In a photography project, Cherene Sherrard-Johnson also shows that what Prince diagnoses as an exploitative “saltwork” endures in contemporary Caribbean
industries (Sherrard-Johnson). Following these pathways, my students and I came to see that The History unearths economic formations where the plantation is not past, but a present we now inhabit.

The History’s gestures to a longue durée of economic extraction brought my students and I to critical debates over what to call our current geologic era: Anthropocene, Plantationocene, Capitalocene, White Supremacy Scene—something else? For these conversations, I created a handout that named and defined each option in conversation with Jason W. Moore, Françoise Vergés, and Nicholas Mirzoeff, among others. My students and I considered the affordances and risks attendant to each term and found that Plantationocene was particularly useful in tracking how monocultural industries are constitutive with racialized violences. These discussions enabled us to explore the economic and cultural formations that subtend the Plantationocene as a critical term. As elaborated by Sophie Sapp Moore, Pablo F. Gómez, Monique Allewaert, and Gregg Mittman, Plantationocene identifies climate change as a legacy of large-scale agriculture forged in the seventeenth century (“Plantation Legacies”). Initially conceived as a lens to interrogate the legacies of plantations and their products—sugar, cotton, tobacco, coffee—scholars have been extending the scope of the Plantationocene to histories of Indigenous genocide and territorial displacement as intertwined processes that have fundamentally altered, and are still altering, global climates. Throughout these courses, I came to see that ecocritical imperatives, at least within early American studies, are rarely commensurate with Caribbean and Indigenous scholarship on plantation systems, given the field’s emphases on Euro-American canons and methods. I have come to believe that our syllabi must foreground the significance of racialized extraction to the worlds we study and inhabit. Anishinaabe scholar Kyle Powys Whyte reminds us that settler colonialism and slavery produced environmental change, which for Black and Indigenous communities often means that climate catastrophe has already happened (224-5). A focus on literatures of global warming that does not confront these histories fails to provide the imaginative horizons necessary to understand our current planetary condition.

The History similarly points to possibilities for tracing the broader implications of salt’s extraction by uncovering the co-constitutive emergence of modernity with the plantation, which scholars like Jennifer Morgan argue are central to recovering Black women’s economic knowledge of colonial systems (3-4). In this sense, Prince echoes historian Edward E. Baptist’s argument that while previous scholars described plantations as inefficient and anti-modern, Black witnesses drew on their experiential knowledge to show how these systems “compelled intensively measured labor”—and are thus inherently a mode of capitalist
production (48-9). More particularly, my students and I approached The History as an elaboration of what Samantha Pinto terms “Black feeling as knowing”: “[Few] people in England know what slavery is. I have been a slave—I have felt what a slave feels, and I know what a slave knows” (Pinto 500; Prince 74). In this way, Prince shows how systems of extraction seep into everyday life, provoking us to consider how Black and Indigenous witnesses improvised embodied and affective archives to these unlivable histories. Prince’s dissident assemblage of feeling, knowing, and remembering locates colonial extraction in intimate scenes of exposure that enslaved people were subjected to throughout Turk’s Island (Maddison-MacFadyen 120). Building on these critical engagements, Sinanan brought us to Prince’s descriptions of a brutal accelerated labor rhythm in the salt ponds as emblematic of racial capitalism: “Then we had no sleep—no rest—but were forced to work as fast as we could, and go on again all next day the same as usual. Work—work—work—Oh that Turk's Island was a horrible place!” (Prince 73-4; Sinanan, “Critique”). With this passage, my students and I mediated on how Prince’s repetition of “work—work—work” makes legible the plantation as the crucible of capital modernity. Indeed, The History’s typographical repetition of the dash challenges colonial efforts to render these exploitative processes invisible: “work—work—work.” In close reading this scene with my students, we found that what resides in the dash is a submerged history, one that unearths the Plantationocene as a system of extraction that shapes the geologic epoch we now inhabit. And we came to understand that what we know about the historical trajectories of a warming planet is this: the plantation’s violences, which manifest with differential intensities for global communities of color, is an “enclosure,” to draw from Édouard Glissant, that perpetually limits any full project of abolition and decolonization (64).

**Unlearning the plantation with Black and Indigenous archives**

Salt is time. Evidence of how long since evaporation. Resident time of water in basins. Measured future for the preserved dead. Salt is first and lasting.¹—Alexis Pauline Gumbs, “The Age of Stolen Salt”

To bring these enclosures into further relief, I want to discuss the literary archive we assembled to read with The History, which included seventeenth and eighteenth-century settler portrayals of colonial expansion, as well as Indigenous and Black witnesses to the intertwined emergences of Native displacement and plantation empires. Put somewhat differently, this section discusses the semester-long scaffolding that enabled Prince’s critiques of the plantation to come into visibility. For this, I deliberately foregrounded questions of method by beginning with Ariella Aïsha Azoulay’s call to “unlearn imperialism” in Potential History:
Unlearning Imperialism (2019), selections of which we read for class. As Azoulay defines this practice, “Potential history does not mend worlds after violence but rewinds to the moment before violence occurred […] Such rehearsals of nonimperial political thinking and archival practice are not undertaken in preparation for an imminent day of reckoning, but rather as a mode of being with others differently” (10). To perform this process of unlearning, my students brought discussion questions to class—questions that carefully resisted the impulse to achieve any conclusive answers but unfolded different possibilities for understanding the origins and continuing effects of the Plantationocene. In what follows, I interweave our investigations in this literary archive with the open-ended questions my students so provocatively posed. By considering the questions my students asked about Black and Indigenous testimonies of resistance to the plantation, I hope we can further understand how figures like Prince open politically vibrant pathways for being in the world that disrupt plantation modernity.

Broadly, my students and I pressed on what it means to engage with suppressed archives, given colonial erasures of diasporic knowledge. For Prince, we lingered with salt as an archive, recalling Sharpe’s reminder that the matter of the Middle Passage remains with us: “[T]hey, like us, are alive in hydrogen, in oxygen; in carbon, in phosphorous, and iron; in sodium and chlorine. This is what we know about those Africans thrown, jumped, dumped overboard in the Middle Passage; they are with us still” (19). And we could add that plantation violence is embedded not only in the economic and cultural systems that continue to contour the globe, but in the very sodium molecules that circulate within salt deposits and saltwater currents. As Alexis Pauline Gumbs puts it with harrowing succinctness, “Salt is firsting and lasting.” In terms of pedagogical ethos, then, unlearning the plantation requires that we place Black and Indigenous archives of resistance to the plantation in simultaneity, for their testimonies allow us to witness the transhistorical ruptures to colonial histories of subjugated life and earth.

More specifically, my syllabi were organized around four units: “Origin Stories,” “Novel Plots,” “Plantation Witnesses, Removal Testimonies,” and “Revolutionary Presents, Radical Futures.” In “Origin Stories,” we engaged with three different sites for narrating beginnings: the creation of the cosmos, colonial “discovery” of the Americas, and contemporary debates over when the Holocene transitions to an epoch of human-driven climate change—a geologic era many are now calling the Anthropocene. Regarding the latter, Simon L. Lewis and Mark A. Maslin propose 1610 as the year that heralds the Anthropocene, arguing that colonialism provoked widespread demographic declines in Indigenous communities, and hence a waning in the human activities that shape hemispheric weather patterns,
which produced historically low carbon levels, while setting into motion the extractive economic systems driving increasing levels of atmospheric carbon today (175). However, Jason W. Moore urges that the usefulness of Anthropocene is limited because it suggests that an abstracted, generalized humanity is responsible for global warming: “The Anthropocene […] does not challenge the naturalized inequalities, alienation, and violence inscribed in modernity’s strategic relations of power and production” (170). We came to see that Plantationocene extends a vital frame for engaging with colonial literature by centering the plantation as a transformational system on a planetary scale.

Building on these engagements, our next unit, “Novel Plots,” was anchored in Sylvia Wynter’s groundbreaking essay, “Novel and History, Plot and Plantation,” which contends that the novel and the plantation developed concurrently as worldmaking systems. While Wynter traces material and imagined forms of life engendered by colonialism, she also presses on plot’s polyphonic meanings—a narrative form, a conspiracy, a piece of earth—to chart diasporic “secretive” histories at odds with the plantation and the novel (101). Guided by Wynter, my students and I turned to three early novels whose portrayals of colonial subjectivity depended on and sustained exercises of slavery and land theft—Aphra Behn’s Oroonoko (1688), Daniel Defoe’s Robinson Crusoe (1719), and the anonymously published The Female American (1767). We sifted these novels’ cultural reproductions of colonial violence, which prompted one student to wonder if “voices of color within” them can ever “[create] a counter-narrative and resist the damning effects of the Plantationocene?” (Mullen). Put differently, how can we listen for traces of dissident worlds when Oroonoko silences Imoinda, Robinson Crusoe infamously portrays Friday’s willed assent to his own captivity, and The Female American portrays Unca’s assimilation to the benevolent imperatives of British missionary projects (Richardson 140)?

To press on these questions, our unit on “Plantation Witnesses, Removal Testimonies” turned to Black and Indigenous voices on the legacies of colonial displacement and plantation slavery, archived in texts like Mohegan writer Samson Occom’s “Herbs and Roots” (1754), Ottobah Cugoano’s Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evils of Slavery (1787), Olaudah Equiano’s Interesting Narrative (1789), Mashantucket Pequot writer William Apess’s Indian Nullification of the Unconstitutional Laws of Massachusetts (1835), and Charles Ball’s Slavery in the United States (1837). In reading selections from these writers, we traced the different ways they implicated plantation modernity in Indigenous displacement, as well as the growth of lumber industries in the U.S. Northeast and cotton empires in the South. Each writer also delineates pathways for remembering and re-membering decolonial worlds in the wake of plantation
ruin. My graduate students and I were fortunate to have guest scholars join us for these conversations, as Kelly Wisecup discussed her research on Occom’s medicinal recipes, while Carrie Shanafelt explored Cugoano’s challenge to speculative debt economies with us (Wisecup, “Recipe”; Shanafelt, “Economic Witness”). Wisecup began by encouraging us to unlearn settler teleologies that reify Indigenous vanishing, with one model of unlearning exemplified by Occom’s herbal writings, which “made relations among humans, plants and bodies” vibrantly legible in contrast to settler erasures of Native place-based knowledge—erasures often structurally reproduced in public memory projects and museum exhibits, as we explored with the recent renovation of the Field Museum’s Native North America Hall (Occom 44-7; Wisecup, Assembled, 25). During our discussion, we came to see how “Herbs and Roots” reflects Occom’s efforts to compile Native archives for his community and for future generations (“Recipe”). In a similar vein, our dialogues lingered with Cugoano’s critiques of global financial systems predicated on plantation slavery alongside his call for us to engage in “days of mourning and fasting” to make visible “the horrible iniquity of making merchandize of us” (Cugoano 98; Shanafelt, “A World,” 38). We mediated on what a decolonial praxis rooted in Cugoano and Occom’s orientations to witnessing and remembering should encompass, as one student probed: “Ignorance is not unlearning; if we haven’t ever truly reckoned with or moved beyond/moved out of our past, how can we ever enter into any sort of future, let alone one that is different from the past?” (Dvorak, October 14).

We could approach this question another way: our final unit, “Revolutionary Presents, Radical Futures,” surveyed Black traditions of resistance to the plantation. More particularly, we traced the past and present legacies of the Haitian Revolution, as elaborated in freedom documents like the Declaration of Independence (1804) and the Constitution of 1805. Our conversations were further guided by scholars like Michel-Rolph Trouillot, C.L.R. James, and David Scott, who differently argue that the forces of racial capitalism perpetually constrain the promise of the Haitian Revolution (Trouillot 70-107; James 269-88; Scott 132-68). Trouillot, for one, enabled us to see how the Haitian resistance movement has frequently been condemned to silencing and erasure in treatments of the “Age of Revolution”: “The Haitian Revolution entered history with the peculiar characteristic of being unthinkable even as it happened” (72-3). At the same time, after the abolition of slavery in Haiti, the plantation system remained dominant throughout the Atlantic world, and even endured in a limited fashion in Haiti, despite efforts to organize new economic and political relations. Indeed, Toussaint L’Ouverture would come to re-institute a modified form of large-scale sugar cultivation on the island, convinced that this system could protect Haiti’s autonomy. For James, L’Ouverture’s decision powerfully shaped his views on
anticolonial revolution’s possibilities and limitations, and in the second edition of *The Black Jacobins* (1962), he added six paragraphs meditating on L’Ouverture’s career in relation to Fidel Castro and the Cuban Revolution in 1959. There, he argued that “Toussaint’s failure was the failure of enlightenment, not of darkness” (288). His choice was not an error of imagination, but a condition of global systems of power that constrained his ability to construct alternatives to the plantation—he was a “conscript of modernity,” as Scott puts it. James extends a critical praxis for not only interpreting the Haitian Revolution’s seeming failures in eradicating the plantation, but also for understanding what it means to continue living with the Haitian Revolution as an unfinished project of freedom.⁵ James and Scott’s critical engagements with L’Ouverture and the Haitian Revolution thus provoked urgent questions about our collective capacity to reimagine the present anew. As one student asked in response to these readings: “If we make it clear in our stories and in our retellings of the past that ‘history is not leading us anywhere in particular,’ that there is ‘no necessary promise of rescue or reconciliation,’ and that the past cannot be neatly compartmentalized as a series of episodes that have definitively ended […] does it then become more difficult for people to (mistakenly) believe that we are post-anything?”—and certainly not post-plantation (Dvorak, October 21; Scott 166 and 135)?

**Potential histories, speculative futures**

I would like to think that this new world is still to come.

--*Marlene Daut, Tropics of Haiti*

Meditating on silenced pasts and conscripted presents prompted my students to speculate in the gaps of colonial archives and with noncanonical Black and Indigenous texts to open up new futures. In this, we sought to practice what Saidiya Hartman calls “critical fabulation,” or a way of “advancing a series of speculative arguments […] to imagine what cannot be verified” (12-13). Many of these speculations clarified when we arrived at *The History* near the end of the semester. We recognized that the Haitian Revolution is vital to any engagement with Prince, who may have heard stories about Haitian resistance from Hetty, “a French Black […] whom my master took in privateering from another vessel” (65). We wondered if Hetty hailed from Haiti and was carried away by enslavers fleeing the war—if her possible memories of Black insurgency in the Francophone Caribbean could have inflected the future of abolition that *The History* gestures towards (94). To address these possibilities, we engaged with the Jamaican activist Robert Wedderburn, whose periodical *The Axe Laid to the Root* (1817) capaciousely cites Maroon and Haitian resistance practices as potential histories that enable alternatives to the plantation (Castellano 17). Indeed, he
warns that a “time is fast approaching, when such rulers must act righteousness, or be drawn from their seats; for truth and justice must prevail” (87). Yet The Axe Laid to the Root is an incomplete text, ending mid-sentence: “Now, gentle—To be continued” (110; Johnson 386-7). Because Wedderburn is attuned to history as it could be otherwise, he presses on what it means to anticipate a future that has not yet arrived. If his future is both unfinished and imminent, then how can we continue to dwell with him in the dash and inhabit the interruption of “To be continued”? Or, to paraphrase Katherine McKittrick, what futures can we summon beyond the plantation’s ongoing ruin of time, space, and flesh (12)?

By the semester’s end, my students and I came to recognize that questions of ecology and futurity cannot be untangled from cultural and economic systems coterminous with plantation time—and this essay has been preoccupied with witnessing, imagination, and remembrance for this reason. Prince’s conscription within the plantation reminds me of Ramesh Mallipeddi’s point that she testifies to the “great torment” of slavery in the corrosive effects of the salt ponds on her body, which “are not overt but imperceptible, not spectacular but hidden, not instantaneous but cumulative” (Prince 72; Mallipeddi 74-83). He extends Rob Nixon’s claim that environmental injustice often unfolds as a slow violence “that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all” (3). By reading Prince within an environmental lens, we can see how colonialism, as Kathryn Yusoff puts it, “cuts across both flesh and earth in the economies of valuation it established” (32). And we can reckon with plantation violence as a slow dis(re)membering of bodies and lands—as an incremental rupturing of anticolonial futures.

In the same way that The History and The Axe Laid to the Root carry chronologies of these violences in the dash, unlearning the plantation requires us to grapple with the production and reproduction of deadly economies—in origin stories and novels, in stolen territories and monocultural industries, in museum spaces and remembrance projects—if we are to reconceive material and political life in the coming future. Prince’s testimony, when assembled with the witness of Occom, Cugoano, and Wedderburn, extends a life-sustaining practice for interrupting the plantation’s ideological and economic hegemony, as one of my students suggested: “Can we say that Prince fills an imaginative gap in the archive or offers an outline for what Black worlds could have been because plantation violence has not given us other options?” (De Leon). In addition to recalling Hartman’s work on archival aporia, his question evoked a critical practice that Lisa Lowe names “what could have been”—a mode of “revisit[ing] times of historical contingency and possibility to consider alternatives that may have been
“unthought in those times” but which may allow us “to imagine different futures for what lies ahead” (175). In this way, Prince calls us to continue unlearning the plantation by teaching towards potential history—by reaching towards not only “what could have been” but also what could be otherwise.

Notes

This essay is part of a special issue: “Teaching The History of Mary Prince (1831), guest edited by Kerry Sinanan,” Aphra Behn Online 13, no. 1 (Summer 2023). To read the essays in the cluster, follow this link: https://digitalcommons.usf.edu/abo/vol13/iss1/.

1 I am grateful to Kerry Sinanan for first sharing Gumbs’s essay with me.

2 All questions are shared with permission.

3 For creation accounts, I pair the first three chapters from the book of Genesis with Potawatomi writer Robin Wall Kimmerer’s retelling of an Anishinaabe creation account in Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teaching of Plants (3-10). For myths of discovery and the origins of colonialism, I pair selections from Christopher Columbus’s letters and journals with the Seneca prophet Handsome Lake’s historical fable, “How America Was Discovered,” and the chapter “On Property” from John Locke’s Second Treatise of Government with early Indigenous treaties and petitions, which archive important counter-narratives of settler colonialism. I draw the latter selections from Kristina Bross and Hilary Wyss’s edited collection, Early Native Literacies in New England.

4 The newly renovated hall at the Field Museum, titled “Native Truths: Our Voices, Our Stories,” foregrounds rotating exhibits that emphasize past and present Indigenous storytelling, rather than objects and belongings confined to the past. With Wisecup, we considered these contemporary reckonings in museum cultures with excerpts from Mohegan tribal historian Melissa Tantaquidgeon Zobel’s novel Oracles, which includes a depiction of a fictionalized Mohegan-run museum. Zobel is a relative of Occom through his sister, Lucy Occom Tantaquidgeon.

5 Here, I am reminded of Jeremy Matthew Glick’s point that for many Black writers the Haitian Revolution summoned an “unfinished” horizon for imagining “a transformative future” (6).
Works Cited


