A Lattice of Pain and Technique: Narrative, Trauma, and Mêtis in Patrick Chamoiseau’s *Texaco*

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A Lattice of Pain and Technique: Narrative, Trauma, and Mētis in Patrick Chamoiseau’s Texaco

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Abstract

This thesis studies Patrick Chamoiseau’s novel Texaco utilizing narratological tools to analyze how it explores the topics of trauma and practical knowledge through the concept of storytelling. Utilizing Walter Benjamin’s essay “The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov,” I show how Texaco champions the power of storytelling and the figure of the storyteller as a vector through which experiences are transmitted, mainly knowledge and trauma. To explain these types of experiences, I rely on the concept of mētis as expressed in James C. Scott’s book Seeing Like A State and the theories on trauma that Dori Laub, Shoshana Felman, and Cathy Caruth study. This thesis ends for a call to adapt and apply this frame further in other works of literature.
Biography

Orlando O. Zabala Figueroa is a Puerto Rican scholar born in 1994. He studies Comparative Literature and has earned a BA from the University of Puerto Rico Río Piedras Campus. His academic interests include postcolonial theory, trauma studies, Caribbean literature, narratology, and the novel. He has written an undergraduate thesis titled *Machos and Losers: Representations of Caribbean Masculinities in the Fiction of Junot Díaz*. Likewise, he has presented his essays on the works of Edwidge Danticat, Piri Thomas, and Harriet Jacobs in academic conferences.
A Lattice of Pain and Technique: Narrative, Trauma, and Mētis in Patrick Chamoiseau’s Texaco
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Introduction: *Texaco*’s Premise and Storytelling

*Texaco* (1992), a novel by Martinican author Patrick Chamoiseau, begins with a confrontation. Its protagonist, Marie-Sophie Laborieux, prepares to protect the town of Texaco, which has been at “open war” with Martinique’s “city council,” from an urban planner whose mission is to destroy their homes (24-27). Facing terrible uncertainty about the town’s fate, she decides to “wage. . . the decisive battle for Texaco’s survival” using her “word” as her “only weapon” and share a narrative of “Texaco’s story” (25-27). There begins a lengthy narration of events which follow the life of Esternome, Sophie-Marie’s father, and the emotional and social basis for Texaco’s existence. Framing this event is a conversation between Marie-Sophie and the Word Scratcher, who pens her words as well as the fragments of other writings that inform the text as a whole. At the center of *Texaco* is an act of storytelling that is repeated through writing and conversations, creating a complex web of communication that transmits ideas, themes, and affects. This study explores these themes in order to develop a theory that elaborates upon the elements of storytelling and reinforces the belief in their power that this novel represents.

I propose a theoretical model– a method of reading that can be replicated in other texts. My concern is with the development of a theoretical framework whose concepts can be expanded upon by other scholars. This frame’s main foundation is Walter Benjamin’s work on storytelling synthesized with concepts taken from James C. Scott’s book *Seeing Like A State* and Dori Laub, Shoshana Felman, and Cathy Caruth’s studies on trauma. Adapting these ideas for the novel specifically, I cite Mikhail Bakhtin’s work on the composition of the novel, H. Porter Abbott’s work on the elements of narrative, and Manfred Jahn’s work on narratology. Due to the Caribbean nature of the object of study, I adopt the lens of postcolonial theory, specifically its description of colonial societies, as presented in the writing of Antonio Benítez Rojo, Édouard
Glissant, Achille Mbembe, and Nelson Maldonado-Torres to better inform the frame.

In general terms, I argue, from Benjamin’s explanations, that the formation of stories, and therefore the act of storytelling, is composed of two elements, both of which are informed by experience: technical knowledge, and emotional knowledge. The first chapter of my thesis explains this model through the work of the theorists mentioned above, and considers how such a model plugs into and is informed by the Caribbean colonial condition. The second chapter explores the interconnected way in which *Texaco* champions a type of practical knowledge that Scott names mêtis (311) while presenting them in a context of traumatic events and how they inform the novel’s world. Finally, this thesis concludes with an explanation of how both elements interact with each other, one that invites other scholars to test this theory by applying it to the analysis of other narratives.
Chapter I: Narrating Mētis and Trauma: A Theory on Storytelling and its Uses

The Anatomy of a Story(teller)

This theoretical frame is best understood as a collection of three groups of concepts that inform and are informed by each other in feedback loop: narration, mētis, and trauma. The first group’s most important concept is the act of storytelling and the figure of the storyteller. Once these are established, I explore how these figures interact with the other two groups. In doing so, I propose a model of what constitutes a story and its storyteller.

Walter Benjamin, in his essay “The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov,” describes the storyteller as a figure that has “become something remote from us and something that is getting even more distant,” and storytelling itself “is coming to an end” (83). He argues that this disinterest happens because “experience has fallen in value” and implies that storytelling, at its core, is “the ability to exchange experiences” (83-84). This is explained as a “process” that could be perceived since the end of World War I, where the soldiers “returned from the battlefield grown silent—not richer but poorer in communicable experience” (84). Rather, Benjamin does not consider the discourse that occurs after that war “experience that goes from mouth to mouth” but which seems to be a replacement for it, arguing that “strategic,” “economic,” “bodily,” and “moral,” experiences have been replaced by “tactical warfare,” “inflation,” “mechanical warfare,” and “those in power” respectively (84). I follow this thread through the second group of concepts, the one that explains mētis and its relationship to knowledge in the next section.

Benjamin argues that the key “source” of a storyteller is “experience which is passed on from mouth to mouth” (84). He then explains that, while storytellers are formed from “each sphere of life,” one can see them coming from a combination of two archetypes, the travelling
“seaman” who deals with “the lore of faraway places” and the stationary “peasant” who handles “the lore of the past,” both of which combine within the “artisan class” (84-85). This reveals an inclination “toward practical interests” that is important to storytellers that translates to “the nature of every real story [which is that it] contains, openly or covertly, something useful” (86).

What is useful could be something ethical or “practical advice,” but Benjamin considers that all that a storyteller offers is “counsel” (86). He argues that “counsel is less an answer to a question than a proposal concerning the continuation of a story which is just unfolding,” and that if it is “woven into the fabric of real life [it] is wisdom” (86-87).

Benjamin views storytelling as “the art of repeating stories” (91) and ties it deeply to the storyteller. He writes:

The storytelling that thrives for a long time in the milieu of work—the rural, the maritime, and the urban—is itself an artisan form of communication, as it were. It does not aim to convey the pure essence of the thing, like information or a report. It sinks the thing into the life of the storyteller, in order to bring it out of him again. Thus, traces of the storyteller cling to the story the way the handprints of the potter cling to the clay vessel. (91-92)

The storyteller possesses a “craftsman’s relationship” with “his material, human life. . . the raw material of experience, his own and that of others” (108). Therefore, a storyteller can be seen as an artisan of experiences, while the story is the product of crafting with said experience.

Benjamin even points out that Leskov believed that to write was to craft (92). In contrast, the one who listens to the story “is controlled by his interest in retaining what he is told . . . to assure himself of the possibility of reproducing the story” (97), thereby becoming a potential storyteller. This requires “a comprehensive memory” that “creates the chain of tradition which passes a
happening on from generation to generation (97-98).

Even so, as it has been stated, Benjamin believes that this process is being neglected culturally. One reason why, he states, is information, which he calls “a new form of communication” that has an emphasis on familiarity, or “what is nearest” and an emphasis on explanation that the story does not have (88-89). Another one is the popularity of the novel (87). He compares the story and the novel thus:

What differentiates the novel from all other forms of prose literature—the fairy tale, the legend, even the novella—is that it neither comes from oral tradition nor goes into it. This distinguishes it from storytelling in particular. The storyteller takes what he tells from experience—his own or that reported by others. And he in turn makes it the experience of those who are listening to his tale. The novelist has isolated himself. The birthplace of the novel is the solitary individual, who is no longer able to express himself by giving examples of his most important concerns, is himself uncounseled, and cannot counsel others. To write a novel means to carry the incommensurable to extremes in the representation of human life. (87; emphasis mine)

For Benjamin the differences between storytelling and the novel as a genre, as well as information as a way of transmitting knowledge, mean that this replacement erases counsel from the picture. A novel usually cannot carry or transmit the type of experience that a story can. I say usually since Benjamin calls Leskov, a novelist, a storyteller (83). I have a more optimistic position on the relationship between the novel and storytelling, as I explain below. For now, I point out that the novel is capable of containing multiple elements, which include what Benjamin believes it lacks.
A third element that, according to Benjamin, has influenced the art of storytelling is a change in the relationship between people and death. He says that its “face” has changed and has, therefore, impacted its role in the transmission of experience and storytelling (93). He writes:

> It has been observable for a number of centuries how in the general consciousness the thought of death has declined in omnipresence and vividness. In its last stages this process is accelerated. And, in the course of the nineteenth century bourgeois society has, by means of hygienic and social, private and public institutions, realized a secondary effect which may have been its subconscious main purpose: to make it possible for people to avoid the sight of the dying. (93)

Benjamin believes that in this time period “people live in rooms that have never been touched by death” and that “when their end approaches they are stowed away in sanatoria or hospitals by their heirs” (94). This affects the practice of storytelling because a person’s “real life” becomes “transmissible” when they die, giving their experiences “authority” (94).

In summation, the storyteller is an artisan who takes from human experience and molds it into a story that contains counsel, which can include practical knowledge. These elements of experience and knowledge are what interest me most in Benjamin’s essay. I expand with the two remaining groups of concept in subsequent sections. To do this, I engage with the work of James C. Scott for the second group of concepts, and with the understanding of trauma that is derived from the readings by Felman, Laub, and Caruth.

*Mētis and a Conflict between Forms of Knowledge*

The second group of concepts that I explore involves an epistemological conflict that James C Scott’s book *Seeing Like A State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* presents. In order to understand it, it is important to establish the concept
of high modernism. Scott presents the idea of a “high modernist ideology” (4) which he defines:

... as a strong... version of the self-confidence about scientific and technical progress, the expansion of production, the growing satisfaction of human needs, the mastery of nature (including human nature), and, above all, the rational design of social order commensurate with the scientific understanding of natural laws.

The followers of “high modernism” possess “a particularly sweeping vision of how the benefits of technical and scientific progress might be applied–usually through the state–in every field of human activity” (89-90). Likewise, they “see rational order in remarkably visual aesthetic terms” and organized cities as such (4). To do this, they engage in what Scott calls “[s]tate simplifications,” which are “techniques for grasping a large and complex reality,” such as designing maps and taking censuses, done as a way of maintaining power (77). Even certain policies like establishing official last names are a high modernist strategy (64-71). These forms of “state social engineering” can be used to attempt to better the lives of the underclass, yet Scott argues that they are “inherently authoritarian” (92-93). He writes that in these cases: “In place of multiple sources of invention and change, there was a single planning authority; in place of the plasticity and autonomy of existing social life, there was a fixed social order in which positions were designated” (93). This can becomes extremely pernicious when, behind it, “an authoritarian state that is willing and able to use the full weight of its coercive power to bring [it’s] designs into being” exists in company with “a prostrate civil society that lacks the capacity to resist these plans” (5). In other words, high modernism is an ideology that asserts science and reason can, and should, dominate and dictate elements on the social sphere. It also emboldens authoritarian states to pursue certain goals.
In opposition to high modernism, Scott promotes the concept of “mētis” an Ancient Greek word that “denotes the knowledge that can only come from practical experience” (6). This “practical knowledge” is pitted against the “scientific knowledge” that the high modernist values, in turn forming part of “a political struggle for institutional hegemony by experts and their institutions” (311). Explaining the concept further, Scott writes:

Mētis is most applicable to broadly similar but never precisely identical situations requiring a quick and practiced adaptation that becomes almost second nature to the practitioner. The skills of mētis may well involve rules of thumb, but such rules are largely acquired through practice (often in formal apprenticeship) and a developed feel or knack for strategy. (315-316).

In other words, mētis represents a highly local and personal knowledge, which can be learned through experience, and is primarily focused on results (317-324). Such knowledge is not appreciated in “high modernist schemes” since it is mostly “practical, opportune, and contextual” (323). Even so, Scott argues that mētis is actually “plastic” and “divergent,” comparing it to the flexibility of oral cultures and language, even if it is “created and maintained . . . in the context of lifelong observation and a relatively stable, multigenerational community that routinely exchanges and preserves knowledge of this kind” (332-334). Mētis also “applies to human interaction,” ranging from sports to politics¹ (314-315). Finally, Scott presents mētis as knowledge that is destroyed easily through “industrialization” and “standardized formulas” which can only be utilized with the knowledge approved by the state (335).

I argue that mētis is closely linked to Benjamin’s views on storytelling. Since Benjamin

¹ For a rather informal, albeit informative, reading on mētis’ relationship to politics, see Lou Keep’s blog post “Man as Rationalist Animal.”
links the art of storytelling to both the knowledge and communities of craftsmen, it is natural to conclude that the storyteller both engages in and presents mētis to the listener. A story transmits mētis, and the crafting of stories could also be considered mētis on its own. Likewise, I place Benjamin’s complaints on the rise of information over storytelling within the conflicts of mētis and high modernism. This ideology’s fetish for abstract though over experimental knowledge, in a way, strengthens Benjamin’s arguments for why storytelling has fallen out of favor. More than that, through my analysis of Texaco, I argue that stories play a large role in the conflict between mētis and high modernism. Since a story conveys experience, it often represents the kinds of knowledge that a simplified and abstract outlook on reality would overlook. As such, storytelling, I argue, can be an effective tool for the promotion of mētis in discourse.

Trauma and its Narratives

The final group of concepts for this thesis involves trauma. Cathy Caruth, in her book Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History, defines trauma as “an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrollable repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena” (Caruth). Explaining this delay further, she writes:

Traumatic experience, beyond the psychological dimension of suffering it involves, suggests a certain paradox: that the most direct seeing of a violent event may occur as an absolute inability to know it; that immediacy, paradoxically, may take the form of belatedness. The repetitions of the traumatic event—which remain unavailable to consciousness but intrude repeatedly on sight—thus suggest a larger relation to the event that extends beyond what can simply be seen or what can be known, and is inextricably tied up with the belatedness and
incomprehensibility that remain at the heart of this repetitive seeing. (Caruth)

In other words, Caruth points out that trauma’s repetitions are a result of one not understanding the event. Diving further into it, she writes:

As it is generally understood today, post-traumatic stress disorder reflects the direct imposition on the mind of the unavoidable reality of horrific events, the taking over of the mind, psychically and neurobiologically, by an event that it cannot control. As such, PTSD seems to provide the most direct link between the psyche and external violence and to be the most destructive psychic disorder. I will argue . . . that trauma is not simply an effect of destruction but also, fundamentally, an enigma of survival. (Caruth)

Reading Freud, she explains that trauma is the result of a consciousness that does not understand their survival (Caruth). In which case, she states, “consciousness, once faced with the possibility of its death, can do nothing but repeat the destructive event over and over again” (Caruth). This results in “[a] painful repetition of the flashback [that] can only be understood as the absolute inability of the mind to avoid an unpleasurable event that has not been given psychic meaning in any way” (Caruth). Trauma can be then interpreted as a dysfunction of a mind that cannot assimilate a painful and dangerous event that it recognizes, would have destroyed it. The fact that it didn’t, however, leads to a repetition of the events.

Dori Laub, in “Bearing Witness or the Vicissitudes of Listening” also mentions this “uncanny repetition” which “duplicate[s] . . . the traumatic past” (65). Moreover, she sees this happening because the victim is unable to grasp trauma’s reality, since “the event, although real, took place outside the parameters of “normal reality” (68-69). Laub argues that trauma “precludes its registration” and that “[t]he victim’s narrative. . . does indeed begin with someone
who testifies to an absence, to an event that has not yet come to existence, in spite of the overwhelming and compelling nature of the reality of its occurrence” (57).

Laub is interested in the relationship between the trauma victim and the listener, where the latter “is a party to the creation of knowledge de novo” and “comes to be a participant and a co-owner of the traumatic event” and “experience trauma in himself,” therefore empathizing with the former (57-58). Talking about the trauma, however, “might become severely traumatizing” in itself, so the speaker has to be “truly listened to” so that “the telling” does not turn into “a re-experiencing of the event itself” (67). Despite this, Laub believes that only through this act can the victim of trauma heal, writing:

To undo this entrapment in a fate that cannot be known, cannot be told, but can only be repeated, a therapeutic process—a process of constructing a narrative of reconstructing a history and, essentially, of re-externalizing the event—has to be set in motion. This re-externalization of the event can occur and take effect only when one can articulate and transmit the story, literally transfer it to another outside of oneself and then take it back again, inside. Telling thus entails a reassertion of the hegemony of reality and re-externalization of the evil that affected and contaminated the trauma victim. (69)

In other words, for the victim of trauma to move on from the constant repetition of that event, they must become a storyteller. This storytelling can, in part, be classified as testimony, which, to Shoshana Felman in her essay “Education and Crisis, Or the Vicissitudes of Teaching,” is “a performative speech act” which “addresses what in history is action” (5). She also ties testimony through its original legal meaning, writing that it is necessary “when the facts upon which justice must pronounce its verdict are not clear, when historical accuracy is in doubt and
when both the truth and its supporting elements of evidence are called into question” (6). Besides this, Felman explains the relationship between trauma and testimony thus:

As a relation to events, testimony seems to be composed of bits and pieces of a memory that has been overwhelmed by occurrences that have not settled into understanding or remembrance, acts that cannot be constructed as knowledge nor assimilated into full cognition, events in excess of our frames of reference. (5)

This can be joined with Caruth’s vision of trauma as an event that the mind has not taken hold of; testimony is then what results when trauma is transformed into a story.

Through her own reading of Freud, however, Felman proposes that there’s a way to present an “unconscious testimony” (15). She writes:

[Through a study] Freud makes a scientific statement of his discovery that there is in effect such a thing as an unconscious testimony, and that this unconscious, unintended, unintentional testimony has, as such, an incomparable heuristic and investigative value. Psychoanalysis, in this way, profoundly rethinks and radically renews the very concept of the testimony, by submitting, by and recognizing for the first time in the history of culture, that one does not have to possess or own the truth, in order to effectively bear witness to it; that speech as such is unwittingly testimonial; and that the speaking subject constantly bears witness to a truth that nonetheless continues to escape him, a truth that is, essentially, not available to its own speaker. (15)

Testimony, then, can be found in speech acts and it can be subjective in its own way. Not only that, but the one communicating can transmit their testimony without having a driving will to do so. Speech, including stories and narratives, can then be analyzed with the goal of discovering
the testimony that hides and utilizes its words.

I theorize that trauma is an important part of the human life that Benjamin argues is the artisanal material of storytellers, meaning that there is a mētis to the narration of trauma. My hypothesis, at its core, is that both trauma and mētis are the key components of many stories, which in turn are transmitted through narration.

*The Story in the Novel*

This section explores storytelling as an important component of the genre of the novel and explains the tools I utilize to analyze storytelling in *Texaco*. While Benjamin has his own view on what stories are, it is important to recognize the narratological understanding of the term in order to see how his ideas can be applied in more than one context. H. Porter Abbot in his book *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative* explains that a story “is a chronological sequence of events involving entities” that exists within “narrative discourse” (241). Explaining these differences further, he writes:

> Story should not be confused with narrative discourse, which is the telling or presenting of a story. A story is bound by the laws of time; it goes in one direction, starting at the beginning, moving through the middle, and arriving at the end . . . narrative discourse does not have to follow this order. (241)

Elsewhere, he clarifies that “narrative is the representation of events consisting of story and narrative discourse” all the while “story is . . . (the action)” (19). Stories in turn are “mediated” through elements such as “voice, a style of writing, camera angles, actors’ interpretations” and the like (20). As such, any narrative genre contains stories, including the kind of storytelling that Benjamin believes is in decline.

Not only that, but the genre of the novel, which Benjamin in part blames for the loss of
popularity with storytelling, itself transmits stories as a form of narrative discourse. To explain this, I appropriate terms and concepts studied by Mikhail Bakhtin and Manfred Jahn. In Problems of Dostoevski’s Poetics, Bakhtin, studying Dostoevsky, discusses “the polyphonic novel” and argues that “polyphony” can be seen in Dostoevsky’s narratives since they contain “[a] plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses” (Bakhtin). Developing this further, Bakhtin states, “polyphony presumes a plurality of fully valid voices within the limits of a single work” (Bakhtin). Likewise, in “Discourse and the Novel,” Bakhtin, for whom the novel is “a diversity of social speech types. . . and a diversity of individual voices, artistically organized” (Bakhtin), proposes a vision of the novel that is explained through the “internal stratification present in every language” (Bakhtin). He states that “the social diversity of speech types [raznorečie]” is what allows the novel to manage “all its themes . . . and ideas depicted and expressed in it” (Bakhtin). He coins the term “heteroglossia,” which “can enter” a work through the different “speeches” and “genres” it utilizes, allowing for “a multiplicity of social voices” to be in it (Bakhtin). Heteroglossia is the “base condition governing the operation of meaning in any utterance . . . which insures the primacy of context over text” (Emerson and Holquist).

Bakhtin explains that a novel contains “several heterogeneous stylistic unities,” among them the “[s]tylization of the various semiliterary [written] everyday narrations [the letter, the diary, etc.]” and the “[s]tylization of the various forms of oral everyday narration,” which then “combine to form a structured artistic system, and are subordinated to the higher stylistic unity of the work as a whole” although they are still “relatively autonomous” (Bakhtin). He also states that “the language used by characters” gives heteroglossia to the work, analyzing the writing of Turgenev, and that a text can contain “character zones” which “are formed from the fragments of character speech” (Bakhtin). These moments can then be viewed as acts of a “speaking
person” who “is always, to one degree or another, an ideologue, and his words are always ideologemes” which represent “a particular way of viewing the world” (Bakhtin). To specify, he states that “[t]he activity of a character in a novel is always ideologically demarcated: he lives and acts in an ideological world of his own . . . he has his own perception of the world that is incarnated in his action and in his discourse” (Bakhtin). Finally, he showcases that a way of “incorporating and organizing heteroglossia in the novel” involves “‘incorporated genres’” (Bakhtin). He writes:

The novel permits the incorporation of various genres, both artistic (inserted short stories, lyrical songs, poems, dramatic scenes, etc.) and extra-artistic (everyday, rhetorical, scholarly, religious genres, and others). In principle, any genre could be included in the construction of the novel, and in fact it is difficult to find any genres that have not at some point been incorporated into a novel by someone. Such incorporated genres usually preserve within the novel their own structural integrity and independence, as well as their own linguistic and stylistic peculiarities. (Bakhtin)

In other words, a novel’s heteroglossia can involve the use of other genres within it and the speech of its characters, which is ideological. This includes the kind of story that Benjamin’s storyteller would tell. More importantly, considering that a storyteller can indeed be a character within the novel, their speech can be considered storytelling in the novel’s diegesis. Novels, as complex works of art, contain multiple elements, and they are capable of transmitting human experiences through narration.

To analyze these concepts in terms of narratology, I borrow from the vocabulary Manfred Jahn presents in “Narratology: A Guide to the Theory of Narrative.” Among these terms, I will
focus on reading *Texaco* as a “matrix narrative,” which “is a narrative containing an 'embedded' or 'hyponarrative’” (Jahn N2.4.1). To understand how the matrix narrative interacts with the hyponarratives, I will explore their focalization, which is “the selection and restriction of narrative information relative to somebody's perception, knowledge, and point of view” (Jahn 3.2.1), and the focal characters, “whose perception filters the narrative” (Jahn N3.2.3). Other important concepts include the two different types of discourse, narrative discourse being “all 'diegetic statements' telling the 'narrative of (nonverbal) events’” and character discourse, which “[makes] up the 'narrative of verbal events/words’” (Jahn N8.1). These tools allow me to analyze the pieces composing *Texaco* and how they give it meaning as a whole.

*Storytelling in a Caribbean Context*

I now explain how Benjamin’s views on storytelling connect to a Caribbean context. Benjamin argues that the transmission of mouth-to-mouth experience is dying out in modern times. However, thinkers like Antonio Benítez Rojo and Édouard Glissant would disagree that this observation applies to the Caribbean context. Benítez Rojo, in *La isla que se repite*, explains that the African cultural elements that are present within the Caribbean must have been preserved through speech rather than writing (383-384). Explaining the prevalent links between the artistic output related to the Caribbean and its culture, Benítez Rojo writes:

Sin el ritmo, la santería cubana y la macumba brasileña no existirían hoy; los centenares de patakíes que forman el sistema adivinatorio yoruba no hubieran podido ser memorizados en África y transmitidos en América. Más aún, si entre los escritores caribeños el realismo mágico y el estilo barroco tienen alguna preferencia, es porque en el Caribe existe una poderosa tradición oral, transmitida rítmicamente desde la canción de cuna hasta las oraciones milagrosas, que en su
conjunto constituyen una riquísima biblioteca invisible repleta de historias fantásticas, mitos, leyendas, proverbios, anécdotas, adivinanzas, creencias, sortilegios, recetas de cocina, sistemas numerológicos, remedios para el cuerpo y para el espíritu, y fórmulas para la interpretación de sueños y presagios que proceden de materiales indígenas, africanos, asiáticos, sefarditas, islámicos, grecolatinos, góticos, renacentistas, y todo esto mezclado sin orden ni concierto dentro de formas acriolladas de cristianismo. (384)

In the Caribbean, different systems of thought coming from different sources have been transmitted to others through what Benjamin calls “experience that goes from mouth to mouth” (Benjamin 84). This highly oral tradition is full of the elements that Benjamin finds necessary for the prevalence of storytelling. Moreover, the existence of recipes and remedies within this tradition means that there is also an element of mêtis presented in these traditions.

Glissant expands upon the relationship between literature and storytelling, as well as history, in the “History–Histories–Stories” section on his essay book Caribbean Discourse. He argues:

The French Caribbean is the site of a history characterized by ruptures and that began with a brutal dislocation, the slave trade. Our historical consciousness could not be deposited gradually and continuously like sediment, as it were, as happened with those people who have frequently produced a totalitarian philosophy of history, for instance European peoples, but came together in the context of shock, contraction, painful negation, and explosive forces. This dislocation of the continuum, and the inability of the collective consciousness to absorb it all, characterizes what I call nonhistory. (61-62)
This phenomenon of nonhistory ends up, to Glissant, in “the erasing of the collective memory” (62). This affects the dynamic between the peoples of the Caribbean and their territory, which did not develop a link between “nature and culture” that could turn into “a dialectical whole that informs a people’s consciousness” (63). Exploring how history forms further, he sees it as a development of different types of “rhetoric”, going from the “folktale, story, or speech” to the “record, statistic, and verification” which then becomes “a universal, systematic, and imposed whole” that finally deals “with the obscure areas of lived reality” (69). Glissant then ties this to “Literature,” saying that they “form a part of the same problematic: the account, or the frame of reference, of the collective relationships of men with their environment, in a space that keeps changing and in a time that constantly is being altered” (69-70). In the Caribbean context, he argues, “historical consciousness can be (or be lived primarily as) the repertorie of responses of an individual within a country to an Other-Elsewhere that would appear in terms of difference or transcendence” (70).

For Glissant, history and literature “can be traced back to myth” (71). In the African context, however, “myth can be conveyed through a tale” (83). He differentiates between the myth and the tale by presenting the myth as something that “coils meaning around the image itself” and “its intention is not evident from the outset” (71-83). Meanwhile, the tale, he explains: “. . . is transparent in its structure as in its intention: its symbolic value is clear. It is not an exploration of the known-unknown, it is a stylized reading of the real” (83). In the context of the Caribbean, however, the folktale relates to writing “by means of a sacrilegious approach” (84). Glissant writes: “The Caribbean folktale focuses on an experience suppressed by decree or the law. It is antidecree and antilaw, that is to say, antiwriting” (84). Finally the Caribbean story “zeroes in on our absence of history: it is the site of the deactivated word” and “outlines a
landscape that is not possessed: it is anti-History” (85). I interpret what Glissant sees as Caribbean storytelling as a response to myth, the institution of writing, and the Caribbean’s ruptured and troubled relationship to history. The Caribbean storyteller then exists as a counter-cultural force that expresses the lived experiences that are repressed by others. One would have to explore what experiences are not communicated.

To better understand the context in which a Caribbean storyteller develops, and how it links to trauma, I briefly turn to the work of postcolonial thinkers. Nelson Maldonado-Torres, in his book Against War, offers a reading of Fanon that highlights his views of the colonial society as one marked by death, explaining how that affects the ethics of the people who inhabit that context (100). He writes:

The colonial world . . . is a world where the allegedly extraordinary event of anticipating one’s own death cannot be achieved, not because the individual is lost in an anonymous “mass,” but simply because death (the death of the slave, or of the indigenous population for instance) is already part and parcel of ordinary life. In the colonial condition the human reaches its limits. It represents the point where humanity is made to face inhuman situations as part of ordinary life. (100)

The colonial world is not one where death is an abstract idea that resides in the far future. It is a reality that the colonial subject is conscious of, which informs his or her actions and beliefs. The subjects’ experiences are molded by this reality. The Caribbean storyteller presents all of this in her tales.

The relationship between the colonial context and death is better explained by Achille Mbembe in his paper “Necropolitics.” He argues “that the ultimate expression of sovereignty resides, to a large degree, in the power and the capacity to dictate who may live and who must
die” (11). He then explains how such a notion acts in the context of slavery, specifically plantation slavery, writing that it “is a form of death-in-life” (21). He states that in that context there is “no reciprocity on the plantation outside of the possibilities of rebellion and suicide, flight and silent mourning, and there is certainly no grammatical unity of speech to mediate communicative reason” (21). Afterwards, he expands upon this idea by stating that “the relations between life and death, the politics of cruelty, and the symbolic of profanity” which are present and “blurred” through slavery become “a particular terror” within “the colony and under the apartheid regime” (22). Expanding on how death and killing are experienced in a colonial context, Mbembe writes:

. . . the sovereign right to kill is not subject to any rule in the colonies. In the colonies, the sovereign might kill at any time or in any manner. Colonial warfare is not subject to legal and institutional rules. It is not a legally codified activity. Instead, colonial terror constantly intertwines with colonially generated fantasies of a wilderness and death and fictions to create the effect of the real. Peace is not necessarily the natural outcome of a colonial war. In fact, the distinction between war and peace does not avail. Colonial wars are conceived of as the expression of an absolute hostility that sets the conqueror against an absolute enemy. (25)

In other words, a subject in a colonial context either has or is residing within a system where violence and death are common. Specifically, due to their political realities, they exist within a system of conflicts where they are under siege by another.

These ideas lead me to trauma. Subjugation and conflicts of power end up creating and fueling trauma in the colonial subject. Glissant, in his essay on history, explores these ideas. He writes:
Would it be ridiculous to consider our lived history as a steadily advancing neurosis? To see the Slave Trade as a traumatic shock, our relocation (in the new land) as a repressive phase, slavery as the period of latency, “emancipation” in 1848 as reactivation, our everyday fantasies as symptoms, and even our horror of “returning to those things of the past” as a possible manifestation of the neurotic’s fear of his past? Would it not be useful and revealing to investigate such a parallel? What is repressed in our history persuades us, furthermore, that this is more than an intellectual game. Which psychiatrist could state the problematic of such a parallel? None. History has its dimensions of the unexplorable, at the edge of which we wander, our eyes wide open. (65-66)

Here, Glissant ponders that it could be possible to read the colonial subject’s relationship to lived history and its events as one of psychological turmoil. The traumatic events of the past inform the troubles of the present and explain it. The Caribbean subject is then one whose life is informed by the traumas of history. The Caribbean storyteller is in a position where she can confront all of that trauma, be it her experiences living within a world drenched in death or as presented in history and the oral tradition, and transmit it through the story in order to provide counsel. The next chapter analyzes how such a storyteller does so in *Texaco* and how that informs the rest of the novel.
Chapter II: Skill and Pain: Storytelling, Mētis, and Trauma in *Texaco*

At the beginning of *Texaco*, Marie-Sophie Laborieux narrates how she encounters the Urban Planner and decides to tell him Texaco’s story (26-27). Afterwards, around the end of the novel, after she finishes the story, Texaco becomes an official part of the city and is rescued from demolition (380-381). This chapter of my thesis explores why and how this act of storytelling begets these results, theorizing that Marie-Sophie achieves this by portraying Texaco as a place where systems of knowledge and painful history, both collective and individual, interact. To do this, I first analyze how Texaco is represented at the beginning of the novel. Then I explore the character of Esternome and how mētis and trauma affect his story. This leads to an explanation of the transmission of these skills and traumatic history to Marie-Sophie and how they then affect her story. Later on, I explain how this leads to the Urban Planner’s decision and, finally, to Oiseau de Cham, the one who pens the story into a novel (390).

The novel begins with Marie-Sophie narrating how the Urban Planner, as he surveyed the place, is struck by a rock, something “that surprised no one,” due to them being “nervous” (9). The cause of this is that “a road called Pénétrante West” was established near their quarter, which meant that Texaco’s existence would be viewed by the higher classes, who have deemed the place “insalubrious” (9-10). It is then explained that this is yet another chapter of “a very ancient war” between the people of Texaco and “City,” one which threatened “police crackdowns” after the end of a “cease fire” (10). From the beginning then, Texaco is presented as an affront to the city, one which sometimes can be treated through violence. The establishment of the road, most certainly an attempt from City to make it easier to manage and more effective, clashes with the existence of the shantytown. Not only that, but the place, with its “piled up hutches” (10), is deemed an eyesore, an aesthetic issue that threatens the coherence of the city.
Texaco is presented in conflict with the high modernist worldview of the city and its more wealthy citizens.

This immediately presents the context of what the Urban Planner is doing there. He is characterized as someone who seems to be “one of those agents from the modernizing city council which destroyed poor quarters to civilize them into stacks of projects” (10). Afterwards he is described as “scrutinizing [their] shacks and their assault on the timorous cliffs,” someone who “was coming to question the usefulness of [their] insalubrious existence” (11). He is presented as a force of modernization that, due to the will of his superiors, must analyze Texaco and say if it can be of any use to their interests. Texaco is not seen as a place that can exist for its own sake, nor its people as individuals. Rather, they must prove themselves to be of use to the city’s plans, capable of conforming to their vision of civility, which is here presented through the effectiveness of the projects that would replace their homes. In which case, the Urban Planner came with the threat to “renovate Texaco,” something that “[i]n his scientific language . . . really mean[s]: to raze it” (21).

The arrival of the Urban Planner is narrated through the focalization of four characters, which present a sample of the kind of people who inhabit Texaco. The first character is Iréné, who is a “shark catcher” (11). Iréné sees him and feels disgust, since he can tell what his plans are (11). He is presented at sea, fishing, where he is said to “grasp the horsehair thread with the irresistible power of his twenty-five years of making the same movements” (12). This fragment characterizes Iréné as skillful, someone who has had ample experience practicing his craft, to the point where he is capable of performing key movements naturally. It is here where one finds an instance of a character’s métis commended. This example of métis challenges the Urban Planner’s view of Texaco as useless.
The second character, Sonore, is characterized through her history. The narration explains that her father was “a lay blackman” who destroyed his career in some French World War I trench where none of [them] had sent him” (14). Sonore gains that moniker by her wailing over the loss of her husband, “a ne’er-do-well called Jojo Bonamitan” who has a crippling gambling problem that is implied kills him (15). She has “seven children whose insolence the whitening of their mama’s hair attested to day by day” (15). Due to her situation, Ti-Cirique, “a Haitian man of letters” that lives there aids her, since his role is to write to the authorities and appeal to the mayor, who is “a poet and a littérateur,” using literary references to improve his chances (16). In that process, Ti-Cirique feels the need to lie about Sonore, since he does not see her situation as “too noble,” and must appeal to images and tropes from the likes of Victor Hugo, De Vigny, and Baudelaire to make his appeal (16-17). This showcases that, while Sonore’s life– her identity even– is marked by tragedy and poverty, this is not legible to those in power. The kind of person Sonore is makes it difficult for the people of the city council to empathize with her, so Ti-Cirique has to use references that they would understand in order to get them to comprehend her needs. He succeeds, proving that his method, while spurious, is effective (18-19).

Marie-Clémence is the third character, who is characterized as meddlesome and “able to tie everything together in her vicious memory” (19). The text explains her abilities thus:

She was able to look at the world with great astonishment and see what no one else saw. She could decipher the murkiest eye and link a quivering lip to a broken heart. She could catalogue all life’s struggles shaking through the Quarter, for the benefit of the whole world. Through her we learned, for example that a bright and early morning departure with a small suitcase and eyes too downcast announced the shipwreck of a Catholic love on the abortionist’s table. In other words, with
her our Quarter of Texaco, a life without witnesses, like life downtown, was a
difficult wish. All was known of all. Miseries shouldered miseries.
Commiseration intervened to fight despair and no one lived in the anxiety of
ultimate loneliness. (19)

While I do not in any way celebrate the ethics of being a busybody, I pay attention to the skill
that Marie-Clémence has developed for analyzing people and situations, as well as her
mnemonic abilities. Such a characterization presents two elements; the mētis that Marie-
Clémence has developed and how it impacts the life of the people of Texaco. Specifically,
Marie-Clémence serves as a witness to the events that occur in the town, which unites the place
in the miseries that its inhabitants suffer, therefore combating loneliness in a way.

The fourth character is “the black medicine man,” Papa Totone, whom the town decides
to send the injured Urban Planner to his living space known as the “Doum” (23-24). At this
moment, it is suffices to know that he has enough standing with the community as someone who
is skilled at healing people. It is he who decides to send the Urban Planner to Marie-Sophie, the
narrator of the novel (24-25).

Through these four characters, one gets a feel for the kind of town Texaco is. Through
Iréné, Marie-Clémence, Papa Totone, and Ti-Cirique, one sees that the town contains people
who are skillful at their trade. Likewise, the story of Sonore presents the reality that these same
people have tragic, painful back-stories that inform who they are. The existence of Marie-
Clémence hints that the town has a need for someone to witness the stories that occur within it, at
least to ameliorate the loneliness. These first sections, then, sketch the kind of people that Marie-
Sophie feels the need to fight for; men and women who, despite their poverty and tragic
moments, have managed to scrape a life there through their abilities.
After this, Marie-Sophie is characterized briefly, explaining that “weakness” is “her condition” and that due to her situation she is able to better comprehend “the kind of things that tormented” her father Esternome (25). She then expresses her attachment to Texaco, her place within its struggle, and the consequences of this encounter:

Texaco, my work, our Quarter, our field of battle and resistance summed up my interest in the world. There we kept up the fight to be part of City, a century-old battle. And this battle was the beginning of a final confrontation in which the stakes were either life as we knew it or our definitive defeat. (25)

The town that the Urban Planner threatens here is characterized as a product of the labor of Marie-Sophie, an older person whose attachment to the world is deeply involved with the town. Marie-Sophie can be interpreted as a type of architect, or a type of urban planner herself, who, as the novel later explores, plays an important role in the organization and maintenance of Texaco (341-342).

In contrast to Marie-Sophie, the Urban Planner is “tall, lean, but not dry, with somber eyes full of melancholic pain. . . a good mannered boy” (26). Marie-Sophie believes that he is “a fellow of questions” and someone without “the inflexibility of stiff certainties” (26). She learns he is a graduate student and that he is hired by the “urban services bureau” in order “to rationalize space, and conquer the pockets of insalubrity which were a crown of thorns around [the city]” (26). This presents an image of a young man who, while intelligent, has the capability and openness to be taught. In contrast with the city council, who knows what it wants, the Urban Planner actually ponders about the decisions to demolish certain quarters and, when asked why he would survey a place he has decided to destroy, lacks a true response (26). The Urban Planner then in one aspect symbolizes the high modernist aspirations of the local government, but also
lacks the authoritarian stubbornness and condescension to just impose his will on others. He is someone that Marie-Sophie believes could be turned to their side by listening to the story of Texaco (26-27).

The beginning of this story is then framed by this strange paragraph:

   –Little fellow, permit me to tell you Texaco’s story . . . That’s probably how, Oiseau de Cham, I began to tell him the story of our Quarter and our conquest of City, to speak in the name of us all, pleading our cause, telling my life . . .
   And if it didn’t happen like that, that doesn’t matter. . . (27)

Multiple things occur in here. Concurrently, the novel has Marie-Sophie tell the Urban Planner and Oiseau de Cham the same story, with the former being inside the latter. This serves to confuse the transmission of the tale, both lending it some ambiguity and giving it the prestige of being a tale that has been told and retold multiple times. These repetitions are explored further in the novel. Said ambiguity, on the other hand, is addressed outright by stating that factuality is not important, which makes the reader think that some details could be exaggerated or misinformed, meaning that events that occur later whose realism is assumed can be questioned. Finally, Marie-Sophie expresses that the history of the Quarter, the sentiments of the community, their principles, and the life of the storyteller are all connected to each other deeply. This means that Marie-Sophie’s story is not just a particular narrative, but that it is a synthesis of the multiple causes and stories that she has obtained; all of them joined together with her own life story. The story then, is larger than her but also deeply personal.

The narrative begins with another frame; an exploration of Marie-Sophie’s outlook on life. She explains that “despite the river [her] eyes have shed, [she has] always looked at the world in a good light” (33). She states with bleak humor that due to the amount of work she has
done, she “never had time for melancholy” and that she “chose battle over tears” (33). This statement is questionable. While melancholy is not a part of my theoretical frame, it is relevant enough to the exploration of trauma, which is why I work with the subject through Kimberly Michele Bowman’s thesis *Establishing Agency: Subjection and Melancholy in Chamoiseau’s Texaco*. What is important to note is that work and struggle are presented early on as tools against these negative emotions.

Another aspect of this opening is that it sets the tone of what life in this novel’s setting is like. Marie-Sophie, speaking about melancholy, narrates:

> But how many wretched ones around me have choked the life out of their bodies?

Coolies would hang themselves on the acacia branches of the plantations they burned down. Young blackmen would let themselves die from their crumpled hearts. Chinese would flee the country, panicked, flailing as if drowning . . . How many have left the world through the gaping hole of some madness? (33)

Marie-Sophie here presents her surroundings as littered with death. She presents an image of a world where suicide, fear, destruction, heartbreak, and insanity are commonplace. This headspace that is introduced presents a form of the world of death that Maldonado-Torres, Fanon, and Mbembe articulate in their writings. While there are many political and sociological issues that can be explored as causes for these events, and the novel itself presents more examples, what should be noticed is that the quotidian interaction with death in this setting informs the material that a storyteller has in this world. The enumeration of multiple accounts points to the many other stories that Marie-Sophie has heard throughout her life there. It means that, despite the focus on the tragedies and suffering that are to be narrated, they are not
uncommon within this context.

Marie-Sophie then explains that in order to narrate Texaco’s history she needs to go back to her “own family tree,” since the closest relationship to a “collective memory” that she has exists in the context of her family’s story (34). This story, she states, is deeply entrenched in the history of slavery, which left its mark on her relationship with her parents:

When I was born, my papa and mama were just returned from the chains. A time in their lives no one has heard them regret. Sure they spoke about it, but neither to me nor to anyone else. They whispered it to each other kssu kssu kssu. I sometimes heard them laughing over it, but deep down it really ate up their silence, turning it into shudders. I could have not forgotten about those days. Mama, to avoid my questions, pretended she was wrestling with my hair she was braiding. She would drag the comb back like a farmer plowing rocky ground who, surely you understand, does not have time for chitchat. Papa was more evasive. At my questions he slipped away smoother than a cool September wind. He would suddenly remember yams to pullout of the little puddles he had everywhere. I, patient to a fault, learned of the path that had brought them to the conquest of the towns, from an inch of recollection here, a quarter of a word there, a tender outpouring in which their tongues would snare themselves. That of course wasn’t the same as knowing everything. (34)

This paragraph explains that Marie-Sophie does not hear much about her parents’ experience with slavery as she grew up. It is presented as something that, paradoxically, they could take lightly yet also be unable and unwilling to confront and articulate. The image of them shuddering in their silence hints that their experience is a traumatizing one; they cannot properly tell Marie-
Sophie about it because it’s a series of events that they themselves can barely understand. It is only by approaching it in a piecemeal manner that Marie-Sophie can get them to articulate anything about their past as enslaved people. Thus, she constructs this narrative through her limited understanding in an attempt to communicate in a coherent and complete way a pain that her parents failed to address. This, however, makes her narrative a unreliable, which gives the reader’s interpretations some leeway.

Marie-Sophie begins by explaining the story of Esternome’s parents. Marie-Sophie’s grandfather is introduced as an enslaved man who “made poisons” in order to resist slavery (35). She presents him as a type of slave who is known from “stories” that are told; they are described as “men of strength who knew what none should know” (35). The text explains that they, through arcane means, sabotage plantation life, killing animals, causing enslaved women to abort, and ruining the crops (35). While the text ties this to African beliefs and magical practices, I focus more on the technical knowledge that these people seem to possess. Esternome’s father, along with other slaves, utilize mêtis to advance their struggle against slavery and make their lives bearable. For instance, when he is bitten by a snake the text tells us that he “rolled on the grass . . . tearing a leaf here, scratching some bark there, chewing this and that root, bellowing some blurry song in an unknown tongue” and that then he recovered from his injury (36-37). Similarly, Esternome’s father, when he sees that his woman is pregnant, offers her “some foul tea” which is meant as an abortifacient (41). The effective result of his usage of plants, while they could be believed to be a result of magic, does not necessarily need to be so. The remedies that the enslaved people brought from their African traditions can be read as a form of mêtis that has been passed down through the culture². Bowman, in her thesis Establishing Agency:

² For an informal interpretation of how superstitions and beliefs can be read as mêtis, see Lou
Subjection and Melancholy in Chamoiseau’s Texaco also notices the knowledge of Esternome’s father, recognizing how it characterizes him as knowledgeable, and argues that because he maintains this knowledge, he resists the “subjecting” power of the béké and maintains the “subjecting agency” of his culture (15-16). My reading, in that vein, focuses on the practical aspect of their actions and not on the underlying beliefs that inform them.

The béké, upon hearing about how Esternome’s father healed, interrogates him and then puts him in a dungeon (37). Marie-Sophie, when offering a narrative about those dungeons, lets her father’s voice slip into the narration:

Later, to frighten prisoners, the békés invented the dungeons. I still tremble each time I see one in those landscapes that I don’t forget. Their stone is still the gray of bottomless sadness. Those presumed guilty never came out of the dungeon except maybe for labor beyond all fatigue with legs, neck, and soul chained. Allow me not to go into details about the dungeon, Marie-Sophie, because you see those things are not to be described. Lest we ease the burden of those who built them. (36)

In this passage, while Marie-Sophie is expressing her troubled feelings about the dungeons, the narration shifts into Esternome’s voice, as if Marie-Sophie were imitating the stories her father would tell her. The polyphony of this novel increases in moments like this so that it not only adds the aesthetic effect of Marie-Sophie and Esternome’s voices fusing together, but also characterizes their relationship as one where they share knowledge intimately. In this case, the trauma caused by the methods of repression that slave owners used on people like Esternome is communicated into the next generation in such a way that Marie-Sophie can become uneasy.

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Keep’s blog entry “The Use and Abuse of Witchdoctors for Life.”
when viewing the dungeons. It is moments like this where Esternome’s silence about the time of slavery is broken and one can get a sense of how he has communicated this experience to his daughter. What is ironic, however, is that Esternome claims that one should not enunciate these issues, because it would “ease the burden of those who built them” (36), but it is he and Marie-Sophie who bear the burden of the effects of these things. A similar fear is presented when Marie-Sophie narrates that Esternome does not characterize his master because he is “probably fearing he would come back to haunt his old age” (47). This fear indicates how Esternome’s trauma from slavery leads him, like with the dungeons, to silence his experiences since he fears some sort of repetition of what happened.

The results of the dungeons are told when Esternome’s encounter with his father’s corpse is narrated:

My papa knew the man from the dungeon to be his papa the day they pulled his remains covered with whitish fungus out of a foul-smelling hole. The Béké had it put on a pile of wood which he set on fire himself. An abbot from City intoned thirteen verses in solemn Latin. We had all been summoned around this pyre, my papa used to tell me. On our knees, our hands clasped like in the Gospel, we lowered our heads. At my side, my dear mama was crying. Her pained heart strangling the breath in her breast. I, not understanding anything, ventured an anxious crab-eye on her sorrow. So she put my head down and said: Prédie ba papa’w ich mwen, Pray for your papa, my son . . . My papa played this role beautifully, even shedding, so he admitted without false pride, the most real tears of his life. Together, they went back home–she shaken and he eyeing her as if he’d just discovered her. (38)
In this paragraph, another instance in which Esternome’s voice pierces through the discourse of Marie-Sophie, one observes how the institution of slavery allows the master to have complete control of the bodies of the enslaved. The enslaved youth had no access to his father, and only becomes aware of him once he encounters death for what can be assumed is the first time. This event informs the horror of the dungeons that Esternome expresses before, which presents an echo of the sadness he feels as a child. Here Esternome is faced with the necrotic reality of colonial life. This encounter with death, however, is not the only one that teaches him how dangerous the world is.

Esternome’s mother is also familiar with métis. Her skills at gardening and sewing allow her to work “in the Big Hutch” and “[escape] the sugarcane horrors” (38). Her interactions with Esternome’s father first involve him teaching her various things (40). The text explains:

He plunged into simple talk about water, catching crayfish, about what the small lapia fish drinking the basin’s water might be thinking. He taught her how to replace the Béké’s soap with foaming creepers so she could barter with the soap she saved. He showed her how to perfume the shirts with the essence of some seed curled up under pale leaves or whiten dull cloth with opaline sap. But he especially revealed to her the pleasure of the memory of an impossible land, which is, he whispered, Africa. If he gave her his distaste for the sea, he taught her his sacred wonder before the smallest shiver that ran through nature. (40)

Here, the novel shows a link between the teaching of skills and storytelling. Esternome’s father not only teaches her tricks to get by, but he informs those tricks with stories about Africa and the subtle testimony of how he is a man transported against his will into another land. This transmission of experience affects her, as is displayed by her newfound “distaste for the sea”
(40). However, their talks also allow her to connect with nature better, which, while problematic later in her life, allows her to have “some kind of happiness” while Esternome’s father is alive (40).

Esternome, once born, quickly becomes an errand boy in the Big Hutch. They have him work various homemaking tasks, and as he grows, he becomes enamored with the building (43). The text explains:

He became fascinated by a marble sideboard which looked like a person, by beds with columns undulating under mosquito nets. A diffuse magic of the mooring of the beams and planks. He wondered what kind of strength could have erected this, combined these scents, domesticated these winds, these balmy shadows, and these lights. This admiration reached its height in the forgotten attic where a geometry of girders tied the knot of the Big Hutch. This view of the frame probably determined the course of his life, his destiny, and finally mine. (43-44; emphasis mine).

Esternome here is characterized as someone with a clear eye for detail and an admiration for the kind of people who could build such a house. The building represents to him a mastery over nature that is comparable to the skills that his father has. The text then foreshadows Esternome’s path by stating that it is this admiration that informs his decisions later in life.

Esternome’s life changes when he saves his master’s life. A famine occurs in the region, which deeply affects the Béké. All the while, the enslaved, accustomed to scarcity, relied on their survival skills to fish, hunt, and cultivate enough to sustain themselves, which once again demonstrates how the community of slaves maintained métis in order to survive (45). The Béké, while hunting, is attacked by a maroon who leaves him wounded. Esternome, grabbing his
master’s weapon, shoots the maroon dead. However, when he arrives with his wounded master, the people in the plantation assumes him to be guilty of the attack and attempt to lynch him, only for the Béké to intercede in his favor (45-46). Here, at a young age still, Esternome becomes even more acquainted with death. Not only did he see his father’s rotting corpse, but now he is forced to kill and comes close to meeting a fate similar to his father’s. This reinforces the social landscape of Martinique that Marie-Sophie describes at the beginning; a place where violent death is commonplace. Likewise, the famine, which is stated to have happened due to “[d]elayed ships from town,” (45) presents how delicate living conditions can be in the setting; natural inconveniences like that could greatly affect the living conditions on the plantation. Since the enslaved already live in unstable conditions, they rely on their métis to survive.

After the Béké frees Esternome in gratitude, a storm attacks the island and destroys most of the buildings (48-55). In the process of rebuilding, Esternome meets Théodorus, “a white master carpenter” and works under him, learning carpentry (55-56). Marie-Sophie narrates:

It was with such a man that my Esternome discovered the craft that was to become his: the art of tying beams without putting in a single nail, the art of the equilibrium of masses and the balancing of weights, the art of calculating the right slopes, the art of shingles and tiles held together by copper. Théodorus Sweetmeat would add his Norman knowledge to the teachings offered by the African huts and Carib longhouses. Bit by bit, his science of buildings grew more particular, attuned to the ways of the wind and the earth in this country of novelties. (55)

It is here where Esternome realizes himself as a builder. The boy who is curious about the power required to construct the master’s house becomes the person who can now produce such results. This foreshadows how Esternome’s knowledge influences the rest of his life. His ability to build
becomes one of his most powerful resources.

During his time in Saint-Pierre, Esternome would give out his labor “as carpenter-locksmith-handyman-cleaner,” utilizing all of the skills he had learned throughout his life so far in order to make a living (65). While, during his time in Saint-Pierre, the “store békés and boat-owning-france-békés” rule the city and the “mulattoes” strive for social power, Esternome continues to rely on his skill (77). Marie-Sophie narrates:

What did he do? Work. Esternome my papa worked, worked, gathering his money without addition or subtraction. And, if you will, one can say he built the city in its expansion. Since need dictates law, he became a real Greek in the mason business. He learned to paste the stones with lime or friable stone mortar. He learned to make the basalt rise, to carve out dacite, and even to shape himself ghostly pumices. He learned to fill his mortar with ashes from the bagasse which bound better than all the strong glues put together. The békés and france-whites always wanted to build houses like the ones in their original province, wanted thick walls that would hold in the coolness. The big-time mulattoes reproduced these models. But on the construction sites, my papa Esternome witnessed how the spirit of the blackworkers undid and reinvented the dwelling. So, easy-here, easy-there, Saint-Pierre moving “this way and that way.” “In a special aesthetic,” I think he wanted to say. (77-78)

Through his métis, Esternome is able to evolve in the environment of the city and find a better place within its social and racial dynamics. Here, Marie-Sophie argues for the importance of people like her father, those who have the knowledge necessary to construct the visions of the ruling classes. While the people above Esternome establish their plans for the city and its society
based on their aesthetic values, there needs to be people who know how to actually produce things. It is here where one can see a dynamic between high-modernist thought and the know-how that is needed to enact it. While the high-modernist prioritizes their designs, Marie-Sophie argues that it is in the know-how of the workers that progress is made. This naturally can devolve into a deeper analysis of the class issues inherent within these dynamics, but that is beyond the scope of my thesis.

Afterwards, during a period where abolition is considered imminent, Esternome meets Ninon, a woman who, according to Marie-Sophie, becomes, to her father, analogous to “freedom,” to the point where in his old age he would repeat their names, shouting “Kill me but leave me my freedom, kill me but leave me my Ninon!” (83-84). This is foreshadowing that something occurs with her that is traumatic in the sense that there are repetitions associated with her throughout Esternome’s life.

Analyzing their relationship through the lenses of melancholy, Bowman first argues that, due to the dehumanizing culture he is born in, which Hommi Bhabha states is “unhomely,” “Esternome’s life would be marked by the struggle to reclaim his humanity within the unhomely culture with which he had been inculcated” (22). In this context, Esternome and Ninon first bonded over the exchange of a “knowledge of politics,” which she names “[a] relationship of power” (30). It is then through that power that, Bowman explains, Esternome wins over Ninon after solving a conflict between her fellow enslaved people and some workers (32-34). Bowman then analyzes how, psychologically, Ninon becomes an object of Esternome’s issues with melancholia (34). She writes:

Ninon, as the prize bestowed for the efforts of his agency, became the symbol of his humanity, the lost object he still had been able neither to avow and grieve—
nor, therefore, to reclaim. Before Esternome still had been unable to articulate its loss and grieve, his humanity remained inassimilible [sic] and unclaimable, sublimated within his subconscious. According to Butler, we should expect that sublimation to emerge as a psychic effect in the form of melancholia. However, Esternome seems to project his lost-object melancholy upon Ninon, who awaited the decree from France which she believed would reinstate her own humanity.

(34)

To Bowman, Ninon becomes for Esternome a metonym of everything that his culture has denied him that he can neither claim nor understand. His feelings would naturally devolve into melancholy, which she argues is something that already happens (34), but Ninon becomes a sort of coping mechanism that helps him manage these feelings. This psychological dynamic informs their relationship and what happens later.

Esternome and Ninon bond through his habit of visiting her and her fellow slaves in their headquarters (93-94). In a scene, he interacts with Ninon’s mother and hears a story (94), Marie-Sophie narrates:

It took place one night. Like in the tales. But on a more sober one than in the tales; that night was not bright. Men and women had spent a blessed day full of disappointments and scared pursuits. In the wide alley of the slave hutches, they prattled to death about the miseries of the world. Ninon and my papa Esternome were sitting in front of their hutch with the addlebrained African mama. The latter was telling extraordinary things about a voyage in the hold of a slaver. During each of her silences, my Esternome murmured incredulously. Forgive me, dear-Mama, but such amount of cruelty appears to be not exactly possible. So, the old
lady, a bit cuckoo, would multiply the details. She mobilized the resources of her language, built with all of the other tongues she had rubbed up against, to do that. Busy, stirring roasting coffee, Ninon discreetly laughed at Esternome’s fright.

(94)

This section introduces the scene through the lenses of storytelling, situating the event in that headspace but also distinguishing it from other tales by saying that the space is “more sober” (94). The experiences that are exchanged through the tales about their reality are negative ones. Within this environment, the narrative introduces the character of the African mama, an enslaved woman who comes directly from Africa and remembers her journey through the Middle Passage. Esternome, who so far has seen his father’s corpse, has killed a man, and has almost been lynched as a boy, is perplexed by the kind of horror that this woman describes. In retaliation, the woman elaborates on what has happened to her, utilizing whatever relevant cultural elements that she can muster to present her experience and transmit it to the audience.

This scene evidences my thesis. The woman presents her testimony over the horrors she has experienced and witnessed in her kidnapping and smuggling. This testimony, at first, confuses Esternome, who cannot come to terms with how her level of suffering could even be real. However, since the woman is a skillful storyteller, she elaborates, to the point that Esternome becomes frightened. This fright is proof that Esternome, through the skillful use of language that the woman applies, has become a good listener, and a witness of her trauma. In turn, Marie-Sophie, who has become a witness of that trauma, makes the Urban Planner and Oiseau de Cham witnesses of it. Even if the details are obscured, the key aspect of the severe suffering of the Middle Passage is transmitted through storytelling to various characters throughout time and space.
After a series of violent racial riots and fears of genocide, slavery is abolished in Martinique, resulting in many whites fleeing (99-101). Esternome and Ninon gain “civil status” and the former is named “Laborieux” (109). During that time, Marie-Sophie narrates, “[t]he word of interest was citizen” (110). While some people believe that their new status might entitle them to land, Esternome is forced to explain that the law maintains the ruling class’ ownership of it (110-111). This presents how, despite the abolition of slavery, there is still an order in the society that determines the logistics of how nature works, one that does not really attempt to benefit ex-slaves as a class. While, with the implementation of last names, society becomes easier to comprehend, it does not become more equal. Later on, the government of Gueydon under Napoleon the Third enacts strict labor laws and popularizes the use of contracts in business (119). Marie-Sophie narrates:

Freedom had gotten itself a contract, a bankbook, and a passport. Any contract with a béké for more than a year made you a man worthy of honors. Contracts of less than a year made you vulnerable to the patrols checking your passport. To work by the job or by the day (taking it easy) was asking for it. Where do you live, what do you do the rest of the time, parasite of the Republic? . . . The others, the stargazers, the stubborn blacks like Ninon who insisted on carrying their dreams wherever they took their shadows, they were called vagabonds, were arrested, condemned to some sort of slavery said to be disciplinary. They were made to do forced labor for the public good, meaning the colonial one. (119)

This swell of authoritarian norms, which the text establishes is meant for colonial purposes, is an example of the norms that high modernist institutions can establish in order to make their societies more productive and legible. Rather than tolerate a diversity of forms of labor, the
government must maximize the productivity of the citizens. Therefore, they punish those who made their living in a way they see as unfit with forced labor. It is within this context that Esternome decides to move with Ninon to the hills, which “had not yet been besieged,” an act that, despite their new status as free citizens, Marie-Sophie calls “marooning” (120-123).

It is through this decision that Marie-Sophie introduces the concept of the “noutéka,” which she refers to as “a kind of magical we,” and it is coined by her father (122). She explains that it is through this concept that “Texaco was budding” (123). Describing the community that forms in that Noutéka, Esternome presents it thus:

Helping each other was the law, a helping hand to do what was possible, working together for the immediate needs: in the hills, solitude must fight isolation. Many of the first colonists failed in their adventure because they did not know that. Solitude is a relative of freedom. Isolation is snake food . . . (131)

What characterizes this budding community, then, is an unspoken deal of solidarity where people share their abilities in order to enrich their lives. Once the couple are “settled somewhere on the hill,” Esternome constructs the hutches of those who “moved up into the hills” with them, earning the title of “Doctor of Hutches” (132-133). This segment of the book, which has this same title, explains his methods and the materials he utilizes, with Marie-Sophie appropriating Esternome’s voice (132-135). Specifically, there is a moment where the narration shifts and Marie-Sophie enacts how Esternome would teach her about his abilities (133-134). The text narrates:

During these evocations, ardent vanity flowed in my Esternome. . . for the moment, my Esternome was wallowing in his “I.” I this. I that. I built the hutch with bitterwood to discourage the hungry termites’ teeth. For poles, I used West
Indian cashew, Marie-Sophie, or the simaruba which astounded the birds. . . What do you know of these woods, Marie-So? (133-134)

This part works as a subtle example of heteroglossia, where Marie-Sophie presents her father’s thoughts and speech—his ideology it could be said, into the narrative. Not only that, but it cements in Esternome’s character a niche interest and skill as well as the desire to impart that knowledge to others, which, as Benjamin explains, are some of the qualities of a storyteller. Therefore, part of Esternome’s storytelling appears through the narrative.

Marie-Sophie explains that she had annotated what she had learned about the noutéka (122-123). The segment “The Noutéka of the Hills,” containing the story of Ninon and Esternome’s quest for a place to settle (123-132), presents technical advice such as “where to put up your hutch” (129) and “Creole gardening” (128), all of it compiled in Marie-Sophie’s notebooks (132). This segment is not exactly narrated by Marie-Sophie, but it addresses her directly in order to either explain their motives for “marooning” (124), warning her about the distinction between “the Quarters up there” and “the Quarters down there” (128) or to tell her “to read the landscape” (129). The segment can be interpreted, as the work of Bakhtin suggests, as the inserting of another genre into the novel, an oral one since Marie-Sophie, it seems, refuses to “recite” it (123). More important than that is the insertion of Esternome’s ideas into the narrative through the main narrative, as well the purpose of the fragment, which is to transmit knowledge to Marie-Sophie.

The novel presents many fragments throughout. Serge Dominique Ménager in his article “Topographie, texte, et palimpseste : Texaco de Patrick Chamoiseau” explains that the text has three levels, the main narration, the footnotes, and “infra-textes,” the latter which appear tagged
with information relating to where it can be found in the Schœlcher Library (61). Ménager includes *The Noutéka of the Hills* as one of the most extensive “infra-textes” (62). Like it, some of these infra-texts are dedicated to showcasing the mētis that Esternome passes down to Marie-Sophie. Marie-Sophie writes how Esternome taught her where and how to use certain building materials like “limestone” and “sand” to make cement (Chamoiseau 35, 40). He also tells her when he gains knowledge from the Caribs (35, 42). Marie-Sophie quotes him saying that “[c]raft is good memory,” meaning that through this understanding of craft one is capable of preserving many forms of knowledge and history and, as Marie-Sophie showcases by writing these notes, passing it down to others.

Esternome’s life in the noutéka does not remain idyllic. Esternome loses Ninon when, after having difficulties in their relationship, she abandons him for a musician (140-144). Esternome’s reaction to it is to “make up childish yarns” where he devises fantastic explanations for the loss, including a story about a “mermaid” and another about “[a] witch” (144-146). Such tales do not stop the pain, however, since “[h]is brain was clotted with sadness,” but it allows him to ignore the outside world for a long time (146-147). One can see, then, that such an event causes a great deal of emotional distress to Esternome, to the point where he falls into denial in order to cope.

This denial is interrupted when the volcano’s eruption destroys Saint-Pierre (147-150). The narrator states that “a huge bang blogodooom shook him into consciousness. He came out of his thousand-year stupor with a ball of hope. His first thought upon his return to life was: Ninon” (147). Such an event gives Esternome the idea that he could find his beloved again, that he could “save” her, yet he never encounters her (147-153). Rather, Esternome becomes traumatized with the event, as the narrator explains:
Anyway, much has already been said about that horror. Books upon books. He must have whitened his last black hair over it. Dug his forehead’s creases with it. The disconcerted look in his eyes, which he covered with his hands when he suddenly broke down, must have arisen there too. His first step into the ruins must have cut up his life into a before and after. Of it he kept a pain buried even when he laughed. When at night I sometimes caught him wandering around the hut, glimpsed the hesitation in his legs which he raised high like ducks do, his hands calming his face, his mouth open with asthma, I felt like I was seeing him standing in the middle of that disaster. He walked on like that, not seeing anything any more, so much had he seen. A tide of ash. A deposit of still heat. The stone’s red glow. Intact beings stuck to wall corners, going up in strings of smoke. Some were shriveled up like dried grass dolls. Children savagely interrupted. Bodies undone, bones too clean, and oh how many eyes without look. (150)

The novel shows that Eternome’s relationship with the disaster is one that affects him deeply. Marie-Sophie, by seeing his behavior, notices that he seems to repeat these events in his mind, reacting in an automatic fashion to these memories. She empathizes with him and imagines what horrors he has witnessed and, in turn, becomes a witness to their result. This is comparable to the effect of slavery on him since Marie-Sophie notes that he “did not want to describe” the event and that he keeps quiet about it like he does “concerning the old days in chains” (149). The novel then, puts both the natural disaster and the violence perpetrated by other humans in the same playing field of traumatic experiences. Not only that, but by adding the note that “much has already been said” in “books,” Marie-Sophie places this story within the discourse surrounding the tragedy, adding her own witness of her father’s story, which in turn lends more credibility to
the overall narrative that she presents.

Esternome’s trauma manifests itself when, after his attempts “to build in Saint-Pierre,” he encounters Ninon “as a zombie” who appears “to torment him” (154-155). While he attempted to find “Ninon’s ghost,” he found that she “had changed” and that his “sweet primordial image of Ninon” is disfigured into “some sort of fishwife” accompanied by “the scumbag with the serenade” that took her away at first, all the while having her “[call] out” to him (155). Such images continue to affect him until he decides to flee elsewhere (155-157). Here, Chamoiseau presents the kind of repetitions that Caruth describes. His desire to encounter Ninon again causes him to see images that bind together the two ways in which he loses her: to the other man and to the volcano disaster. Esternome, then, cannot ignore the reality of how he lost Ninon. Returning to Bowman’s thesis, she finds that Esternome ends up in a worse state than he does before with the other loses in his life, including his mother, because a dead Ninon, as “the symbol of his humanity,” means that he “lost his humanity as well,” and he cannot deal with such a loss (40).

After all of that, Esternome meets Indoménée, a blind woman, after wandering around in another city among refugee camps and begging for food (Chamoiseau 162-169). Esternome tells her his story, including the things he has suffered through slavery and the loss of his community, which results in them connecting with each other (169). In turn, Indoménée tells Esternome about her own story with slavery, including the death of her mother, that she knows how to garden, and her many responsibilities, including being a “storytelling mammy” to the children of a white man (171). Here, once more, the narration showcases the importance of storytelling in the formation of human connections, specifically in the middle of such violent social spaces like this novel’s Martinique. Like he does with Ninon’s mother, Esternome becomes a witness to Indoménée’s sad history, as she does of Esternome’s. This brings them together, with them
sharing more stories and views on life, to the point where they have a child, Marie-Sophie (169-189)

The family moves into Lonyon’s property and owe him rent (193). As a child, Marie-Sophie is instructed in the mētis of cooking, to the point where she is capable of repeating her mother’s recipes in an uncanny way (194-197). She also narrates how Esternome tells her stories as a child and how her attitude to this changes after her mother dies (195). She narrates:

On Saturdays I went with Esternome to sell vegetables. He stood at one end of the market among the women, without shame. While waiting for the customers, he spoke to me, his daughter. He told me about the mistakes of his life as if teaching a lesson. It took me awhile to get interested. For me, his words were just those of the old, a babbling in which his spirit drowned but which did not fulfill my appetite for life. Only after the death of my Indoménée did I really listen to him.

(195)

For Marie-Sophie, her mother’s death seems to add more weight to Esternome’s stories. Benjamin’s view that mortality gives authority to the act of storytelling and the storyteller is seen here in effect. This effect is not unilateral to Marie-Sophie, however, since Esternome’s behavior towards her is modified as well, with him being more loving to “reduce [her] pain” (197). This is expressed through an increase in communication, Marie-Sophie explaining that he would say to her “everything, several times, in Creole, in French, with silences” (197). This characterization cements their relationship as one where he teaches her how to live, which has positive results for the rest of the narrative, as I show below.

This comes to an end when Lonyon, demanding money, attacks Esternome brutally, a beating from which “he never recovered” (197-199). Bed-ridden, Esternome can only speak, and
Marie-Sophie keeps his words in her mind to the point where she is able to write them effectively later on in her life (200). These words, which their neighbors also hear (200), have a profound effect on Marie-Sophie and how she views her father. She narrates:

My Esternome’s words took us back to a time none of us could have guessed at. That time long past vibrated over his zombified body, like a living memory. I didn’t realize the reach of his words, but I foresaw their hidden importance: they would, beyond my Esternome, feed a legend that would give me momentum for my battle to found Texaco. (200)

Here, Marie-Sophie and those who listen to her father become witnesses to a body that has been burdened; Esternome’s experiences, and how he embodies them, become informing agents for the formation of Texaco; a kind of cultural soil that promotes the growth of such a future community. Marie-Sophie explains how Esternome shares his story thus:

Then his words became incoherent. He had never told his story in a linear fashion. He proceeded by whirling paths, sort of like driftwood riding the tide of memories. But now the incoherence came from his words which no longer meant anything. They sank wandering inside slowly eroding memory, which harped on useless markers so as not to disappear altogether. He spoke of his mama. He spoke of a house frame. He spoke of Ninon. Of Indoménée’s eyes beneath tears of light. Named names. Named places. Laughed to himself. He began to disremember where his body was. He sometimes thought he was in the coolness of the hills. An hour later, some sort of music would make him shudder. He would cover his head, press in his ears, hysterical at seeing himself lose it in those awful serenade days. (200)
Esternome’s testimony, then, is one that is disjointed and strongly bearing the scars of trauma. Here the form of the story is just as informative as the content, presenting the reality of the kind of life that Esternome has lived starkly. It is this display which lends Esternome’s story even more credibility, which then translates to the credibility of Marie-Sophie’s story, which makes the listeners also a witness to her father’s suffering. It is in these moments that Esternome’s story ends and Marie-Sophie becomes the continuation of that story, inheriting the struggles of her father and being informed by the trauma he has experienced.

After Esternome passes away, Marie-Sophie is left destitute, forced to be under the care of Lonyon (202-204). She works for him under these conditions, becoming a victim of his lecherous stares (204-207). He then attempts to rape her, and she is forced to violently retaliate, which results in him sending her away to work for Madame Latisse (208-209). Such an event is the first in a cycle of sexual violence and precarious employment that occurs throughout this section of Marie-Sophie’s life. Marie-Sophie notes that, during her youth, men lust after her, saying that they “panted at the sight of [her] figure” (214). Like her father and her grandfather, Marie-Sophie is affected by men like Lonyon who pretend to claim ownership of her body. Lonyon attempts to control Marie-Sophie sexually, asserting himself over her. This example, like those that take place in the future, can be further examined through a feminist lens, but that is beyond the interests of this thesis. Sufficient to say, this event and the ones that follow inform the traumatic life of Marie-Sophie.

With Madame Latisse, Marie-Sophie is “playing the maid,” doing similar errands to the ones her father does in his youth (210). She also learns how to make hats, which fascinates her at first but then leaves her tired (211). After leaving Madame Latisse because of her colorist biases, she works for the Labonne family, whose religious practices spook her, so she finds work with
Mademoiselle Larville, whose ill treatment of her mother also motivates her to leave (213-214). The point is that, due to one thing or another, Marie-Sophie does not have stable employment that can guarantee her any standard of living.

It is not until she stays with Monsieur Gros-Joseph and his family that she finds some sort of respite from this uncertain period (214). She learns to read and write in French, being taught by Caméléon Sainte-Claire (216). Thanks to this, she is taught by Gros-Joseph to appreciate literature and develop a taste for books (216-218). Her interest in them, however, is not intellectual per se, since she claims that she does not make distinctions among authors, but sensuous (218). She explains: “For me, each book released an aroma, a voice, a time, a moment, a pain, a presence; each book cast a light or burdened me with its shadow; I was terrified feeling these souls, tied up in one hum, crackling under my fingers” (218). Marie-Sophie finds that in books she can encounter experiences, including some relating to pain. Like her father’s words, books can present a testimony of events and emotions that can then be accessed by the readers. This foreshadows the role that writing has on the novel’s story.

This relatively happy period does not last, however, since World War II occurs and France is overrun by the Germans (219). In response, Gros-Joseph encloses himself in his library and stays with his books as “the last rampart against barbarism,” with his quarantine lasting “the whole war” (219-220). During the period of scarcity, the Gros-Josephs manage, growing vegetables and trading with the community (221). Meanwhile, Marie-Sophie ponders on how the city has changed due to the war, as Esternome had told her happened in the previous one, leaving behind agricultural pursuits; she states that the city is “proliferating yet incapable of surviving,” meaning that their progress only exists for the sake of progress and is not influenced by a reasoning that actually aids in the survival of the people (221-22). In contrast to this, Marie-
Sophie chooses to remember her father’s stories and to see them as a source of inspiration (222). The text narrates:

I had a feeling that all of this would collapse; the hunger borne from the war and Admiral Robert reinforced that diffused impression. For a long time I saw myself as a passer-by in this City, still thinking of starting a community in the hills… as soon as my pockets were full, a Noutéka of the Hills… that poor epic of my poor Esternome… I would repeat it to myself in those miserable beds where I breathed in dust, latrine odors, and clogged canals. . . the misery of the hearts anxious to rise here . . . and these respected families which I was able to stare at with intense scorn, except maybe for the Gros-Josephs–poor epic, already the accomplice of bitterness. (222)

In this case, the epic of her father serves not only as a source of practical advice, but as a boon that guides her and accompanies her during her misery. Marie-Sophie encounters, in her father’s story, a goal to strive towards within the context of the city’s problematic expansion and difficulties in survival. Here, Marie-Sophie is viewing the high modernist ideology that fuels the progress in the city and yearns for a world that relies more on the mētis of learning how to farm and build hutches. As Estelle Tarica in “Patrick Chamoiseau’s Creole Conteur and the ethics of survival” argues, Marie-Sophie “is the direct beneficiary of the symbolic transfer of Creole knowledge from rural to urban space” (48).

Monsieur Gros-Joseph, however, maintains himself enclosed in the library, where, due to his mental state, he is reduced to the animalistic, to the point of sustaining himself by eating his books (Chamoiseau 223). Rather than be a defense against barbarism, Gros-Joseph isolates himself and does not find satisfaction in the library he has accrued. In contrast to Marie-Sophie,
who is nurtured by the experiences that her father has transmitted to her through his storytelling, Gros-Joseph cannot thrive while surrounded by the experiences of the likes of Montaigne, Rimbaud, and Lautréamont (223-224). The type of experience that is portrayed in these books is insufficient within the context of the colonial world. Something more practical and close to it is needed.

Marie-Sophie has to leave the Gros-Josephs and only has the idealized vision of Esternome’s life in the noutéka to motivate her (225-226). She works for the Mathurins in “cooking and cleaning” and meets Basile, with whom she starts a romantic relationship (226-227). This relationship continues after Marie-Sophie starts working for Madama Thelle Alcibiade instead (227). Madame Thelle’s husband, however, becomes wary of their relationship and ends up calling the authorities, claiming that Basile was “corrupting a minor” (228-229). While the text is ambiguous as to what age Marie-Sophie is when she begins having sex, if she began as a minor and with an adult, it is a form of statutory rape and therefore can be read as another unassumingly tragic event in her life. Likewise, the fact that the police do nothing to investigate this claim speaks volumes about the priorities of the legal system (229). Finally, Marie-Sophie, in hindsight, refers to her first sexual encounter with Basile as an “indelicacy,” which means her encounter might have had a negative effect on her (230).

The more negative aspects of her relationship with Basile are made apparent when she moves in with him. Once she lives with him, he becomes authoritarian and possessive, with Marie-Sophie calling it “the beginning of [her] tale of suffering” (231-232). This relationship is characterized by Basile, who believes in physical power as a sign of “more humanity,” keeping various mistresses from Marie-Sophie and constantly impregnating her (233-240). The repercussion of the former’s promiscuity leads them into conflicts that result in physical and
verbal violence (236-237). The outcome of this is various abortions, which are portrayed as tragic (239-240). Marie-Sophie narrates:

Basile was giving me children I did not want to keep. It was a sort of repulsion, fright, refusal, which came both from the war and from my scorn for Basile, my fear of facing City with a child on my shoulder. My first pregnancy was a shock. . . and it was Sylphénise . . . who gave me a hint and recommended green pineapple tea. I drank it for a whole day until I felt my whole body dripping. The second time, now more attentive, I was able to pick up on the drying up of my period and began to drink the tea, which did nothing. Sylphénise had to teach me how to handle watergrass, which could pull out the most stubborn eggs. That’s how, from then on, alone, feverish, full of tears and despair, I brought myself endless bleeding, days and days of fevers in which I thought I was dying but which I always came out of . . . I wasn’t the only one making a hole in my belly. How much women suffer behind closed louvered shutters . . . and even today, how much harsh loneliness around the blood that flows away with some life in it . . . Oh that death faced in the heart of one’s flesh . . . oh women’s sorrows. (239-240)

It is clear that these procedures have a negative effect on Marie-Sophie and that she believes they are a part of the general malaise that women in her society deal with. Marie-Sophie’s decision is informed by her precarious living situation and how she cannot possibly continue her struggle with a child to maintain. Due to this, she has to learn how to perform abortions on her own, which, while they are successful, also isolates her and causes her to have another close experience with death, comparable to her mother and father’s deaths. This, then, showcases the
kinds of decisions over the body and life that people, specifically women, have to make when they reside in such hostile living environments as the colonial territory.

Another example of this hostile environment is a period of scarcity and famine that occurs during these events. Marie-Sophie notes that the people of the city are unprepared for it, but the people of the Quarters “mastered” that “economy” (238). She then recalls that those with resources were selfish and partial to those who have more power (238). Marie-Sophie narrates: “Each and every one cherished the right to rule over the other’s famine. City seemed to harden and orphan the heart” (238). This contrasts heavily with the solidarity that Esternome mentions as part of the community that he belonged to in the hills.

Within this context, Marie-Sophie manages by relying on the mētis that her father taught her. She explains:

The art of surviving, which my Esternome had transmitted to me in veiled words, allowed me to hang in there without too much damage. I drank milk, ate eggs, mashed wild arrowroot, Saint-Vincent arrowroot. I made candles with butter from the big cocoa, to trade for some soap, then I had to wash my linen with the foaming plant my droopy-eyed grandmamma used. I learned to track down crayfish under the stones of the Grosse-Roche basin. To trap possum by Point-de-Chaînes. I learned to fight in the ration lines, to keep my place by putting down a rock there and go chase some windfall to the left and a bit of luck to the right. Soon, salt from Sainte-Anne, forgotten by everyone, reappeared in the stores. Jams that more than one astute woman began to make also took their place on the shelves. Anguish also inspired orange wine, ambarella beer, and a whole army of inventions. (238-239)
Here, Marie-Sophie showcases how her father’s stories have successfully transmitted the mētis of survival. Marie-Sophie’s listening allows her to accrue various skills and techniques which allow her to survive the hostile environment that her father and grandparents have faced. Not only that, but the people around her have also learned their fair share of abilities that allow them not only to benefit themselves, but others. Marie-Sophie is able to not only live off the land, but to give others products that she could trade for other essentials. Therefore, Marie-Sophie’s inherited mētis is not an isolated effect, nor does it only benefit her; it belongs to a community that relies on it in times of need.

After that period, Basile gets Marie-Sophie a job with M. Alcibiade (240). Alcibiade believes in the use of power, stating that “‘[t]hat the strong dominate the weak is natural law’. . . ‘cruel, indeed, but natural’, ” and that the colonizing countries “takes on the role of a Roman tutor who must work in order to be no longer needed” (245-247). He holds a strong distaste for Aimé Césaire’s ideal and, when he sees Marie-Sophie celebrating his victory, gives her a look of “despair, hatred, and murderousness” (249-253). This develops into something worse after Marie-Sophie meets Felicité Nelta and begins a relationship with him (253-254). Abelard appears one night while she sleeps to, as Marie-Sophie narrates, “bring [her] misery” (254). She then narrates how she was raped:

It was no longer Monsieur Alcibiade sitting before me, but someone that I did not know, stemming in him with a deadly–fascinating–strength. Even now, when I think of it again, I don’t understand the phenomenon that made me fail to react when he got on top of me, undressed me, and ruptured me with one savage thrust. His invincible body shattered me with much striving, quartered me, boned me, ran me through. He grunted with vengeful joy. I, who was just back from Nelta’s
arms, toppled into a ditch full of mingled pleasure, shame, pain, the desire to die, to kill and be killed, the feeling of injustice, of not existing, of being a scorned dog, the hated of this City where I swirled about all by myself, faced seven dangers alone without ever choosing my path. Serving as Monsieur Alcibiade’s flaccid toy for almost two hours–that must have been what would bring me to never let anyone order me around, to decide all by myself what was good for me and what had to be done. (254)

The narration presents this rape as a clearly traumatic event in her life. Even when this event repeats itself in her mind, she is unable to comprehend it fully, only deriving from the event that it might have made her opposed to submission. Alcibiade, living the law that the strong take advantage of the weak, imposes his will on Marie-Sophie. This brings Marie-Sophie to a state of suicidal depression, which is then projected to her life’s conditions. She feels hated by a city that promotes the precarious lifestyle that she has and places her in such a situation. She ends up pregnant again and “had to face the watergrass and the four days of blood flowing with [her] life” again (256). Likewise, her depression worsens when she stays in the Alcibiade house, with her claiming that she “was going mad” and could empathize with her father and how he is also tied to abusive masters (257-260).

It is her relationship with Nelta that gets her “out of the tomb” (262). He gets her away from the Alcibiades and walks her across the city to his community in Morne Abelard (262-266). Asbestos becomes a popular building material and Nelta teaches Marie-Sophie how to work with it (266-267). While he wishes to leave the island, Marie-Sophie hopes to build a life with him and bear his children (268-270). However, she understands that her abortions have rendered her infertile, explaining: “I had bled so much, I had hurt myself so much with that
watergrass (fevers and blackish scabs had sucked on me like zombies trying to possess me) that my belly no longer had access to the great mystery” (270). The sacrifices Marie-Sophie made in order to survive in the city, then, cost her more than she thought it would. The demands of city life and her poverty take from her the possibility of a traditional family. She describes this as a “barely imaginable horror whose true extent appeared to [her] only much later” (270). Like trauma, the repercussions of her actions can only be truly understood afterwards.

Marie-Sophie, knowing that Nelta would desert her, establishes herself in Morne Abelard. She makes a living through various jobs, as her father does, using her skills in cooking, fabricating goods, and finding food to satisfy the demands of others in the city (272). She becomes “one of the women in the Quarter,” she develops a mental fortitude that makes her a pillar of her community (272-273). She explains:

I tended to take care of others, not with pity, but to tell them how to outrun distress. I added a spoonful of oil to anyone’s dry flour. I lent a shoulder to the limping. Whoever was crying came to see me. Whoever had a sick child stopped by my hutch and I was the one who led the descent to the poorhouse or toward some old doctor, who’d do most anything for some fish. I organized the collections, the wakes and gatherings, ran the errands whenever trouble came.

(273)

Marie-Sophie here proves herself to be a dependable member of the community—someone who, like her father, gives counsel to those who need it and is able to aid them in their troubles because she has experienced her share of them. Marie-Sophie states that this is done both because of her own internal struggles relating to Nelta and because she “felt (like [her] Esternome must have) that [they] had to organize a true Quarter of the Hills against City” (273).
Not only does Esternome’s story of the Noutéka lend her internal strength, but it materially benefits others in their own struggles. Marie-Sophie believes that her “fate” is “tied to” the fate of her fellow members of the Quarter, so she builds a strong sense of solidarity (273).

This prepares her well for when Nelta leaves her. She decides to build her own hutch but finds no available land. She wishes to do this to help her cope with the loss of Nelta and to prove him wrong. However, she is still severely depressed, especially due to her infertility, which, with each menstrual cycle, repeats the harm she has done to herself and what she has lost (274-276). However, Marie-Sophie still finds community within her struggles, as the people of Morne Abelard help her build her hutch and start living around her more (276-277). Explaining the development of this, and how it is structured, Marie-Sophie narrates:

All these huts formed a trapdoor spider’s web in which we all lived in clusters. Before there was a community of people, there was one of huts carrying each other, tied through one another to the sliding land, each getting its bearings from the other according to laws from my poor Esternome’s Noutéka. Dreams touched on each other. Sighs mingled. Miseries shouldered each other. Forces knocked each other out until you saw blood. It was a sort of rough draft of City. The streets were still lanes, but each lane was more alive than a street. To walk through a lane (which would cross through lives, intimacies, dreams, fate) you had to shout *Good day everyone, Evening ladies and gentlemen*, and ask to go through, may I go through, and sometimes stop to take stock of the news of the world. If you weren’t talking to so-and-so, then you had to use a distant lane. The Bosses themselves obeyed these rules. (277)
Here, Marie-Sophie presents how the community is organized, contrasting it with the high modernist design of the city. Rather than have a community dictated by vacuous notions of progress and authoritarian will, this community follows the solidarity and mētis that have been tried and tested in Esternome’s old community. With this kind of awareness, the novel presents the segment “Law 35” which, similar to “The Noutéka of the Hills,” consists of a fragment of Marie-Sophie’s writings that is inserted into the main narrative, this one containing practical advice on how to behave with the neighbors of the place, like exhorting people to “hail Good day to all, with gusto, with respect, kindness, and be obliging” (277-278). Therefore, Marie-Sophie is capable of producing her own form of advice, mimicking what her father did. Thus, her father’s teachings are shown to be successful.

However, the greatest example of Esternome’s success in teaching Marie-Sophie occurs later on when, after giving herself “a secret name” like Papa Totone recommends, she builds a hutch for herself near Texaco’s territory, “like [her] Esternome had taught [her]” (296-297). Her actions “attracted other hutches” and people started to settle near her (300). These people include Eugénie Labourace, who goes to Texaco to escape her abusive husband, and Serénous Léoza, who also has issues with poverty and rent (301). Explaining the influence that Esternome’s story of the Noutéka has for their settlement, Marie-Sophie narrates: “We behaved according to the Noutéka of the Hills that my Esternome had described to me in detail, in communion with the open spaces right outside the hutch, to the rhythm or the moon’s seasons, the rain, and the winds” (311). Going beyond merely recognizing the behavior her father explains or implementing his advice, Marie-Sophie is shown to be capable of replicating all of that in a community she started. She evolves from being a character motivated by such stories to someone capable of enacting the experience transmitted through them.
The narrative then presents how Marie-Sophie writes her notebooks. During her time in Texaco, Marie-Sophie explains, she found “Esternome’s every word in [her] head” and decides to write (320-321). She says: “Writing meant finding my Esternome, listening once again to the echoes of his voice lost in me, building myself slowly around a memory, out of a disorder of words both obscure and strong” (321). The act of writing involved, then, handling her emotions over her father’s death, repeating the event. The effects are expressed as such:

It’s around that time, you know, that I began to write, that is: to die a little. As soon as my Esternome began to supply me the words, I felt death. Each of his sentences (salvaged in my memory, inscribed in the notebook) distanced him from me. With the notebooks piling up, I felt they were burying him once again. Each written sentence coated a little of him . . . Sometimes I would catch myself crying when I realized how much (finding him again so I might keep him) I was losing him and immolating him myself: the written words, my poor French words, dissipated the echo of his words forever and imposed betrayal upon my memory. (321-322)

Her writing, then, directly managed Marie-Sophie’s memories and created distance between her and her father. This “feeling of death” expands when she starts to document her own life and that of Texaco (322). Despite this, she turns to writing after Arcadius’ passing, stating that she “wrote despair” which “does well at the end of an edge of oneself” (359). She says: “I would tie together the memories of my Esternome and my Indoménée, two daydreams about Basile, three musings about Nelta, seven thoughts on my Arcadius, and I grated them together like manioc, making ink from the tears I cried” (359-360). Her writing, then, is emotionally engaged, informed by her
own traumatic encounters and losses. It is a healthy way of repeating the story to herself in order to relive those experiences safely and, understanding them better, cope with the results.

Marie-Sophie, once she finishes transmitting “the bulk of the stories” to the Urban Planner, challenges him to “unleash his bulldozers and raze it all” (380). However, after some absence, the “E.D.F.” gives Texaco electricity, announcing that the Urban Planner, within the city council, “was working for [them]” (380-381). Explaining this new situation, Marie-Sophie narrates:

> When he reappeared one day and made for my hutch, I knew he was bringing me the latest news: City from now on was taking us under its wing and admitted our existence. And indeed, he told me that City would integrate Texaco’s soul, that everything would be improved but that everything would remain in accordance with its fundamental law, with its alleys, places, with its so old memory which the country needed. He told me that he would help each hutch become livable, in accordance with the resident’s wishes and working from its original structure. He told me that Texaco would be rehabilitated where it stood and in the minds of the people, just like it happened for the impenetrable mangrove swamps. I told him that it wouldn’t be easy, that there would be gnashing, tears, refusals, that we were used to fighting, crying out, and that we were going to fight alongside him to advance what he was proposing for us, but that the essential thing was that we would enter City by his side, rich with what we were and strong with a legend that was becoming clearer and clearer for us. (381)
A dramatic change is perceived here. Rather than the Urban Planner’s view of Texaco as one informed by high modernist ideals of legibility, efficiency, and health, he sees it as something valuable that should not only be preserved, but allowed to thrive. This change is the great success of Marie-Sophie’s story. It manages to save Texaco and secure its future. Storytelling, then, is proven to be so effective at transmitting experiences that it can turn enemies into friends.

Tarica’s article, “Patrick Chamoiseau’s Creole Conteur and the ethics of survival,” it presents an analysis of storytelling in Chamoiseau’s work that is similar to mine. She first contrasts the lack of nourishment that the enslaved in the plantations have with the lack of “food for the soul and the self which are sustained by the sense of belonging to a cultural tradition and by the ability to remember a collective past” (40). The provider of this is the “Conteur, the storyteller, because he forges a collective identity out of the fragments and famine of plantation life” (40). Tarica argues that this is difficult, however, since Chamoiseau describes the plantation “as a kind of moral grey zone, a place of intense desperation and hence an impossible moral universe” (40). Due to this, Tarica accepts that the same society of death and traumatic events that informs the storyteller’s ideas is also the place that does not allow for easy moral answers. She states that: “[t]he Conteur . . . embodies Chamoiseau’s concern with the ethics of survival under slavery, colonialism, and neocolonialism” (41). Exploring further the kind of stories that Chamoiseau’s storytellers tell, she writes:

These are survivors’ tales; survie is their obsessive theme, and so they involve a calculus beyond good and evil – an amoral calculus of survival that Chamoiseau elucidates in his depictions of débrouillardise, the art of making do. The very return to the duress of survival thus places the parable function of the story under strain; it breaks the frame of moral instruction by implying questions that few
survivors can answer: what is the price of survival? Is survival an end in itself, worth any price? (42)

Here, Tarica presents the notion that the storytelling that exists in Texaco is, at its heart, a testimony of the survival of people placed within contexts where ethical decisions are very difficult. One could think of Marie-Sophie’s abortions, for instance. In the context of the tale that Marie-Sophie tells the Urban Planner, she makes him face how she and her father have survived their many troubles and why Texaco is necessary. Tarica also introduces the concept of débrouillardise, which could be confused with mêtis since it does involve a degree of improvisation, but my study does not present mêtis within a strict moral or amoral context. Rather, mêtis is a form of knowledge that is the resource of these characters and informs both their survival and the stories about it. So, when Tarica writes that “Texaco strongly affirms the virtuous nature of the act of storytelling and offers a narrative to which the power of stories competes against, and ultimately vanquishes, the amorality unleashed by hunger” (46), I can agree, with the addition that the novel also presents that storytelling, and the mêtis that informs it, defeating the authoritarian high modernism of a government that devalues the lives of its people.

To understand the urban planner independently, as well as how Marie-Sophie’s story affects him, one must view his writing, this being the infra-texts that appear throughout the novel that are attributed to him. A fragment of “The urban planner’s notes to the Word Scratcher” showcases his perception of Marie-Sophie, what she tells him, and how this changes his mind (165-166). He writes:
That’s her, the Old Woman who gave me new eyes. She spoke so much that for a moment I thought she was delirious. But then, a certain permanence appeared in her flood of words, like an invincible duration that absorbed the chaos of her poor stories. I suddenly got the feeling Texaco came from the deepest reaches of ourselves and that I had to learn everything. And even to relearn everything. . . (165-166).

This fragment explains that the urban planner is convinced to look at Texaco from another perspective and find value in it, something that both interests him and motivates him to reevaluate what he knows. He also writes that, with her he learns “to see the city as an ecosystem, made up of equilibriums and interactions” (257). As to what he should look for in them, a fragment states that Marie-Sophie’s words teach him that “there was a coherence to decipher, which allowed these people to live there as perfectly and as harmoniously as it was possible to live in such conditions” (244). In another fragment, he writes that Marie-Sophie “taught [him] to reread our Creole city’s two spaces: the historical center living on the new demands of consumption; the suburban crowns of grassroots occupations, rich with the depth of our stories” and that “[h]umanity throb between these two places” (170). This demonstrates that Marie-Sophie, through her words, is capable of transmitting her ideas effectively to the urban planner, who in turn learns to understand other spaces and see the value they possess.

The urban planner also explains that, while “the insalubrity of Texaco” is seen as a problem, he wishes “to listen to what these places have to tell,” since they possess “the other urban poem” (143). This, he writes, is informed by the interactions between “an occidental urban logic, all lined up, ordered, strong like the French language” and “Creole’s open profusion” which turn into “a new language” within “the Creole city” (220). These interactions propose “a
new identity: multilingual, multiracial, multihistorical, open, sensible to the world’s diversity” (220). Here, the urban planner showcases a deep interest in the cultural forces that shape these areas and their products.

In turn, these ideas affect how the urban planner understands his object of study. In a fragment, he explains:

Urbanity is a violence. The town spreads with one violence after another. Its equilibrium is violence. In the Creole city, the violence hits harder than elsewhere. First, because around her, murder (slavery, colonialism, racism) prevails, but especially because this city, without the factories, without the industries with which to absorb the new influx, is empty. It attracts without proposing anything besides its resistance—like Fort-de-France did after Saint-Pierre was wiped out. The Quarter of Texaco is born of violence. (148)

In his process “to relearn everything” (166), the urban planner formulates a vision of the city that highlights its violent tendencies and how they affect places like Texaco. He internalizes the traumatic struggles of Marie-Sophie, Esternome, and the other citizens of Texaco as informed by the profound problems of the city. His vision is tied to an idea of responsibility, as stated when he writes that “Texaco is Fort-de-France’s mess” (184). Expanding upon this idea, the urban planner states that “the city is danger, our danger . . . she spreads everywhere, threatens cultures and differences like a global virus” (346-347). The city, and its high modernist paradigm, is portrayed as something that homogenizes everything else, a problem that he articulates as follows:
But the city is danger; she becomes a megalopolis and doesn’t ever stop; she petrifies the countryside into silence like the Empires used to smother everything around them; on the ruins of the Nation-state, she rises monstrously, multinational, transnational, supranational, cosmopolitan . . . and becomes the sole dehumanized structure of the human species. (356)

In this way, the urban planner’s focus of study becomes a profound threat to everyone, not only places like Texaco. This idea causes him fear, as shown in the first cited fragment (368).

Due to this, the urban planner proposes a solution that showcases his new ideals. The text states: “The Creole urban planner must from now on restart new trails, in order to arouse a countercity in the city. And around the city, reinvent the countryside. That’s why the architect must become a musician, sculptor, painter . . .—and the urban planner a poet” (361). This identity is then appropriated by him, stating: “Out of the urban planner, the lady made a poet. Or rather: she called forth the poet in the urban planner. Forever” (341). The urban planner not only changes his views regarding Texaco, but alters his own identity radically. Such a change influences his actions towards Texaco. His actions are the culmination of what the urban planner learns from Marie-Sophie, and demonstrates that his ideas can be translated into concrete actions. More than just assuming an identity, he is using this knowledge to benefit Texaco.

Marie-Sophie, in offering her story, presents the Urban Planner with the opportunity to see the reasons why Texaco should not be razed. He is given a superior insight into the dynamics of society and the lives that the other lives. By feeling the horror that they feel, and understanding their perspective, the Urban Planner is forced to look within himself and think critically about his position within the high modernist practices of the country.
Ménager’s essay also discusses the Urban Planner’s infra-texts, arguing that they are mainly preoccupied by two categories: “déchiffrage et poésie” (66). Likewise, he ties up these infra-texts to the structure of the novel and Oiseau de Cham’s actions, writing:

L’infra-texte des notes de l’urbaniste exerce de plus une fonction métonymique dans l’économie du roman, il reflète fidèlement la démarche du Marqueur de paroles adoptant la même progression dans la résolution du problème mobilisant les deux personnages. Cette démarche, bien sûr, répète en écho celle de Chamoiseau lui-même en tant que manipulateur central du texte de Texaco. Le Marqueur de paroles tente de mettre en page le discours de Marie-Sophie Laborieux, (laquelle a déjà elle-même essayé de coucher ses souvenirs sur le papier), l’urbaniste essaye de déchiffrer le discours caché sous l’architecture sauvage du quartier de Texaco et il le met peu à peu à jour comme étant celui de la créolité. Il se demande comment s’inspirer de celui-ci pour l’établir dans L’Enville (qui figure bien, par ses connotations françaises, le texte littéraire français classique), de la même manière que le Marqueur de paroles insère dans le texte les infratextes comme autant d’envahissements du roman en tant que structure académique figée. (66-67)

Ménager here analyzes the structure of the novel as one that shows the similarities between how the Urban Planner, Oiseau de Cham, and Marie-Sophie transmit their experiences. While this appreciation of the text is interesting, and it does illuminate the process of how Oiseau de Cham constructs the novel, my interest is in how he sees, within these infra-textes, the way that the Urban Planner discovers his own thoughts on Marie-Sophie’s story and how that mimics the thought process of Oiseau de Cham. The three characters turn to writing in order to better
understand their thoughts and emotions about their experiences. The same can be said for the art of storytelling.

Oiseau de Cham tells the story of how and why he decided to narrate the story of Texaco. He goes to the area “looking for the old man of the Duom” because he might be “the last of the Mentohs,” motivated by the passing away of another storyteller, “Solibo Magnifique” (385). He fears that, with the Mentohs disappearing, there would be a profound loss of cultural knowledge (386-387). Instead, however, he meets Marie-Sophie, and gains her trust so he can curate her story and writings, listening attentively to her life’s testimony, until her death (387-389). This final death legitimizes her stories profoundly, giving them more worth and making it imperative that they be recorded for others. He writes: “I wanted it to be sung somewhere, in the ears of future generations, that we had fought with City, not to conquer it (it was City that gobbled us), but to conquer ourselves in the Creole unsaid which we had to name— in ourselves and for ourselves— until we came into our own” (390). The novel, then, ends with a hope that Marie-Sophie’s story, encompassing the stories of many, can transmit their experiences to others as an example of how the survival of the precarious high modernist colonial conditions through métis and the managing of trauma can be done. Oiseau de Cham keeps the story going by propagating it to others through his writing, preserving the multiple voices that compose the story. The novel, then, is a testimony to what can be done in the struggle for survival.
Conclusion: A Lattice of Pain and Technique: Towards a Mētis of Trauma Storytelling

In the previous chapter, I discuss the novel to showcase the ways that it presents the use of mētis and traumatic events as material for its storytelling. Essentially, I find that the novel itself is a testimony of the way of life in the Caribbean throughout time—the way of surviving struggles with the government and the different forms of violence that the region inflicts on the populace. The novel presents how Esternome’s knowledge and traumatic memories are passed on to Marie-Sophie through his stories. She then takes her father’s role as a storyteller and, wielding the weapons that he has given her then, learns how to survive within the city, all the while managing her own traumatic events. Long after she becomes an established member in her own community, someone that others rely on, she utilizes these devices to convince the Urban Planner to aid Texaco rather than destroy it. This change is then shown by the insertion of the consciousness of the Urban Planner into a narrative that is largely first person, becoming, in a way, another form of storytelling. This gives the novel another perspective, which adds to the sense of polyphony that Bakhtin describes as well as heteroglossia. The way that the narrative incorporates these ideas not only makes the novel more complex and layered but it also follows Benjamin’s vision of what a storyteller is and how stories can function as vectors for experience.

I use the word “lattice” in my title because I want to showcase the way in which stories are a construct of experiences and ideas that intersect with each other. Experiences exist within contexts and are connected to other experiences; that means they cannot be completely isolated or compartmentalized. In a story, those experiences that are transmitted exist as part of a construct whose connections make it more effective. In Texaco’s case, the novel presents the realm of mētis and the realm of trauma in a structure where they intersect. Said structure is then reinforced through the heteroglossia of the novel, which is capable of showing the trauma and
mētis of multiple voices which, likewise, intersect in the text.

Finally, in a similar way, this thesis is a lattice where the theories on stories, trauma, and mētis connect with the text to form a structured whole. This construct is meant to showcase the different uses that its materials have. While the role of mētis is very prevalent in this novel, it might not be in a text where one wishes to study the intersection between trauma and storytelling as testimony. Similarly, some works that showcase mētis might not even approach storytelling or trauma. This frame has to be malleable enough that it can interact with other concepts depending on the text that it analyzes. This lattice works because it has adapted to the text, yet the core analysis of how experiences intersect to inform a type of narrative can be utilized for other works of literature. There is a kind of mētis to the creation of such theoretical frameworks, in the sense that it depends a lot on the kind of work that is being studied and the goals that of the reader.

With that stated, I propose that scholarship should deeply consider the tangible ways that the testimonies of others—whether fictitious or historical—express the kind of counsel that is relevant to mētis. I think back to the African mama that tells Esternome and the others how she survived the Middle Passage. Like it happens to Esternome, many of us are incapable of fathoming the kinds of cruelties of which societies, specifically high modernist and colonial ones, are capable. Testimonies like hers unite people and give us a greater understanding and appreciation of the struggles of others.

James C. Scott, at the end of his book, argues in favor of “institutions that are multifunctional, plastic, diverse, and adaptable— in other words, institutions that are powerfully shaped by mētis” (353). I think about the way that our stories would function as promoters and examples of such institutions. *Texaco* is a strong example of the ways that the seemingly inhuman institutions can reworked to benefit those that they would otherwise oppress. The
stories of those that are deemed lesser—their knowledge and testimony—should be valued as information necessary for the betterment of the world. It is stories like this one that transmit such voices to others, and their propagation shows the way that those experiences and their meaning can influence others.

I close with a two-fold call. The canon and the canons within are rife with tales of survival, authors who are witnesses to the traumatic events of their times and the many skills that are needed to survive them. While trauma studies is a rich and engaging field, I hold that there is a need to explore the role of mētis in both the crafting and content of these stories. Personally, I plan to apply this framework to the analysis of other texts, both within and outside the Caribbean. The second aspect of the call is for the writers and artists who are the current witnesses of the era. The world still has a profound necessity for stories and artwork that transmit the experiences of those who bear the scars of trauma to those with the power to make a change. While Benjamin believed that storytelling was a dying art, I find that nowadays there is a need for the testimony of others that can only be satisfied by skillful storytellers of all kinds. Let us then strive forward in the analysis and production of the like, for it is through the creation and propagation of stories that we also survive.
Works Cited and Consulted


