Toward a Phenomenology of *Chabinité*: Raphaël Confiant, Max Élisée, and the Experience of the Face

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Abstract: This article examines a figure of Caribbean *métissage* (mixing) known as *chabin* in a corpus that includes Raphaël Confiant's *Eau de Café* (1991), *Ravines du devant-jour* (1993), *Le Cahier de romances* (2000), and Max Élisée's *Mémoires d'un chabin* (1998). In focusing on the lived experience of what it means to be "clear with *nègre* features," both authors lay the basis for a phenomenology that revises 18th-century accounts of miscegenation as well as more recent critiques of racialization.

Keywords: race – *métissage* – phenomenology – *chabin* – face

> [N]ous autres, peuple bâtard au visage brouillé par d'inédits métissages…
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> —Ernest Pépin, "Les Enjeux de la créolité: Conférence d'Ernest Pépin"

The question of what counts as *métissage* has prompted significant debate within academia, producing a body of scholarship that ranges from Glissant's work on Antillanity in the 1970's to our current "Age of Critique" in which mixed race studies scholars "continue to grapple with unresolved tensions between identification and categorization and structure and agency" (Ifekwunigwe 8). While many disciplines have contributed to the discussion, *métissage* remains a poorly defined, and perhaps inherently undefinable, notion that straddles the

line between biology, culture, and politics.[1] Passed into everyday speech in French, it has become a catch-all buzzword for just about "tous les phénomènes de mélange ou de fusion affectant la réalité sociale" (Bonniol 9). The astonishing ubiquity with which the word has wound through our culture should not obscure the fact that, in its inception, *métissage* referred to a process of intermixing between individuals of European and Amerindian ancestries only. Nowadays, it has become commonplace to describe the entire Caribbean population as *métisse.* Yet, and this is important, *métissage* has also been used with additional emphasis to describe a small group of biracial, black/white individuals known as *chabins*.

The word might be unfamiliar to many. While commonly used in Martinique and Guadeloupe,[2] it gained wider recognition in the early 1990's, after acclaimed writer and Creole activist Raphaël Confiant received a number of awards for works that feature *chabins* as protagonists and/or narrators. Those include his novel *Eau de café* (1991) which won the Prix Novembre and made it to the 1991 Goncourt shortlist, as well as his childhood memoirs *Ravines du devant-jour* (1993). Dedicated "à tous les petits 'chabins' du monde," it received the Cuban Prix Casa de las Américas the same year that it was published. In an interview with Lucien Taylor, Confiant, who occupies a singular position in Caribbean letters as a self-proclaimed *chabin* as well as a writer on and a theorist of *chabinité*, explains that:

> Unlike the *mulâtres* (mixture of black and white) and *câpres* (mixture of *mulâtre* and black) there's no racial grouping of *chabins*, discrete or otherwise. You can find *chabins* in any family: two very black parents could have a *chabin*, *mulâtres* can give birth to *chabins*, and so on—just like *chabins* can have a *mulâtre* baby. […] *Chabins* are an accident of history, apparently something to do with the chromosomes of some of the early white settlers and the Africans. In the *chabin*, you see both elements, white and black. We have light skin and clear eyes—often they're green—but we have an African physiognomy. We're clear with *nègre* features. Our hair is light or red, but it's always kinky. So when you look at a *chabin*, you immediately see the two races, each setting the other off in relief. (282)

[1] A list of inevitable works on *métisssage* includes Bonniol, Jean-Luc. *Paradoxes du métissage*. Paris: CTHS, 2001; Glissant Édouard, *Discours Antillais*. Paris: Seuil, 1981, and *Poétique de la relation*. Paris: Gallimard, 1991. Saada, Emmanuelle. *Les Enfants de la colonie. Les métis de l'Empire français entre sujétion et citoyenneté*. Paris: Éditions La Découverte, 2007; Sylvia Kandé, ed. *Discours sur le métissage, identités métisses: En quête d'Ariel*. Paris: L'Harmattan, 1999; Toumson, Roger. *Mythologie du métissage*. Paris: PUF, 1998; Maignan-Claverie, Chantal. *Le Métissage dans la littérature des Antilles françaises. Le complexe d'Ariel*. Paris: Karthala, 2005.

[2] The word also appears, albeit in a different form, in Derek Walcott's "The Schooner Flight," a poem that features Shabine, a protagonist named after "the patois for/any red nigger..." (129). In Haiti, *chabins* are generally referred to as *grimos* and *chabines* as *grimelles*.

Confiant construes the *chabin*'s face as a metonym for his biraciality, a site where his difference is simultaneously inscribed and performed. Marked by dramatic contrasts that are reflected in the opposition of black features and light skin/eyes, his appearance has earned him various epithets, among them those of "marque vivante, […] homme-sandwich, en quelque sorte, du métissage," and "pur produit […] du métissage Noir/Blanc aux Antilles françaises" (Potomitan). Baba Abraham Jatoe-Kaleo has called him "un être évocateur de la créolité et de la créolisation de la société caribéenne" (2), echoing Valérie Loichot's comment that he is an example of "créolisation anatomique" (622). Likewise Louise Hardwick has argued that the word itself "with its opaque Normandy origins, exemplifies the positive aesthetics of diversity [...] promoted in *Eloge*" (97).

Despite his status as an emblem of Creole hybridization, the *chabin* stands out as the only figure of black/white *métissage* missing from early taxonomies of skin color.[3] How does one explain this absence? *Chabinité* is a form of intermixing that blurs the color line. As the only brand of *métissage* in which heredity does not produce the physical traits one would expect to encounter, it challenges the colorist ideology that informed eighteenth-century scientific discourse. In particular, the *chabin*'s face offers an example of bodily variation that subverts the parameters of racial identification. His traits do not fall within any of the conventional categories used at the time—*câpres*, *sacatras*, *mulâtres*, *quarterons*, etc.—but are randomly distributed across them.

It is this unclassifiable appearance, one that has been largely ignored by Enlightenment anthropology, yet widely celebrated by the Creolist generation, that I take as the focus of my discussion. Drawing on a corpus of autobiographical narratives and novels that include Raphaël Confiant's *Eau de café* (1991), *Ravines du devant-jour* (1993) and *Le Cahier de romances* (2000), as well as Max Élisée's *Mémoires d'un chabin* (1998), I examine the ways in which both authors use the *chabin*'s body as a vehicle for interrogating notions of racial profiling. While *Ravines* traces Confiant's early childhood in his hometown of Grande-Anse, *Le Cahier* focuses on his life as a middle-school student in Fort-de-France. Labeled "roman," *Eau de café* describes yet another return to the homeland, that of the narrator—a young *chabin* from Grande-Anse—who attempts to reintegrate into Martinican society after studying in metropolitan France. Finally

[3] While descriptions of *octavons*, *quarterons*, *sacatras*, *câpres*, and *sangs mêlés* fill the works of Enlightenment anthropologists, *chabins* shine by their absence. Neither Cornelius de Pauw's *Recherches philosophiques sur les Américains, ou Mémoires intéressants pour servir à l'Histoire de l'Espèce Humaine* (1770), nor Michel-René Hilliard d'Auberteuil's *Considérations sur l'état présent de la colonie française de Saint-Domingue* (1776) acknowledge their presence. Nowhere are they found in Gabriel de Bory's *Mémoires sur l'administration de la marine et des colonies* (1789) either. Even Moreau de Saint-Méry's monumental *Description topographique, physique, civile, politique et historique de la partie française de l'isle de Saint-Domingue* (1798) overlooks them despite the exhaustive nomenclature of skin color variation it comprises.

Mémoires d'un chabin recounts Frédéric Edgar's tribulations as he flees his native Martinique for Senegal in an attempt to break a curse that has plagued his family.

These works, which have as a common feature *chabin* narrators, speak in important ways to the "phenomenology of *chabinité*" in my title. A brief perusal of *Éloge de la créolité* (1989) will clarify what I mean by this. In their essay, Bernabé, Chamoiseau, and Confiant state the need for a literature that should renounce Western regimes of representation, shatter the exotic frameworks that have informed portrayals of (post)colonial others, and account for the mechanisms of oppression that have impacted their lives. *Éloge*'s approach may be best described as an archeology of the Caribbean subject, one geared toward recovering what has been buried under layers of "frenchification" to create the conditions for an authentic reassessment of "ce qu'est l'Antillais" (22). Doing so entails a perspectival shift. In reaction to the fact that Antilleans have always been fundamentally "frappés d'extériorité," Bernabé, Confiant, and Chamoiseau advocate the development of an interior vision, whereby they mean a new, unmediated gaze, "[u]n regard neuf qui enlèverait notre naturel du secondaire ou de la périphérie afin de le replacer au centre de nous-mêmes. Un peu de ce regard d'enfance, questionneur de tout, qui n'a pas encore ses postulats et qui interroge même les évidences" (24). As such, *créolité* belongs to a tradition of Panafrican thought that stretches back to W.E.B. Du Bois, the first to outline what critics have called "postcolonial phenomenology."[4] One could very well argue that all phenomenology is postcolonial in the sense that it begins with a bracketing of the natural attitude, that is, a suspension of judgement—Husserl talks about a "method of parenthesizing" (60), Gordon evokes "an act of 'ontological suspension'" (142), and Maldonado-Torres, a "decolonial reduction" (101)—whereby one momentarily puts aside her/his repertoires of knowledge, beliefs, and experiences, and casts on the world a questioning eye, one akin to *Éloge*'s "regard neuf," in order to strip phenomena of any symbolic meaning until they appear to consciousness in their "pure" form, ready for analysis. As Gordon explains, to do so is to "[disable] a colonizing episteme's or order of knowledge functioning as a legitimating process" (142).

Phenomenology can be postcolonial in a different way, not simply by virtue of its methodology but as a discipline based on "the self-reflective descriptions of the constituting activities of the consciousness of Africana peoples" (Henry 1). In this sense, a major contributor to the discipline was Frantz Fanon, whose work engages, among other things, with issues of subject formation under colonialism and what it means to *live* as a "negro." The experience of blackness is one he explored at length in

[4] See in particular Du Bois, W.E.B. *The Souls of Black Folk*. New York: Bantam Classic, 1903. An important feature of Du Bois's phenomenology is his notion of "double consciousness," which he explores in this essay within the context of race relations in the United States to describe how African Americans are not only forced to view themselves from their own perspective but from that of the white majority, creating in the process a psychological split. This notion is also at work in Fanon's essay *Peau noire, masques blancs* (1952).

his 1952 essay *Peau noire, masques blancs*. Building on the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty and Sartre, Fanon described the role of the European white gaze in the construction of racialized identities and the ways in which such identities produce a psycho-existential trauma or inferiority complex that precludes black men from the possibility of achieving true self-consciousness: "Le Noir a deux dimensions. L'une avec son congénère, l'autre avec le Blanc. Un Noir se comporte différemment avec un blanc ou avec un autre Noir" (13). It is this conceptualization of black subjectivity, one that has been commented on by the likes of Mbembe, Bhabha, Gates and others, that I interrogate in what follows.[5]

"L'Antillais est avant tout un Noir" (139), Fanon wrote. His work was largely based on the assumption that processes of racialization systematically mark the "Africana subject" as black and that black skin constitutes a metonymic quality of her/his body. What I ask in response is: where does one position the *chabin*, for whom blackness is not always perceived as a given, within this economy of racial representation? And how far do the conceptual tools forged by Fanon account for the range of experiences to which his white skin has subjected him?

For a long time the *chabin* has been relegated to the margins of intellectual discourse, functioning as a blind spot both in Enlightenment anthropology where he was left out of racial taxonomies and, perhaps more surprisingly, in postcolonial phenomenology where critiques of racialization have failed to acknowledge his idiosyncrasies. In what follows, I focus on the *chabin*'s physiognomy as a starting point to show how Confiant and Élisée sketch the contours of a phenomenology that breaks away from a double tradition. Not only does it address the shortcomings of eighteenth-century discourses on *métissage*, but it also rewrites Fanon's account of racial embodiment in a way that foregrounds the lived experience of *chabinité*.[6]

Raphaël Confiant and the Myth of *Chabinité*

To be sure, Confiant's experience of *chabinité* offers a number of parallels with Fanon's account of black embodiment. The scrutiny and abuses to which the former's body has been subjected recalls the latter's confrontation with the colonial gaze. In one of *Peau noire*'s most emblematic scenes, Fanon describes his entrance into "the white world" in terms of an encounter with a child who repeatedly calls him a "nègre." The

[5] See, for example, Bhabha, Homi. "Remembering Fanon: Self, Psyche, and the Colonial Condition." Foreword to Franz Fanon, Black Skin, White Masks. London : Pluto Press, 1986; Gates, Henry Louis, Jr. "Critical Fanonism." Critical Inquiry, 17: 3 (Spring, 1991) pp. 457-70; Mbembe, Achille. *De la postcolonie. Essai sur l'imagination politique dans l'Afrique contemporaine*. Paris: Karthala, 2000.

[6] One might argue, and reasonably so, that the scope of this study leaves aside *chabines*. While there have been efforts to differentiate *chabins* from other "racial" groups, literary and iconographic representations of *chabines* tend to offer very little variation from other female *métisses* like *câpresses* or *mulâtresses* in the sense that they are usually portrayed as sensual, if not sexual bodies.

violence of the word leads Fanon to rethink the constitution of his "corporeal schema": "Ce jour-là, désorienté, incapable d'être dehors avec l'autre, le Blanc, qui, impitoyable, m'emprisonnait, je me portai loin de mon être-là, très loin, me constituant objet. Qu'était-ce pour moi, sinon un décollement, un arrachement, une hémorragie qui caillait du sang noir sur tout mon corps?" (90). The way he becomes aware of his body as that of another is described as a violent form of dispossession, "un décollement, un arrachement, une hémorragie" that I propose to read as an act of bracketing. Indeed the stripping of black skin recalls phenomenology's *modus operandi*, which consists in peeling away the layers of meaning accreted onto phenomena to analyze them in an indiscriminate fashion. Fanon achieves a form of "double consciousness." For the first time, he views himself through the eyes of his observer—as a cannibal, a slave, a savage, etc.—and in doing so, complies with the demand of having to exist not just for himself but for the white other. The imposition of this "epidermal racial schema" sheds light on the extent to which racialized subjects appear limited in their freedom by the conditions of their embodiment.

In *Ravines du devant-jour*, the young *chabin* becomes aware of his physical difference under similar circumstances, after his neighbor Man Cia hurls a series of insults at him: "Espèce de mauvaise race de chabin! Espèce de chabin aux poils suris! Chabin au visage tacheté comme un coq d'Inde! Chabin tiqueté comme une banane mûre!" (41-2). These invectives trigger in him an epiphany that recalls Fanon's reaction upon being called a "nègre":

> Le mot te pétrifie pour la première fois de ton existence: chabin! D'ordinaire, il est prononcé avec gentillesse par ceux qui t'entourent encore qu'il t'est arrivé de t'étonner qu'on te désigne toujours par ce vocable tandis qu'on ne dit jamais 'noir' ou 'mulâtre' à tout propos aux gens de cette complexion. Tu sens confusément que le chabin est un être à part. Nègre et pas nègre, blanc et pas blanc à la fois. (42)

Man Cia's remarks lead to a series of linguistic revelations. For the first time, the word *chabin* appears in a variety of forms and uses that Confiant had never suspected before. First, as a contronym, a term with two opposite meanings that underscore the challenges of racial self-identification: to be a *chabin* is to be simultaneously black and white. Second, as a metonym, that is, a form of address which reduces in essentialist fashion Confiant's identity to his phenotype. Third, and perhaps most importantly, as an insult, the word acquiring in Man Cia's mouth an aggressive charge that leaves the young boy baffled.

Similar insults appear throughout *Le Cahier de romances*. While Confiant's classmates at the lycée Schoelcher often call him a "*Chaben! Chaben prel si!* (Chabin! Chabin aux poils suris!)" (68), his sworn enemy of Grande-Anse, Étienne, nicknamed him "Djôl zanndoli (Gueule de lézard-annolis)" due to the "rousseur crépue" of his

hair, his "lèvres trop minces" and the "pâleur de christophine mûrie" of his complexion (23). These insults have in common to mock the *chabin*'s face, a locus where his difference manifests in the most dramatic way. Indeed, according to Confiant "[i]l porte sur son visage […], et cela de manière spectaculaire, les marques des deux races qui lui ont donné naissance: peau généralement claire + traits généralement négroïdes; cheveux généralement clairs, voire parfois roux + grain de cheveu généralement crépu; yeux souvent clairs parfois bleus ou verts" (Potomitan). In an investigation he conducted on behalf of UNESCO to examine dynamics of ethnic/racial integration in France, Michel Leiris similarly referred to the *chabin*'s appearance not as a harmonious blend of black and white features—a characteristic more commonly observed in *mulâtres*—but "une combinaison paradoxale de traits des races noire et blanche" (161). Valérie Loichot describes him as the embodiment of "l'écriture même des lacs et entrelacs des cultures qui le forment et qui se disputent en lui. Leur dialogue n'a cependant ni la douceur du chant, ni la logique du débat, mais est plutôt cri violent, érayé, tout comme le visage est rayé de la différence" (621), echoing Chantal Maignan-Claverie for whom the *chabin*'s face is a visual enigma that undermines patterns of racial classification, a symbol of the "déconstruction analytique des codes et des classifications qui fondent la civilisation" (18-9).

This sense of indeterminacy has resulted in the production of a unique mythology. *Chabins* have been perceived as uncanny in the collective imaginary of the Caribbean. They are often referred to as evil and inauspicious, and their whiteness is seen as disturbingly unnatural. Another reason that they are feared is the impossibility to account for the accidental circumstances of their birth. Finally, they are known for their raw sensitivity and bellicose disposition, which explains why Confiant's grandmother, Man Yise, is so disconcerted by her grandson's calm demeanor:

> '[U]n chabin mol? Mais c'est impossible! IMPOSSIBLE! Un chabin, ça crie, ça trépigne, ça frappe, ça injurie, ça menace. Jamais ça ne mollit, mon vieux!'
>
> De ce jour naît ta férocité. […]
>
> Tu te rassures en ton for intérieur dès que le plus petit doute menace de t'assaillir: 'Je suis un chabin. Un chabin, c'est raide! C'est fort! C'est méchant! Le monde entier craint les chabins. Nous sommes une race de mâles-bougres.' Mais, certains soirs, sur ton oreiller, quand il ne sert plus à rien de bravacher devant tes pairs, tu laisses des larmes tièdes sinuer sur les pommes de ta figure. Au matin, tu contemples ton tiquetage de coq d'Inde, autrement dit tes taches de rousseur, devant le miroir de la salle de bains. Tu as beau les presser, les purger de toutes tes forces, rien n'y fait: tu demeures la pire espèce de vieux chabin laid. (Confiant, *Ravines* 42-3)

Man Yise acts as a physiognomist when she interprets Confiant's *métissage* as the sign of his angry personality. According to her, there are expectations of how *chabins* should behave; her initial surprise originates from his failure to fulfil them ("Un chabin mol? Mais c'est impossible!"). In order for Confiant to find his place in society, he must comply with the injunction to aggressiveness that his difference entails ("De ce jour naît ta férocité"), but doing so proves challenging because he does not feel a natural inclination to act that way. On the contrary, the young boy is often overwhelmed to the point of tears and wishes he were different. What Man Yise takes to be a natural disposition of *chabins* is disclosed as a performance, a social demand with which Confiant feels very much at odds. The persona he is compelled to adopt has, indeed, no common measure with what he believes himself to be. In front of the bathroom mirror, the young boy experiences his "tiquetage de coq d'Inde" (43) as a stigma in the sense that Erving Goffman gave to the word, that is to say, a discrediting attribute or "language of relationships" which "constitutes a special discrepancy between virtual and actual social identity" (3). By "virtual social identity," Goffman means the set of expectations and anticipated attributes that we assign to strangers when we first come into their presence. Stigmatization originates when the attributes someone is "proved to possess" fail to conform to our notion of what they ought to be: "He is thus reduced in our minds from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one" (3). This definition implicitly builds on a model of intersubjective recognition that was already at work in Fanon's account of racialization. The psychological doubling he experiences on the train stems from a gap between his own perception of himself and the white boy's. It is the same gap that Confiant becomes aware of upon looking at himself—one that finds an echo in the use of the second-person narration. Indeed the narrator of *Ravines* and *Le Cahier*, that is, the "I" that speaks—in other words, Raphaël Confiant in the present of writing—addresses his younger self, the "tu" that is spoken about—the Raphaël Confiant who has yet to come to terms with his *chabinité*.

The Fact of Whiteness: Raphaël Confiant's "Dermographic Schema"

Yet a crucial feature of Fanon's thought, namely his notion of "epidermal racial schema," renders it inapt for explanation of Confiant's *chabinité*. One of the reasons is that unlike the black subject who becomes racialized upon entrance into the "white world," it is in Caribbean society that the *chabin* is marginalized. One might object that color prejudice affects all segments of the population, with the exception of *békés*.[7] While, indeed, the experience of discrimination is often a shared one, this is not to say

[7] As Confiant himself notes, "Les nègres foncés étaient traités de 'nègres-Congo' certes, mais les chabins à la peau laiteuse n'étaient guère mieux lotis. […] Quant aux coulies, les pauvres, ils étaient obligés de courber l'échine sous les insultes et parfois le crachat. Un peu mieux considérés, les mulâtres étaient […] accusés de tous les maux de la terre dès que se produisait la moindre tension sociale" (Confiant, *Le Cahier* 238).

that it plays out in the same way for those targeted. As we know, *chabins* have been subject to a number of unique myths and assumptions. Another reason that Fanon's schema falls short of addressing the embodied experience of *chabinité* is that it posits racialization as a process of categorization through which one is perceived as black. The consequence is to leave aside those who simultaneously identify as "nègre et pas nègre, blanc et pas blanc à la fois" (Confiant, *Ravines* 42). In *Le Cahier de romances*, Confiant underscores the limits of this "epidermal racial schema" in a way that rehabilitates his *métissage*. Reminiscing about his days as a student at the Lycée Schoelcher, he writes:

> Tu n'avais osé contredire ton professeur de français le jour où, dans une envolée pleine d'indignation, il s'était insurgé contre le fait que l'Europe colonisatrice ait divisé le monde entre Blancs et gens de couleur.
>
> "Qu'est-ce qu'une telle dichotomie signifie? s'était-il exclamé. Que la couleur blanche n'est pas une couleur? Que le blanc est l'étalon de mesure de toutes les autres couleurs, hein? Pff! Quelle monstrueuse prétention!" (210)

The teacher's vision of a "monde entre Blancs et gens de couleur" implicitly draws on Fanon's definition of the colonial world as a compartmentalized battleground opposing whites and blacks—a dichotomy that ignores Confiant's positionality:

> Il [ton professeur de français] avait pourtant tort à tes yeux! Il ne pouvait plus, lui qui avait un teint de cacao mûr, comprendre que les gens qui avaient la peau blanche, ou presque blanche, s'imaginassent dur comme fer que, si on leur grattait la peau, on ne trouverait rien en dessous hormis des veines et de la chair. Absolument rien! Tandis que si l'on procédait à la même opération pour quelqu'un qui avait la peau noire, brune, jaune ou rouge, forcément on buterait sur de l'épiderme incolore. (210)

Confiant challenges colonial epistemologies and the way they have forced bodies into systems of categorization that rely on black and white as two opposite markers of race. He does so by re-ordering the terms of this mapping. According to him, the difference between whiteness and blackness is not one of kind but of degree. If one were to scratch off black skin, "on butterait sur de l'épiderme incolore," while one would only find veins and flesh when conducting the same experiment on white skin, which means that "L'incolore, le pâle et donc le blanc étaient donc premiers" (210). Positing the primacy of whiteness without endorsing its superiority over other skin tones allows Confiant to complicate the polarized understanding of race described in *Peau noire* and problematize what it means to be white, or rather to claim blackness when one has

white skin—a necessary step in initiating a discussion on *chabinité* as a mode of subjectivity that cannot be understood in the terms of Fanon's Manichaean analysis. To be sure, *Ravines* describes epidermalization in terms similar to those used in *Peau noire*, which is to say, as a process of skinning. But unlike Fanon for whom this skinning or "arrachement" produced a feeling of alienation, it is lived as form of empowerment by Confiant. His use of the adjective "incolore" deploys a new understanding of whiteness. In redirecting attention to the lack ("in/colore") at its core, he empties the word of all ideological connotations. This operation speaks in significant ways to his literary project. It is as if Confiant's whiteness became a blank slate, a canvas for rethinking the materiality of the *chabin's* body once his skin is no longer perceived as a signifier of colonial privilege. Or better yet, a white page on which to write new narratives of embodiment.

I suggest calling such narratives, *dermographies*. The term is not a new one. Anyone with some level of expertise in the field of medicine probably knows that *dermographia*—from the Greek *derma*, "skin," and *graphein*, "to write"—designates a form of urticaria that causes the skin to be inflamed when touched, scratched, rubbed or hit. In a 2001 collective volume entitled *Thinking Through the Skin*, Sara Ahmed and Jackie Stacey took up the word to enrich it with cultural studies inflections. If they agree with the original definition that *dermographia* is a form of skin writing, they also suggest that "the substance of the skin is itself dependent on regimes of writing that mark the skin in different ways or that produce the skin as marked" (15). In Barthesian terms, skin is "a writerly effect," which means that to write is to skin because "what we write causes ripples and flows that 'skin us' into being" (15). Invoking Derrida's notion of writing as a repeatable process that can be "'cut off' from its context of utterance" (15), Ahmed and Stacey argue that skin is similarly versatile in the way it can be "cut off" and reshaped into new sets of meanings. I use the term as a tool of narrative analysis to show how, in Confiant, rewriting white skin provides an occasion for meta-literary commentary: *Ravines*, *Eau de café*, and *Le Cahier de romances* open up a textual space in which the *chabin* arrives at a form of self-reflective knowledge that allows him to distance himself from mythologies of *chabinité* and become a critical "I"—a process that requires him to gain authorship of his own life. Writing on the white page and rewriting white skin become part of a literary project of self-fashioning in which the *chabin*'s agency is restored.

Among the plethora of works that Confiant has published, *Eau de café* is the one that best exemplifies the challenges of *dermographia*. The novel recounts the narrator's return to his native town of Grande-Anse shortly after the death of his godmother's adoptive daughter, and his attempt to reintegrate into Martinican society with the help of his mentor, a communist carpenter named Thimoléon. As he launches his investigation, the young *chabin* documents his thoughts and experiences, interspersing them with local anecdotes, gossip, and legends told by family members, old friends, and acquaintances. Through a process of mise en abyme, the notebooks he uses to do so

(23, 104, 176-177, 270, 323, 378) eventually become the very novel we are reading. One night, as he goes back to his room at the Oceanic-Hôtel, he notices that they are missing. The maid stole them on the ground that "Monsieur est un chabin. Tous les chabins sont mauvais. Tous les chabins sont méchants" (177), and that they all bring misfortune. The narrator ultimately retrieves his notebooks but decides to get rid of them in the final pages of *Eau de Café*: "M'assurant de n'être épié par personne, je jette mes cahiers […] dans un dalot où une eau nauséeuse s'écoule avec paresse" (377-378). Regretting his gesture, he immediately saves them. While no explanation is given for this volte-face, one could venture that the "eau nauséeuse" in which they are soaked acted as a reminder of the existential nausea that fills his account. In preserving his story, making it public, and thereby drawing attention to his experiences, affects, and emotions, the narrator can finally overcome the kind of anxiety, of nausea, that he believes his *métissage* to be the cause. The erratic circulation of the text, which was first stolen, then carelessly thrown away to be saved at the last minute does not simply serve to dramatize its conditions of possibility; it also brings to light, in meta-literary fashion, the challenges faced by Confiant himself in writing both about *chabinité* and as a *chabin*.

Uprooting *Chabinité*: The Curse of Apollinaire

Aside from Confiant whose work has monopolized much of critics' attention, Max Élisée is one of few other authors who have written about *chabinité*. Born in 1947, he left his hometown of Macouba at age thirteen to study in Paris where he pursued a career in film production. His first novel, *Mémoires d'un chabin*, was initially written as a screenplay. Impressed with the overall quality of the piece, Claude Chabrol agreed to direct it but due to financial hardship the movie never saw the light of day ("Île en île"). Published in 1998, seven years after *Eau de café, Mémoires* offers a glimpse into the life of Frédéric Edgar, a young teacher whose life circumstances strikingly recall Confiant's. Referred to as "nègre blanc" (27), "faux blanc" (57), "le blanc de sa race" (63), "bâtard" (241), "chabinos" (35, 116, 239, 314), or quite simply "petit chabin" (82), Frédéric is faced with the challenge of navigating through Martinican society—a task that proves all the more difficult in a context where his appearance is viewed as peculiar at best and horrifying at worst:

> J'étais chabin, et le seul chabin de cette bourgade. J'étais donc depuis ma naissance, un objet de curiosité, un fétiche: j'étais roux, j'avais les yeux marron et mon corps maculé d'éphélides aurait pu me loger dans la pléïade des roux qui peuplent la planète, si mes cheveux très crépus– "tête grin'" comme on définissait en créole cette particularité–, mon nez très épaté et mes lèvres épaisses n'avaient pas trahi mon appartenance à la race noire. Avoir tous les traits d'un Noir mais être blanc de peau, cela était encore inexplicable aux yeux des gens du début du siècle. (21)

The *chabin*'s face is introduced in terms of a visual enigma. Although Élisée strives to convey the contrasts that mar his appearance through the use of absolute superlatives ("très") and dichotomies, his attempt issues in a confusion of categories. Frédéric is simultaneously black and white, ginger but not quite. This rhetoric of antithesis fails to provide the reader with an adequate visual model, resulting in a description that only underscores its own failure to represent.

In a society ruled by rigid color hierarchies, Frédéric's *métissage* is problematic. Molested by his brother Jean for being white-skinned and despised by the local *békés* for having black blood, he experiences his condition as one of subjection, exclusion, and abuse. The constant flow of insults he endures from his father who once went as far as calling him "'chabin pouèle si'" (75) causes him to wonder: "Suis-je donc vraiment une erreur de la nature?" (83). As a self-proclaimed "opprimé du destin," he feels particular empathy for the marginalized, including "ceux qui sont nés pauvres, esclaves, ou infirmes" (55). An opportunity to take control of his destiny occurs when he finds out, through prophetic visions, that a curse was placed on his family generations ago and how to lift it off. In order to do so, he embarks on an eye-opening journey to Senegal, the land of his ancestors.

Mémoires owes much to the tradition of the Bildungsroman in the sense that it contains many of the themes and devices that the genre typically gravitates to: a conflict between the main protagonist and the values of a society in which she/he cannot function, a quest for self-development through which she/he gains experience of the world, and a positive denouement occasionally tempered by the irruption of nostalgia or resignation. *Mémoires* is also—and this is where its distinctive contribution lies—one of few Caribbean novels to describe a physical return to Africa; an original approach that reframes the personal history of the *chabin* within a broader transatlantic context. Frédéric's journey to Africa marks a pivotal moment in his quest to destroy the curse that has plagued his family. In the early nineteenth century, his great-great grandfather Apollinaire, the headman of a small village in Senegal, worked in close collaboration with European colonists, regularly providing them with Manding slaves until one day the supplies ran out. To overcome this human shortage, Apollinaire decided to hand over his own subjects but, in an act of rebellion, the village sorcerer killed him, buried his head under a tree, and cursed his descendants. As the novel unfolds, Frédéric learns that the only way to cancel this malediction is to make his way to Africa and uproot his ancestor's head.

Apollinaire's story offers striking resemblances to a widely commented, yet enigmatic episode of *Genesis* in which Noah's son, Ham, saw his father naked in his tent shortly after the flood. Following the incident, the latter broke into a series of imprecations: "Cursed be Canaan, a slave of slaves shall he be to his brothers. […] Blessed by the lord my god be Shem; and let Canaan be his slave. God enlarge Japheth, and let him dwell in the tents of Shem; and let Canaan be his slave" (Osborne, *Gen.* 9:18-29). What came to be known, albeit incorrectly, as the curse of Ham (in reality

Canaan is the sole recipient of Noah's wrath) has sparked many a debate among biblical scholars and philologists. A number of incongruities have been pointed out, including the fact that Ham's son, Canaan, was punished for his father's behavior.[8]

It is by way of the first missionaries that the myth of Ham infiltrated Caribbean lore. Du Tertre and Labat invoked it to explain the sinful nature of black Africans and justify their enslavement. Similarly Maurile de Saint-Michel observed upon his arrival in the islands that "[c]ette nation porte *sur le visage* une malédiction temporelle, et est héritière de Cham, dont elle est descendue; ainsi elle est née à l'esclavage de père en fils, et à la servitude éternelle" (qtd., Maignan-Claverie 191). Centuries later, Chamoiseau reclaimed this biblical ancestry by rebranding himself as "Oiseau de Cham" and "Ti-Cham." He saw in the curse of Ham a way to understand his own status as a Caribbean writer, doomed to think and write in a language that was imposed by colonization. In *Mémoires*, Élisée offers his own take on the matter, re-appropriating the myth as a heuristic device to equate *chabinité* with a cursed form of embodiment.

Two mentions of Ham are found in his novel. The first one occurs as Frédéric is overcome by one of his visions and makes contact with what he believes to a sorcerer: "je t'aiderai à sortir de la malédiction de Cham..." he tells the young *chabin*, "Tu ne devras plus être sous cette influence" (62). Like Canaan who is doomed to slavery because of his father's crime, Frédéric falls victim to a curse due to his ancestor's doing. In addition, he repeatedly describes his existence as that of a slave. Indeed, his phenotype makes him the target of constant attack, persecution, stereotyping, and degrading treatment, and he believes that putting an end to his family's curse will allow him to disrupt the forces that have brought his life to misery. In doing so, he hopes to initiate a process of reinvention, a shift in self-image from passive victim to active protagonist. The second occurrence is found four pages later. As Frédéric engages in conversation with his sister Marthe, asking her how familiar she is with the curse of Ham, he is met with silence and confusion: "Comment pouvait-elle comprendre que ce chabin qu'elle avait pour frère et qui n'avait souvent été qu'une descente de lit pouvait à tout moment prendre les rênes" (66). As he makes his way to Senegal in search of Apollinaire's head, Frédéric's hope is to finally free himself from the curse of his ancestor and become, like Confiant, the author of his own life.

While it might be tempting to end the comparison here, something else hints at a deeper kinship between the two curses. Both may deal with slavery but what they are primarily concerned with is "originary anxieties and racial (il)legitimacy" (Johnson 18). At stake in the myth of Ham is the thorny question of where black people came from. Many commentators have used Noah's story as an attempt to explain the origin of

[8] Also of contention is the way early and modern Christian theologians interpreted the curse as a justification for black slavery. As David Goldenberg points out, generations of scholars mistook the word Ham for a derivative of "the Hebrew root ḥmm 'to be hot' (ḥom 'heat', ḥam 'hot'); or from the Hebrew ḥwm (ḥūm) 'black, dark'; or from the Egyptian name for 'Egypt,' kmt" (Goldenberg 145), thus collapsing blackness and slavery in a way that the Bible does not.

human races, arguing that his eldest son Shem was the father of the ancient Near East nations (Asia); Japeth, the founder of Caucasian nations (Europe); and Ham, the primal black man based on the (false) assumption that his name meant "dark," "blackened," or "sunburnt." Yet his racial affiliation is perhaps less obvious than what critics would have us believe. The eighth-century Muslim Wahb Ibn Munabbih claimed that Ham was originally white but that he became black as a result of Noah's curse. This opinion was not isolated; in the seventh-century, someone like Ka'b Al-Ahbar had already ventured a similar hypothesis (Goldenberg 101-102). It is also found in Tanhuma, a medieval collection of homilies and rabbinic exegeses which describes Ham's transformation as a result of Noah's curse: "[His] eyes turned red, since he looked at his father's nakedness; his lips became crooked, since he spoke with his mouth; the hair of his head and beard became singed, since he turned his face around; and since he did not cover [his father's] nakedness, he went naked and his foreskin was extended" (qtd., Goldenberg 187). Although no mention is made of any change in skin color, features such as curled hair, pursed lips, and red eyes were traditionally associated with the African physiognomy in medieval rabbinic literature, thus suggesting it is indeed into a black man that Ham turned. Yet, in 1867, American clergyman Buckner Payne argued in his essay *The Negro: What is His Ethnological Status?* that Ham and his offspring "were at [the time of the flood], and after the flood, and continue to be, *to this day*, of the white race," a race which he believed to include the following traits: "long, straight hair, high foreheads, high noses and thin lips" (11).

Spanning over centuries of exegetical dispute, the discussion of Ham's appearance foregrounds a kind of ontological trouble that Élisée's reader is all too familiar with. The question of what Ham looked like remains unanswered despite the corpus of hermeneutical works it has generated. Commentators alternatively referred to his lips as thick and thin, to his hair as curly and straight, and to his complexion as white and dark. The impossibility to map racial difference onto his face recalls Frédéric's perception of his own body. While Élisée believes his race to be "la noire, bien sûr" (11), the *chabin*'s trials and tribulations suggest that the question of affiliation is more complex. When asked to identify as black or white, he answers with a hint of uncertainty, "Je suis noir..." (200). This brief hesitation is immediately broken by his interlocutor who retorts in a tone of reproach: "Tu viens de me mentir […] ! Tu n'as jamais su de quel côté te ranger !" Shortly after this exchange, Frédéric erupts in self-deprecatory ruminations: "Je n'étais rien. Je n'avais jamais rien été. Ni Blanc, ni Noir, rien !" (200). The sense of despair and self-hatred that permeates these lines is echoed in the repetition of negative terms ("n' […] rien," "n' […] jamais," "rien," "Ni[...], ni […], rien"), as if to highlight the lack of stable referents when it comes to describing Frédéric's body. Élisée's rhetoric is governed by a neither/nor logic that exceeds the predicative function of language. Under his pen, the opposition of black and white breaks down, leading the discussion of Frédéric's identity into contradiction and aporia. His face becomes a liminal site where the parameters of racial discourse are

systematically blurred. Ultimately one could see in the *chabin*, "partagé entre [s]a moitié noire et l'autre, la blanche" (Élisée 45), a modern avatar of Ham, the primal "negro" that some believed was white. If Élisée's appropriation of the biblical figure makes it possible to frame Frédéric's condition as a curse—one in which he cannot reconcile being white and black—it is also an antidote to it. Indeed, the *chabin* is perhaps more of a *nègre* than anyone else given that his physiognomy straddles the color line in the same way that Ham's—the "primal negro"—does.

Interestingly enough, it is in Africa that Frédéric overcomes the challenges posed by his *métissage*. As the story develops, his quest to cast off the curse of Apollinaire turns into an investigation of "les causes de son malheur dans [s]on passé ancestral" (143). His decision to leave Martinique addresses a need to free himself from a double alienation. The course of his life has been determined both by his ancestor's misdeeds and by cultural attitudes towards his *chabinité*. His journey to Africa is thus framed as a project of introspection and self-knowledge. Lifting the curse is not merely about preserving his lineage from extinction, it is also an opportunity for personal growth. What Frédéric uncovers there is a new sense of self, freed from the burden of cultural assumptions. Indeed the notion of *chabinité*, which holds a singular place in the Caribbean imaginary, bears little significance in Africa where the history of colonization has produced a different ideology of race and skin color. Because Frédéric is no longer profiled as a *chabin*, that is to say, forced into the role of "être faible" (52), "agneau fragile" (96), "porte-drapeau du malheur" (125), or "démon" (172), he can finally become the "homme fort, de décision" (229) he has always aspired to be—a first step in his mission to find Apollinaire's head, uproot it, and confound the forces of destiny. The second requirement is that he must remain in Senegal until his death. Ironically enough, for Apollinaire's uprooting to occur Frédéric must not simply migrate to a new country but take root in it, so to speak; which he does by settling down in "La Ruche," the plantation where his ancestors lived, with Rosy, a Senegalese woman with whom he falls in love and ends up spending the rest of his life.

His itinerary offers a counterpoint to the many "retours au pays natal" that have become commonplace in Caribbean literature since the publication of Césaire's *Cahier*. By reframing his personal trajectory within the larger context of African history, Élisée rewrites a hackneyed narrative, that of the *chabin* as an emblem of Caribbean *métissage*. In this respect, the most striking example of uprooting found in *Mémoires* is the one performed by the novel itself. Unlike Confiant who has worked toward "caribbeanizing" *chabinité*, Élisée extracts it from its embeddedness in the social and cultural fabric of Martinique. This removal allows Frédéric to cast off the existential burden of having to articulate his subjectivity within the framework of specific racial constructs. As his story shows, identifying as black in Senegal becomes less of a conundrum than in Martinique where the system of ethno-class hierarchies produced in him a crisis of identification.

Evidence of his successful transformation occurs in the closing chapter where the last of his portraits reads as follows: "chacun voyait mon visage actuel, un visage marqué par l'âge, bien sûr, mais reposé, paisible et très différent de ce qu'il avait pu être auparavant" (315). As the novel draws to an end, his face is no longer reduced to a mosaic of traits that language would fail to express. Emphasis is redirected to the nuances of his expression. Élisée shows him in a different light, relaxed and at peace. In doing so, he stages a new gaze, in which the *chabin* appears liberated from all the mystifications and cultural assignations that previously marked his body as "freakish." It is the same face that Élisée had described in a proleptic passage: "Pataugeant dans l'eau, je pus traîner mes pas jusqu'au vieux miroir fêlé qui couvrait depuis des années la porte de l'armoire. Mon image encore disloquée apparut comme les éléments désordonnés d'un puzzle que mon imagination avait tant de fois reconstitué à sa guise" (18). Confronted with his reflection, Frédéric momentarily assumes the position of reader. In latin, the verb *legere* originally meant "to pick up," "to collect," "to gather." By metaphorical extension, it came to designate a process of reviewing, that is, of picking up with one's eyes. The way Frédéric strives to re-arrange the fragments of his face echoes our own efforts to collect, review, and put together the textual pieces provided by Élisée in an attempt to visualize his character's appearance and solve the puzzle of the text. Yet, the aforementioned passage is voluntarily ambiguous. Is Frédéric's shattered reflection the result of his cracked mirror or of *chabinité* itself—an uprooted signifier, whose meaning is determined in relation to other signifiers ("black," "white," "ginger," etc.) and thus endlessly delayed in a free play of associations?

Efforts to establish his visual identity might after all be useless. In what sense is his "visage actuel," "marqué par l'âge," "reposé," and "paisible" that of a *chabin*? Élisée's description could very well apply to anyone. And what to make of this "image [...] disloquée"? In other words, how to interpret the *chabin*'s appearance when race no longer provides the template to read it? In this sense *Mémoires* hints at a peculiar paradox. While *chabinité* is a form of *métissage* that precludes any racial identification, it cannot be understood without reference to race. As a phenotype that challenges the notion of "racial grouping," it also relies on this notion, if only to position itself as a rejection of it. In other words, *chabinité* can only become operative as a concept if it acknowledges the validity of the very racial divisions that it calls into question. Dismissing race as a biological construct might be experienced as a liberation in both Confiant and Élisée, yet it runs the risk of relegating the *chabin*'s idiosyncrasies to a dangerous form of anonymity—the same one that both authors precisely wrote against.

Conclusion

Following the BUMIDOM's initiative to transfer thousands of Antillean workers to metropolitan France in the 1960's and throughout the 1970's, Martinique

and Guadeloupe became emigration societies.[9] This demographic shift resulted in the formation of a diasporic community that largely settled in the greater Paris area, earning it the status of "third island" (Anselin). Much of contemporary Caribbean literature has been concerned with exploring the new modes of belonging and identity to which this migration stream has given rise. Authors like Suzanne Dracius, Gisèle Pineau, Tony Delsham, and Fabienne Kanor have produced transcultural narratives that question *créolité* and its mission to reclaim the cultural specificity of the West Indies to focus on a new set of challenges: what does it mean to inhabit two identities, two worlds at once? How to create a new home while maintaining meaningful and lasting connections with the old one? And how to learn about the history and culture of one's group when it is spread all over the world? These stories of displacement have brought to light a new figure of *métissage*, "l'Antillais de l'Hexagone." My comparative analysis of Confiant and Élisée makes it possible to see in this diasporic subject, torn between the metropole and the Caribbean, an echo of the *chabin*'s struggle to articulate his identity within changing frames of reference (Martinique and Senegal).

What I proposed is a perspective that views Confiant's and Élisée's discussion of *chabinité* as a phenomenology of facial difference. In a world where *métis* have been considered "poster-faces for a harmonious multicultural society" (Beschea-Fache 101), the *chabin*'s physiognomy tells a different story, one in which *métissage* is experienced as existential angst. The texts I singled out for analysis all cultivate, with varying degrees of self-awareness, a "poeticist style of self-reflection" (Henry 9). Through engagement not just with the literary form but with the act of writing itself, Confiant and Elisee open a discursive space for the *chabin* to negotiate the challenges of being both white and *nègre*. The former's solution to this drama of identification is to replace Fanon's "epidermal racial schema" with a "dermographic schema" in order to articulate narratives of embodiment that divorce race from skin color and rehabilitate the *chabin*'s own brand of *métissage*. Élisée's approach is similar in the way he uses narrative to interrogate *chabinité* and, conversely, exploits *chabinité* to interrogate narrative as a mode of self-representation. Where *Mémoires d'un chabin* breaks new ground, however, is in the way it draws attention to some of the limitations inherent in Confiant's discourse, questioning for example the extent to which race and *chabinité* can be dissociated. Élisée's use of Africa as an alternative space from which to see through and question perceptions of the *chabin* in Caribbean societies also forces us to reconsider the ways in which Confiant re-appropriated the figure. To some extent, Élisée invites his reader to emulate Frédéric's posture and "uproot" the discourses responsible for reifying the *chabin*'s subjectivity—not only those that describe him as a pariah but perhaps, and most importantly, those that consecrate him as an icon of Caribbean *métissage*.

[9] BUMIDOM stands for "Bureau pour le développement des migrations dans les départements d'outre-mer." It was founded by Michel Debré in 1963 with the twofold objective of solving the demographic crisis in the French overseas departments, and of increasing the labor force in metropolitan France.

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