

Marie Vieux Chauvet's Theatres

Thought, Form, and Performance of Revolt

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“To Live with Her Revolt”: *Dance on the Volcano’s* Diegetic Pivot

Jeremy Matthew Glick

I do not believe that you would need a law on the subject of actors. Those who are not excluded are eligible [Robespierre is referring to the voting franchise]. It was good, however that a member of this Assembly came to make a noise in favor of a class too long oppressed. Actors will merit public esteem more when an absurd prejudice no longer resists their obtaining it: then, the virtues of individuals will help purify the shows, and theatres will become public schools of principles, good morals, and patriotism.

MAXIMILIEN ROBESPIERRE speaking to the Constituent Assembly 23 December 1789 (“On Voting Rights for Actors and Jews,” 3–4)

This chapter considers Marie Vieux-Chauvet’s diegetic narrative mode in her novel *Dance on the Volcano*; specifically, how Vieux-Chauvet’s diegetic presentation disrupts what Marx and others have called “the great man” theory of revolutionary change and historical exposition (*The Eighteenth Brumaire*). In addition, it rehearses a speculative genealogy of the critical preoccupation with diegetic and mimetic narrative strategies in a sampling of Black radical thought and creative work. What is proffered by thinking about such narrative-novelistic formal choices? In order to pinpoint the narratological “content of the form” (White) of Vieux-Chauvet’s narration strategy an extended preamble is in order. To read through and alongside Vieux-Chauvet’s formal decisions, this chapter begins by signaling three related matters: (1) The framing appeal to Denis Diderot’s 1762 *Le Neveu de Rameau* (*Rameau’s Nephew*) in Vieux-Chauvet’s novella *Madness*; (2) Georg Lukács’s employment of a formulation by Friedrich Hebbel to think about the difference between the historical novel and the historical drama; and, (3) A digressive, highly selective, and idiosyncratic intellectual genealogy on *the mimetic* versus *the diegetic* – from Plato to Aristotle to Bertolt Brecht to Alain Badiou to Huey P. Newton and Angela Y. Davis.

This tripartite theoretical scaffolding is in service of trying to think the political implications of *Dance on the Volcano’s* narration-choices. The diegetic

framework of *Dance on the Volcano* is one of the main engines of its political work. Protracted attention to this framework demonstrates that the best of Black radical creative and intellectual production (across different genres such as novelistic discourse, philosophical work, and revolutionary political memoir) takes decisions of narrative form seriously. Mimetic versus diegetic narrative framing houses a myriad of narratological-political choices for Black Radical creative production including, but not limited to debates about narrative as pleasure versus narrative as instruction (to riff off Brecht's famous distinction), questions of exemplarity and revolutionary leadership, and the dialectical interplay between leader (protagonist) and mass collectives.

Dance on the Volcano makes a distinct contribution in navigating these challenges. In this regard, Kaiama L. Glover's essay on Vieux-Chauvet as a case of what she calls the "disorderly feminine" resonates. Glover mobilizes the language of exceptionality in order to smartly subvert it, pointing to Vieux-Chauvet's "exceptionalized status" related to transcending "gender-bound political culture of her time." For Glover, Vieux-Chauvet's works "offer terrifically scathing portraits of Haitian society" and "identify no clear 'good' and 'bad' guys." Glover's critical prose enacts a subtle bait and switch: what seems like an initial argument explaining the un-canonical status of Vieux-Chauvet due to her political non-alignment, gives way to a clever itemization of Vieux-Chauvet's various aesthetic/political "betrayals" (8).¹ What is initially lauded as Vieux-Chauvet's "resolute nonalliance" (11) upon closer reading of Glover's essay becomes more a matter of the betrayals enacted by her literary form. Let's begin in the confines of Vieux-Chauvet's *Madness's* enclosures, its claustrophobic architecture and branch outwards.

1 *Rameau's Nephew* as Framework: Escape from *Madness's Cave*

Marie Vieux-Chauvet's *Dance on the Volcano* constitutes a diegetic meditation on revolution and stagecraft that resists comprehensive representation of the

1 See also Raphael Dalleo's, "The Expulsion from the Public Sphere: The Novels of Marie Chauvet" in *Caribbean Literature and the Public Sphere*, for a provocative and generative study that mobilizes Jürgen Habermas's concepts in order to make claims for Caribbean literary production. It would be interesting to imagine how Dalleo's work might be framed anew. What if, instead of enlisting the likes of Habermas and his interlocutors such as Michael Warner, one begins with the radical supplement of their work in the form of Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge's *Public Sphere and Experience: Analysis of the Bourgeois and Proletarian Sphere*? Such a shift would stretch Negt and Kluge's categories to account for Caribbean societies framed in the cauldron of racial capitalism.

narrative's various dramatic performances, whereas, Vieux-Chauvet's novella *Madness* transitions from a first-person narration about confinement, poetics, and politics to an eruption in the form of dramatic, play-script dialogue. Andrew Asibong refers to *Love, Anger Madness: A Haitian Triptych* as a “three-part soul” and “three-headed monster of trauma” (151). Consider how *Madness*, the third head, is introduced. An excerpt from Denis Diderot's *Rameau's Nephew* constitutes the framing epigraph for Vieux-Chauvet's novella and its exploration of confined and erupting “Madness.” Even though Vieux-Chauvet signals at the start of *Madness* resonance in the form of the thematic (the subversive properties and dependency dynamics of the stock character fool), such a convergence is also a question of form. Critical emphasis on *Madness* illuminates the trilogy's significance, constituting the trilogy as an actual and heuristic whole, by way of extended attention to its final part. Vieux-Chauvet's citation of Diderot to introduce *Madness* encourages the reader to theorize the implications of this juxtaposition. Here is the Diderot passage:

There is no better role to play in the presence of the great than that of the fool. For a long time there was an official jester to the king, but there has never been an official wise man to the king. Me, I'm the fool of Bertin and many others, perhaps yours at this moment, or perhaps you are mine; a man who would be wise would have no fool, so anyone who has a fool is not wise, if he's not wise he's a fool, and perhaps, though he be king, his fool's fool. (287)

Rameau's Nephew's generic status as a dramatic dialogue baits the reader to assert with shaky conviction its narrative type: Is it a philosophical dialogue, satire, novella, closet drama, or play? Indeed, thwarted classification is one of its many products, its consequence as a narrative act. It produces its own generic blurring, mimicked in the above passage's proliferation of commas. *Rameau's Nephew* acts as a kind of dual-firing engine: (1) demonstrating in dialogue form (showing) the dialectical split between the “I” (Diderot or perhaps not) and the “He” (Jean-François Rameau, nephew of the musical composer Jean-Phillipe Rameau or maybe a cypher for Diderot himself), and (2) its triangulated narrative structure. This produces a kind of reverie for the reader, part of which is in its humor, its bawdy commentary on sexual freedom and license, its playful exploration of point and counterpoint. Its dialogue posits three subject positions – the “I,” the “He,” and the Reader herself as third position – reader/audience moving along as participant, arbitrator, spectator, and judge. It places the reader in a position where she occupies the site of distinction. Its dialogue form is triangulated and posits its three points

as Actor 1, Actor 2, and Reader/Audience. Diderot plays with narrative strategic conventions theorized and argued about since antiquity. By introducing *Madness* with *Rameau's Nephew*, Vieux-Chauvet is announcing her commitment to questions of literary form that matter.

Rameau's Nephew is a meditation on numerous topics: parts-scientific treatise, exercise in virtue ethics, materialist/rationalist *cri de guerre*, enactment of the struggle between Italian and French theatrical musical forms and competing theories of musical composition, the tensions between the libertine structure of feeling and Rousseau's patriarchal model of social organization, and above all, a meditation on sympathy and how such sympathy is produced. It is also jokingly a retort against the clerical-detractors, the palace scribes decrying Diderot's rationalist, materialist, secular *Encyclopedia* endeavor. *Rameau's Nephew* disrupts a notion of the autonomous self, bound up in producing sympathy. In other words, *Rameau's Nephew* is a production ostensibly concerned with *production*. For example, Rameau does not have a wife so in the dialogue he enacts one. It is an interesting resonating springboard to think about the narrative problems of *Dance on the Volcano*, a diegetic novel about theatre and revolution, pertaining to a world of theatrical productions signaled but never comprehensively represented. Rameau/Diderot produces the sentiment he wants to interrogate by way of comedic reasoning, assertion, and complication of its asserted premises. It is amongst other things a way for Diderot to theorize competing models of subjectivity and narration. The dialogue carefully negotiates itself as an unraveling meditation on sentimentality and affect-production. Consider two dramatic structures broadly construed: If the discourse of recognition constitutes a conservative model of dramatic-aesthetics (Aristotle) and if the transformative narrative discourse constitutes a radical model (Augusto Boal), *Rameau's Nephew* avails itself of neither option. It is an anticipatory rumbling, a worrying of the conservative (recognition) / radical (transformative) divide. It resonates with the rumbling that anticipates the revolution proper in Vieux-Chauvet's *Dance on the Volcano's* world of insurgent stirring prior to volcanic eruption.² The cumulative effect of the dialogue becomes less about recognition and transformation and more about questions of narrative. *Rameau Nephew's* reverie engine is a surplus effect of the vertiginous triangulated narrative form. This dizziness parallels the flux and flow of its arguments and effects. It leaves the reader "dumbfounded at such sagacity and such baseness, such alternatively true and false notions, such absolute perversion

2 My ideas here are directly inspired by Professor Matthew Buckley's peerless study on drama preceding the French Revolution, *Tragedy Walks the Streets: The French Revolution in the Making of Modern Drama* (2006).

of feeling and utter turpitude...such uncommon candour” (Diderot 51). Like Dante electing Virgil (and Beatrice) as knowing guides marshalling his descent into the funnel-shaped underworld, Vieux-Chauvet by prefacing *Madness* with Diderot, retroactively claims her own descendants. By way of the stealth-work of citation, she quietly points to the formal pre-occupations her entire *oeuvre* engages. How *Madness* produces its effects is as if not more important than effects produced and narrative arc conveyed. If Diderot’s *Rameau’s Nephew* is a reverie engine, Vieux-Chauvet’s *Madness* is an incubator of claustrophobia and confinement as narrative effect. Its first-person narrative representation of housebound, confined poet-intellectuals awaiting slaughter functions as a generative foil for the vast diegetic narrative expanse of *Dance on the Volcano*’s pre-revolutionary Saint Domingue.

Rameau’s Nephew resonates with one of its precedents, Plato’s *Republic* as inaugural philosophical dialogue and announces and theorizes the implications of mimetic and diegetic narrative strategies. It makes sense that culture workers from Bertolt Brecht to Marie Vieux-Chauvet would gravitate towards a text in which the “I” announces one of its preoccupations as whether narrative should focus its main labor on “entertainment [or] instruction” (Diderot 82). This is the part of Diderot’s text that directly precedes the excerpt Vieux-Chauvet employs to introduce *Madness*. Her epigraphic choice announces her intention to frame the *Madness* of her title as revolutionary precondition for systemic overhaul, what Andrew Asibong identifies as narrator René’s “plunge into ‘folie’” (155). A consequence of Asibong’s careful and spot-on analytic is that *Folie* for Vieux-Chauvet’s narrator morphs into preoccupation with the “daimonic.” The levity of folly constitutes an entry point to discuss the gravitas of the demonic. The through-line connecting this folly-demonic trajectory in *Madness* is its ongoing discussion of poetry’s relationship to radical change. *Madness*’s poet-narrator René refuses to break free from his confines prior to making proper preparations and resists purging his cave of the poets. Likewise, the “He” in *Rameau’s* meditation on “the tune” as “an imitation, by means of the sounds of a scale” (98) – his assertion “that by changing the variables of the same definition [it] would apply to painting, eloquence, sculpture or poetry” (98) thematically forces the reader to confront complexities mulled over in Plato’s allegorical cave. According to Diderot, anyone can play the position of the fool. This framework plays a trick on the reader – it feigns a lightness of thematic content in Vieux-Chauvet when in fact what will follow is the tracing of a mad demonic descent as precondition for radical overhaul. For Vieux-Chauvet’s first-person narration of *Madness*, protracted confinement (in other words, study) is the precondition for outward explosion; in *Dance on the Volcano*’s diegetic unfolding the entire landscape of pre-Revolutionary Haiti is

the precondition of such rupture. Consider *Madness's* formal bipartite organization. Its Book One is narrated by René, the confined poet-would-be revolutionary waiting out the fascistic ravages of soldiers. Book Two of the novella literally stages René's and his friends' encounter with others as a dramatic play-script.³ *Rameau's Nephew*, by way of its reflection on imitation and aesthetics subtly signals interest in the consequence of diegetic and mimetic narrative form that *Dance on the Volcano* enacts.

2 Delineating Historical Novel/Historical Drama

Dance on the Volcano employs a diegetic mode of narration to actualize a historical novel about the history of theatre as history of revolution in the periphery. Its diegetic narration follows the travails of protagonist Minette, a "free woman of color" who ascends prestige ranks as performer in the Comédie de Port-au-Prince. Her *stagecraft*-theatrical education blossoms, intermingles, and blurs into a repertoire of *statecraft*-revolutionary knowledge. What is absent in *Dance's* diegetic presentation is the mimetic recounting of the actual performances enacted in Vieux-Chauvet/Minette's Saint-Domingue. Despite such an absence, its thematic content heuristically constitutes a melding of the historical novel and historical drama. Consider Georg Lukács's insistence by way of Friedrich Hebbel on thinking the discrete properties of both forms:

Shakespearean drama, in particular as Mikhail Lifschitz rightly pointed out in the discussion on the theory of the novel, exercised a decisive influence on the development of the modern novel. This connection between [Sir Walter] Scott and Shakespeare was clearly recognized already by Friedrich Hebbel, who saw Scott as the modern successor of Shakespeare. "What of Shakespeare came alive again in England was manifested in Walter Scott ... for he combined the most admirable instinct for the basic conditions of all historical circumstances with the most subtle psychological insight into each individual characteristic and the most lucid understanding for the moment of transition, in which general and particular motives coincide, and it was to the combination of these three qualities that Prospero's wand owed its omnipotence and irresistibility." (*The Historical Novel* 90)

3 Similar tactics are employed in "Circe" Episode 15 in James Joyce's *Ulysses* and the shift from novel discourse to play-script in both Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* and Amiri Baraka's *The System of Dante's Hell*.

Why turn to Lukács to think about an historical novel engrossed in revolution and theatre, especially in a novel such as *Dance on the Volcano* where mimetic representations of historical drama are virtually absent? Is this not a vertiginous blurry of critical discourse on distinct, discrete genres: the historical novel, historical drama, philosophical and memoir/autobiographical discourse? *Dance on the Volcano* offers up a diegetic combination of discrete literary and performative genres that Lukács takes great pains to disaggregate. Placing Vieux-Chauvet in conversation with Lukács performs a critical, speculative dance of combination, and separation; an intellectual exercise of aggregation and disaggregation. Lukács insists on a critical analytical that parses “the basic differences of form between drama and novel, uncovering their source in life itself, in order to comprehend the difference of both genres in their relationship to history” (90). For Lukács such a procedure is wrapped up in delineating the differences of form between drama, epic, and the novel about how each form thinks the totality of their respective social worlds – the very differences that *Dance on the Volcano*’s diegetic execution pushes to the point of collapse.

3 Mimetic/Diegetic Genealogies

The accumulation of particular sets of Lukácsian “moments of transition” when “general and particular motives coincide” is another word for revolution. Moments of transition house the transformation of quantity into quality, the alignment, un-alignment, and re-alignment of competing insurgent and counter-insurgent power blocks, and the mapping and traversing of various landscapes and social actors. Particular grievances, particular with-holdings, particular seizing a myriad of technologies of redress can quantitatively morph into qualitative radical change. In narrative, how you get to this culmination-concatenation depends upon the consequences of literary form.

What follows mines the *diegetic* mode of Marie Vieux-Chauvet’s *Dance on the Volcano* (tracing this concept from Aristotle’s *Poetics* and Book III of Plato’s *Republic* to Bertolt Brecht’s Weimar refunctioning/recalibration) as a narrative strategy that allows the author to pivot focus, presenting pre-revolutionary stirrings in Saint-Domingue as a totality. *Diegesis* is from the Greek διήγησις from διηγέσθαι meaning “to narrate.” The narrator presents the story, employing the narrative itself as the engine in which details, interconnections, and chains of causality are asserted, established, and pursued. The diegetic narrative (unlike the mimetic one) is *told* as opposed to *shown*. This opposition is famously fleshed out in Book III of Plato’s *Republic* where Plato enacts a

discursive strategy of splitting apart and (re)combination. For Plato, tragedy and comedy are mimetic imitative forms and the dithyramb is the diegetic narrative and combinatory strength (synthesis) actualized in epic. Alain Badiou's re-interpretive "translation" of *Plato's Republic: A Dialogue in 16 Chapters* re-purposes its source material by way of "formal restructuration, universalization, conceptual displacement, and contemporaneity" (xiii) – this as Kenneth Reinhard argues resonates with Badiou's Lacanian psychoanalytic imperatives.⁴ In Aristotle's *Poetics*, "The Anthropology and History of Poetry" enacts a differentiation procedure according to medium, objects, and mode. This is in the service of elaborating a theory of mimetic "imitation": cataloging epic poetry and tragic drama's properties in terms of meter, duration, sources of imitation, and other criteria.

The act of paying critical attention to how Black radical narrative is preoccupied by questions of genre and subgenre as well as particular works' narrative decisions honors the formal complexity/actuality of such creative production. Critics bring to bare preoccupations already operative in the works under discussion. I am interested in how critical questions of narratology preoccupying philosophers of Antiquity help to clarify the work of *mimesis* and *diegesis* resonating in Black radical creative production and thought. Constituting such a vast genealogy and expansive chronology acts as a hedge against the tendency of modern criticism to render the implications of both the diegetic and the mimetic as caricature; for example, tendencies to simplify and render as caricature the complexity of Plato's *Republic's* discussion of representation and narrative form. Black radical thought is often, amongst other things, an antidote to such simplifications. Consider, like *Dance on the Volcano's* primer on theatrical virtuosity as revolutionary becoming, a more contemporary Black radical text staging of the scene of instruction as meditation on the diegetic and mimetic. Black Panther Party of Self-Defense founder Huey P. Newton's memoir, *Revolutionary Suicide*, is amongst other things an itinerary of what young Newton spent time reading. Plato's *Republic* factors heavily here. The way Newton tackles the text was not "trying to deal with the ideas or concepts, just learning to recognize the words" (54–55). Newton breaks down a conceptually dense philosophical treatise into its word-component parts. Conceptual mastery takes second fiddle to word recognition. Newton indicates how he

4 Reinhard argues that Badiou's *Republic* in its "reorganization...acts as a kind of repunctuation of the discourse, in the matter in which a Lacanian psychoanalyst might intervene in an analysand's discourse by adding or removing a comma or a period that transforms its meaning, or by unexpectedly cutting the session itself short, in order to draw attention to the sudden emergence of a new way of understanding its significance."

achieves conceptual mastery of Plato’s most famous dialogue by the time he enters college. Yet, there is something resonant about the level of abstraction Newton pursues, mining conceptual dialogue and conceptual density for its most elemental parts.

Consider the peculiar fact that Newton’s comrade Angela Y. Davis frames the fifth part of her *Autobiography* (the segment entitled “Walls”) with the following excerpt from Wallace Stevens’s 1941 work “Poem with Rhythms”: “The hand between the candle and the wall/ Grows large on the wall .../ It must be the hand/ Has a will to grow larger on the wall, / To grow larger and heavier than the wall” (qtd. in Davis 281). Yet again, we enter Plato’s cave, repurposing the consequence of such entry towards subversive ends. The “hand between the candle and the wall” is clearly the hand’s shadow. Stevens’s mediation on how that shadow grows “heavier than the wall” imbues such shadows (such forms) with a material agency, a materialist consequence that might have made Plato uncomfortable – or perhaps not. Davis’s inclusion of this in a series of epigraphs framing her chapters (including lines from the spirituals, Federico Garcia Lorca, and writer-poet-culture worker Henry Dumas, who was slain by a New York City Transit police officer) functions as a way to revisit the anxieties she articulates in her book’s *Preface* surrounding composing a memoir. Davis’s meditation is wrapped up in a concern for not self-framing herself as the exemplar, divorced from the struggling Black mass. Like Vieux-Chauvet, her way out of this political impasse is taken up partially as a problem of genre. In Davis’s case the political memoir functions as a similar distantiation device as Vieux-Chauvet’s employment of the diegetic.

I was not anxious to write this book. Writing an autobiography at my age seemed presumptuous. Moreover, I felt that to write about my life, what I did, what I thought and what happened to me would require a posture of difference, an assumption that I was unlike other women – other Black women – and therefore needed to explain myself. I felt that such a book might end up obscuring the most essential fact: the forces that have made my life what it is are the very same forces that have shaped and misshaped the lives of millions of my people. Furthermore I am convinced that my response to these forces has been unexceptional as well, that my political involvement, ultimately as a member of the Communist Party, has been a natural, logical way to defend our embattled humanity.

The one extraordinary event of my life had nothing to do with me as an individual – with a little twist of history, another sister or brother could have easily become the political prisoner whom millions of people from

throughout the world rescued from persecution to death. I was reluctant to write this book because concentration on my personal history might detract from the movement which brought my case to the people in the first place. I was also unwilling to render my life as a personal “adventure” – as though there was a “real” person separate and apart from a political person ... (ix–x)

This is an extraordinary meditation. Davis initially resolves this conundrum by way of a declaration of genre. What she introduces to the reader is not just an autobiography, but rather a “political autobiography.” Davis subsumes the mimetic/diegetic relationship to questions of imitation as a personal meditation on the radical political efficacy of autobiographical testimony. The problem of “the real person” and the imitation, the material figure and shadow is internal to the division between the “political” and “real” person. She hazards the designation “adventure” resonating with “adventurist,” an opprobrium waged against insurgents by established left political projects. This is the same opprobrium assigned by some to Fidel Castro and The Cuban Revolutionary project, the very same ensemble that invited Davis and provided a space for her to write this memoir. Introducing Stevens towards the end of her work opens up space for thinking how the shadow/testimony can aspire to revolutionary political impact, a gathering of political insights in service of collective struggle. Perhaps the novella and novel forms offer Vieux-Chauvet a similar kind of distantiating that “political autobiography” fosters. It is the generic shadow (as in genre) that weighs heavier than the wall.

Consider Paul Haacke’s insight from his brilliant *diacritics* essay “The Brechtian Exception: From Weimar to The Cold War”:

... Perhaps the best evidence of Brecht’s persistent devotion to the Greek philosopher may be found in his own 1921 copy of the *Poetics*, in which he slipped a typewritten page of fragmented notes, written in all lowercase, that try to come to terms with its basic tenets (only recently published in German thanks to an exhibition commemorating the one hundredth anniversary of his birth). Presumed to have been written in the mid-1930s, when he finished writing his *Lehrstücke* and left Germany, Brecht’s response to Aristotle begins with a clear and bold defense:

aristotle is in no way a dethroned lawgiver for the dramatist of the present. the proper significance of his laws are still not understood by scholars, yet so much do they rule! [Sic]

What were Aristotle’s aesthetic laws, then? As Brecht points out in his notes, they were based primarily on the principle of *mimesis*, which may

be translated as imitation, representation, performance, or, in German, *Nachahmung*. For Plato and Aristotle, the idea of mimesis did not stand for any kind of “reflection theory” or realism or verisimilitude, as is often presumed by modern critics, but for an aesthetic form of representation based on illusion, deception, or masking. While *diegesis* was considered a trustworthy, historical method of relating the facts, *mimesis* was taken to be a poetic mode of performative showing, a theatrical – and, for Plato, also effeminate and dangerous – mode of representation that made its mark above all on the stage. (60–61)

Haacke throws down a chain of signifiers here: “theatrical ... also effeminate and dangerous,” registering its mark “above all on the stage.” By constructing this selective genealogy of the mimetic versus the diegetic we get a clearer sense of the implications of Vieux-Chauvet’s narrative choices. Vieux-Chauvet infuses a historicist (and masculinist) diegetic mode with the structure of feeling and perspective-in-motion of radical girlhood and young-womanhood engaged directly in theatrical performance as professional vocation. The trustworthiness of the diegetic is troubled not by a disruptive mendacity; but rather, it is complicated by the partial subjective perspective of its protagonist’s development. Brecht, Vieux-Chauvet, and Davis try to reconcile the revolutionary transcending of exceptionality with the protocols necessary to effectively convey a story.

4 Exceptional Non-Exceptionality as Diegetic Narrative Strategy in *Dance on the Volcano*

Vieux-Chauvet’s narratological choices bypass conventions of representing revolution. The novel’s expositional strategies resist reading the protagonist’s theatre career as exceptional transgression, a radical overhaul of oppressive regimes of gender, color, caste, and class by earned acclaim for virtuoso stage performances tellingly not represented in the text. Instead, Vieux-Chauvet’s diegetic pivot thinks the revolution’s unfolding as an *aside*, an unfolding of daily life. Vieux-Chauvet charts protagonist Minette’s revolutionary becoming from “the young person” to “Mademoiselle Minette,” a cognitive mapping of gendered class hierarchy, anti-racist insurgency, and a kind of *Critique of Everyday Life* (Henri Lefebvre) as Haitian Revolutionary unfolding. In Vieux-Chauvet’s *diegetic* mode, Minette’s colleagues and the worlds she traverses are all collective spring-boards to think about the way the revolution transforms collective life and thought.

In the diegetic pivot of the novel, (pivoting away from established Haitian revolutionary's plot-lines), particular components of the theatrical performances are not elaborated. Rather, Minette's theatre experience functions as a field of *exceptional everyday life* – subtle registers of Haitian Revolutionary becoming. Consider the anxiety surrounding verisimilitude in the novel's "Author's Note":

This book is based on historical documents. The two heroines and all the principal figures are real figures, and all have kept their real names. The major events of their lives, as well as historical events recounted here, are completely authentic. (493)

Housed at the end of Kaiama L. Glover's new translation, the "Author's Note" acts as a signpost pointing to the "authentic" historical acts, the "authentic" historical referents that the imitation is based on, this includes record of actual performances mimetically reproduced in the text. As readers, we never actually "see," we are never actually presented with a mimetic representation of the dramatic productions that exist as sites for Minette's mastery. Vieux-Chauvet never breaks from a diegetic telling. The final placement of the "Author's Note" functions as an authorial prompting to readers on how they should process the work just finished. Even if such a placement is part of a French convention in book production, it is helpful to speculatively read how such a placement functions as an adroit and brilliant trick. Early on in the novel you learn that Minette actively struggles against the racial prejudices and structures of dominance of Saint-Domingue by joining and excelling as performer in the theatre of a slave-holding society, with a rigid class stratification, and a racial capitalist regime of coercive labor where the freedom of so-called free women and men is precarious at best. Vieux-Chauvet announces a political project embedded in a narrative framework: the dialectic of a gifted individual young person and her condition of possibility – the positive reception of an eager, enthusiastic mass as crowd. Minette's climbing the ranks of prestige as a performer, her relationship with her younger sister, her Mother Jasmine's insistent memory and unwavering prerogative to not forget her enslavement as a child, the young girls' tutor (Joseph Ogé) turned revolutionary, and the theatre itself, are all episodes qualitatively transformed based on the text's narrative choices. Vieux-Chauvet's diegetic mode, her diegetic insistence transforms these individual characters and sites into simultaneous collective springboards to think the way soon-to-be Haitian revolutionary stirrings transform collective life and collective thought. *Mimesis* shows rather than tells; *Diegesis* tells rather than shows, specifically by way of the narrator's positioning outside the narrative action.

This is the case whether or not dialogue is offset by quotations marks, or other markers.⁵

Minette’s smashing of barriers does not stand in for the revolution itself but it is the vantage point, it is the privileged way of seeing the whole, it is the narratological command of focus that renders such a revolution visibly complex. This sophisticated diegetic narration, *la danse* of the novel as such is captured brilliantly by Minette’s mother who consistently affirms only to downplay interest in her daughters’ gifted status. The theatre in *Dance on the Volcano* registers the revolutionary transformation of the society it entertains. The formal diegetic properties of Vieux-Chauvet’s text fashion the story of these individual young women as a way to register the ways in which Saint-Domingue experiences revolutionary overhaul. These young girls provide a partisan way of seeing, a kind of filter, that in its exceptional specificity distributes the revolutionary sensibility throughout the entire Saint-Domingue landscape they travel. In the text, individual theatrical plotlines of the Comédie’s performances are not elaborated, aside from signaling (not showing) Minette’s virtuoso singing and attention to theatrical craft, as well as cataloging various critical questions around the dramatic repertoire/canon and disputes on aesthetics and performative technique. Details of theatrical costuming are abundant. Vieux-Chauvet’s narrative landscape is swimming in taffetas and a myriad of named and billowing fabrics. It is not the case that Minette’s heroic feat of negotiating and conquering the prejudice of Saint-Domingue by breaking down exclusionary barriers of participation in theatre is minimized. Performative virtuosity is not a reformist substitute and stand-in for revolutionary overhaul. Rather, Minette’s experience in the theatre functions as a kind of field that is both exceptional and lifted from everyday life. Vieux-Chauvet never compromises her mastery as political storyteller to render the thrust of her narrative as pertaining to the political implications of the individual protagonist’s triumph at the theatre; yet, the protocols of the historical novel demand such a singularity of focus in plot as its condition of possibility to capture and illuminate the totality of its political story. Minette’s mother signals this part of a whole by way of what would become a dialectical protocol, a negation after an affirmation made famous centuries later by the great trumpet player Miles Davis.⁶

5 Germane to Vieux-Chauvet’s narrative mode choices, it is interesting to note that the same year C.L.R. James staged his Haitian Revolutionary drama, *Toussaint Louverture*, Georg Lukács publishes a most brilliant study of narrative modes entitled “Narrate or Describe?,” in which he distinguishes between novels that “narrate” versus novels that “describe” as a question of their relationship to narrative detail and a larger political-ethico-totality.

6 The “So what!” in Davis/Vieux-Chauvet asserts as it denies, affirms as it negates, and separates from what it is inevitably tethered to. I am referring here to the 1959 Miles Davis

Diegetic narrative choices assert these tropes while simultaneously distancing from asserting the chance that any one might be perceived as a singular site and supreme register of revolutionary significance and indicator/agent of radical systemic overhaul. Such diegetic presentation by way of its distance ushers in and constitutes the intimacy of thinking the collective. These include questions of literacy and insurgent ascent: “they’re afraid of us becoming educated, because education encourages men to revolt. Ignorance creates resignation” (Vieux-Chauvet 21); theorization of the tragic form; the critical ideological work of spectacle and entertainment (as in the case of the theatre) in societies structured in dominance; problems of *anamnesis* (Platonic re-remembering): Jasmine, who “stammered whenever it came to recalling her past” (35); and the critical work of sound in African Diasporic insurgence: both Minette’s triumphant voice (described not shown, let alone heard) and tutor-theologian-turned-revolutionary maimed combatant Joseph’s silent scream. Jasmine’s stammer, in its obstruction of *anamnesis* (to call back, to remember, to recollect) recalls the Platonic challenge captured in the dialogue *Meno*, the paradox of someone who tries to know something of virtue but can only provide a series of descriptive examples instead of an abstract principle. Diegetic and mimetic; descriptive particularity and abstract universality: such parameters of scale and focus specific to narrative construction also constitute or impede a political ken of vision for mapping the whole as precondition for transforming it. In Vieux-Chauvet’s *Dance on the Volcano* suspicion, revolt, and righteous insurgent revolutionary hatred are distributed throughout the sensibility and movement of the *body politic*. They are “visible in thousands of tiny ways in people’s eyes, attitudes, and gestures” (373).

Theatrical performances in *Dance on the Volcano* might not be mimetically captured, but they still constitute phenomena in the text of hefty causal weight. Consider Chapter XXXIII of *Dance on the Volcano*, when the revolution clears out part of the theatre, accounting for the empty seats: “As soon as the curtains have been lowered, the political discussions began again...” (460) The peace that is announced in the chapter’s first sentence – “the peace has returned” – is short lived. When Minette channels a sermon learned from her tutor, Joseph, her singing and the voices of the crowd fuse as one. This is one of the few times in the novel that narrative *showing* takes place. Four lines from the sermon are

recording “So What,” its title’s performative denial of the profundity of its existence; as well as Davis sometimes performing his music with his back turned to the audience. There is an affirmation-denial dance of significance that constitutes the recording (and performance’s) significance. It is the dialectic staged as the pivot, Klee’s *Angelus-Novus*’s back-turn staged.

transcribed in the text. Prior to this moment the titles of canonical works from Racine and Rousseau are evoked and debates on the aesthetic merits of work from France versus local literary and dramatic productions are narrated. Yet, there is no *Hamlet's* “Mousetrap” in the entire novel, no mimetic representation of the plays performed. The closest the text comes to mimetic representation of performance is in the four lines from this sermon. For that matter, the novel does not break off partially into play script like in Book II of Vieux-Chauvet’s novella *Madness*. From *Dance on the Volcano's* Chapter XXXIII, a passage whose content mimes the silent scream, presence-absence of its diegetic framework:

Unable to speak; his eyes were bulging out his head, Minette took his hand in hers. To think that he had once roused crowds with his words! The time had come – the moment he had been waiting for his whole life. The first serious revolts were beginning and he could not speak to his people. The miracles he had dreamed of in spreading the good word, he could no longer conjure into being with his words ... (461)

Eyes bulging, Joseph’s action become a kind of *gestic* moment (a dramatic gesture that in its enactment signals the totality of a political-representational universe and stakes of intervening in such a universe) rehearses in its intensity a monument to the perversity of the whites’ cruelty, as well as Joseph’s revolutionary resolve. It enacts a sort of distancing, a push and pull that Vieux-Chauvet manages throughout her novel by way of her formal choices.

If in *The Black Jacobins* (1938), C.L.R. James presents the revolutionary becoming of the Haitian Revolution in all of its stirrings (including latent and manifest stages and military-strategic components), Marie Vieux-Chauvet employs diegetic novelistic form to speculate on how such tactical and military-strategic components are lived in everyday life. The formulation and query – “How to live with her revolt” – tells all (117). The theatre in *Dance on the Volcano* is a *told* not *shown* space of insurgent social life that registers Haitian Revolutionary Becoming up to the point where individual performance becomes collective mobilization. The action of the revolution supplants the action on the stage:

Marie-Rose shivered and looked with Minette in the direction of the hills. “My old ‘storyteller’ used to say to me, “They won’t forget Mackandal any time soon ... The *lwas* spirits speak with the voice of the *lambi* and when the Negroes hear it they hear messages from the gods of Africa. A day will come when they’ll all rally around that voice.” (281)

To rally around a voice and a series of theatrical performances that are told but not shown, that are described but not imitated, to rally as readers and as would be insurgent subjects is the work of the diegetic. Vieux-Chauvet's narrative (to evoke a formulation from *Madness*) intentionally and generatively "gets all mixed up in her panic" (328). The first-person claustrophobia of Book One of *Madness* gives way to Book Two's play-script ensemble. Whereas, the diegetic narration of *Dance of the Volcano* in its pretense of historicist objectivity and truth telling is both undermined and enriched by Minette's feminine narrative of revolutionary becoming. Vieux-Chauvet's narrative decisions teach her readers that Mackandal's voice alchemizes a future radical collectivity whether or not we can hear it.

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