

PROLOGUE
Josephine Beheaded

Marble like Greece, like Faulkner's South in stone
Deciduous beauty prospered and is gone . . .
—Derek Walcott, “Ruins of a Great House,” *Collected Poems*

THERE IS A SPECTACLE in Martinique’s gracious Savane park that is hard to miss. The statue honoring one of the island’s most famous citizens, Josephine Tascher, the white creole woman who was to become Napoleon’s lover, wife, and empress, is defaced in the most curious and creative of ways. Her head is missing; she has been decapitated. But this is no ordinary defacement: the marble head has been cleanly sawed off—an effort that could not have been executed without the help of machinery and more than one pair of willing hands—and red paint has been dripped from her neck and her gown. The defacement is a beheading, a reenactment of the most visible of revolutionary France’s punitive and socially purifying acts—death by guillotine. The biographical record shows Josephine born of a slaveholding family of declining fortunes, married into the ranks of France’s minor aristocracy, and surviving the social chaos of the French Revolution, which sentenced countless members of the ancien régime to the guillotine. In the form of this statue, she received her comeuppance in twentieth-century Martinique, where she met the fate that she narrowly missed a century earlier. Scratched on the pedestal are the words—painted in red and penned in creole—“Respe ba Martinik. Respe ba 22 Me” [Respect Martinique. Respect May 22]. The date inscribed here of the anniversary of the 1848 slave rebellion that led to the abolition of slavery on Martinique is itself an act of postcolonial reinscription, one that challenges the official French-authored abolition proclamation of March 31, 1848, and



Statue of Josephine in Fort-de-France, Martinique, today. (Photo by Christian Gallion.)

makes the enslaved the rightful heirs to their own historical destiny. Josephine's symbolic disfigurement is an act of retribution for the cumulative shame of the island's colonial history, a history of slavery and dominion from France that is not yet over. Today, Martinique is still a department of France.

The creole heiress's beheading, like her contradictory embodiment as a figure of Martinican identity, maps the reciprocal economies at the heart of many Caribbean postcolonial performances. The defacement of Josephine's image brings to center stage the debates—about gender, race, and power—that have placed the West Indian-born white woman at the vortex of Caribbean social passions for over two centuries, and many of these debates are the subject of this book.¹ Josephine's biography engages all these dualities. Born to a slaveholding dynasty that made its female members

beneficiaries of the plantocratic privileges rendered to landed whites, she was a pawn in the patriarchal structuration to reproduce its hold on sugar and slavery. Shipped to France at sixteen to be partner to a marriage scheme that was to secure the financial viability of her father's failing estate, Marie-Josephe-Rose Tascher de la Pagerie was soon abandoned by her profligate husband, who preferred the company of his military officers and mistresses to the dreary domesticism of life as a father and husband. Alone with her two children, the Viscountess de Beauharnais spent much of her twenties cultivating her charm and youthful good looks in exchange for sexual liaisons with powerful men who could offer financial support to her and her family. With the arrival of revolutionary fervor in Paris, her creole identity came in handy for yet other means of her self-preservation: not only were Frenchmen captivated by her languid body movements and the delicious way she dropped the *r*'s from her speech, a habit she undoubtedly picked up from the accents of her black and mulatto domestic slaves; but in styling herself as an "American," she could claim an ancestral destiny with democrats and lovers of freedom. Yet her affairs with influential men in the First Assembly of Notables—such as the profligate Paul Vicomte de Barras, whose sensuous orgies with women and young men matched the intensity of Revolutionary Tribunal bloodletting—could not stop her imprisonment in the notorious Carmelite Prison in 1794. In these fetid halls she began a frenzied intimacy with a fellow prisoner, General Lazare Hoche, in the hopes that the sexual coupling could bring pregnancy and a few months' reprieve from the guillotine. Released from prison with the restoration of the National Convention some few months later, Josephine knew more than ever the benefits that come with a permanent attachment to a powerful man. When she met the thin, nervous, badly dressed Napoleon Bonaparte at a soiree hosted by Barras, she used every feminine art at her disposal to flatter and seduce the young artillery officer. The Corsican was twenty-four; Josephine was thirty-one, a widow (her ex-husband, Vicomte de Beauharnais, was guillotined after a brief career in republican politics) desperate for a marriage that had evaded her despite the legendary charms of her fine figure—which was visible to all in her transparent Empire dresses—and the perfection of a toilette routine that consumed some three hours of her day. No cosmetic, however, could disguise the rotted teeth that she tried desperately to hide; those black stumps showed

the signs of her age and the hundred-day incarceration at the Carmelite, a veritable lifetime of worry, starvation, and near death.²

To be sure, metropolitan inventions of the colony animated Napoleon's passion for Josephine. After his military victory in the Alps in 1796, he wrote to her: "Good God! How happy I should be if I could see you at your pretty toilet, little shoulder, little white breast, elastic and so firm, above it a pretty face with a creole headscarf, good enough to eat."³ The "creole headscarf" became a critical medium in the social exchange between black, white, and mulatta women in the colonies. They are part of what Joan Dayan describes as the "uneasy similarities" that bound together black and white: "[F]irst used as a headdress by slave women, who took a sign of servitude and adroitly turned it to their own advantage," white women's adaptation of the brightly colored and intricately knotted headpieces signal the kind of double appropriation that characterized the circularity of style among the slave and the free.⁴ Indeed, Josephine's harnessing of a particularly creole affect best describes the allure of her sexuality. What made her stand out among Paris's many coquettes and courtesans, some more youthful and beautiful than the thirty-something-year-old widow, was her manner of making every man feel uniquely and intensely loved by her, a projection of womanly sensuality and childish petulance that was irresistible to her sexual partners. Napoleon reminisced about her effect on him as a young man: "Madame de Beauharnais always listened with interest to my [military] plans . . . One day when I was sitting next to her at table, she began to pay me all manner of compliments on my military qualities. Her praise intoxicated me. From that moment I confined my conversation to her and never left her side. I was passionately in love with her."⁵

But to pay attention to the character of this adoration is to note its similarities to the much-circulated discourse about the legendary sexual appeal of the mulatta/mulatress, the mixed-race product of licentious and forbidden sex between black and white. Lafcadio Hearn describes the affect of the mulatta's sexual charm, where the configuration of intense passion and selfless adoration must have been irresistible to its white male recipients.

One could not but feel attracted towards this *naif* being, docile as an infant, and as easily pleased or as easily pained,—artless in her goodwill as in her faults, to all outward appearance;—willing to

give her youth, her beauty, her caresses to some one in exchange for the promise to love her . . . And that desire to please—which the *fille-de-colour* seemed to prevail above all other motives of action (maternal affection excepted)—could have appeared absolutely natural only to those who never reflected that even sentiment had been artificially cultivated by slavery.

She asked for so little,—accepted a gift with such childish pleasure,—submitting so unresistingly to the will of the man who promised to love her. She bore him children—such beautiful children!—whom he rarely acknowledged, and was never asked to legitimize;—and she did not ask perpetual affection notwithstanding,—regarded the relation as a necessarily temporary one, to be sooner or later dissolved by the marriage of her children’s father. If deceived in all things,—if absolutely ill-treated and left destitute, she did not lose faith in human nature: she was a born optimist, believing most men good;—she would make a home for another and serve him better than any slave . . . “*Née de l’amour,*” says a creole writer, “*la fille-de-colour vit d’amour, de rires, et d’oublis.*”⁶

“Born of love to live for love,” the mulatta is slavery’s best projection of its economic and social interest. As a willing agent in what Mary Louise Pratt describes as “transracial love plots,” the mulatta enables the social “imaginings in which European supremacy is guaranteed by affective and social bonding: in which sex replaces slavery as the way others are seen to belong to the white man; in which romantic love rather than filial servitude or force guarantee the willful submission of the colonized.”⁷ But if Josephine Tascher transformed herself into a slave of love to get the attention of the officer who would be emperor, the economics of desire revolving around sugar and slavery procured her the marriage offer that she desperately craved. Bonaparte’s proposal was secured when Josephine styled herself as a beneficiary of a much-exaggerated sugar fortune lodged at her family estate in Trois-Islets, Martinique. In Josephine’s time, white men married sugar heiresses, never their mulattas.

If Napoleon was seduced by the multiple benefits of this white creole woman (whose body refracted a composite of sentiments—both sexual and economic—of slave and slave mistress), so, too, the

modalities of her “execution” in 1991 in Fort-de-France, Martinique, are doubly burdened. As a postcolonial performance—it bears all the character of Caribbean protest: refusal of colonial iconography and substitution of metropolitan history and language with native memory and creole *parole*—the statue’s defacing nonetheless reproduces the most iconic of France’s modern symbols. When Dr. Guillotin perfected his death machine, it was an instrument to reflect the best values of the Enlightenment: the guillotine, as historian Antoine de Baecque describes it, was not only “to shorten and ‘despectacularize’ the torture . . . [but to] allow the torture to be rationalized and made uniform,” so that “all the condemned die in an identical way” and “the symbolic localization of the penalty on the body is reduced.”⁸ But its use in revolutionary France, where it was put into motion to make quick and egalitarian spectacles of death, reified—even more so than the modes of ancien régime torture described eloquently in Michel Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish*⁹—intense forms of specularization of the dead. Corpses thus became symbolic of the utopic and pathological in the many refractions of the Revolution’s ideological work. De Baecque explains: “The French Revolution in its central episode represented itself as a tragedy, in the profound ancient sense of the word: on dead bodies is conferred the power to discourse about the city. The corpse is the sign of death of the enemy, the mutilated and scorned remains of ‘guilty victims’ whose wounds are the bloody signature of the Terror; it reveals the ‘cruelty’ of the conspirators and counterrevolutionaries, it falls under the blade of the guillotine.”¹⁰ Josephine’s beheaded image in contemporary Fort-de-France enacts all the specularity of the Revolution’s doubled obsessions—that of a cleansed social space made possible by the spilled blood of the offender. But corpses in general—and beheadings in particular—are iconic tropes of yet another of the Caribbean’s old worlds; they were prominent trophies in the Afro-restorative efforts of the enslaved to fight their way out of the brutalities of New World slavery. When the Scotsman John Gabriel Stedman came upon the massacre of a platoon of Dutch soldiers in the Guiana interior, by black and mulatto maroons, he made William Blake, his poet-engraver, reproduce the scene of seven disembodied soldiers’ skulls planted at the ends of sticks by their black captors.¹¹ Joan Dayan reports the habit of planters in French Saint-Domingue to disfigure the dead bodies of slaves who committed suicide, in the hopes that the sight of the



Revolutionary punishment: the head of Louis XVI.
(© Corbis/Bettman.)

viciously mangled corpses would suspend the rash of slave suicides that were believed to transport its victims back to Africa. Dayan notes, “This gruesome bodily deformation shows how profoundly whites both understood and perverted the mysteries of the spirit: no African would want a homecoming with such a mangled visage.”¹² In the iconic *mélange* of France and Africa, one wonders what the Martinican rebels did with Empress Josephine’s marble head?

The Fort-de-France statue, chiseled by Vital Debray, memorialized the Josephine of the coronation ceremony made famous by the court painting of Jacques-Louis David rather than the Josephine of the borrowed madras-headscarves. To pause on Lafcadio Hearn’s 1890 description of the “marble memory of Josephine” is to have immediate access to the colonial weight of her historical meanings on



Suriname punishment: the skulls of Lieutenant Lepper and six of his men. (Courtesy of the Edward E. Ayer Collection, the Newberry Library, Chicago.)

Martinique. As Hearn, an American traveler in the French West Indies, stumbled into Fort-de-France (then the island's second major city after its gracious and vibrant capital, Saint-Pierre), he was struck by the city's single architectural wonder.

I went to look at the white dream of her there, a creation of master-sculptors . . . It seemed to me absolutely lovely.

Sea winds have bitten it; tropical rains have streaked it: some microscopic growth has darkened the exquisite hollow of the throat. And yet such is the human charm of the figure that you almost fancy you are gazing at a living presence . . . Perhaps the profile is less artistically real,—statuesque to the point of betraying the chisel; but when you look straight up into the sweet creole face,



Lafcadio Hearn's Josephine

you can believe she lives: all the wonderful West Indian charm of the woman is there.

She is standing just in the centre of the Savane, robed in the fashion of the First Empire, with gracious arms and shoulders bare: one hand leans on a medallion bearing the eagle profile of Napoleon. . . . Seven tall palms stand in a circle around her, lifting their comely heads into the blue glory of the tropical day. Within their enchanted circle you feel that you tread holy ground,—the sacred soil of artist and poet;—here the recollections of memoir-writers vanish away; the gossip of history so hushed for you; you no longer care to know how rumor has it that she spoke or smiled or wept: only the bewitchment of her lives under the thin, soft, swaying shadows of those feminine palms . . . Over violet light, she is looking back to the place of her birth, back to beautiful drowsy Trois-Islets,—and always with the same half-dreaming, half-plaintive smile,—unutterably touching.¹³



Mulatress in Martinique headscarf

Hearn's tremulous prose, with its many parentheses and ellipses, conveys both the wonder of Josephine's memory and the history of gossip and scandal that had always been the sullied underside of her "royal" status. Sordid pamphlets about her sex life were distributed in Paris among the memorials of her death in 1814, and the ex-lovers of her Directory days, most notably the sensualist Paul Barras, had already penned exposés about her sexual profligacy and her habit—Barras is particularly emphatic about this—of feigning love in the throes of her passion. Barras notes: "The men who possessed her may have flattered themselves on her apparently passionate abandon, but the lubricious creole never for a moment lost sight of business. Her heart played no part in her physical enjoyment."¹⁴ Taken together, such examples of memorializing display all that is compromised—and indeed shameful—about Martinique's historical past. Although Edouard Glissant, the island's most famous living postcolonialist writer and intellectual, does not name her outright, it could only be Josephine Tasher who is invoked in his scathing parenthetical sentence about the colonial meanings of Martinique's ancestral past, a



Josephine Bonaparte. (© Corbis/Bettman.)

past that prevents the emergence of a more heroic—and manly—autochthonous historical legacy: “[T]he official history of Martinique (totally fashioned according to Western ideology, naturally) has been conceived in terms of the list of discoverers and governors of this country, without taking into account the sovereign beauties—since there were no male sovereigns—that it has produced. (Those are indeed the key chapters of our official history. The Martinican elite can see ‘power’ only in the shape of the female thigh. Empress, queen, courtesan: History for them is nothing but a submission to pleasure, where the male is dominant; the male is Other. This notion of history as pleasure is about making oneself available.)”¹⁵ Could the act of Josephine’s symbolic decapitation in 1991, the stroke that makes collective violence against what Lafcadio Hearn names as the

“white dream” of her memory, be the first example of Glissant’s yearning for an “exploded discourse,” for “a revolutionary and *national* theater of the people”?¹⁶

If the script of postcoloniality is enacted through the spectacle of Josephine’s bloodied and headless body in contemporary Fort-de-France, this book is concerned with the character of such performances; the nature of the histories, identities, and politics they unleash; and the social investments they are made to bear. *Cultural Conundrums* attempts to understand how and why “the cultural”—a term that glosses, but is not limited to, understandings of Caribbean popular histories, secular and religious expressivities, practices and experiences of the “everyday,” and individual and communal vernacular styles—is such a category of significance today. Moreover, it takes seriously the weight of the claim made by the Trinidadian C. L. R. James (a man whose prodigious thinking about the meanings of Caribbean cultural performativity is both the guide and counterpoint to the ideas presented here) that “the African who made the Middle Passage and came to live in the West Indies was an entirely new historical and social category.”¹⁷ To be attuned, in the manner of Ralph Ellison’s protagonist-sage in *Invisible Man*, to the “lower frequencies” of James’s pronouncement is to witness in Caribbean subjectivity something like a Dionysian flash of catastrophe, bewilderment, and chaos—a flash that is both the product of colonial encounter and the impetus of postcolonial reconstructions. *Cultural Conundrums* brings together unconventional pairings of Caribbean personalities and cultural events and makes the perspective and poetics of the disjunctive a point of entry into the history of twentieth-century cultural production and the intellectual arguments that the histories of these personalities and events are made to bear. This book is written with an ear to the discord that continues to conjure up creative and bewildering cultural products and communities; it makes the protean, frenetic, and improvisatory character of Caribbean cultural productivity—its capacity to shape itself from disparate sources and its refusal to be straightjacketed by any single set of meanings—both a programmatic and formal template for a new kind of scholarly investigation. In its investigation of the histories of cricket and beauty pageants, Carnival and dancehalls, this book does not aim to present itself as an expansive history of discrete cultural formations in the twentieth-century anglophone Caribbean—much of this scholarship

has already been capably written. Rather, this book is concerned with capturing the manner that these histories, emerging with lightning speed throughout the century, converge and cauterize upon each other.

The unconventional linkages this book makes between discrete cultural practices and differently raced and gendered cultural heroes—its idiosyncratic juxtaposition of histories and geographies—makes for the delineation of a Caribbean cultural history where the blind spots of burgeoning regional cultural studies become visible. The recent prodigious outpouring of West Indian cricket scholarship, much of it brilliantly written and researched and contributing to a global historiography of sports, makes opaque what is easily the central preoccupation of Caribbean scholarly investigation today: the full tally of the meanings that the women bring to the discourses of Caribbean ontology. There is hardly a narrative of emergent postcolonial cricket that even comes close to naming the concession that prefaces Grant Farred's study of postapartheid sporting culture in South Africa—that "sport's practices replicate patriarchy" in that they are "always gendered male."¹⁸ To make obvious this point and to historicize the exclusions of a cadre of male cultural writers that have made invisible the cultural work of women, I retell the story of nascent Caribbean cricket alongside that of regional beauty pageants. I thus recast what counts as culture. The discordant continuities that link the history of Caribbean cricket, an area of cultural study that has become a growth industry of late, with the considerably less studied—but certainly no less popularly consumed—history of beauty contests in the region show that women's performativity on the pageant podium is structurally freighted to reproduce the meanings imposed on the body of the national cricket hero: quite simply, national beauty queens are, and have always been, "recognized" (in the Althusserian sense of the term) as national representatives. Considering the ideological destiny of both cultural arenas, distinct as they are as specifically gendered sites of play, tells a fuller story not only of the struggle to nationalize colonial institutions but of how narratives of "arrival" become burdened with equally spectacular moments where cricketers and queens find themselves and their performances entangled in politics of misrecognition. Like cricket, Caribbean beauty pageants speak both of the triumph of the postcolonial consolidation of a national cultural sphere and of its vulner-

ability to the changing script of priorities necessitated by global capitalist imperatives. Contrary to the perspective of many Caribbean cultural nationalists who see the interface between local and global cultural networks as an essentially unequal and debilitating encounter, one that shifts the hermeneutic ground on which the meanings of national culture depend, this book makes interpretive use of those encounters to lay bare the protocols and expectations of cultural meaning making in the region.

Cultural Conundrums is particularly interested in the social passions invested in the Caribbean cultural arena, in the metaphors—political, social, and economic—that the expressive performance is made to bear. While the historical trajectory of this book looks back to the time of anticolonial ferment in the anglophone West Indies prior to the culmination of independence in the 1960s, its open-ended narratives are ultimately about the present. In the same way that the defacing of Josephine’s monument—bold, wickedly creative in its figurative reversals, and portentous in its meaning about politics and the political—occurred at a historical moment when the political questions it raised could not be solved by the conventional teleology of national sovereignty (nationalist movements for independence are all but dead on the island), the political character of the postcolonial performative remains in question today. Just as Earl Lovelace’s meditations on Trinidad’s Carnival in his famous novel *The Dragon Can’t Dance* instantiate a host of questions about the efficacy of performance to transform the political arena, Josephine’s beheading tells something about the limitations of formal politics as a mode of community redress. This raises a constituent preoccupation of this book and its arguments: the status of and intellectual investment in the location of a “politics” of Caribbean culture. *Cultural Conundrums* pauses on, rather than assumes, the linkage between the cultural and political, and in so doing, the book consciously works against the grain of a long tradition of cultural interpretation in the region. The orthodoxy that sees cultural expression simply as an extension of resistance politics has no interpretive mechanism to make productive analysis of the new modes and meanings of Caribbean cultural articulation in the present. More notably, it has failed to take seriously contemporary culture’s most persistent message about regional politics today: its indictment of postcolonial party politics as a mode of failure. If, as Belinda

Edmondson reminds us, “the recovery of the almost-revolutions of Caribbean history” is a unifying characteristic of contemporary Caribbean counterdiscursivity,¹⁹ what meanings about the political should we discern from the fact that postcolonial culture hovers in the tensions between the possibility of a renewed social order and the deferral of such potentiality?

Of course, these conclusions are the very inverse of the body of interpretation brought to anglophone popular culture since the early twentieth century. While regional centers of higher learning have been slow to institutionalize the kind of cultural studies disciplinary practices informed by such theoreticians as Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-François Lyotard, whose writings have structured the field in the American and British academy, much in the subaltern character of Caribbean postcolonial intellectualism since the nineteenth century—in its philosophical, epistemological, and ethical engagements—presages the kinds of intellectual presumptions and practices that have coalesced into the discipline of cultural studies lately. Regional cultural production borne from the crucible of slavery, forced migration, and colonization was always fraught with the foundational issue of cultural studies investigation, the question of power, generally, and of the center-periphery relations that instantiated colonial domination in the region, in particular. Life under colonialism made visible the centrality of culture as a trenchant, if contested, field of production, whose political, social, and psychological meanings were often explicit. In some ways, all Caribbean peoples are beneficiaries of a highly developed sense of what was at stake in the work of culture and its interpretive mechanisms. Historical accounts of the rise of nationalist ideology in the Caribbean region almost always begin in the cultural arena, where black sensitivity about the image of its postemancipatory societies launched a small, but significant, body of work in defense of the region’s disenfranchised, African-descended peoples and their social world.²⁰ Early correctives, such as the famed monographs penned by the self-taught black Trinidadian schoolmaster J. J. Thomas (*Froudacity* in 1889 and *The Theory and Practice of Creole Grammar* in 1869), made a vigorous case for the integrity of West Indian society through the recuperation of its African-inflected, but essentially creolized, cultural origins.²¹ Culture, particularly in the recuperative antiracist arguments that sought to explain and rationalize popular Afro-Caribbean ethical-religious

ritual, the most mystified and misunderstood arena of regional expression,²² became the terrain for a sustained political argument about difference and identity. Even more significantly, the efforts to find integrity and internal logic in the apparently confused and chaotic display of everyday expression formed the conceptual ground for a set of interpretive practices and cognitive mechanisms through which Afro-Caribbean cultural practices were to be read. Culture—or, more properly, the radical ways-of-reading strategies that were developed through postcolonial critique—became the foundation for a vanguard Caribbean intellectual tradition in which resistance and opposition emerge as prominent themes from the complex caldron of Afro-creole popular expressivity.

I have conceived this book as both an homage to and a critique of this venerable tradition. The contention that an “art of resistance” (to use Michel de Certeau’s much celebrated phrase)²³ is lodged in the practices of the everyday has been a hallmark of postcolonial Caribbean thought for close to a century. I can think of no novelist, political theorist, historian, or sociologist sympathetic to the recuperation of the Afro-Caribbean whose work does not begin with the premise that the cultural and political worlds of the oppressed are conjoined entities—that as members of the black working class have been denied state-sponsored outlets for self-determination, their articulations of religiosity, choices about work and play, patterns of consumption, and struggles for personal dignity and respect have coalesced into a shifting, but ideologically discrete, subaltern political worldview. However positively or negatively viewed, the belief that black Caribbean culture was the host to a submerged and repressed political consciousness was an important starting point of the Afro-Caribbean interpretive enterprise, and out of it emerges some of the region’s best sociology, history, fiction, and poetry. *Cultural Conundrums* traces the history of the linkages made between the cultural and the political in twentieth-century Caribbean intellectual life, while showing how such a conjoining has limited our understanding of both categories, particularly in the murky enterprise of making meaning in the world of our present. In the narratives and cultural histories I present here are the sketchings of an anglophone Caribbean intellectual history (a history largely unknown to cultural theorists outside the region) and of the local modes of cultural literacy it generated. While *Cultural Conundrums* asks the constituent

questions of any cultural studies enterprise—questions that make visible the epistemes of knowledge produced by a vanguard postcolonial intelligentsia—this book’s itinerant scope (its open-ended narratives and circuitous plots) emphasizes the unrecoverable and the unknowable in all Caribbean cultural manifestation. Here, the book makes productive use of a “poeticist” imperative (to borrow a phrase from the Antiguan philosopher Paget Henry)²⁴ that is closely allied to Afro-Caribbean empirical effort. Because so much of Afro-Caribbean cultural history is lodged in the chorus of everyday public opinion (in gossip, in barroom braggadocio, in the jokes and asides circulated in calypso songs, in the bawdy verbal exchanges dancehall deejays hurl at each other), *Cultural Conundrums* makes imaginative use of the conjecture from “throwaway” speech (*cass-cass* and *sou-sou*) and other *diseicta membra* of Caribbean orality.²⁵

This book is framed by the work of two Caribbean intellectuals whose philosophizing is particularly mindful of vernaculars from below. Poet, historian, and philosopher are entwined in the biographical lives and intellectual preoccupation of two great regional postcolonial thinkers whose lives and scholarship are mapped in this book: the Trinidadian-born Marxist C. L. R. James and the Jamaican scholar and cultural critic Sylvia Wynter. Bringing these two figures together—one dead, the other living; one a man whose place in a tradition of anglophone Caribbean intellectual dissent is assured, the other a woman whose claim to that tradition is less universally recognized²⁶—engages a crucial value of the epistemic categories inaugurated by Caribbean postcoloniality. If, as Faith Smith’s intellectual biography of J. J. Thomas makes clear,²⁷ racial difference is the critical modality from which a vanguard Afro-Caribbean intellectualism is produced and performed, how and when does gender and/or sexual difference assume the same interpretive value? *Cultural Conundrums* pays keen attention to the torturous circuits through which a radical Caribbean alterity built on gender and sexual identity fails to emerge as postcolonial grand narrative. Historicizing that failure is both an undercurrent of this book and the configuration of the conclusion to the story I want to tell about the mutilated remains of Josephine’s image in contemporary Fort-de-France.

Across the Savane from where the empress’s headless statue remains since its decapitation in 1991 (perhaps the authorities deemed it too expensive to affix a new head or felt its replacement would ini-

tiate a carnival of repetitions) is the magnificent library built to honor the memory of another of Martinique's French colonial patron saints. Victor Schoelcher (1804–93) is officially remembered on the island as the author of the emancipation proclamation, the deliverer of liberty that transformed the identity of Martinican blacks from slave to citizen. As a national hero of Martinique, Schoelcher's memorialization had much to do with the new modalities of consensus in the post-emancipation era: his canonization permits the self-congratulatory inscription of metropolitan moral values while giving newly freed blacks a stake in an official record of French-authored progress and enlightenment. For Martinique's twentieth-century anticolonialists, from Aime Cesaire to Edouard Glissant, Schoelcher's record is a cruel trick, inscribing France, whose profit from the slave trade was second only to England, as the progenitor of black emancipation. Glissant declared the Frenchman's antislavery ideas "repulsive, hypocritical, sanctimonious" and deemed the proclamation Schoelcher authored a "thinly veiled declaration of our alienation, the outline of what the Martinican people have to undergo, the prefiguration of what the colonizer will try to make of us, and what in part (at least for what we call our elite) we have become."²⁸ To constitute an epistemological break with "Schoelcherism" (the neologism Glissant coins to describe the cumulative effects of colonial historiography), Glissant proposes and promotes an alternative date of Martinican emancipation, May 22, the date scratched in red on the pedestal of Josephine's statue. But the degree to which black Martinicans, as newly emancipated "French" citizens, embraced Victor Schoelcher as liberator speaks to the ambivalence of their newfound subjectivity: he was voted and sworn in as their elected representative in the French National Assembly, despite the fact that the Frenchman never lived on the island. At Fort de France's Place Barre, opening out to the street that bears his name, there is a statue of the abolitionist engaged in a symbolic performance of his role as Martinique's liberator: its pedestal is inscribed "Aucune Terre Francaise Ne Peut Plus Porter D'esclaves!" [No French soil shall ever more hold slaves!]. The statue shows Schoelcher protecting a small black girl whose Martinicanness is denoted by her distinctive creole style: she wears a madras headscarf.