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A BOOK TO HOLD THE EVENT: “ACTING OUT” AND “WORKING THROUGH” LOSS IN VICTOR HUGO'S *BUG-JARGAL*

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LITERATURE

by

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# Table of Contents

Abstract.................................................................................................................iv
Acknowledgments..................................................................................................v
Introduction.............................................................................................................1
Section 1................................................................................................................11
Section 2.................................................................................................................23
Section 3................................................................................................................34
References..............................................................................................................49
Abstract

A Book to Hold the Event:
“Acting Out” and “Working Through” Loss in Victor Hugo's *Bug-Jargal*

Julianne Ruetz

This paper examines Victor Hugo's *Bug-Jargal* (1826) and considers why a text that focuses on French losses incurred during the Haitian Revolution in the colony then known as Saint Domingue also opens and closes its narrative with reference to the French Revolution. Utilizing Dominick LaCapra's understanding of “acting out” and “working through” trauma, as well as Freud's distinction of “conscious” and “unconscious” loss, I argue that the novel functions as an attempted “working through” of the conscious loss of French lives and colonial wealth in Saint Domingue. It is by drawing the violence of both revolutions into comparison that *Bug-Jargal* produces evidence of an unconscious loss also at work in the text: a general destabilization of French identity as the meaning of “whiteness” is rendered uncertain in Saint Domingue, and the privileges of the aristocracy are eliminated in France. In its struggle to reinvest the figure of the French aristocrat with discursive, racial, and social authority, Hugo's novel inadvertently exposes that its French narrator acts in imitation of other races; that possibilities for life exist outside of the aristocrat's death-driven narrative; and that the French aristocrat's limited insight as narrator causes the voices of others, collaborative and contradictory, to reveal their own losses resulting from encounters with the French.
Acknowledgments

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Introduction

Published in the year following the Franco-Haitian Accord of 1825, Victor Hugo's *Bug-Jargal* narrates the start of the Haitian Revolution in 1791 and situates Leopold d'Auverney's retrospective account of his experiences in Haiti—then known as the French colony “Saint Domingue”—within a narrative frame set in 1794 during the revolutionary wars in Europe (Bongie 214). Hugo's novel sutures death, storytelling, and the historical event. The text opens with a request for narrative—a narrative d'Auverney does not perceive he possesses: “When Captain Leopold d'Auverney's turn came up, he looked surprised and admitted to the assembled gentlemen that he really knew of no event in his life which would merit their attention” (Bongie 59). His is a story that must be brought forth, and it is the reappearance of Captain d'Auverney's injured dog, Rask, and Sergeant Thaddeus that

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1 The Accord signaled France's recognition of Haiti as its own nation, though Haiti itself had declared independence in 1804 (Bongie 49).
2 Hugo's novel is the revision of his 1819-1820 “Bug-Jargal” (Bongie 49). Dominique Jullien provides the following explanation of the differences between the short story and the novel in “Bug-Jargal: la Révolution et ses doubles”: “La nouvelle originale mettait en place une rivalité de générosité entre deux 'frères' spirituels, un jeune colon blanc, Delmar [who is given the name d'Auverney in the novel], et l'esclave noir Pierrot, alias Bug-Jargal, fils d'un roi africain, devenu un des chefs des révoltés ; l'histoire se déroulait sur fond des massacres de Saint-Domingue au cours desquels les deux héros faisaient assaut de magnanimité et d'héroïsme sacrificiel. À cette trame cornélienne un peu mince, Hugo ajoute huit ans plus tard une rivalité amoureuse (les deux héros aiment Marie, qui est fiancée au Français), et le personnage grotesque et sinistre du nain Habibrah, bouffon de l'oncle du narrateur. Surtout il développe considérablement les scènes historiques.... La seconde version fait donc passer au premier plan la révolution hatienne, tout en mettant en évidence l'ambiguïté de ses rapports avec la Révolution française” (78-79).
3 During the 1790s, the Haitian Revolution and the French Revolution were both underway, with the latter beginning four years before the former, in 1787. Chris Bongie notes that Hugo's “tale is narrated during the Napoleonic Wars, sometime around 1806, whereas in the novel it is recounted at the height of the Terror in 1794” (214)—Jullien suggests the frame occurs one year earlier in 1793 (79)—emphasizing the ways in which Hugo's revision from short story to novel specifically invites a comparison between the Haitian Revolution and the French Revolution.
serves to begin the story d'Auverney does not know he has to tell. Thaddeus explains that he risked death to retrieve Rask from the English soldiers who stole him because Rask used to belong to an individual called Bug-Jargal, and that the first time Thaddeus ever cried, it was the “‘day when he gave the order to open fire on Bug-Jargal’” (Bongie 60). The soldiers persuade Captain d'Auverney, who “among all the chance circumstances of war, desired only death” (Bongie 64) to relate the story of himself, Thaddeus, Rask, and Bug-Jargal as it happened in Saint Domingue in 1791. D'Auverney agrees, though claims that he has nothing more to offer his audience “‘than the recital of an extremely simple anecdote, in which I [d'Auverney] only play a very secondary role’” (Bongie 65).

D'Auverney, an aristocrat born in France, subsequently narrates the friendship born of a romantic rivalry between himself and the enslaved African king turned-revolutionary-leader Bug-Jargal, known to d'Auverney for much of his narrative as “Pierrot.” Having repeatedly saved each other from death, they enter into a bond of brotherhood. Bug-Jargal ceases his pursuit of d'Auverney's cousin and fiancée, Marie, and attempts to warn d'Auverney of the impending revolution in which Bug-Jargal

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4 Thaddeus (Thadée in the French) is referring to himself in the third person here.
5 The narrator of the frame informs the reader of d'Auverney's desire for death, but his audience of fellow soldiers are not privy to this information (Bongie 64), suggesting that those who consume the written text assume a special access of information over those who hear a story conveyed orally, further privileging the material form of the novel.
6 While Bug-Jargal is imprisoned and sentenced to die for intervening on the behalf of another slave and physically confronting d'Auverney's uncle, Bug-Jargal tells d'Auverney, “‘Even so, I am not of a rank inferior to yours!’” (Bongie 86). The text and its translations never quite seem to settle on Bug-Jargal's “true” rank, particularly as to whether he was formerly a prince or a king—English translation titles include: The Slave-King, from the Bug-Jargal of Victor Hugo (1833) and The Noble Rival, or, the Prince of the Congo (1845) (Bongie 10) as Bug-Jargal was a prince whose father was killed by the Europeans. This points to a complex dynamic between current and former social position, as well as status as derived from manner, values, and appearance.
will play an integral part. As the violence of the revolution begins, d'Auverney sees Bug-Jargal carry Marie away, and, mistakenly believing that Bug-Jargal means to harm her, declares Bug-Jargal his enemy. Having decided he now has nothing to live for, D'Auverney agrees to die at the hands of the revolutionary leader Biassou of whom d'Auverney has become a prisoner, rather than assist Biassou by rewriting a letter in fluent European French.

Because Bug-Jargal petitions for d'Auverney's life and Biassou allows d'Auverney to reconsider his refusal, Bug-Jargal is able to reunite d'Auverney with Marie, and d'Auverney finally learns that “Pierrot” is really the revolutionary leader Bug-Jargal. Yet d'Auverney insists he must return to be killed, having promised his life to Biassou for refusing Biassou's offer. In an execution to occur over an abyss, Biassou's veiled “sorcerer” reveals himself as Habibrah, the former slave of d'Auverney's uncle whom d'Auverney long despised, but lauded in memory when he imagines Habibrah must have died fighting to save d'Auverney's uncle. Bug-Jargal and Rask appear, a struggle ensues, and d'Auverney is saved; Habibrah falls into the abyss. D'Auverney and Thaddeus conclude with Bug-Jargal's death: when Thaddeus believed d'Auverney was to be executed, he declared that either Bug-Jargal or ten of his soldiers must die. Upon their return, d'Auverney is shot and wounded before he can intervene, and Bug-Jargal does nothing to explain that d'Auverney is still alive and instead allows himself to be killed in place of his men. The novel ends with a “Note” in which the extradiegetic narrator explains the death of d'Auverney's fiancée Marie in Haiti during subsequent acts of revolutionary violence, and details the deaths
of d'Auverney, Thaddeus, and Rask in battle in Europe.

Hugo's novel thus ends when its characters—despite numerous and unexpected opportunities at life—successfully achieve their deaths. This in turn precludes any representation of the historical end of the Haitian Revolution and the loss of Haiti, then known as the French colony Saint Domingue. Hugo's statement from 1823 that “I would rather believe in the novel than in history, because I prefer moral truth to historical truth” (Bongie 13), suggests that for Hugo, the narrative of the individual serves as a means of explaining and so exposing the “moral truth” of the historical event by writing what should have happened, as opposed to what did happen, even as the reality of the latter continually pervades the former.

Narrative is thus what allows the individual to reorder history after it happens, unexpectedly and “irreversibly.” Indeed, in “Narrativity in the Representation of Reality,” Hayden White argues that the “demand for closure in the historical story is a demand...for moral meaning, a demand that sequences of real events be assessed as to their significance as elements of a moral drama.” White questions whether “any historical narrative [has] ever been written that was not informed not only by moral awareness but specifically by the moral authority of the narrator” (21). Hugo uses the

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7 E.M. Forster writes in his *Aspects of the Novel*: “All of us, even the sophisticated, yearn for permanence...We all want books to endure, to be refuges, and their inhabitants to always be the same” (70). Though Forster's work was written some centuries after Hugo's *Bug-Jargal*, this seems relevant in regard to Hugo's belief in the novel and suggestive of an impossible desire for the individual to produce narratives that assume the “permanence” of history.

8 As Paul Ricoeur explains in “Memory—History—Forgetting,” even “if one cannot undo what is done or make what has happened not happen...the meaning of what has happened is not fixed once and for all. Apart from the fact that past events can be interpreted differently, the moral burden attached to the debt that is owed to the past can be increased or lightened, depending on whether an accusation imprisons a guilty party in a painful sense of irreversibility or a pardon opens the prospect of a deliverance from debt that is equivalent to a transformation of the actual meaning of the past” (478).
novel to establish the authorial vision of an individual history by determining how to begin and how to end; what to put in, and what to leave out. In this way, the novel serves as the form that contains the event: Hugo asserts in his 1826 preface that “it stands to reason that if the subject matter treated therein has acquired a new degree of interest since that time this is in no way the author's fault. Events have accommodated themselves to the book, not the book to the events” (Bongie 57). Here Hugo reminds the reader that “Bug-Jargal” (1820) appeared in print many years prior to the Franco-Haitian Accord (1825), but this statement is also evocative of the manner in which Hugo uses the narrative of the individual to redefine the bounds of a historical event. Indeed, Hugo's 1826 preface does not overtly name the Accord to which he alludes,

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Robyn Warhol refers both to the “subnarratable” or “events too insignificant or banal to warrant representation”—though what is considered “insignificant” or “banal” necessarily depends on the particular perspective of a given character, narrator, or author—as well as the “supranarratable,” or that which “comprises those events that defy narrative, foregrounding the inadequacy of language” (233). In Hugo's text, the reader becomes aware of d'Auverney's choices as translation when he (or the extradiegetic narrator, or Hugo) explains in a footnote, while recounting the lyrics of Bug-Jargal's Spanish romance that he sings to Marie: “It has been deemed unnecessary to reproduce here in their entirety the words of the Spanish song: 'Porque me huyes, Maria?' etc” (75). “It has been deemed unnecessary” immediately alerts the reader that what is present in a text necessarily depends on what a narrator (and author) leaves out. What else has d'Auverney “deemed unnecessary” without informing the reader that he deemed it unnecessary? Elision thus occurs both at the level of minute detail and larger historical outcomes. In terms of the historical, Michel-Rolph Trouillot would argue that what is absent or incomplete constitutes the nature of the archives, that “[s]ilences are inherent in history because any single event enters history with some of its constituting parts missing. Something is always left out while something else is recorded” (49). To complicate Trouillot's notion of silence, Ada Ferrer in “Talk about Haiti,” explores the ways in which news of Haiti came into being and was consumed in Cuba with a “focus...on the social and physical networks that helped produce, circulate, and transform rumor and observation into news and eventually into historical narrative and explanation” (22). I would argue that the Trouillot's question of “can historical narratives convey plots that are unthinkable in the world within which these narratives take place?” (73) pertains particularly to a French perspective. That, even though Bug-Jargal predates many of the works Said considers in “Narrative and Social Space,” the narrator of the frame and d'Auverney represent France's presence in Saint Domingue with a “quality of permanence” (67) that makes the loss so startling and “unthinkable.” I would also argue that “silences” in narratives are not merely the absence of information, but necessarily draw attention to and reveal something about the limits and possibilities of thought regarding a particular historical moment.
but Hugo expresses his “warmest gratitude” for his access to the historical sources that were “uncommonly useful to him in correcting those details in the tale of Captain d'Auverney that were incomplete” (Bongie 57). Here history serves to further authenticate Hugo's rendering of a fictive individual during a historical moment.

*Bug-Jargal* therefore exposes a tension between its focus on personal trajectories and the larger historical outcomes it cannot evade even as it elides them. Hugo instead renders the end of his narrative of the individual conclusive through death. *Bug-Jargal* is a text whose narrators and characters both reflect on and are inhabited by a drive for death, something Freud refers to as “more primitive, more elementary, more instinctual than the pleasure principle which it over-rides” (25). To borrow terms from Dominick LaCapra, the narrators of Hugo's text attempt to “work through” what they and other characters have “acted out,” only to “act out” what they ultimately cannot “work through.”

LaCapra summarizes “acting out” in relation to the death drive “as the tendency to compulsively repeat traumatic scenes—often violent scenes—in a way that is destructive and self-destructive” whereas in “working through, the person tries to gain critical distance on a problem and to distinguish between past, present, and future” (143). At the level of the historical event, the novel seemingly begins by attempting to work through the loss of Haiti as the French colony Saint Domingue. Early in Hugo's text, the unnamed extradiegetic narrator of the frame explains d'Auverney's situation to the reader:

> It was known that d'Auverney had experienced great adversity in America: that, having gotten married in Saint Domingue, he had lost
his wife and his entire family during the massacres which marked the revolution's invasive arrival in that magnificent colony. At that time in our history, calamities of this type were so common that there had formed a sort of general fund of pity concerning them, which everybody drew on or contributed to. People thus felt sorry for Captain d'Auverney, less for the losses he had suffered than for the way in which they had made him suffer. For the fact is that underneath his glacial indifference, you could see the incurable wound inside of him and the tremors it provoked.¹⁰ (Bongie 63)

“It was known”—but by whom? The absent subject suggests common knowledge by an unnamed audience; however, as I will explore in my subsequent sections, for an individual in Hugo's text to “see,” to “know,” or even to “recognize” is not the same as to “understand,” “work through,” or integrate perceived otherness into one's ideological frameworks. The narrator's generalized assertion of “knowing” in conjunction with his reference to “our history,” invites the reader to participate in a French perspective specifically invested in its imperial possessions, in Saint Domingue as “that magnificent colony.” No longer “our” colony, “Saint Domingue” is now Haiti and thus both a physical place that still is, and by the time of the frame, already only a remembered place that was.

The unnamed narrator describes d'Auverney as a passive recipient of

¹⁰ “On savait que d'Auverney avait éprouvé de grands malheurs en Amérique ; que, s'étant marié à Saint-Domingue, il avait perdu sa femme et toute sa famille au milieu des massacres qui avaient marqué l'invasion de la révolution dans cette magnifique colonie. A cette époque de notre histoire, les infortunes de ce genre étaient si communes, qu'il s'était formé par elles une espèce de pitié générale dans laquelle chacun prenait et apportait sa part. On plaignait donc le capitaine d'Auverney, moins pour les pertes qu'il avait souffertes que pour sa manière de les souffrir. C'est qu'en effet, à travers son indifférence glaciaire, on voyait quelquefois les tressaillements d'une plaie incurable et intérieure” (Borderie 33). Bongie translates “On savait” as “it was known,” but the French retains the ambiguity of whether the subject is singular or plural. That “on savait” can be read both as “one knew” as well as “we knew,” exposes the narrative friction within the novel between the responsibility associated with the actions and awareness of the individual vs. that of a collective. It is also worth noting the slight difference between the English: “the revolution's invasive arrival” and the literal translation of the French as the “invasion of the revolution,” which further emphasizes the narrator's position that the revolution came from elsewhere.
atrocities. The narrator makes no mention of slavery, but refers to the way in which d'Auverney “lost his wife and his entire family during the massacres which marked the revolution's invasive arrival in that magnificent colony,” as if the revolution brought its violence unprovoked from elsewhere. Only Saint Domingue's status as a former colony emphasizes that the French were not there first. The narrator universalizes the experience of loss—“calamities of this type were so common that there had formed a sort of general fund of pity concerning them which everybody drew on or contributed to”—and the narrator refers not just to the “losses he [d'Auverney] had suffered” (loss forced upon him), but states that “he had lost his wife and his entire family during the massacres.” With d'Auverney as the subject who performs the verb, the syntax marks d'Auverney as an active participant in his loss, and it is his particular experience of loss that interests the text: “People thus felt sorry for Captain d'Auverney, less for the losses he had suffered than for the way in which they had made him suffer.” Here the text privileges an offering of sympathy for the individual over any attempt to understand what precipitated the loss—what the French did before the “great adversity,” “massacres,” and “calamities” occurred.

The narrator refers to d'Auverney's “incurable wound,”11 ostensibly the loss of his family, but also, as I will argue, a historical double wounding on the part of the French, pertaining both to the Haitian Revolution and to the revolution in France. In

11 Cathy Caruth writes in “The Wound and the Voice”: “As the repeated infliction of a wound, the act of Tancred [“wounding his beloved in battle and then, unknowingly, seemingly by chance, wounding her again” (Caruth 2)] calls up the originary meaning of trauma itself (in both English and German), the Greek trauma, or ‘wound,’ originally referring to an injury inflicted on the body. In its later usage, particularly in the medical and psychiatric literature, and most centrally in Freud's text, the term trauma is understood as a wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind” (3).
addition to LaCapra's terms of “acting out” and “working through” I would also like to make use of Freud's terms: “conscious loss” and “unconscious loss.” The narrator of the frame depicts the loss of Haiti as a conscious, material loss—France loses a colony and d'Auverney loses his family. The narrator does not refer to the French Revolution as producing any particular loss, but both revolutions retain the association of unthinkable violence rendered omnipresent and commonplace: the frame begins with a reference to the guillotine, while the novel concludes with the Citizen-Representative's search for d'Auverney, only just killed in battle, to condemn him as an enemy of the French Revolution. The Citizen-General responds:

“'There still remains one course of action for you, Citizen-Representative of the people! Go find the body of Captain d'Auverney in the ruins of the redoubt. Who knows? Perhaps the enemy's cannon-balls may have spared the corpse's head for the national guillotine!'” (Bongie 199)

In this way, the frame narrator's assertion that at “that time in our history, calamities of this type were so common that there had formed a sort of general fund of pity concerning them, which everybody drew on or contributed to,” serves both as an overt reference to the violence of the Haitian Revolution and an implicit one regarding the concurrent violence of the French Revolution. That d'Auverney functions as a recipient of and a participant in loss points to what Cathy Caruth calls “the complex relation between knowing and not knowing” that is central to literature and psychoanalysis. Thus I will be arguing that while Hugo's novel is ostensibly an

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12 Freud describes “mourning” as largely a response to a “conscious loss” and “melancholia” as the reaction to an “unconscious loss” (164). For the sake of my argument, however, I am not discussing mourning or melancholia, but rather working with the distinction between a loss that is conscious and one that is unconscious.
attempt to work through the conscious loss of Saint Domingue as a French colony, the conscious and material loss of French wealth and French lives also contains an unconscious loss that permeates Hugo's text. The unconscious loss of Saint Domingue is in turn, inextricable from the unconscious loss of the French Revolution. The unconscious loss is this: both revolutions call into question what it means to be French.\(^\text{13}\)

A problematic correlation occurs, however, as the text tries to use one event to examine the other. The internal conflicts of each event are not equivalent: in Haiti, the text presents the racial struggle for political control between those deemed white and those deemed not white, while the end note emphasizes the violent execution of nobles by non-nobles. In this way, as the text works through France's attack on its own aristocracy by re-staging the beginning of the Haitian Revolution, issues of race cannot be extricated from an examination of class, causing European terms, tropes, and social structures to play out differently in the context of Haiti.

In the following sections, I explore three different issues. At the level of character, I consider a “crisis of being” and what happens when the text attempts to valorize nobility and assert the semantic boundaries of “whiteness” by doubling\(^\text{14}\) the

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\(^{13}\) Or rather, what it means to be a French aristocrat. The narrator of the frame extrapolates from d'Auverney's individual experience as being representative of what happened to the French in Saint Domingue.

\(^{14}\) Dominique Jullien argues that Hugo’s “texte étant construit sur la figure de l'antithèse et du double, c'est par similitude ou par opposition que les éléments prennent sens” (81) and explores numerous instances of ideological conflict and moments of misreading on the part of d'Auverney, who, “loin de se montrer fiable, se révèle au contraire fort mauvais lecteur, interprétant systématiquement tous les signes à l'envers” (81) through the lens of “doubling” and inversion. In this paper, I consider examples of doubling and misrecognition in relation to theories of trauma and how narrative structures function as a means of beginning to access experiences that can never be fully articulated or worked through.
figures of d'Auverney and Bug-Jargal. In the second section, I explore a “crisis of closure” and the ways in which the death-driven novel, structured around the demise of its racially pure characters, actually preserves the dissenting voices of the mixed-race characters it tries to silence. Hugo's text exposes a contradictory duality in which it attempts to secure the permanence of a particular assessment of the past and yet continually begins again. This ultimately leads back to Hugo's discussion of “books” and “events” and the ways in which Hugo is unable to contain the event within the form of the novel. In the final section, I examine “a crisis of recognition” and the effect of the novel's representation of storytelling in which d'Auverney retells Bug-Jargal's death, already revealed from the outset, but chooses to “veil” and “unveil” Habibrah for his audience as he experienced it for himself. Here I examine the manner in which the text begins by explaining what was done to the French and in the course of doing so, continually exposes, even as it attempts to suppress, its own awareness of French culpability in having done violence to others and to themselves.

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Section One: A Crisis of Being

Chris Bongie argues in “The Memory of Hayti,” that Hugo's rewrite from short story to novel is an “act of narrative containment” as Hugo focuses on demarcating what he deems “threateningly indeterminate identity\textsuperscript{15} to give it a name

\textsuperscript{15} Pascale Gaitet also pursues the ways in Bug-Jargal is “loaded with covert political contradictions
in order to more effectively suppress it” (232). Yet in order for the text to control what it fears, the text must represent that which it desires to control. Hugo thus employs an arsenal of pseudo-scientific racial terms as if enough linguistic specificity might secure all mixed-race individuals within a citadel of words. By contrast, Hugo reduces racial purity to an immutable way of being that unites appearance with internal essence. The text depicts the racially pure as behaving in accordance with the color of their skin: for Hugo, racial purity denotes purity of character.

I would like to complicate Bongie's argument, however, by suggesting that although mixed-race characters do threaten the stability of meaning within the text, they do not actually threaten d'Auverney's racial identity. As Bongie states in his introduction to the novel: “doubles proliferate in Bug-Jargal, nowhere more obviously than in the (un)likely pairing of its equally noble white and black protagonists” (11). It is this ostensible interchangeability (not actual equivalence or equality) of absolute difference, of “white” and “black”—rather than the possibility of miscegenation that the text seems to fear—that discursively allows Bug-Jargal to displace d'Auverney within his own narrative and so threaten the semantic integrity of

and ambiguities” that show themselves “in the many hybrid constructions that populate” the text (253).

In Hugo's long and largely plagiarized—though nevertheless selective—footnote, he explains that a “precise explanation will perhaps be necessary for understanding this word [“griffe” — used to describe Habibrah, the enslaved “dwarf” who belongs to d'Auverney's uncle]. Monsieur Moreau de Saint-Méry...posits that men are made up of a total of one hundred and twenty-eight parts” and names the “nine species” as “the sacatra, the griffe, the marabou, the mulatto, the quadroon, the metiff, the mameluco, the quarteronné, and the sang-mêlé” (Bongie 67).

When d'Auverney is prisoner of the revolutionary leader Biassou, he remarks of the equivocal planter: “he had already come close to killing me in order to prove that he was a white man; now he was going to murder me in order to show he was a mulatto” (Bongie 144). D'Auverney presents this ultimately pragmatic ideological inversion as wholly contemptible and so critiques mixed-race individuals for refusing to follow a code of ethics that he understands and adheres to; in essence, they are guilty of choosing to survive however they see fit.
Near the beginning of his narrative, d'Auverney explains to his audience:

“Only once did I happen to get caught up in a debate concerning the affairs of the day. It was on the occasion of the disastrous decree of 15 May 1791, whereby the national assembly of France granted the free men of colour the same political rights as the whites. At a ball given by the Governor of the city of the Cape, several young colonists were arguing over this law which so cruelly wounded the self-esteem—perhaps justified—of the whites” (Bongie 70).

“Wounded self-esteem” is, I would argue, the unconscious loss and collective trauma that effects a “crisis of being” on the part of the French that d'Auverney's experience specifically embodies. D'Auverney's assessment of “this law which so cruelly wounded” both undermines its claim in what seems a sentiment of offense rather than actual injury, yet recalls his own “incurable wound,” as described by the narrator of the frame. Thus I read “self-esteem” as sense of self: if “whiteness,” up until the moment of the law, represented unlimited access to anything desired—in contrast to slavery, a system of brutally enforced limitation—the law radically reveals that the privilege of whiteness is not immanent. Rather, whiteness has secured for itself certain social, political, and material advantages that can be taken away. Through the law, whiteness can be brought into comparison with other groups of people and deemed in some sense equivalent: “whereby the national assembly of France granted

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18 Again the text's semantic ambiguity is suggestive of a multiplicity of meaning that the novel can neither accept nor fully elide: when d'Auverney refers to “this law which so cruelly wounded the self-esteem—perhaps justified—of the whites,” is d'Auverney “justifying” the self-esteem the whites have for themselves, or is he admitting that the law and subsequent “wounding” is in some way justified?

19 D'Auverney says of himself: “Surrounded almost from birth with all the gratifications of wealth, with all of the privileges of rank in a country where one's colour was enough to confer it” (Bongie 69)
the free men of colour *the same* political rights as the whites” (emphasis added). As d'Auverney identifies free men of color as encroaching on advantages reserved for whites, the text focuses its attention on the external threat of the “other” as the most immediate threat to whiteness in an attempt to contain the influence of mixed-race individuals.

Hugo's text identifies a mixed-race character, “the equivocal planter,” as one of the most obvious instances of this pressing threat to whiteness: the equivocal planter's physical person represents the culmination of repeated racial mixing now attempting to pass as racially pure. D'Auverney describes the planter as “a person whom the whites only grudgingly admitted into their company and whose equivocal colour raised doubts about his origins” (Bongie 70). If the “whites” have identified the planter as that which needs to be contained—as someone who is not really “white” and thus will never be accepted as such—why is it that they admit him at all, even grudgingly? D'Auverney's description suggests that the whites do not, in fact, possess sufficient evidence to keep the equivocal planter from their society, thereby emphasizing the inadequacy of their own constructed racial categories to socially differentiate who is and is not “white.” Hugo's characters thus reenact the struggles of the text: identification of a semantic threat does not result in its successful containment. At the same time, because the text continually identifies the equivocal planter as a manifestation of the external threat to whiteness, the equivocal planter, in actuality, poses no threat to d'Auverney. Even though the planter's appearance suggests that whiteness can largely be achieved over time through the process of
sustained racial mixing, the classifying language of the novel's French narrators will never allow its readers to forget that the planter's color is “equivocal.” Thus, even as the equivocal planter very briefly occupies d'Auverney's place, that of the well-bred white male, by dancing with d'Auverney's fiancée, Marie (Bongie 70), it is textually impossible for any racial “contamination” to occur between the equivocal planter and another truly “white” character.

However, since the equivocal planter possesses a kind of counterfeit whiteness that very nearly conceals its own mixed ancestry even as the planter's “equivocal” complexion inevitably betrays itself, physical appearance becomes a necessary but not sufficient condition for establishing the existence of so-called racial purity. Thus it is a performance of “nobility”—which includes some evidence of a noble birth followed by an unceasing show of self-sacrifice—that serves as the text's primary means of authenticating racial purity: comportment and complexion must always align as purity of race supposedly reflects purity of deed. To this end, the novel seizes upon the character of the enslaved African king, Bug-Jargal, as d'Auverney's counterpart: Bug-Jargal's racial purity as someone brought from Africa precludes miscegenation and presumably any possibility that he might pass as a member of white society. Bug-Jargal therefore functions as a comparative example of racial purity without posing a threat to the ideological integrity of actual whiteness.

Since the novel seemingly focuses its attention on the containment of “indeterminate identity” and because, as Bongie argues in “The Memory of Hayti,” the “scapegoating of mulattoes...provides the thematic and ideological glue holding
the novel together” (215), d'Auverney unsurprisingly assumes that the “rival” for Marie's affections is the equivocal planter (Bongie 72). The rival is not the equivocal planter, however, but Bug-Jargal. In this way, the text, without appearing to understand the significance of its own revelation, informs its readers that the real threat is Bug-Jargal, and not the very thing the novel struggles so ardently to contain.

The text initially portrays Bug-Jargal and d'Auverney as rivals for the same object (Marie) when really, they rival one another to fulfill the subject position as the noble male of the text. Bug's actions do not so much mirror d'Auverney's as preempt and displace them. Before the text names Bug-Jargal, Bug-Jargal “held back, as if petrified; he let the dagger run indecisively over my [d'Auverney's] chest for a few seconds longer and then, suddenly casting it away, he said, this time in French: 'No! No! She would weep too much!'” (Bongie 72) Much later, believing that Bug betrayed him by stealing Marie, d'Auverney similarly repeats this erotic gesture as he “grabbed hold of it and ran that glistening dagger up and down his chest” (Bongie 167).

While Bug remains d'Auverney's unknown rival, he “plants” himself between d'Auverney and Marie when he replaces d'Auverney's flowers with his own, thereby inserting himself into d'Auverney's role of courtship in a metaphoric act of

\[\text{As mentioned earlier, Bongie notes in his introduction that the 1845 English edition of Hugo's novel assumes for its title: The Noble Rival; or, The Prince of Congo (10), which I would read doubly. First, as the rival who is noble, and secondly, as the rival who exemplifies a rival form of nobility.}\]
insemination. D'Auverney recounts that “the work I'd done that very morning had indeed already been destroyed and those wretched flowers, whose freshness astonished my poor Marie, had once again insolently taken the place of the roses I had scattered there” (Bongie 74).

Finally, despite Marie embodying the very whiteness that the text must preserve, Marie ultimately asserts that she owes her life to Bug rather than d'Auverney. Initially this is not the case. As Bug defends Marie from the crocodile, “Marie let out a cry of joy [when d'Auverney appeared], tore herself from the arms of the negro, and sank into mine, exclaiming, 'I'm saved!'” (Bongie 78) Yet she later explains to d'Auverney, “'Without him [Bug], I was done for! You would have arrived too late’” (81).

Many of these details are easy to overlook, however, because the frame familiarizes its readers with d'Auverney before Bug-Jargal, and so d'Auverney becomes the reader's first experience of “nobility.” The unnamed extradiegetic narrator of the frame describes d'Auverney as “cold-mannered” with “a look of complete indifference” (Bongie 62). D'Auverney recalls that when he visits Bug in prison, Bug's “facial expression immediately turned calm and cold again and he stared at me with indifference” (Bongie 85). D'Auverney of the frame “among all the chance circumstances of war, desired only death” (64), while d'Auverney, in turn, ponders Bug's “disgust with life” and attempts to let himself be killed (Bongie 80). The “bleak severity” of d'Auverney's thoughts are “carved in the premature lines on

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21 D'Auverney marries Marie but is never able to consummate the marriage.
his brow” (Bongie 63), while we later learn that Bug (only then known to d'Auverney as “Pierrot”) was understood to be “buried in a dark melancholy”(Bongie 83).

However, when one realizes that the content of the frame necessarily occurs after the events presented in d'Auverney's narration, it becomes evident that d'Auverney experiences Bug's “indifference” and desire for death before he himself becomes the “cold-mannered” Captain d'Auverney that we first encounter, which suggests that Bug does not so much function as the safely enslaved “Noble Savage” who mirrors the universalized figure of the European noble, but rather, that d'Auverney acts out in inadvertent imitation of Bug-Jargal.

22 And in the final note, the unnamed narrator specifies that “the captain's dark melancholy arose from a double cause: the death of Bug-Jargal, otherwise known as Pierrot, and the loss of his dear Marie” (Bongie 197), concluding that d'Auverney has come to assume the behavior he previously observed in Bug-Jargal.

23 Edward D. Seeber's work from 1936, “Oroonoko in France in the XVIIIth Century,” builds off prior studies, including one that traces the emergence of a figure such as Bug-Jargal back to English author Aphra Behn's widely read Oroonoko, or the Royal Slave. Seeber deems the eighteenth century “a period in which the Negro emerges from his despised condition and takes on heroic qualities and possibilities” (953), and connects this in part to the increasing prevalence of abolitionist thought at the time. Hayden White, however, asserts in his examination of “The Noble Savage Theme as Fetish” that the “idolization of the natives of the New World only occurs after the conflict between Europeans and the natives had already been decided and when, and therefore, it could no longer hamper the exploitation of the latter by the former” (186). Yet the context of the Haitian Revolution provides a counterexample in which the “conflict” becomes suddenly unresolved, thereby allowing Bug-Jargal to function, not as an empty trope, but as a figure capable of effecting real social change. It is also important to note that while Bongie writes that modern readers “can only be disheartened at the extent to which Hugo's novel reduces one of the most momentous events in the history of anti-colonial resistance to a reactionary tale about villainous mulattoes, frenzied negresses, and one rather docile noble savage” (37), Hugo never refers to Bug-Jargal as such nor uses the term within his novel. As Ter Ellingson points out in The Myth of the Noble Savage, the concept did not originate with Rousseau as popularly believed (2-4), this being the idea of “a mythic personification of natural goodness by a romantic glorification of savage life” (1). Rather, the concept seemingly began with lawyer and “traveler-ethnographer” Lescarbot in the early 1600s. Ellingson asserts that Lescarbot determined “that by their free practice of hunting, which is also an 'image of war' and defense of the innocent, the 'savages' of America occupy a status that corresponds, from a legal standpoint, to the nobility of Europe [as only the nobility in Europe were allowed to hunt]” (23). Bug-Jargal does not obviously hunt in the novel, yet saves Marie from the crocodile. He is romanticized by d'Auverney for the “nobleness of his bearing; the beauty of his form” (Bongie 80), yet there is no contest between civilization and an impossible return to nature; instead, there is the old order rendered irretrievable, and in its place, revolutionary change.
Though d'Auverney cannot initially understand Bug-Jargal's willingness to allow himself to be killed, d'Auverney soon assumes an even more absurd position that Bug-Jargal himself contests. While Bug-Jargal is imprisoned for defying d'Auverney's uncle in defense of another slave, d'Auverney explains that

“[w]hat astonished me was that, believing himself [“Pierrot”/Bug-Jargal] condemned to die, he did not take advantage of any of the means of escape that were in his power. I asked him about this. 'I must stay,' he answered icily. 'They would think I was afraid’” (Bongie 88).

D'Auverney is “astonished” by such a reaction, and yet after being reunited with Marie once the revolution has begun, d'Auverney realizes that he could “begin again [the life he imagined before the revolution]. Everything—within me and without—was beckoning me to do so. There was no material obstacle, no visible hindrance. I was free, I was happy, and yet I had to die” (Bongie 177). Even Bug-Jargal cannot understand why d'Auverney is so determined to return to the rebel leader Biassou to allow himself to be killed. D'Auverney insists that his “‘honour’” compels him. Bug-Jargal responds, “Nothing binds you to Biassou. Come with us” (Bongie 175). For that reason d'Auverney is correct in that there is no “material obstacle, no visible hindrance.” No one holds d'Auverney prisoner, that much is clear. By reading this statement in line with the text's attempt to work through its fear of the perceived threat of racial mixedness, d'Auverney has to die because in order for him to verify the essence of his nobility, he must be willing to sacrifice himself; for purity to distinguish itself from mixedness, purity must prove itself to the very mixedness it fears and desires to contain. But even in this, d'Auverney doubles Bug-Jargal rather than Bug-Jargal mirroring d'Auverney. Bug-Jargal achieves his death before
d'Auverney does, while Bug-Jargal's family is sacrificed\textsuperscript{24} long before d'Auverney's. If nobility serves a means of confirming racial purity in opposition to mixedness, nobility paradoxically can only verify itself through self-sacrifice, thus allowing racial purity to be extinguished while mixedness continues to survive.

But if we also read d'Auverney's retelling of his experiences in Haiti as an unconscious means of counteracting the French Revolution's attack on its aristocracy, the text's doubling of Bug-Jargal and d'Auverney seems obvious in that they are both noble. D'Auverney's death is what allows the Citizen-General to respond to the Citizen-Representative's search for d'Auverney: “It is a mercy, though, that this brave soldier was able to die in battle and escape being tortured by you. God be thanked! He whom you would put to death is already dead. He did not wait for you” (Bongie 199). In this way, the text that focuses so much of its attention on the containment of indeterminate identity in Haiti exposes the threat that whiteness poses to whiteness itself. In this context, d'Auverney's statement, “I was free, I was happy, and yet I had to die” alludes to this historical moment of violence in which the French effect a wounding of their own social body that d'Auverney, “born in France” and “sent at an early age to Saint Domingue” (Bongie 66), is unable to successfully act out in Haiti since Bug-Jargal is always there to save him. D'Auverney can only act out the unconscious loss of his French identity within Europe.

And if d'Auverney and Bug-Jargal are indeed doubles, does Bug-Jargal also

\textsuperscript{24} After Bug-Jargal reunites d'Auverney with Marie, Bug-Jargal explains his past to d'Auverney, that he saw his father, the king of Kakongo “broken on the wheel,” that his wife “was prostituted to the whites” and “died, begging I avenge her” and that his children “expired under the blows of a white man” (Bongie 171-172).
acquire and act out the death drive of the French Revolution through his contact with Europeans? Bug-Jargal explains, “We were happy, we were powerful. The Europeans came; they gave me all that useless knowledge that so impressed you” (Bongie 171). Bug-Jargal arguably reproduces this drive for death in two ways. Firstly, in that the loss of Bug-Jargal's family and the impossibility of any future with Marie ostensibly causes him to pursue his death. Secondly, that the Europeans, by enslaving a king and sending him to Saint Domingue, produce a revolutionary leader who aids in the overthrow of the French. The Haitian Revolution in which Bug-Jargal participates in turn effects the circumstances of d'Auverney's loss that spur him to seek his own death.

Yet even as Bug-Jargal and d'Auverney both achieve their deaths, the effects of each are not the same. In her discussion of the “Male Malady,” Margaret Waller argues that “the mal du siècle hero is incapable of social production, the plot revolves around his inability to carry on society's reproduction” (141). The start of the revolution prevents d'Auverney from consummating his marriage. Bug-Jargal has children but cannot save them (Bongie 171-72). D'Auverney responds to the loss of his family by escaping the collapse of French society in Saint Domingue and, rather than remarry, pursues death in battle. Bug-Jargal also achieves his death following the loss of his family, but first radically disrupts French colonial control over Saint

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25 After Bug-Jargal reunites d'Auverney with Marie, Bug-Jargal says, “You are no longer unhappy. I, on the contrary, will always be so!” (Bongie 170). Much earlier in the narrative Hugo's text entertains the very possibilities it would initially negate and efface when d'Auverney narrates, “As for that peculiar way in which he [Bug-Jargal, still the unnamed rival] reproached me for having killed the crocodile, it bespoke in the slave a disgust for life that needed no further explanation than his own condition, without it being necessary to drag in the hypothesis of an impossible love for the master's daughter” (Bongie 80).
Domingue and so engages in a profound act of social production. In this way, the text suggests that the death drive can effect a different outcome depending on the individual and context in which it operates; here racial difference allows Bug-Jargal to evade the paralysis of a death-driven whiteness voided of its political, material, and social privilege. Yet even as the French perspective of Hugo's narrators cannot sanction the loss of Haiti, Hugo's text exalts Bug-Jargal as individual. It is Thaddeus who says of Bug-Jargal, “Oh, he was a man, he was!” and that Bug-Jargal “was well and truly worth it, that's for certain! He was black, it's true, but gunpowder is also black, and...and...' The worthy sergeant would have liked to bring his bizarre comparison to an honourable close. Perhaps there was something about the comparison that attracted him but it was in vain that he tried to express it. After several times attacking his idea from all sides, like the general of an army who fails to take possession of a fortified town he abruptly lifted siege” (Bongie 60).

The difficulty Thaddeus encounters in his attempt to articulate his comparison of Bug-Jargal and gunpowder points to the problematic endeavor of collapsing difference and eliding complexity in a bid to unearth evidence of “sameness” through shared characteristics—much as the doubling of Bug-Jargal and d'Auverney leads to narrative displacement. As Susan Stanford Friedman writes in “Why Not Compare?” the “Self-Other relationship that constitutes individual and collective identities enfolds comparison at its core” (37) and that to “learn through comparison that others

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26 The 1979 Roger Toumson version of Bug-Jargal bears the title of “Bug-Jargal ou la Révolution Haïtienne” which has the interesting effect of equating the name Bug-Jargal with the Revolution by suggesting that one could call the novel either “Bug-Jargal” or “the Haitian Revolution,” with presumably the same effect, thereby suggesting that Bug-Jargal as individual embodies the historical event.
see things differently is to recognize the constructedness of one's own frame of reference” as “one effect of comparing cultures is to call into question the standards of the dominant precisely because it is unveiled as not universal” (38). Hugo's text is not ready to fully work through the “constructedness” of its frame of reference, but Bug-Jargal's declaration that they were “happy and powerful” before the Europeans came serves to question “the standards of the dominant” at moment when European colonial control is suddenly undermined. Finally, Thaddeus's praise of Bug-Jargal, the revolutionary leader whose actions violently force the French from Saint Domingue, suggests that it is within the narrative space of the novel that unthinkable historical loss—conscious and unconscious—can be incorporated into the very perspective that rejects such a loss through the story of the individual.

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Section Two: A Crisis of Structure

Bongie notes that the first edition of Bug-Jargal from 1826 includes “an epigraph by an 'unknown author' (Hugo himself), which would be eventually dropped in the 1830s: 'C'est le bonheur de vivre/Qui fait la gloire de mourir!' ('In the joy of living / Resides the glory of dying!')” (53). Here Hugo's text begins with an epigraph that extols life lived for its end. To choose one's death is a final act of punctuation in the narrative of the individual and an attempt to conclusively determine its meaning, much as Peter Brooks suggests in Reading for the Plot that

we are able to read present moments—in literature, and by extension, in life—as endowed with narrative meaning only because we read
them in anticipation of the structuring power of those endings that will retrospectively give them the order and significance of plot (94).

Even in the absence of its epigraph, Hugo's novel begins by anticipating the end of Captain d'Auverney's life. D'Auverney's retrospective reflection on the death of Bug-Jargal—the narrativization of which concludes d'Auverney's homodiegetic narration—is in turn what seemingly allows d'Auverney to die. If we read this in terms of doubling, by telling the story of Bug-Jargal, d'Auverney has told his own, and if Bug-Jargal has died, d'Auverney must die too. Or, if we read this in terms of structure, d'Auverney as narrator, having arrived at the end of his story, has also arrived at the end of the novel, and so d'Auverney is caught up in the storytelling structures that require resolution.

D'Auverney's death, in turn, is what enables the unnamed narrator of the frame to finally return to the image of the guillotine that d'Auverney associates with himself from the beginning: “Since the enemy's cannon always spares me,' he [d'Auverney] would say, 'perhaps the guillotine, which strikes down all those who rise to the top, might have favoured me with its attention” (Bongie 64). The threat of the guillotine is only a conceptual one in Hugo's text, a symbol of a socially destabilizing violence perpetrated by the French against the French, of a divided perception that splits the individual in another kind of doubling: as the Citizen-General says to the Citizen-Representative in the final note, “you denounce it [d'Auverney's name] as the name of a traitor, I declare it to be that of a hero; you consign him to ignominy, I to glory; you erect a guillotine for him, and I a memorial” (Bongie 199). This is another facet of the unconscious loss of the French Revolution: the loss of unified self. As no one actually

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suffers death by guillotine in the novel, Hugo's novel anticipates a violence that it never represents, arguably in anticipation of the finality of a physical severance that mirrors the split in the social perception of an individual.

Hugo's text can only again acknowledge the threat that whiteness poses itself after it represents the also unthinkable possibility of a successful slave revolution.27 This suggests that the text must first attempt to reconcile the conscious, material loss of Saint Domingue as a French possession before approaching its unconscious loss,28 a sudden destabilization of what it means to be a French aristocrat, to which the loss of Saint Domingue ultimately contributes. As previously examined, the text largely focuses its attention first on the ostensibly external threat of racial mixing.

Hugo cannot actually contain the existence of racial mixedness, of course, but by structuring his text around the death of its racially pure protagonists, Hugo suggests that the end of purity is the end of all things, that when the racially pure die, there is no story left to tell. Concluding the novel through character death therefore serves as the discursive means by which Hugo denies mixedness further instances of representation. Yet a text so concerned with conclusively determining individual ends also contains, through the text's inability or unwillingness to represent historical outcomes, the possibility of beginning again in the anticipation that this end is not the

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27 D'Auverney explains to his audience: “It's not that anyone at the time, even those quickest to sound the alarm, seriously expected a slave revolt—this class was too greatly despised for it to be feared” (Bongie 71).
28 D'Auverney seems to navigate the boundary between conscious and unconscious loss when he explains to his audience: “Unexpected adversity resembles the torpedo-fish: it strikes, but what it strikes it numbs.... Everything that exists then seems impossible and absurd to us; we scarcely believe in our existence, because finding nothing around us of what once comprised our being, we do not understand how it could all have disappeared without sweeping us away along with it, nor why we should be all that is left of our life” (Bongie 154-155)
end. If “the traumatic loss of the 'pearl of Antilles' was not readily accepted by many in France, and after Napoleon's fall hopes resurfaced that a 'restoration' of French rule on the island might be possible, through negotiations or military force” (Bongie 26), what seems the end—with the independence of Haiti as the unthinkable telos of the “other” that displaces the presumed predominance of the French colonial narrative (“our history”)—need not be accepted if a subsequent return to French control was anticipated to occur, reducing the revolution to a failed revolt in retrospect.

Hugo's text thus exposes a tension between its insistence on the ostensible narrative closure of individual ends fictively enforced within the realm of authorial control, and the actual historical outcomes that the text approaches but cannot acknowledge.29 If the novel contains the implicit possibility of a future return to French colonial rule, such a return is not something any individual author can actually bring about. The novel instead focuses on reestablishing the semantic boundaries of whiteness and investing the figure of the French aristocrat with the authority to explain what happened in Haiti. The text stages conversations between d'Auverney and mixed-race characters as a means of discrediting what the other characters have to say, yet this causes Hugo's novel to lend narrative space to the very voices of mixed-race characters that it attempts to silence. These dissenting voices in turn recall a time prior to, as well as outside of, French control and threaten to divert the attention of the reader from the narrative of the death-driven French aristocrat by

29 Caruth posits in “Trauma and Experience” that “Freud's late insight into this inextricable and paradoxical relation between history and trauma…suggests that what trauma has to tell us – the historical and personal truth it transmits – is intricately bound up with its refusal of historical boundaries; that its truth is bound up with its crisis of truth” (203).
imagining other ways of living.

When d'Auverney wants to know if Habibrah can tell him who was singing—the answer being Bug-Jargal then unknown and unnamed—Habibrah seizes upon the Spanish language and the ways in which the disembodied voice eludes the confines of slavery and the resulting racial hierarchy. Habibrah narrates:

“All of a sudden, the wind bolstered this concert with some words from a language that you call Spanish, the first that I ever lisped—when my age was counted by months and not by years, when my mother used to carry me on her back in a sling made of red and yellow strips of wool. I love that language. To me it recalls a time when I was merely small and not yet a dwarf, just a child and not yet someone's fool. I moved closer to the voice and I heard the end of the song.” (Bongie 77)

For Habibrah, Spanish recalls a maternal bond from a time that still holds the possibility of undetermined futurity. Language here is not tied to an enslaved or racialized body, but posits the beginning of a life unbound by any stigmatized end.

Though d'Auverney insists he must die, Biassou—the revolutionary leader who holds him prisoner—does not. He informs d'Auverey: “your life depends on you. You can save it if you so desire” (Bongie 151), yet for d'Auverney, “my pride found the idea of assuming the role of Biassou's diplomatic orthographer simply too distasteful for me to waver even one moment. And besides, what did life matter to me? I refused his offer” (Bongie 153). Biassou exclaims: “You'd rather die than fix up a few strokes of the pen on a scrap of parchment?” and tells d'Auverney, “Listen here, young fool. I'm not as obstinate as you. I'm giving you until tomorrow evening to make up your mind to obey me [and rewrite the letter].... And keep in mind that
with us death is not simply a matter of dying”30 (Bongie 154). Here d'Auverney seems less obviously compelled by any historical death drive than, in the context of racial conflict in Haiti, he is unwilling to lend the privilege of his native French fluency to the words of mixed race and non-white individuals. D'Auverney would rather death render his “purity of language”31 inaccessible than retain any possibility for his own happiness.

Yet even as Biassou offers d'Auverney a chance at life, Biassou warns d'Auverney to “keep in mind that with us death is not simply a matter of dying” presumably in indication that a sustained experience of torture awaits, but also that he who determines the moment and manner of death asserts a semantic control over the expired life. As d'Auverney witnesses previously, Biassou announces to his men: “Go and get two sawhorses, two boards, and a saw, and take this man away. Jacques Belin, carpenter at the Cape, you should thank me, for I'm furnishing you with a carpenter's death” (Bongie 135). Here the carpenter experiences death as a consequence of enforced obsolescence; Biassou effects “a death of the Saint Domingue carpenter” in a double voiding of social position and sense of self; Belin dies by the trade that sustains his living, as being a white carpenter in Saint Domingue as either an identity

30 Though Biassou later responds: “Ah! You refuse to serve as my secretary! It's just as well, you're right, for in any case I would have had you killed afterwards. No one can be allowed to live with a secret of Biassou's. And besides, my friend, I promised our good chaplain the pleasure of your death.” Hugo's text thus seems torn between its insistence that d'Auverney need not die even as he insists he must, and the notion that death follows d'Auverney regardless of circumstance, and that his only means of retaining control over the meaning of his existence is to choose how and when he dies.

31 “Purity” of language becomes a means for d'Auverney to assess Bug-Jargal according to a European standard of sophistication and achievement: “Chatting with him, I noticed that he spoke French and Spanish fluently, and that his mind did not appear devoid of mental culture... This man was so inexplicable in so many other respects that up until then the purity of his speech had not yet struck me” (Bongie 87).
position or occupation is no longer possible. When d'Auverney tells Bug-Jargal he must die, then, it is arguably to assert his own end in order to evade the collapse of meaning—or rather, of an aristocratic code—that follows the Haitian and French Revolution. As the Citizen-General informs the Citizen-Representative in the final note that: “'He [d'Auverney] whom you would put to death is already dead. He did not wait for you’” (Bongie 199). Yet unlike d'Auverney, Biassou does not die within Hugo's text, and is perhaps the most significant character to evade any representation of death. In this way, the figure of Biassou retains the possibility of meaning always in play.

Even though d'Auverney dismisses Habibrah's words as “bizarre meanderings” (Bongie 78), Spanish becomes the means of conveying memory from one race to another. As Paul Ricoeur writes of memory, “memory establishes the meaning of the past” (476). In this way, Bug-Jargal, despite acting out his own death drive, instills his story within d'Auverney and ensures that his memory of the past will propagate in the future.

D'Auverney is searching for his unknown rival—Bug-Jargal—when

“a moment later there rose up from the depths of the wood a voice, the harmony of which had something both manly and plaintive about it. The low-pitched notes of the guitar blended in with the words of a Spanish romance—each of which reverberated so deeply in my ears that even today my memory can still conjure them up almost word for word.” (Bongie 75)

Words and notes resonate together such that d'Auverney cannot help but receive them. His memory becomes a chamber of sounds that echoes the experience of the other. The act of “conjuring” the words up suggests some kind of spell that renders
the words internally bound until d'Auverney, entranced, summons them in an act of narration.

Yet Bug would willingly forget just as d'Auverney must always remember. It is through the form of the romance that Bug discursively represents a precolonial space as he sings of the “land of my fathers where I was king, the land where I was free! …I would forget all that for you [Marie]. I would forget them all: kingdom, family, duties, vengeance, yes, even vengeance—though the moment will soon come to pluck this bitter and delicious fruit” (75). Bug-Jargal must “pluck this bitter and delicious fruit” and fall from Eden already knowing the consequence: his “vengeance” may begin a revolution, but it cannot restore the “land of my fathers where, the land where I was free” nor unite him with Marie. Yet in the brief span of the song, the revolution does not seem a thing already only inevitable. Bug-Jargal's words suggest that the revolution need not happen—even though it will and it must.

Ricoeur further argues that “excess of memory resembles repetition compulsion, which Freud tells us puts a turn to action in the place of genuine memory through which the present and the past could be reconciled with each other” (477). In this context, if d'Auverney assumes the excess of Bug-Jargal's memory, d'Auverney arguably also acts out Bug-Jargal's vengeance—only Bug's vengeance is towards the French—and so d'Auverney must ensure his own death. Yet by first telling his story, and also that of Bug-Jargal before choosing his own end, d'Auverney not only fulfills

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32 En route to his execution, having still refused Biassou's offer, d'Auverney remarks: “From every corner of this virgin soil there arose a primitive perfume like the one that the first man must have breathed as he smelled the first roses of Eden” (180). D'Auverney is treading the path of the revolutionary “vengeance” of the other.
Bug-Jargal's need for vengeance against the French, but retains control over the trajectory of his individual narrative, a narrative that survives with his audience.  

Though Bug-Jargal focuses on and foreshadows the individual ends it will ultimately narrate, the 1826 preface emphasizes the open-ended context of his larger literary project to which Bug-Jargal belongs. Hugo writes that he must also inform readers that the story of Bug-Jargal is only a fragment of a more extensive piece of work.... The episode being published here was part of that series of narratives; it can be detached from it without any inconvenience to the reader and, besides, the larger work of which it was to have been a part is not finished, will never be finished, and is not worth the trouble of finishing (Bongie 57)

Here Hugo undermines his own emphasis on definitive ends and reveals that Bug-Jargal was “detached” as a means of specifically and selectively concluding a particular episode. His assertion that “events have accommodated themselves to the book” again suggests that an author may narratively inscribe aspects of an event within the form of the novel, while history itself, like Hugo's larger project, “is not finished” and “will never be finished.”

That Hugo deems this series of narratives “not worth the trouble of finishing” indicates the critical distance he assumes towards himself as the author that was—narratives that could have been told have now lost the imperative of conclusive

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Of course, in the hands of his audience, d'Auverney's story may never again be told, or, through repeated retelling, be transformed over time. It is the written text of the novel that most ostensibly secures d'Auverney's story in its original form, though Bug-Jargal—itself a rewrite—was significantly rewritten in early translations such as The Slave King, from the Bug-Jargal of Victor Hugo (1833) (Bongie 9). In the “Preface” for The Slave King, the editors write that “we hope he [Hugo] will excuse us for the liberties we have taken with his splendid and original romance. We are quite sensible of our own presumption in meddling with the work of so great a master; yet we venture to express our opinion, that if he himself were to alter 'Bug-Jargal,' on the plan sketched by us, he would render it one of the best and most lasting of his productions.”
telling. As the end of a trajectory recalls a prior origin, Hugo's text is in some ways as much concerned with establishing the right beginning—in its prefaces, in the frame, and at the start of d'Auverney's narration—as it is with ending, only beginning again for Hugo's text constitutes an iterative process; there is no one beginning. Hugo's 1832 preface causes him to reflect on “the author's first work” and “what he set out to do here, like those travellers who turn round in the middle of their journey to see if they can still discern in the misty folds of the horizon the place from which they set out,” and that what he, as the author of Bug-Jargal, set out to do was cast a reminiscent look back at the time at that time of serenity, boldness, and confidence when he grappled with such an immense topic: the revolt of the Saint Domingue blacks in 1791, a struggle of giants, three worlds having a stake in the matter—Europe and Africa as combatants, America as the field of battle (Bongie 58).

Hugo uses his prefaces to work through and reflect on his position as author in relation to the subject matter of Bug-Jargal. He first identifies his topic as “the revolt of the Saint Domingue blacks in 1791”—the conscious loss of the text—while the act of “grappling” suggests that the topic was not so easily rendered in narrative form within the confines of the novel. Hugo then outlines the struggle between “Europe and Africa” that emphasizes the work of the frame: to excavate the unconscious loss on the part of the French aristocrat that results in a crisis of being—that the descendants of Africa could forcefully displace colonists from Europe, and, though Hugo elides this from his introduction, that France eliminated its previous forms of privilege from within.

That is why when Hugo asserts in his 1826 preface that “events have
accommodated themselves to the book, not the book to the events,” and posits the origin of the work of the author as preceding that of the historical event, Hugo reveals the selectively linear parameters of his comparison: “Bug-Jargal” (1820) may have preceded the Franco-Haitian Accord of 1825, but Bug-Jargal followed in 1826, just as Hugo was born in 1802, years after the Haitian Revolution began (Bongie 49). Hugo's comparison requires that he in part divest himself of the historical past that he narrates (1791) and implicitly demarcate the appearance of the first version of his work as the authoritative (authorial) “beginning.” As Paul de Man argues:

“Modernity exists in the form of a desire to wipe out whatever came earlier, in the hope of reaching at last a point that could be called a true present, a point of origin that marks a new departure. This combined interplay of deliberate forgetting with an action that is also a new origin reaches the full power of the idea of modernity.” (148)

Bug-Jargal's iterative attempts to begin again thus serve to reach further back into the past as the narrative's progression requires a recollection of what came before to explain the significance of events as the text's narrators order them. At the end of the frame, just before d'Auverney begins his narration, d'Auverney “remained lost in thought for a moment, as if conjuring up in his memory events long since displaced by others” (Bongie 65). Ultimately what constitutes the end of Bug-Jargal—the final note—is not really the end. Rather, it is the 1832 preface that is the ostensible conclusion of Hugo's work on the text—a second beginning that reflects back on a prior beginning (the 1826 edition of Bug-Jargal), a beginning that came of Hugo's rewrite of a prior beginning for him as author—“Bug-Jargal” in 1819-1820—each moment in the text's production receding further into the past with every new
revision, publication, and preface.

As Roger Borderie begins his “Préface” of Bug-Jargal:

“Nous qui sommes modernes, serons anciens dans quelques siècles,’ écrivait La Bruyère. Voulait-il dire que le temps confère quelque autorité aux choses qui durent ? Ou bien entendait-il que la modernité se périme avec le temps ? Auquel cas nous lui répondrions, avec Stravinski, que l’oeuvre qui a été moderne en son temps, le restera à jamais.”34 (7)

In Hugo's text, a tension exists between a drive for death—to establish the end and definitively so—and a drive to always begin again from a critical distance, knowing what the individual knows now. It is a tension between irreversible linear progressions—what has happened has happened and cannot be undone—and a cyclical return that always returns different than it was—that what is to come could change, displace, or ease what has happened before. Hugo's novel exposes, within its attempts to definitively establish the beginning and end of its own event, that the past is a network of unrealized possibilities for life and other possible lives, and it is this very possibility of possibility that continually lives again in the form of the novel in the moment of reading the text.

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Section Three: A Crisis of Recognition

Having retraced and reconstructed their shared narrative, both d'Auverney and

34 “We who are moderns, will be ancients in a few centuries,’ wrote La Bruyère. Did he mean that time confers some authority on things that endure? Or rather that modernity perishes with the times? To this we would respond with Stravinski that 'the work that was modern in its time stays that way forever.'” (my translation)
Thaddeus pronounce Bug-Jargal's death. “Solemnly, in a voice racked with pain, d'Auverney finished off the story: 'Bug-Jargal was dead!'” (Bongie 197). But this isn't quite the end. It is Thaddeus who claims the last line of d'Auverney's homodiegetic narration: “‘Yes,’ he said. 'And he had spared my life. And I'm the one who killed him!' (197). Thaddeus acknowledges and accepts from the beginning of the frame that he caused Bug-Jargal's death, but it is only at the end of d'Auverney's narrative that Thaddeus is able to work through Bug-Jargal's death and use the pronoun “I” rather than distancing himself from the trauma of the event by referring to himself in the third person.

This raises the question within Hugo's text of who Bug-Jargal is, and what it means to have killed him. Thaddeus's difficulty in specifying a single name for Bug-Jargal reproduces itself in the dialogue of d'Auverney's listeners. Henry says, “‘This Bug, otherwise known as Pierrot, piques my curiosity in a singular fashion’” (65), and addresses d'Auverney with: “‘I hope, my dear friend, that you'll be so good as to fulfill your part of the bargain by telling us the story of your lame dog and of Bug … whatever, otherwise known as Pierrot’” (65). The former instance seems a parroting of what Thaddeus has said, while the latter seems more representative of ordinary speech when Henry gives up recalling the original name and ends with “‘Bug...whatever.’” Here the novel's title remains yet unassimilable into the frameworks of understanding of d'Auverney's French audience. The unfamiliar sounds of the name have yet to acquire a comprehensible context or meaning.  

35 As the Haitian Revolution begins, the same day as the marriage of d'Auverney and Marie,
That Thaddeus continually refers to “Bug-Jargal, otherwise known as Pierrot,” also reveals a temporal disconnect of identity: Thaddeus associates the name “Pierrot” with Bug-Jargal when he was known as the slave of d'Auverney's uncle, before later being revealed as a former African king. Bug-Jargal, however, is the name of the revolutionary leader. Thaddeus has yet to collapse and combine these two names into a single identity and instead holds them in tension as a kind of “before” and “after” of being, in an act of non-integrated recognition in which two names produce two separate instances of an individual that Thaddeus cannot reconcile.

In Hugo's text, a moment of “recognition” is not just a revelation that occurs in an instant but is an instant within an iterative process. Repeated experiences of recognition do not necessarily result in understanding, but rather accumulate alongside the possibility of producing understanding. Hugo's text can only begin to work towards this possibility by re-staging past experiences through the act of narration. As Thaddeus recounts:

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36 Just as d'Auverney believes he has no story to tell, he persists in his inability to recognize the purpose of his narrative: “It is not clear to me, gentleman, why I am telling you all this. These are not the sort of ideas that lend themselves to being understood, by oneself or by others. They are something one needs to have felt” (Bongie 155). Gretchen Braun makes reference to the way in which Caruth, in “[e]xplaining the resistance of survivors who hesitate to speak of the traumatic event...states, 'beyond the loss of precision, there is another, more profound disappearance: the loss, precisely, of the event's incomprehensibility, the force of its affront to understanding. By reducing the ethically and emotionally obscene event—the event so totally unacceptable that it cannot be
“I saw a big negro defending himself against eight or ten of my comrades, like Beelzebub himself he was. I swam over and recognized Pierrot, otherwise called Bug... But we don't find that out yet, right, my Captain? I recognized Pierrot. Ever since the capture of the fort [when Bug-Jargal carries off Marie], we hadn't been on the best of terms. I seized him by the throat. He was about to dispose of me with one thrust of his dagger when he saw who I was, and instead of killing me, surrendered. Which was a great misfortune, my Captain, for had he not surrendered... But that's for later.” (108)

Thaddeus highlights the ways in which the sjužet\textsuperscript{37} determines the reader's perception of the fabula\textsuperscript{38} by suggesting that “Pierrot” should not, or perhaps cannot, be known as “Bug-Jargal” at this point in the narrative, even when Thaddeus himself has already established that Bug-Jargal is “Pierrot” and that Thaddeus gave the order that killed him. “But we don't find that out yet, right, my Captain?” and “that's for later” are indicative of Thaddeus's attempt to narrate the events in the order they occurred, suggesting that for the revelation of who Bug-Jargal is and what happened to him to have meaning, the pronouncement must be arrived at via a very particular narrative sequencing of events.

As Thaddeus collaborates with d'Auverney in an act of narrative production, what occurs is not a displacement along the axis of race, but of class. Thaddeus, a

\textsuperscript{37}“In Russian formalist terminology, the set of narrated situations and events in the order of their presentation to the receiver” (Prince 89)

\textsuperscript{38}“The set of narrated situations and events in their chronological sequence; the basic STORY material” (Prince 30)
sergeant and not of noble birth, seemingly defers to what he perceives as the ordering principle of d'Auverney's narrative, yet does not actually wait for d'Auverney's response. Instead, he tells the story according to his assessment of it, and, as examined earlier, claims the final line of d'Auverney's narrative. At the same time, the shared narrative between Thaddeus and d'Auverney suggests that rather than the voices of non-nobles merely becoming subsumed within the narrative of the aristocrat, d'Auverney's narrative becomes a participatory process.

Just as Hugo's text expands the possibilities of who can tell a story, it is Thaddeus who recognizes the significance of Bug-Jargal in relation to d'Auverney in a way that d'Auverney cannot or will not acknowledge. Thaddeus articulates this understanding via the character of Rask. If Hugo's text is most overtly the story of d'Auverney and Bug-Jargal, it is the appearance of Rask and Thaddeus's explanation of his efforts to retrieve Rask that first establish the link between Bug-Jargal and d'Auverney. In response to learning that Thaddeus has become wounded in the process of saving Rask, d'Auverney reprimands Thaddeus:

"Thaddeus!..." the captain burst out in an irritated tone. Then he added, more gently: 'How can you have been so mad as to risk yourself like—and for a dog?' 'It was not for a dog, my Captain, it was for Rask.' D'Auverney's expression softened completely. The sergeant continued: 'For Rask, the mastiff of Bug....' 'Enough, Thad! Enough of that, my friend,' the captain appealed, placing his hand over his eyes." (Bongie 63)

D'Auverney does not perceive Rask himself as important, but Thaddeus's reference to Rask's connection to Bug-Jargal elicits an unbearable affective response that

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39 Leopold d'Auverney is an officer and possesses the nobiliary particle “de” (“of”) that Thaddeus does not.
d'Auverney immediately attempts to suppress. Thaddeus indicates that he understands that the physical absence of Rask, something d'Auverney is willing to accept, actually poses a more significant and unconscious loss of the self. “You see, my Captain,” Thaddeus explains at the beginning of the frame, “ever since this poor Rask got lost, it was very clear to me—by your leave, if I may be so bold—that you were missing something” (Bongie 59).

As d'Auverney's narrative approaches its end, d'Auverney inadvertently illustrates the ways in which Rask functions as an extension of Bug-Jargal. As Habibrah tries to pull d'Auverney into the abyss, “I rallied my spent forces and once again shouted: 'Bug-Jargal!' A bark answered me” (Bongie 190). Rask responds for Bug-Jargal, and so directed, pulls d'Auverney to safety. Yet even when Bug-Jargal explicitly tells d'Auverney, “I am Rask for you” (Bongie 159), it is only Thaddeus, and not d'Auverney who recognizes that Rask and Bug-Jargal act as one, and that if Bug-Jargal and d'Auverney function as doubles, to allow Rask to be lost would be not only lose to Bug-Jargal a second time, but to cause d'Auverney to lose himself. In the end note, the unnamed narrator details that d'Auverney “played the decisive role in the latest victory that our arms have secured.... He took the redoubt, met his death there, and we were victorious. Sergeant Thaddeus of the 32nd and a dog were found dead next to him” (Bongie 199). By retrieving Rask, it is Thaddeus, who, having given the order to fire on Bug-Jargal, brings Bug-Jargal back so that two sets of doubles, Thaddeus and d'Auverney, and d'Auverney and Bug-Jargal, can find their end together.
Whereas Thaddeus, not of noble birth, is able to understand d'Auverney's relationship with Rask and Bug-Jargal in a way d'Auverney cannot, d'Auverney's difficulty in making sense of Bug-Jargal as both a slave and an African king, as well as finally recognizing Bug-Jargal as a revolutionary leader, is arguably tied up with the ways in which d'Auverney's privilege as a French aristocrat in Saint Domingue is founded upon slavery. To recognize Bug-Jargal for who he is, is also to reveal truths that are unacceptable to d'Auverney and the French perspective of the novel. Shortly after d'Auverney is reunited with Marie, Bug-Jargal asks d'Auverney, "'Have you not heard that Bug-Jargal was being held prisoner?' he said impatiently. 'Yes, but what does this Bug-Jargal have to do with you?' He seemed astonished in turn, and answered solemnly: 'I am Bug-Jargal'" (173). A chapter break occurs and d'Auverney explains,

“You might say that when it came to this man I was accustomed to being surprised. Not without astonishment had I seen the slave Pierrot transformed just moments earlier into an African king. I was all the more struck with admiration now that I recognized in him the redoubtable and magnanimous Bug-Jargal.” (Bongie 173)

Bug's “impatience” reflects the text's struggle to rid itself of its own opacity in a

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40 Perhaps the only instance in which Bug-Jargal does not recognize d'Auverney occurs when d'Auverney visits Bug-Jargal, then “Pierrot,” imprisoned and sentenced to death for moving against the uncle in defense of another slave. “He was looking straight at me as if he didn't know me,” recounts d'Auverney (Bongie 85). “I embraced him, squeezed his hand, set him straight. 'Don't you recognize me?' I asked him. 'I knew you were a white man, and as far as the whites are concerned, no matter how good they might be a black man counts for so very little’” (Bongie 86). Here recognition seems to come less from the production of narrative than as a result of physical contact—the embrace, the squeezing of the hand—while whatever is said to “set him straight,” to make Bug-Jargal understand who d'Auverney is, is not specifically elaborated. Even more significant, Bug-Jargal's words suggest that “whites” can only be so “good” when the value of whiteness depends on devaluing other races.

41 As Bongie points out in “A Note on the Text,” these chapter breaks were added in after the 1826 edition. In the 1826 edition, there were only two breaks to mark the beginning and end of d'Auverney's homodiegetic narrative within the frame and final note (Bongie 53).
doubling of astonishment; Bug-Jargal cannot understand why d'Auverney does not perceive what has long been before him. That d'Auverney only just now comprehends what Bug expressed early on through his Spanish romance—that he was a former African king—suggests that the text requires a repeated retelling of the narrative of the other in order for it to be integrated into the master narrative of the French perspective that structures Hugo's text. When Bug-Jargal first sings of his past, he is yet unnamed. D'Auverney, in response, “was beside myself with rage. 'King! Black! Slave!' A mass of incoherent ideas, brought on by the inexplicable song I had just heard, whirled round in my head” (Bongie 76).

At this point in d'Auverney's narrative, there is no context in which d'Auverney can reconcile these concepts—“King! Black! Slave!”—within a single individual. That d'Auverney and Thaddeus understand Bug-Jargal as “the slave Pierrot” for most of the novel suggests that d'Auverney's narrative suppresses the subversive and radical revolutionary change associated with the name Bug-Jargal for as long as it can by valorizing “Pierrot” as noble for his actions as a slave: d'Auverney relates learning that it “often happened that he [“Pierrot”] would end up doing in one day the work of ten of his comrades so as to shield them from the punishment specified for negligence or fatigue” (Bongie 83). D'Auverney admires Bug-Jargal for accepting work and punishment in the place of others, presumably for his “nobility” of character. Yet such actions also lessen the discontent that would otherwise threaten the stability of the slave system.

D'Auverney can most easily admire “Pierrot the slave” so long as “Pierrot”
remains safely secured within the bottom rungs of Saint Domingue's oppressive social structures, since “every bone in my [d'Auverney's] body rejected the revolting supposition that I had a slave for a rival” (Bongie 73), as the state of being “rivals” implies some equality among individuals in pursuit of and each capable of obtaining a desired object or outcome. In this way, d'Auverney's prolonged inability to recognize Bug-Jargal as revolutionary leader suggests a reluctance on the part of the text to release, finally and fully, “Pierrot the slave” and acknowledge the radical social change that Bug-Jargal and his name—of no recognizable European origin—brings to Saint Domingue. Ultimately, d'Auverney is able to work through the contradictions of entering into a brotherhood with a former slave/rival and a revolutionary leader—and be “all the more struck with admiration now that I recognized in him the redoubtable and magnanimous Bug-Jargal” (Bongie 173)—because a shared sense of ethics, that of the dying “race” of nobility, mediates their dynamic. D'Auverney's acceptance of Bug-Jargal indicates some possibility for his acceptance of radical social change. His inability to recognize Habibrah, however, represents the text's most sustained acting out of its unconscious loss: the meaning and associated privilege of whiteness now destabilized and rendered uncertain.

When the Revolutionary leader Biassou holds d'Auverney captive, d'Auverney describes another individual,

“a very thick-set, very short man, a sort of dwarf whose face was hidden by a white veil with three holes pierced in it for the mouth and eyes, in the fashion of penitents. His hairy chest, though, was left exposed; its colour seemed to me that of a griffe's.... His head was topped with a pointed bonnet decorated with bells; once he drew near I was more than a little surprised to discover that it was the gorra of
Habibrah, except now, alongside the hieroglyphs that covered the makeshift mitre, you could see blood stains. No doubt this blood was that of the faithful jester. To me, these traces of murder seemed a new proof of his death, and they kindled in my heart one last regret. The minute the griotes noticed this inheritor of Habibrah's bonnet, they all cried out together, 'the obi!'” (Bongie 114)

D'Auverney uses the same terms with which he describes Habibrah at the beginning of his narrative—“dwarf” (Bongie 67) the racial designation “griffe” (Bongie 67), and “obi,” meaning “sorcerer” (Bongie 69)—yet he cannot recognize Habibrah through Habibrah's own veil, a veil that d'Auverney specifically recognizes as belonging to Habibrah: “the sparkling eyes of the little obi fastened on me through the openings of his veil and I once again detected a familiar tone hidden under the customary solemnity of his voice” (Bongie 130). Indeed, the sight of an individual who possesses the attributes and attire of Habibrah does not serve to call into question d'Auverney's assumption that Habibrah is dead, but rather, allows d'Auverney to establish his desired narrative more fully: “No doubt this blood was that of the faithful jester. To me, these traces of murder seemed a new proof of his death, and they kindled in my heart one last regret.” Only, there is never any definitive “proof” of Habibrah's death, only assumptions to be made in the absence of a body, and

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42 And “again, on hearing that angry voice, I had the impression of having encountered this accursed little man somewhere, but the memory proved elusive and I was left none the wiser” (Bongie 151).

43 “There was my ill-starred uncle lying on his blood-soaked bed, a dagger driven deep into his heart.... Also spotted with blood was the cot belonging to the dwarf Habibrah....There was no doubt in my mind that the jester had died a victim of his well-known attachment to my uncle, that he had been slaughtered by his fellow slaves, perhaps while defending his master. I bitterly reproached myself for the biases that had led me to make such false judgments regarding Habibrah and Pierrot; the tears wrung from me by my uncle's premature end were mingled with a sense of regret for his fool. On my orders, his body was searched for, but in vain. The negroes, I assumed, had carried the dwarf off and thrown him into the flames. I gave orders that, during the funeral service for my father-in-law, prayers be said for the repose of the faithful Habibrah's soul” (102). D'Auverney initially assumes that Habibrah dies for his associations with whiteness, “perhaps while defending
d'Auverney further undermines his own affirmation of “no doubt” by suggesting that he is accumulating evidence with which to support his theory.

In this way, the lack of recognition d'Auverney stages for his audience—in what seems a rather ineffectual attempt at suspense—instead serves to emphasize the manner in which d'Auverney as character negotiates the boundary of “knowing” and “not knowing” as he continually remarks upon but fails to recognize Habibrah in Saint Domingue, while exposing the process of un-knowing d'Auverney engages in as narrator in Europe. By retelling events without acknowledging any awareness of their outcome—that the individual who resembles Habibrah is Habibrah, and that Habibrah did not die defending d'Auverney's uncle as a consequence of the revolution, but rather killed the uncle and joined the revolution—d'Auverney as narrator can believe for a time what he would have had happen, even as he must inevitably reveal the truth to his listeners and again to himself. This, I would argue, exposes a longing on the part of the text to work through the loss of Haiti and, in doing so, for the old order to be reinstated;\(^{44}\) for Habibrah to have been an individual who died defending d'Auverney's uncle; for whiteness to regain the privilege of a dismantled hierarchy now reinstated.

Thus d'Auverney's “regret” for Habibrah's “death”—for the death of one who isn't really dead—seems indicative rather of d'Auverney's desire for that death to have occurred, thereby allowing d'Auverney to impose his own narrative meaning on

\(^{44}\) This could also be read as the unconscious desire on the part of the text to restore the Ancien Régime of France.
Habibrah's life by determining how it must have ended. While Habibrah clearly lives, however, d'Auverney cannot do this, and inadvertently expresses the extreme discomfort with which he witnesses Habibrah's behavior:

“I didn't like this slave. There was something too grovelling about this servility, and while there is nothing dishonourable about being a slave, there is something thoroughly degrading about being domesticated. I had a feeling of benevolent pity for those poor negroes I saw working all day with scarcely any clothing to hide their chains... Never once had he [Habibrah] begged a pardon from his master, who was so given to handing out punishments. Indeed, he was overheard one day, when believing himself to be alone with my uncle, encouraging him to show even more severity towards his unfortunate fellow slaves.” (Bongie 68)

Unlike Bug-Jargal's behavior as a slave—he alleviates the suffering of those around him until he can ensure slavery's systemic end—Habibrah renders d'Auverney all the more uneasy for demonstrating he somehow has assumed a privilege that whiteness reserves for itself by directing who should be punished and how. That d'Auverney refers to the “absolute despotism” of his uncle and that “most of the time we could do no more than relieve in secret the ill-usage we could not prevent” (Bongie 66) reveals that d'Auverney concerns himself with details such that he need not consider the system of slavery as a whole, and instead narratively renders it an immutable social and economic feature of Saint Domingue. Habibrah, in contrast, professes to have sought the opposite approach, and declares to d'Auverney: “I encouraged him [d'Auverney's uncle] to treat his slaves even more badly so as to hasten the hour of rebellion, so that the excess of oppression would finally bring the time for vengeance” (Bongie 184).

The moment at which d'Auverney finally recognizes Habibrah as d'Auverney
awaits his execution over the abyss is is a protracted one. “Miserable creature,’ I said to him, ‘who are you?’ ‘You are about to find out!’ he answered me.... Two names were burnt into the obi's hairy breast in whitish letters.... one of these names was...that of my uncle, my own name, d'Auverney! I was struck dumb with surprise” but still, recognition is slow to come:

“‘Well then, Leopold d'Auverney!’ the obi asked me. 'Does your name tell you mine?' Astonished to hear this man call me by name, I answered, 'no,' trying hard to rally my memory. '….But he is dead, that poor dwarf, and in any case he was devoted to us. You can't be Habibrah!’” (Bongie 182)

D'Auverney cannot accept ownership of the narrative of privilege written on the flesh before him and so cannot understand what he sees even as he recognizes his own name. D'Auverney's assertion that “he [Habibrah] is dead, that poor dwarf, and in any case he was devoted to us” exposes the extent to which d'Auverney has determinedly rewritten the past, and by re-staging his not knowing for his audience, exposes d'Auverney's wish for his narrative to show that Habibrah died devoted, and a last, impossible hope on the part of Hugo's text for the mixed-race characters it fears to reveal themselves as actually in support of maintaining the privileges of whiteness. D'Auverney believes Habibrah's entreaty to “prove to him [Habibrah] that whites are more worthy than mulattoes, masters more worthy than slaves” (Bongie 189), and in offering Habibrah his assistance, d'Auverney is nearly pulled into the abyss along with Habibrah who is determined, as ever, to ensure d'Auverney's death.

Yet d'Auverney is never fully allowed to fully remake the past, and Habibrah, for being one of the most prominent “monsters” of d'Auverney's text and bent on
vengeance until the very end, rather poignantly poses the question, “Do you think that just because I am mulatto, a misshapen dwarf, that I am not a man?” (Bongie 183).

In this way, the narratives of Habibrah, Bug-Jargal, and Biassou become inextricable from d'Auverney's, and so prevent d'Auverney from ever successfully retelling what “should have happened” from the perspective of a French aristocrat; too many voices forever contest his own.

For this reason, I would like to return to the moment shortly before Bug-Jargal reveals to d'Auverney that he has saved Marie. When d'Auverney accuses him of treachery, Bug-Jargal responds:

“I see the hatred in your eyes, as one day you had the chance to see it in mine. I know that you have suffered many calamities: your uncle butchered, your fields burned down, the throats of your friends slit. Your houses have been ransacked, your inheritance laid waste, but it is not I, it is my people, who did it. Look, one day I told you that your people had done me great harm, and you answered me that it was not you had done it. So what is it that I have done?" (Bongie 159)

Bug-Jargal uses the word “calamities” and so both reaffirms and offers an opposing view to that of the narrator of the frame. He acknowledges the “calamities” done to d'Auverney, yet exposes the way in which d'Auverney seemingly holds Bug-Jargal responsible for the actions of the collective, but cannot accept responsibility for slavery and colonialism, two institutions on which his privilege as a French aristocrat is founded. Just as d'Auverney's story begins as the story of himself and the story of

45 In “‘Bug-Jargal' et le 'style blanc,’” Pierre Laforgue points out that when d'Auverney cannot understand how Habibrah could react with violence against the master—d'Auverney's uncle—who allowed Habibrah to live in close proximity with him, Habibrah emphasizes that he was treated like a “dog.” Laforgue continues, “Comble de la logique, Habibrah parvient même à fonder de façon éthique ce dévoiement de toute morale: ‘Crois-tu donc que pour être mulâtre, nain et difforme, je ne sois homme ?’ Par cette extraordinaire provocation référentielle Habibrah revendique sa tartufferie et, trait de génie, renvoie d'Auverney à sa propre tartufferie, bien plus immorale que la sienne” (31).
the “other”—of Bug-Jargal, of a name his audience initially struggles to fully remember—Bug-Jargal's response reminds us that d'Auverney is the “other” of Bug-Jargal's story. The story of the individual is never the story of one, and if d'Auverney must lend narrative space to mixed-race individuals such as the equivocal planter, Habibrah, and Biassou to ostensibly assert validity of his own position, then the story of the French aristocrat, by incorporating these voices, actually becomes the story of revolutionary change—whether or not its narrators can sanction the losses incurred.

For as Roger Borderie writes in his Préface, at the time of Bug-Jargal: “Hugo est révolutionnaire et ne le sait encore”46 (10).

D'Auverney's act of retrospection is a difficult birth: d'Auverney dies, but the story lives, with the manner of consuming Hugo's text never quite finished, as every subsequent century offers up its editions, translations, introductions, and prefaces.

Instead of conclusively establishing any “moral truth,” Hugo's text functions to contain and reproduce its own internal contradictions. Such contradictions continually call for another working through in another context, by another reader, who, in glancing back at the horizon, will look into the past with a new perspective on how to begin again.

46 “Hugo is a revolutionary and doesn't know it yet” (my translation)
References


