Sylvia Wynter has identified the predicament of our time as one concerned with realizing a nonhierarchical we experience, or what she calls an ecumenical politics of the propter nos homines. It is a task, according to Wynter, that requires mapping an alternate genealogy of the human that delinks from Enlightenment representations of the human and instead recasts the human as a figure on the horizon, rooted in anticolonial struggle and thought. Wynter’s assertion is that we must move beyond Western episteme’s preoccupation with Man (what she calls an overrepresentation) as the controlling iconography for the Human in order to move toward the human, or a humanism that is “made to the measure of the world” and a genre of the human that renders possible human freedom via our storytelling capacity. The question remains as to how we can do the intellectual labor of “moving beyond,” and how to make the “great leap forward” as Frantz Fanon insisted in Black Skin, White Masks. In this article, I do not provide a singular answer to this question but rather use this question as an orienting principle for thinking about this intellectual rupture that is yet to be realized. Though this rupture or “Third Event,” as Wynter has termed it, has yet to be completed, we can find traces of this radical human configuration in works of Caribbean fiction. In addition, we can extend Wynter’s work to consider the generative nature of a Caribbean radical imagination, as a site for staging both this rupture as well as an arena for articulating a storytelling genre of the human. I begin this exploration first by outlining two of Wynter’s main preoccupations: the problem of Man’s overrepresentation and alternate genres of the human (including the human as storytelling). I then consider how Wynter’s Fanonian gestures offer us a starting point for theorizing a Caribbean radical imagination, which I extend via the works of Anthony Bogues, Carole Boyce Davies, and Derek Walcott.
then consider Jamaica Kincaid’s *Autobiography of My Mother* and Patrick Chamoiseau’s *Texaco*, paying special attention to invocations of a humanity rooted in narration. These works of fiction, I argue, are one way we might be able to detach ourselves from the semiolinguistic limits placed on our own imaginative realm due to the afterlife of colonialism and racial slavery. All of this will serve to reinforce the argument that though there may not be one way forward, there is a way *out*, if we allow imagination to lead the way.

**THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

*Man’s Overrepresentation*

For Wynter, the problem of Man’s overrepresentation is an obstacle in our desire to move past our society’s descriptive code for being human, which is at the heart of various violences (both symbolic and material) that have been conditioned into existing forms of human sociality. For Wynter, there have been two installations of Man that have been overrepresented as the human, both of which have shaped Western episteme’s current understanding of the human: (1) the emergence of Christian Man, later resignified as *homo politicus*; and (2) *homo economicus*, produced by colonial-Darwinian classifications of the naturally selected (Man) and the naturally “dysselected” (enslaved/colonized). Man1 emerged out of the Renaissance as Christian Man, a transformation that occurred in part as a response to the encounter in the New World. Christian Man would later be resignified in order to conform to the emerging secularization route, which reinscribed Man-as-moral into a new formulation of Man-as-rational-and-political. This gave us our first dominant genre of being human, which Wynter terms *homo politicus*. A revision of Man later gave rise to the liberal *homo economicus* (Man2), made possible by Western episteme’s Darwinian division between the naturally selected (Europeans) and naturally dysselected (Black/native/Other), marked by a boundary that inscribed Man2 as “breadwinning” and Man’s other as laboring. The violence of Man’s overrepresentation is in its foreclosure of a nonhierarchical referent “we” in favor of Man1/2 and nothing else. Wynter refers to each of these transformations as genres of the human, each articulating its own truths and forms of sociality that make up a culture’s “descriptive statement.” Man’s overrepresentation is therefore a problem of the overrepresentation of the West’s genre-specific truths, through colonial occupation and racial slavery (among other methods). We can map each of these overrepresented genres of the human against three important
intellectual revolutions that have defined our modern world: (1) the Copernican break, which she identifies as founding heresy of the original *Studia Humanitatis*, which secularized knowledge and laid the foundations for our modern rational world, disrupting the assumed link between the *mythois* and the *theologos*; (2) the Darwinian rupture, which freed us from the conception of the Adamic “fall” and instead placed us within an ecology of life that is generated in the world rather than in the celestial, producing those forms of life (including human life) that are naturally selected and dysselected; and (3) the Fanonian break premised on the disciplinary rupture offered by the framework of sociogeny.7

*The Science of the Word*

It is precisely Man’s overrepresentation that renders opaque what is at the core of human life and sociality. This core, according to Wynter, includes two expressions: the human as storytelling (*homo narrans*) and the human as praxis, both of which acknowledge that who we are is hybridly human, biology and culture, *bios* and *mythois*.8 Wynter pushes us to realize an epistememic ceremony that would dislodge our binaristic associations and make possible this ecumenical politics of the *propter nos homines*. The ceremony lies in the incomplete Third Event / Fanonian break, which introduced to us the heretical statement that humans are both bios-mythois, skin and mask, through his revelation of sociogeny.9 The third and incomplete Fanonian break, according to Wynter, is the ceremony to be found, a ceremony that would usher in an order of knowledge that interrupts the assumed discrete-ness of bios and mythois, known as a “science of the Word.”

Drawing on Aimé Césaire’s 1944 piece titled “Poetry and Knowledge,” Wynter carries forward Césaire’s call for a new science, a hybrid science that addresses the conceptual gaps left by the natural sciences concerning the “human predicament.”10 Césaire calls this new science the “science of the Word,” a new order of knowledge that begins with the study of the Word (*mythoi*), which then conditions the study of nature (*bios*), decentering the biocentric descriptive code of humanity that prioritizes the bios. Césaire writes that “poetic knowledge is born in the great silence of scientific knowledge . . . a fulfilling knowledge. . . . And it is on the word, a chip off the world, secret and chaste slice of the world, *that he* [the poet] *gambles all our possibilities . . . our first and last chance*.”11 It is in her commitment to realizing this new science of the word, a science that recognizes that even the bios must tell a story about our human predicament, that Wynter establishes narration as a pillar of an alternate, non-Eurocentric genre of the human. This human
as storytelling, or homo narrans, is an important consideration, insofar as it recognizes that in generating stories, humans are also generating themselves, taking the cue of the Third Event, as Fanon remarked: “in the world through which I travel, I am endlessly creating myself.”

This process of creating oneself endlessly is an expression of what Wynter calls “autopoeisis.” Methodologically, this process requires a transdisciplinary commitment with its base in the humanities in order to reenact an epistemological break akin to the “founding heresy of the Studia Humanitatus.” As such, autopoeisis is a creative process whereby humans have been able to question binary and oppositional epistemic codifications of sameness and difference to signify, semiolinguistically, the possibility and/or conditions for freedom. The binary structure of epistemes produces commensurate binaries in the founding and liminal categories of these epistemes, and autopoeisis is the mechanism whereby these associations are constituted/deconstituted. As such, one important pillar of another genre of the human that is rooted in anticolonial and radical deeds/utterances is the homo narrans autopoetically insti-
tuting ourselves and knowledge itself.

With these considerations in mind, I consider the basis of what we might call a Caribbean radical imagination, and how it is an appropriate arena of expression for Wynter’s theorizations. I forward the argument that Wynter’s theorizations, as seen in works of fiction, do not simply offer an alternate genre of the human. She is also theorizing the terrain in which this struggle for an alternate genre of the human is enacted. I offer the Caribbean radical imagination as a way to name this terrain. I then extend Wynter’s work into conversation with other works that, in my estimation, are committed to a Caribbean radical imagination as an expression of political possibilities on the horizon.

**THE CARIBBEAN RADICAL IMAGINATION**

But they don’t want to go to the fundamental issue. Once he [Fanon] has said ontogeny-and-sociogeny, every discipline you’re practicing ceases to exist.

—Sylvia Wynter, interview in *Proud Flesh*

The Fanonion foundations of Wynter’s formulations cannot be stressed enough. Wynter’s Fanonian theoretical anchors offer us a useful starting point for an introductory delineation of the contours of a Caribbean radical imagination, and its role as a terrain for deliberating an alternate genre of
the human as storytelling (in addition to offering disciplinary rupture as Wynter insists). I begin with Fanon in my delineation of a Caribbean radical imagination precisely because of the disciplinary and categorical rupture he offers us in *Black Skin, White Masks*. As stated previously, Wynter explains that there is a third, unresolved event, akin to the Copernican and Darwininan ruptures, that is the realm of possibility for a way out of our overdetermined descriptive code of the human (Man1 and Man2). This third, unresolved event is the Fanonian, which she locates in his description of a sociogenic principle. Fanon writes, “It will be seen that the black man’s alienation is not an individual question. Beside phylogeny and ontogeny stands sociogeny.”15 The sociogenic principle offers a rupture by highlighting the culture-specific codes at the heart of alienation, interrupting the biocentric code at the heart of discourses concerning Black pathology. Additionally, the sociogenic principle offers a disciplinary breach (a primary concern for Wynter’s thought) because of its insistence that matters of culture bear a great deal on the bios, making us (in the words of Wynter) “hybridly human” rather than biologically overdetermined.16 Finally, sociogeny renders possible Fanon’s insistence on “bringing invention into existence.”17 Why? Precisely because of the sociogenic principle’s shattering of the idea that human life and human sociality is entirely biologically determined/outside our control. By intervening via Fanon’s sociogenic principle, we can now take the matter of reconstituting human life into our own hands, which Wynter describes in her theorization of the homo narrans. All of this is to say that in order to begin thinking about a Caribbean radical imagination, this rupture is the catapult. If Wynter and McKittrick ask us what happens when we are unburdened with the referent “we” of our currently overdetermined descriptive code of the human, then Wynter and Fanon reveal that we can only become unburdened once we can first invent or imagine an alternative.18

The radical imagination is also a primary concern for political theorist Anthony Bogues. In “And What about the Human?” Bogues discusses the circumstances that influenced the creation of what he calls the “Freedom Project.” Bogues highlights three considerations that emerged during his studies of the Haitian revolution and African anticolonial movements, which transformed his own work: theorizing freedom as a practice, liberating it from its dualistic construction in Western political philosophy as something that is based on a deficit model; how to account for all the complexities that arise from theorizing freedom as a practice, which requires an “undisciplining” of the archive and working with “the traditions of the oppressed”; and whether political theory or a new radical intellectual history poses the right
questions so that an appropriate exploration into “the traditions of the oppressed” can occur. These considerations led Bogues to consider the possibilities of what he calls an “archive of the ordinary,” including music, art/visual culture, spiritual and sacred practices, and so on.19

Bogues also considers whether philosophic investigations into the human pose the right questions. He describes a moment that he calls a crisis of critical thought, which centered the “vanishing subject and the growing exhaustion of the Western archive.”20 Bogues explains that the centrality of the vanishing subject has dislodged any possibility of discerning the histories of those that Nicolás Guillén calls “living corpses.”21 As such, radical thought is tasked with uncovering the utterances of “the living corpse,” whose lives were a theater for violation and whose thoughts and practices go unnoticed due to the preoccupation with the vanishing subject. Bogues asserts that an acknowledgment of the Black radical intellectual tradition’s interest in the experiences of Africa and the African Diaspora forces a new question, “What about the human?” Bogues concludes by offering the radical imagination as a terrain for considering new questions, a terrain whose bedrock is a political project of freedom, and as a nurturer of critical thought that makes thinking differently about freedom more possible. Bogues reminds us once again that Fanon’s declaration that one must “bring invention into existence” affirms the importance of the imaginative realm.22 It is the radical imagination, according to Bogues, that permits us to launch the orienting question, “What about the human?” which makes possible new conceptions of freedom in addition to new histories of thought in which the living corpse and “the traditions of the oppressed” are taken as the point of entry.

The question remains as to why I have chosen to focus on the Caribbean as a space and as a place, and how this relates to fiction and a radical imagination. In addition to the fact that Wynter, Fanon, and Bogues are all Caribbean intellectuals who theorize from the Caribbean, works of Caribbean fiction disrupt our currently overdetermined genre of the human in a manner that highlights the saliency of Wynter’s insistence on the homo narrans. As Carole Boyce Davies reminds us in Caribbean Spaces: Escapes from Twilight Zones, the Caribbean moves between the autobiographical and conceptual discursive orders, between experiential and theoretical, and highlights the tensions embedded in the constant re-creations of community after the Middle Passage and migration.23 Boyce Davies theorizes Caribbean archipelago geographies as twilight zones, or spaces of transformation from one condition to another, one location to another, and the reimagined physical (and symbolic) spaces of difficulty and struggle.24 Boyce Davies considers
the need for what she calls a “fresh vision” in the idea of Kamau Brathwaite’s “tidalectics,” that is, the ability to move between contradictory expressions of birth, migration, gendered economic labor, histories, and performance. Boyce Davies also highlights the importance of the Caribbean as a terrain of struggle in the material and the symbolic (with intense bleeding between the two). It is precisely this framing of the Caribbean as fundamentally a terrain of struggle that generates bodies of literature that mobilize a hybridly human possibility. It is, as Derek Walcott remarks, a place where the possibility of “Adamic naming” (of using old words anew) is of critical importance. This Adamic imagination is at the core of the predicament for the homo narrans—the predicament being that of embracing the weight of history while also embracing a “newness” at every possible juncture. If it is true as Walcott says, that colonialism is the common experience of the New World, then the Caribbean (as the site of the encounter of 1492) and its radical, Adamic imagination are fundamental to realizing a counternarrative to such an experience.

Additionally, understanding the “science of the Word” as a methodological intervention, and the homo narrans as something made possible by this intervention, means that we can apply this method to multiple disciplines and transdisciplinarily. For Fanon, this transdisciplinarity was a combination of history, philosophy, and psychoanalytic theory. For Wynter, it is history, philosophy, linguistics, literary and expressive culture (and more). In this article, the arena is fiction. I first consider Jamaica Kincaid’s *Autobiography of My Mother* and its protagonist Xuela’s radical self-storying and disruptive gendered/racialized performative acts. This is followed by a reading of Patrick Chamoiseau’s *Texaco* that pays attention to protagonist Marie-Sophie’s intergenerational steadfastness in her “Word,” in addition to the radical instability of enslaved Africans in flight / always-on-the-move / always-becoming-anew. These works of fiction remind us that Fanon’s unresolved “Third Event,” the possibility of bringing invention into existence, and the possibility of another genre of the human rooted in storytelling is within our reach if we decipher and inhabit the Word.

**HOMON NARRANS IN THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF MY MOTHER AND TEXACO**

*The Autobiography of My Mother*

Jamaica Kincaid’s *Autobiography of My Mother* chronicles the life of Xuela Claudette Richardson. The seventy-year-old protagonist recounts her life, embedding herself in a seemingly impossible epistemological dilemma—
that of an orphaned girl attempting to narrate the autobiography of her dead mother. Without navigating further than the opening page, the reader immediately understands that Xuela is trying to reconcile an insurmountable loss by collapsing the project of self-fashioning with that of narrating the life of a mother she has never known or seen. In this novel, we see that Xuela's self-fashioning in search of her mother's story places her in a position of radical instability outside normative representations of racialization / gender expression / sexuality. Beginning with her preoccupation with the ghost of her mother, Xuela repeats the refrain “my mother died at the moment I was born.”

Denied the vision of her mother’s face and therefore her own, Xuela battles an erasure she comes to understand as a necessary part of the feminized and racialized experiences of colonial domination. Since coloniality is premised on a series of binary associations—as either Black or white, female or male, vanquished or victor, Xuela manages to dislodge these associations in what could be understood as an autopoetic break with binarist modes that organize our current order of knowledge. Xuela's adamant self-storying, defiant labor / sexual politics / praxis, and her defiance of the imposed boundaries between genesis and destruction provide a useful literary exposition regarding the human as storytelling. Xuela is engaged in a process of endlessly creating and re-creating herself, all within a radical racialized/gendered performativity that refuses the biological determinism of reproduction and refuses the racial oppositions of colonized/colonizer that are amplified when considering Indigenous erasure (including that of her Carib mother).

Throughout the novel, Xuela engages in a process of self-storying and auto-fashioning by resisting outside attempts to possess or destroy her. For example, her father's second wife, frustrated at her own infertility and her husband's infidelity, attempts to kill Xuela with a necklace made of poison-berries. She takes the necklace and puts it around her stepmother's dog, which descends into a psychotic fit and dies. In rejecting multiple attempts to fix her in a racialized particularity and equally to destroy her, Xuela atones for the destruction of her mother, her mother's people, and the history that remains unintelligible as a result. As Xuela matures, she comes to understand what it means to be a Native/enslaved/Other woman in a colony, at which point she vows to reject both motherhood and traditional romantic partnerships as a declaration of survival. In the end, Xuela does not have children, and her immediate biological family members have all died. Having no mother (or maternal ancestors with whom she can identify, due to the genocide committed against the Caribs), Xuela is once again faced with
the possibility (or rather, the certainty) of extinction. The reader realizes that since Xuela has no ancestral linkages and no children, she represents a historical totality unto herself, and upon her death, her story will go with it, leaving it impossible to recover yet equally impossible to revise, violate, and, most importantly, to possess. Xuela has managed to insert herself as the possessor of her mother’s first-person story and simultaneously escapes the potentially harmful trappings of historical erasure by creating the conditions for her own beginning and end.

The death of her mother during childbirth is a major leitmotif in this novel. By insisting that she narrate her dead mother’s life through her own, Xuela blurs the distinction between inherited/ancestral knowledge and personal memory and, in fact, by assuming the position of her forebear, she is contributing toward a process of “undisciplining” archive. By switching between the referential and the possessive (vis-à-vis her mother’s story), infusing herself in the story, and revealing the deliberate and important slippage between herself and her feminized forebears (which, we learn, is an entire Indigenous population attached to her maternal loss), Xuela weaves a recombinant narrative and destroys the harsh boundary between personal and ancestral “knowing” and fiction. Since hers is a story that is impossible to trace in a canonical understanding of history, she engages self-narration and self-institution by placing herself as her own ancestor (mother) and her own end in her refusal to bear children.

What is more remarkable, however, is Xuela’s insistence on narrating her story despite the practical roadblocks to doing this. Kincaid writes, “In me is the voice I never heard, the face I never saw, the being I came from. . . . This is an account of the person who was never allowed to be and an account of the person I did not allow myself to become.” Xuela is narrating not only an unknowable past but an equally unknowable present and future. She is narrating, first-hand, several impossibilities—we learn in the novel that she never knew her mother, nor can she learn about her since her mother was an orphan in addition to being a Carib, who were subjected to genocide spanning centuries. We know she cannot bear children, and all her immediate biological family has died. We know that narrating the past and predicting the future is a practical impossibility, yet Xuela insists on telling this history notwithstanding this impossibility. In a marvelous display of radical instability, Xuela uses the process of narration (rather than documentation) to enact the impossible, to build a story that shapes her(self) and the world as she experiences it. She is engaging in a humanity that is always storytelling—the homo narrans.
There are moments in the novel during which Xuela manages to (re-) create herself in her paradoxical ancestral/autobiographical narrative. Her own beginning dislodges the orthodox origin stories that position birth or life as the generative moment. Instead, Xuela’s genesis story is structured as a paradox in which life emerges out of death. The death of her mother in the moment of her birth also informs her decisions to deny life to those who might expose her fragility or destroy her. We see this first in the instance of Xuela’s destruction of her pet turtles in a fit of pain and resentment.

I saw three land turtles . . . and I fell in love with them . . . . But they would withdraw into their shells when I did not want them to, and when I called them, they would not come out. To teach them a lesson, I took some mud from the riverbed and covered up the small hole from which each neck would emerge, and I allowed it to dry up . . . . When they came into my mind again, I went to take a look at them in the place where I had left them. They were by then all dead.  

The recognition of her own destructive capacities allows Xuela to engage in a project of self-fashioning or self-reconstitution as she matures. In an exercise of a godlike authority, she engages in multiple instances of destruction-cum-genesis, the defining moment being her first abortion. After her first abortion, Xuela recognizes her own ability to will things in and out of existence, and she is awakened to her own power: “I was a new person then, I knew things I had not known before, I knew things that you can know only if you have been through what I had just been through. I had carried my own life in my own hands.” She gives birth to her new self, a new life through the death of her unborn child, turning the controlling metaphor of her mother’s death (as circumscribing her life) on its head and recasting Xuela as both the giver and taker of life. Xuela narrates a new, radical self via the science of the Word; though her bios suggests an assumed reproductive labor, her mythois—which prioritizes solitude and autonomy above all else—preempts her body. By asserting her narrative of solitude, her body follows, the mythois dictating the bios in a reversal of our biocentric descriptive statement of the human, an insurgent commitment to the science of the Word.

In another passage, Xuela leaves the Labatte household and finds a job as a road worker. Upon beginning the job, Xuela purchases the clothes of a dead man and consequently reconstitutes herself outside the typical gendered bifurcation between feminized and masculine labor. Xuela’s refusal to
bear children and her job as a road worker interrupt the bifurcation of productive and reproductive labor along the axes of gender but, most importantly, this moment of rebirth emerges out of the moments of her abortion and is facilitated by (literally) inhabiting a dead man's image.

I bought from his wife the garments of a man who had just died. . . . I paid her fourpence for all this. . . . It was these clothes, the clothes of a dead man, that I wore to work each day. I cut off the two plaits of hair on my head; they fell to my feet looking like two headless serpents. I did not look like a man, I did not look like a woman. . . . I came to know myself, and this frightened me.36

Here, we see Xuela operating outside the gendered/racialized performative tropes of the Black colonized woman, rejecting the assumption of Black women’s reproductive labors and simultaneously delinking public labor from its masculine prescription. She enacts a version of herself that is dependent on neither female biological determinants nor colonial boundaries between feminine/masculine, public/reproductive labor. Xuela manages to self-fashion in a manner that allows her to reject the confines of colonial patriarchy and assert her narrative of solitude. In addition to rejecting the assertion that Black women’s sexual politics are reduced to reproductive uses or to satisfy a patriarchal gaze, Xuela’s insistence on a radical sexual politics of pleasure also represents a break that allows her to be both a person and a body, or what Wynter calls “hybridly human.”

For Xuela, sexual pleasure (for example) does not equate to happiness but to a type of self-determination, which translates into the “auto”/biographical/poetic of storying herself in and out of existence again and again. Her sexual politics as well as her refusal of her paternal linkages in favor of an invisible maternal memory is another instance of her radical self-storying. Xuela laments that her mother’s people, the Caribs, were “like living fossils,” representing for her an absence that is a controlling metaphor for losing one’s mother (country). She is engaged in a project of self-narration insofar as she is attempting to narrate the absent presence of Indigenous women through her own imagination and experience. Xuela’s body politics and autosexuality/autobiography give us a way out of our current racialized and gendered order of knowledge regarding the human and offer us instead a realm where self-narration, world-making, imagination, and insurgent quotidian praxes are the markers of personhood. Hers is a world in which her imagination leads.
At a surface level, *Texaco* is the history of the erection and establishment of a shantytown on the outskirts of Fort-de-France in Martinique, next to a gasoline reservoir along the river. At the beginning of the novel, Patrick Chamoiseau offers the reader a table of contents titled “Milestones in Our Attempts to Conquer the City,” consisting of multiple iterations to that end with “the fractious creation of the district of Texaco and the ominous reign of a boundless city.” His table of contents offers an alternate chronology: “The Age of Straw,” “The Age of Crate Wood,” “The Age of Asbestos,” and “The Age of Concrete.” Through the experiences of formerly enslaved inhabitants of Texaco, and using the materials typically used for constructing homes as a point of entry, we are told the history of Fort-de-France and Martinique through categories that eschew traditional chronologies.

The novel begins in the early 1980s when an urban planner arrives in Texaco with a “modernizing mission” and finds himself listening to the story of Texaco, which results in his subsequent transfixion with the place and its people, sparing it the wrath of the bulldozers in favor of “rehabilitation.” The *matadora* of this book is Marie-Sophie, the unofficial mayor of Texaco and the community’s founder. She provides the city planner with an oral history, what she calls her “Word.” Marie-Sophie draws on an archive of memory dating several centuries back, and her narration switches voice numerous times as she narrates the life of her parents, Esternome and Idomenee. Marie-Sophie switches between the referential and the possessive, infusing herself in the story and revealing the deliberate and important slippage between herself and her forebears in understanding the history of Texaco. The result is transcribed by an ethnographer called The Word Scratcher, and the novel is her “Word,” or rather, her own creation. *Texaco* is an important literary example of the possibilities that emerge from rethinking the human outside of Man’s overrepresentation, and it is also important for considering the possibilities that emerge from an understanding of the human as storytelling. In *Texaco*, Marie-Sophie’s recombinant approach to chronology and intergenerational memory in her “Word” allows her to re-create herself and her surroundings, wherever she may find herself. In addition, the reversal of the bios/mythois into mythois/bios is apparent insofar as the spirit world interacts with the material to dislodge assumptions about where biology and myth begin and end.

If we recall Césaire’s prompt, the science of the Word exists in the silences of empirical knowledge. Marie-Sophie presents her “Word” as a counterpoint
to the industrial takeover and scientism of the city planner, and eventually she manages to prevent Texaco from being demolished by speaking back to scientific knowledge via her own story. In the end, the science of the “Word” circumscribes scientific prescriptions. What exactly is Marie-Sophie’s “Word?” It is a story of herself, a story of her forebears, in addition to being a creation of her own via the use of a radical imagination to fill gaps in her memory. Marie-Sophie remarks, “In what I tell you, there’s the almost-true, the sometimes-true, and the half-true. That’s what telling a life is like, braiding all of that like one plaits the white Indies currant’s hair to make a hut. And the true-true comes out of that braid. . . . You can’t be scared of lying if you want to know everything.” She deploys her “Word” to assert herself as homo narrans, yet she also uses it to create the world around her through a history that is fundamentally an expression of her own imagination. By assuming the position of her ancestors and of herself simultaneously (in a similar vein as Xuela), Marie-Sophie represents a break in the linearity of ancestry, history, and knowledge. Marie-Sophie reflects in her notebook that “in Creole we know how to say slavery, or the chains or the whip, but none of our words or our riddles can say Abolition. Do you know why, huh?” She reveals that words as grammar, or as prescribed, are not sufficient and that the Word is where, as Fanon reminds us, invention is brought into existence. Part of this process of anchoring history around the experience of enslaved Africans is evident in the relationship between written words—diaries, letters, notebooks (which are quoted throughout the book), and The Word, which is Marie-Sophie’s imaginative (re)telling of the history of Texaco, told through the first person though she was not alive for all the events she recounts. Marie-Sophie’s “Word” reveals that she is her story, a life made possible through the process of storytelling itself.

The first setting of the story of her father, Esternome, is the plantation, with the image of the dungeon beneath the Big Hutch of the plantation. As Marie-Sophie begins to recount the tale of the abolition of slavery through the eyes of her father, and the coming of “freedom,” she describes the apocalyptic scene of the carnival turned riot that preceded the proclamation.
decreed. The end of May was therefore as beautiful as a nine rolled in a serbi game. Slavery, or travail-ery, was abolished, Marie-Sophie.  

Following this apocalyptic scene, something new emerges. Esternome and the other survivors embark on a journey to the top of the hill in a quest to found a new community, based on the principle of Noutéka, described as a “magical we.” In this scene, the survivors rise out of the jaws of the city and climb closer to the sun to found something akin to a City upon a Hill, which in biblical accounts describes a community of communal charity, unity, and affection. In the ascent to this city upon a hill, the survivors are required to leave behind the old world, and on the way up they pass the békés, “Africans,” and other residuals of the old world that had been destroyed. What arises however, during this ascent and establishment of their community upon a hill is the question of the “I” in this understanding of freedom. As Esternome begins the work of leading the construction of this new community, he becomes preoccupied with the I. I. I. This tension ultimately paves the way for the reader to understand that this new community upon a hill is not in fact the container for freedom, and soon after it is also destroyed in another disaster. 

In each instance of catastrophe on the plantation and in the city, Esternome seeks refuge in/between the two, convinced that the horrors of the city can only be remedied by a return to the plantation, and vice versa. While the field is referred to as outside humanity, and the city as the Big Hutch of Big Hutches, what becomes apparent is that humanity, for Marie-Sophie, is located in the interstices between city and plantation. Essentially, humanity is an idea that fills the crevices of history, existing in the tiny spaces that both city and plantation have not yet managed to suffocate. Humanity is the “Word”—it exists where our overdetermined knowledge order fails, as Césaire informs us.

Spirituality also plays a central role in the telling of the story of Texaco, insofar as the interior life the enslaved is offered is a vast and rich archive from which alternate traditions of freedom and historical knowledge production can be located. One example is the Mentoh, a recurring figure in this novel, presented at first as invisible, living among humans without any noise or smell. We then learn that the Mentoh is not in fact invisible but rather invisible in ways—the Mentoh is always present (though not always visible). The reader is then told by Marie-Sophie that her father, Esternome, could be in two places at once (on the plantation and in the city). This suggests that Esternome himself possessed Mentoh-like qualities, and perhaps, since enslaved Africans were required to navigate these two spaces in order
to make a claim to self-determination, all enslaved Africans are in fact Mentohs in a way, carrying with them a “single knowledge.”

The reader comes to understand that there is something particular about the experience of enslavement, as evidenced in the figure of the Mentoh, that troubles the distinction between bios and mythois. This irresolute boundary is also evident in the Mentoh’s ambivalence between life/death, which also subverts the biocentric conception of the human, revealing the spirit realm as one such location where a truly hybridly human that is equally mythois/bios can be realized. It is through a flight or marronage that these binaristic categories are thrown into crisis, as Marie-Sophie’s father, Esternome, enacts a rupture of the plantation prescription of enslaved Africans as immobile/biology-without-spirit. He does this by using flight as a performative enactment of self that disrupts colonial assumptions about the inviolability of the link between enslaved Africans and the plantation, and disrupts the overrepresentation of Man1/Man2 in the colony by rejecting the economic logic of the plantation and the spiritual singularity of Man1 in favor of a spirit world inhabited by Mentohs. In the spirit world, a hybrid human that is both mythois and bios is possible. Though at the end of the novel Texaco becomes “rehabilitated” in the image of Christ (as opposed to being destroyed entirely), Marie-Sophie insists that no one across centuries ever remove the name of the community of Texaco, “by the intangible law of our highest memories.”

We realize that in the end, the science of the Word is not the terrain of this new world we hope to actualize but a way of continually struggling for self-determination even as new challenges to freedom arise (both literally and figuratively). Chamoiseau’s novel reminds us that even assumed disciplinary formations such as history are fundamentally expressions of the human imagination, a fundamental terrain for Marie-Sophie and, as I have argued, for all those expelled from the referent “we” in our present moment.

CONCLUSION

What I have considered in my reading of The Autobiography of My Mother and Texaco forwards the core argument of this article concerning the possibilities of literature for revealing to us the need to rethink the human along the lines of narration. What I have also proposed is a meta-argument that forwards Bogues’s assertion that the radical imagination (and more specifically, a Caribbean radical imagination) is a core component of this project of expanding the referent “we,” and moreover, the radical imagination in
the form of literature is one possible terrain where the intellectual labor of working through new semiotic devices in the service of freedom might occur. In Kincaid's novel, the protagonist Xuela is charged with an incredible imaginative task that includes narrating an invisible or destroyed history/ancestral knowledge, the task of self-fashioning and survival under colonial violence, as well as the daunting task of making possible a new future (one that Xuela rejects in the end). Marie-Sophie also faces a similar challenge, and confronts it via an oral history that relies on imagination to account for gaps in personal and collective memory.

If we return to Bogues, in his discussion of the radical imagination he remarks that part of the function of such a terrain is to offer a venue for posing new questions. If the questions that orient our time are those that ask who we are (per Wynter) and, as Bogues suggests, what we are, then we might also add to these questions by offering one that asks how we are. This article has offered one response to the latter question—how we are is fundamentally concerned with storytelling, offering us the conditions for mobilizing a radical imagination in the pursuit of alternate, freedom-oriented practices of human sociality.

Bedour Alaggra's research focuses on present-day legacies of the intellectual tradition of catastrophism and Black life post–Middle Passage as a counternarrative/creative outside of traditional theorizations of catastrophe. More specifically, her research examines modern-day ecological catastrophes as theaters for the reproduction of this intellectual tradition of catastrophism and equally Black political horizons and possibilities in opposition to and apart from this theoretical inheritance. More broadly, she is interested in Black political thought, especially African anticolonial thought (1920s–1980s), Caribbean political thought, and Black Marxism(s).

NOTES


5. Wynter and McKittrick, “Unparalleled Catastrophe for Our Species?,” 12.


7. Wynter, “On How We Mistook the Map for the Territory.”

8. Wynter and McKittrick, “Unparalleled Catastrophe for Our Species?,” 16.


10. Wynter and McKittrick, “Unparalleled Catastrophe for Our Species?,” 17.

11. Césaire, quoted in Wynter and McKittrick, 64.

12. Frantz Fanon, Black Skin, White Masks (New York: Grove, 2008), 204.

13. Fanon, 21.

14. Fanon, 21.

15. Fanon, xv.


17. Fanon, Black Skin, White Masks, 204.


22. Fanon, Black Skin, White Masks, 204.


25. Boyce Davies, 42.


29. Kincaid, 35.


33. Kincaid, 12.
34. Kincaid, 83.
35. Wynter and McKittrick, “Unparalleled Catastrophe for Our Species?,” 16.
38. Chamoiseau, 22.
39. Chamoiseau, 100.
41. Chamoiseau, 317.
42. Chamoiseau, 382.