



# Other Ways of Seeing and Knowing: Historical Re-Vision in *The Salt Roads*

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**Abstract**

Caribbean writers have had extensive, creative engagement with ideas of history and historiography. They have confronted andro/Eurocentric scholarship that has marginalised the experiences of the Caribbean subjects; relegating their culture and spirituality to caricatures and footnotes. Caribbean women writers have also had to confront instances where Caribbean womanhood was both marginalised by and erased from official historical records, their contribution to national development relegated to the dark spaces of history. In this paper I examine the recuperative strategies employed by Nalo Hopkinson, a later generational woman writer of Caribbean affiliation, in her text *The Salt Roads*. Hopkinson employs science fictional elements, combining them with Haitian spirituality to present her readers with a radical re-vision of three women; Jeanne Duval, the enigmatic mistress of famed French poet Charles Baudelaire, St. Mary of Egypt the Dusky Saint and Mer, a slave on St. Domingue just prior to the Makandal uprising. Reading *The Salt Roads* through rhizomatic lenses reveals the ways in which Hopkinson's text journeys into the dark areas of history to present her readers with alternative ways of seeing and knowing maligned and marginalised historical figures.

**Keywords:** history, Hopkinson, feminism, rhizome, revision

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## Introduction

*The Salt Roads* stands out as Nalo Hopkinson's most experimental novel to date. In its structure and content it diverges from its antecedents which are set in distant dystopian/utopian futures. Its engagement with significant historical personalities and events distinguishes it from Hopkinson's subsequent works that mark a return to subject matter readily categorised as science fiction. *The Salt Roads* is of particular import when examined from a Caribbean critical perspective for the ways in which it engages ideas of historical reclamation. Its narrative experiments with the fantastic and the supernatural achieves what Leif Sorensen describes as functioning as a "dub mix, producing links between seemingly discrete compositional elements and historical moments" (Sorensen 2014, 267). Of particular interest to this paper is the impact of Hopkinson's experimentation with ways of viewing history and her consequent challenge to ideas of historical authority and the particular historical representation of Jeanne Duval and St. Mary of Egypt. Additionally, through centering the perspective of a fictional character Mer, Hopkinson's novel presents a feminine perspective of the events leading up to and during the initial slave unrests on the island of Saint Domingue and the figure of Makandal. *The Salt Roads*, when read from the perspective of an Anglophone Caribbean literary tradition, participates in a larger practice of interrogating official historical narratives – a preoccupation of literary predecessors such as Wilson Harris, Derek Walcott and Caryl Phillips. Moreover, Hopkinson's work centres women characters that have been maligned in Euro/androcentric historical discourse, a feat that places her work in discursive dialogue with Caribbean feminist historians and her literary mothers about the importance of alternative sources of knowledge and feminine perspectives on history.

The impact of slavery and colonialism on Caribbean historiography remains a preoccupation of many Caribbean writers. As Simon Gikandi states, "African slaves in the New World were denied their history as a precondition for enslavement; to claim subjectivity they had to struggle for their essential

historicity" (Gikandi 1992, 6). Often, this preoccupation is with the absence of marginalised peoples from dominant historical discourses and there is discursive engagement with these absences and erasures in an attempt at recovery.

Strategies for historical reclamation have taken many forms. Notably, where women are concerned, these strategies have involved feminist re-visions of historical narratives to account for these absences, and the focalisation of alternative histories that emerge from this shift in historical scrutiny. For example, Shepherd et al. describe methods of correcting discursive historical imbalances, as including: "cataloguing historical areas of neglect and female oppression", writing "biographies of outstanding women", narrating "histories of women's contribution to political struggles like slave resistance", and adopting "a more descriptive and compensatory approach in this reconstruction of historical knowledge" (Shepherd et al. 1995, xii). Furthermore, some writers of women's histories "went a step further and began to look for ways to include a type of analysis which had been omitted from historical discourse which would produce a feminist standpoint and therefore a better picture of reality" (Shepherd et al. 1995, xii).

From a Caribbean perspective this call for the discursive deconstruction of history and for alternative sources is of critical import especially when we consider the fact that many of the historical sources on Caribbean women "utilised justificatory language, written as they were in a period when European colonisation efforts were at their zenith" (Shepherd et al. 1995, xiii). Further, "[t]hose written in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were often couched in the language of pro-slavery ideologues and were aimed at impeding the emancipation struggles on both sides of the Atlantic" (Shepherd et al. 1995, xiii). It is this apparent "complicity of academic forms of knowledge with institutions of power" (Hall 1995, 50) and its implied consequence of the historical misrepresentation of Caribbean women that underscores the need for alternative ways of perceiving and reckoning the past.

It is precisely this type of feminist re-evaluation that *The Salt Roads* offers, providing alternative ways of seeing and knowing characters such as François Makandal, Jeanne Duval, and St. Mary of Egypt. Hopkinson adopts a three-pronged approach in her re-evaluation. Firstly, she employs a non-linear narrative structure that transports the reader at random from pre-revolutionary St. Domingue to 19th century France, as well as to Egypt and Jerusalem around the fifth century. This strategy works to disrupt the fixed linearity associated with traditional historiography. Hopkinson is thus able to privilege multiple feminine perspectives that disrupt the projections of official narratives, and present readers with alternative experiences.

Secondly, her central narrator is the burgeoning consciousness of the polymorphous voodoo deity Erzulie, who is drawn spontaneously to Duval in Paris, Meri in Egypt, and Mer on St. Domingue. Erzulie is an innocent often disoriented spirit and when she merges with the minds of the women in Hopkinson's narrative, she provides intimate insight into their experiences and centres their perspectives on significant moments and experiences that challenge and subvert the authority of official records.

Thirdly, Hopkinson's genre of choice is speculative fiction/fantasy, or SF, and this allows for a further layering of textual experimentation with ideas of history and historiography. Hopkinson's use of supernatural elements, imagining Erzulie as journeying through spiritual streams, means that her work enters into this discussion of historical representation of real historical figures from a discursive position of fantasy. It undoubtedly raises questions as to the suitability and relevance of *The Salt Roads* to a discussion of Caribbean history or historiography. Indeed as Lewis Call suggests, "if literature operates at the margins of history, then speculative fiction surely represents the margin of that margin" (Call 2005, 277), since realism/the realist novel retains a place of prominence within literary academia while speculative fiction has only recently started to gain academic legitimacy.

I submit that what Hopkinson achieves, from within the margins of history and within the margins of literature is, is a blurring of lines of demarcation between two categories of representation that are still considered discrete, despite works on postmodern historiography from scholars such as Hayden White, Linda Hutcheon and Amy Elias. Furthermore, as Shepherd et al. (1995) have indicated, privileging traditional colonialists' historical discourse may well mean ontological oblivion for Caribbean women subjects, thus it becomes the imperative of Caribbean women writers to engage with a range of recuperative strategies. Hopkinson is able to achieve this through the figure of Erzulie, whose random journeys in and out of the realm of spirits and the realm of official historical record, blur these spaces. Additionally, I borrow the concepts of the rhizome and line of flight, offered by Deleuze and Guattari (1987), and I contend that Hopkinson's use of Erzulie recalls the rhizomatic line of flight that acts as an exit route from a restrictive territorial or intellectual domain. Thus, Erzulie's ability to journey at random into the lives of these marginal women figures provides readers with the opportunity to journey into "dark spaces" of history, and to engage with Hopkinson's recuperative strategies as she trains our gaze towards other ways of seeing and knowing.

### **Theoretical framework**

My theoretical approach is informed by the discussion of the rhizomatic line of flight offered by Deleuze and Guattari (1987).<sup>1</sup> In their theory of the rhizome, Deleuze and Guattari (D&G) offer an alternative to what they describe as the arborescent structuring of knowledge. They contend that a rhizome, a tuber that can randomly sprout shoots along an even plane and create unlikely linkages and associations, breaks free from arborescent boundaries through lines of flight. A line of flight is random, and establishes new and unlikely connections of thought and knowledge. It facilitates deterritorialisation and the possibility of multidimensional connectivity in contrast to the "tree or root which

plots point, fixes an order" (D&G, 7). Furthermore, for D&G a rhizome "ceaselessly establishes connections between semiotic chains, organizations of power, and circumstances relative to the arts, sciences, and social struggles" (D&G, 7). Additionally, every rhizome "contains lines of segmentarity according to which it is stratified, territorialized, organized, signified, attributed, etc., as well as lines of deterritorialization down which it constantly flees" (D&G, 9). Lines of flight are routes for escape from restrictive modes of knowing to unexpected locations of knowledge. Lines of flight are also routes for hetero-connectivity between disparate sources of knowledge. To journey along these lines of flight is to embark on a form of nomadic travel through in-between spaces, to be in a persistent metamorphosis which empowers the subject with the capacity to deterritorialise stratified and/or binary spaces.

The ideas offered by Deleuze and Guattari allow for a reading of Hopkinson's Erzulie that sees her acting as a deterritorialising agent in *The Salt Roads*. Her journeys are *ad hoc* and take us into moments that coincide with the official recording of these events and moments. However, her genesis from within the spiritual plane and the minds of a scattered and dispossessed African peoples and her polymorphous nature, means that she, in her being, is the antithesis of restrictive ideas of reading history. Indeed, as Dayan (1994) suggests, Erzulie seems especially suited as vessel for interrogating history since her associated rituals "store and re-interpret the past" and "articulate and embody a memory of slavery, intimacy, and revenge. She survives as the record of and habitation for women's experiences in the New World...[a] motive...for a specific kind of Caribbean history" (Dayan 1994, 10-11). Erzulie's polymorphous capabilities, her ability to transcend dichotomies, time, space and other boundaries, her capacity within the larger spiritual belief system of Voudun as a vessel for ignored local histories, provide Hopkinson with an effective vehicle for presenting alternative historical perspectives on figures named above. As a textual strategy, Erzulie becomes the line of flight from restrictive and exclusionary historical modes of seeing and knowing the past.

My reading of *The Salt Roads* will thus be informed by concepts of line of flight and journeying into what McHale (1987) describes the 'dark areas' of history. Dark areas, according to McHale, are "those aspects about which 'official' record has nothing to report", and it is within these dark areas that the traditional "historical novelist is permitted a relatively free hand...the 'dark areas' are normally the times and places where real-world and purely fictional characters interact in 'classic' historical fiction" (McHale, 87). An example of how this works is where "[s]ome historical novels treat the interior life of the historical figures as dark areas – logically enough since the 'official' historical record cannot report what went on *inside* a historical figure without fictionalizing to some extent" (McHale, 87). In my use of the terms 'official historical records' and 'line of flight' I am treating official historical records as the stratified space. Official historical records construct specific types of knowledge of the lives of Caribbean subjects from positions of discursive power within Western scholarship, which often lead to omissions and erasures of Caribbean subjects and their perspectives. I am also arguing that my analysis of *The Salt Roads* will demonstrate that Hopkinson's strategic use of Erzulie serves as a line of flight from restrictive modes of knowing and that takes us into the dark spaces of history. In critiquing *The Salt Roads*, I will demonstrate how Hopkinson employs creative strategies that feminist historians have advocated, the effect of which is to provide us with other ways of seeing and knowing significant historical figures.

## **Jeanne Duval**

As stated earlier Hopkinson's text centres the lives of three women, Jeanne Duval, St. Mary of Egypt or Meri, and Mer, and each of these women has experienced varying degrees of historical erasures. In Duval's case, her erasure occurs through Baudelaire's poetry, his letters and Western scholarship. Firstly, although the inspiration for the group of poems designated "The Duval Cycle" in *Les Fleurs du Mal*, Duval is objectified and exoticised in Baudelaire's poetic



language. Examples of these works include "Le Serpent qui danse", where Duval is described as "indolent", having "eyes where nothing is revealed" and a walk that is "[b]eautifully dissolute", in which Baudelaire sees "a serpent dance before a wand and flute." She is also described as having a "lithe body", which "bends and stretches/Like a splendid barque/ That rolls from side to side and wets/ With seas its tipping yards" (Baudelaire 1998, 56, 59).<sup>2</sup> The animal imagery of the dancing serpent is echoed in "Le Chat", which opens as the poet's homage to his beloved feline companion: "Come my fine cat, to my amorous heart;/ Please let our claws be concealed./ And let me plunge into your beautiful eyes,/ Coalescence of agate and steel" (71), and seamlessly shifts to an analogous description of Duval, who is described as having a cold regard, much like the cat, that "splits like a spear" (71). Further, in "Parfum exotique" Baudelaire is transported by the warm scent of Duval's breast to "inviting shorelines" of an "idle isle", where there are "charming shores" and "verdant tamarind's enchanting scent", that fill his nostrils and swirls to his brain, where "[m]en who are lean and vigorous and free", and the women's "frank eyes are astonishing," (Baudelaire, 49). In "La Chevelure, the sight and scent of Duval's long tresses conjure images for the poet of "Languorous Asia and scorching Africa", of a "whole world distant, vacant, nearly dead" (Baudelaire, 51). Duval inspires a slew of powerful images in "Sed non satiate."<sup>3</sup> She is the "[s]ingular goddess, brown as night, and wild," the "[w]ork of some Faust, some wizard of the dusk/ Ebony sorceress, black midnight's child," a "heartless demon!" and his "Megaera"<sup>4</sup> whose nerve he cannot break nor bring to her knees (Baudelaire, 55).

Having read these poems, the reader is left with a grotesque montage of goddesses and furies, demons and sorcerers, temptresses and concubines, tamed, exotic and dangerous animals, faraway places with strong olfactory appeal, a shape-shifting incongruity, a morally ambivalent construct that is anything but human – all intertwined with Baudelaire's beautifully eloquent poetic language. Indeed, as Munford (2004, 6) states: "Baudelaire's is an aesthetic of exclusion that, grounded in the *metaphorisation* of femininity, exiles the female subject from history and being".

Most accounts of the Duval/Baudelaire relationship reach us through letters written by Baudelaire to his mother. They detail a complex and often abusive love affair – a cycle of disagreements and tenuous reconciliation. In one letter dated March 27 1852, Baudelaire describes Duval as being a "creature who shows no gratitude...who frustrates every effort with her continual negligence or malevolence...with whom it is impossible to talk politics or literature, a creature who wishes to learn nothing...a creature who does not admire [him], who even shows no interest in [his] studies" (Pichois and Ziegler 1991, 198-199). Duval, although the inspiration for his poetry, is paradoxically presented as a sterile influence in the life of the poet, and is also depicted as an evil presence, sub-human in her incapacity to discuss politics and literature and in her apparent unwillingness to learn. The letters underscore the ahistorical treatment that Duval has received. Her anti-intellectual attitude consistently pits her against Baudelaire's superior intellect, being a man of letters, and she is seen as a space void of any significant knowledge of her own.

Finally, Duval has also suffered at the hands of Eurocentric academic scholarship that has perpetuated Baudelaire's account of their relationship, and has remained on the surface where interrogating the implications of Baudelairean/ European poetic gaze on the body of a black woman is concerned. For example, McGowan's notes on the Duval Cycle describe Duval as a "mulatto actress, and sometime prostitute Baudelaire first mentions in a letter of 1843...[who]... was by no means [his] intellectual equal and cared little for his poetry, but her body and her temperament fascinated the poet" (McGowan 1998, 358). Duval, as McGowan's brief note depicts, is treated as though she has no history prior to 1843, and is uncultured and unlearned in her lack of appreciation for Baudelaire's poetry despite often being its object. Hyslop (1980) describes Duval's presence/absence in these poems as "a mere abstraction, a means to an end, a way of evoking dreams of the distant past" (Hyslop, 168). Richardson (1994) details the many and often contradictory tales that have emerged about Duval's origins, none of which shed any light on her age or her ancestry, which leads to the conclusion made by Carter that

"[n]obody seems to know in what year Jeanne Duval was born, although the year in which she met Charles Baudelaire (1842) is precisely logged" (Carter 1985, 12).

Carter herself would have written about Duval's representation in Baudelaire's poetry. Her short story, "The Black Venus", represents the earliest written feminist satirical critique of the relationship between Baudelaire and Duval and the manner in which she is presented in his poetry. However, while Carter's "Venus" focalises Duval, there is still considerable distance between the reader and Duval, arising from Carter's use of the third person narrative perspective. Additionally, Carter's "Venus" does little to present Duval with any form of historical or cultural background, inverting the gaze only within the parameters of Baudelaire's poetry. As such, at the end of Carter's treatment, Duval remains incomplete in her personhood, even as she is an effective satirical tool for Carter's feminist critique of Baudelaire.

The tri-factor of Baudelaire's poetry, letters and the academic scholarship focused on his life and work, has left Duval devoid of history and heritage. Hopkinson's strategies for retrieving Duval from the ontological abyss include privileging her perspective and voice and merging her with mind and soul with Erzulie. What Hopkinson achieves with her treatment of Duval is an inversion of the historical gaze. She re-presents Duval's story in the first person, and gives the reader access to her experiences as a woman of colour in mid-nineteenth century Paris. Hopkinson also merges Erzulie with Duval at pivotal moments in the text. These moments serve to both further humanise her as well as provide her with a history, a heritage that subverts the anti-intellectual, ahistorical treatment she receives in Baudelaire's poetry, letters and the scholarship spawned by both.

One such occasion, which Hopkinson appropriately introduces with the word "Sister", Erzulie is drawn to Duval in a moment invoked by music:

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I find my way fully into the world! It only takes a minute of Jeanne's inattention. Music is the key, it seems; flowing as rivers do, beating like the wash of her blood in her body. Jeanne is helping me too, unawares; by humming. She doesn't even know what the words of the tune mean. She just tries to say them as she has heard her grandmother hum them. That tune is how her grandmother entreats her gods... It pulls at me, that music. The rhythms take Jeanne's thoughts, drown them for a time in their flood. And suddenly I am finally master of her body... I have Jeanne get to her feet she never once protests. She never once protests. Her floating mind, caught by the rhythm, isn't aware that it is being swept away. Still we hum. That chant! Beat, beat. My feet move in time. I let her throat continue the song. Now there are words coming from her lips. I dance. My torso falls forward, catches and holds the beat, parallel to the floor. Jerks upright again....A pox on all this cloth! I catch at it, tear it away with our hands. By herself, Jeanne is not so strong as to shred heavy silks. I am. The gown pools in rags at my feet. The stays are next, and the pins that hold our hair. Stamp. Sway. Jerk towards the floor. Then up. Again. Feel air on our flesh, cool and sweet as rain. The pounding of blood in our ears comes in waves, crashing against our senses. My hands reach for our breasts, ripe as plums. I hold them, weigh them in my palms, thrust them forth as offerings. To whom, to whom? (*The Salt Roads* 116-117)<sup>5</sup>

This example of intimate merger of subject and deity (or Sisters as Hopkinson's naming may lead us to infer) energised by music from Duval's ancestry, connects her to a heritage shared with the Ginen who are now enslaved on the island of Saint Domingue and with Africa. Erzulie serves to retrieve Duval's lost history and her connection with Duval immerses the reader into a heritage that has not been presented heretofore. Erzulie is acting here as a line of flight, taking Duval out of the domain of Western discourse that has delimited her existence. The episode develops further and Hopkinson details Duval's/Erzulie's dance as the deity is reeled back into the mind of her original host:

I stamp out the steps of the dance – yet there is a rug beneath my feet again. Toss my head – and behold once more the somber furnishings of Charles's apartments. Oh, oh; Jeanne is reeling me back in. I am back in her apartments, in her head.

He is watching; the Charles man. I glance at him with Jeanne's eyes, yet she does not perceive him. She is caught up still in her own dance. Charles's face, shocked, is even whiter than its usual pallour. His mouth gapes. Wonder makes his visage ugly, slack.

But I care nothing for that. I wish to be free! Jeanne and I thump with our heels, toss our torso towards the earth, thrust back with our hips. We shake our shoulders. And still I offer our breasts, promise their juices to someone, something, not him. (*The Salt Roads* 123-124)

At the end of this scene, Erzulie is battling to free herself from Jeanne's body to return to the people of Saint Domingue, with whom she wishes to share her knowledge and for whom she wishes to dance. However, she loses this battle and is subsumed as Jeanne emerges from her trance.

Several observations can be made from this excerpt; firstly, as Hopkinson returns the gaze to Duval, the reader observes that she is scarcely aware of Baudelaire's presence – his importance is relegated to the periphery of her consciousness. Additionally, in Duval/Erzulie's eyes, Baudelaire appears grotesque and weak, his pallor and slack visage an unpoetic inversion of the tropical spaces created in poems such as "Parfum exotique" and "Chevelure." Furthermore, the physicality of the dance, a sensuous and vibrant homage to her gods, an expression of worship, parodies and supplants the vacant female body described in "Les Bijoux" and "Le Serpent qui danse". Indeed, we see that Baudelaire, in awe of the dance, immediately reduces the depth and scale of Duval/Erzulie's experience, the intensity of which is shared with the reader, to an

almost mundane simile in his comment: "Such grace. Like a snake. So sinuous." (125) – the birthing of "Le Serpent qui danse".

What Hopkinson achieves in *The Salt Roads*, as this example demonstrates, is an effectual re-vision of Duval that undermines the authority and potency of Baudelaire's poetic gaze. Through the important and effective medium of Erzulie, Hopkinson suggests that Baudelaire's perception of Duval (and by extension, Western scholarship generated by his letters and his poetry) is limited. She presents Duval with a multidimensional personhood, history and heritage that she is denied through Baudelaire's letters and the subsequent scholarship.

### **St. Mary of Egypt**

Hopkinson's treatment of Duval is echoed in her presentation of Saint Mary of Egypt. Like Duval, St. Mary of Egypt, perceived through the male gaze, is an obscure site of moral decadence, living solely for lustful escapades, hence her occupation as a prostitute in Alexandria. The stories surrounding the Dusky Saint detail a miraculous transformation from prostitute to penitent; wandering the deserts of Jordan and being struck down by a vision of the Virgin Mary, (her antithesis on the scale of virtue) inspiring "extraordinary devotion of Catholics over the Mediterranean" (Cruz-Sáenz 1979, 10).

The primary source of information on the life of the Dusky Saint is the account detailed by Sophronius, Patriarch of Jerusalem and dates from the second half of the fifth century. Like Duval, the Dusky Saint's origins are also mired in obscurity. As Cruz-Sáenz states, the legend was composed from three probable sources. The general outline was copied by Sophronius from the life of Saint Paul the hermit written by Saint Jerome. The character of Mary probably came from a story of another Mary, a singer who became an anchoress and survived miraculously for eighteen years in the desert. The tale also appears to have

been adopted from the life of Saint Cyriacus (d. 556) written by Saint Cyril of Scythopolis. A third source, according to Delmas, was another adaptation of the story of Cyril of Scythopolis which is found in chapter 179 of the *Pratum Spirituale* by John Moschus. Long quotations from a developed legend of Saint Mary of Egypt are also included without reference to the sources in the mid-eight century work of Saint John Damascene (Cruz-Sáenz 11-12). What we glean from Cruz-Sáenz's statement, is that there are several existing accounts of the life of the Dusky Saint which have undergone several adaptations and alterations, and that portions of the Saint's life have appeared at various eras in history. What is also notable is that the authors of her story are predominantly men. Seen in this light, Saint Mary of Egypt thus strikes a figure comparable with Jeanne Duval in that the records that reach us about her life are male-authored and are weighted heavily with the patriarchal gaze.

The story of the Dusky Saint, whenever it has been recounted, has focused on three crucial moments. The first focuses on a young monk's (Zozimus) initial encounter with the Dusky Saint where, although the story is named after the Egyptian penitent, it is the young monk's journey and his experiences that take precedence. When he first encounters her she appears ill-defined, "in the likeness of a human" (Skeat 1890, 13), but more akin to a delusion of an evil spirit against whom he must protect himself. The second moment focuses on her life as a child slave in Alexandria and her journey to Jerusalem. As told in Aelfric's *Life of Saints*, St. Mary of Egypt had a family and home in Egypt and, after turning twelve, began despising their love and ran away to Alexandria, where she committed sins of a sexual nature, making herself the "vessel of election by the devil himself" (Skeat, 23). The third feature of the legend of the Saint focuses on her encounter with the Virgin Mary. According to Aelfric, Mary of Egypt was attempting to enter a church but was prevented by the 'divine might' due to her grave sins. She breaks down and weeps and it is at that moment that the Virgin Mary appears, eliciting feelings of repentance, and she crosses the river Jordan and spends 47 years in the wilderness as penance.

Hopkinson's version of St. Mary's life offers an inversion of the original recorded texts. Hopkinson firstly names the penitent Meri (also Thais and Meritet), and in so doing begins to construct her identity independent of the sacred texts. Then, through merging Meri with Erzulie, she connects her with a larger heritage, providing her with a more nuanced origin.

Hopkinson's presentation of Meri's childhood also challenges the way the penitent has been presented in the sacred texts. We learn that she was a slave in the house of Tausiris and was forced into slavery by her Nubian mother. Here, Hopkinson's narrative of a girl sold into prostitution challenges the idea of young Mary being driven by lust. Perhaps the most significant moment in the life of the saint is her encounter with the Virgin Mary in Jerusalem. In Hopkinson's version Erzulie's possession of Meri drives her unconsciously towards the Holy City. Erzulie has detected a susurrus in the spiritual ether and while joined with Meri, reveals intimate detail about the real state of her condition.

Hopkinson's Meri is also driven to Jerusalem through her desire to find the young sailor Antoniou for whom she is pregnant. As with Duval, it is through her merger with Erzulie that we are able to intimately understand Meri's, or Thais's, condition and what happens to her as she attempts to enter the church:

It felt like hours before we got to the church. A long, long time of walking. I don't remember the journey too clearly any more, just that I hurt and Judah kept asking me if I wanted to stop.

But I am determined that we keep going. Something is wrong with this Thais. Something has grown in her that is making her sick. If she dies, if her dying throws me out of her as Jeanne's did, who knows where I'll be tossed to? Then maybe I won't get to find out what that susurrus is in the aether. I nudge Thais to keep walking. She's strong and young, and she wants



to see Aelia Capitolina badly too. So she keeps on for my sake, for hers. (*The Salt Roads* 299)

Erzulie senses, and thus communicates to the reader, that something is amiss with Meri's pregnancy, but as the deity is dependent on her subject's body, she urges her forward. Things get progressively worse as they approach the Church of the Sepulchre. Meri is struck by pain as she enters the church and collapses: "Something tore loose in my belly and I screamed. I felt hot liquid rush from between my legs" (*The Salt Roads* 301). She passes out from this pain and Erzulie experiences the impact of the miscarriage as well:

I tear loose from Thais, as the little dot of cells tears away from her too. I'm tumbling, no control. That would have been a child, that thing growing in Thais. As I am a child in this spirit world. I don't learn fast enough. It didn't learn fast enough how to stick in Thais's belly. (*The Salt Roads* 303)

The deity's merger with Meri serves once more to reveal to the reader a story of greater profundity than what is offered in historical records, an alternative history of a woman who, like Jeanne Duval, has had her body and her personhood serve as mere metaphoric abstraction for the purposes of patriarchal discourse. In Hopkinson's account, Meri's desires, drive and her experiences are, like Jeanne Duval's, outside the scope of the sacred texts. Once more Hopkinson's use of Erzulie as an insightful device, a line of flight into these dark areas of history, these areas that have been created by the erasures and obscuring tactics of patriarchal discourses. Reading Hopkinson's text in this manner places it in a polemical discussion with the texts that have been accepted as official historical records, a discussion which reveals the limitations of these records. Hopkinson's use of Erzulie as a device for the exploration of these dark histories links the stories of these women from different eras. Reading this connection as rhizomatic and its consequent re-visioning of historical records, then sees Erzulie

as taking the reader on an exit route, a line of flight from the official accounts of the lives of Duval and the Dusky Saint.

### **Mer of St. Domingue**

Erzulie is also drawn to Mer, a slave woman on the island of Saint Domingue, and the reader is given an up-close view of the life on plantations just prior to the Francois Makandal uprising, the first major anti-slavery movement in the island's history. In Haitian history and folklore, Makandal stands as a formidable figure of resistance. Born in Guinea, Makandal was brought up in an illustrious family who educated him in the ways of Islam and the Arabic language. He was exposed to various arts, and had "acquired a considerable knowledge of tropical medicine" (Fick 1990, 60) – a knowledge that would prove most useful in his plot against the planters on Saint Domingue. He was also a practicing Voudun priest. Makandal persuaded and mobilised hundreds of slaves from different plantations, as well as fellow maroons, to implement his poison plot against the white plantation owners and he was able to do so by convincing "many a slave that it was he whom the Creator had sent to carry out the destruction of the whites and to liberate his people" (Fick, 61).

Makandal's plot represented a concerted effort to overthrow the white regime and elevate the blacks as new masters of Saint Domingue. However, his attempt was unsuccessful and Fick's record of the moment of Makandal's betrayal sees him as being on the one hand "denounced by a slave, (or by several slaves) while attending a calenda on the Dufresne plantation in Limbé" (Fick 1990, 292, note 86). Another account of particular interest sees him being given up by a female slave who, upon torture and despite the threats of eternal damnation by a Jesuit priest who supported the cause of the slaves, provided the means which led to his capture.<sup>6</sup>

The most spectacular account of Makandal's existence remains the story of his death. He had convinced his followers that he was immortal and that it would be impossible for the whites to kill him if they ever captured him since he would transform himself into a mosquito and escape only to return even more formidable.

His ability to assume the shape of animals is featured in Hopkinson's text. This feature of Makandal's personality, combined with his knowledge of tropical remedies, his understanding of the race relations on the island, his position as priest as well as his charisma, cement his place in Haitian history and folk beliefs. His influence is especially evident within the oral folk traditions, as he is remembered long after he had been captured and burned at the stake by the whites.

It is into this pre-revolutionary scenario that Hopkinson inserts Mer, slave woman and healer, a fictional character. This narrative ploy shifts the focus from the dynamic and legendary Makandal to an ordinary slave woman, whose perspective offers a unique view of the hero and the events leading to the failure of the poison plot. Through Mer's eyes, and later through Erzulie's, we see Makandal not as the charismatic leader of folk legend, but rather as a ruthless, merciless leader who would endanger the lives of his fellow Ginen (Hopping John for example) if he felt them a threat to his plot. It is interesting to note the dualities at play between the two characters. Both Mer and Makandal possess knowledge of herbs and other medicines, each putting this knowledge to very different use – the former for healing and the latter for harming. Her role as a healer brings her closer to the Ginen as she is called upon to repair the damage that Makandal has caused. Mer does not trust Makandal and her perspective casts Makandal in an unsympathetic light.

Mer is also presented as Makandal's spiritual superior as she is in contact with the Iwas, the gods of the Ginen, in particular La Siren, who instruct her, but refuse to speak to him, undermining his claim to spiritual authority. We learn through Mer's

first person account that Makandal is guilty of hubris, for thinking that "if the Powers didn't act in a way that made sense to him, well then he must make himself one of them and do the job he wanted them to do. Yes, he thought he knew best. That couldn't be right" (*The Salt Roads* 69).

From Mer's perspective we see a diminished Makandal, whose desire to elevate himself has angered the gods and they, as punishment, have distanced themselves from him. The fact that they speak to Mer elevates her as a holder of ancestral knowledge. She is more connected with the Ginen and the Iwas than Makandal, and Makandal's hubris, as revealed through Mer, complicates the image of the larger-than-life folk hero as he has been presented in historical records.

Hopkinson's treatment of this aspect of Haitian history merits a closer inspection. She has provided us with a fictional character, a humble woman healer, whose first person perspective she privileges and through whom the reader perceives a real figure of historical import. Thus, instead of adopting the 'great man of history' approach, an approach that often pervades mainstream historical scholarship about the Haitian revolution, Hopkinson centres the ordinary woman citizen.

She also introduces the supernatural element in the retelling of Makandal's rebellion, this time in the form of both Erzulie and Ogu(n). In the Yoruba pantheon and within its Caribbean permutations such as Voudun and Santeria, Ogu(n) is an Orisha of nuanced paradoxes (Curry 1997, 68). He is the "Orisha of Iron", the "embodiment of violence and creativity and yet the soul of complete integrity. He is a hero, an artist and a poet" (Curry, 68). Makandal shares similarities with Ogu, and the scene where Hopkinson invokes a second deity in her historical re-telling of the events surrounding Makandal's demise, sees a contest between Erzulie and Ogu manifesting through Mer and Makandal – a battle of wills between two deities for the destiny of their people:

He is like me, Makandal's rider...Ogu, they call this one. I call him usurper. Outrage fills me, but no time, no time! This battle is happening in the mortal world of time, and time is flowing away, like water poured on desert sands. Ogu is pitched for battle. Makandal wouldn't listen to Mer my horse, but in the many flowing strands of the Ginen's story, I could see a thing I could do. Mer could warn the slaves in the great house of the fire. She could protect those my people. And she could mislead the whites, send them away from this bush meeting. She could take me to them, and I could beguile them as I had before...I turn Mer's body to run, tumble, flow through the bush to the great house, to save, to save. (*The Salt Roads* 326)

In her depiction of a pivotal moment in Haitian history, Hopkinson demonstrates the contest between two Powers of the Ginen with differing agendas for the future of their people. Erzulie sees the destructive potential of the Ogu/Makandal pairing and is concerned for the well being of the people. She conceives of a bloodless alternative to Makandal's destructive plot. Makandal, possessed by a warrior god, and his own hubris, would not listen to lowly Mer and would be indiscriminate in executing his plot. Seeking to curb the destructive potential, Erzulie possesses Mer but Mer is subdued by the Ginen, and Makandal/Ogu proceeds to exact revenge on her for "talking Ginen business":

Ogu in Makandal's body used his good hand to draw my tongue out from my mouth. Then, smiling, he used the arm that was not there and sliced the spirit machète across my tongue. Pain exploded like light in my head. I tried to scream, but with no air in my chest, it came out a gurgle. (*The Salt Roads*, 330)

This act of violence, which leads to Mer becoming mute, may also be read as a symbolic silencing of a woman's version of history, when we consider Mer's

knowledge of the gods, Makandal's hubris and the contesting agendas of Erzulie and Ogu. The violence may also be read as a rejection of a feminine perspective or role in shaping the destiny of a nation.

Through the encounter between Erzulie and Ogu, Hopkinson revises the figure of Makandal. In the same way as when she is paired with Jeanne Duval and Meri, Erzulie takes the reader beyond the official records which, though they acknowledge the importance of Voudun in the life practices of Haitians and their journey from slavery to freedom, are unable to convey its full impact on worshipers.

## **Conclusion**

Reading *The Salt Roads* through a rhizomatic lens, sees Erzulie as a source of knowledge that gives the reader privileged access to the consciousness of historically marginalised women. Erzulie's ability to journey at random (again a trait of the line of flight), from one consciousness to the other through different historical eras, links Jeanne Duval, Mer and Meri to their own ancestral heritage and allows their stories to be told from her perspective, with intimate detail. Hopkinson is thus able, through Erzulie, to delve into the lives of historical figures, such as Makandal, in ways that official historical accounts have not. Hopkinson's use of Erzulie in connecting three women from different historical eras centres their experiences and exemplifies some of the recuperative strategies that feminist historians, Shepherd et al. for instance, have described. Further, Erzulie's journeying through the ether – the smooth space outside the scope of oppressive structures of historical knowledge – connects her with an alternative ontology that is given prescience and presence. In so doing, Hopkinson's work participates in discursive discussions with her literary ancestors on the topic of Caribbean history and brings with it a distinct perspective where the treatment of women in history is concerned. Her work effectively and creatively re-vises

history from a subject position situated within the dark areas of slavery and colonialism.

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<sup>1</sup> Deleuze and Guattari's corpus is expansive and continues to draw as many proponents as critics from diverse quarters. Significant criticism from Kaplan, Miller, Jardin, Badiou and Hallward argue that the theories are not very useful for any type of political engagement. On the other hand theorists such as Glissant, Braidotti, Grosz, Conley and Flieger offer routes for feminist and post-colonial engagement with D&G. My particular use of Deleuzo-Guattarian thought is undertaken with Edward Baugh's (2004) reminder in mind "that all criticisms, and indeed, all theory is partial" and that "no word is ever final or complete." It does not set out to prove or disprove the political applicability of their work. More importantly, this article does not claim to offer an absolute way of reading *The Salt Roads*, but rather utilizes Deleuzo-Guattarian line of flight in a non-doctrinaire manner.

<sup>2</sup> All references to and translations of Baudelaire poetry are quoted from the Oxford World Classics, *The Flowers of Evil*, translated with notes by James McGowan.

<sup>3</sup> This translates to "'but not satisfied'", a reference to the Roman poet Juvenal's description of the sexual appetite of Valeria Messalina, wife of the Emper

<sup>4</sup> Megaera is "one of the Furies, female divinities who live in the Underworld (Erebus) and punish human transgressors." (McGowan, 359)

<sup>5</sup> Immediately following, Erzulie is transported to a space outdoors, where there are black people everywhere doing varying tasks, wearing scraps of clothing. Where she sees not just African born, but white and mulatto faces, and where she is recognized in her spirit form and named "Ezili, or "the lady". (*The Salt Roads* 118-119). Erzulie recognizes this space as Saint Domingue.

<sup>6</sup> Karol K. Weaver (2006) offers another account of Makandal's capture, which sees the houngan being given up to the whites by a young slave boy and arrested at a kalenda or dance in the parish of Limbé (91).



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