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ORIGINAL PAPER

A Speculative Return to Africa: Remembering Slavery in Tracy Baptiste's *the Rise of the Jumbies*

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Abstract
Tracey Baptiste explores the value and risks of exposing child readers to the harsh realities of the past in *The Rise of the Jumbies* (2017). In the novel, Baptiste uses African-derived deities and folk figures to examine the horrors of slavery, in particular the Middle Passage. The author turns to speculative tropes like time travel and mermaids to help young readers navigate such historical trauma. By using a double narrative strategy, both hopeful and truth telling, Baptiste explores the emotional challenges posed to young readers learning about historical atrocities. Her work encourages the development of empathy and critical thinking skills, an appreciation for the natural world, and acceptance of difference. The book provides opportunities to deepen readers' diasporic knowledge and eco-literacy through its representations of African-derived gods and folk figures from Baptiste's Trinidadian heritage. The essay presents the core argument of Baptiste's novel, namely that individuals should keep what is valuable from their past that accords respect to all beings and discard ideologies based on domination.

Keywords Caribbean children's literature · Slavery · Trauma · Middle passage · Eco-literacy · Diasporic literacy

Introduction

> *To all the ones who were taken, to the ones who took, to those who have forgotten, and to those who remember all too well.*
> Tracey Baptiste, *The Rise of the Jumbies*

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When Tracey Baptiste's five-year-old son returned home from kindergarten one day, he was distressed. As Baptiste shares in a 2017 National Public Radio interview, "[H]e had just heard about slavery at school…. And he was just so upset about it and couldn't reconcile who he was with…these stories that he was hearing" (Garcia-Navarro). Author of a Caribbean-based fantasy trilogy *The Jumbies* (2015), *The Rise of the Jumbies* (2017), and *The Jumbie God's Revenge* (2019), Baptiste realized that children need stories to understand the historical trauma of their African ancestors. She shares the viewpoint of many educators who argue that children's literature offers an important vehicle for learning about slavery (Bickford and Rich, 2014; Thomas, et al., 2016; Gómez, 2016). Writing within an increasingly conservative US political and educational climate, Baptiste chose to tackle the topic directly after only mentioning slavery in passing in her first novel of the series; when she did not receive any critical backlash, she felt emboldened to take a step forward in her second novel, as she puts it, "to go there in a big way" ("Slavery," 2018). Baptiste writes from the perspective of any parent who might want their child to learn about historical tragedies but not be overwhelmed by the horror of such topics.

Baptiste's novel *The Rise of the Jumbies* by its nature becomes a part of a broader critical discussion among literary scholars and educators about the difficulties of representing historical violence in children's literature. In her review of the literature, Jani L. Barker (2013, pp. 172–74) notes that many critics argue for the necessity of examining historical events with an eye for truth—as a pathway for educating children about contemporary issues such as racism through a lens of the past—while others seek to protect children from such violence, to, in effect, preserve their childhood innocence a bit longer. In her work with future educators and parents taking children's literature courses at the undergraduate level, Barker observes that "concerns about sharing literature of violence, especially narratives that address issues of racism and racial violence, persist and can be very strong and impassioned" (174). David Russell (1996) proposes that often children are "only too aware that they live in a world where death and destruction respect no age" (p. 347) and the desire to protect child readers may indicate more about the fantasies of adults than the actual readers (p. 346). While parents may want to protect children, children born into such ancestral lines of historical oppression, such as Baptiste's son, may need assistance making sense of the relationship between such historical terrors and their own self-identity. Mainstream readers, of course, also can benefit from understanding the realities of the past.

Baptiste navigates these competing interests through her use of a double narrative, the adoption of the speculative genre, and the use of a protagonist who models for readers a pathway for navigating emotional reactions to past atrocities. Adrienne Kurtzer (2002, p. 75) describes how "a double narrative" can teach "a different lesson about history" while "simultaneously respect[ing] our need for hope and happy endings." Baptiste locates hope in Afro-Caribbean ancestral deities who teach children about survival and the importance of integrating values from the past into the present while discarding those that are harmful. Analyzing the work of Christopher Paul Curtis, Barker (2013, p. 174) points to another strategy writers of historical fiction use to help young readers absorb information about slavery and the history of racism without being overwhelmed—a naïve narrator. Baptiste chooses another route; she

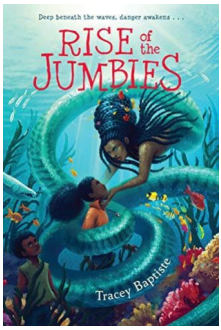
couches her narrative about the horrors of the Middle Passage within a fantasy story. She includes mermaids (who were formerly captured slave children) and time travel as her young characters journey from the Caribbean to Africa, where her protagonist Corrine Le Mer bears witness to the Middle Passage. In a recent interview, Baptiste comments that given the "pain and shame" of the past, perhaps "this kind of story where something horrible happened, but something beautiful resulted from it, would be some small amount of comfort" (Garcia-Navarro, 2017). She also creates, I will show, a pathway for young readers to care for themselves should they have an emotional reaction to learning about a traumatic event, evidenced in Corrine's response to the Middle Passage. Baptiste's text walks a careful path, touching on the pain of the past in particular moments, yet separating out the protagonist's reaction from those who experienced slavery first-hand.

In addition to exposing young readers to the terrors of Caribbean history, the text takes up, I will argue, the relationship of slavery to the present in ideological ways. While the various ethnicities represented in the story—Afro-Caribbean, Indo-Caribbean, and presumably Latin American—coexist peacefully, the protagonist faces rejection from the community because of her half-jumbie status. Jumbies are mythological creatures from Baptiste's Trinidadian background who inhabit the forest, sometimes causing problems for humans. Corrine's mother was a jumbie, her father human. Her mixed-species status causes fear among townspeople, echoing then the social stigma embedded in blood purity laws that located mixed race people as lower on the social and economic rung than whites during slavery and beyond. In fact, jumbies represent an inherited folk culture complete with African roots that some humans in the text reject. Literary theorist Sylvia Wynter (1971, p. 99) calls this folk culture "plot culture," referencing the small plots slaves used to feed their families in the Caribbean. Slaves and their descendants, Wynter (p. 99) argues, "create[d] on the plot a folk culture—the basis of a social order—in three hundred years." Baptiste's text suggests that the "plot" culture remains in play via jumbies who represent remnants of African spirituality, including a respect for and a connection to the natural world. These Afro-Caribbean figures challenge an ideological culture that separates people from the landscape and their heritage.

This complex text invites then an ecological reading even as it grapples with larger issues of representing violence in children's literature. Baptiste provides hope for young readers through her use of African deities, offering Kurtzer's (2002, p. 75) "happy ending[s]" and a "different lesson about history." Three examples position Baptiste's text within the body of children's literature by African-American and Afro-Caribbean writers who have turned to speculative fiction to create an emotional safety net for young readers in books that address slavery. Readers might be familiar with Julius Lester's *The Old African* (2005), illustrated by Jerry Pinkney, a US-based narrative that re-envisions the folktale about enslaved Africans flying back to Africa. The titular character has a knowledge of African herbalism and shape-shifting that allows him to heal one slave and then free the rest by according them the power to walk under the water back to Africa. Other books for children contain mystical elements that promise relief for current problems. For example, in *Freedom Child of the Sea* (1995), with illustrations by Julia Gukova, Grenadian Richardo Keens Douglas tells the story of the Middle Passage. Slavers throw overboard a pregnant African

woman who gives birth to a boy under the sea. Centuries later that same boy—his back "covered with welts and scars for all the pain his people suffered"—rescues a swimmer off an unnamed Caribbean coastline. According to legend, this boy will rise up and come on land when "true freedom, compassion and harmony" arrives for all people. In Joel-Franz Rosell's *La légende de Taïta Osongo* (2005), a powerful seer Taïta Osongo is kidnapped from his African homeland to become a slave in Cuba by evil profiteer Severo Blanco. When Blanco frees him thirteen years later, Osongo uses his spiritual power to protect his grandson who marries Blanco's daughter, awakening the father's murderous rage. Rosell then provides a lesson on the roots of hostility towards interracial marriage. Such textual storylines navigate intersections of a nightmarish past with contemporary racial inequities. These speculative writers promote a set of values that honor ancestral knowledge as an important anchor for responding to current challenges.

As a Trinidadian who moved to the US when she was fifteen, Baptist relies on local beliefs—her childhood jumbies—to upset the logic of domination (of the environment and people) that informed the slave trade and its long-term ideological effects. She turns to what Michael Rothberg (2008, p. 227) sees as central to postcolonial trauma studies, a field that combines postcolonial theory and trauma studies to investigate the ways in which widespread historical traumas find expression in today's postcolonial literature. Rothberg notes that in postcolonial texts, such as Baptiste's series, "the relevance of localized modes of belief, ritual, and understanding, [can] undermin[e] the centrality of Western knowledge and expertise." The author includes a Caribbean mer-woman Mama D'Leau (a French creole name for Mother of the Water) and other young mermaids. She writes, "I thought that with this particular story and using Mama D'Leau and the mermaids, I could address the things that have happened, but also have it be attached to something that was beautiful" (Garcia-Navarro, 2017). Mama D'Leau as a deity, and her iterations such as Mama D'Lo, River Mumma, and others, arrived in the Caribbean as creolized versions of the African Mami Wata (Drewal, 2008, pp. 60–61). In contemporary Caribbean literature for adults, she serves as a protector for all living inhabitants of the seas (see, for example, Lorna Goodison's poem "River Mumma Wants Out," 2005).



Mama D'Leau's literary presence finds it partner in her lover or husband, Papa Bois (French creole for "Father Wood" or father of the forest; Morris,2022). Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert (2005, p. 186) notes that the Christian perspective that accom-

panied colonialism, which gives humans dominion over the natural world and its inhabitants in Genesis, stands in contrast to African and indigenous theologies that envision nature as a conduit to spiritual realities (2005, p.186). Trees play a particularly important role in various Afro-Caribbean religious systems whether that be the pole at the center of Vodou ceremonies or the forest's role in the formation of healing balms or elixirs (Bird, 2009, p. 65). In Caribbean literature written for adults, Paravisini-Gebert (2005, p. 183) argues, human counterparts of figures such as Papa Bois and Mama D'Leau serve as "protector[s] of the balance between nature, the spirits, and man"; the novels she reviews depict the "threat to the Caribbean environment posed by increased pollution and development as a menace to Creole religiosities themselves." Similarly, in literature for children, water and forest deities protect the wildlife—including flora and fauna—and the sea from human decimation.

Baptiste writes within this folkloric tradition—relying on Papa Bois and Mama D'Leau—as central figures in her trilogy. She also expands her repertoire to include other Trinidadian jumbies who arguably also serve an environmental function. While Corrine initially believes these creatures are not real, she later discovers their importance to environmental preservation. The lagahoo—from the French *loup-garou*—is a werewolf figure whose chains and trailing iron collar betray the relics of slavery carried into the present (Baptiste, *The Jumbies*, 2015, p. 233). In *The Rise of the Jumbies*, he helps the community fight a forest fire. Additionally, Baptiste introduces douens, or "spirit babies that live in the forest" (*The Jumbies*, p. 232). With backward feet, they chant and put children under their spell. They resemble the West African Mmotia, small male spirits who live in the Ashanti and Akan forests of Ghana; they have backward-pointed feet and whistle to communicate (Pradel, 1998, p. 147; Pursiful, 2014). These spirit beings kidnap people and teach them medicinal knowledge of the herbs and plants (Munyaradzi and Awuah-Nyamekye, 2015, pp.187–88). In *The Rise of the Jumbies*, these creatures do kidnap a child—yet they carry him into the forest, a place of rejuvenation and growth. Papa Bois knows exactly where they live and can locate any missing children (as occurs later in the novel). Baptiste relies on these creatures as a part of a larger message about the relationship between slavery and contemporary divisions between people (expressed in the relationships between humans and jumbies) and less-than-informed decisions regarding ecological practices. Her work fits nicely alongside other Caribbean children's books that link African deities to environmental preservation.

Environmentalism and the Folklore Deities of Caribbean Children's Literature

To situate Baptiste's novel, I will review a few Caribbean children's books built on this folklore/environmental paradigm and the place of such folklore within African ontologies.

In Caribbean children's literature, water and forest deities have long been operationalized to battle colonial, neocolonial, and postcolonial systems of oppression expressed through story (García-Vega, 2016, p. 14). These Afro-centric deities and their accompanying religious ideologies have grounded liberation movements, most

famously Haiti's war for independence against France through a Vodou ceremony. As Melissa García-Vega (2016, p. 14) observes, such folklore figures represent a space of resistance to oppressive systems particularly in relationship to environmental protection; she quotes Ashcroft et al. (2002, p. 213), observing, "The sacred has frequently entered postcolonial debates in relation to environmental issues."

The following books exemplify this relation. In a novel for middle graders, *Legend of the St. Ann's Flood* (2004), Debbie Jacob tells the story of 1993 flood of St. Ann's, Trinidad, through the lens of a young boy who learns the story from Papa Bois. While the author attributes the flood—that took six lives—to deforestation in the afterward, she situates the cause of deluge to the rage of Mama Dlo who discovers humans have trapped creatures from the forest for exhibition in the zoo, disrupting local ecologies. She, Papa Bois, and the child protagonists must work together to protect the forest and its inhabitants. Suzanne Francis-Brown's *The Mermaid Escapade* (2013) features stories of the Jamaican River Mumma to teach young mermaids and child protagonists how to desalinate the water and keep the aquifer clean. Loekie Morales, a Curaçaoan-Sint Maartener writer, also draws on the goddess of the water in *Mina Marina* (2008); a mermaid, who lives near the island of Curaçao and swims near Venezuela, meets a merman; together they establish transnational connections to keep the seas unpolluted (Cornet). These storylines connect these folk figures to underlying beliefs tying such deities to African epistemologies appropriated for contemporary purposes.

Baptiste extends this literary conversation to include a treatment of slavery's long-term effects, metaphorically represented in human/jumbie relations and human disregard for the environment. The author creates several hybrid families (interspecies and interethnic) who learn that love—not bloodlines—matters most of all, challenging the blood purity laws and racist hierarchies that informed the slave trade. Ancestral deities educate the protagonist and village (and the reader) about the importance of sustainability, challenging then the historical denigration of folk knowledge. Baptiste enacts what postcolonial trauma critics see as central to the decolonizing project: an expression of indigenous (in this case, Afro-Caribbean) beliefs that counter Western models of rationality that seek to separate the spiritual world from lived reality (Visser, 2015, p. 260; Rothberg, 2008, p.22). This common plotline surfaces repeatedly in speculative fiction by African-American and Afro-Caribbean writers for adults (consider the works of Toni Morrison, Nalo Hopkinson, Erna Brodber, or Karen Lord). Postcolonial trauma critic Irene Visser (2015, p. 259) argues that "storytelling is itself a ritual means to heal from trauma because it connects past and present, drawing upon the ancestors and their sacred power to restore harmony and health." By situating Corrine as occupying both worlds—she has access to the everyday and spiritual worlds because of her human-jumbie ancestry—Baptiste connects creolized folklore figures (with the exception of one jumbie Severine) to environmental sustainability.

Baptiste builds a backstory to explore the issue of sustainability in her first novel *The Jumbies.* She introduces Severine, a folktale figure not birthed from African sources but rather Haitian slavery. She represents the mindset of slave holders with their desire to subjugate others and keep resources for their own consumption and profit. As Severine shares with Corrine, Corrine's mother Nicole set the slaves free

to Severine's dismay. She offers a narration that very much mirrors, in a condensed form, the adoption by the newcomers (those of African descent) of colonial ways that included the destruction of the environment and suppression of folk knowledge. Severine comments to Corrine,

> "My sister saved their kind. She took off their chains and brought them to the island and how did they repay her? By forgetting. In mere days, they started to cut down our trees to build their own homes. Then they set fire to our forests to make space to grow their food. A few years later, they told their children that we were monsters and tried to get rid of us." (*The Jumbies*, 2105, p.124)

After her sister's death, Severine weds herself to the very ideology she decries by becoming herself monstrous, turning jumbies who are under her control on the island into her servants who frighten islanders by kidnapping children. In *The Rise of the Jumbies*, Severine becomes the primary aggressor (taking three children).

Baptiste credits "The Magic Orange Tree," retold by Diane Wolkstein (1978), as her inspiration for her first novel (2015, p. 232). Severine emerges as a stepmother figure from a tale type reflective of the slavery's ideologies, namely a desire to hoard food at the cost of the subjugation and diminishment of other human beings. The folktale features an evil stepmother, an orphaned child, and an orange tree, the spiritual embodiment of the dead biological mother. The stepmother leaves three oranges on a kitchen table and threatens to kill the starving stepdaughter (who toils during the day) if she should eat them. The child, however, cannot resist doing so and fearing her stepmother's rage, runs to the mother's grave where a seed falls from her skirt, which she inadvertently waters with her tears. The stepmother ascends the tree to grab all of the oranges for herself; under the child's commands, the tree grows so tall it shatters, leaving the stepmother dead on the mother's grave. The child then takes the oranges to market, sharing the produce; her act of unintentionally planting a seed gestures towards the importance of sustainability. In Baptiste's tale, Nicole, in death, continues on as an orange tree that Corrine visits daily; she gathers seeds to plant more trees and provide her father and her community with oranges. The mother also leaves Corrine an amulet that unbeknownst to her daughter contains a magic seed. Baptiste links the stepmother figure Severine to a combined need to both consume the island's resources (in the form of oranges) and subjugate the humans by turning them into jumbies so that they will be under her control.

Severine's efforts to gain dominion over humans begins with Corrine's father Pierre. She tethers him to her mentally and emotionally via a poisonous stew that erases his memories of his immediate family. Eager to make Corrine a full jumbie, a replica of herself, in essence a daughter through coercion, Severine steals Corrine's amulet; she leaves it atop a precipice where Corrine sees it and climbs up, only to come face to face again with embittered aunt. Uncertain how to release the amulet's powers, Corrine throws it down in frustration, inadvertently revealing a seed that she waters with her tears. Like in the folktale, the tree grows in response to Corrine's commands, and as Severine climbs the tree, grasping for the delicious fruit, the tree splits the precipice in two, tossing her into the sea. Baptiste then links human subjugation—the fate of the father whom Corrine must rescue—to a desire to consume

resources without a concern for either sustainability (what Corrine enacts when she plants more trees) or sharing to benefit the community.

Joan Dayan (1995) has argued that many Haitian folktales and spiritual figures of the Vodou pantheon emerged from Haiti's legacy of slavery, containing then the remnants of human suffering. The earlier 1937 version of "The Magic Orange Tree," simply titled "The Orange," makes visible these connections. The stepmother threatens to "take all the skin off his [the protagonist's] body" for taking the three oranges (Comhaire-Sylvain, p. 230). In another version titled "The Legend of Firewood," two daughters eat an orange in the bottom of a basket; the stepmother then threatens to skin them alive (Comhaire-Sylvain, 1937, p. 235). As Liza Giselle Anatol (2015, p. 8) notes, representations from this particular tale type support Dayan's argument that Haitian folktales carry echoes of slavery represented in the skin-flaying and killing of those who tried to secure more food (1995, p. 258). If so, Baptiste's Severine emerges from this tale type, not as an African-derived jumbie trying to save the environment, but the opposite—as someone ready to enforce the ancestral evils of slavery for her own gain.

Reimagining African Roots and the Slave Trade: Baptiste's *The Rise of the Jumbies*

In her second novel, Baptiste bypasses her environmental messaging initially to explore the slave trade in the first portion of *The Rise of the Jumbies*. She shares,

> In the first book, in *The Jumbies*, I inserted in a very small way that the way the people came to the island was off of these slave ships…. I wasn't sure that this was a topic that one could broach in a book for very young kids, and nobody batted an eye…. So with *Rise*, I decided, now's my chance…. I'm going to really really go there in a big way. But again with something like that, you know, the horror really of the transatlantic slave trade, that is an extremely difficult thing to try to broach with. .. kids that are really young. How do you bring that up? ("Slavery," 2018)

Baptiste answers her own question, as noted earlier, by turning to mermaids who appear in all of their splendor—Afro-Caribbean mermaids with tightly coiled hair, intricately braided in ways that introduce Corrine to the styles she will soon see in Africa. Additionally, she accords Corrine spiritual power; her half-jumbie status allows her to experience others' memories as if they were her own. Tasked by Mama D'Leau with travelling to Ghana through the ocean with the assistance of her children, Corrine bears witness to the Middle Passage via the mermaids' memories; they were once captured slave children who nearly drowned before Mama D'Leau transformed them into mermaids. Baptiste shows how it is possible to survive such raw exposure to historical events, indicating a possible pathway for navigating the experience of reading about trauma for young readers.

The Rise of the Jumbies additionally explores questions of memory of and complicity in the slave trade. Baptiste raises the very fears that educators and parents

might have regarding the introduction of such a brutal history to children. These awakened memories of one mermaid prove to be emotionally devasting. She focuses on her childhood trauma to the extent that her desire to reunite with her birth family in Ghana, now centuries dead, rips her from the present, resulting in her symbolic death. Additionally, the novel represents Africans as bystanders or conspirators in the slave trade, suggesting that young people should learn the complexity of history that often includes no easy separation between the oppressed and oppressors. Postcolonial trauma theorists argue that in literature that treats colonial oppression, writers should acknowledge the ways the colonized actively supported and forwarded legacies of domination (Visser, 2015, p. 159; Rothberg, 2008, p. 232). For educators interested in teaching critical thinking, such background knowledge could spark discussions of the place of bystanders and participants in relationship to activities that are morally reprehensible and catastrophic to those involved.

Mama D'Leau sends Corrine, her friends, and the mermaids to Africa to retrieve a very valuable opal, one that will unite her with Papa Bois in their mutual spiritual efforts to take care of land and sea. Corrine must grant Mama D'Leau this favor before she will help recover the children who Severine has kidnapped. When the mermaids come across a shipwreck, Baptiste enters what many would consider traumatic territory, evidenced in Corrine's response to the mermaids' vision of their past. They remember their African names, the expressions on people's faces as they drowned, and the chains that bound them. With her half-jumbie status, Corrine can visualize these events. Baptiste focalizes the narrative through Corrine's consciousness, as if she were experiencing the moment in the present:

> People were all around her, lying like she was, packed close, skin to skin. Water came through the opening and sloshed over her. It covered her face and made it almost impossible to breathe, but she could not get up. Her hands and feet were bound in iron. The water rolled away and the sounds of screaming voices and screeching chains filled her ears. The ship cracked and ripped at the joints, then sank. Water closed over them. It sealed them in like an iron box…. Corrine could see the wide, frightened eyes of others below her who were still chained to the ship. Their mouths opened, sucking for air that would never come. (*Rise*, 2017, pp. 94–95)

One mermaid shudders, noting, "*There were so many others*" (*Rise*, p. 96). Another, on entering the sunken ship, remembers her family's reaction to her kidnapping: "*I turned around and saw them crumple on land, watching me be taken away*" (*Rise*, p. 93). The mermaids try to awaken "from the nightmare" (*Rise*, p. 96). Corrine struggles for air as she scrambles towards the surface, nearly blacking out, her vision fading. The mermaids' memories have breached for Corrine what psychiatrist Dan Siegel (2020, p. 348) calls the "window of tolerance," namely the ability to stay embodied in the present without being overcome by the physical and emotional sensations that accompany such disturbing observations. Baptiste narrates Corrine's recovery as she breaks the surface for air if she were in a therapeutic mindfulness session (with its emphasis on calming the heartrate, soothing the body): "Corrine opened her eyes. Her friends and the mermaids surround her. Their faces were soft

and peaceful. It took a few moments for her heartbeat to slow and for her muscles to relax." Her friend Malik squeezes her hand as Corinne tries "to shake the images she'd just seen out of her mind" (p. 95).

Baptiste then also addresses Africans' participation in and failure to prevent the trafficking in human beings, following then a trend in postcolonial trauma fiction that considers "attentiveness to complicity" an important direction (Rothberg, 2008, p. 232). The mermaids and children swim to a beach near Accra where the young boy Kahiri offers to search for the mermaids' families. He only uncovers one story—told by an old man. A young girl was carried off, leaving behind a trail of pieces of Kente cloth; her younger brother followed, only to find her captured by "warriors," a term that implies African participation. Additionally, the children learn that the ancestors of "the richest person around," Ma Dessaly, received the opal as a gift from Mami Wata generations before to keep Ma Dessaly's ancestral family safe from slavery; it did not, however, protect others, according to Ma Dessaly, becoming then "a blessing and a burden" (*Rise*, 2017, p. 110, p. 147). Corrine learns this story after she tries to trick the woman into giving her the opal. She impersonates Mami Wata after seeing her image painted on the side of a building—"a sun-bleached image of a woman with loose, thick hair that fell past her shoulders. . [with] two large snakes wound around her neck" with a sign underneath that reads "Mami Wata" (*Rise*, p. 102), a literal evocation of the African Mami Wata whose common image continues to be that of an Indian snake charmer initially circulated in Africa from a German chromolithograph in the 1880s (Drewal, 2008, p. 71). However, Ma Dessaly sees through the ruse and chases the children with her henchmen to "the Castle" (presumably Osu Castle) where the children manage to lift the opal from her without her knowledge. She imprisons them in dungeons where the children discover the scratches on the walls where slaves marked off their days of imprisonment. As this loop of the story comes to a close, Kahiri rescues the children and Ma Dessaly chases them to the beach where she recognizes the mermaids as the African children taken years before from her village; she screams out, "Forgive me!", an apology that seems to stretch across generations. Ironically, Mami Wata represents not only the goddess of water, but for one African group, the Ijo of the Niger delta, the patron saint of slavery; she is often pictured in a giant canoe, the vehicle of choice for transporting large groups of captured Africans to the sea for trade (Drewal, 1988, p. 39). Mama D'Leau, in the final moments of the text, affirms to Corrine's friend Bouki that she is Mami Wata, making African diasporic connections central to the text's meaning.

Baptiste concludes the children's visit with one additional sorrow that addresses the dangers of being too attached to the past; allowing memories of trauma to define one's present identity can only lead to self-destruction, the text posits. One mermaid named Ellie (with the Ghanian name Ababuo or "child keeps returning") ignores Mama D'Leau's warning about leaving the water, the very sea that keeps Ellie connected to her adoptive mother and siblings. She crawls onto shore, longing to find her birth family, now long passed; doing so turns her body to ash. To return then carries loss and as Baptiste indicates in her chapter titled "The Door of No Return" (*Rise*, 2017, p. 149), if one entered the slave fortress in the past, there is no going back. Even though Corrine discovers interesting intersections between Ghana and the Caribbean—such as food (saltfish cakes), the open market, the head ties, the houses

painted bright colors with galvanized metal roofs (*Rise*, p. 118)—she also knows she must return home. They all must return, especially the remaining three mermaids. On leaving the African coast to head to the Caribbean, the mermaids quickly forget their African names and even their African past, suggesting that if memories of trauma trigger a person to an extent that they cannot hold onto the present, letting go of such memories might be best. Baptiste then separates out Corrine's response to learning about slavery (which causes temporary distress) from the one mermaid's reaction to such recollections. Ellie, at least, cannot assimilate her memories, what Cathy Caruth (1996, p. 4) sees as characteristic of the first-person experience of trauma. Baptiste then offers underlying commentary on what young readers can survive—not necessarily evocations of their own trauma but rather second-hand versions of historical events—even if they are difficult or challenging to comprehend or momentarily upsetting, with the help of friends.

Baptiste explores the impact of personal trauma more completely in a discussion between Corrine and Mama D'Leau concerning the mermaids' memory loss in a way that also educates today's readers about the traumatic effect slavery had on families. D'Leau offers in a Creole-informed vernacular,

> Imagine if they remembered that pain all the time," Mama D'Leau said. "How you think they would survive that, eh? How many can survive being ripped from their family and friends, forever torn apart?… Memories are painful.
> "You pruned them," Corrine said.
> "What you mean, prune?
> "I mean, you cut off the part of their memory that was hurting them. You didn't think it was something they needed. You were trying to help." (*Rise*, 2017, p.194)

Mama D'Leau created a new family with her mermaids just like Hugo, the village baker, who adopted Corrine's homeless friends Bouki and Malik (*Rise*, p. 194). Mama D'Leau's responses then suggest that remembering traumatic moments can be too much for some children. Yet learning about another's trauma (in a secondhand fashion) might be manageable. When Corrine sees her mermaid friends' pain through their memories, she feels profound empathy, an experience that can promote critical thinking, according to Neil Houser (1999, p. 212). Houser (p. 213) notes, referencing the inclusions of novels that address discrimination in the social studies curriculum,

> Novels like this can help young Americans experience empathy and engage in the kinds of critical analysis needed to disrupt continuing forms of discrimination in our society. To the extent that critical literature can help humanize unnamed people, challenge unexamined assumptions, and explore the emotional and relational aspects of human experience, it offers a valuable alternative to traditional social studies teaching.

For young readers, then, exposure may be emotionally challenging but perhaps a risk worth taking as long as one remains grounded in the present, connected to friends or family.

Integrating Environmental Lessons through Folklore

Baptiste eclipses the European colonialization of the island and its role in the slave trade in order to make this story about the responsibilities of today's Caribbean's inhabitants. What colonization began, the descendants of slaves continued, engaging in what Visser (2015, p. 159) describes as "collective complicity with hegemonic systems of oppression" often highlighted in decolonial trauma fiction. The humans no longer remember the jumbies as sentient beings to be protected; they instead "other" them, turning these ancestral incantations into monsters to be destroyed. When the children and remaining mermaids return to the Caribbean, they discover that some humans, angered that their children were still missing, set the island on fire to drive the jumbies from the woods. Responding in such a disastrous fashion—leveling the forest and alienating and blaming those who are different—Baptiste's text indicates, leads to broader environmental consequences. Mama D'Leau fusses over "the broken and bleached remains of a coral reef, which looks pail and eerie, like a ghost underwater" (*Rise*, 2017, p. 164). Her concern points to the widespread bleaching and subsequent death of coral reefs in the Caribbean due to rising temperatures which, scientists argue, have resulted from global warming (Donner, et al., 2007; Buddemeier, et al., 2011). The mermaids themselves are streaked in white ash, an ominous observation that reminds Corrine of Ellie's dying moments, suggesting that sea creatures face risks potentially from human actions (*Rise*, 2017, p. 163–64).

Despite such human aggression, the jumbies on land have joined forces with people to put out the fire; even the lagahoo and the douens participate in the water line. Additionally, Papa Bois enters the picture as a character who instructs Corrine and her friends on the importance of protecting forest ecologies. A child-turned douen walks Corrine over to a rock where she feels "a heartbeat coming up. . as if the entire forest had come alive" (*Rise*, 2017, p. 183). Papa Bois emerges as a goat-type man with graying cornrows; he chastises Corrine's friend Drupatee Sareena Rootsingh (or Dru) who had started a fire in the woods earlier, teaching her that she not only burned down trees but "hurt others." He preaches, "Burn one tree, burn one hundred, it's all the same unless you are burning it for warmth or to cook your food. It's wasteful" (*Rise*, p. 185). His tears fall and "tiny white flowers spring up"; he touches a tree and the bark turns "from ashen gray to deep brown" (*Rise*, p.185). As he walks, "[b]eneath his hooves, grass shot up and bushes grew with every brush of his fingers"; "the black-and-white world of the forest" comes to life (*Rise*, p.186). He calls to Mama D'Leau for help; the two of them momentarily assume human form. She graces the shore to present him with the opal the children retrieved; he recognizes in it "both of us. It's land and sea" (*Rise*, p. 191). "Together," Mama D'Leau adds (*Rise*, p. 191). Their romantic moment and momentary transformation into humans echoes iterations from other texts such as Jacob's *The Legend of St. Ann's Flood*, where the two bond in their ecological quest to keep the land and sea protected.

Baptiste closes her text with the recovery of three children who have been kept in an underwater grotto and the re-transformation of the one child-douen into a full child. Severine has captured three of the children, and after rescuing them, Corrine must find a way to rid the island of Severine so that she does not cause more despair and rage as she tears apart families and seeks full control of humans. Severine's atti-

tudes, however, are not solely hers, but find echoes in the voice of one villager who is determined to differentiate humans from jumbies, reflective of Severine's attachment to narratives of superiority and control. Victor, father of one of the missing children, spouts colonial attitudes when he calls the jumbies "savage" (*Rise*, 2017, p. 173). When a lagahoo assists people in the water line, he attacks it, saying, "*They* don't belong here. *They* are not like us" (italics mine; *Rise*, p. 173). Like Severine who cannot accept plurality and banks on sameness to build a family, he adopts an us/them paradigm, complete with its rejection of Afro-Caribbean folk culture as a valuable orientation to the world. Surviving in the contemporary world, according to the novel, involves respecting both jumbies—and their ecological presence, ancestral symbols of forest and sea life—and humans represented in the protagonist's final embrace of both identities.

Baptiste then encourages children to connect to their environment, which from a speculative view can includes ancestors—whether it's the jumbies who survive across generations or family members whose spirits continue to live on through the land and sea. Corrine's father teaches her to remain true to those ancestors who mean well, but not to ones who try to pass on a politics of domination. He explains to her,

> "I feel the pull of the sea, not just because I love it, but because this is where your grand-pere taught me everything I know. You feel rooted to the earth because that is where your mama taught you to grow things. That's love….
> "Listen quietly, Corrine. You can hear your mother in the insects buzzing through your garden, and you can hear Grand-pere in the waves. These are the ancestors who love you. You are more connected to them than to Severine. She only wanted you because she was greedy." (*Rise*, 2017, pp. 18–19)

Perhaps Baptiste's approach to the past involves a carefully threaded path between letting go of ideologies of domination and the pain they produce—sending adrift ideologies of slavery—and accepting and integrating into one's current life ancestral beliefs that nurture and support one's relationships to the surroundings—whether that be "the insects buzzing" in the garden or "the pull of the sea." In this fashion, Baptiste honors the slave past and its surviving remnants—in loving ancestral parents (jumbie or human)—and powerful deities such as Mama D'Leau and Papa Bois. When Bouki asks Corrine, "What do you like better? Being a jumbie or being a girl?", she responds, "I like being Corrine" (*Rise*, p. 263).

Baptiste offers her young readers a quest story—a group of multi-ethnic friends who travel across the sea with mermaids to retrieve a symbolic opal. Readers also learn about the dangers of prejudice and judgement enacted against others, a strong lesson in today's political climate where opposing sides tether themselves to their beliefs, refusing to recognize nuance or middle ground, a potential launching point then for educators interested in teaching critical self-reflection or productive ways to respond to opposing views. Baptiste asks parents, guardians, and teachers alike to allow for the possibility of learning about the Caribbean's tragic history of slavery that mirrors that of the US. The magic and mayhem of her childhood surfaces as she corrects what was missing from children's literature when she grew up—stories about jumbies (*The Jumbies*, 2015, p. 232)—as she presents what she believes any

child should know about Caribbean and US history. Parsing such trauma—walking between the demand for hopeful endings while revealing historical truths—offers insight additionally for those who see the ideological link between environmental devastation and systems of human oppression. In her powerful article on environmentalism in children's books, Greta Gaard asks, when evaluating texts for such content, whether "self-identity [is] constructed in relation or in opposition to nature, animals, and diverse human cultures/identities" (2009, p. 323). She queries, "[D]oes the narrative/text provide an antidote to…the logic of domination?" (p. 323). *The Rise of the Jumbies*, with its insistence on interconnections between people and the environment—represented in part through its folklore creatures—celebrates such alignments, encouraging young readers (and teachers alike) to dive into the past, one step towards understanding who each person might like to be in the present.

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