The Open City as the Stuff of Creation in *Texaco*

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> The easiest way to free a slave was to give him savanna freedom. (Chamoiseau 1998: 48)

> And that (if anything) was the mark of a Mentoh. They lived among humans without any noise or smell, in invisible ways. Today still, few people suspect their existence. Yet only the Good Lord knows how we could ever have done without them. (Ibid.: 52)

> Esternome my papa was not a poet (of the chimerical kind who is moved by words handled like mirrors and by pain), but in this bric-a-brac he could see a kind of power. (Ibid.: 75)

> The Creole city did not inhale the workhands useful to its expansion, it simply suffered (while resisting) the shockwave of an agricultural disaster. Faced with the Creole city, the Creole urban planner must forget The City. When I say "Creole urban planning," I am invoking: *a mutation of the spirit*. (Ibid.: 234)

> No, we must dismiss the West and re-learn to read: to reinvent the city. Here the urban planner must think Creole before he even thinks. . . . I wanted to taste that ultimate treasure of repeating it according to the freedom of my Creole and the bouncing joys of the word. (Ibid.: 270, 322)

These five passages serve as the basis for my meditation on the "stuff of creation and the religious imagination of matter" regarding the colonial city. They are from Patrick Chamoiseau's innovative novel *Texaco* and represent five different ways that the descendents of black slaves explore what Jennifer Reid calls the

"stuff of creation" in the "fractious . . . district of Texaco and the ominous reign of a boundless city." These five *creation-stuffs* are: knowing nature, having African ancestors, work, creating a hybrid language and making an alternate city. Note that each of these *creation-stuffs* is an action: knowing, having lineage, working, speaking in hybrids, re-creating. I approach this novel, not as a literary critic 'but as an historian of religions' exploring what I have called elsewhere "America's Americas," the multiple narratives of making and knowing the diverse human and cultural spaces of the Americas (Carrasco 2000). When I say "America" I do not mean the religious and political history of New England and the land grabbing Euro-Americans. I mean *all* the Americas, north, middle, island and south. Large parts of these Americas came to be constituted, like Texaco, as urban-leaning cultural geographies—social and religious worlds tilting toward cities. In an attempt to glimpse the deeper imaginary structures of America's Americas and the creative stuffs of *Texaco*, claimed in the quotes above, I employ a method for deciphering what Paul Riceour calls the "enigma of anteriority" or what historians of religions call the *arché*. The enigma of the *arché* or archaic natural or cultural structures is that even though they are old, ancient and appear distant, inconspicuous and irrelevant, they continue to assert and insert powers, meanings, encumbrances and possibilities in the present day. The *arché* is often lodged in myths and mythic structures that, even when trampled by secular histories, continue to provide strange sustenances. In my view, the struggles of the peoples who inhabit the Creole worlds of Texaco must be understood in part through reference to three grand archaic structures that form the foundations, act as encumbrances and serve as creative resources for its inhabitants: The *arché* of cosmic nature (savanna freedom and the Mentohs in quote one and two above); the *arché* of colonialism (the bric-a brac work and the hybrid language of quotes 3 and 5); and the *arché* of the city (the alternate city, the mutated city of quote 4). By *arché*, I mean first of all the social and symbolic prestige given to what a culture or people consider to be "original forms" and which take on the potency of *primordial powers*. Further, by *arché* I mean in a more complex formulation deep-rooted and recurrent orders of materials, meanings and symbols which grow to constitute our physical and mental environment and which become the social and cultural *stuff* of what we mold, renew, and struggle to depart from. At a time when we speak of posts – postcolonial, postmodern, post-twentieth century – I'm also interested in the fact that "origins cue structures" and do not just recede in some evolutionary fog of the past. In the words of the novel, they are the "stories beneath history." In what follows, I outline three *archés* and interpret the five creation-stuffs of the novel. The language of the novel, in the end, will confound my models and interpretations and this pleases me. No scholarly apparatus can claim to be more than an approximation of a swinging, dancing text like *Texaco* and after all I'm still looking for the secret name the novel commands us to find when it writes,

> What is a City, you say.
>
> It's the bottleneck
>
> where all our stories come together. The Times too.
>
> What is a City? You say. It's not a place of happiness. It's not a place of misfortune.
>
> It's the calabash of fate. . . .
>
> Find yourself a secret name and fight with it.
>
> A name that no one knows and that in the silence of your heart you can howl for courage.

Creation Stuff No. 1: Savanna Freedom and the Cosmic *Arché*

> That is why those who knew the memory of place. . . .

This memory of place is the first stuff of creation in *Texaco* and this long-term knowledge of place has a salvific function. It saves from utter destruction those who have this memory and those who depend on those to have the memory. We see this *arché* introduced in the section entitled "The Conquest of the Big Hutch." The Big Hutch refers to the plantation and especially the big house plus its human masters and it's supporting colonial buildings and institutions worked by slaves of varying degrees of racial mixture. The complex supply line of foodstuffs for the Big Hutch is seriously interrupted when ships from various ports are delayed. White Creoles of Martinique, descendents of the old colonial planter families, are driven to the edge of starvation. Fluent in Creole, but speaking accented French, they face a devastating famine in part because they've never learned how to make-do in times of scarcity and famine or work in a vegetable garden. It is through the less valued knowledge of the slaves who have long survived on the land, waters, trees, plants and animals and are able to find food for themselves *and* their social superiors—these white Creoles or Békés—that relief from hunger comes. The text reads:

> The Béké had never thought of scratching the ground to make vegetable garden. He then saw his own pantry get thin. The slaves, used to sagging bellies, brought back from invisible gardens enough to stand on their legs. What's more

> they were able to grab the river's crayfish, make the lapia fish drunk with a bark juice, trap the flesh of migrating prey. And though it wasn't enough for a feast of first communion, this averted the famine for the Béké and his servants on top of hectares of cane and coffee. (45)

This episode represents the first *arché*—the world of nature that constituted the dominant environment for human kind for the longest period of human existence on earth. Recognition of its importance in the study of religion and the religious imagination has had enormous, though waning influence in Religious Studies over the last 25 years. The insight has been that the *cosmic arché* of nature, with its reliable patterns (sky structures, lunar and solar cycles, seasonal patterns of plants and animals) and eccentric manifestations (storms, lightning, floods, diseases) contributed significantly to the internal ordering of human consciousness, the shapes of the human imagination and the economic forms in human cultures. Human awareness of the cosmos emerged through rigorous interaction with something other than itself, mainly the given, natural forms of the world. Among the most vivid expressions of this *arché* were Mircea Eliade's *Patterns in Comparative Religion* (1958), Joseph Kitagawa's *Religion in Japanese History* (1966), and Charles H. Long's *Alpha: Myths of Creation* (1963). In all these works, the cosmic patterns of nature, interpreted through creation mythology and ritual practices, provide the background and context for thinking about daily life, ethics, sexuality, child rearing, warfare, and indeed every aspect of life.

In the colonial world of Texaco, this internal ordering of consciousness based on knowledge of nature not only saves the slaves and their masters from commerce-induced famine, but it also alerts the people with memory to the coming of an earthquake, an internal disordering of the land they live on. The father of the book's narrator, "my Esternome," was alert to both social and natural occurrences and realized that even in their enslaved state, the slaves had a knowledge that was superior to that of the white Creoles and the milatoes who strove to make social changes through rational means. This knowledge came because "the land slaves had chosen the land," while the superior social classes threw themselves into exporting, counting their wealth, arguing with the politics of the mother country. This choice of the land was to save them. The text tells us they chose "the land to survive on. The land to feed themselves with. The land to understand and inhabit." The novelist shows us how the land *comes to inhabit them* in the form of a powerful knowledge and awareness of its rhythms and chaos. While the upper classes are distracted by making history, the slaves were focused on the *arché* of the mountain they lived on. "That is why they, who lived the memory of this place, knew before everyone else that the lumpish mountain overlooking Saint-Pierre was in reality a raging bull." This volcano, when it

blows, devastates the city but many slaves armed with this memory, know the explosion is coming and they make off with their lives.

An example of the ironic power of the cosmic *arché* as the "stuff of creation" comes in an episode of murder, slave-master loyalty and an act of metaphorical freedom that was also a form of real freedom. Soon after the slaves save the masters with their knowledge of growing food in nature, Esternome escorts his Béké into the woods so he can learn the ways of the forest. They are attacked by a "maroon of a bad sort" gone mad with a "spirit drowning in hatred" for all the beatings he had received. The maroon attacks the soft-bellied master and shoves a bayonet into him, nearly killing him. Esternome kills the attacker with a musket and "not daring to mount the horse" carries the dying Béké on his back to the plantation where he is accused of stabbing his master and is readied for hanging. At the last possible moment, the master regains consciousness and exonerates him, saving his life. After a long period of recovery, the master decides to give Esternome his freedom but it isn't an official, legal freedom or a fully rational freedom. Instead he's given "savanna freedom" meaning he's returned back to the outdoors or open spaces with an unofficial freedom. The text reads,

> The easiest way to free a slave was to give him savanna freedom. You declared him free without any act of notary, tax, or mandatory food pension. He issued a sheet of paper which my papa kept all of his life and instead of signing it, he had stamped it with a cross. The glossary of the book defines savanna as "in many urban areas in the Caribbean, an open space, sometimes grassy, a central gathering place. Used as an adjective, the word is equivalent to 'unofficial.'"

Creation Stuff No. 2: The Mentohs: African Ancestors

It is immediately after this act of unofficial freedom that we are introduced to the spirits of the cosmic *arché*, the Mentohs, the unofficial "outside" spiritual resources of creation who animate the novel. These Mentohs appear at various points in the novel when a healing, catalytic or comforting presence is needed.[1] They represent a non-linear, multi-valenced, *haint*-filled history of the black experience in the Caribbean and the Americas in general. As the second quote above notes, "only the Good Lord knows how we could have ever done without them." These spirit forces represent another dimension of the cosmic *arché*, the dimension of human ancestors who have traveled over into the "given" structure of life-in-death, the permanent status of a lineage for slaves and others who have been radically cut off from their roots. What is especially important about Mentohs, as the "stuff of creation," is their alliance against the arbitrariness of violence

under slavery. The novelist writes, "The békés had reduced this earth to a frightful circus whose laws they guarded." The symbol of this frightful circus was the béké's dungeon in which he imprisoned whomever he wanted, whenever he wanted, for whatever reason he wanted. The Mentoh was the spiritual negation of this colonial violence in the sense that his origins and powers were rooted in a primordial order which antedated slavery but was an African presence *within* slavery. The text reads,

> He was smooth and discreet like a quiet draft. A Mentoh, so they say, has never suffered from the whip or the dungeon; by the time of the chains and the rod they were entirely forgotten; they never suffered anyone's envy . . . they lived among humans without any noise or smell, in invisible ways . . . with men of strength, sometimes Strength itself would show, and its name was the Mentoh.

Esternome and others who became alerted to its presence because "the Mentoh preserved what remained of our humanity" sought after this invisible strength, at first forgotten under the relentless lashes of slavery, but then wafting about in the close vicinity of suffering blacks. They provide the insightful perspective, "He was searching in each of them for a certain way of eyeing this City"; show themselves in special human postures, "A back straightened in a different way"; and had a luminous look about them, "Authority glowing under a weary eyelid" (Ibid.: 83). These are the living, invisible beings whose primordial meanings and accessible powers stimulate their interlocutors to imagine life sustaining openings in their minds, daily lives and families-openings of creative power bending toward freedom.

Stuff of Creation No. 3: Skills and Work

> ... but in this bric-à-brac he could see a kind of power.

The third stuff of creation is the prodigious amount and quality of work done by the people of Texaco and its environs. We see this theme illustrated in terms of hard labor in sections entitled "The Mentoh and the Carpenter" and "Building City." In the later chapter, the narrator's father goes back to work, after several seasons of savanna freedom and discovers in a fuller way what he had begun to learn in his Big Hutch days, mainly that the labor of the slaves and other people stuck in poverty created the wealth of the plantation which fed the prosperity of the towns that blossomed into the city with its "magical unction of some fat accounting books" (Ibid.: 75). The crushing labor done by the slaves was the

stuff of wealth for the other classes who escaped the great misery they had created. "Esternome . . . understood . . . that the plantation's wealth had created this town by passing through quickly, feeding with the crumbs left in its track thousands who knew nothing of the field slaves and couldn't give a damn." In other words, working became a way of *knowing*, a mode of knowledge both about one's misery but also about the richer world that sprouted from this misery. These slaves had eyes, brains, minds, imaginations and their *interactions and exchanges* with the colonial world they helped build became the dynamic environment that made them Americans or Caribbeans or Martiniquians and in which they recreated themselves. In this sense their work of identity represents the second *arché*, the *arché* of colonialism.

The profundity of this second originary process has been explored by the historian of religions Charles H. Long, who coined the phrase "new *arché* of colonialism." For Long, this is the worldwide destructive process of colonial social and symbolic constructions beginning with the Voyages of Discovery in the fifteenth century and reverberating strongly in many places, societies and individuals today. In his *Significations: Signs, Symbols and Images in the Interpretation of Religion* (1986), Long admits that religious studies is a child of the Enlightenment but also fingers another parental figure of our disciplines—the modern period of Imperialism and Colonialism. Impressed with Eliade's previous insistence that the internal ordering of the human imagination *always* resulted from interactions with pervasive *environments*, Long perceives the history of the era of discovery, with its world-wide invasions, violence, conquest and trade, as constituting a new archaic structure, *a new total environment for the formation of human thought and the study of religion*. He writes about his hermeneutical project,

> I shall attempt to raise the issue of the constitution of religion and human consciousness but instead of seeking for an arena of primordiality I shall locate this arena within the time and space of the formation of the new extra-European cultures, the new mercantilism and the ensuing relationships that took place during the modern period of imperialism and colonialism.

Long calls for a new positioning of the interpreters of religion. We are not only faced mainly with new opportunities to imagine religion, as J. Z. Smith has argued, nor with a prodigious set of hierophanies to decipher as Eliade claimed, but also with the *dynamics of concealment*, that is "the history of significations reflected in the delayed and distorted appearance of the colonized, the signified, the 'others' in our epistemology." This is the most pervasive (if concealed) and powerful environment of the study of religion facing us today.

Because the dynamics of concealment are so layered with linguistic, sym-

bolic and political power, and because epistemologies of white privilege, wherever they are deployed, work hard to deny the concealments; Long claims that interpreters who want to unmask these concealments must struggle to locate themselves *within* what he calls the slash, the in-between spaces, the liminal perspectives of the peoples who have been pushed there or have taken refuge there. We must seek, twist and renew ourselves into the s(lashes) of history because that is where the colonized developed their epistemologies. In *Texaco*, we see Esternome working slyly in the slash to unmask the dynamics of concealment in this passage about his creative work:

> my papa worked . . . one can say he built the city in its expansion. He learned to paste the stones with lime or friable stone mortar. He learned to make the basalt rise, to carve out dacite, and even to shape himself ghostly pumices. . . . The békés and France-whites always wanted to build houses like the ones in their original province, wanted thick walls that would hold in the coolness. The big-time mulattoes reproduced these models. But on the construction sites, my papa Esternome witnessed how the spirit of the black workers undid and reinvented the dwelling. . . . What to read in this wrought iron, these painted wood shutters, these enormous cut stones? These parks . . . Bonbon once said to him, and he was right that City was a Big Hutch. The Big Hutch of all Big Hutches. Same mystery. Same power. That made Esternome my papa a tad bit sick. (Chamoiseau 1998: 77-80)

Esternome becomes sick, not only because he is worked nearly to death, but also because he *reads*, he deciphers the mystery of the Big Hutch of all Big Hutches while he is slaving away. In this reading, learning, deciphering he achieves something akin to what Ashis Nandy calls the superior epistemology of the colonized. The colonized has recognized the humanity of both the master *and* the slave while the master only knows of his own humanity and is therefore a more ignorant being (Nandy 1983: xv-xvi).

Creation Stuff No. 4: Thinking Creole, Speaking Hybrids

> No, we must dismiss the West and re-learn to read: to reinvent the city. Here the urban planner must think Creole before he even thinks. . . . I wanted to taste that ultimate treasure of repeating it according to the freedom of my Creole and the bouncing joys of the word. (Chamoiseau : 270, 322)

Colonialism is experienced by Maria Sophie's people as a total environment, an anteriority with cosmic prestige and they are faced *everyday and every time they open up their mouths or their minds* with the problem of what language one is to speak. The primordial force of language and therefore its *arché* is exactly what is meant in the quote above—it determines what one thinks, how one's mind works, what spaces in human thought are opened as an internal geography for reflection. One "must think Creole before he even thinks . . . "! There are numerous references in the book to the variety of languages, dialects and accents used by whites, blacks, milatoes, maroons and other variations of race and ethnicity. Clearly language is one of the most potent "stuffs" of creation and the central expressive vehicle for the imagination of matter, life and death. To see how profound and problematic the work of language is to the novel, read the Afterword written by the translator of the novel into English. She is emphatic that the novel is "grounded in French" (Ibid.: 395) but also in an objection to French and several of its variants on Martinique. There is Creole French, Mulatto French and other variations and intrusions dwelling within the four literary sources of *Texaco* a) Marie-Sophie Laborieux's notebooks which record her father's words, b) Oiseau de Cham's transcriptions of Marie-Sophie's story, c) Chamoiseau's letters to her and d) the urban planner's notes to the Word Scratcher. Consider this passage by the translator to see how central, deep and diverse this problem of finding a *creative language* is for these people. We are told that the author:

> dares mess with standard French. He creates a text whose French matrix is scattered with Martinique's flora and fauna, with Carib, Old French, Spanish, English, East Indian Arabic, and African words with multiple *Weltanschauungen*, registers, meanings and word play. Play which strikes both Ti-Cirique and the Texaco Béké as "négrerie," which is why the béké class leaves the "literature crap," as well as "that foul heap of City"—in short, Texaco (both the literary work and the actual site, property of the oil company) – to those squatting at the edge of City, at the fringes of the French language. (Ibid.: 395)

It is these "dares to mess" with standard colonial structures that constitutes a kind of third creation of their world. The first creation was the creation by God. The second creation was the renaming and reordering of African and indigenous lives by the "civilizers." The third creation was the "daring to mess" with these colonial structures. But this third creation is filled with ambivalence, the ambivalence of writing the new language but also destroying the full integrity of oral modes of expression. Creating a new language—in this case the language of creolite means for Marie Sophie also a kind of death. She tells us that as she

begins to write her father's life story into some version of French, she began "to die a little." Writing her father's life both salvages his memory and distances herself from him or as she says, "Each written sentence coated a little of him, his Creole tongue, his words, his intonation, his laughs, his eyes, his airs, with formaldehyde." She is writing in the French language, not in Creole, and the task reveals the double consciousness of her lineage. "*How to bring in my so Creole Esternome?* Oh, knowing I was writing him into French would have made him proud, yes . . . but I, holding the quill, measured the abyss" (Ibid.: 321). She cries as she writes because she is both prolonging his life in words and "losing him and immolating him myself" because her poor French words pushed the echo of his way of speaking, thinking and being farther into the canyons of memory. This is why she speaks of yearning for the 'ultimate treasure of . . . the freedom of my Creole."

Creation Stuff No. 5: The Mutated City

> The Creole city did not inhale the workhands useful to its expansion, it simply suffered (while resisting) the shockwave of an agricultural disaster. Faced with the Creole city, the Creole urban planner must forget The City. When I say "Creole urban planning," I am invoking: *a mutation of the spirit.* (Ibid.: 234)

The third and most pervasive environment that constitutes the stuff of creation and profoundly effects the imagination of matter is the emergence of cities and especially the Ecumenopolis, the global city prophesied by Paul Wheatley in 1967. For it is within the total environment of the urban revolution that the cosmic *arché* has undergone radical re-evaluation, the colonial *arché* was created in the first place and what we call Religious Studies has developed its traditions of interpretation. What I am arguing is that the epistemological claims which Eliade made for the cosmic *arché* and Long has made for the colonial *arché* should be extended and tested against the history and power of cities to shape society and the human imagination. We can imagine that the city, as humankind's most powerful artifact, has worked to orient and re-orient human thought and culture and that the Ecumenopolis of the immediate future will have an even greater influence on our lives and work. Playing with the scheme of this paper, the patterns of nature that Eliade perceived constitute the *arché of the beginning*. Long's insight suggests the *arché of the end of the West*, but the city, with its visible and invisible entities, constitutes the *arché of the center* of human thought and religious practice in most parts of the world.

Cities as a Way of Life and as Social Stratification

It has been difficult for many scholars of religion and social order to realize what urban ecologists have made clear, namely, that the urban way of life *was not a system contained within the city's walls, or formal boundaries, but rather it spread far beyond the limits of the built form.* Wheatley is persuasive when he insists that cities were the style centers of the traditional world.

> It is the city which has been, and to a large extent still is, the style center of the traditional world, disseminating social, political, technical, religious and aesthetic values, and functioning as an organizing principle conditioning the manner and quality of life in the countryside. Those who focus their regional studies on peasant society to the exclusion of urban forms are—as I have stated elsewhere—as deluded as Plato's prisoners (or in another sense, Beckett's) who mistake the flickering shadows on a wall for reality. They, too, are turning their backs on the generative force of ecological transformation and seeking the causes of the great tides of social change in ripples on the beach of history. (Wheatley 1967)

But this insight is not necessarily good news to the masses of city dwellers or city supporters. Studies now show that cities are fundamentally places of permanent and pervasive social differentiation. Urbanists such as Max Weber, S. N. Eisenstadt and Wheatley have revealed that cities emerged only when the major institutional spheres of society became dissociated *once and for all* from the masses of the populace. These central economic, ideological and political spheres were usually accorded material manifestations at the hub of the settlement where the major religious and political mythologies were imprinted on the physiognomies of spectacular buildings. Social differentiation was not only the key to the generation of these effective spaces, architectures and overall urban settlements, but it was also the critical link that bound the larger city-state together throughout history. Following Eisenstadt, who held that the most important breakthrough of ancient social history consisted of the emergence of a religio-political elite controlling all institutions, Wheatley noted that:

> It signified for the *first time in the history of the world* the sundering of the populace at large from direct access to supernatural power, at the same time that it deprived the people *en masse* of participation in political decision making. In other words the populace had been alienated from the loci of both sacred and secular power. (Wheatley 1971: 319)

This is a profound point, namely that social stratification or class conflict is endemic to all cityscapes, Latin American, traditional, colonial, modern or postmodern. It's the way things are in all cityscapes and to avoid the significance of this challenging social architecture is a form of interpretive blindness.

Redistribution and Control

The material expressions of these enormous powers in the hands of elites were concentrated in monumental Central Places, whether as pyramids, palaces, plazas, ball courts, stadiums or civic structures which functioned as religious and political *axis mundis*, quintessential places of sacralized authority. These central ceremonial precincts sometimes imagined as replicas of cosmic or idealized political order, functioned as theatres for the vital spectacles which dramatized the cultural mythology as directed by specialists hired by the ruling elites. Wheatley and a host of urbanists have shown how cityscapes have an immense magnetism, a centripetal power that draws all manner of goods, ideas, technology, art, produce and commerce into the city's central institutions and precincts. The city becomes a bulging container that "cooks," transforms and redistributes everything that comes under its control. Eventually, these objects and ideas undergo a centrifugal force by being sent back out, in various ways, to specialist communities or the population at large, *but only after* they have been "redistributed" in the systems and values of exchange in the heart of the city. In other words, cityscapes are not territories where the goods, ideas, technology, agriculture are actually "shared" in some balanced or just fashion. Rather, they are redistributed, always unevenly, according to formulas of dispensation determined by the sacralized or idealized authorities and luxurious needs of the people who occupy the top rungs of the social pyramid. These elites contrive, prescribe, modulate and disseminate order and value throughout the subsystems of society. Their most crucial export, as Wheatley says, "is control" (1983: 9).

This fact of urban power can serve as a caution and balance with the cultural fashion of seeing everything taking place in social change in terms of diasporas. The tremendous waves of immigration throughout and from Latin America into the United States for example cannot be adequately understood unless the symbol of diaspora is studied in relation to the dynamics of cities that both stimulate and attract immigration. Consider this opening paragraph from "City as Symbol", where Paul Wheatley notes that we are living at a culminating period in the history of the city when two cycles of urbanization – the Urban Revolution begun over 5,000 years ago and the Industrial Revolution of the eighteenth century—are coming to an end and will merge into a universal city. He wrote:

> Now, when the rate of urbanization in industrial communities is tending to decline at the same time as it is accelerat-

> ing in most underdeveloped. countries, we are approaching a time when not only will all men live in terms of the city, but urban dwellers will again be distributed more or less in accordance with regional population densities. It seems inevitable that by the end of the twenty-first century, a universal city, Ecumenopolis, will come to comprise a world-wide network of hierarchically ordered urban forms enclosing only such tracts of rural landscape as necessary for man's survival. (Wheatley 1967: 1-2)

In my view, scholars of religion, whether concerned with morphology, history, postmodernism or symbolism, too often ignore the pervasive and unceasing influences of the urban ways of life, with their characteristics of monumentality (in ideas, personality cults and buildings), social stratifications (in social order, pantheons and philosophies), and capacities for control (of information, transportation, communication and symbolism). While the city is not the context of everything we study, it is the most pervasive social and symbolic context of what we study. Cities, more than any other place, artifact or "nature," provide humans with their most profound sense of *orientatio* on this earth, *orientation* meaning the fundamental process of situating human life in the world. Cities fix the human place in existence in ways that have religious dimensions and orient human beings toward existence in general and the sacred in particular.

Texaco as the Alternative City

This urban revolution is the most powerful underlying thread in *Texaco*, but it is not the balanced, cosmic city of the above model but rather a place of discards—discarded models of urban planning, discarded places passing as imitations of the mother of all city lands, France, and discarded peoples who, having undergone a mutation of their spirits, find creative stuffs in the interstices of Texaco's ominous urban reign. In other words, they create an alternative city that gives birth to this book and much of what it represents.

In order to understand how Texaco is a radical departure from some elements of the classical model of the city as outlined above, the reader must take on the challenge of reading all of Texaco . . . several times. As a prologue for your own adventure into this alternative city, I will merely guide you on a quick tour of some of the words, passages and metaphors that Chamoiseau uses to construct his mythic-tragic city of Texaco. This city is a "sanctuary of the word . . . struggle" and the first section of the book is entitled "Milestones in Our Attempt to Conquer the City." This is an ironic notion of conquest because it is only through the religious language of the three major headings of the novel that the people "came into our own." This conquest begins in an "Annunciation," continues through a "Sermon" and ends in a "Resurrection." But to be resur-

rected you must be dead! And, in fact, the protagonists of this novel had to "escape the night of slavery and colonialism" onto these pages in order to "throw themselves into the conquest of cities." Now it is plural cities because this novel is very plural—even in its *archaic structures*. These plural experiences of many cities that come to constitute Texaco are filtered through a harsh imagination of matters including the ages of Straw, Crate Wood, Asbestos and Concrete that make up the Table of Contents. In the center of this fragile but progressively hardening world lies this alternative vision, these final words of my essay from the old black man of the doum who answers the question, "What is City," with these words that constitute an invitation to us to enter into the Monumental Time that is an opening.

> City is not to be taken. It's to be known. It's a place the world gives you like it gives air.
> The path of this Time is through there.
> And that's another kind of iron path.
>
> There is no History of the City. Rubbish. Speak of Time. It Does not come like a thread but like a leashed dog that steps forward, rolls back, shivers, skids and takes a sharp right.
> All the stories are here, but there's no History. Only grand Time without beginning or end, without befores or afters. Monumental Time.
>
> Warm up your words before uttering them. Speak in your heart. To know how to speak is to know to withhold the word. To speak truly is to first polish silence. True silence is one place of *The Word*. Listen to the true Storytellers.
>
> You'll have to let go of City. You'll have to be wary of City. The gasoline holds out its cradle to you until you Take and let go of City. But that's still far away. And it's City which is going to change. It's a question of fates. It's a Bottleneck but it's open. It's open, it's open. . . .

Notes

1 I'm indebted to Rachel Harding for sharing some of these interpretations about the healing significance of the Mentohs in the novel.

Works Cited

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