MARIA CRISTINA FUMAGALLI

Border (Un)Writing: Victor Hugo's Bug

official recognition of the French colony of Saint Domingue in 1777, the French constantly pushed their unofficial borders, while the Spanish carried on punitive raids to eradicate the French presence. In 1792, in the course of the slave rebellion on the French side, war was declared between French and Spanish Saint Dominigue, and in February 1793 Toussaint L'Ouverture, Georges Biassou and Jean-François crossed the border and formally joined the Spanish forces to fight against the French. In September, the British invasion began and, at the end of the year, Toussaint, still fighting for the Spanish, occupied central Haiti. When slavery was abolished in Saint Domingue in February 1794, he returned to fight for the French, expelled the Spanish from the north and drove the English back from the fortifications of the Cordon de l'Ouest. In 1795, Toussaint continued to sweep the Spanish out of the French territory and, in September, the Spanish part was ceded to France in exchange for the return of all continental territories taken by France during the monarchist war. After being defeated by Toussaint's army, the English withdrew from Saint Domingue in 1798. In January 1801 Toussaint invaded the Spanish side of the island and kept it under his own control until the arrival of the French the following year. After that, Hispaniola again became a war zone, especially after Dessalines's Declaration of Independence in 1804. Reconquered by the Haitians in 1805, the Spanish part was reclaimed by Spain (with the military help of British Jamaicans) in 1809. In 1822, Jean-Pierre Boyer annexed the former Spanish colony of Santo Domingo; the Haitian occupation of Santo Domingo lasted twenty years, until 1844. The relationship between the two sides of Hispaniola, however, was not only characterised by antagonism but also by other kinds of interactions, mutual influences and collaborative linkages; in fact, the border between the Spanish and French sides of the island had always been a contact

zone endlessly traversed by discourses and practices aiming at its watertight closure, but discourses and practices that, instead, kept the gates open.

Victor Hugo first wrote *Bug-Jargal* as a short story in 1819, when he was only seventeen years old, and then substantially revised it in 1826. In the Preface for the 1826 edition, Hugo asserts that by that date his "subject matter ha[d] acquired a new degree of interest" (57). Many critics have pointed out that Hugo probably revised his short story because in 1825 Haiti had just agreed to pay France an indemnity for property lost by the colonists during the Revolution, in order to have its independence officially recognised and regain access to the international market. One should stress, though, that if this indemnity made Haiti topical once again in 1826 France, Hugo was never enthusiastic about his country's decision to recognise Haiti officially. In a note to *Bug-Jargal* he explains:

> Our readers will doubtless not be unaware that [Hispaniola] was the first name given to Saint Domingue, by Christopher Columbus, at the time of the discovery in December 1492.[3]

This short account of the history of the island is inflected by Hugo's political views: by calling Hispaniola "Saint Domingue," Hugo does not acknowledge, *de facto*, the existence of Haiti. He was not alone, of course: in 1819, for example, Baron de Vastey, the secretary to King Henry Christophe wrote that "while we uniformly adopt these new names [Haiti, Haitians], the French pertinaciously adhere to the term Saint Domingue, both in their acts and writing."[4] It is noteworthy that Vastey's declaration precedes the Franco-Haitian agreement, while Hugo's footnote to the second version of *Bug-Jargal* follows it.

In 1819, when Hugo was working on the first version of *Bug-Jargal*, the Spanish part of the island, previously captured by the rebels, had been re-Hispanized

connections with Saint Domingue.[6] In a letter dated 18 December 1829 Hugo claims that his family belonged to the list of Saint Domingue's colonists who had been financially ruined by the revolution, and holds the Haitian president Jean-Pierre Boyer responsible for withholding his family's indemnity.[7] It has been noted, however, that if Hugo was indeed entitled to any compensation (and historians are still debating

another by their respective metropolises but they did it all the same, out of necessity and mutual advantage. Santo Domingo's livestock economy, for example, depended in great part on the contraband trade with Saint Domingue.[11] In the second version of *Bug-Jargal*, Hugo informs us that some of the livestock eaten in the French part of the island was actually raised on the Spanish side.[12]

In both versions, Pierrot, the slave who sings the song of the *contrabandista*, recounts that before arriving to Saint Domingue he was brought to Santo Domingo by a Spanish captain and then sold "to different masters as one sells a head of cattle" (171).[13] Like leather and beef, slaves were bought and sold across the border (both legally and illegally), or even borrowed: the French, in fact, did sometimes borrow them from the Spanish when they needed more workers. Slavery was practised in both parts of the island but there were important differences in the way of life of the slaves: the fact that the economy of the Spanish colony was livestock- and not plantation-based gave rise to a different relationship between masters and slaves, who shared hardships and formed bonds of intimacy unknown (and abhorred) on the French side.[14] Furthermore, a source of the time reports that between 1786 and 1787 "over four thousand slaves fled into Spanish territory [from Sainte Domingue]. The Spanish hardly returned any of them […. T]here are now [in 1787] six thousand [runaway slaves] in the Spanish colony."[15] Before Haiti became independent, marronage had become a major problem for the French plantation owners and represented a crucial means of resistance for slaves who identified the border with freedom. The colony of Santo Domingo, in fact, was a popular refuge for the maroons who had established permanent communities there from the beginnings of slavery.[16] This symbolic function of the border is clearly illustrated in *Bug-Jargal*: when the rebel army feels threatened, its leaders decide to "head for the Spanish frontier" (178). Interestingly,

These are words directed to the "white daughter of Hispaniola" Marie/Maria by the black Pierrot/Bug-Jargal—however, the *griffe de couleur* Habibrah defiantly claims the song as a description of himself:

> Now, if this song speaks the truth, the griffe Habibrah, your humble slave, born of a negress and a white man, is more beautiful than you, *señorito de amor*. I am the issue of the joining of day and night. I am the dawn or the sunset referred to in the Spanish song, and you are only the day. So I am more beautiful than you, *si usted quiere*, more beautiful than a white man. (77-78)

It goes without saying that the subtext is the threat of miscegenation: Habibrah has been repeatedly identified as the tragic mulatto and scapegoat of this mixophobic text.[17] Yet, I would like to focus here not on what Habibrah says but on *how* he speaks.

The *griffe* Habibrah speaks Spanish as well as French, plus Latin, English and Creole, but he mixes all these languages in a confusing fashion. In the above quotation, for example, some Spanish words pronounced by Habibrah are translated by Hugo in the text (*si usted quiere*—if you will) while others (*señorito de amor*) are not: this is a repeated pattern throughout the novel and adds to the threatening confusion that Habibrah is supposed to represent. Habibrah's code-switching and his "opacity," in fact, reveal Hugo's anxiety in relation to a border that did not hold and, as a result, was eventually erased by the Haitians. The simultaneous presence of different languages in the territory, however, testifies to the permeability of the internal border of the island, and signposts the existence of locally-derived multilinguistic and multicultural formations which refuse homogenisation. Hugo deals with the multilingualism of the text by trying to absorb the threat to the established order that such Babel entails: his use of notes and translations, in fact, chimes with his other strategies of containment: for example, his decision to end both versions of *Bug-*

among Vodouisant cults of the time, and whose appropriation of Mariology could identify him as Congolese, that is, from a part of Africa which had been exposed to, and had freely adapted, Catholic symbolism for three hundred years.[29] In Hugo's 1826 version, Bug-Jargal isr e n

i6-1(n)-4

well be deliberate, an attempt to both represent and vilify the language spoken by the rebels: the narrator himself explains that "many negroes who had originally belonged to colonists in Santo Domingo or were born there—mixed the Spanish language with their own jargon" ("*jargon*" in French, 80). Pierrot's, Biassou's, Habibrah's and the other rebels' (bad) Spanish appears in the text alongside the French spoken in Saint Domingue, African words, Creole expressions, Latin and English.[34] Hugo highlights the "impropriety" of such mixture of languages in chapter thirty-eight of the second version, where D'Auverney, a prisoner of the rebel army, is offered the possibility of saving his life if he consents to become Biassou's "diplomatic orthographer" (153). Biassou and Jean-François have just finished writing a letter addressed to the assembly in which they outline their conditions for surrender but, before sending it, they ask D'Auverney to get rid of any error that, as Biassou puts it, "could provoke the arrogant *burlerias* of [their] former masters" (153). It is worth reproducing Biassou's exact words here, because of the presence of the Spanish word *burlerias* (in italics and untranslated in the text), a reminder of his connection with the other side of the border: in the second version we are told that Biassou was sold by his first master in Saint Domingue to "a dealer from Santo Domingo for thirteen piastres-gourdes" (134). The principled D'Auverney predictably refuses to help the rebels, but what is interesting here is the fact that Hugo presents us with multilingual insurgent

indeed sent to the assembly" (153), and what he offers us in the pages of *Bug-Jargal*

second version of *Bug-Jargal*, multilingualism and code-switching are not limited to Habibrah's and other rebels' interventions. D'Auverney/the narrator seems incapable of keeping himself to standard French, when he approaches the border and describes life in the rebels' camp:

> The time had come for [the] *almuerzo*. A large turtle shell was brought before the *mariscal de campo de su magestad catolica*: steaming inside it was a sort of *olla podrida*, abundantly seasoned with slabs of lard, turtle flesh substituting for the *carnero* and sweet potatoes for the *garganzas*. An enormous Caribbean cabbage flowed on the surface of this *puchero*. On each side of the shell […] were two cups made out of coconut husks and filled with raisins, *sandias*, yams, and figs; this was the *postre* (147, italics in the text).

Some of the foreign words are translated into French in the text, but others are left untranslated.[43] OOn2(s0 Td f2(e)43(he)4( )3(he)4((da)]T(t)-2(h s)(ubs)-uo)-10)4(am)2(po ot)-2(a)4(l)-2

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aristocrats!' … 'Long live religion!' … 'Liberty!' … 'Equality!' … 'Long live the king!' … 'Down with France!' … 'Viva España!' … 'No more tyrants!'" (150).

[43] Hugo includes only the following translations in his note: *almuerzo* = lunch // *carnero* = lamb // *garganzes* = chickpeas // *sandias* = watermelon // *postre* = dessert (147).