A Seabird's Messages to the Blue Humanities: The Frigatebird, Steward of Water, Land and Cultures

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Abstract: The Blue Humanities highlights the connection between cultures of the world and the sea in order to better our environment. To exemplify the importance of interdisciplinary research in a time where conservation efforts will determine our future, this essay proposes a seabird, more specifically the frigatebird, as a steward of conservation for waters, lands and culture within francophone island literature. In the following essay, frigatebird representations from the Pacific, where the bird is mostly revered, confront the seabird's symbolism in the Caribbean for the Atlantic realm, and more specifically in Martinique and Guadeloupe where despite its ability to guide seamen, the bird is not always associated with good omens. In all texts encountered across oceans in the francophone world, the frigatebird's unique ability to glide endlessly, its piracy skills and its inability for a seabird to dive in the water allow us to determine that it becomes a steward of land, water and culture (literal and metaphorical) as a model of transformation and adaptability in a fast-changing environment.

Keywords: Frigatebird, Francophone Literature, Caribbean Literature, Pacific Ocean, Environmental Ethics, Blue Humanities, Martinique, Haiti

The Blue Humanities highlights the connection between cultures of the world and the sea in order to better our environment. To exemplify the importance of interdisciplinary research in a time where conservation efforts will determine our future, this essay proposes a seabird, more specifically the frigatebird, as a steward of conservation for waters, lands and culture within francophone island literature. Keith Moser, in his reading of French philosopher Edgar Morin's "complex thought" in the time of the Anthropocene, determines that the philosopher's suggestion to adapt our behavior is crucial: "In place of the myopic, human-centered frame of reference that is emblematic of the identiary quest in Western civilization, Morin proposes a radically different paradigm for achieving a genuine state of self-actualization" (20). In the following essay, frigatebird representations from the Pacific, where the bird is mostly revered, confront the seabird's symbolism in the Caribbean for the Atlantic realm, where despite its ability to guide seamen, it is not always associated with good omens due to its piracy skills. The complex western perception of the frigatebird is also reflected in its name in both French and English which is borrowed from a sailing warship, from Middle French *frégate* (Chambers 409). This complexity is also evident in John James Audubon's description of frigatebirds in the Florida Keys in 1839 as "equally lazy, tyrannical, and rapacious, domineering over birds weaker than themselves, and devouring the young of every species, whenever an opportunity offers, in the absence of the parents; in a word, they are most truly 'Marine Vultures'" ("Frigate Pelican"). There are five frigatebird species around the globe, and this essay focuses on two distinct ones: The great frigate (*fregata minor*) which is found in the Pacific, the biggest and deepest of all five oceans and the magnificent frigate (*frigata magnificens*) which is mostly found in the Atlantic realm. In the Pacific, the great frigate is so important that in the Marshall Islands and on the island of Nauru in eastern Micronesia, people devoted a cult to the seabird— as Nancy

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Pollock describes in her article "The Frigate Bird Cult in Eastern Micronesia"— whereas in the Atlantic within the Caribbean archipelagos, the bird is often called man-o-war in anglophone Caribbean spaces and its characteristics as a bird of prey epitomize its relationship with humans. In the Pacific realm, Pollock explains: "The frigate bird cult functioned as a strong symbolic link between the scattered islands of eastern Micronesia […] The frigate bird cult is one indication that, before European contact, Nauruans maintained close links with neighboring populations to the east, using the birds as a means of communication" (99). The frigatebird is then an agent for communication between people of the Pacific realm. Both Nancy Pollock and the ethnographer Solange Petit-Skinner before her document the taming of the frigatebird by the Naruan population and how the relationship with the seabird informs the inhabitants of the island on the state of the land and waters. In her book *Birds of the Wind, People of the Wind: Frigate Birds and Polynesians,* Petit-Skinner first describes a customary ritual where two teams capture and tame frigatebirds following ancestral practices. Two teams compete by baiting the birds then capturing them with a sling (10). It takes a few days for them to accept food from humans but after over a week, they become accustomed to humans and return to them for food and rest daily. The Naruans notice the flight of the bird is then altered, less majestic, but only an expert eye can distinguish them (12-18). The sling needs to be used with skill as this bird is revered, and contestants are not allowed to harm them. The number of competitors in each team must be in multiples of three and while women participated by the time of Petit-Skinner's observations, she notes that the space had previously been reserved for men (23-27). The prize is nothing but prestige, and the losing team carries a sentiment of shame and endures teasing. Petit-Skinner insists the lessons taught are immaterial in this competition of spirits where the frigates are revered as godly creatures (47). In the following chapter, Petit-Skinner explains the multiple spiritual abilities of this messenger of the supernatural world. The prophetic bird delivers messages from the spirits as the birds hold the ability to abolish the contingencies of space and time. For the Polynesians, the frigate bird is a messenger of the wind, of the future, of ancestors and of the people who live far away. The frigatebird carries the souls of the dead and protects the living (73-124). In the light of the work of Petit-Skinner, the frigatebird becomes a steward of culture literally and metaphorically. The same bird is known under the name of *Iwa* in Hawaii and *Te 'Otaha* in Tahiti. The Tahitian journal *Hiro'a* highlights the importance of understanding the bird and it gives clues to the patterns of the land and of waters through its ability to harness the energy of a key element that connects them, the wind. For these reasons, the frigatebird is not only respected but also revered: the frigatebird is a glider, and its flight helps both fishermen and sailors; the former follow their dives to locate fish in the ocean while sailors observe their behavior as a clear indicator of weather patterns and consequently the relationship between land and sea:

> This mysterious bird, difficult to approach, has an important place for Polynesians who gaze at the sky, paying attention when observing, when evaluating the height of its flight, when admiring its poised *and* majestic flight which sends manifest signs. If the frigate flies high, it's a sign for calm weather. If it flies at coconut tree or *tumu aito* (the iron tree) height, it is a sign of strong wings. However, if the frigate starts shrieking, it's a sign that strong rains are to be expected. ("La frégate" 1-2)[1]

The ability of the bird to alert people to weather patterns through its behavior on land and sea is perpetuated through generations via ancestral cultural knowledge, and since confirmed in recent studies. In "Frigate Birds Track Atmospheric Conditions over Months-long Transoceanic Flights," Henri Weimerskirch et al. explain the seabird's capability to stay aloft for months without touching down to rest:

> To do this, [the great frigate bird] tracks the edge of the doldrums [area where trade winds converge affecting weather, rainfall, and the formation of tropical cyclones near the equator] to take advantage of favorable winds and strong convection. Locally, they use a roller-coaster flight, relying on thermals and wind to soar within a 50- to 600-meter altitude band under cumulus clouds and then glide over kilometers at low energy costs. To deal with the local scarcity of clouds and gain longer gliding

> distances, birds regularly soar inside cumulus clouds to use their strong updraft, and they can reach altitudes of 4000 meters, where freezing conditions occur. (74)

This fascinating ability to disappear for months has been associated with the ability to communicate with the invisible world, the world of the ancestors attested to in many archipelagic cultures (Pollock 94). Religious symbolism, folk tales and science clearly make this seabird a perfect object of study in relation to the Blue Humanities where interdisciplinary knowledge is valorized in search for better harmony with our environment.

In the Galapagos, the two species of frigatebirds selected for this essay coexist among hundreds of seabird species and subspecies. It is now established that the sacred great frigate bird of the Pacific *Fregata minor* holds clues to many connections between land and sea and culture as it populates legend as a spiritual messenger. The Pacific frigate nests next to the magnificent frigate (*Fregata magnificens*) found between northern Mexico and Peru on the Pacific coast and between Florida and southern Brazil along the Atlantic coast. There are also populations on the Galapagos Islands in the Pacific and the Cape Verde islands in the Atlantic. In the Galapagos, conservation goes hand in hand with exploration, and the World Wildlife Fund and its emissaries document both the great and the magnificent frigate ("Frigatebird Facts"). While males of the two species are hard to distinguish, the differentiation between females is possible since magnificent females have a blue eye-ring and white underparts adorned with a black throat while great females have a reddish eye-ring and entirely white underparts, including the throat. Besides these physical attributes and the ability of the great frigate to sustain longer flights at sea, they share most characteristics. The frigate has "the largest wingspan to weight ratio of any bird in the world," which allows them to make months-long glides across the oceans of the planet ("Frigatebird Facts"). As Jean Jimenez explains, the birds' mode of locomotion is called "dynamic soaring." They repeatedly fly into the wind — which lifts them without much expenditure of energy — and then swoop down toward the ocean, turning back into the wind again as they approach the surface. They have likely evolved this low energy form of flying because of a unique disability; they are unable to dive below the surface to obtain food (Jimenez). Most seabirds have an uropygial gland or preening gland that allows them to produce an oil-like substance that renders their feathers waterproof. The frigate bird's preening gland is very small and does not produce the necessary substance to waterproof its plumage. Lacking this ability, which is common to other seabirds, the frigatebird relies on other methods to survive at sea; they use their hooked beaks to snatch fish from the surface of the waters ("Frigatebird Facts"). Frigatebirds favor feeding on rough seas, flying above sea mammals, who push fish to the surface when trapping them to feed. This is not their only form of piracy. As J.L Orsono et al. have observed, they are also kleptoparasites. Since their feathers do not allow them to dive, the frigatebird targets and harasses other seabirds until they regurgitate their meals. The bird then dives and snatches the food before it hits the water. Females and juveniles seem to be the most likely to display the behavior (Osorno et al. 692).

The frigatebird's extraordinary ability to glide endlessly, its inability to dive in the ocean and its piracy skills are noted by humans as they integrate the sea bird into their belief systems through legends and literature. An exploration of the seabird's importance within the francophone Caribbean space in the Atlantic Ocean reveals many delineations of the message to the Blue Humanities. To further understand these delineations in the Caribbean realm, two texts from Martinique and two novels from Haiti can help the reader understand the complex symbolism of the frigatebird in each geographical area.

In variations of Caribbean Creoles, the magnificent frigate is referred to as *malfini.* In the official Guide to National Parks of Guadeloupe, the frigatebird is designated by three names *frégate superbe*, *frégata ngnifique* and *malfini.* The form *mensfenil* is cited by French linguist Jourdain in her 1956 book on Créole, and the word *menfenil* appear*s* in several works by Aimé Césaire, one of the founding fathers of *Négritude* in the 1940s. In contemporary Martinican literature, the *malfini* (frigatebird or magnificent frigate) is also found in the works of another Martinican author, Patrick

Chamoiseau who gives readers a useful message of warning for the Blue Humanities. However, caution is required when common names of birds are used because in other instances, *malfini* could refer to an Antillean hawk. Therefore, for each of the francophone novels from the Caribbean realm analyzed below, a probe of the bird is necessary since the name *malfini* could refer to either a frigatebird or a *falco sparverius caribaerum*, an endemic Antillean chicken hawk. Mostly, the color of the bird determines which *malfini* is featured in the text. The frigatebird is black, and the hawk sports a grey spotted plumage. In British lesser Antilles seabird lists, the frigate is also named Hurricane Bird, Weather Bird, Man-o-war bird (as previously highlighted), Scissors, Malfini, *Frégate Superbe* ("Lesser Antillean Seabird List").

Firstly, in "Colombes et Menfenil" in *Text and Image: Taking Flight From Conquest in Aimé Césaire and Wifredo Lam's Collaborative Aesthetics*, Katerina Gonzalez Seligmann analyzes the understudied work by Césaire in collaboration with Cuban painter Wilfredo Lam as they engage a dialogue in words and images about two birds: the dove and the *menfenil*. In a convincing demonstration, Gonzalez Seligmann explores the classical antithesis between the peaceful symbolisms attached to the former and the belligerent nature of the second as a symbol of war. She also uses the later paintings by Lam inspired by his dialogue with Césaire "Menfenil" (1947), "Lunguanda Yembe" (1950), and "La Colombe Noire–The Black Dove (1959) to make a compelling case. By the third painting cited, the Manichean division between white dove/peace and black *menfenil* /war is clearly challenged by Lam as the dove is now black. Despite the abstract nature of Lam's work, the drawing clearly depicts a frigatebird because unlike the hawk, the frigatebird has pointed wings, a long, deeply forked tail and long, hooked bill and beak. An association with Audubon Plate 271 mentioned earlier comes to mind at first glance. All those typical features of the frigate are recognizable in each drawing by Lam.

Gonzales Seligman, in her analysis of the art by Lam and text by Césaire, confirms the reading where the frigatebird becomes a catalyst for transformation:

> In Aimé Césaire's *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*, the *menfenil* acts both as a bird of prey that may devour the moribund system of thought that undergirds and naturalizes the history of conquest and as a "mens-phoenix" figure that rises out of the ashes left by that history. Césaire's *menfenil* serves as a guide for a poetics that both excavates the violence of conquest (including slavery and its legacy in anti-Blackness) and writes a new self-in-community. (38)

Cahier d'un retour au pays natal, a seminal and epic work on the situation of the African diaspora in the colonial context, also features the *menfenil*, as a bird that offers the oppressed a way to find a new and better condition. The collective group who translated Césaire's work into English chose the title *Notes for a Return to my Birthplace* and translated *Menfenil* as "malfini," which is used by English speakers in the Caribbean. The passage often associates the bird with funerals, as the translation reveals:

> My star now, the funeral malfini./And on this old dream my cannibalistic cruelties/The balls are thick saliva in the mouth/Our heart of daily baseness explodes/continents break the frail attachment of isthmuses/land masses leap following the fatal division of rivers/and the hillock that for centuries has held its cry within itself is the one who in turn tears the silence apart/and this people rebounding valor!/ and our limbs vainly disjointed by the most refined torments, and the more impetuous life springing from this dung – like the surprise of soursop from decaying jackfruit! (Césaire 67)

Here the association with funerals clearly points at the black plumage which allows for the hypothesis of a frigatebird for a *menfenil*/*malfini* in Césaire's work to be sustained. While at first glance the bird could appear to be associated with a bad omen and a negative situation, a closer reading lends the *malfini* strong abilities including that of a renewal of life in the worst of situations as did the beautiful Caribbean multilayered societies that emerged in resistance to violence, death, and destruction imposed on the captives. The association with the *malfini* helps the author see the nectar flow from a land that appeared to be inert and unsalvageable at first glance, making the bird yet

again the conduit for a new vision where, even in death, the living is emerging. The bird's message is an admonition to consider the living world in a more nuanced way, starting with the reconsideration of the frontier between the dead and the living.

While Césaire uses the *malfini* to connect with his African ancestry and the multiple layers of his identity, his compatriot, Patrick Chamoiseau, refers to himself as an American Creole. To respect the right to self-determination and to remain coherent with the archipelagic nature of the landscape studied, it is important to place Chamoiseau as an American author who proposes an anthropomorphic tale of birds in context. His novel *Les Neuf Consciences du Malfini* also offers a nuanced understanding of the frigatebird by humans in the Caribbean realm. In "Le Maître dans l'Oeil du Disciple" [The Master in the Eye of the Disciple], Paul Kana Nguetse examines Patrick Chamoiseau's novel : *Les Neuf Consciences du Malfini*, (note here the number is a multiple of three) as a coming of age novel in which the reader adopts the perspective of a frigatebird who settles down in the small corner of an island of a fragile Martinican ecosystem. The reader discovers the landscape through the glide of a majestic *malfini* called Malfini whose life is transformed when he starts observing and imitating a hummingbird's behavior, shifting from predator to steward of conservation (157). This change in perspective, according to Nguetse, is facilitated by a shift in the *malfini*'s view of Nature's order as he no longer abides by a vertical hierarchical order of species according to their size and abilities where the *malfini* is the almighty ruler of the skies through its amazing biological abilities at sea and on land, but he instead accepts a horizontal order where interaction with others proves to be a better *modus operandi* to be in harmony with the elements (159).

A dive into Chamoiseau's story allows us to gauge how much the bird evolves. Chamoiseau's keen knowledge of the Martinican landscape and ecology of the place he is describing is obvious from the start. Rabuchon, a small Martinican region, becomes home to Foufou, the hummingbird, and to Malfini whose perspective is lent to the reader and who sees a series of threats: pesticide, monoculture, birds of prey, weather; the threats are countless but Malfini does not flinch and ends his tale with a "Manifest of the Living" for a commitment to nature. The encounter with the reader happens at the threshold between water and land, Malfini's preferred domain. However, his almighty reign is challenged early on by the presence of a small insect-like creature, a hummingbird who does not feel threatened nor bothered by the great predator. Malfini's curiosity is piqued, and he starts spying on this small creature, noticing that among the hummingbirds, he is the smallest. The novel begins through Malfini's bird's eye view, which allows the reader to visualize every interaction from a unique and unsettling perspective. Colibri (French for hummingbird) is the ruler of all hummingbirds, but unfortunately, he rejects Foufou, the little hummingbird who does not mindlessly follow the group, and Foufou is not really welcome among his own kind. Malfini's encounter with Foufou (which in creole is the name of the *Huppe colibri*, the smallest hummingbird species found in Guadeloupe and Martinique) makes Malfini realize that he is not as powerful as he once thought. The little bird ignores every other bird and only seems interested in carrying dust, which we infer is pollen that he carries from one flower to another (82). Foufou also tends to explore new areas, including the high seas in the ocean on two occasions, where Malfini observes how Foufou's awkward flight at first glance becomes a useful skill when at sea.

The description of high seas excursions confirms that the black malfini described in this novel is a frigatebird. Indeed, one of the aforementioned characteristics is the frigatebird's inability to dive into water, a strange trait for a seabird who needs to survive while gliding over the ocean for months. In the novel, Malfini first follows Foufou, who mimics the behavior of diving seabirds (112). Throughout the novel Malfini claims to be guided by his *Alaya,* which is never really explained but seems to be an ancestral whisper that guides natures principles and fosters balance, influencing each species of bird to follow certain behaviors. The contact with Foufou clearly changes the *Alaya* Malfini thought he had, yet it does not change his inability to dive. He keeps trying but eventually has to fall back on using his beak and claws to feed himself (123–130). Chamoiseau gives us an interesting clue to the

bird's behavior and to his understanding of evolution. If the bird cannot change its biological traits, it can modify its behavior and find a better way to interact with nature to preserve culture by protecting the biosphere actively and daily.

The hierarchy is challenged and the once powerful Malfini calls Foufou his master as they return from the sea to Robuchon (132). From this point on, Malfini follows Foufou's lead, carrying and spreading dust. This behavior proves to be effective when threats come. Firstly, humans, called *nocive* (noxious) in the novel, endanger the ecosystem of the place with their banana plantations (156). The rest of the hummingbirds accuse Foufou and his strange ways of causing damage to nature and bully him, but Foufou ignores them and continues to carry dust while the reader is informed that the damage is caused by the pesticides spread by mankind. Malfini becomes omniscient when describing the thought process of the hummingbird, who correlates the death of many animals in the area with their interaction with flowers, realizing the importance of dust (pollen) which revives the landscape when spread (161). The Malfini follows Foufou, and their efforts to pollinate another area appear to save the ecosystem of the place which sees a rebirth (177). Malfini is now aware of his transformation although he confesses that he does not enjoy feeling less powerful and mighty (190). Later in the text, the *Malfini* calls himself a full disciple who can celebrate the living. Foufou fights off different invaders who threaten the place but eventually a more pernicious threat emerges, a global weather pattern change, which forces the pair to collaborate with the *nocive* (humans) to overcome the new threat. Malfini notices Foufou does not age, and for three generations, with the help of the Malfini, Foufou tries to maintain a balanced ecology for the place. Eventually, Foufou disappears and Malfini is left to carry the mission of dispersing dust on his own.

The last chapter of the book is a message left by the Malfini who conveys what he learnt from Foufou the hummingbird to the humans. This Malfini's Manifest on the Living is an incantation in nine parts urging *nocive* (humans) to alter their daily behavior to live a better life, in harmony with their changing surroundings. This message is then repeated and elaborated on by a *nocive* narrator himself who chants the nine principles of the "Song of the Living" [the Song within the Recitation] (270). In Césaire's work, the Malfini allowed for a rebirth of an African heritage within Caribbean identity, a part of culture. In Chamoiseau's work, the rebirth of the culture is literal in Rabuchon, where plants start to grow again as the frigatebird has a metaphorical and literal message for the Blue Humanities as a steward of culture and warns us of the impact of our actions on our common environment. The idea of life evolution in Chamoiseau's text is very interesting and stated in the first tenet of the Recitation on the Living, the frigatebird's message: "Nothing is true, right or good, everything is living" (260, 262). This inaugural statement in what reads as a manifesto calls attention, as one immediately recognizes a variation of the great philosopher Edouard Glissant's motto, epigraph and epitaph "Nothing is true, everything is living." Alessandro Corio discusses its significance:

> This statement, seemingly so radical and definitive, recurs as both a motto and an admonition in the later publications and lectures of Edouard Glissant. It is used as the epigraph to the Tout-monde poetry anthology La terre le feu l'eau et les vents, the final work to be published during the author's lifetime. Glissant himself suggested the phrase should be the theme for the annual seminar cycle of the Institut du Tout-Monde the institution he had founded in Paris. In this seminar cycle, he gave a keynote with the same title, "Nothing is true, everything is living" (916).

In Chamoiseau's iteration of the admonition, the words of Glissant are visible, as the two Martinican intellectuals shared correspondence and exchanges for decades and produced work together. The addition of "right or good" seems to imply that a personal responsibility, a betterment of the situation, is only possible if the awareness of the importance of the work of each living individual has an impact. These two adjectives seem to elaborate on Glissant's legacy by adding a direct call to a practical individual action as the frigatebird delivers its message. In the second tenet, an invitation to abandon vertical hierarchy for what he calls a "horizontal plenitude" is advised: "nothing is universal, everything is *di/versal* in the infinite variety of the living and in the ideal perspective of its

horizontal plenitude" (263). In the work of Chamoiseau, the frigate is a steward of conservation whose adaptative relationship to the waters and lands and arguably to the world of the ancestors represents a model for humans, and arguably an injunction to transform our parasitic rapport with all these terraqueous elements. Chamoiseau's frigatebird's message to the Blue Humanities is literary, poetic, and ecological, yet he warns against an attempt of fixing and classifying the knowledge gathered because the living being's evolution and change are constant. The final admonitions add a spiritual aspect to the message of the frigatebird as Boualem Sansal, the Algerian author explains in his reading of the masterpiece:

> Here, read the *Neuf Consciences du Malfini*; it is the book of infinite consciousness and total realization. Set yourself under the wings of the rough bird of prey and follow this surprising hummingbird that Chamoiseau, the extraordinary explorer, has found who knows where and let the instinct guide you. It will not be long before you die and enter the world. Then, you might hear the song, the full Song of the Living. (26)

In Chamoiseau's work, the frigatebird is an agent for the Blue Humanities, changing patterns of behavior to adapt to change, showing us a way forward that resonates all the way in North Africa where Sansal does not need to be part of the bird's habitat to understand its message to humankind.

This quick survey of the frigate bird in the literary landscape of Martinique proves challenging as the work is scarce and words and classifications remain misleading at times especially when considering the fast evolution of vernacular languages. To continue this exploration of the frigatebird's message to the Blue Humanities within the Caribbean Francophone context, the neighboring independent nation of Haiti offers an interesting and challenging reflective lens. In Haiti, the frigatebird is also known as *malfini*. In Tahiti and in Haiti, a plethora of legends, tales and other literary works are populated by the seabird whose abilities to connect with another world can be common knowledge to certain people living near the water. A reminder of the previous linguistic disclaimer is essential as *malfini* in Haitian *Kreyiol* refers to the frigatebird (also called *wazo cizo*) as well as a variety of raptors under the category of chicken hawks, especially a Ridgewood Hawk, endemic to the island of Hispaniola. Here again in Haitian literature where a *malfini* is featured, a close analysis of how the bird is described is necessary to confirm it is a frigatebird. Two novels analyzed below offer interesting perspectives. The first one is *Le Cercle de Époux Fidèles* by living literary legend Gary Victor and the second novel is *L'Oeil du Malfini,* the first novel of Johémy Delinois, a female emerging writer. The *malfini*'s talent for piracy is a trait on which both Haitian writers elaborate. The frigatebird's piracy, that inspire beliefs, legends, and literature from Haiti and elsewhere is documented by biologists:

> We observed Magnificent Frigatebirds (Fregata magnificens) kleptoparasitizing human fisherman in early July 1982 […] in southwestern Ecuador. Despite their ability to fish for themselves and catch most of their own food, mainly by surface fishing for flying fish and squid (Bent 1922, Murphy 1936, Nelson 1975), frigatebirds are well known pirates or kleptoparasites of other piscivorous birds (Howell 1932, Meinertzhergen 1959, Palmer 1962, Rand 1954, Clapp et al. 1982). No previous mention of humans as victims of their active piracy has been noted in scientific literature. Piracy or kleptoparasitism is defined in this report as active harassment and attack upon other individuals for the purpose of robbing them of their food or prey. (Buckley and Tilger 214)

In Gary Victor's *Le Cercle des Époux fidèles,* (*The Faithful Husband Society*), the *malfini* displays the ability for piracy in several instances and the encounters of the narrator with the birds prove that the symbolic powers associated with the *malfini* are present in everyday life in Haiti. The novel opens with the interior monologue of a male narrator, a suicidal writer, who routinely plays Russian roulette with a gun loaded with one bullet while listening to psychedelic music. His main complaint is about his wife, who is caught up in domestic life and keeping up appearances and ignores him. The narrator, who claims to possess love and desire for his wife, entertains several extramarital affairs until one day an encounter with a *malfini* leads him to write a new novel and to live otherwise. The

narrator immediately recognizes the type of bird when it scratches his window, inviting the writer to embark on a new adventure (which is then turned into a novel), a new life via a secret society in a parallel world. Despite the disproportionate body size of the specimen he meets, the narrator knows it is a *malfini* (Victor 25). The narrator also expresses that the general feelings the bird provokes among humans, especially children, are fear and respect for its majesty. Indeed, early in the novel, Victor's narrator shares an anecdote where his father catches him in the act of self-pleasure and reprimands him. The father threatens the teenager by telling him that if he would continue to engage in such despicable action, a *malfini* would snatch his penis away (Victor 52). The narrator then proceeds to share another childhood story where a chick he tended to as a child is seized by a *malfini* under his eyes (Victor 62). In both cases it is clearly the ability of this seabird for piracy inspiring respect and fear that presides over the relationship with the frigatebird.

However, the frigatebird's piracy is not the sole biological characteristic Victor divulges that leads the reader to believe his *malfini* is a frigatebird. Indeed, the flight of the bird described also correlates with the gliding abilities of the magnificent frigate previously described. When the seabird comes to pick up the narrator-author to take him to a secret society in a parallel world, its majestic flight and glide are that of a frigatebird as Victor describes an incredible ascent using a sky corridor. While in scientific literature, the frigate birds fly high to reach doldrums, in Victor's novel, the bird uses a moon ray for the steep ascent (43). The narrator then describes the bird's dives for food. Its piracy skills and its everlasting glide make the bird a perfect animal to cross the frontier between worlds in the Haitian context, offering an interesting variation from the Pacific frigate who also navigates the space between our world and an invisible realm. In Victor's work, the portal between the worlds is located at the door of the underprivileged neighborhood of *La Jalousie* and more precisely on a painted mural. The world beyond this threshold defies western rationality when the *malfini* takes the protagonist to a secret society where nine birds (here again a multiple of three) in tuxedos engage men in highly violent and sexualized activities before dropping the protagonist back to the mural of *La Jalousie* at the end of the night. The location of this portal is a message from the frigatebird to the Blue Humanities regarding urbanization. *La Jalousie* was built on a hill that used to be full of natural life and is now an ever-growing accumulation of precarious housing that continues to destroy the Haitian natural landscape, making the frigatebird a steward of literal culture through land conservation in an urban setting and metaphorical culture through its travels to the invisible world.

The frigatebird becomes a messenger of the Blue Humanities in Victor's work when his protagonist-writer realizes that every time he travels on the back of the *malfini* to the world of spirits where the secret society is located, the stories he experiences get transcribed in his novel on his computer without him having any memory of writing. The narrator starts questioning who is writing, the traditional narrative role is challenged by the intervention of the frigatebird and its ability to escape a fully rational world. In that moment, the narrator starts to believe the bird himself produces the words that constitute the novel he is currently writing (87). The narrator goes as far as adopting the point of view of the bird (similar to Chamoiseau in this perspective, but to different ends) conflating the ability of the frigatebird to create text with his own. The narrator realizes his experience of the book; the worlds of fiction and reality fully collide. A rollercoaster of reactions follows as the narrator first stops writing and tries to avoid the bird before realizing he needs help to finish his work, forcing him to seek out the bird. During this process, one body part of the Malfini seems particularly important, his eye. When early in the novel, the protagonist consults with his clairvoyant to figure out what is happening to him at night, she advises him to avoid the bird and from that moment on, the eye of the bird becomes a center. The point of fascination is the eye (43), yet in one of the night adventures where they are attacked, the bird loses that eye in a battle (88). In a later encounter, the bird has a replacement eye that he loses again (133).

If in Haitian literature the eye of the frigatebird is the connector to humans who learn about land, water, weather, and spirituality, then Johémie Délinois' novel *l'Oeil du Malfini* [The Eye of the

Malfini] deserves special attention. Indeed, the story features a raptor who haunts a protagonist, and many commonalities with Gary Victor's text offer paths to gauge the importance of the seabird in Haitian culture in relation to the Blue Humanities. At first glance, the title of the novel appears very significant, and the plot could be perceived as similar: the reader encounters a *malfini* and its eye is important enough to be part of the book's title. Then, we have a main protagonist, this time female, who is experiencing relationship issues with the world around her. Laila is struggling in her marriage with Jocelyne and confides in her friends Caroline and Antoine, respectively a woman who works in nonprofit organizations that helps the less fortunate and a respected doctor. When her husband is kidnapped, Leila seeks comfort at Caroline's house (50). A ransom of 50,000 dollars is demanded. Despite this large sum for a Haitian family, Jocelyne, with the help of the community and family abroad manages to gather the requested amount. Unfortunately, the exchange does not go well, and while the money is paid, the hostage is not returned. Leila proceeds to go to the village of her ancestors and meets her grandmother who unfortunately passes away before divulging a message to Leila (74). From that moment on, Leila feels the presence of a yellow eye spying on her and finds out she is pregnant and that her family is haunted by a *malfini.* She proceeds to visit a Vodoo priest (a *bokor*) who advises her to stay the night for an exorcism (100). She chooses to leave and a miscarriage ensues. Her husband Jocelyne manages to escape, and Leila finds out that her two friends Caroline and Antoine are the kidnappers who are illegally running a lucrative organ trafficking scam. Through another clairvoyant, Leila learns that she needs to find the eye of the *malfini* to end the curse. She follows the clairvoyant's directions and rows a boat to meet the *malfini* at a liminal space between land and water where the veil between the tangible world and the enigmatic spirit world is lifted (165). The *malfini* is again a messenger between worlds operating between land and water but Leila learns in that final moment of the novel that the eye of the *malfini* is a personification of human fears, anxiety, and doubts which have overtaken Haitian society. It is the insidious voice that makes people believe thoughts that scapegoat others. If Leila triumphs and beats her "demons" at the end of the novel, there is still more work to be accomplished to liberate Haitian society according to the author. Délinois' *malfini* shares many common characteristics with Gary Victor's frigatebird at first glance, such as the ability to connect with the spiritual world while it arouses respect and fear in humans. However, a closer reading determines that in this case, the *malfini* is more likely to be a chicken hawk because of its dark brown plumage spotted with beige and its yellow and black eyes (94). The use of common names is potentially misleading which indicates that this type of study about the animal and vegetal world always requires caution and precision. The importance of the frigatebird in the Caribbean realm is mentioned in the study of frigates and people by Petit-Skinner cited earlier. She writes that the frigate is also considered sacred in the Vodou religion because of its ability to abolish time, space, and distance and its ability to rescue the living by delivering messages from the ancestors who live in the invisible world (51). However, in this case, the *malfini* is not a frigatebird and vernacular language is misleading. This closer attempt at bird identification dismisses the inclusion of this novel into the corpus. It is still important to keep Delinois' Haitian hawk, as her novel in the context of this essay teaches the reader to be weary of finite perception and catalogs of nature as both our language and our environment are in constant evolution.

In conclusion, the frigatebird offers a wide array of symbolic readings that can be interpreted as useful messages for the Blue Humanities to "(re-) anchor human consciousness into the inner workings of an interconnected and interdependent planet" and an invitation to adapt our behavior. The environmental ethicist and social justice advocate Keith Moser highlights the value of Edgar Morin's theories about "hominization." Specifically, Moser posits that the dawn of the Anthropocene urgently requires a multifaceted improvement of our relationship with the natural world. In the words of Morin himself, only a radical paradigm shift, or an "anatomical, cerebral, psychological, affective, and social transformation" will permit global society to reach this objective (Morin qtd. in Moser 20). To some extent, the frigatebird's behavior gives us keys for understanding these necessary

behavioral modifications if we choose to observe it carefully. Indeed, in every case encountered, an invitation to change the way we interact among humans is suggested by the frigatebird, directly or indirectly. Whether in Nauru, Tahiti, Martinique or Haiti, the frigatebird's communication with humans affects the social relationships of the protagonists within their respective lives. The same can be said for the psychological or cerebral change required from the characters in both the Pacific and the Atlantic realm. The frigatebird's relationship with water and land, its ability to glide endlessly, its piracy skills and its unique inability for a seabird to dive have informed seamen about land proximity, weather patterns and fish availability for millennia. We are likely to continue to observe further adaptations in behavior because of anthropogenic climate change. The belief in the sacred ability of the frigatebird to cross the frontier between this world and that of the spirits and ancestors is also widespread around the globe. Yet, this study insists that each culture has a specific way to relate to the frigatebird even in that unique capacity: in Martinique, Aimé Césaire uses the frigatebird to connect with his African ancestry while Patrick Chamoiseau writes a full novel from the perspective of a frigatebird, (Malfini) who follows the lead of a hummingbird and modifies its daily behavior and diet to live in better harmony with our environment which is undergoing waves of changes. Chamoiseau highlights how the frigatebird is well-equipped to deliver meaningful messages across different regions of the world. In Haiti, the piracy skills exemplify the fear associated with the frigatebird often called *malfini*. Yet, Gary Victor's *malfini* leads him to write a novel and connects to a world of spirits to improve his daily life. Delinois's *malfini* teaches the reader to be cautious about generalization as in her novel, the common creole name could have been misleading. In this interdisciplinary study of the frigatebird, it is important to correlate information from autochthonic contexts and avoid systemic generalizations. When looking at the appearances of the frigatebird in the text, it is essential to underscore the specificity of each tale, legend and practice even within the same water realm as endemic knowledge is key for survival when each of the places cited is unfortunately vulnerable to the meteorological changes previously discussed. This reflection centered around the Francophone Blue Humanities does not offer the means to directly mitigate those changes but continuing to observe, protect, and trying to understand frigatebirds might give us important clues on how to anticipate some of the daunting challenges ahead and allow us to adapt our behavior in accordance with the particular region in question.

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Notes

[1] All translations are my own unless otherwise indicated.

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