



Middle Passage Narratives: Flight, Loss and Resistance

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Archipélies

Middle Passage Narratives: Flight, Loss and Resistance

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RÉSUMÉS

Il s'agit ici d'explorer les stratégies textuelles que les écrivaines antillaises diasporiques Fabienne Kanor et Edwidge Danticat, mettent en œuvre dans leurs romans afin d'inscrire la mémoire de l'oubli et de la perte engendrée par la traversée du Middle Passage. Pour ce faire, elles s'emploient à recréer les voix de la résistance et de la survie, à élaborer de nouveaux récits pour énoncer la parole des subalternes et transformer les espaces traumatiques en de nouvelles poétiques du chancellement.

INDEX

MOTS-CLÉS

Limbo, poétique du chancellement, écrivains soucouyan, récits subalternes, Middle Passage

KEYWORDS

herstory, Limbo, poetics of staggering, soucouyan writers, Middle Passage

PLAN

Introduction

1. Flight as Memory: Remembering/Dismembering

2. Language as Reconfiguration and W/holeness

Conclusion

TEXTE INTÉGRAL

Introduction

- 1 Fabienne Kanor was born in 1970 in Orléans, France, of Martinican parents. She has published seven novels *D'eaux douces* (2004), *Humus* (2006) *Le jour où la mer a disparu* (2007), *Les chiens ne font pas les chats* (2008), *Anticorps* (2010), *Faire l'aventure* (2014), *Je ne suis pas un homme qui pleure* (2016). She is also a film maker and a performer.
- 2 Edwidge Danticat was born in Port-au-Prince, Haiti in 1969. Her parents separately moved to the United States. Danticat followed them at the age of twelve. Danticat grew up speaking French and Creole as she spoke no English upon moving to the United States. She published in English: *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (1994); *Krik? Krak!* (1995); *The Farming of Bones* (1998); *The Dew Breaker* (2004); *Claire of the Sea light* (2013) and non-fiction *After the Dance* (2002), *Brother, I'm dying* (2007), *Create dangerously, the immigrant artist at work* (2010)
- 3 All Danticat's and Kanor's texts are genuine embodiments of the female diasporic experience of displacement and dislocation, and concrete illustrations of the various authorial strategies to voice self-recreation beyond normative borders. They transform spaces of trauma into spaces of self-expression and self-renewal.

- 4 To illustrate this point, I will focus on Kanor's novel *Humus* (2006) and Danticat's short story *1937* (*Krik Krak*, 1995), and *The Farming of Bones* (1998), which relates the story of the island of Hispaniola, and the bloody slaughter of twenty thousands of Haitians in 1937 from the point of view of a female character Anabelle. In these narratives, the figure of the *soucouyan* defined in *The Dictionary of Caribbean English Usage* as "a legendary evil, wrinkled old woman who hides by day, but by night sheds her skin she carefully hides in a jar, then becomes a ball of fire roving in the air," (Allsopp, 1996) is manifest. To my mind, this figure should be considered, in a de-centering approach, as a flying maroon who changes his body into that of a bird. The ghost (or witch), represents the negation reborn by reactivating memory and subversion. It returns as an irruption of signs that fragments the text, creating a complex space that questions the center which is the Western world. In doing so, these authors promote a cosmogony and an epistemology scorned and obscured by colonialism.
- 5 Speaking of the experience of the New World, these writers' intention is to re-create myths, to restructure a past for their community. As Helene Christol aptly points it:

Such echoes of the cultures and rituals from Africa point to the attempt to tame the strangeness, the deregulation of the universe, thus incurring a subtle interplay between continuities and discontinuities, ruptures and fusions, the ontological objective being the restoration of order preceded by its disruption. (Christol, 1999, 169)

1. Flight as Memory: Remembering/Dismembering

- 6 This reclamation of the ancestor represents not only an aesthetic act but an act of historical recovery. The one who flies has chosen freedom instead of amnesia. To fly is to remember.
- 7 Toni Morrison's fiction, particularly *Song of Solomon* (1977), claims and is rooted in Black expressive cultures which include traditions of myths and oral history.

- 8 The vital themes and governing structural patterns of Morrison's novels are modeled on African narrative modes which Morrison calls "the oral origins" (mythology, folktales). As an example of an oral origin model, Morrison discusses her use of the myth of Flying Africans in an interview with Leclair: "The flying African myth in *Song of Solomon*.. If it means Icarus to some readers. Fine. My meaning is specific: it is about Black people who could fly. That was always part of the folklore of my life: flying was one of our gifts" (Leclair, 1993)
- 9 Morrison's argument refocuses my reading of *Song of Solomon* but also redirects my approach toward Caribbean literature as a whole: how can one explore this myth? As a way of reshaping the slave's fragmented body through memories? As transgression, resistance or healing?
- 10 Let us consider the original myth as reported in *The Book of Negro Folklore*, a ground breaking book of Black folktales collected in the 1950's by Langston Hughes and Arna Bontemps. Told to the authors by a Gullah man living in the Sea Islands off the coast of Georgia, the story was said to be of Angolan origin. The folktale reads:

"Once all Africans could fly like birds; but owing to their many transgressions their wings were taken away. They remained, here and the power of flight, though they looked like other men, there, in the Sea Islands and out-of-the way places in the low country [...]"

- 11 Speaking of flight is referring to the passage of the African myth to the Americas. A process through which the African became a Caribbean or an American while keeping the essence of his heritage and renewing it.
- 12 Those who had kept the gift of flight, those who remember, must transgress their suffering bodies and through the process of metamorphosis dismember their bodies. During slavery, the slave's body belonged to the master who used it as a tool, an object. But he did not own the slave's soul. To be free is to have power over one's own body to be able to manipulate it, to transform it and create new flesh and bones. In Creole *chapé kow* literally means "to flee with your body and to save it". In English flight (to flee) and flight (to fly) are homonyms. In the present study they seem to proceed from the same pattern: resistance and memory.

- 13 The *soucouyan writers* are the new sorcerers who have stolen the salt from the white masters to give their characters the power of flight. They unveiled the mask. They are the new diviners who apply the myth as paradigm for the diagnosis and solutions of the community's problems. The *soucouyan writers* reconceived the sorcerer or witch as figures of healing and resistance. They are the ones capable of returning to Africa, to make the reverse journey under the waters and through the air mastering the sacred and old language of the homeland. They are also the embodiment of syncretism for they are bridges upon the salted seas. Those who can fly know the (secret) Word. These writers having recourse to myth want to transform the void of historical rupture and fragmentation into an open-ended vision of possibility. To rehabilitate the image of the *soucouyan* is to destroy, to dismantle the "master's house" via the medium of language, to challenge western codes. Flight is a fit metaphor for the secret and hazardous act of writing, an act of faith and communion. These writers tell us that the community must complete an odyssey of discovery and realize this absolute paradox: that one must be rooted in order to fly.
- 14 The process and reclamation of the suffering body could be read as an epitome of the concepts of deterritorialization and reterritorialization as coined by Deleuze and Guatarri. (Deleuze, Guatarri, 1972) :
- The movement of deterritorialization that goes from the center to the periphery is accompanied by a peripheral reterritorialization, a kind of economic and political self-centering of the periphery, either in the modernistic forms of a State, socialism or capitalism, or in the archaic form of local despots. It may be all but impossible to distinguish deterritorialization from reterritorialization, since they are mutually enmeshed, or like opposite faces of one and the same process. (Deleuze, 1972, 258).
- 15 Within this perspective, territorialization in the USA in the case of Danticat and in Africa or in France in the case of Kanor can appear as a means of protection and of preservation and therefore questions the idea of *belonging* in so far as America in Danticat's work, is mostly a ghost figure as all her characters are haunted by Haiti. As for Kanor she has created her own space in which she can voice her multiple being.

- 16 Kanor's venture and challenge, similar to Toni Morrison's before her, is to reconstruct history through the reinvention of memory, using the angle of the broken narrative that projects through the text's space in a discontinued and disconnected aesthetic. The troubled waters of the Atlantic then become the ambivalent figure of memory and oblivion.
- 17 As emphasized by Anny Dominique Curtius in *Symbiose d'une mémoire* (Curtius, 2006) the Middle Passage waters are not only a burying place for voices and bodies but also transfer routes that cross over from an ontological space toward another.
- 18 They (the *soucouyan*/writers) are the ones capable of returning to Africa, to make the reverse journey under the waters and through the air mastering the sacred and old language of the homeland. They are also the embodiment of syncretism for they are bridges upon the salted seas. Those who can fly know the (secret) word. These writers having recourse to myth, want to transform the void of historical rupture and fragmentation into an open-ended vision of possibility.
- 19 In Fabienne Kanor's *Humus*, the female character who flies is the initiated, the priestess. The one who is named Cécile. The one who becomes invisible; who dismembers and transforms into a bird and flies all the way to France; who finds herself burning the plantations in *Ayiti*.
- 20 In using magic as a tool for feminine resistance, Kanor/the one-who-flies reveals herself to be the heiress of Toni Morrison, Simone Schwarz-Bart, Paule Marshall, Maryse Condé. These female writers display in their novels what Toni Morrison defines as the concept of *black cosmogony*². This concept is represented by the enrolling of the ghost character who marks, as absent, all those bodies, those anonymous voices, drowned during the Middle Passage
- 21 The suffering female slave bodies become sites of memory—in Pierre Nora's terms, "crossroads" places crossed by multiple dimensions. They are hybrid, mutable sites, where life and death, time and eternity are interwoven. Kanor proceeds to reconstruct, re-assemble the syncopated and rhizomatic writing fragments of the past into a *w/hole* through the writing of the novel. At the same time sacred and prosaic, these lost bodies can be conceived in the sense of Walcott's poem *The Sea is History* (Walcott, 1979, 48) as invisible yet present yet bursting of unpredictability, a performative site of memory:

Where are your monuments, your battles, martyrs?
 Where is your tribal memory? Sirs
 In that gray vault. The sea. The Sea
 Has locked them up. The sea is History.

- 22 Danticat's depiction of the sea is linked to the construction and reconstruction of the female selves as it is seen as a road to freedom and the beginning and the end of all things. This vision of the sea is close to Kanor's landscape as both seascape and landscape appear as feminized or female-constituted or reconstituted spaces. The imagery of the sea not only embodies the fluidity of diasporic identities but also establishes the ancestral female figure as a crossroad character allowing cultural continuity. Danticat's prose is also reminiscent of the African belief that the dead, the living and the unborn coexist in the same spiritual space, thus envisioning time as non-linear and blurring the frontiers between reality and myth.
- 23 In the collection of short stories *Krik Krak*, the short story *Children of the sea* tells of *Lasirène* and of the spirits and deities that live underwater (*anba dlo*). Danticat refers to Yemaya, who is, in Africa, the Yoruba deities of rivers, but who having to cross the Ocean with the enslaved and subalterns³, dwells underwater with the engulfed victims of the Middle Passage.
- 24 This notion of the subaltern who dwells underwater is developed in Mimi Sheller's *Citizenship from Below: Erotic Agency and Caribbean Freedom*:

To think about what is below also means to interrogate the spatializations of power that maintain and make material such high-low distinctions and social judgments in the first place (Ulysse, 2008⁴). In addition to these bodily and profane meanings, moreover, there is a further sacred meaning within West African and Caribbean cosmologies in which the ancestral spirits are thought to dwell beneath the waves – or, as Haitians say, *anba dlo*. (2012, 31).

- 25 The short story *1937* relates the Parsley Massacre when Haitians were unleashed by Dominican dictator Rafael Leonidas Trujillo in October of the same year.

- 26 The passage when Josephine replicates her mother's ritualistic and spiritual visit to the river/memorial, echoes to another water grave:

We were all daughters of that river, which had taken our mothers from us. Our mothers were the ashes and we were the light. Our mothers were the embers and we were the sparks. Our mothers were the flames and we were the blaze. We came from the bottom of that river where the blood never stops flowing, where my mother's dive toward life her swim among all those bodies slaughtered in flight-gave her those wings of flame (41).

The river is obviously the figure of Oshun⁵, the orisha of Love and unsalted waters. This mythical figure is a major one in The Middle Passage Narratives as paradigm of memory as evocated in Toni Morrison's acclaimed novel *Beloved* (Morrison, 1987).

- 27 In her essay, *Mythatypes: Signatures and Signs of African/Diaspora and Black Goddesses* Brook de Vita explores the multiple metamorphosis and dislocations of the African deities, being violently uprooted in the space Outside (American slave plantations). She shows the unconscious inscription of African rituals and spirituality within the literature of the African diaspora:

The empowering legacy of riverain goddesses who dwell at the mouth of the sea seems to have dissipated throughout the Diaspora into folktales of lonely, gift-giving or trapped mermaids and hags, such as in the Haitian tale "Mother of Waters" and the African American tales *Sukey and the Mermaid* (2000,62).

- 28 Another illustration of Oshun appears in the epigraph of *The Farming of bones*:

« A vous confidentiellement, Metrès Dlo, Mère des Rivières »

- 29 Being displaced in the New World, Oshun became reterritorialized into Erzulie⁶ in Haiti, in red and blue.

- 30 In the novel, the colours red and yellow at times clash, then fuse when Sophie's set free herself the shame of *testing*. She would then, in a transgressive way, choose to wrap her mother's corpse in a red shroud, in the flamboyant sound of

the red bird (which is reminiscent of the Christian Pentecostal symbol). Hence, the matrilineal transmission echoes to the sparks and wings of flame of the short story *1937*.

- 31 We were all daughters of that river, which had taken our mothers from us. Our mothers were the ashes and we were the light. Our mothers were the embers and we were the sparks. Our mothers were the flames and we were the blaze. We came from the bottom of that river where the blood never stops flowing, where my mother's dive toward life her swim among all those bodies slaughtered in flight- gave her those wings of flame (41). (My emphasis)
- 32 Hence, both Danticat and Kanor propose a redefinition of interstitial identities as they challenge the limits and parameters of "Americaness or Frenchness" and interrogate the very definitions of identity in terms of a third space.
- 33 The epigraph to Danticat's first novel, *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, certainly illustrates this fact:

To the brave women of Haiti, grandmothers, mothers, aunts, sisters, cousins, daughters, and friends, on this shore and other shores. We have stumbled but we will not fall (1994: 5). (My emphasis).

- 34 Stumbling depicts losing one's balance, one's stability and in Danticat's prose, it seems to work as a metaphor for the resistance of Haitian people against the odds. Stumbling thus implies staggering but not falling, hence managing to voice one's identity beyond obstacles. Both Fabienne Kanor and Edwidge Danticat's works illustrate this permanent quest of belonging and the staging of what I posit as *the poetics of staggering*⁷ that is the search of a third place of re-creation and reinvention of the self, that tries to determinate itself through the interweaving of accommodation and wandering.
- 35 I posit this perspective within Homi K. Bhabha's conceptualization of a third space (1996) as being "interruptive, interrogative, and enunciative." This space in between that suggests a certain emptiness, a void between two places, is, in my own definition, full and vibrant. Being an interstice, it is never safe, never stable, but unpredictable and disrupted; it is therefore a complex place of life and death,

of permanent re-creation and reinvention of the self that tries to determinate itself through the interweaving of the ambiguities of accommodation, as in a state of *limbo* governed by uncertainty and *dis-membering*.

- 36 This poetics is also an echo to *Limbo*, a popular dance from Trinidad. Some anthropologists such as Sojah Stanley-Niaah relate it to a former African rite to Legba, the god of crossroads, the gate-opener (the God of the writers according to Haitian writer Danny Laferrière). “Consistent with certain African beliefs, the dance reflects the whole cycle of life. Dancers move under a pole that is gradually lowered from chest level, and they emerge on the other side, as their heads clear the pole, as in the triumph of life over death.” (Sojah Stanley-Niaah, 2007).

2. Language as Reconfiguration and *W/holeness*

- 37 This in-betweenity, this state of unbalanced existence recalls the limbo, this “bordering place”, neither here nor there, “a state of nonresolution or uncertainty” (Hirsch 98). The word *limbo* comes from the Latin *limbus* which means “on the border”, or “in between”, a kind of no-man’s land between heaven and hell where the blessed who died before the coming of Christ resided.
- 38 The Barbadian poet Edward Kamau Brathwaite is well-known for his metaphor of the *limbo* in his texts and his many attempts to print the staggering movement, the unbalance as well as the sounds on the page:

limbo limbo like me knees spread wide and the dark ground is under me
down down down
and the drummer is calling me
limbo limbo like me sun coming up
and the drummers are praising me out of the dark
and the dumb gods are raising me up up up
and the music is saving me
hot slow step on the burning sound (1967, 194–195).

- 39 In the above poem, as Myriam Moise puts it⁸, “the limbo experience is re-enacted and the liminal self is depicted as experiencing movement, rhythm and sound. Brathwaite actually gives a voice to the *limbo* self who is associated with the ascending and descending movements as well as with the inner and outer sounds of survival. This poem embraces Brathwaite’s concept of the word as generating power and as carrying power in itself as he writes in his poem “Negus”, “I/must be given words to refashion futures/ like a healer’s hand [...] fill me with words/ and I will blind your God” (1967, 224).
- 40 Repossession is the driving force of Brathwaite’s poetry. It is part of the Caribbean response to the idea that Africans in the New World are doomed to conspire in their own futility and despair (*hole*) unless they repossess themselves by repossessing their hidden past (*whole*). This seemingly ambiguous example of repossession portrays the African descent search for cultural wholeness.
- 41 The multiplicity of languages in their narratives informs a mongrelized speech community, which demystifies the notion of purity and therefore stands in opposition to all forms of fundamentalisms, linguistic or otherwise.
- 42 Beyond the metaphorical edification of a Babelian world, Danticat and Kanor remind us of the power of language to hide, distort or blur reality. The juxtaposition and intertwining of divergent voices have subversive overtones that bear upon the construction of a new place. By presenting language, a crucial identity marker, as inherently multiple, impure and unpredictable, they sketch what Foucault defines as *heterotopia* that is “an agency that uses writing in order to construct rival spaces at variance with dominant geographical order” (Foucault, 6, 1967) Language interrogates the place, disrupts and remaps it.
- 43 In addition to the intra-textual stitching that nourishes the narrative, *Humus* for instance, is enriched with an intertext that illuminates the work’s meaning. Kanor summons authors through referencing (Derek Walcott, Marguerite Duras, Zora Neale Hurston), parodying (Victor Hugo), and borrowing fictional figures (Alejo Carpentier’s Makandal), as if to open the text, as if she were invoking the divinities, the openers of barriers.
- 44 Danticat actually exploits diglossia, as a way of disorganizing and destabilizing the text. In doing so, she goes beyond translation and exploits the power of the word, she fuses languages. This crossing of languages (English, Creole, French)

is an epitome of the poetics of staggering, of the *soucouyanness* which incribes a belonging to a place where the self should be invented, “le lieu de la littérature impossible”⁹ as Roland Barthes puts it.

- 45 Kanor and Danticat are *soucouyan* writers and like *soucouyans*, are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim to look back.

Conclusion

- 46 As Mimi Sheller puts *Citizenship from Below: Erotic Agency and Caribbean Freedom* (2012) “we must look for subaltern histories below the surface of the image, tangled in the roots of trees, close to the ground, submerged in the water” (Sheller, 2012, 139). Danticat and Kanor both seek to create “herstory” they displace and dislocate below the surface, in the air, hence invisible but haunting and interrogating. These authors not only rewrite/right history, they also reshape the voids of below and transform them into places from which Middle Passage narratives may emerge.

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* NOTES

1 In the nineteenth-century slave narratives, the narrator was dispossessed of his story/history as his text was determined and governed by other voices (the ghost writer, the constraints of the fight for the abolition of slavery, etc.). Thus silence and self-censuring shone through his text because he addressed a white public that had to be placated if his (the fugitive) voice was to be heard. The process of rewriting and reappropriating the true voice of the slave narrator is at the core of the neoslave narratives trend which was initiated and enhanced by women writers (e.g., Toni Morrison, Margaret Walker) in the 1960s. Their texts produced meaning that demystified the unique official reading called *History*; thus their stories turned into "Herstory".

2 Morrison, Toni, « Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation » in *Black Women Writers 1950–1980*, ed. Mari Evans, Garden City, New York, Anchor-Doubleday, 1984, 339–345.

3 "The subaltern as female cannot be heard or read" (Spivak, 1994, 104). Spivak, Gayatri. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory*, Patrick Williams & Laura Chrisman, Eds. New York: Columbia UP, 1994.

4 Ulysse, Gina Athena. *Downtown Ladies: Informal Commercial Importers, a Haitian Anthropologist, and Self-Making in Jamaica*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

5 According to anthropologist Robert Farris Thompson, Oshun is a Yoruba deity who "unifies the world by holding a length of chain about her head, an action called I-tie-all-my-people-together. Fish as motifs, in which her spirit moves within the river, appears left and lower right». *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy*. New York: Vintage Books, 83, 1984.

6 Erzulie is considered as the most powerful and arbitrary of Gods in Vodou. In her study about Edwidge Danticat's poetics of Vodou, Anne Bruske & Wiebke Beushausen consider her as follows: «She stands in for the struggle of African Haitian women and their dignified existence. As a symbol of female subjectivity and corporeality, she represents womanhood within a postcolonial culture of resistance. She is represented as the "Black Venus", a "Tragic Mistress", or the "Goddess of Love". "Writing from Lot Bo Dlo. The aesthetics and poetics of Vodou in Edwidge Danticat and Myriam Chancy" (Anne Bruske & Wiebke Beushausen, 2016, 151) in *Vodou in Haitian Memory. The idea and representation of Vodou in Haitian imagination*. Maryland: Lexington Books Celucien L. Joseph and Nixon S. Cleophas eds 2016.

7 Aurélia Dominique, « In Search of a Third Space: Fabienne Kanor's *Humus* », *Small Axe* 15 (2011), 80–88

8 *African Caribbean women writers in Canada and the USA. Can the diaspora speak?* Moise, Myriam. Unpublished dissertation directed by Martha Dvorak and Barbara Lalla, Université Paris III.

9 "La modernité commence avec la recherche d'une Littérature impossible" (Barthe, 30,1953). *Le degré zéro de l'écriture*, Barthes, Roland. Paris : Seuil, 1953.

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