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Créations | Textos criativos**

Mi'Lady / What I left for River Muma Two poems

Jacqueline Bishop

Traduzione italiana di Federica Messulam

Introduction to the author by Michela Calderaro

Jacqueline Bishop is an award-winning writer, academic, and visual artist, born and raised in Jamaica, who now lives between Miami and New York City. She has had exhibitions in Belgium, Morocco, Italy, Cape Verde, Niger, USA, and Jamaica. In addition to her role as clinical full professor at New York University, Jacqueline Bishop was a Dora Maar/Brown Foundation Fellow in France; a UNESCO/Fulbright Fellow in Paris; and a Fulbright Fellow in Morocco.

Bishop has received several awards, including the OCM Bocas Prize for Non-Fiction for her book *The Gymnast and Other Positions: Stories, Essays, Interviews*, The Canute A. Brodhurst Prize for short story writing, the Arthur Schomburg Award for Excellence in the Humanities from New York University, a James Michener Creative Writing Fellowship, as well as several awards from the Jamaica Cultural Development Commission. Jacqueline Bishop's recent ceramic work consists of brightly colored bone china plates, such as are often used symbolically in Caribbean homes, and explores how their designs hid the violent legacy of slavery and colonialism in the Atlantic world.



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Mi'Lady

On the island of Jamaica
there is a spiritual being who moves easily
between this world and others. This half fish/

half woman mythical creature
is not one thing or another.
At midday Mi'Lady surfaces

in the bluest parts
of the Nonsuch river.
If you catch a glimpse, you will see:

tangled moss green hair, sharp white teeth,
her fused sex, and iridescent
scales covering her plump dark body.

What I left for River Muma

A brand-new handheld mirror.
Half dozen yellow palm-sized rose apples
picked from my grandmother's garden.
A bouquet of thickly-veined croton leaves,
pink and white old garden roses,
fat stalks of red ginger and heliconia ---
all scented with Florida cologne and Kanaga Waters.
One blue, one black, one thick green candle.
A small rum-bottle filled with honey,
four white eggs, a dragon stout
and two bottles of cream soda.
The last thing I added was shiny silver
and copper-colored coins
collected in England, Jamaica, and Ghana.

Mi'Lady

Sull'isola di Giamaica
una presenza spirituale fluttua leggera
tra questa e le altre realtà. Mitica creatura

per metà pesce /per metà donna
senza essere questo né quella.
E a mezzodì Mi'Lady affiora

dalle più profonde acque
del fiume Nonsuch.
Se riesci a scorgerla, allora vedrai:

intricate chiome verde muschio, bianchi denti aguzzi,
il suo sesso impenetrabile, squame
cangianti che ne ricoprono le curve del corpo scuro.

Cosa ho lasciato per River Muma

Uno specchio tascabile nuovo di zecca.
Una mezza dozzina di gialli frutti di melarosa grossi quanto un
palmo
colti dal giardino di nonna.
Un mazzo con foglie di croton dalle fitte venature,
rose antiche bianche e rosa,
opulenti fiori di zenzero rosso e di eliconia -
spruzzato con acqua di Florida e colonia Kanaga Waters.
Una candela blu, una nera, una di un verde cupo.
Una bottiglietta da rum colma di miele,
quattro uova dal guscio bianco, birra scura
e due bottiglie di gazzosa dolce.
Da ultimo ho aggiunto le luccicanti monete
color argento e rame
raccolte in Inghilterra, in Giamaica, e in Ghana.

One ah Dem Days Before they happened upon us Two poems

Adisa Opal Palmer

Former Principal Director of the Institute for Gender and Development Studies.
RCO University of the West Indies, Jamaica

Traduzione italiana di Federica Messulam

Introduction to the author by Michela Calderaro

Opal Palmer Adisa is a Jamaican poet, writer, and cultural advocate whose body of work spans twenty-six books, including novels, short story collections, poetry, and children's literature. She currently teaches part-time at the University of the West Indies, Mona Campus, where she continues to inspire through her scholarship and creative practice. A committed cultural and gender advocate, Adisa's work often explores themes of memory, history, identity, and redemption, giving voice to personal and collective experiences within the Caribbean and beyond. Her latest works are the bi-lingual Italian collection of selected poems, *La lingua è un tamburo*, 2025; *The Storyteller's Return*, a poetry collection, 2022; *Pretty like Jamaica*, a children's picture book, 2023.

Introduction by the author

One ah Dem Days is a reflective meditation on aging, desire, and renewal. The poem's persona – a mature woman weighed down by the stresses of life and the creeping awareness of age – seeks solace by the river. There she encounters a group of young boys whose youthful vigor is expressed in their daring leaps and playful somersaults into the water. Watching them, she is both wistful and tempted, longing for that kind of abandon yet recognizing her physical limits. Though she does not join them, she allows the river itself to offer healing, release, and a gentle reminder of vitality. The poem captures the tension between yearning and acceptance, and the quiet redemptive power of nature to soothe the spirit.



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One ah Dem Days

me head feel
 like a big bankra
 loaded wid yam

so me go to de river
 listen to de water
 dat loosens de knots
 cool de fever of waiting
 rinses de sticky fog
 of aging

de river
 nuh argue wid regret
every day new
 as it moves

on de hill above
 boys learn flight by rope:
 climb / swing / double-flip
 into green pools
 dem laughter
 like coins on tiles

me think
 if me leap
 me would dead
but still
 me want fi swing,
 flip like de boys,
 even if death meet me

but for now
 me watch dem

mek de slow mercy
 of de water
 love me clean
wash de malaise from me shoulders
 carry weh de heavy grammar
 of doubt

maybe tomorrow
 de sun will find de same skin
 mek it feel
 kinder
 to touch

È una di quelle giornate

sento la testa
come un grosso cesto
zeppo di patate dolci

e allora me ne vado al fiume
ad ascoltare l'acqua
che allenta i nodi
raffredda la febbre dell'attesa
sciacqua via la nebbia collosa
dell'età che avanza

il fiume
mica fa tante storie coi rimpianti
ogni giorno è un nuovo giorno
giacchè scorre

lassù sulla collina
ragazzini imparano a volare appesi ad una corda:
si arrampicano/dondolano/ doppia capriola
e giù nelle pozze verdi
le loro risa
suonano come spiccioli sul pavimento

penso che
se dovessi far io un salto così
di certo creperei
eppure
come vorrei dondolarmi
far capriole come quei ragazzini
anche a rischio di trovarmi la morte davanti

ma per ora
resto a guardarli

possa la lenta misericordia
dell'acqua
mondarmi amorevolmente
lavare il malessere che sento sulle spalle
trascinare via la gravosa grammatica
del dubbio

forse domani
il sole incontrerà la stessa pelle
e la renderà
più carezzevole
al tatto

Before they happened upon us

my body was this land
fertile fresh
neither cliché nor fantasy

soil
red open
wet dry
breathing

lizards
roamed freely
crawling/scattering

trees = ribs
plants = mouths
rivers = veins

water
everywhere every where
blue abundant
sweet cool
quenching
balm

before they happened upon us
my body was this land
able to slither
(lizards in trees)
able to sing
(green parrot throaty)
able to wobble
(wild pigs grunting)

the first ship that brought
my ancestors

land imprisoning
becoming refuting
transforming
nourishing again
and again and again
again

Prima che incombessero

il mio corpo era questa terra
fertile fresca
non uno stereotipo non una fantasia

terreno
rosso sconfinato
rorido riarso
che respirava

lucertole
vagavano libere
strisciando/disperdendosi

alberi=costole
piante=bocche
fiumi=vene acqua
ovunque e in ogni dove
azzurra copiosa
dolce fredda
balsamo
dissetante

prima che incombessero
il mio corpo era questa terra
capace di strisciare
(lucertole negli alberi)
capace di cantare
(un pappagallo verde gracchiava)
capace di dondolare
(maialini selvatici grugnivano)

e giunse la prima nave
che trasportava i miei avi

la terra è stata prigioniera
è mutata è stata rifugio
è stata cambiamento
è stata nutrimento ancora
e ancora e ancora
ancora

but now
shuttered
broken/closed
pain inside
the green
sealed
verdant love
locked

peace
withheld
for now...

from the forth coming collection,
My Boyd is Xaymaca

ma ora
 spezzata
 infranta/racchiusa
 colma di dolore
 il verde
 inaccessibile
 la lussureggiante passione
 imbrigliata

 la pace
 negata
per ora....

Dalla raccolta di prossima pubblicazione
My Body is Xaymaca

Varia | Mélanges | Secção generalista

Les *Batouala* illustrés ou une question de *cases* et de *casques* Dynamiques de resémantisation iconique d'un roman « in-européen »

Silvia Riva

Università degli Studi di Milano, Italia

Abstract This study examines the three illustrated luxury editions of René Maran's seminal 1921 anti-colonial novel *Batouala*, created by Alexandre Iacovleff (1928), Miguel Covarrubias (1932), and Paul-Émile Bécát (1947). Analyzing the dialogue between text and image, it argues that the paratextual illustrations are not mere decorations but active sites of 'resemanticization'. The analysis demonstrates how the iconography oscillates between a subtle subversion of colonial norms – through the appropriation of indigenous Oubanguian motifs like the *garaba* headdress and murals – and an eventual assimilation into colonial discourse, particularly in Bécát's 1947 edition. The shifting visual representations of key elements, such as the *ga'nza* ceremony, reveal a continuous negotiation and transformation of the novel's political meaning across different cultural and temporal contexts.

Keywords Iconic resemanticization. René Maran. *Batouala*. Colonial intermediality. Paratext.

Sommaire 1 Avant l'image : le cadre d'une rencontre conflictuelle. – 2 « Rendre du vu ». Inscriptions ethnographiques. – 3 Les trois *Batouala* illustrés. – 3.1 Alexandre Iacovleff : un style ethnographique ? – 3.2 Miguel Covarrubias : « A Novel ». – 3.3 Paul-Émile Bécát : intégrations.



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1 Avant l'image : le cadre d'une rencontre conflictuelle

Il y a un peu plus d'un siècle, un écrivain originaire des colonies remportait le prestigieux prix Goncourt avec un roman dont le sous-titre, provocateur, le présentait comme un « véritable roman nègre »¹ et dont la préface, scandaleuse pour l'époque, était extrêmement « hostile [aux] coloniaux »² qui occupaient l'Afrique équatoriale française (A.E.F.) dans les premières décennies du XX^e siècle. C'est, d'ailleurs, ce territoire, au cœur de l'Afrique, qui sert de cadre au récit.

Ce texte, publié par Albin Michel en 1921 par le martiniquais René Maran,³ est *Batouala*.

Selon des grilles critiques récentes, attentives aux considérations autour de la « fabrication »⁴ d'un modèle littéraire francophone, le caractère inaugural de cet ouvrage est évident : l'entrée de *Batouala* dans le champ littéraire hexagonal par la porte d'une maison d'édition indépendante déjà consacrée par un Goncourt et en pleine période coloniale, est emblématique de la volonté manifeste d'une partie du système culturel de l'époque qui suit la « vogue du nègre »,⁵ d'exploiter politiquement tant le texte que son auteur – lequel, rappelons-le, était fonctionnaire de l'administration coloniale bien qu'en conflit ouvert avec elle depuis 1915 (Roubiales 2010, 225). Les faits relatifs aux frictions entre l'écrivain et l'appareil colonial (l'« affaire Maran », dont la préface de *Batouala* se fait l'écho) concernaient d'abord l'affrontement avec le système colonial belge dans l'Oubangui-Chari – cadre de *Batouala*. Affecté au début de sa carrière dans cette région alors sous domination

1 Il faut rappeler que le sous-titre de *Batouala* n'avait pas été choisi par René Maran, qui préférait le mot *mokondji* (« chef » dans la langue des Banda). À l'occasion du centenaire de l'attribution du Prix, le roman a connu un regain d'intérêt de la part de la critique. Parmi les contributions les plus philologiques, cf. le numéro monographique de 2021 dirigé par Xavier Luce et Claire Riffard.

2 Lettre de Maran à l'ami Manoel Gahisto datée du 12 janvier 1921 écrite depuis Bordeaux (cf. Scheel 2021).

3 L'appartenance de Maran est difficile à cerner, car plurinationale et intercontinentale. Comme l'observe Lourdes Roubiales (Roubiales 2010, 219-20) : « Maran appartenait à une famille guyanaise liée au fonctionnariat de Cayenne. Né, semble-t-il, en mer lors de la traversée menant ses parents à la Martinique, où le père avait été affecté pour un poste dans l'administration de l'île, il a trois ans lorsque, à la suite d'une nouvelle mutation du père, les Maran partent pour le Gabon. À sept ans, Maran abandonne Libreville pour entrer au Petit Lycée de Talence qui sera le théâtre du drame de l'enfant, séparé précocement de sa famille ».

4 Claire Ducournau, *La fabrique des classiques africains. Écrivains d'Afrique subsaharienne francophone (1960-2012)*, Paris, CNRS, 2017.

5 Cf. Nicolas Bancel, Pascal Blanchard et Laurent Gervereau (éds), *Images et colonies. Iconographie et propagande coloniale sur l'Afrique française de 1880 à 1962*, Paris, MHC-BDIC/Achac, 1993.

belge, Maran y représentait l'administration coloniale française. Or, durant ces années – et ce jusqu'à l'indépendance –, les autorités belges y imposaient un régime ségrégationniste rigoureux. En tant qu'administrateur noir, Maran en subissait directement les humiliations et les vexations. Il dénonça ces traitements en vain dans un rapport au ministre français des Colonies de l'époque (226).⁶ D'autres épisodes l'avaient définitivement rendu odieux aux yeux de la hiérarchie coloniale en A.E.F., notamment durant son affectation à Fort-Sibut (1917-18). Sa réaction au refus de se voir mobiliser, perçu par ses supérieurs comme une « susceptibilité exagérée » (227), ne fit qu'envenimer la situation. Finalement, « entre 1918 et 1919, Maran sera accusé de brutalité envers les indigènes » (225). Il admit partiellement ces accusations, reconnaissant avoir effectivement « maltraité plusieurs porteurs qui l'avaient traité de *boy* » (229)⁷ – un terme dont la charge péjorative ne pouvait que provoquer sa révolte.

La critique s'accorde généralement à reconnaître que le véritable « générateur d'idéologie » (Roubiales 2005, 127) est contenu dans la préface, rédigée a posteriori (Scheel 2021), plutôt que dans la fiction romanesque. La parution de *Batouala* s'inscrit effectivement dans un contexte historico-politique tendu, marqué par deux phénomènes antagonistes : d'un côté, une presse métropolitaine alertant sur la montée des idées de gauche dans les colonies ; de l'autre, les craintes des autorités face au risque de récupération du roman à l'étranger, particulièrement en Allemagne, où sa traduction pouvait servir d'instrument de propagande anti-française. Ainsi, l'affaire Maran et l'affaire *Batouala* (à savoir les critiques formulées par une partie des journaux à l'encontre du romancier peu après la remise du prix Goncourt) se rejoignent, et elles se prêtent à des interprétations diamétralement opposées du point de vue de la portée idéologique du texte.

Si l'objectif de cet article n'est pas d'analyser le roman *Batouala* ni sa préface en eux-mêmes, mais bien ses éditions illustrées, les éléments exposés ci-dessus restent indispensables pour saisir les transformations – voire les régressions – de l'apparat iconographique qui accompagne l'œuvre.

Il existe, en fait, trois *Batouala* illustrés en édition de luxe publiés du vivant de Maran : le premier orné par Alexandre Iacovleff (1928), le deuxième par Miguel Covarrubias (1932), le dernier par Paul Émile Bécât (1947) – trois artistes ayant tous voyagé en Afrique équatoriale, cosmopolites et, dans deux cas sur trois, expatriés.

6 Son nom était Gaston Doumergue.

7 Ces aveux sont évoqués dans la note de bas de page no. 27 du texte de Roubiales de 2010, où il est dit qu'ils ressortent de la lettre de Lamblin au Gouverneur général de l'A.E.F., Frédéric Estèbe, écrite à Bangui le 15-7-1918 (CAOM FP, « Cabinet » 75c).

Bien que Maran n'ait vraisemblablement pas supervisé la réalisation graphique de ces *Batouala* illustrés, sa correspondance avec l'un de ses interlocuteurs les plus fiables, Manoel Gahisto,⁸ révèle une préoccupation persistante pour la postérité de son œuvre. En outre, peu avant la parution de l'édition illustrée de Iacovleff, si Maran suggère en plaisantant à son interlocuteur américain Alain LeRoy Locke (membre du mouvement newyorkais New Negro) d'inviter ses amis riches et bibliophiles à s'en procurer un exemplaire, il ajoute cependant, et sur un ton très sérieux cette fois, que cet ouvrage avait pour lui une valeur « incomparable » (Riesz 2011, 19).

En recourant aux notions de *décalage* et de *resémantisation* (soit la réappropriation et la transformation du sens d'un élément symbolique par une collectivité), il s'agira de démontrer comment ces images oscillent entre une subversion discrète des normes dominantes – afin d'affirmer une identité locale africaine – et leur assimilation partielle. Cette dynamique fera l'objet d'une mise en lumière par le jeu dialogique entre le texte et l'image – reflet, à l'échelle du paratexte, de la même tension structurante qui anime les rapports entre préface et récit.

2 « Rendre du vu ». Inscriptions ethnographiques

La riche correspondance entre René Maran, alors en poste à Grimari (Oubangui), et son ami Gahisto – le dédicataire de *Batouala* – offre un éclairage précieux sur les préoccupations de l'écrivain durant la rédaction de son manuscrit. Maran voulait, notamment via le style, donner une image aussi exacte que possible du mode de vie d'un village de l'Afrique et de ses mœurs. Dans une lettre datée du 13 novembre 1912, Maran affirme :

J'ai entrepris deux proses [...]. L'une est une étude sur Mathurin Régnier. [...] L'autre est un roman qui sera purement indigène. J'y étudierai la vie au jour le jour d'un chef de ces pays-ci. Le titre de ce roman [...] sera : « *Batouala, le mokondji* ». J'y vois un écueil pour les lecteurs à venir. Ce sera la monotonie du récit. Mais c'est ce qui en fera tout le mérite. En somme, je ne veux faire que du *plaqué*. Je veux *rendre du « vu »*. Je veux que l'on *voie réellement* l'existence de ceux qu'une pitié sentimentale nous fait prendre pour des malheureux. Le péril à craindre pour moi n'est pas la monotonie de ce que je vais raconter, mais plutôt celle d'un

⁸ Manoel Gahisto (1878-1948), écrivain et traducteur, participa à la fondation de la *Revue de l'Amérique Latine* (1922-32) et fut en contact avec nombre d'intellectuels du monde hispano-américain et de l'Europe.

style que je désire *exact* et *minutieux*, *coloré* et non romantique ». (Ghaisio s.d., 34-5 ; italique ajouté)

Grâce à la précision des descriptions de la vie oubanguienne Maran veut se distinguer d'autres écrivains coloniaux (dont Pierre Loti) qui, comme il l'observe ironiquement (40), rédigeaient dans ces mêmes années des textes sur l'Afrique équatoriale sans y avoir réellement vécu.

Afin de parvenir à un compte rendu précis des faits réels, René Maran ne cesse donc de prendre des notes, qui deviennent de véritables croquis :

J'ai des notes sur la circoncision, d'autres sur l'excision [...], la chasse au feu, l'ensevelissement des morts, la pêche, la danse du coït [...], j'ai sur tout cela, pris d'utiles notes. Je veux que *Batouala* soit, aussi exactement que possible, la reconstitution de la vie d'un nègre en général, et d'un chef en particulier. (59)

Cette quête de précision ethnographique se heurta pourtant au scepticisme de Maurice Delafosse (Delafosse 1923, 170), à la fois père fondateur de l'ethnologie française et administrateur colonial. Cent ans après ses prises de position, on peut affirmer que « l'inaptitude supposée de Maran à transcrire [les] paroles » (Fraiture 2005, 32) des Oubangiens, affirmé par Delafosse, répond plutôt à une démarche qui relève d'un « contre-ethnocentrisme » (Diouf 2016, 84), selon une stratégie de renversement utilisée souvent en littérature, par exemple dans les *Lettres Persanes*. À cela il faut ajouter également un décalage que Maran incarne physiquement lui-même, entre son rôle d'administrateur colonial, son ancrage français, ses liens afro-américains et ses origines martiniquaises (Edwards 2001, 65). Or, c'est précisément sur la diversité de son texte et de son corps que Maran conclut, à la dernière page de la correspondance avec Gahisto : « Ce roman est trop noir et trop 'ineuropéen'. Mais s'il était pris, quel tracass » (Gahisto s.d., 97).

Le roman doit ainsi son caractère 'in-européen' non seulement à son propos, mais aussi à son contexte de création : rédigé à Grimari, il s'enracine dans la complexité historique et esthétique de la culture *banda* de l'Oubangui.⁹ Cette genèse singulière invite à interroger l'écart entre les réalités locales et leur perception par le regard européen de l'époque. Un article récent, bien que ne mentionnant *Batouala* que de manière tangentielle, suggère la nécessité d'une approche transdisciplinaire afin de cueillir pleinement la signification du roman. Centré sur la cérémonie *ga'nza* – rite collectif de circoncision

9 Sur la perception des Bandas à l'époque coloniale cf. Lord 2022.

et d'excision qui structure le chapitre central de *Batouala* –, l'étude « Agonie, perte ou renouveau ? Pour une esthétique oubanguienne » d'Andrea Ceriana Mayneri souligne les enjeux méthodologiques liés à l'analyse « de certains artefacts anciens et de leurs avatars récents en Centrafrique » (Ceriana Mayneri 2018, sous-titre de l'article). Pour ce faire, il croise un corpus hétéroclite : objets conservés au musée Barthélémy Boganda de Bangui (inventoriés en 2007), archives ethnographiques produites par les administrateurs coloniaux dans les années 1910-20, ainsi que des documents visuels (des prises de vue, surtout) issus d'expéditions comme la *Croisière noire* (1924-25). Menée sous la direction de Georges-Marie Haardt avec le soutien d'André Citroën – soucieux de tester ses 'autochenilles' –, cette mission offre un témoignage ambigu, à la fois documentaire et profondément inscrit dans l'imaginaire colonial. Alexandre Iacovleff, l'illustrateur russe de la première édition précieuse de *Batouala* (1928), participa lui aussi à cette Croisière. Ses croquis (fusain, sanguine) et planches sur le rituel *ga'nza* furent influencés par un cliché pris durant l'expédition, lequel deviendra la base d'un de ses tableaux et de réinterprétations ultérieures, comme nous le montrerons [fig. 1].



Figure 1 Indigènes de Bambari en costume de *Gan'za* [sic], 22 janvier 1925.
Photo Georges Specht, Mission Citroën Centre-Afrique
© Archivio fotografico della Società Geografica Italiana

Il existe un malentendu commun à ceux qui perçoivent la cérémonie *ga'nza* comme authentique, donc fascinante, et ceux qui en ont une vision cynique, comme les participants à la mission Citroën et notamment André Gide, qui la décrit dans son *Voyage au Congo*.¹⁰ Cette discordance interprétative est

celle qui sépare, dans ces années 1920-30, les descriptions de l'ethnographie coloniale, où la *ga'nza* est communément présentée au lecteur occidental comme une initiation élaborée [...] sans faire mention de l'existence de 'mises en scènes', et celles de Gide et des membres de la mission Citroën, dans lesquelles le spectacle de la danse suscite [...] aversion ou enthousiasme. Ces différents auteurs ont toutefois en commun de rêver à l'authenticité d'une cérémonie inexistante, qui « n'est belle que distante dans le temps » : ils ne peuvent pas vraiment s'intéresser aux transformations contemporaines de la *ga'nza*, que les uns sont obligés de taire ou d'épurer dans leurs descriptions, et que Gide considère comme un abaissement. (Ceriana Mayneri 2018, 16)

Ces attitudes sont en fait les deux faces de la même médaille, qui affiche le mythe de l'« Afrique éternelle » soutenu par les concepts d'origine et de patrimoine, typiques de la vision occidentale de la culture et de sa transmission. Cependant, la transformation de la 'coiffe à pointes' (*garaba*), objet de cérémonie, en instrument de mise en scène est donc attestée dès l'expédition de 1924-25¹¹ et révèle l'opération locale de 'resémantisation', c'est-à-dire d'intégration et de réinterprétation des signes exogènes du pouvoir politique. L'image photographique qui accompagne l'article de Ceriana Mayneri, prise en 2007 lors de la fête des Mères, et qui montre un tête-à-tête entre les deux emblèmes du pouvoir d'antan et d'aujourd'hui, est un exemple évident de ce procédé : on y voit le casque colonial surmonté d'un hélicoptère et les coiffes rituelles *garaba* [fig. 2].

10 Gide écrit de Bambari, le 14 octobre 1925 (*Voyage au Congo. Carnets de route*, Paris, Gallimard, 1927, 68-9) : « Vingt-huit petits danseurs, de 8 à 13 ans, badigeonnés de blanc de la tête aux pieds ; coiffés d'une sorte de casque que hérissent une quarantaine de dards noirs et rouges. Chacun tient à la main un fout fait en jonc et en cordes tressées [...]. Ils dansent en file indienne, gravement, aux sons de vingt-trois trompes de terre ou de bois d'inégales longueurs. [...] Les joueurs de trompe forment cercle ; au milieu d'eux une vieille femme bat la mesure avec un plumeau de crins noirs. À ses pieds un grand démon noir se tord dans la poussière, en proie à de feintes convulsions ». L'illustrateur Alexandre Iacovleff aussi a fourni une version écrite de cette cérémonie, illustré en marges et en surimpressions (Iacovleff, n.p.). En feuilles, on trouve 50 planches hors-texte en couleurs, dont une double, gravées par Godde et Chevassus et imprimées sur Lafuma filigrané « Croisière noire ».

11 Cf. l'expression « feintes convulsions » dans le passage cité dans la note de bas de page no. 30.



Figure 2 Danseurs *ga'nza* à Bambari le 3 juin 2007, jour de la fête des Mères : détails des tenues cérémoniales. Photo © Andrea Ceriana Mayneri

Nous assistons donc à un magnifique exemple de recyclage symbolique d'éléments exogènes et endogènes, qui dialoguent à travers une mise en regard de la culture traditionnelle et de la civilisation technique contemporaine.

Or, cette même dynamique de réappropriation symbolique du pouvoir colonial nous semble être à l'œuvre dans les illustrations du *Batouala* dès 1928 : la première page du roman inscrit concrètement les fresques peintes sur les cases de l'Oubangui mentionnées non seulement dans l'article de Ceriana Mayneri, mais aussi dans un court article de l'expert en littérature africaine János Riesz [figs 3-4].¹²

12 Dans l'article « Une édition du *Batouala* de René Maran illustrée par le peintre russe Alexandre Iacovleff (1928) », tout en citant la source de ses images (Haardt et Audouin-Dubreuil éds), János Riesz affirme : « Les quelques vignettes du début des chapitres que nous reproduisons, sont intéressantes surtout par le fait que le peintre, visiblement, s'est inspiré des peintures murales des cases Banda telles que nous les voyons sur les photographies du livre *La Croisière Noire* » (Riesz 2011, 22).



Figure 3 *Fresques dans une case à Ndélé.* Albums photographiques des missions de Georges Bruel : mission du Haut-Chari (Oubangui-Chari et Tchad), 1900-01. © BNF – Société de Géographie



Figure 4 *Décorations indigènes sur les cases Banda à Bria,* 24 janvier 1925. Mission Citroën Centre-Afrique © musée du quai Branly – Jacques Chirac

Non seulement certains de ces pictogrammes sont reproduits, comme le rappelle Riesz (2011, 22), en tête des chapitres 1, 2, 4 et 12 de l'édition illustrée par Iacovleff, mais ils se détachent également au-dessus de la *Préface* controversée que Maran a conservée dans cette édition de luxe, agrémentée de *tirailleurs* africains stylisés [fig. 5].

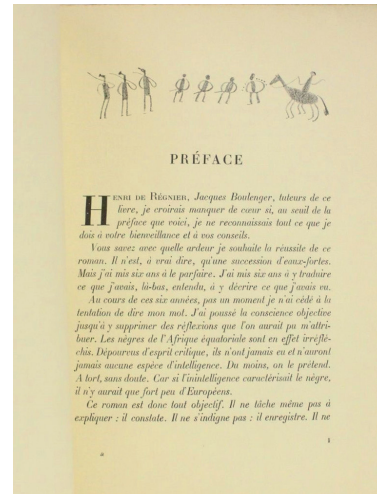


Figure 5
Préface de *Batouala*. Illustré de dessins
par Iacovleff. Paris : Mornay, 1928, 1

Ces fresques des cases du 'village indigène' ont été ignorées par l'ethnographie coloniale. Comme le note Ceriana Mayneri,¹³ seules quelques photos en subsistent dans les archives coloniales, et aucune étude n'approfondissait leur fonction à l'époque. Les travaux de Bogumil Jewsiewicki sur les peintures murales congolaises, en revanche, révèlent que ces images stylisées exprimaient des stratégies d'appropriation du pouvoir bien plus qu'une simple imitation.¹⁴

En particulier, en ce qui concerne les représentations de la cérémonie *ga'nza*, elles semblent s'apparenter plutôt [...] à des « copies qui ne sont pas des copies » : leur caractère performatif s'exprime à travers une « appropriation mimétique » des pouvoirs présents, dont ceux « éloignés et inaccessibles » de l'administration, des militaires ou de la médecine occidentale, afin d'en tirer un profit, ou une efficacité, ou même un renversement de certains rapports

13 « Le fonds photographique de la mission Citroën conserve aujourd'hui le témoignage le plus complet sur cette peinture peu connue : mais, pour les membres de la Croisière, ces 'savoureux dessins' sur case demeurent essentiellement décoratifs » (Ceriana Mayneri 2018, 18).

14 Bogumil Jewsiewicki, « Peintres de cases, imagiers et savants populaires 1900-1960. Un essai d'histoire de l'esthétique indigène ». *Cahiers d'Études Africaines*, 31(123), 1991, 307-26.

de force inégaux. De surcroît, fresques murales et répétitions des danses initiatiques viennent bousculer la frontière entre exhibition publique et exhibition ésotérique, mais aussi celle entre contexte ordinaire et contexte rituel : les scènes que Bruel commence à photographier au début du siècle, les spectacles et les fresques que Gide et ses contemporains observent plus tard, sont d'autant plus performatifs qu'ils s'affichent délibérément sous les yeux des protagonistes, donc aussi des instigateurs, de ces transformations qui bouleversent violemment le paysage social oubanguien (Ceriana Mayneri 2018, 19).¹⁵

Nous n'avons pas pu reconstituer les circonstances concrètes de la collaboration entre Maran et Iacovleff concernant le choix des images pour l'édition de 1928 de *Batouala*. Cependant, que l'insertion des fresques ait été suggérée par l'écrivain, ou qu'il s'agisse d'une stratégie exclusivement artistique, il nous semble que l'utilisation de ces « copies qui ne sont pas des copies » – *a fortiori* dans l'en-tête de la Préface si contestée – constitue une mise en abyme intertextuelle des mécanismes de renversement de rapports de force inégaux mis en œuvre par les populations de l'Oubangui (et, avec elles, par le livre de Maran). Et, plus encore, cette insertion iconique peut être lue comme une manière de répondre aux accusations portées dans ces mêmes années par Maurice Delafosse qui « [déplorait] l'inaptitude de Maran à restituer [les] paroles » (Fraiture 2005, 32) des Oubangiens. Il semblerait en effet que ces paroles qui s'insurgent contre l'injustice épistémique du colonialisme soient ici confiées aux dessins et à la peinture, arts auxquels Maran n'était nullement indifférent.¹⁶

En somme, si Maran portait un intérêt certain à l'image, ce n'était nullement au nom des prétendus « dons nègres de l'image et du rythme » (Senghor 1964, 410) vantés par Léopold Sédar Senghor – qui se méprenait en faisant de l'auteur de *Batouala* un précurseur de la Négritude – mais au nom d'un souci ethnographique et politique.

15 Ceriana Mayneri cite ici l'étude de Michael Taussig (17).

16 En parcourant la correspondance Maran/Gahisto, et en pensant aussi au sous-titre du roman posthume de Maran *Djogoni (Eaux-fortes)*, on est frappé par les nombreux passages empruntant au champ lexical des beaux-arts : couleur, clair-obscur, tableaux, lumière (cf. Gahisto 1965, 67). Chez Maran, l'art visuel porte en effet une double exigence : sublimation formelle et subversion politique. Cette conviction transparaît tant dans son lexique chromatique que dans ses alliances intellectuelles, notamment sa préface au volume *Negro in Art* d'Alain LeRoy Locke, premier manifeste à révéler systématiquement l'apport des arts africains à la modernité occidentale (cf. Locke 1940 ; Maran 1949). Cette même tension dialectique anime ses collaborations avec Lucie Cousturier, peintre postimpressionniste devenue ethnographe des « tirailleurs sénégalais » (Cousturier 2001; 2003).

3 Les trois *Batouala* illustrés

3.1 Alexandre Iacovleff : un style ethnographique ?

La première édition illustrée de *Batouala*, publiée en 1928, est la plus étudiée à ce jour,¹⁷ et concerne Alexandre Iacovleff (1887-1938). L'artiste russe, né et formé à Saint-Petersbourg à l'Académie impériale des Beaux-Arts sous l'égide du néoclassique Dimitri Kardovski, arrive en France en 1919 après avoir effectué de longs séjours d'études en Italie et en Espagne. Alors qu'il est en voyage, la Révolution d'Octobre éclate et il ne reviendra jamais dans son pays natal. À Paris, il retrouve son atelier et son compagnon de voyage Vassili Choukhhaeff. Ayant obtenu la nationalité française, il jouit d'une réputation de plus en plus grande, au point d'attirer l'attention d'André Citroën.¹⁸ Il constituait ainsi le seul membre non français de naissance à participer à la « Croisière noire ». L'expédition a parcouru 28 000 kilomètres en quelques mois, en partant de l'Algérie, en passant par le Niger, le Tchad, l'Oubangui-Chari, le Congo belge, puis en se séparant à Kampala en groupes qui ont rejoint Madagascar (avec Iacovleff à bord),¹⁹ Mombasa, Dar-el-Salaam, Le Cap et le Mozambique. Ce périple avait notamment des ambitions publicitaires : la présence conjointe d'un cinéaste et d'un illustrateur fraîchement auréolé de sa participation aux Olympiades artistiques de Paris (1924) revêt une signification particulière, alors que se multiplient les collectes de documents visuels à double vocation – ethnographique et propagandiste.

Alexandre Iacovleff était particulièrement qualifié pour prendre part à cette expédition, compte tenu de son expérience préalable en Asie. En effet, entre 1917 et 1919, une bourse lui avait permis de parcourir la Mongolie, la Chine et le Japon, forgeant ainsi son expertise des représentations culturelles extra-européennes. Cette aptitude répondait aux attentes d'un public métropolitain alors largement ignorant des réalités africaines. À son retour de l'expédition, Iacovleff organisa une exposition personnelle à l'Hôtel Jean Charpentier (7-23 mai 1926), événement qui fut salué par la critique. Parmi les nombreux journalistes ayant célébré son travail figurait Pierre Mille, figure influente du paysage médiatique de l'époque, qui apprécie le style

17 Cf. la synthèse de Caroline Haardt de La Baume.

18 La carrière de Iacovleff s'est terminée aux États-Unis, à Boston, où il a été nommé en 1934 directeur du département de dessin de la School of the Museum of Fine Arts à l'Université Tufts (De Rycke 2010, 287-9).

19 Ce fut l'occasion pour le peintre d'origine russe de réaliser un important portrait au fusain de l'écrivain malgache Jean-Joseph Rabéarivelo, accompagné d'une dédicace (Source : Claire Riffard).

simple mais non stylisé, et surtout le fait que ses œuvres sont des « documents exacts » (Mille 1926, 185) de la vie d'Afrique.

Cependant, ces œuvres exposées ne figurent pas dans l'édition illustrée de *Batouala*, laquelle présente un style radicalement différent, marqué par une approche résolument ethnographique. Les illustrations du roman se caractérisent en effet par une exécution rapide, évoquant le croquis pris sur le vif, bien éloignée des compositions élaborées de ses travaux antérieurs. Pour saisir l'ampleur de cette divergence stylistique, une analyse comparative s'impose, notamment à travers les deux versions de la fameuse cérémonie *ga'nza* réalisées par Iacovleff. Celles-ci semblent directement inspirées du cliché photographique issu de l'expédition Citroën évoqué précédemment, tout en en proposant des interprétations plastiques distinctes [fig. 1].



Figures 6-7 *Batouala*. Illustré de dessins par Iacovleff. Paris : Mornay, 1928, 78, 165

Plus précisément, la première version, exécutée en noir et blanc selon une technique de crayon à peine esquissée, illustre l'édition de *Batouala* parue en 1928 [fig. 6]. Cette facture rapide se retrouve également dans le panneau de plus grand format placé en conclusion de l'ouvrage [fig. 7]. À l'inverse, la seconde interprétation (une lithographie en couleurs) fut exposée à l'Hôtel Jean Charpentier²⁰ [fig. 8] et se distingue par un traitement stylistique qui s'apparente aux codes visuels de la publicité de l'époque. Cette parenté esthétique se

²⁰ Il s'agit de la planche 21 du portfolio (cf. Vogel 1927, n.p.).

manifeste particulièrement dans la comparaison avec l'affiche créée par Louis-Jean Beaupuy²¹ pour le film *La Croisière noire* de Léon Poirier, projeté en première à l'Opéra de Paris le 2 mars 1926 [fig. 9].



Figure 8
Alexandre Iacovleff, *La Ga'nza (Bambili)*,
lithographie en couleurs, 1927. In *Dessins
et peintures d'Afrique. Exécutés au cours de
l'Expedition Citroën Centre Afrique. Deuxième
mission Haardt-Audouin-Dubreuil*, n.p.
© Gallica BNF



Figure 9
Louis-Jean Beaupuy, affiche du Film de
*l'Expedition Citroën-Centre Afrique. 2ème
Mission Haardt-Audouin Dubreuil* (1926)

La collaboration entre Maran et Iacovleff a donné lieu à une publication de luxe tirée à 448 exemplaires, comme le montre le médaillon du volume [fig. 10].²²

21 Louis-Jean Beaupuy (1896-1974) se rendra à son tour à Madagascar, en 1931, et en 1934 en Afrique Occidentale.

22 René Maran, *Batouala*, illustré de dessins par Iacovleff. Paris : Mornay, 1928, 170 p.

L'analyse de cette deuxième version de 1928, d'un point de vue purement littéraire, conduit à déceler un certain nombre de variantes, mais elles sont essentiellement stylistiques et considérées comme négligeables par Michel Hausser, auteur de l'étude comparative des ces deux éditions et de celle de 1938 (republiée par Albin Michel), qui porte non seulement la mention « édition définitive », mais aussi, à côté de la page de titre, une des planches de Iacovleff (signée), tirée de l'édition de luxe de 1928 [figs 11-12].²³

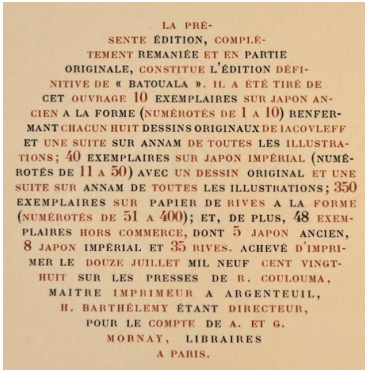


Figure 10
Batouala. Illustré de dessins par Iacovleff.
Paris : Mornay, 1928, n.p.

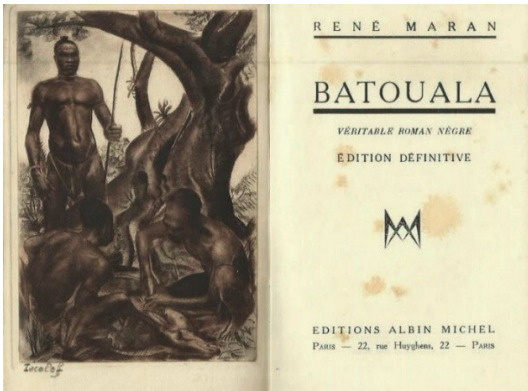


Figure 11
Réédition de *Batouala*
chez Albin Michel, 1937

23 Michel Hausser dans *Les deux Batouala* (note de bas de page no. 8, p. 11 de l'*Introduction*) affirme : « Par souci de simplification, je néglige une version intermédiaire, publiée en 1928 [...]. Cette édition de luxe, tirée à 400 ex., 'complètement remaniée et en partie originale', est donnée comme 'l'édition définitive de *Batouala*'. Elle représente une étape intéressante dans la transformation de *B1* [1921] en *B2* [1938]. [...] Tout se passe comme si elle avait été, sauf exceptions, [...] moins réécrite qu'amendée sur le texte même de *B1*. Elle est, somme toute, beaucoup plus proche de *B1* que de *B2*. ». Pour une critique de l'étude de Hausser, comparant l'édition de 1921 à celle de 1938, cf. la recension plutôt sévère mais très utile de Chidi Ikonné.

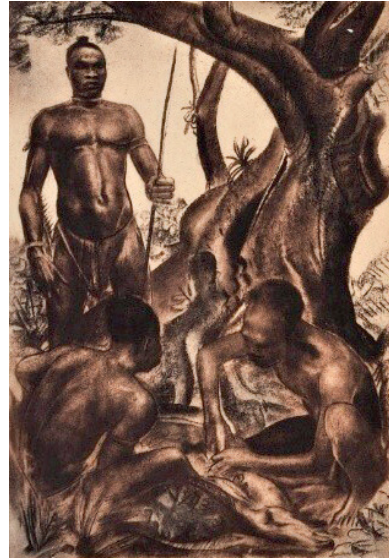


Figure 12
Batouala. Illustré de dessins par Iacovleff.
Paris : Mornay, 1928, n.p.

Comme le souligne à juste titre Hausser, les multiples rééditions de *Batouala* témoignent de l'obsession marquante qui anima Maran durant quinze ans pour parfaire son texte. Cette persistance éditoriale invite cependant à s'interroger : relève-t-elle simplement d'une quête esthétique individuelle, ou procède-t-elle d'une stratégie littéraire et politique plus complexe ? Nous y reviendrons dans notre conclusion, après avoir examiné les éditions illustrées postérieurement.

Ce qu'il faut retenir ici de l'édition illustrée par Iacovleff est son style documentaire et la présence d'éléments de la culture *banda* inscrits dans l'en-tête de la préface.

3.2 Miguel Covarrubias : « A Novel »

Lorsqu'en 1932, c'est-à-dire dix ans après la première traduction en langue anglaise,²⁴ *Batouala : A Novel* (qui n'est plus « véritablement nègre ») est à nouveau en librairie aux États-Unis, le roman de René Maran a recours à l'aide iconique d'un artiste une fois de plus expatrié et très proche du monde de la Renaissance de Harlem : le Mexicain Miguel Covarrubias.

Né en 1904 à Mexico, Covarrubias était peintre, caricaturiste, illustrateur, anthropologue, collectionneur, créateur de décors et

24 René Maran, *Batouala*. New York : Thomas Seltzer, 1922 (first English language edition). Traduit par Adele Szold Seltzer.

de costumes, et directeur de danse. Passionné des cultures, il s'est intéressé non seulement au Mexique, mais aussi aux États-Unis, qu'il a fréquentés à partir de 1923, à la France, à l'Amérique centrale et du Sud, aux Caraïbes, à l'Afrique du Nord et à l'Extrême Orient, notamment à Bali.²⁵

La première publication d'une de ses caricatures a eu lieu en 1920, en couverture de *Policromías*, la revue des étudiants de l'université nationale de Mexico. En décembre de la même année, l'hebdomadaire *Zig Zag* reprend un dessin qu'il a fait du peintre muraliste, ami de Diego Rivelto, Roberto Montenegro. En 1923, grâce au poète avant-gardiste José Juan Tablada qui a collaboré avec le compositeur Edgard Varèse, Covarrubias obtient un billet pour New York et six mois de soutien économique. Tablada le met en contact avec Sherrill Schell, un artiste photographe et écrivain réputé, qui s'intéresse particulièrement au Mexique. C'est par l'intermédiaire de Schell qu'il rencontre le critique musical du *New York Times*, Carl Van Vechten, des écrivains indépendants (H.L. Mencken, Waldo Frank), le dramaturge Avery Hopwood, la productrice et scénariste Eva Le Gallienne et surtout le dessinateur Ralph Barton. Le talent de caricaturiste de Covarrubias lui permet d'être engagé par des revues et journaux réputés. Frank Crowninshield, rédacteur en chef du magazine *Vanity Fair* (1913-36),²⁶ le remarque et l'invite à collaborer. Habitué des boîtes de nuit de Harlem, où la culture noire s'épanouissait autour du jazz, du blues, des spirituals et de la danse, Covarrubias connaît le mouvement de la « Renaissance noire » de Harlem. Il produit une série de dessins, connue sous le nom de « Negro Drawings » (1927), dont huit sont publiés dans le numéro de décembre 1924 de *Vanity Fair*. « Enter the New Negro » est le titre de l'éditorial qui l'accompagnait ; celui-ci montrait, pour la première fois aux États-Unis dans les pages d'un magazine, des dessins représentant des Afro-Américains en costume.²⁷

Durant l'été 1926, il se rend à Paris. Il y séjourne pendant toute l'année 1927 à l'hôtel Excelsior. La même année, son livre *Negro Drawings* voit le jour : il y dépeint une galerie de personnages et de situations du monde urbain noir états-unien. Covarrubias se rend ensuite en Afrique du Nord, où il réalise des dessins et collectionne de nombreux objets d'art. Une fois rentré à New York en 1928, il

25 Les informations ci-dessus sont principalement tirées de l'étude d'Adriana Williams (1994), avec quelques éléments supplémentaires issus de nos propres recherches. Cf. aussi l'étude de Sylvia Navarrete (1993).

26 Au sujet du magazine américain *Vanity Fair* dans la période 1913-36, cf. Malou Haine.

27 À partir de 1925, Covarrubias offre au *New Negro* trois de ses dessins, la couverture du livre *The Weary Blues* du poète panafricaniste Langston Hughes, les illustrations de *Father of the Blues : an Autobiography* du musicien W.C. Handy.

illustre le recueil de poèmes de José Juan Tablada, *La Feria. Poèmes mexicains*. Au cours de l'été, il rentre au Mexique, où il rencontre Diego Rivera et Frida Kahlo. De retour à New York, Covarrubias contribue avec ses illustrations au texte parodique *Meaning No Offense* de John Riddell, aux couvertures de *Adventures of an African Slaver*, qui relate les gestes de Theodore Canot, un commerçant d'origine italienne dans les milieux esclavagistes américains au XIX^e siècle, et *Born to Be (Blacks in the American West)* du musicien Taylor Gordon, un récit autobiographique qui porte sur la vie de la seule famille noire vivant au Montana à l'époque. Après un long séjour en Extrême Orient avec son épouse, l'artiste Rosa Rolanda, en janvier 1932 Covarrubias rentre à New York, où il expose 32 huiles et gouaches de son séjour à Bali à la Valentine Gallery. L'exposition est un succès et suscite un grand intérêt de la part de la critique. La même année, il illustre *Batouala* de René Maran.²⁸

L'intérêt de Covarrubias pour les cultures du monde, ses liens étroits avec le milieu de la Harlem Renaissance et, probablement, sa célébrité, ont convaincu les éditions Albin Michel, de confier les droits du roman aux Limited Editions Club de New York et aux soins de l'artiste mexicain.

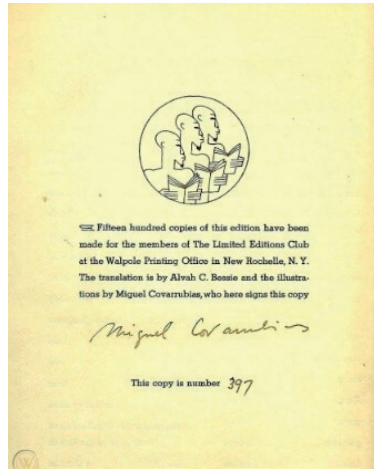


Figure 13
Batouala. A Novel. New York : Limited Editions Club, 1932, n.p.

28 René Maran, *Batouala. A Novel*, traduit par Alvah C. Bessie et illustré par Miguel Covarrubias. New York : Limited Editions Club, 1932 (New Rochelle, N.Y., Walpole Printing Office). Édition limitée à 1500 exemplaires signés par l'illustrateur. Le traducteur américain Alvah C. Bessie (1904-1985) écrivain à son tour et combattant pendant la Guerre d'Espagne, fut l'une des dix personnes reprise dans la fameuse « Liste noire d'Hollywood », instituée le 25 novembre 1947 au lendemain de la condamnation de dix scénaristes et réalisateurs pour outrage au Congrès, pour avoir refusé de témoigner devant le « House Un-American Activities Committee » (HUAC).

Les illustrations de *Batouala* par Covarrubias, avec leurs couleurs vives et leur primitivisme intentionnellement naïf [figs 14-15], se situent aux antipodes de l'esthétique de l'esquisse rapide en noir et blanc de certains dessins de l'édition Iacovleff. À quelques exceptions près : dans le frontispice, on retrouve des silhouettes stylisées qui encadrent le récit, ce qui marque une divergence esthétique par rapport aux tonalités chromatiques triomphantes des tables internes au roman. Cette rupture stylistique mérite une attention particulière à plusieurs égards.



Figures 14-15 *Batouala. A Novel*. New York : Limited Editions Club, 1932, n.p.

La page de titre [fig. 16] réinterprète avec une sobriété graphique remarquable le thème iconique des peintures murales qui ornaient le bandeau supérieur de la préface dans l'édition de 1928 [fig. 5]. Cette reprise stylisée masque pourtant une différence fondamentale : là où l'édition originale mettait en avant les inscriptions des gens *banda* – ces graphismes rituels des habitations oubanguiennes que nous avons interprétés comme une métaphore visuelle de la réappropriation du pouvoir colonial –, la nouvelle version n'en conserve que le support architectural. Autrement dit, seules subsistent désormais des cases anonymes, des huttes perdues dans l'épaisseur forestière.

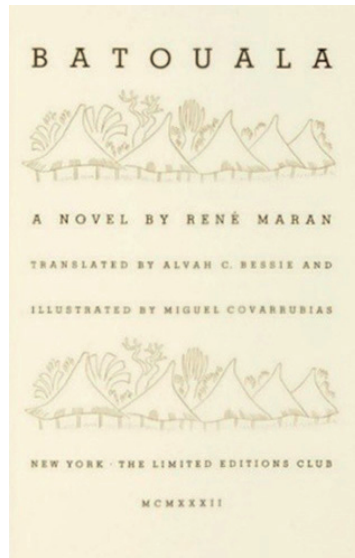


Figure 16
Batouala. A Novel. New York : Limited Editions Club, 1932, n.p.

La deuxième différence iconographique avec l'édition de 1928 concerne l'image la plus connue du roman de Maran, celle de la cérémonie *ga'nza* [fig. 17].

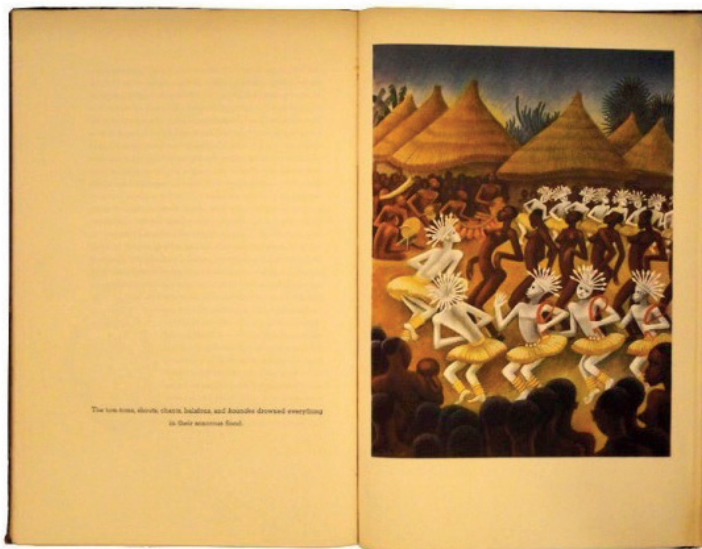


Figure 17 *Batouala. A Novel.* New York : Limited Editions Club, 1932, n.p.

La planche qui la représente dans l'édition américaine de 1932 est manifestement un moulage de celle que Iacovleff avait réalisée à partir de la photographie de l'expédition Citroën, présentée à l'Hôtel Jean Charpentier en 1926. Cependant, il n'y a aucune trace résiduelle de l'esthétique rapide, mais précise, contenue dans l'édition en noir et blanc de 1928. La circularité de la scène et les tons moins vifs par rapport aux planches de l'éléphant et du baobab en témoignent, de même que la prédominance du jaune, de l'ocre, du noir et du gris, reflétant les choix coloristes de Iacovleff. De sorte que l'iconographie « publicitaire » relative à la cérémonie *ga'nza* semble s'être fixée dans l'imaginaire collectif batoualien, tel un produit de consommation exporté.

Traversant l'océan Atlantique, *Batouala* ne devint pas seulement « A Novel », un roman sans autre qualificatif, mais perdit aussi la portée ethnographique et politique qui l'avait caractérisé en 1921 auprès du public français – une dimension qui n'avait pas, ou pas encore, de résonance aux États-Unis de l'époque. Toutefois, dans un contexte fortement ségrégationniste, le simple fait de publier le roman d'un Noir, auréolé du plus prestigieux prix littéraire français, constituait déjà en soi un acte subversif. C'était là un geste aussi audacieux que celui de Covarrubias dans *Vanity Fair*, lorsqu'il représentait des Noirs non pas nus, mais vêtus en bourgeois.

3.3 Paul-Émile Bécât : intégrations

Le dernier glissement sémantico-iconique des *Batouala* illustrés se produit avec la publication, en 1947, du roman avec les dessins de Paul-Émile Bécât (1885-1960), élève de Gabriel Ferrer, peintre orientaliste et membre éminent de la Troisième République, ainsi que portraitiste. Au cours de sa carrière, il a illustré de nombreux textes littéraires (dont *Les Bijoux indiscrets* de Denis Diderot et *L'Éducation sentimentale* de Flaubert),²⁹ et il a dessiné un portrait d'André Gide en 1919.

Certains éléments biographiques rendent Bécât proche du milieu français de Maran.³⁰ Tout d'abord, il est membre de la Société coloniale des artistes français, fondée en 1908 par Louis Dumoulin et consacrée à « l'expansion coloniale par l'Art, au profit de la France ».

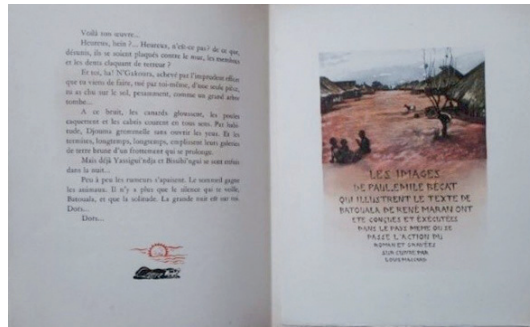
29 Gustave Flaubert, *L'Éducation sentimentale*. Illustré de pointes-sèches originales de Paul-Émile Bécât, dont hors-texte, tirage limité à 550 exemplaires numérotés. Paris : La Tradition, 1937.

30 À notre connaissance, aucun ouvrage monographique consacré à l'artiste n'a été publié en France ou ailleurs. Les informations contenues dans cet article sont le résultat de recherches personnelles, recoupant les sources relatives aux prix et aux concours artistiques de l'époque.

En 1920, il a remporté le prestigieux Prix de Rome. Grâce à ses nombreux voyages en Afrique dans les années 1920, il reçoit à la fois le prix du meilleur artiste de l'A.O.F. et le prix de l'A.E.F. (il voyage au Congo Brazzaville, en passant par l'Oubangui-Chari).

Dans sa version de *Batouala*,³¹ il affiche sa connaissance des lieux : juste après la conclusion du roman, un tableau précise que tout ce qui a été peint a été produit lors de ses séjours africains, dans les contrées mêmes où se sont déroulés les événements du chef Batouala (inscription sur le dessin, page de droite) [fig. 18].

Figure 18
Batouala. Illustré de dix-huit gouaches de P.-E. Bécât.
Paris : Georges Guillot, 1947,
n.p. © Bibliothèque
Nationale de France



Le besoin d'exactitude et de réalisme que Maran recherchait tellement revient en force avec cette dernière version illustrée. On retrouve également le dénominateur commun du voyage, que les trois illustrateurs de Maran ont effectué en Afrique équatoriale. Parmi ces trois artistes, Bécât se distingue comme le seul à être un créateur métropolitain.

L'édition de 1947 est à nouveau luxueuse, comme le prouve le colophon [fig. 19].

Ce *Batouala*, qui conserve la préface de 1921 (non paginée), est accompagné de 18 gouaches. Les planches, aux couleurs vives, sont beaucoup plus réalistes que celles de Covarrubias. Cependant, l'impression esthétique que l'on ressent en feuilletant ces dessins rappelle celle qui se dégage des éditions pour enfants des années 1950 [figs 20-21].

31 René Maran, *Batouala. Illustré de dix-huit gouaches de P.-E. Bécât, gravées par Louis Maccard*, Paris, Georges Guillot (impr. de J. Zichieri), 1947.

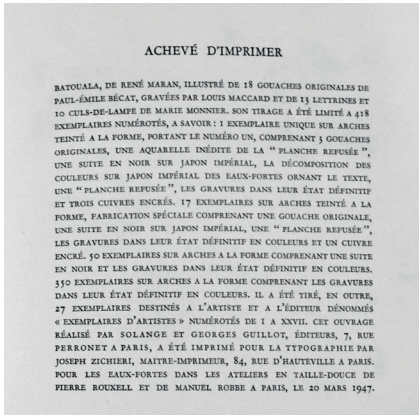
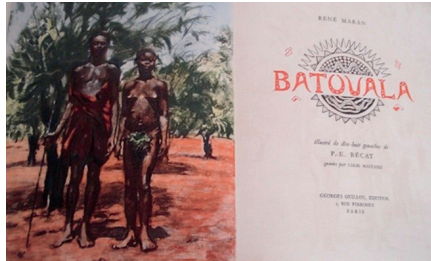
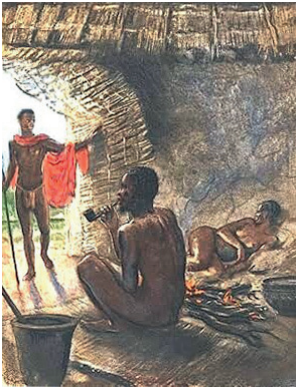


Figure 19
Batouala. Illustré de dix-huit gouaches de P.-E. Bécot. Paris : Georges Guillot, 1947, n.p.
© Bibliothèque Nationale de France



Figures 20-21
Batouala. Illustré de dix-huit gouaches de P.-E. Bécot. Paris : Georges Guillot, 1947, n.p.
© Bibliothèque Nationale de France

Les importantes illustrations stylisées qui, dans l'édition de 1928, accompagnaient le début des chapitres ou la page de titre des deux premiers *Batouala* illustrés, sont ici remplacées par des en-têtes qui rappellent davantage les enluminures médiévales que les inscriptions sur les cases de l'Oubangui, à l'exception de l'élément exotique du totem [fig. 22].

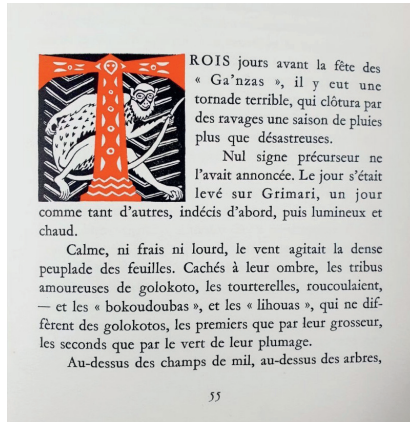


Figure 22
Batouala. Illustré de dix-huit gouaches de P.-E. Bécât. Paris : Georges Guillot, 1947, 17
© Bibliothèque Nationale de France

Au retour de ses voyages en Afrique, Paul-Émile Bécât se spécialise dans la technique de la pointe sèche et se distingue, à partir des années 1930, par une production résolument érotique, qui lui apporte une certaine notoriété. Quand on sait l'importance de la dimension sexuelle de la cérémonie *ga'nza*, on s'attend à en retrouver des traces dans les illustrations. Mais ce n'est aucunement le cas. Il n'y a pas non plus de références visuelles au casque à pointes *garaba*.

Nous découvrons cependant une planche en couleur (toutes les planches sont ici en couleur) d'un homme assis portant une coiffe bien différente de celle utilisée pour la fameuse cérémonie [fig. 23]. Il est facile d'imaginer qu'il s'agit du héros *Batouala*. De ce point de vue, cette édition présente une autre exception par rapport aux précédentes : c'est la seule qui singularise le chef par une pose, une pose régale (dans l'édition Iacovleff, on trouve des dessins au fusain montrant un homme portant une épaisse coiffe qui a peut-être inspiré Bécât, mais ce style typiquement portraitiste fait défaut à l'illustrateur russe).

La plupart des gouaches présentent des portraits de femmes et, dans deux cas, le motif des cases revient. Dans l'une, elles sont reléguées à l'arrière-plan de la scène ; dans une autre [fig. 20] elle fait référence à l'incipit du roman, et on peut voir l'intérieur de la cabane.



Figure 23
Batouala. Illustré de dix-huit gouaches de
P.-E. Bécot. Paris : Georges Guillot, 1947, 109
© Bibliothèque Nationale de France

Mais voilà qui relève du véritable coup de théâtre : alors que tout les oppose dans leurs approches et leurs intentions, c'est pourtant Bécot qui, de manière aussi inattendue que provocante, introduit dans *Batouala* une représentation frontale de la réalité coloniale. L'artiste (avec, ou, très probablement, sans l'aval de Maran) ose en effet intercaler parmi les planches du roman le portrait de « son » *boy* Djoudé – auquel il consacre même deux pages manuscrites reproduites dans chaque exemplaire imprimé. On y lit cette dédicace troublante : en récompense des services rendus et pour lui avoir sauvé la vie, Djoudé aurait « bien mérité de figurer parmi les personnages de cette Illustration au grand costume d'apparat, celui avec lequel il se présentait pour trouver un emploi de Domestique ! » [figs 24-25].

Ironie cruelle ou inconscience ? La page suivante montre ledit *boy* affublé d'un casque colonial des plus stéréotypés [fig. 25], créant un contraste saisissant avec les représentations 'ethnographiques' du reste de l'ouvrage. Par ailleurs, ce constat s'oppose également au propos liminaire de l'œuvre de Maran, lequel, comme on le sait, entretenait un différend avec l'administration coloniale exactement en raison de son assimilation au statut de domestique.

Figure 24
Batouala. Illustré de dix-huit gouaches de
P.-E. Bécot. Paris : Georges Guillot, 1947,
n.p. © Bibliothèque Nationale de France

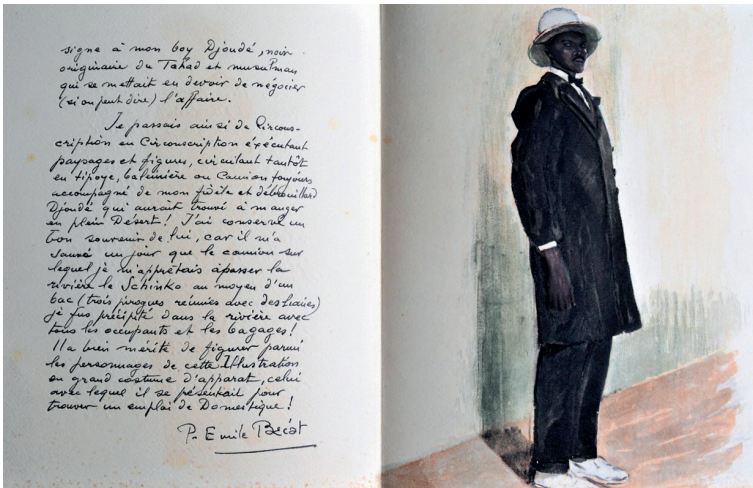
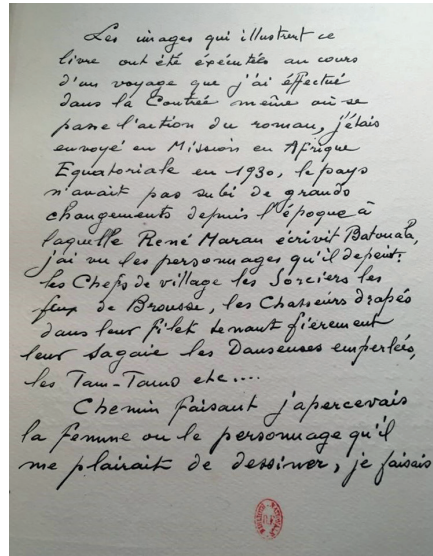


Figure 25 Batouala. Illustré de dix-huit gouaches de P.-E. Bécot.
Paris : Georges Guillot, 1947, n.p.

Bien que d'une facture moins suggestive que les versions antérieures, cette édition s'avère essentielle en ce qu'elle révèle une resémantisation de l'œuvre, marquée par l'intégration – à la fois textuelle et symbolique – du colonisé 'civilisé' (figuré par le casque). Ce mécanisme renverse la logique à l'œuvre dans la mise en scène photographique du *ga'nza* lors de la fête des Mères : si la performance

de 2007 prolonge en effet l'idée d'une appropriation du pouvoir occidental à travers l'assimilation de ses symboles, cette planche en couleurs, quant à elle, vient conforter le discours dominant via un détournement du texte maranien. Autrement dit, elle l'assimile.

L'espoir formulé par Maran à l'attention de son ami Manoel Gahisto – celui de voir son récit de la vie des Banda atteindre une véracité maximale –, se réalisait-il peut-être ? « Les éclairer, les animer, les rendre humains [sic], dignes de l'hommage des foules » ? (Gahisto 1965, 69). Presque, mais pas encore tout à fait : en 1947, le chef *mokondji* est toujours flanqué par un serviteur, bien que ce dernier porte un casque colonial... Et si l'on se remémore la réaction de Maran, évoquée en préambule, lorsqu'il fut traité de 'boy' par l'administration coloniale, cette insertion se révèle non pas comme une subversion, mais bien comme une moquerie crue – un rappel cynique des hiérarchies raciales inchangées.

Les recherches effectuées n'ont pas permis de déterminer pourquoi les éditions Albin Michel décident de confier *Batouala* à Bécot après la guerre. Se pourrait-il qu'on ait voulu profiter de la notoriété de son illustrateur pour faire revivre une histoire qui avait mûri pendant de nombreuses années, mais dont le message était toujours d'actualité au lendemain de la Seconde Guerre mondiale, à laquelle la Force Noire avait tant donné ? Est-ce pour cela que le « Domestique »/boy a été intégré au sein du dispositif iconographique de l'histoire ? Ces questions restent ouvertes.

Il reste que les illustrations successives du roman *Batouala* opèrent une articulation entre une histoire et l'Histoire. Comme le rappelle Brent Hayes Edwards dans *The Practice of Diaspora : Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism*, le double sens du terme 'articulation' – à la fois 'expression distincte' et 'agencement' – rend ce geste de mise en relation toujours ambivalent. Dans le corps, en effet, seule la différence – la séparation entre les os ou les membres – permet le mouvement (Edwards 2003, 15).³² C'est précisément cette logique dialectique de la jointure et de la disjonction que matérialisent les prothèses iconiques du texte de René Maran : les peintures murales sur les cases de l'Oubangui, les coiffes *garaba*, les totems 'médiévaux', les attributs vestimentaires hybrides, la dimension coloniale expulsée puis réinsérée par l'hommage au serviteur, autant d'éléments qui, avec les tensions entre préface et récit s'étalant de 1928 à 1947, rendent ce processus dialogique continu. Ces illustrations ne se contentent donc pas d'orner le texte ; elles sont l'incarnation d'une resémantisation

32 « Articulation is always a strange and ambivalent gesture, because finally, in the body it is *only* difference – the separation between bones or members – that allows movement ». C'est l'auteur qui souligne.

constante et exemplaire. Autrement dit, le corps iconographique de l'homme Batouala rend manifeste le lieu où se joue, se négocie et parfois se bloque la rencontre entre les histoires et l'Histoire (celles des colonisés et celle de l'empire). Ainsi, l'image ne fait pas que représenter ; elle performe la tension même de la relation coloniale, cette connexion nécessaire mais fondamentalement asymétrique qui, à l'instar d'une articulation corporelle, ne produit du mouvement (ici, sémantique et politique) que par la reconnaissance et l'exploitation d'une différence à l'époque encore perçue comme irréductible.

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Une femme muette et La Reine Soleil levée de Gérard Étienne : la résilience de la femme noire

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Abstract Gérard Étienne (1936-2008), a pivotal figure in Haitian Canadian literature during the latter half of the twentieth century, has received relatively limited critical attention in the early years of the new century. As a journalist, poet, and novelist, Étienne's work persistently stages a revolt against various forms of oppression – political, social, and familial. This paper focuses on two of Étienne's novels: *Une femme muette* (1983) and *La Reine soleil levée* (1987). While the two protagonists – Marie-Anne and Mathilda – appear to stand in stark contrast to one another in terms of geographic setting, social class, temperament, and modes of resistance, a closer reading reveals significant parallels. This study aims to explore how these women, through resilience and resistance, disrupt a seemingly predetermined fate and forge paths toward self-determination.

Keywords Haitian literature. Canadian literature. Québec. Colonial text. Resistance.

Sommaire 1 Introduction. – 2 Marie-Anne ou la renaissance par les mots. – 3 Faire lever le soleil de la révolte. – 4 En guise de conclusion.



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1 Introduction

Gérard Étienne est l'un des noms majeurs de la littérature haïtiano-canadienne de la deuxième moitié du XX^e siècle, cependant sa place dans le champ littéraire francophone n'a pas toujours été, nous semble-t-il, reconnue à sa juste valeur. Poète, romancier, essayiste, journaliste, critique littéraire, professeur de linguistique, son écriture est l'écho d'une indignation toujours aux aguets qui traque les injustices de tous ordres, de sa colère, de son humanisme également. Déjà arrêté et torturé sous le régime de Magloire, « il s'engagea contre la satrapie duvaliériste [...] fut torturé et resta trois jours dans le coma [...]. Victime d'un complot monté contre lui, il dut s'exiler le 15 août 1964 » (Accau 1988, 9). Le départ est inévitable pour sauver sa vie et le Québec, ou mieux la ville de Montréal, devient son espace d'accueil lui permettant de relever un autre défi : porter à terme ses études. Il est cependant déjà prêt à refermer ses valises pour un nouveau déménagement avec comme destination le Nouveau Brunswick ; il a en effet quitté la capitale québécoise « par dégoût et par écœurement dans la mesure où celle-ci se voyait envahie par la racaille duvaliériste et où les petits bourgeois opportunistes étaient trop lâches pour régler leurs comptes à ces délateurs qui torpillaient tout projet de révolution contre la tyrannie en Haïti » (9). Dans toute son œuvre il n'a de cesse de mettre en scène sa révolte qu'elle soit de nature politique, sociale ou familiale ; peu importe le lieu où se déroulent ses fictions, en Haïti ou dans le pays qui accueille ses personnages en exil, son « écriture combattante » (Hauptman 2024, 5) est mise au service de la lutte contre les iniquités, les oppressions et les persécutions.

Les questionnements de l'écrivain côtoient ceux du chercheur dans un dialogue dense et ininterrompu où se font écho réflexions théoriques et imaginaire romanesque. Dans la deuxième moitié des années quatre-vingt-dix, Gérard Étienne entreprend des recherches qui ont comme support théorique l'anthropo-sémiotique auxquelles il mêle des analyses statistiques ; le résultat se concrétise à travers – entre autres – deux essais : *La question raciale et raciste dans le roman québécois* (1995) et *La femme noire dans le discours littéraire haïtien* (1998). Le premier articule sa réflexion sur la problématique raciale et raciste qu'Étienne relève dans le roman québécois depuis les années 1960 jusqu'au début des années 1990 ; Patrick Imbert dans sa contribution intitulée *Étienne : Discours savant et analyse du racisme* insiste sur le caractère précurseur de cet essai. La critique littéraire québécoise à cette époque évince de ses propos toute préoccupation pour le discours raciste présent dans les textes et focalise principalement son attention sur l'importance que revêt la littérature comme intermédiaire dans la diffusion d'un discours où prime l'intérêt pour « l'affirmation nationale » de la part

de la communauté québécoise francophone précarisée dans un milieu où elle se sent minoritaire par rapport à la communauté anglophone :

De ce point de vue, la recherche d'Étienne est en avance sur son temps, car après l'affirmation des écrivains dits ethniques ou migrants et des auteurs autochtones, de nombreux livres, thèses et articles jetteront une lumière intéressante sur les rapports d'inclusion et d'exclusion dans la littérature québécoise. (Imbert 2024, 26)

L'approche de Gérard Étienne dans le constat de clichés racistes qui émaillent les romans québécois ne tombe jamais dans un manichéisme stérile « et sait proposer une réflexion nuancée au sujet des rapports aux altérités » (28).

Le deuxième essai interpelle directement le sujet de notre étude puisqu'il s'agit pour l'écrivain de se pencher sur la représentation de la femme noire dans le discours littéraire haïtien qu'il oppose à la représentation « de la Brune, de la Mulâtresse et de la Blanche » (Étienne 1998a, 12). Dans l'introduction à son ouvrage, Étienne s'applique à nous fournir une définition de ce qu'il entend par discours littéraire et nous présente le corpus qui va être la matière de son investigation : « a) **le texte colonial, le texte littéraire** [...] et enfin des **Histoires de vies**. Il s'agira de voir si l'on peut établir une ligne de démarcation entre trois types de discours où la femme noire est considérée soit comme objet, soit comme sujet » (12 ; caractère gras ajouté). Gérard Étienne va donc se pencher sur un certain nombre d'ouvrages publiés sur l'esclavage à Saint-Domingue à l'époque coloniale, sur des textes littéraires et des histoires sociales, c'est-à-dire des témoignages de femmes noires haïtiennes livrés sous forme de conversations directes obtenues sur cassette.

C'est déjà dans la production des textes coloniaux, qui ne sont pas nécessairement des textes littéraires, que l'auteur trouve les premiers portraits de femmes noires particulièrement actives et notamment dans la représentation des marronnes ; il indique en effet le marronnage comme une « idéologie de contestation, de renversement de valeurs, voire d'affrontements à un système d'idées fondées sur la supériorité raciale » (25). Cette pratique de résistance et de rébellion qui a vu le jour dès l'établissement de l'esclavage à Saint-Domingue a été vidée de son essence par les auteurs coloniaux puisqu'elle n'est pas reconnue comme « organisation révolutionnaire », pourtant les marronnes comme Marianne Montbrun, Cécile Fatiman (31) ont été, selon Étienne, des actrices indispensables de l'ébranlement du système esclavagiste, tout comme l'ont été d'ailleurs, d'une façon différente, les femmes noires parquées dans les plantations à la merci des maîtres. Les femmes en captivité sur les plantations « considérées comme des signes vides »

cachent derrière une situation de soumission des stratégies « pour non seulement déjouer le maître, mais [...] représenter un maillon important de la chaîne » (33) de la révolte. L'espace esclavagiste est le premier lieu de vexations et d'humiliation de la femme noire et il en sera de même – voire pire – quand le système esclavagiste va être démantelé et que s'instaure ce qu'Étienne qualifie de système féodal¹ irrémédiablement implanté dans toutes les strates de la société.

Nous essaierons, dans notre étude, de montrer comment l'image négative qui afflige la « Nègresse » tend à se dissoudre sous la plume d'Étienne romancier et comment il tente de forger une image de la femme noire qui rejette une identité imposée, subie, en partie aussi à cause des croyances vodou. Étienne approfondit en effet les rapports entre le vodou, la domination patriarcale et la condition de la femme noire. Les deux romans qui ont particulièrement retenu notre attention sont *Une femme muette* (1983) et *La Reine Soleil levée* (1987) ; ces deux textes forment une synthèse efficace et un portrait sans complaisances des problématiques qui jalonnent l'existence de la femme noire qui n'a de cesse de se débattre et de résister, que ce soit dans son milieu familial ou encore dans la société où elle cherche à trouver sa place.

Dans ces deux fictions, Étienne campe sa narration dans deux espaces différents. *Une femme muette* se déroule, pendant les années 1980 du siècle dernier, à Montréal, la ville d'accueil où Marie-Anne, une jeune femme haïtienne a atterri pour suivre son mari, Gros Zos, devenu médecin. Ce dernier, après l'avoir exploitée pour décrocher son diplôme, va tenter de la pousser au suicide non sans l'avoir auparavant humiliée, malmenée et séquestrée. En effet, il voit en elle l'obstacle ultime qui l'empêche d'accéder à une soi-disant respectabilité sociale qui se traduirait par le mariage avec une femme blanche. L'avenir semblerait donc réserver à Marie-Anne un destin déjà tracé. Quant à Mathilda, protagoniste de *La Reine Soleil levée*, elle mène sa vie à Port-au-Prince sans grands soubresauts quand le jour de la Toussaint, son mari, Jo Cannel, transporteur de son métier au marché de la Croix-des-Bossales, est terrassé par des douleurs insoutenables et inexplicables que rien n'arrive à calmer. La première réaction de Mathilda quand elle le voit rentrer est un

1 « Transfert d'un système esclavagiste à un autre système où l'oppression sera produite par des hommes qui ont ravi aux esclaves marronnes la victoire de 1804. En d'autres termes, l'esclavagisme sera battu en brèche, mais pour être situé sur le même axe temporel par le féodalisme. [...] Depuis, le pays est habité par des seigneurs féodaux (propriétaires terriens, propriétaires fonciers, usuriers, etc.) et toutes les crises politiques de ce pays, de 1804 à nos jours (1994) dérivent des tensions sociales entre castes féodales en vue de la prise d'un pouvoir absolu. D'où la nécessité de poser l'idéologie féodale comme le lieu producteur d'asservissement et de dégradation de la Noire » (Étienne 1998a, 62).

regard de mépris, qui sera bref mais significatif, celui d'une femme qui a toujours refusé, contrairement à la plupart des femmes de son quartier, de se tuer au travail pour entretenir son compagnon. Marie-Anne et Mathilda doivent toutes deux affronter une situation inconfortable, l'une victime de son milieu familial, de son conjoint, l'autre victime de l'inertie des institutions et des hommes du pouvoir. Ces deux romans ne sont pas les seuls où Gérard Étienne s'indigne contre le traitement réservé à la femme noire qui doit subvenir aux besoins de son compagnon, il s'applique à pointer du doigt ce qu'il appelle « le sous-racisme vis-à-vis de la Noire » (63) pratiqué par l'homme noir lui-même pendant la période qu'Étienne a baptisé – nous l'avons-vu – le temps du système féodal.

Si dans son essai de 1998 la peinture de la femme noire qui ressort des différents matériaux textuels interrogés est dépréciative, la fiction romanesque lui permet de rectifier cette représentation et d'attribuer à ces deux personnages féminins des qualités telles que la détermination et la témérité, qui leur appartiennent mais qui ont toujours été volontairement occultées ; il s'agit pour lui de corriger une image faussée et très négative pour redonner à la femme noire une agentivité trop souvent négligée. Étienne a planté chez ses deux héroïnes la semence de la révolte qui germe au fil des pages, elles s'attachent à racheter leur condition de femme, à imposer leur être au monde en tant que Noires. Il a voulu conférer à Marie-Anne et à Mathilda la posture de la femme subversive qui rappelle justement celle de la marronne : « Rien n'a changé depuis cinq siècles, pense Marie-Anne, elle aussi est une marronne, la chose d'un propriétaire qui, lui aussi, a signalé son évasion » (Étienne 1983, 100).

Avant d'aborder de façon plus approfondie les deux textes cités, il est essentiel, pour saisir l'importance de la femme noire dont Étienne brosse le portrait, d'avoir bien à l'esprit les considérations qui animent son texte théorique et les aspects (la révolte et le vodou) sur lesquels nous nous pencherons. L'auteur en effet a voulu prendre ses distances des romanciers qui ont occupé le panorama littéraire précédent² – y compris des grands noms comme Jacques Roumain ou Jacques Stephen Alexis, même si Étienne nuance ses propos – ; il n'est plus question de dire la femme noire comme avant, de la reléguer à un personnage de second plan. En ce qui concerne Roumain, par exemple, le personnage féminin principal de *Gouverneurs de la rosée*, Annaïse, reste dans une position subalterne même si elle est dotée d'une force morale à toute épreuve et incarne la possibilité d'un renouveau et d'une vie future qu'elle porte en

² Dans son essai *La Femme noire...*, il définit son corpus et procède à « un échantillonnage sélectif composé des pièces les plus marquantes de la littérature haïtienne » (Étienne 1998a, 121), qu'il cite et qui constituent le pivot de sa recherche.

elle, l'enfant de Manuel ; selon Étienne, certains préjugés chez Roumain ne sont pas encore dépassés, la femme noire tend à être valorisée mais elle reste embrigadée dans des rôles conventionnels. Chez Jacques Stephen Alexis les personnages féminins, notamment Claire-Heureuse dans *Compère Général Soleil*, ont une place fondamentale dans l'architecture de la narration ; tout comme Annaïse, malgré les adversités, c'est elle qui se chargera de prendre la relève après la mort d'Hilarion, son compagnon. Étienne souligne le fait qu'à la fois pendant la période esclavagiste, et au cours de la période qui suit la fin de l'esclavage, « la femme noire incarnerait le mal absolu, d'où son basculement dans un cycle marqué par la persécution et par l'exploitation » (Étienne 1998a, 45). Il s'insurge donc contre cette maltraitance qui colonise les pages de presque tous les textes, littéraires et non, qu'il a analysés ; ce que Gérard Étienne a voulu réaliser dans son œuvre relève de la représentation « [d'] une femme noire [qui] sera posée non pas comme une chose non-marquée, mais comme un être qui fait une histoire et non qui subit un récit » (Campana 2005, 163).

2 Marie-Anne ou la renaissance par les mots

Dans *Une femme muette*, Marie-Anne s'engage, non sans difficultés, dans un parcours périlleux pour se défaire de l'emprise d'un mari qui l'a internée dans un hôpital psychiatrique. La fuite de Marie-Anne de ce lieu n'est que le premier pas d'une rébellion qu'elle entreprend seule au début ; elle sera très rapidement accompagnée dans son errance à travers la ville par Hélène, une montréalaise qui lui vient en aide et qui cherche à saisir l'incompréhensible mutisme qui l'empêche de se confier à elle. Marie-Anne trouve aussi le soutien des femmes haïtiennes qui mobilisent la communauté pour donner une leçon à Gros Zo mais les hommes ne vont pas suivre et cette tentative de soulèvement pour mettre Gros Zo face à ses méfaits sera vaine. Hélène, malgré tout, essaie de ne pas émettre de jugement mais de décoder et de démêler les tenants et les aboutissants d'un univers opaque, qu'elle a du mal à cerner : « C'est peut-être un monde à découvrir, un peuple dont l'oppression subie se fait encore sentir sur une terre étrangère et qui tente maintenant d'exprimer ses frustrations librement » (Étienne 1983, 122). Pour Gérard Étienne, la survie de Marie-Anne passe à travers la solidarité des femmes, qu'elles soient noires ou blanches. Le rôle que l'écrivain attribue à Hélène est, dans cette optique, particulièrement significatif : c'est elle qui réussit à accepter son silence, à l'interpréter et c'est justement grâce à cette capacité de déchiffrer les non-dits qu'elle aide Marie-Anne à retrouver les mots nécessaires. Ce ne sont pas d'ailleurs des mots quelconques ; les premiers qu'elle prononce à

la fin du texte alors que son mari s'est étouffé sur « un morceau de viande logé dans sa trachée-artère », sont ceux d'une chanson antillaise, en créole. Son silence s'interrompt pour faire ressurgir un passé qui la renvoie à sa véritable essence, à une vie antérieure, avant l'enfer qu'elle a vécu.³ Marie-Anne, au cours des réflexions qui animent son parcours de « re-naissance » (titre du dernier chapitre), s'interroge également sur ses fautes, ses manques, sur ce qu'elle n'a pas su mettre en œuvre pour sortir de cette situation dans laquelle elle s'est lentement laissée entraîner. L'auteur met en scène une autre Marie-Anne, une sorte de double, contre laquelle la jeune femme lutte et tente de se révolter :

Elle éprouve maintenant le besoin de descendre au fond de sa boîte à fatras, de retrouver la Nègresse lâche. Plus que lâche, disloquée. Cette lâche négresse couche à côté d'elle, dort à côté d'elle. À n'importe quel moment elle fonce sur elle comme une jument mal domptée pour lui donner des directives conformes à la bassesse. Cette lâche n'a rien fait pour lui éviter l'humiliation à l'ambassade américaine de Port-au-Prince où le Consul l'a fait jurer sur la Bible, qu'elle n'a pas couché avec des chiens, qu'elle ne transporte pas dans son sac à main des images du démon.

[...]

Et chaque fois qu'elle tente de sortir de la boîte à fatras, la lâche vient lui barrer la route. C'est avec les ritournelles du passé, des phrases comme Dieu est bon, c'est avec des dévotions aux esprits, des vœux à Sainte-Anne et à Sainte-Bernadette, c'est avec l'impossibilité de frapper le poing sur la table en disant assez ! que vit cette lâche négresse. (Étienne 1983, 190)

C'est aussi grâce à son plongeon dans cette « boîte à fatras », à travers cette descente en elle-même que Marie-Anne va pouvoir se défaire de la zombification⁴ dont elle a été la victime. Il est indispensable d'évoquer ici, très brièvement, les positions que Gérard Étienne entretient face au vodou et cela depuis son tout premier récit *Le Nègre crucifié* (1974) où cette religion syncrétique se manifeste d'emblée

3 « Je ne pense pas que ce recours à un chant créole soit un retour conscient à la créolité. Sans nier la portée du rôle de la langue et de la parole qui traversent tout le roman, je serais plutôt menée à croire en une descente en soi, une tentative de se ressourcer afin de se dépasser. Retrouver la pureté de la langue, c'est lessiver tout ce qu'il y a de bassesse et recommencer, recréer. Marie-Anne a besoin de retrouver en elle la femme qu'elle fut avant l'entrée de Gros Zo dans sa vie » (Adamson 1998, 101).

4 Dans la pratique du vodou être transformé en zombi (zombification) signifie que l'individu est devenu un instrument dans les mains d'un bokor. Il perd son libre arbitre, sa volonté et est vidé de sa substance. Il se transforme ainsi en automate, en errant. Le mari de Marie-Anne a eu recours aux pratiques vodouisantes pour pouvoir garder sa femme dans une condition subalterne.

comme un mal absolu. Il s'avère être pour l'écrivain une des plaies de la société haïtienne qui concourt à son aliénation, justement à sa zombification, il est la cible d'Étienne qui voit dans ce culte détourné de ses origines, un moyen au service du pouvoir pour soumettre et tyranniser la population. Les croyances vodou telles qu'elles sont présentées dans le roman ne relèvent pas d'une pratique sincère de la religion, elles entretiennent la frayeur, l'immobilité, la crainte ; Marie-Anne, au fil de son cheminement, se libère des pratiques vodouisantes auxquelles recourait Gros Zo qui l'assujettissaient et qui la maintenaient dans une position d'infériorité dans leur rapport de couple.

3 Faire lever le soleil de la révolte

Dans *La Reine soleil levée*, nous retrouvons les deux motifs de la rébellion et du vodou que nous avons suivis jusqu'à présent au cours de notre lecture d'*Une femme muette* ; nous dirons même que le passage d'un texte à l'autre se fait tout naturellement avec l'anticipation, au chapitre 10, l'avant-dernier, d'une partie du titre du roman de 1987. Après la révolte qui mènera Marie-Anne à l'apaisement et à l'épanouissement, elle reprend possession de la ville et du lieu qui ont été témoins de ses vexations, elle sent une force nouvelle se manifester, elle perçoit la lumière qui éclaire à nouveau son chemin :

Ce matin veut imprimer son propre rythme à ses cellules afin que, se retirant du jour, il lui permette de faire le pas décisif vers la sortie de sa caverne. De plus Marie-Anne se rend compte que beaucoup de choses prennent à ses yeux une nouvelle dimension. Les images de morts ne sont rien d'autres qu'une masse nébuleuse prête à s'évaporer à la moindre intervention de la lumière, un moment du temps intérieur [...] ; elle sent que c'est la femme, en elle, qui progresse avec des images qu'elle veut bien façonner ; c'est **la Reine-Soleil**, non la bête qu'elle nourrissait dans son esprit de la même façon qu'on tolère une angoisse qui vous contraint à accepter votre mal comme quelque chose d'immuable. D'insaisissable. (203; caractère gras ajouté)

Cet appellatif de « Reine-Soleil » est le surnom qu'Étienne attribue à Mathilda⁵ dans le roman du même nom, la femme-courage qui va épauler son compagnon frappé par une maladie mystérieuse que personne n'arrive à guérir, ni le général qui, à l'hôpital, se fait passer pour un médecin, ni les hougans auxquels tout le monde, lors des difficultés qui se présentent au quotidien, rend visite pour contrer les mauvais esprits.

Le face à face de Mathilda avec ses interlocuteurs, les représentants du pouvoir et du vodou, sera sans appel, leur alliance rend inopérantes toutes les tentatives de la protagoniste. Malgré ses réticences envers ces pratiques, pour le bien de Jo, elle s'aventure en premier chez Ti-Boss, le grand prêtre vodou. Gérard Étienne prête à cette femme rebelle des gestes et des attitudes qui manifestent sa véhémence et sa détermination, sa colère également dans des situations qu'elle n'arrive pas à accepter et encore moins à dominer. Avant de sortir pour se rendre chez Ti-Boss, Mathilda se donne un

coup de peigne. Elle enfle une robe de chanvre, serre fortement les lacets de ses sandales. Sortie en coup de vent, un mouchoir rouge grenat noué autour de la tête, décidée à tout pour que son homme soit sur pied d'ici peu. (Étienne 1987, 27)

C'est en combattante qu'elle entreprend ce qui deviendra un véritable chemin de croix. Le style syncopé, les accélérations de la phrase, renvoient à la fougue qui s'empare de Mathilda pour secourir Jo, le temps presse et elle voit son mari lentement perdre sa vitalité. Au fil du récit, Gérard Étienne brosse le portrait d'une héroïne qui s'affirme par sa fierté, sa hardiesse et sa ténacité, contrainte à tenir tête à maintes adversités. Son premier adversaire est le général-médecin qui œuvre dans l'hôpital où Jo aurait dû être pris en charge mais qui dirige au contraire un lieu en décomposition où l'on a fait perdre à l'être humain toute dignité et qui s'annonce comme l'antichambre d'une mort certaine ; le désespoir et la douleur sont sous les yeux de tout un chacun, sans aucun respect pour la souffrance des hommes avachis par terre au milieu de la crasse. Gérard Étienne ne laisse

5 Le choix du prénom Mathilda est récurrent dans l'œuvre de Gérard Étienne ; il apparaît pour la première fois sous la variante de Mathilde dans *Le Nègre crucifié*, et personnifie une jeune femme militante que l'auteur a brièvement connue et avec laquelle il a partagé sa cellule avant qu'elle ne succombe à la torture. « La Reine Soleil levée » est aussi le titre d'une chanson populaire où le soleil est personnifié par une reine, la reine Kongo, habillée de tissu multicolore et d'une beauté sans pareil. Gérard Étienne dans la très belle interview qu'il accorde à Roberta Campana s'explique sur sa prédilection pour la Reine Soleil (alias Mathilda) : « J'aime tellement ce personnage que j'aurais voulu l'avoir comme mère, au moins elle aurait pu résister à la violence de mon père et retourner avec moi dans son pays d'origine, la République Dominicaine » (Campana 2005, 166).

rien à notre imagination, tout est décrit dans les moindres détails, la vie et la mort se côtoient. L'insalubrité du lieu, l'indifférence du personnel soignant, la corruption et l'argent que Mathilda doit donner au maître chanteur pour un lit misérable dans une chambre bondée à laquelle Jo devrait accéder de droit, font germer en elle une colère sans précédent. Sa première cible sera le général-médecin dont le stéthoscope est le seul signe qui l'apparente véritablement au corps médical, son incompetence à soigner les malades est à la hauteur de sa répulsion à les toucher. Il réduit les gestes du soi-disant médecin à des simagrées qui font de lui le général vainqueur d'une armée de moribonds. Mathilda impose un véritable bras de fer au général, impuissant à fournir une réponse satisfaisante aux questions pressantes de la femme. Ce face-à-face va mettre en évidence la distance entre ces deux individus ainsi que l'écart qui s'est créé entre le peuple et les hommes de pouvoir, c'est au premier que Mathilda va prêter sa voix et son énergie. L'écrivain nous invite à suivre la métamorphose de son héroïne qui soutient le regard du général, le presse pour qu'il lui fournisse un diagnostic. Étienne présente ce conflit comme un véritable duel et nous conduit à un tournant : en présence du général, Mathilda va prendre conscience du changement qui s'opère en elle. Ce qu'elle voit, ce qu'elle entend, la fait sortir de sa simple condition de femme du peuple du tout début du roman, aiguise sa sensibilité face à ce qui l'entoure et lui permet d'ouvrir les yeux sur ce qui se passe :

Cette envie de devenir une autre Mathilda, elle ne sait pas d'où ça vient. Ce nouveau personnage entièrement différent de cette marchande de quincaillerie à La Croix-des-Bossales qui n'avait qu'une ambition réussir en suant ; [...] indifférente jusqu'à présent aux remous de la société, l'idée de justice l'amène aujourd'hui à se poser des questions. (43)

Consciente de l'impossibilité d'une guérison à travers une science pseudo-médicale, Mathilda ne peut que s'en remettre, comme ultime recours, aux croyances vodou, auxquelles elle avait été jusque-là plutôt réfractaire. C'est à Maître Sonson, alias Ti-Boss « par référence à l'époque où il affectait un air de patron, malgré sa condition de paysan » (29) qu'elle va s'adresser. Dans ce cheminement, elle sera accompagnée par ce que le texte nomme « la bande », des individus du quartier qui lentement se sont retrouvés autour d'elle, une masse au début hétéroclite qui pourtant se compacte. Ce groupe subit au fil de la narration une véritable transformation, ils passent d'un stade de simple compassion pour la douleur de Matilda à la prise de conscience de leur soumission à un pouvoir véreux qu'ils expriment à travers une révolte qu'ils pousseront jusqu'à des conséquences extrêmes car les représailles du pouvoir seront terribles. Ces individus passifs qui se

limitaient à ne pas contrarier les dominants en place, à fermer les yeux pour réussir à survivre, avaient jusque-là étouffé leur nature et c'est Mathilda qui va les faire sortir de leur torpeur, qui va leur permettre de se mettre debout, ils voient en elle une libératrice auprès de laquelle ils se sentent à même de lutter :

Cette femme de stature imposante est en train de chambarder l'ordre des choses dans une capitale qui marche presque sur des béquilles à force d'avoir vu mourir sous la torture, ses Noirs les plus téméraires. Ceux qui tremblaient de peur dans les baraques, [...] le temps fabuleux qui vit les Noirs orgueilleux incendier les plantations de cannes à sucre, font brusquement sauter les barres de fer de cette espèce de cage dans laquelle ils se voient enfermés, depuis un quart de siècle. (115)

À l'image de cette bande, Mathilda portait déjà en elle les signes avant-coureurs de ce que serait son destin ; elle se souvient qu'on le lui avait prédit :

Son parrain, un arpenteur avait laissé tomber ces mots. Dans ce pays, disait-il, après la grande geste de 1804, les femmes noires sont tombées très bas [...]. Je vois toutefois dans ton regard une passion sauvage, une force redoutable. Il suffirait d'une étincelle pour la faire exploser.

Quelqu'un avait donc déjà saisi la vraie nature de cette femme qui changerait le cours non seulement de sa vie mais aussi de celles et ceux qui l'accompagneraient dans la mission de sauver Jo.

D'autres personnages féminins émaillent le texte de Gérard Étienne même s'ils ne sont qu'évoqués, ils conditionnent pourtant les décisions de la protagoniste. Il s'agit de Louisina, la grand-mère de Mathilda, dont les paroles affleurent continuellement à son esprit, traçant le chemin à parcourir. Mathilda s'enrichit de sa sagesse, de son expérience, de la connaissance qu'elle avait de ces hommes tout-puissants qui par leur magie, leurs superstitions tiennent en laisse un peuple mais en particulier la femme noire :

Pour eux la femme noire ressemble à un marécage où viennent mourir les petits dragons de la cité. On la renifle à distance, on l'empoigne, on la saigne. Pour la magnificence des esprits. [...] La grand-mère Louisina avait raison. Voici des milliers de mortels dans la fosse aux serpents. Des milliers de femmes enterrées vivantes. (40-1)

Les femmes occupent également une place essentielle dans la vie de Jo. Il superpose aux images qu'évoque son épouse les images des

femmes de sa famille. Sa mère, sa grand-mère Antoinette, qui ont habité et façonné son univers d'enfant et d'homme renaissent dans les traits de caractère de Mathilda :

Jo a retrouvé chez sa femme, l'un des traits de tempéraments de sa mère, une façon antillaise d'affronter les autorités en faisant des gorges chaudes de leurs avances. (66)

Une autre image [...], encore plus téméraire, sauvage, fracassante. La grand-mère Antoinette. Le transporteur se sera nourri pendant un bon bout de temps de cette femme qui ne tolérerait pas la faiblesse. [...] Quand elle grondait entre ses dents, tout le monde s'en allait la queue entre les jambes. (68)

Mathilda à la fin du récit, accompagnée et encouragée par la bande, tente la prise d'assaut de la forteresse où se retranche Maître Sonson. La connivence entre le vodou et le pouvoir, ce dernier venant à la rescousse du hougan, met en évidence l'alliance et l'action commune de ces deux forces en présence (voir Joubert Satyre (2019) et semble véhiculer l'idée que non seulement cette révolte mais toute révolte est vouée à l'échec. La tuerie des dernières pages en est emblématique. Le pouvoir s'acharne contre Mathilda et la bande :

Les miliciens chargent la bande de Mathilda. Non armée elle essaie de se replier. Peine perdue. Des sifflements de balles couvrent des cris de lamentation. Corps écrabouillés sous les bottes. Carnage total. Les personnes non criblées de balles ont la figure déchiquetée à coups de pierres, les bras arrachés, les jambes pulvérisées. (195)

Mathilda n'échappe pas à son destin, elle aussi succombe non sans avoir passé le flambeau, dans un dernier souffle, à un jeune intellectuel en lui indiquant la voie à suivre.

4 En guise de conclusion

Si Matilda nous paraît être le personnage féminin le plus réussi au sein de l'univers romanesque d'Étienne, d'autres femmes peuplent son imaginaire et les pages qu'il nous a laissées ; n'oublions pas Adrienne dans *La Romance en do mineur de Maître Clo* (2000) ou encore Anna, l'héroïne d'*Au Bord de la Falaise* (2004). Ce dernier texte est particulièrement intéressant puisqu'il s'agit de la réécriture d'*Une femme muette*, une réécriture qui avait d'ailleurs été partiellement esquissée dans *La Romance...* (Andrews 2024, 87). Ce retour sur ses propres textes permet à Gérard Étienne de mesurer

la distance temporelle qui s'est creusée depuis ses premiers romans et de l'interroger, de broser un nouveau portrait de la femme noire qui la situe dans un processus d'adaptation à la terre d'exil qui l'a accueillie. Il s'agit désormais pour l'écrivain de rendre compte des transformations, de dire le présent et d'envisager l'avenir. Un exemple significatif de ce passage à une nouvelle phase qui a progressivement trouvé ses marques dans le contexte canadien est à remarquer dans le roman *Au Bord de la falaise*. Le texte se termine comme *Une femme muette* avec la protagoniste Anna qui, après une période d'aphasie, retrouve la parole à travers les mots d'une chanson qui cette fois ne sont plus des mots en créole, comme pour Marie-Anne, mais en québécois. Le personnage du dernier roman d'Étienne s'affranchit ainsi du passé pour permettre au présent de parler et de considérer un destin qui semble s'ancrer sur le sol canadien.

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Mémoires en conflit et le rôle du silence dans *Un plat de porc aux bananes vertes* de Simone et André Schwarz-Bart et *La mémoire aux abois* d'Évelyne Trouillot

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Abstract This article explores how memory is recovered and represented in the novels *Un plat de porc aux bananes vertes* (1967) by the Franco-Guadeloupean couple Simone and André Schwarz-Bart and *La mémoire aux abois* (2010) by the Haitian Évelyne Trouillot. Drawing on Régine Robin's typologies of memory described in *Le roman mémoriel* (1989), it examines the interplay between individual, collective, national and cultural memory, analyzing how fragmented recollections, silences, and sensory stimuli articulate diasporic and intergenerational remembrance. Through polyphonic female voices, the novels challenge dominant historical narratives and foreground subaltern, decolonial modes of memory rooted in Caribbean postcolonial experience.

Keywords Simone Schwarz-Bart. André Schwarz-Bart. Évelyne Trouillot. Francophone Caribbean literature. Haitian literature. Régine Robin.

Sommaire 1 Introduction. – 2 Souvenirs fragmentés, rémanence du passé. – 3 Mécanismes mémoriels. – 4 Le rôle du silence et des non-dits. – 5 Conclusion.



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1 Introduction

Les romans *Un plat de porc aux bananes vertes*¹ du couple franco-guadeloupéen Simone et André Schwarz-Bart et *La mémoire aux abois*² de l'écrivaine haïtienne Évelyne Trouillot, publiés à une quarantaine d'années de distance, s'articulent autour de la dynamique entre les mémoires, le silence et l'amnésie. Les deux œuvres abordent des thématiques communes et leurs intrigues se ressemblent de manière significative : trois femmes caribéennes afro-descendantes instaurent un dialogue avec leur passé à partir de leur présent en métropole, dans la solitude d'un hospice parisien. Les personnages sont pourtant issus de deux contextes postcoloniaux profondément différents. Dans *Un plat de porc aux bananes vertes*, roman écrit à quatre mains par les Schwarz-Bart paru en 1967, est raconté le destin de Mariotte, une Martiniquaise enfermée depuis deux ans dans un hospice pour les personnes âgées qu'elle appelle le « Trou ». Dans *La mémoire aux abois*, publié en 2010, Évelyne Trouillot tisse un dialogue silencieux entre deux femmes originaires d'Haïti, la vieille veuve d'un ancien dictateur et la jeune femme qui la soigne.

Un plat de porc aux bananes vertes a fait l'objet de nombreuses études qui ont mis en évidence son rôle fondamental dans l'œuvre schwarz-bartienne en tant que roman qui inaugure le « cycle antillais »³ du couple, et ont amplement analysé les procédés utilisés pour décrire l'expérience antillaise, l'aliénation, le racisme et l'exil ainsi que l'intertextualité avec d'autres œuvres de l'espace caribéen.⁴ Notre intention n'est pas de revenir sur des problématiques déjà explorées, mais d'utiliser *Un plat de porc aux bananes vertes* comme point de départ pour mener une lecture croisée de ce roman et de celui de Trouillot qui aura pour but de dégager les convergences et les divergences dans les mécanismes de récupération des souvenirs ainsi que dans le rôle du silence et des non-dits. Afin de saisir les raisons qui déclenchent la lutte entre les mémoires et d'interpréter les effets de cette réappropriation, nous aurons recours à des concepts et réflexions élaborés par Régine Robin dans *Le roman mémoriel : de l'histoire à l'écriture du hors-lieu* (1989). En particulier, nous tenterons de comprendre pourquoi certains épisodes demeurent ensevelis et nous nous interrogerons ensuite sur les fonctions du

1 PP dans la suite du texte, suivi du numéro de page.

2 MA dans la suite du texte, suivi du numéro de page.

3 Cycle qui se compose de quatre romans : *Un plat de porc aux bananes vertes* (1967), *La Mulâtresse Solitude* (1972, signé par André Schwarz-Bart uniquement), *L'Ancêtre en Solitude* (2015) et *Adieu Bogota* (2017).

4 Voir entre autres Abdeladhim 2011 ; Gyssels 1996 ; 1998 ; 2000 ; 2002 ; 2015 ; 2020 ; Hanania 2003 ; Miller 2001 ; Wilson 1992.

silence et des non-dits. Relèvent-ils de l'inconscient ou constituent-ils une forme de résistance protectrice face au vécu intime ?

2 Souvenirs fragmentés, rémanence du passé

Dans *Un plat de porc aux bananes vertes* Mariotte exprime le désir d'être transportée par les odeurs, les visages et les paysages de sa jeunesse. Pourtant, ce voyage mémoriel est loin d'être apaisant : le parcours à rebours est douloureux, souvent confus. Au fur et à mesure que Mariotte se rapproche de sa Martinique natale, à travers une série de réminiscences convoquées dans un ordre non chronologique, elle mêle dans son récit son existence, celle des autres et des fragments imaginaires, inventés. Parmi ces évocations, les scènes d'enfance liées à sa famille occupent une place essentielle, et elle instaure un dialogue imaginaire avec sa grand-mère. Cette dernière, ancienne esclave endurcie par la vie dont Mariotte se souvient avec amertume, apparaît hostile, à l'opposé de l'image stéréotypée de la grand-mère bienveillante. Au cours de leur dialogue fictif, émergent les conseils que l'aïeule donnait à Mariotte enfant pour la mettre en garde contre les blancs :

Reste à ta place de négresse, ma fille, [...] sinon le monde blanc va t'écraser comme un simple margouillat. (PP, 48)

Elle reproche à sa petite-fille le fait de parler français et non créole, lui crache dessus avec mépris, la traite de « sans-vergogne » (PP, 50) et de « sans-maman » (PP, 50) et l'insulte pour ses cheveux crépus, sa peau trop foncée, ses narines trop épaisses. Mariotte se souvient également du délire hallucinatoire qui a conduit à la mort de sa grand-mère, lors duquel l'ancienne esclave encore mentalement enchaînée à son maître, comme le remarque Wilson (1992, 183), revit les coups de fouet pour la dernière fois. La douleur éprouvée par Mariotte dans le présent est indissociable de ces souvenirs traumatiques :

Seulement ces mots que j'attendais de toi, grand-mère ; seulement ces mots : *Alors, Mariotte, coumen ou yé chère ?* (PP, 54)

Ces visions aident Mariotte à comprendre que sa grand-mère était avant tout en lutte contre elle-même, contre son passé d'esclave qu'elle revivait constamment et qu'elle projetait sur sa petite-fille. À cet héritage familial s'ajoutent d'autres traces, également marquées par la perte, notamment l'éruption de la Montagne Pelée en 1902 qui a emporté la mère de Mariotte et détruit la ville de Saint-Pierre. Le visage de la mère a été effacé par la fureur du volcan et Mariotte,

« bien plus âgée qu'elle ne le fut à sa mort » (PP, 96), n'arrive pas à récupérer les traits maternels dans le présent, malgré les efforts :

M'arc-boutant sur ma canne, j'ai serré mes paupières à toutes forces dans l'espoir fou d'y voir paraître les traits de Moman [...] Mais plus je l'appelais, et plus Moman s'enfonçait davantage en terre, dans cette tombe étrange qu'elle s'était creusée, en moi, le 8 mai 1902, quand les flots de lave volcanique eurent recouvert son petit monde et dissous jusqu'à la moindre trace de son passage ici-bas. (PP, 96)

Les éléments sensoriels contribuent à raviver l'acte de récupération des images éloignées dans le temps, comme le « soleil blanc des Tropiques » (PP, 60), les voix, le ciel, la végétation tropicale, le goût d'un fruit et l'odeur du piment, encore vives et pénétrantes après plus de soixante ans. Pourtant, l'évocation est souvent imprécise et des éclats émergent « à la manière dont resurgissent brusquement des douleurs d'âme oubliées, sans racines visibles et sans frondaisons » (PP, 68). Le roman s'achève sur la narration, à la troisième personne, de l'évasion de Mariotte de l'hospice. Elle déambule en plein hiver dans les rues de Paris avec une sensation d'ivresse qu'elle attribue d'abord au vin, aux mégots fumés ou à un malaise cardiaque. À genoux dans la neige, un dernier souvenir lui apparaît devant les yeux fatigués, le plat de porc aux bananes vertes du titre, associé à des sensations qui contrastent avec la scène tragique :

Tout disparut et [Mariotte] vit à nouveau devant elle un plat de nourriture pays d'origine et eut l'impression de tomber le visage en avant mais se retint deux mains à la canne [...]. [S]on ivresse ne venait pas du cœur ni du vin ni des cigarettes mais de l'odeur de vie, des couleurs de beauté, du goût de tendresse qu'il y avait [...] dans un plat de porc avec des bananes vertes ! (PP, 246)

Dans *La mémoire aux abois*, les deux femmes, enfermées dans leurs silences respectifs, parcourent plus de trente ans de leurs vies et de l'histoire de leur pays d'origine, Haïti, appelé dans le roman Quisqueya, de son nom amérindien. Comme le constate Lindsey Scott (2014, 90), Trouillot aborde la période duvaliériste en établissant une distance spatiale entre les personnages, exilés à Paris, et Quisqueya/Haïti ; cette distanciation est aussi assurée par l'usage d'allégories pour se référer à la famille du dictateur François Duvalier, dans le roman Fabien Doréval, et à quelques lieux.⁵ Le dialogue entre la

5 Les lieux mentionnés et les noms de quelques personnages, pour un lecteur attentif, renvoient immédiatement aux contreparties haïtiennes : le dictateur Fabien Doréval

veuve du dictateur et la jeune femme qui la soigne montre la tension entre le désir d'être transportées par le passé et la résistance à la mémoire, de peur de revivre des épisodes trop cruels. Cette tension est rendue du point de vue formel par l'alternance des voix narratives et par la distinction typographique entre les deux récits : la jeune femme, Marie-Ange, s'exprime à la première personne tandis que le récit de la veuve, en italique, est pris en charge par un narrateur à la troisième personne. Ce procédé établit une distance entre la veuve, dont les pensées les plus intimes restent inaccessibles, et le lecteur. L'alternance des points de vue met aussi en évidence le contraste, sur le plan de l'énonciation, entre le récit antidictatorial porté par Marie-Ange et le récit de la veuve. Cette dernière, expulsée du plan de l'énonciation, n'a pas droit à sa propre parole qui est médiatisée et transposée par un narrateur externe. La narration à la première personne l'emporte sur le récit narré à la troisième personne, donnant ainsi l'impression d'une parole libérée du joug dictatorial, d'un triomphe posthume sur la dictature.⁶

Dans le roman de Trouillot, les souvenirs appartiennent à trois personnages distincts : à la vieille femme, à la jeune soignante et à la mère de cette dernière. Le lecteur apprend le prénom de la veuve, Odile, seulement à travers son récit, car personne à l'hospice ne possède la moindre information à son sujet, bien que des rumeurs circulent. Odile cherche à recomposer son parcours de vie de manière ordonnée et refuse de se laisser emporter par la mélancolie. Toutefois, les visions du passé émergent à partir des émotions qu'elles suscitent encore, comme les couleurs de la mer de son île natale, les chants religieux appris à l'orphelinat et le goût du chocolat chaud. Elle revit des moments qui appartiennent à sa famille mais sont aussi étroitement imbriqués à des événements charnières de Quisqueya : la naissance de ses quatre enfants, le départ en exil en 1986, le début de la présidence de son mari en 1957, le choix du successeur du dictateur père, le mariage du fils avec une mulâtresse divorcée - événement marquant le début du déclin du régime - et les funérailles de son époux.

De son côté Marie-Ange, après la rencontre avec la veuve, se réapproprie les récits transmis par sa mère Marie-Carmelle. Elle exprime à maintes reprises sa lassitude d'avoir grandi avec des histoires répétées, de violence et de terreur, que la mère lui racontait en les lui faisant revivre :

(François Duvalier) appelé aussi « Pap Fab » (Papa Doc), son épouse Odile (Simone Ovide) appelée par la population « maman Odile » (Mama Doc/maman Simone), le fils Jean-Paul Doréval (Jean-Claude Duvalier), la ville de Port-du-Roi (Port-au-Prince), la prison de Fort Décembre (Fort Dimanche).

6 Pour une analyse du roman de la dictature dans l'espace caribéen et des similitudes sur le plan formel et thématique, voir Costantini 2016.

J'ai essayé plusieurs fois d'échapper à tes souvenirs [...] je n'ai pris en héritage que tes angoisses. (MA, 28)

Les principaux événements qui ont marqué le pays et la famille de Marie-Ange pendant la dictature se croisent de manière non linéaire dans le récit de Marie-Carmelle, montrant le lien entre la matière fictionnelle et l'Histoire de Quisqueya/Haïti : le jour du départ de Quisqueya en 1980 ; la tentative d'enlèvement du fils du dictateur en 1963 ; le début de la présidence à vie du dictateur père en 1964, alors que la mère de Marie-Ange avait 10 ans ; la disparition du frère, membre du mouvement étudiant, emprisonné et décédé à Fort Décembre ; l'émigration massive de ceux qui peuvent quitter le pays, comme des cousins partis à Montréal en 1970 ; la mort du dictateur père en 1971 qui coïncide avec le baccalauréat de Marie-Carmelle et, enfin, la mort du père de Marie-Ange, qu'elle n'a jamais connu, assassiné pendant le régime du dictateur fils en 1980.

L'histoire quisqueyenne est ponctuée de répressions, massacres, exils, trahisons et révoltes,⁷ qu'Odile et Marie-Ange jugent différemment selon leur position de bourreau ou de victime, dans un contraste évident qui met en relief les interprétations opposées données par les deux femmes aux mêmes événements. La veuve, prisonnière d'une mémoire falsifiée et d'un regard biaisé sur le passé, ne comprend pas pourquoi ses compatriotes cherchent à fuir Quisqueya, malgré les efforts de son mari qui « avait tout fait pour améliorer le sort de la population » (MA, 17), alors que la population, pour toute réponse, osait « traiter le Défunt et ses partisans d'opresseurs » (MA, 23). Dans le présent de la narration, qui se situe vers la fin des années 1990, Odile réfléchit sur la situation des immigrés en banlieue parisienne, en particulier sur les conditions pitoyables de ses compatriotes, révélant un détachement de la réalité ainsi qu'une perception altérée des actions de son époux :

Qu'avaient-ils donc tous à vouloir à tout prix quitter Quisqueya ? Malgré tous les efforts du Défunt pour les retirer de la misère, ils se laissaient prendre au piège des Antilles françaises, de la Barbade

7 Parmi les horreurs de la dictature duvaliériste (réfèrent non affiché mais pas caché non plus), le roman mentionne les faits suivants : la tentative manquée de renversement du régime en 1958 avec l'exécution des conspirateurs, l'assassinat la même année des frères Clifford et Duquesne Joris (Charles et Ducasse Jumelle) et l'exposition de leurs cadavres en pleine rue, les massacres de l'été 1958 ordonnés par le dictateur pour assurer sa montée au pouvoir, l'exécution publique en novembre 1964 de Lionel Dubois et Marc Noisin (Marcel Numa et Louis Drouin), membres d'un groupe d'opposants, la révolte des paysans en 1969, ou encore l'expulsion d'un groupe de prêtres le 15 août 1969 qui marque le début d'une période d'interdits et d'angoisse pour Marie-Carmelle. Les seuls souvenirs heureux évoqués par Marie-Carmelle renvoient à son enfance avant la dictature, en particulier aux vacances en province chez sa grand-mère.

ou pire encore de la république voisine. (MA, 34 ; en italique dans le texte)

En songeant à la cérémonie d'inauguration de la cité Odile Savien Doréval (Cité Simone, devenue ensuite Cité Soleil) au début des années 1960, Marie-Carmelle se souvient d'une grande mise en scène par la Première dame, fière et bien habillée, qui s'apprêtait à donner son nom à l'un des quartiers les plus dégradées de la capitale, futur symbole de la violence actuelle des gangs. Dans le récit de la veuve, une importance majeure est donnée à la préparation de la cérémonie, en particulier à la création de la robe confectionnée pour l'occasion. Odile se remémore cette journée avec émotion et satisfaction, mais affirme aussi son soulagement car à partir de 1987 la cité ne porte plus son nom. Inversement, le mariage du fils Jean-Paul avec Isabelle Baudet, représentante de l'élite mulâtre du pays (portrait allégorique de la femme de Jean-Claude Duvalier, Michèle Bennet), est considéré comme « une des erreurs les plus graves du régime » (MA, 116) et évoqué avec amertume ; en pleine période de crise politique et sociale, une telle cérémonie a attiré les critiques et représenté un moment de non-retour pour le dictateur fils et pour sa famille. Il s'agit du seul instant où les émotions coïncident en partie : l'ostentation de richesse par le nouveau couple présidentiel est racontée avec indignation par Odile et par Marie-Carmelle. Quand Marie-Ange relate cette journée par l'entremise des récits de sa mère, elle parle de colère, de mépris et aussi d'indifférence, émotions qui reflètent les réactions du peuple à l'annonce du mariage :

Alors que le pays sombre dans la misère, que les gens meurent de faim, que le prix du café baisse chaque jour davantage, que l'économie du pays devient de plus en plus dépendante de l'aide internationale, cet idiot va se marier avec une fille de la bourgeoisie. (MA, 127)

Les funérailles du dictateur père le 24 avril 1971 donnent aussi lieu à un double récit : pour Odile il s'agit d'un moment de désolation extrême, pendant lequel se lève un vent impétueux qu'elle interprète comme une manifestation surnaturelle du dictateur même après sa mort. Pour Marie-Carmelle, la nature déchaînée représente la cruauté du régime qui ne s'arrête pas même lors des funérailles, car ce jour-là a eu lieu le dernier assassinat d'un opposant politique sous le régime du dictateur père. La journée de deuil de la veuve est décrite par Marie-Carmelle comme une journée de fête ailleurs, en particulier en Martinique où les Quisqueyens exilés pensent que cette mort signifie la possibilité du retour au pays. La divergence interprétative apparaît de manière encore plus nette lors de la narration des arrestations et assassinats en novembre 1980, pendant

lesquels le père de Marie-Ange est tué. Alors qu'Odile considère cette répression comme une mesure nécessaire adoptée par le régime pour garder le pouvoir, une de ses conséquences directes, notamment la mort du compagnon de Marie-Carmelle, marque le point de rupture qui change radicalement le destin de toute une famille, contrainte à l'exil.

3 Mécanismes mémoriels

Régine Robin distingue quatre types de mémoire : « nationale », « savante », « collective » et « culturelle ». La mémoire nationale, qui « relève d'un espace-temps monumental, et épique » (Robin 1989, 58), est pétrifiée dans les monuments et par les commémorations officielles et « scandée par des dates, ses jours fériés [...] et sa fête nationale qui sont le rappel des temps héroïques » (49). La mémoire « savante », établie par les historiens, est chronologique et vise à l'objectivité (49). La mémoire « collective », « faite de souvenirs réels ou de souvenirs écrans, [...] de témoignages directs ou de traditions familiales » (52) comporte une composante émotionnelle et identitaire, fonctionne par associations et est « cyclique, uchronique, mythique » (58). Enfin, la mémoire « culturelle » est une mémoire potentielle qui peut englober les autres registres mémoriels et reste disponible à l'imaginaire de l'écrivain (60).

Dans *Un plat de porc aux bananes vertes*, la mémoire de Mariotte est défaillante, marquée par la fragmentation et l'effacement ; elle voudrait démêler les fils du passé mais ne récupère que des images floues :

Deux ans seulement que je me trouve ici, et ce court laps de temps a éclipsé trois longs quarts de siècle. (PP, 18)

Les visages, les odeurs et les sons du présent, et des deux dernières années, semblent avoir effacé tout ce que Mariotte était avant son arrivée à l'hospice et le travail de remémoration apparaît inhibé par la peur :

Il suffirait de fermer les yeux, les oreilles, et d'ouvrir à l'intérieur du crâne quelque lucarne qui donne sur le passé : mais je ne le puis. [...] Quelque chose m'empêche de dévider la substance du passé : la peur. (PP, 19)

Le vécu surgit donc difficilement, sous forme de bribes incertaines et réminiscences qui semblent appartenir à toute une généalogie de femmes antillaises, puisque Mariotte recèle non seulement son histoire, mais aussi celle de ses ancêtres martiniquaises. Ce

personnage complexe, polyphonique car habité par plusieurs voix issues de temporalités multiples (Abdeladhim 2011, 83), se charge de transmettre la mémoire collective du peuple martiniquais à partir de Paris, métropole hostile et lieu de l'effacement mémoriel. Mariotte s'efforce de revoir sa Martinique natale, mais le processus s'avère extrêmement laborieux :

J'avais beau serrer les gencives de toutes mes forces, afin de faire apparaître l'île sur ma rétine : rien ne surgissait de l'ombre. (PP, 92)

Les moments de nuit absolue, où l'expérience vécue disparaît dans l'obscurité, alternent avec des moments d'ouverture où les traces mémorielles sont déclenchées principalement à partir de stimuli sensoriels : les sons et les odeurs du présent. Ainsi, un bruit provenant du réfectoire, une sorte de tam-tam, lui rappelle le son du tambour N'goka et une vieille chanson : à partir de cette association, une fenêtre s'ouvre sur la Martinique et elle revoit la ville de Saint-Pierre en 1903, au moment de son départ pour la Guyane. Cette apparition qui jaillit de manière inattendue la rend désireuse de plonger dans « le fleuve du passé » (PP, 148), dans la « rivière souterraine » (PP, 148) des souvenirs.

Le roman déploie ainsi un dialogue polyphonique intérieur qui s'étale sur différentes strates temporelles. À la voix de la grand-mère, personnage qui surgit comme un fantôme, se superposent de manière conflictuelle la voix de Mariotte adulte (Marie, comme on l'appelle à l'hospice) et de Mariotte enfant, qui s'exprime en créole martiniquais. Le créole est une langue qu'elle associe, de par son expérience personnelle, à des empreintes affectives pour la plupart négatives. Ce choix stylistique symbolise le rapport conflictuel que peut entretenir l'immigré antillais à Paris avec sa langue maternelle, source de douleur. La pratique de l'écriture, outil de remémoration souvent associé à un « mécanisme thérapeutique » (Kuon 2013, 297), apparaît aussi défaillante ; la rédaction de son journal intime dans les sept cahiers qui composent le roman est pour Mariotte insatisfaisante et ne donne pas de points de repère, contrairement à ce qu'on observe chez Marie-Ange dans *La mémoire aux abois*.

Dans le roman d'Évelyne Trouillot, les souvenirs des deux femmes remontent à la surface après leur première rencontre, qui déclenche chez elles des tentatives de reconstitution du vécu. Les contacts fréquents avec la veuve replongent Marie-Ange dans le passé de sa famille, aidée dans sa quête par des sources écrites : ses notes sur Quisqueya prises à la bibliothèque et les cahiers de sa mère. Dans la solitude d'un hospice parisien, deux mondes intérieurs s'entrelacent sans parler et instaurent un combat entre les récits des victimes et des bourreaux, la recherche de la vérité et les mensonges sur les atrocités

du régime, passées sous silence.⁸ Entre les deux femmes se joue le conflit entre le peuple et le dictateur et ses complices ; la mémoire collective du peuple haïtien est transmise par l'intermédiaire de Marie-Ange, qui devient la voix des opprimés par la dictature, en opposition au récit de la veuve. La transmission mémorielle de mère en fille au caractère double – oral et écrit⁹ – permet de donner la parole aux victimes, de faire sortir de l'oubli des dates et personnes qui ont perdu leur vie et dont la mémoire nationale ne s'est jamais chargée. Face à la figure affaiblie de la veuve complice de tant d'horreurs, Marie-Ange parcourt à rebours les faits les plus marquants de son histoire familiale, consciente d'avoir dû faire face au silence de sa mère, à ses non-dits, mais aussi à sa souffrance :

Tu as ponctué mon enfance de tes lamentations, de ta rage, de ta douleur. Ce que je n'avais pas vécu, tu as veillé à me le dire, à me le répéter jusqu'à ce que ma mémoire s'en empare. (MA, 17)

Le concept de « postmémoire » forgé par Marianne Hirsch illustre précisément la situation dans laquelle se trouve Marie-Ange, confrontée à une transmission transgénérationnelle du traumatisme :

Le terme de postmémoire décrit la relation que la « génération d'après » entretient avec le trauma culturel, collectif et personnel vécu par ceux qui l'ont précédée, il concerne ainsi des expériences dont cette génération d'après ne se « souvient » que par le biais d'histoires, d'images et de comportements parmi lesquels elle a grandi. Mais ces expériences lui ont été transmises de façon si profonde et affective qu'elles semblent constituer sa propre mémoire. (Hirsch 2014)

La mémoire devient ainsi un lieu de résistance au silence imposé par la narration officielle, à la falsification des récits nationaux, mais aussi au traumatisme hérité. La mémoire activée par Marie-Ange, nourrie de colère et de douleur, se veut réparatrice, car elle exhume les violences de la dictature et redonne voix aux disparus :

Combien d'autres que mon père avaient péri ? Anonymes, oubliés au fil des ans. Peut-être encore pleurés par la mémoire d'un proche, mais délaissés parmi toutes les autres victimes de la dictature.

8 Nous empruntons l'expression « passer sous silence » (*silencing*) à l'anthropologue Michel-Rolph Trouillot (frère aîné d'Evelyne Trouillot) qui a analysé l'effacement intentionnel par le discours national de plusieurs personnalités appartenant au peuple haïtien, jugées dangereuses pour la narration officielle (Trouillot 1995).

9 Marie-Ange affirme que sa mère avait des « talents de conteuse » (MA, 53).

Nulla histoire extraordinaire n'accompagnait leur mort. (MA, 182)

Dans sa réhabilitation de l'histoire, la prison de Fort Dimanche, lieu-symbole des horreurs duvaliéristes, devient le lieu de commémoration « de tous ceux dont on se souvient mais surtout de ceux et celles dont on ne parle pas » (MA, 49). Comme Mariotte, Marie-Ange navigue entre réalité et hallucination, hantée par des cauchemars¹⁰ qu'elle qualifie de « monstres hybrides » (MA, 32), fabriqués à partir des récits racontés et écrits par la mère mais aussi fruit de ses recherches sur Quisqueya menées à la bibliothèque :

Ma mémoire s'affole, emmêlée entre souvenirs et réalités, assiégée par tes cauchemars et mes rêves à moi. (MA, 129)

Sa rancune devient un moteur de remémoration, une manière de redonner dignité à ceux et celles que la mémoire nationale a effacés. En miroir, la veuve, comme Mariotte, tente elle aussi de réécrire son passé :

Mère aimante et dévouée. Voilà le titre du premier chapitre de ce livre qui roulait dans sa tête. (MA, 14 ; en italique dans le texte)

Ce projet mémoriel, à visée justificatrice, révèle une sélection fragmentée des souvenirs. Au fur et à mesure que la remémoration progresse, la veuve s'affaiblit, le « travail de mémoire »,¹¹ à savoir l'élaboration du traumatisme qui donne place à une interprétation subjective de l'événement traumatique, devient un fardeau lourd et laborieux, mais elle s'accroche au passé pour le revivre avant de se laisser mourir. De plus en plus fatiguée, Odile est hantée par des scènes qui se superposent, parmi lesquelles les accusations et les commentaires dénonciateurs des étrangers et la vision d'une amie d'enfance condamnée par le dictateur à la torture. Ce dernier souvenir lucide lui provoque une crise respiratoire de laquelle la sauve Marie-Ange.

4 Le rôle du silence et des non-dits

Comme le souligne Régine Robin, « le silence structuré, le silence refus, le silence tabou, le silence sur ce qui gêne ou sur ce qui fait mal, à l'échelon individuel comme à l'échelon collectif » (1989, 60)

¹⁰ Comme le rappelle Cathy Caruth (1996, 91), le traumatisme qui n'a pas été assimilé par le sujet revient dans l'après-coup sous forme de flash-back visuels et cauchemars.

¹¹ Voir Ricœur 2000 ; Robin 2003.

forment un entrelacs d'expressions non verbalisées, révélatrices de conflits internes et de blessures. Dans *Un plat de porc aux bananes vertes* et dans *La mémoire aux abois* le silence, tantôt refuge, tantôt stratégie de défense, se manifeste également comme symptôme de traumatismes individuels ou collectifs.

Pour la veuve du dictateur dans *La mémoire aux abois*, le silence apparaît dès les premières pages comme un choix délibéré, une décision arbitraire, le « moyen de contrôle le plus garanti » (MA, 8) pour ne pas communiquer avec l'extérieur. Odile décide de barrer toute communication avec les autres : « elle se laisserait faire sans prononcer une parole. Elle se réfugierait dans sa mémoire » (MA, 9) ; malgré ce choix, elle instaure un dialogue intérieur tourné vers son vécu, un parcours mémoriel qu'elle entame pour « le repos de son esprit » (MA, 13). Toutefois, ce silence volontaire se fissure au fil du récit, étant donné que la vieillesse et la fatigue rendent le processus de remémoration de plus en plus ardu, jusqu'à la perte d'éléments identitaires fondamentaux tels que l'année de sa propre naissance : ¹²

Voici que maintenant, elle se perdait dans les milles détours d'un cerveau fatigué. Toute son énergie concentrée à scruter les coins de sa pensée, à ne pas lâcher prise. Elle ne pouvait se rappeler si elle était née en 1914 ou en 1913. [...] Qu'elle ait 84 ou 82 ans ne changeait rien au fait que la vie s'écoulait d'elle. (MA, 153 ; en italique dans le texte)

Mariotte dans *Un plat de porc aux bananes vertes* résiste activement à la mémoire : elle ne veut pas se laisser aller aux souvenirs, car chaque instant du passé est une ouverture traumatique sur des épisodes de souffrance. La raison pour laquelle elle a quitté la Martinique n'est jamais précisée, mais ce non-dit lourd et persistant suggère une blessure intime, enfouie, qui excède le cadre individuel pour s'inscrire dans une mémoire ancestrale et collective : celle des femmes martiniquaises, de l'histoire coloniale et des traumatismes transmis. Le silence est ici un filtre, un écran de protection face à la douleur, mais aussi le signe d'un rapport complexe propre aux peuples colonisés, d'une « amnésie individuelle et collective » (Robin 1989, 21) qui entraîne des trous de mémoire.

La logique du silence s'étend également à l'échelle collective. Le silence institutionnel, « négation volontaire ou inconsciente », participe selon Robin à la « négation du passé par dénégation », au « refus de savoir » (1989, 61). Les deux romans révèlent le silence de la mémoire nationale – qu'il s'agisse de l'État français ou haïtien – qui

¹² Ce brouillage progressif de la mémoire illustre ce que Robin nomme « le silence qui permet le refoulement, le déni ou l'oubli » (1989, 61).

escamote volontairement des faits historiques marqués par la violence et l'injustice, comme l'affirme clairement Marie-Ange :

Parfois, j'ai l'impression que tous ces disparus ont été gommés tout bonnement et les dates vidées de leur sens, comme des cadavres inertes. (MA, 96)

Le silence peut aussi être protecteur, puisqu'il devient un mécanisme de défense face à des vérités insoutenables, comme le montre l'histoire de Marie-Carmelle. Marie-Ange, dans le présent, regrette de ne pas avoir posé de questions à sa mère, de ne pas l'avoir aidée à surmonter les traumatismes mais d'avoir juste absorbé ses récits. En particulier, les circonstances de la mort du père de Marie-Ange ne sont jamais racontées par Marie-Carmelle. Sa fille, à partir des bribes d'informations apprises, parvient à recomposer le dernier jour du père, victime de la répression des artistes, intellectuels et écrivains pendant le régime du dictateur fils en novembre 1980.

Les personnages des romans ont recours aussi au silence comme refuge et protection du monde extérieur. Mariotte, seule Antillaise et femme noire de l'hospice, ne veut et ne peut pas être comprise par les autres pensionnaires : son langage est considéré comme mystérieux, complexe et inaccessible. Ce choix linguistique, qui se double d'un effacement des souvenirs martiniquais, souligne un rejet de l'assimilation à la culture française. Marie-Ange, devenue adulte, avait tenté d'effacer les histoires de sa mère, avait réduit leurs contacts téléphoniques et même modifié sa façon de parler en abandonnant les tournures quisqueyennes. Les souvenirs refoulés ne trouveront d'expression qu'après la rencontre de Marie-Ange avec la veuve :

La première fois que je posai les yeux sur la vieille femme, je crus justement que tes rêves devenus miens me poursuivaient en plein midi, s'animaient devant moi, donnant vie aux personnages principaux de tes sinistres feuilletons. (MA, 77)

Trouillot montre un autre visage de la Première dame qui a passé sa vie à côté d'un dictateur sanguinaire et qui a aussi donné naissance à un dictateur ; l'accent est mis sur son rôle de mère et d'épouse, toujours digne et respectueuse, ambitieuse, fidèle et loyale, qui ne regrette rien dans le présent. Le vide laissé par la mort de son mari d'abord, par la trahison de son fils ensuite, la plongent dans une solitude extrême, qu'elle qualifie d'« insoutenable » (MA, 126). Le dictateur, vu du point de vue de sa femme, est décrit comme un homme obstiné, obsédé par le pouvoir. La vie du couple présidentiel est évoquée par la veuve avec des sentiments opposés de tendresse, respect, amour et haine :

Elle n'arrêta jamais de l'aimer, ne regretta jamais de l'avoir épousé, mais à de rares moments, elle le haït passionnément. (MA, 136 ; en italique dans le texte)

Affaiblie par l'âge et par l'effort de se remémorer tant d'événements, toujours enfermée dans son silence mais de moins en moins capable de gérer ses émotions, la veuve pleure et Marie-Ange essuie ses larmes. Ensuite, elle serre le poignet de la soignante et prononce un dernier mot, « merci », où sont condensées la douleur et la reconnaissance. Cette confrontation pendant laquelle pour la première fois les regards des deux femmes se croisent permet à Marie-Ange de libérer sa mémoire et de faire face à l'épisode le plus douloureux, la mort du père, qu'elle reconstitue à partir de ses souvenirs pour ne plus être hantée par les blessures du passé :

Je veux vivre. Sans cette charge oppressante qui m'a été léguée. Sans peur et sans angoisse autre que celles que la vie m'amènera au rythme du temps présent. (MA, 180)

5 Conclusion

Les deux romans montrent des figures de femmes caribéennes confrontées à la mémoire et à l'histoire, en dialogue avec un héritage individuel et collectif. Dans *Un plat de porc aux bananes vertes*, l'attitude de Mariotte révèle une assimilation à la France jamais aboutie. L'impossibilité d'accéder à une part refoulée de son existence dévoile un conflit intérieur constant entre son présent à Paris et la vie en Martinique. L'acte de remémoration s'accompagne d'émotions négatives : elle éprouve de la honte pour son passé traumatique et les réminiscences de son enfance antillaise suscitent de la douleur en elle. Elle lutte non seulement contre elle-même, mais aussi contre l'assimilation à la culture française, à ce monde blanc incarné par Paris où, dépaycée, elle subit une dépersonnalisation à laquelle elle oppose « un langage halluciné résistant à la compréhension de son entourage » (Abdeladhim 2011, 83) et ses traditions, gardées au fond de sa mémoire. Le contexte sociohistorique – le journal de Mariotte se termine en 1952 – ne permet pas encore l'émergence d'une parole diasporique apaisée et l'expérience antillaise demeure ici intransmissible, étranglée par la solitude et le mutisme environnants.

En revanche, *La mémoire aux abois*, en articulant un double récit porté par deux mères, l'un narré par la veuve d'un ancien dictateur et l'autre rapporté par la fille d'une victime de la dictature, explore le silence non comme une fin, mais comme un point de départ vers une élaboration libératrice du passé. L'histoire de Marie-Ange est celle de la lutte d'une mémoire transmise de manière transgénérationnelle

contre l'effacement mis en place pendant et après la dictature des Doréval/Duvalier. Pour Marie-Ange, Odile est en partie responsable du parcours de vie douloureux mené par sa mère, marqué par l'angoisse :

Malgré tous les arguments rationnels que je m'oppose à moi-même, je vois dans cette patiente impotente une coupable. Quelque part responsable des ombres qui ont entouré ta vie. (MA, 47)

En confrontant les zones d'ombre de son lignage, elle parvient à se défaire de la parole imposée par les autres et à produire son propre récit ; ¹³ grâce à la rencontre avec Odile, elle accède à une paix inespérée. Le roman se termine par une scène de délivrance réciproque, presque rédemptrice : la jeune femme s'assoit à côté de la veuve et ensemble elles attendent la mort de cette dernière.

Ainsi, malgré des contextes temporels différents, les romans interrogent la même problématique : comment inscrire dans la mémoire littéraire ce qui a été effacé de la mémoire nationale et collective ? Au-delà de la situation matérielle des deux femmes caribéennes déracinées et abandonnées dans la solitude d'un lieu qui ne leur appartient pas, les auteurs abordent à une quarantaine d'années de distance les questions du rapport entre transmission, refoulement et résurgence des non-dits, mais les enjeux sont différents. Pour Mariotte et Marie-Ange, les souvenirs sont difficiles à interpréter et imprégnés de douleur, alors que pour la veuve ils sont pour la plupart doux et elle considère avec lucidité et sans aucun regret les actions de son mari. Son rôle est de permettre à Marie-Ange de clore avec le passé familial et de pouvoir s'affranchir des traumatismes hérités.

Le cheminement de Mariotte est plus compliqué, et le roman des Schwarz-Bart beaucoup plus énigmatique : la rédaction du journal intime se révèle un échec, car la forme écrite n'est pas apte à transcrire l'expérience diasporique et le présent est une lutte pour la survie dans un milieu hostile ; Mariotte affirme son identité martiniquaise, sa voix, mais la réconciliation ne survient pas. Le lien qui se noue entre la veuve et Marie-Ange, ce dialogue silencieux qui leur permet de récupérer et élaborer le passé, n'a pas de correspondance dans *Un plat de porc aux bananes vertes* où, malgré les efforts, le dialogue reste incomplet, insatisfaisant, probablement car la solitude de Mariotte est absolue puisqu'elle est exclue du processus dialogique, à la différence de Marie-Ange et Odile, dont la

13 Comme le rappelle Robin, le passage de l'inexprimé à l'énoncé permet l'élaboration des traumatismes : « la chose nommée prend corps. Non verbalisée, elle reste dans le flou » (1989, 60).

solitude est partagée. La perspective de délivrance est absente dans le roman d'André et Simone Schwarz-Bart, dont l'intrigue se passe au début des années 1950 et met la femme antillaise face aux préjugés et au racisme de la métropole française. Évelyne Trouillot revient sur la période de la dictature duvaliériste avec un recul temporel qui lui permet de rendre hommage aux oubliés, invisibilisés par la narration officielle. Si ces figures effacées sont désormais peu présentes dans la conscience collective à cause du manque de transmission d'une génération à l'autre, leur souvenir persiste dans la mémoire culturelle des écrivains et écrivaines d'Haïti.

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Multispecies (Co)migrations Across the Mediterranean and Cyprus: Elif Shafak and Christy Lefteri

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Abstract Drawing on the *Overlap* (2020) project, this paper examines how overlapping human and non-human migrations shape Mediterranean routes. Analyzing Elif Shafak's *The Island of Missing Trees* (2021) and Christy Lefteri's *Songbirds* (2021), the study uses a sympoietic framework (Haraway) to parallel gender inequality faced by Asian women workers and minorities with the victimization of songbirds in Cyprus. This intersection challenges borders, citizenship, and rights, focusing on exploitation and trauma. The analysis calls for response-ability toward social and environmental justice through a multidisciplinary approach.

Keywords Migrations. Mediterranean Sea. Cyprus. Gender. Sympoiesis. Human-non-human relationships.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 *The Island of Missing Trees* and *Songbirds*. – 3 Conclusion.



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1 Introduction

The constant migrations that have characterised the end of the past century and the first two decades of the twenty-first century have had the effect of increasingly attracting media discourses towards descriptions of massive, menacing human flows. It is important to acknowledge the complexity of this mass movement with appropriate terms. And yet, more often than not, humans who are on the move follow and share trajectories with non-human beings, or, sometimes, because of non-human natural agents. Thus, speaking of human and non-human co-migration and bio-diverse co-evolution, or comparing patterns, cycles and routes of diverse migratory species does not mean diminishing the importance and impact of human migration flows. For instance, Amitav Ghosh claims that nowadays migrants' routes from East to West follow the same silk road routes as ancient merchants; similarly, the central Mediterranean route is used by both humans and non-human migratory birds.

The study by Canadian scholar Julie Cruikshank, *Do Glaciers Listen? Local Knowledge, Colonial Encounters, & Social Imagination* (2023) is paramount in depicting non-human and human migration agency. She studies the behaviour of surging glaciers in the Gulf of Alaska, on the border between British Columbia, Yukon and Alaska. These glaciers have the specific peculiarity of advancing and retreating periodically and abruptly, thus causing clans' and moieties' migrations either to move away from their newly glaciated lands, or to move back and reclaim for themselves the newly uncovered lands, once freed from ice. Therefore, one might say that as glaciers migrate and travel, local people inevitably migrate, too, as a consequence. And all this contributes to the biological co-evolution of humans (society) and non-humans (geomorphology) in a specific region, facilitates or hinders encounters, and triggers mythical narratives and storytelling: "References to glaciers were embedded in larger stories about human migrations and connections among clans" (Cruikshank 2005, 48). It is evident that the same thing happens with volcanoes, whose eruptions and subsequent lava ejections and flows not only change the geomorphology of certain places, but might also determine the migration of local people who live on the slopes of volcanic cones, or around the active areas.

Moving from the glaciers of the North American continent to the Mediterranean Sea, another innovative and crucial Italian study promotes reflections on human and non-human migrations. The publication, entitled *Overlap* (2020), is the report of an international research group - Icemura - and its activities, and of the performances of a dance-theatre company - *Senza confine di pelle*, literally 'without skin border' - co-founded by Dario La Stella, a cultural anthropologist and ethnologist, but also art director, choreographer and performer,

together with Valentina Solinas, an investigative, forensic and criminal psychologist, but also co-director and playwright for the same dance-theatre company.

The volume is, among other things, a reflection on how the trajectories of migratory birds across the Mediterranean coincide with the trajectories of human migrant flows. This is a further instance of multispecies co-evolution, favoured by a specific ecosystem and by an almost unique body of water: the Mediterranean with its various archipelagos. *Overlap* results from a project involving researchers from different disciplines, students, and asylum seekers who converge to share their research. This project is possible thanks to the infrastructures of the Asinara National Park, where the international multidisciplinary research centre Icemura and the association of performing arts were operating:

Icemura's background stems from field research, from experiencing the Asinara as a space of contemplation where social, cultural, and biological diversities find a place where they can live harmoniously. [...]. A centre that could see this landscape as the seat of a shared and multifaceted methodology, one that could open up new ideas on issues concerning the relationship between man and the environment, discussing the relationship that exists between behaviour, regulations, architecture, the linguistic articulations of human beings, and the dynamics of mineral, plant and animal processes.

From reflections on the Anthropocene and biodiversity to artistic and scientific results, Icemura investigates the implications of this continuous contamination between man and the environment. (La Stella, Solinas 2020, 12-13)

One of the outstanding reflections produced by the Icemura research group involves migrations as a system of entangled dependencies:

Human migration is first of all biological migration, where human beings are only one of the nodes of a vast network of relationships in continuous movement and not its centre. Indeed the systemic vision of social processes brings human behaviour back into a network in which all elements – social, cultural, biological – are an integral and integrated part of contemporary phenomenology. Splitting these elements and placing man above or outside the other elements of the system creates an anthropocentric vision that is too limiting when one wants to investigate the interdependencies of which the system we live in is composed. (La Stella, Solinas 2020, 14)

Icemura configures itself as an inclusive and innovative research project operating along the horizon of Anthropocene studies, taking into consideration both environmental justice and human rights: in particular, the right to migrate. Moreover, *Overlap* – events at the crossroads between art and science and biodiversity and migration – investigates the overlapping of migratory routes of birds and those of humans, and specifically the routes that connect the Mediterranean Sea with Central Africa and Northern Europe (La Stella, Solinas 2020, 19):

From the first reading, one can see how the maps developed by ISPRA (Higher Institute of Environmental Research) in use at the wildlife Observatory of the Asinara National Park depicting the routes of migratory birds between Africa and Europe almost completely coincide with the maps drawn up by Medu (Doctors of Human Rights) showing the routes of people moving from central Africa to Europe. This reveals much more than a simple graphic superimposition, highlighting a biological aspect of migration that completely goes beyond politics. (La Stella, Solinas 2020, 19)

Such reflections on migration, on the one hand, and on biodiversity, on the other, allow for reconfigurations of the concept of ‘residence’. With the help of scientists and artists from different fields of study such as anthropology, ornithology, architecture, urban planning, geography, photography, dance, literature, theatre, and visual arts the theme of residence is explored in its connection with “a behaviour that subjugates a space through presence” (La Stella, Solinas 2020, 20).

Thanks to the *Overlap* project and workshops, Siranding Mady Sissoko, a migrant himself but also a student in Italy and author of a chapter in the volume, says he has deepened his knowledge regarding the migration of men and birds. First of all, he detects the same interspecies reasons for moving: humans migrate with the aim of “improving living conditions by seeking stability”, while “birds migrate in search of resources for their young” (La Stella Solinas 2020, 75). More importantly, he claims:

I discovered that man may impose laws, borders, political conditions to fight immigration but that migration has really no borders because it is motivated by survival; it breaks all laws, all political regulations to impose itself as a ‘natural condition’. (La Stella, Solinas 2020, 75)

Moreover, Siranding Mady Sissoko studies the maps and the habits of migratory birds and notices how birds fly at night after accumulating enough energy during the day; similarly, migrants

like himself, travelling from Mali to Italy, had to wait sometimes for days, sometimes for years before undertaking the next stretch of the journey. While geographical factors are significant elements for human migrations, particularly areas that are the nearest, similarly, birds orientate themselves thanks to topographical elements. But there is, of course, a major difference between human and non-human migration; the former is due to geopolitical and economic factors, while the latter is regular, seasonal and cyclical, and is due to a change in the habitat or a decrease in food availability, but also to maximization of the possibility of reproduction (La Stella, Solinas 2020, 77).

The Mediterranean Sea is no exception, as migratory routes of humans and non-humans (birds) coincide, overlap and move from South to North or vice-versa; however, “it is not possible to understand the entire phenomenon of current migratory choices without recalling colonial history” (La Stella, Solinas 2020, 78). *Overlap* is an instance of *sympoiesis*, as Donna Haraway would say, a productive narrative experiment of co-participatory agencies, but, above all, it is an act of ‘poesy’, for it involves group work such as dancing, photographic workshops, observations and meditations, maps drawing and much more, as a shared experience on one of the smallest islands of the Italian Mediterranean, off the coast of Sardinia.

The issue of colonial history – raised by Sissoko – plunges the present discourse into the waters of the so-called black Mediterranean, a space not only reminiscent of the Black Atlantic and of the trade of those who had been enslaved, but also a space that has been defined as ‘solid sea’, because of the great number of corpses of drowned black migrants. However, migration across the Mediterranean is not necessarily only from Africa, for flows from Asia also meet in North Africa before crossing the Mediterranean to Europe, or simply move from east to west rather than from south to north, as the works discussed here will demonstrate. Moreover, ‘Colonialism’ is an important chapter in the essay by Suketu Mehta: *This Land is our Land. An Immigrant’s Manifesto* (2019, 57-80), in which the author researches the causes and consequences of migration today: “People are not plants. Migration is a constant of human history. [...] And in recent years, as the legacies of colonialism, inequality, war and climate change have made it close to impossible for people in the poor countries to live a decent life, we’ve become a planet on the move” (Mehta 2019, 8).

2 *The Island of Missing Trees and Songbirds*

Numerous literary works might be quoted to prove that such a multispecies, co-migration narrative is a fruitful methodology that allows a more inclusive view of ecosystems and does not single out human migrants as unwanted intruders, disposable individuals, or even dangerous invaders. Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island* (2019) famously conjures a blue boat full of migrants guided by a woman Shaman and heading to Sicily, accompanied by pods of cetaceans among which are dolphins and whales, and a flock of fanning migratory birds. The turbulence of this multiple arrival is a way to celebrate the Mediterranean as a complex and multilayered ecosystem, quite different from the flattening, unidimensional portrait voiced by the news media (Concilio 2023). Not too differently, Christy Lefteri's *The Beekeeper of Aleppo* (2019) combines a migration journey of refugees from war-torn Syria to northern England, with the re-introduction there of black bees, a species that was considered extinct. Thus, both the bees and the migrants hopefully find a new home and a new cooperative ecosystem in the UK.

In other literary works that tackle this idea of multispecies co-migration, as is the case for instance with Jane Urquhart's *Sanctuary Line* (2010) and with Barbara Kingsolver's *Flight Behaviour* (2012), two novels dealing with the migration of Mexican workers and Monarch butterflies from Mexico to the North American continent (Concilio 2025), the Mediterranean Sea is once more protagonist of similar narratives. Two other novels are also worth examining, as they too tackle multiple species co-migration: Elif Shafak's *The Island of Missing Trees* (2021) and Christy Lefteri's *Songbirds* (2021).

These two novels are two sides of the same coin. They are both set in Cyprus – firstly under military occupation from 1914 to 1925, and later a British colony from 1925 until 1960 – in the heart of the Mediterranean and of its central migration route, but on the two opposing sides of the island, the northern Turkish side and the southern Greek side, which still today are separated by a green line, once militarised, and now in complete decay with its still visible watch towers. The two novels significantly deal with human and non-human migrants, but also tackle gender, race, class, ethnicity, war, trauma, and murder; they both denounce violence against the Other, be it migrant women, migrant songbirds, trees, or newly constructed enemies.

Turkish writer Elif Shafak tells the story of a young Turkish- and Greek-Cypriot couple, Kostas Kazantzakis and Defne, and their daughter, Ada, aged sixteen, who migrated from Cyprus to London, bringing along a twig from a local Mediterranean fig tree, *Ficus carica*. Christy Lefteri, a British author, daughter of Cypriot migrants who left the island after the partition war in the Seventies, tells the story of Sri Lankan migrants in Cyprus, all female house workers

for middle-class families, and of the destiny of migrating songbirds, the victims of local poachers. The latter environmental issue is the element that connects the two novels, which seem to confirm that the island of Cyprus – definitely a central place for respite in the middle of the Mediterranean for both humans and non-humans – is a site where fragile ecosystems overlap with fragile social and geopolitical environments.

Elif Shafak's novel starts with a grieved reconstruction of the partition and of the new border that was cut into the soil and capital city of the Mediterranean island:

For the island was riven into two pieces – the north and the south. A different language, a different script, a different memory prevailed in each, and when they prayed, the islanders, it was seldom to the same god.

The capital was split by a partition which sliced right through it like a slash to the heart. Along the demarcation line – the frontier – were dilapidated houses riddled with bullet holes, empty courtyards scarred with grenade bursts, boarded stores gone to ruin, ornamented gates hanging at angles from broken hinges, luxury cars from another era rusting away under layers of dust... [...].

The partition that tore through Cyprus from one end to the other, a buffer zone patrolled by United Nations troops, was about one hundred and ten miles long, and as wide as four miles in places while merely a few yards in others. [...]. But it was here, across and around the capital, that it became more visible, tangible, and thus haunting.

Nicosia, the only divided capital in the world. [...] The last divided city in Europe.

My home town. (Shafak 2021, 2-3)

Borders are newly created and therefore they also redefine the concept of 'residence'. 'Borders' is also an important chapter in the *Overlap* project; under this rubric it is possible to read:

Fifty of us crossed the Sahara in a vehicle that broke down during the trip and we stayed three days in the middle of the desert.

I lost my mother between Libya and Algeria and I was in prison for five months. There are no words to explain it.

Three women on that broken-down boat in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea were pregnant. Two of them died. [...]

What I went through between Algeria and Libya cannot be expressed in words. (La Stella, Solinas 2020, 36)

Borders and Mediterranean crossings are ways of trespassing between one form of residence and another. For refugees and asylum

seekers no form of residence is less precarious than another. Elif Shafak, too, speaks of border crossings and trespassing, but she refers to non-humans:

There are many things that a border – even one as clear-cut and well-guarded as this – cannot prevent from crossing. The Etesian wind, for instance, the softly named but surprisingly strong *meltemi* or *meltem*. The butterflies, grasshoppers and lizards. The snails, too, painfully slow though they are. Occasionally, a birthday balloon that escapes a child's grip drifts in the sky, strays into the other side – enemy territory.

Then, the birds. Blue herons, black-headed buntings, honey buzzards, yellow wagtails, willow warblers, masked shrikes and, my favourites, golden orioles. All the way from the northern hemisphere, migrating mostly during the night, darkness gathering at the tips of their wings and etching red circles around their eyes, they stop here midway in their long journey, before continuing to Africa. The island for them is a resting place, a lacuna in the tale, an in-between-ness. (Shafak 2021, 3-4)

Cyprus represents a rich ecosystem and is a sanctuary for biodiversity as well; yet, its troubled history makes it a place of ghosts and mourning, too.

The first part of the novel is entitled “How to bury a tree” and it is the sad chronicle of Kostas's attempt to dig a trench in which to set his beloved fig tree to rest over winter, for the novel opens in present-day London, in the year of a heavy winter storm named Hera:

This morning the radio had announced that, within no more than forty-eight hours, Britain would be hit by a polar vortex bringing in record-breaking lows, icy rains and blizzards. Water shortages, power cuts and burst mains were expected to paralyse large swathes of England and Scotland as well as parts of northern Europe. (Shafak 2021, 9)

In this atmosphere of extreme local weather conditions that are connected with global climate change, Ada observes her father interring the fig tree they have in their back garden, while whispering reassuring words to the plant: “No matter the time of the day, her father seemed to prefer the company of trees to the company of humans” (Shafak 2021, 11). The burial of the tree is narrated by the tree herself – “She, this tree is a female” (292) –, thus, the non-human is given voice and is represented as sentient (Raval 2024), endowed with fear, anxieties and doubts about this practice that is put to the test in northern and rigid climates: “Burying fig trees in trenches underground during the harshest winters and unearthing them in

spring is a curious if well-established tradition. Italians settled in sub-zero towns in America and Canada are familiar with it" (Shafak 2021, 23).

Indeed, Kostas's practice and decalogue in ten steps on how to bury a fig tree is well known to Italian migrants. It is not by chance that Italian-Canadian photographer Vincenzo Pietropaolo in his album *Toronto as Community. Fifty Years of Photographs* (2023) has a chapter entitled "Of Fig Trees and Burials" where he describes exactly the same practice Shafak lyrically elaborates on in her novel. Pietropaolo speaks of Toronto's private gardens:

the fig [...] simply cannot survive the brutally cold winters of eastern and central Canada. But with perseverance and tenacity, immigrants – such as my Italian neighbour Domenico Delduca, or Géorgios, the Greek gardener around the corner – have found a way to defy nature. Every November, after the fig's leaves have fallen, the gardener pulls the branches together and ties them into a tight bunch around the trunk. He digs a shallow trench beside the tree and loosens the soil around its base, taking care not to damage the roots. Slowly, he bends the entire tree downward into the trench until it lies flat in the shallow grave, as if laying it to eternal rest. (Pietropaolo 2023, 113)

In the month of April, the fig tree is disinterred and re-planted so as to allow new leaves to sprout and new fruits to ripen, in a stubborn affirmation of resilience and adaptability, not different from that of human migrants. Interestingly enough, it is the voice of the fig tree that recognises the affinity between human and non-human migrants:

First generation immigrants are a species all their own. They wear a lot of beige, grey or brown. Colours that do not stand out. Colours that whisper, never shout. There is a tendency to formality in their mannerism, a wish to be treated with dignity. [...]. First generation immigrants talk to their trees all the time – when there are no other people nearby, that is. [...] They are caring and tender towards their plants, especially those they have brought along with them from lost motherlands. They know, deep within, that when you save a fig tree from a storm, it is someone's memory you are saving. (Shafak 2021, 23-4)

The quoted passage highlights how kinship involves relations between humans and non-humans; the same kind of kinship Tlingit and Athapaskan had with their local glaciers is present in Shafak's novel, where the fig tree is bound to Kostas and to his dead wife, Defne. For that tree saw the birth of their love, while sheltering them in the tavern of "The Happy Fig", where the hosts were male partners,

one Greek and one Turkish; then she witnessed the destruction and murder brought by war, before being transplanted to the UK. It is not surprising that, particularly after the death of his beloved wife, Kostas resolves to talk to the tree.

While the first part of the novel is centred around the alternating voices of the various characters, including the fig tree, the second part of the novel is a painful reconstruction of the post-war years, when Kostas was a student in England, while Defne was part of an international team committed to establishing a Truth and Reconciliation Commission on the island, giving proper burials to the corpses found in mass graves or simply dispersed, and restituting them to their families:

There are many of us – Greek and Turkish. Some excavate, others work in the lab. Then there are psychologists who go and talk to the families. Most of our volunteers are women. [...] What we do here has nothing to do with politics or power. Our work is about grief – and memory. (Shafak 2021, 222)

Defne's secret, private wish is to find out what happened to the two tavern hosts, who had been targeted because of their homosexuality and interethnic union. Defne has been traumatised by the war, by the separation from Kostas and by the death of her friends:

"Where were they found, do you know?"

"In Nicosia." [...] "Inside a well."

"That's right they had been chained to each other, neither could surface. [...] I must say, we have never seen anything like that before. Usually it's a Greek Cypriot buried here, a Turkish Cypriot buried there. Killed separately. Buried separately. But never before a Greek and Turk murdered together."

"So now they will be separated," said Defne. [...].

"It would have been better if they were never found ... if they could have remained lost together." (Shafak 2021, 298)

Defne gives herself up to smoking and drinking, before Kostas comes back to reclaim her and their love and brings her to England, but she continues to be obsessed by 'human suffering' and 'justice', while Kostas believes that "human existence, though no doubt precious beyond words, had no special priority in the ecological chain" (Shafak 2021, 325).

In his short homecoming, and as a parallel to Defne's new commitment to forensic research on victims of war with the Committee on Missing Persons, Kostas experiences the death of others as non-human victims. Cyprus has always had a tradition of

hunting and cooking little migratory birds, but in the post-war period poachers seem to have become more and more aggressive:

He saw, looming in front of him, fine-spun nets suspended in the air, and – strung from them like grisly bunting – trapped songbirds. “Oh, no! Oh, God!”

Kostas began to run.

The net was weighted with blackcaps, warblers, chaffinches, pipits, wagtails, wheatears and those brave merry skylarks, fine songsters, the first on every dawn chorus... They had been snarled in the depths of the night. Kostas stretched up and tugged down hard on the net, but, secured from all four sides, it would not give way. He could only tear one corner. [...] Everywhere he looked he saw sticky lime spread on branches high and low. He was surrounded by dead songbirds, their wings spread out, tangled and motionless, their eyes glazed over, as if encased in glass. (Shafak 2021, 248-9)

Kostas pitifully tries to save the wild migrating birds that have been entrapped in the nets or have been cruelly glued to the branches of acacia trees, which have been planted on purpose to allure all these poor birds. Cyprus, which in the past was known as ‘the green island’ and might still be a sanctuary for species migrating across the Mediterranean – including turtles, for instance – is instead transformed into a deadly place. Kostas is even beaten up by the poachers for interfering with their business:

A black market had sprung up – trafficking dead birds had become a profitable business for international gangs and their collaborators. The birds caught in Cyprus were smuggled into other countries where they would be sold for hefty prices. Italy, Romania, Malta, Spain, France, Russia, as far as Asia... Some restaurants displayed them on the menu; others served them on the sly at special rates. [...] More than two million songbirds were slain in Cyprus every year. (Shafak 2021, 250)

In the passage mentioned here, it is quite evident how the language used to describe the international illegal cross-border trade in birds is similar to the one used for human migrants who cross the Mediterranean from Libya to southern Europe. Quite interestingly, from the project *Overlap*, one learns that:

The French swallows migrate to Nigeria, the Spanish to Cameroon, the Italian to the Central African Republic, the English – which are the largest – to the South African Republic.

In the culture of the Soninke people (Mali, Ghana), there is a kind of initiation journey: at some point in their existence, young men must take this step to show that they can make it on their own.

Travel is a continuous learning process.

Migration is like a choreography, a behaviour adopted by the body to overcome obstacles by measuring space and time, a parkour of life. [...].

From Algeria to Libya, they folded me like a suitcase and put me in the trunk of a car. (La Stella, Solinas 2020, 35-6)

Similarly, Shafak argues that “it wasn’t only passerines: others, too, got caught in the nets – owls, nightingales, even hawks” (2021, 250); all fell victims to hunters and poachers, but this practice also says something about eating habits in the Anthropocene and wildlife migratory routes across the Mediterranean. Shafak’s novel ends circularly, with a chapter entitled “How to Unbury a Fig Tree in Seven Steps”. While the fig tree comes back to life in spring in a London back garden, Ada comes to terms with her own identity as a second-generation migrant in England, also thanks to a visit by her maternal aunt from Cyprus, who helps her to navigate the history of the island and the story of her parents’ love. A final note by the author says: “I want to thank the islanders [...] especially young Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots whose courage, vision and wisdom will hopefully build a better world than the one we have given them” (Shafak 2021, 354).

Christy Lefteri, too, weaves a most lyrical narrative around the destiny of women migrants in Greek Cyprus, who are all house workers. Some of them are young, some are mature women, some of them have children with them, others have left their children behind. They are employed by an agency they owe money to and for this reason they have to work hard. They come from Sri Lanka, from other parts of Asia and from eastern Europe.

The novel starts as a mystery and develops as crime fiction: Nisha vanishes, simply leaving no traces of her whereabouts. Her employer, a young chemist and single mother named Petra and her small daughter, Alik, are desperate. Nisha was a pillar in their life: sweet, efficient, punctual, always present when needed. Her disappearance coincides with two strange events: Yiannis, Nisha’s secret lover, sees a mouflon *Ovis* in the forest. Indeed, this is a very rare sight, particularly along the coast. Moreover, “on this day, in late October, there is a dead hare on the rocky terrain by the lake” (Lefteri 2021, 27). The red lake at Mitsero is a toxic lake and everybody knows the warnings that people and children should avoid it.

Thus, the story immediately includes non-humans as a sort of prediction, almost magical presences whose destiny is interwoven with that of Nisha and of other foreign migrant women. While race, class and gender stigmatize these women as foreigners, of colour,

underprivileged, almost enslaved to the agency that provides employment, and therefore representing examples of new slavery in our contemporary world, the novel does not limit itself to this kind of intersectionality, but also embraces the world of non-humans that are discriminated against (birds), whose story runs parallel to that of the *desaparecidas*. This choice shows a new *response-ability*, to use Haraway's definition, on the side of writers – as is the case also with Shafak – who feel the urgency not only to tackle social issues of injustice, gender inequality, systemic racism and structural violence, but also to face environmental issues, thus providing new strength to the discourse of environmental humanities.

Both Petra and Yiannis are extremely saddened by the loss of Nisha and they even join forces to look for her, following what few clues they have. The police are no help, they dismiss the case, refusing to investigate and claiming that these girls and women might have chosen to sneak into the North, the Turkish side, for better wages. This episode shows how these migrants are considered disposable, redundant, and how they are treated like waste (Bauman 2003). The story, although fictional, is based on real facts: “five migrant women domestic workers and two of their children disappeared”, writes Lefteri in an open letter to the reader, added as an afterword at the end of the novel (Lefteri 2021, n.p.).

Vulnerability and precarity are the main categories that characterize both the women and the birds. While the hare slowly decomposes, the story proceeds step by step in the reconstruction of Nisha's life and possible destiny. Yet, the rotting and rotten hare looks like a bad omen. Petra is left to ponder:

Nisha had lived here for nearly ten years and in that entire time, had only spent two days away from us. She had taken care of my daughter and loved her, she had scrubbed my floors and toilets, she had made us hot dinners and kept the garden looking beautiful. [...] She had lost a husband, too. She gave us everything. In this generosity, she had been the heart of this house. And yet, I had no idea about her life. (Lefteri 2021, 113)

Nisha has a daughter back in Sri Lanka, Kumari, whom she sees only thanks to the Internet on the screen of Yiannis's tablet, once a week. She now has an “outstanding debt” (Lefteri 2021, 75) with the agency, which charges the workers a considerable amount of money to sign up for and secure a placement abroad. Nisha works hard both to reduce her debt and to send a remittance back home to support her daughter and family.

This condition is not necessarily a path to emancipation or to female empowerment; on the contrary, for many girls and women it turns

into a condition of entrapment, slavery, sometimes prostitution, and constraint, as Lefteri claims:

In Cyprus you do not have to be rich to have a domestic worker, just reasonably comfortable. So, the presence of these women, who run the households, look after children, walk the dogs, clean the restaurants/shops or whatever other businesses or properties their employers might own, is commonplace. Migrant domestic workers are a part of the fabric of Cypriot life.

This story is not an attempt to represent the voices of migrant workers or to speak for them, it is an exploration of the ideologies, prejudices, circumstances and underlying belief systems that can lead to very sad and often catastrophic events. It is an exploration of the way in which a flawed system can trap people. (Lefteri 2021, n.p.)

The metaphor of the trap is particularly meaningful, for songbirds are trapped, too, in nets set overnight in the forests:

I usually make more than 2,000 euros for each hanging, and this one was a good one – there were around two hundred blackcaps stuck on the lime sticks. [...] Tiny songbirds migrating from Europe to Africa to escape the winter. They fly in from the west, over the mountains, stopping here on our island before heading out to sea, towards Egypt. In the spring, they make the return journey, coming from the southern coast. They are so small that we can't shoot them. (Lefteri 2021, 10)

Thus, the parallel is clear: migrant women house workers and small migrating birds are both a reality in Cyprus, fruit of the geolocalisation of the island and of its environmental and social history of middle-class prosperity in the post-war years. This sad story of multispecies migration across the Mediterranean once again produces a view of this body of water as a highly complex, multilayered and biodiverse environment, rather than only a huge and deadly highway for migrants.

Moreover, the parallel between murdered women and hunted songbirds evokes the myth of Philomela, as narrated by Ovid in the *Metamorphoses* (*Met.*, VI. 578ff). Notoriously, the fable narrates the rape and violence the king and tyrant Tereus perpetrated against his sister-in-law, then cutting out her tongue so that she could not tell anyone what happened. Philomela then resorted to embroidery, in order to tell her story and let her sister, the queen and Tereus's wife, know her tragic condition. The two sisters planned a revenge against Tereus, killing his son and feeding the king the youth's body. However, the rage and fury of the tyrant could not express themselves, for he and the two women were transformed into birds.

Philomela in her metamorphosised form as a nightingale is allowed to sing her story loudly. T.S. Eliot, among others, quintessentially mentions the mythical plot:

Above the antique mantel was displayed
As though a window gave upon the sylvan scene
The change of Philomel, by the barbarous king
So rudely forced; yet there the nightingale
Filled all the desert with inviolable voice
And still she cried, and still the world pursues,
“Jug Jug” to dirty ears. (Eliot, *The Waste Land*, ll. 97-103; 8)

T.S. Eliot uses inversions to describe Philomela's resilience: while her woman's body had been violated, her voice as a nightingale is 'inviolable'. Her call and her cry are not melodious, however. In fact, they denounce the lascivious act upon her body with a lurid onomatopoeic repeated sound ("Jug jug"). Nisha's story in the novel by Christy Lefteri is reminiscent of Philomela, insofar as Nisha has no voice and cannot cry out; moreover, she will never again fly back to Sri Lanka to see her own daughter. Similarly, the songbirds of the novel's title will never be able to complete their migration across the Mediterranean.

Like Kostas in Shafak's novel, Yiannis experiences a fit of repulsion towards poaching, an activity he falls into because of financial problems after the 2008 economic crisis that hit Greece quite heavily. On one occasion he manages to salvage a little bird: "The bird lay there, breathing, its chest rising and falling more visibly now" (Lefteri 2021, 20). Yiannis manages to nourish the bird and keep it at home until it can fly again. This episode is in sharp contrast with the one where Kostas is the protagonist and finds "a robin glued upside down to a twig, its chest a soft ginger, its beak slightly open, lying inert, though still breathing. Gently, he tried to free the bird, but the adhesive was too strong. [...] he realised the bird's heart had stopped" (Shafak 2021, 249).

The paradox is that, as regards non-humans, in both novels there is a character, a male hero, who interposes himself between the animal-prey and the hunter-predator. First Kostas, who pays a price in bruises and battered bones, and then Yiannis, who takes a bullet to the shoulder in order to prevent Seraphim – in fact, a tempting devil – from shooting a mouflon. In contrast, nobody stands between the five migrant women serially killed and their hunter and murderer, an ex-soldier who is eventually arrested for multiple killings.

It is a couple of tourists who first spot the corpse of a woman in the red lake at Mitsero, an abandoned polluted mining site, where the hare has completed its deadly decomposition cycle. While non-human beings enrich the narrative with a precise symbolism, both human and non-human victims of violence represent otherness, vulnerability,

discrimination and disposability. All these categories in Lefteri's novel apply to migrant women and migrant songbirds: the wasted lives of our modernity (Bauman 2003; Armiero 2021). The questions asked by Judith Butler: "Who counts as human?", "Whose lives count as lives?", "What makes for a grievable life?" (Butler 2004, 20), are exactly the questions that apply to Nisha and to the migrants killed by racism, misogyny and indifference towards the destiny of others. And Lefteri's answer is precisely that such lives are 'grievable', are worth remembering and need to be honoured.

3 Conclusion

In conclusion, with Judith Butler and with Donna Haraway, one might say that writers nowadays – and certainly Shafak and Lefteri are examples of this – have taken *response-ability*, in so far as they denounce inter-ethnic violence, gender inequality, misogyny, homophobia, social traumas (Laheg 2024), but also environmental injustice. They look at reality as an entangled ecosystem and as a co-evolutionary and biodiverse environment. Another major achievement of such narratives is the multiple critical perspectives they promote. Not dissimilarly, Cruikshank emphasises the need to improve the dialogue between science – physical geography, glaciology, anthropology – local storytelling, and indigenous wise thought, now known as traditional ecological knowledge, TEK, or indigenous knowledge, IK (Cruikshank 2020, 10).

A similar approach is the methodology at the heart of the *Overlap* project, which has united scientists, academics, but also refugees, dancers, photographers, in order to create a different, inclusive and innovative kind of storytelling:

Indeed, all stories are migrations that constantly face borders, obstacles, generating elements of diversity by adapting to the new context, to incessant change, to aging, and creating cultural biodiversity.

Not only is migration a dance made through wings (if we think of birds) or gestures (if we think of people), but biodiversity can also be read as such. A dance of speciation. Migrating helps to create new kinds of thoughts and cultural biodiversity; the speciation of thought, a dance of neurons. Something fragile, as vulnerable as it is essential, like endangered species. (La Stella, Solinas 2020, 60)

Drawing upon different critical perspectives, comparing methodologies, and acquiring new ideas through team work, inclusivity and respectful, reciprocal hospitality are perhaps a new way to discuss multispecies co-existence, co-evolution and co-migration.

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The War on Terror in Contemporary Black British Poetry: Hannah Lowe and Moniza Alvi

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Abstract In the light of Cultural Studies' focus on the signifying practices of forms of power, this article concentrates on some poems from Hannah Lowe's *The Kids* (2021) and Moniza Alvi's *Fairoz* (2022), in order to highlight the modalities through which they undermine the discriminatory profiling of minorities effected by the so-called war on terror. By means of a textual analysis of the poems in relation with contextual references, it is argued that both poets unveil the presence of power structures behind symbolic processes. Thus, they unmask the constructedness of apparently natural categories, offering a springboard for undermining them.

Keywords Black British poetry. War on terror. Cultural Studies. 7/7. Hannah Lowe. Moniza Alvi.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 British-Born: Hannah Lowe's *The Kids* (2021). – 3 Extremists, Murderers: Moniza Alvi's *Fairoz* (2022). – 4 Conclusion.



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1 Introduction

Those who command the definitions
command the credibility.
(Hall 1988, 202)

The theoretical premise of this article originates from Cultural Studies and from its focus on the representational practices of cultural and historical forms of power asymmetrically ingrained in everyday life, as Iain Chambers holds (2018, 18). This focus is a politically committed one: when Stuart Hall reflected on the beginnings of Cultural Studies, he depicted a project aiming to

conduct an ideological critique of the way the humanities and the arts presented themselves as parts of disinterested knowledge.
(Hall 1990, 15)

Furthermore, in his “Cultural Studies and Its Theoretical Legacies”, Hall emphasised the “ever irresolvable but permanent tension” between theoretical and political issues which allowed Cultural Studies to avoid any “final theoretical closure” (Hall 1993, 106).

Within this frame, the present article argues that some contemporary Black British poetry is engaged in a similar activity. It shows how some poets have been taking to task forms of discriminatory profiling of minorities as a consequence of the so-called ‘war on terror’ in the aftermath of the July 7th 2005 bombings (known as ‘7/7’). What the poets here examined do, I argue, is unveil the mechanisms whereby these symbolic processes are related to power structures, as is typical of Cultural Studies (Monegato 2016, 67). More specifically, their poetical works bring to the fore the artificiality of some specific labels (as shown in the following pages), thus deconstructing their supposed naturalness and conferring flesh and blood on Hall’s reflections in his seminal article “New Ethnicities”:

The term ethnicity acknowledges the place of history, language and culture in the construction of subjectivity and identity, as well as the fact that all discourse is placed, positioned, situated, and all knowledge is contextual. (Hall 2008, 588)

It is precisely by deftly reconstructing the living context of the people they write about that Lowe and Alvi manage to open glimpses on the ways in which these young girls and boys are reduced to flattening definitions. In relation to this, the two case studies presented here are investigated both through textual analysis and contextual reading. Part 2 focuses on three sonnets from Hannah Lowe’s *The Kids* (2021) centred on the exclusionary definition ‘British-born’, from her perspective as a teacher in some multicultural schools in London.

Part 3 examines Moniza Alvi's poetry sequence *Fairoz* (2022), a fictional portrait of a British teenager lured into participating in terrorist attacks – where definitions such as 'extremists' are placed under scrutiny. Through the peculiarities of their differing poetics, these two authors discuss and undermine mainstream notions which operate under an exclusionary agenda.

They both belong to the category of Black British poetry, and not simply for biographical reasons, being both of mixed origins. Their shared focus on the marginalising fallout of war-on-terror policies constitutes a political orientation which in itself re-affirms a much argued "continued need for the category of 'Black British poetry'" in the face of "a powerful counter impulse [...] to simply see such poetry as 'British'" (Lawson Welsh 2016, 180-1). At the same time, Lowe's and Alvi's oeuvres cannot be said to be limited to political themes – an age-long stereotype attached to Black British poetry (Lawson Welsh 2016, 179; Ramey 2004, 111, 120): as the following pages show, Lowe's recurrent focus on her family history and Alvi's surrealist inspiration testify to their richly diverse output. It should also be noted that according to Lawson Welsh's classification, Lowe (born 1976) and Alvi (born 1954) belong to different phases of Black British poetry (respectively, "millennial" and "second generation"); nevertheless, their shared concern proves the validity of Lawson Welsh's caveat (2016, 181) about the need to see her own categories as necessary oversimplifications.

The Conclusion of this article returns to the theoretical paradigms of Cultural Studies, tracing connections between Lowe's and Alvi's strategies and some mechanisms of the so-called war on terror in British society – mechanisms which have liberticidal effects.

2 British-Born: Hannah Lowe's *The Kids* (2021)

Hannah Lowe is part white British and part Jamaican. Her first two poetry collections *Chick* (2013) and *Chan* (2016) were mainly centred on her Sino-Caribbean father, his migration to England and his role as father and husband controversially maintained through his night-time gambling activities. Those books occasionally experimented with poetical forms (Wong 2020, 249-58), whereas her third collection *The Kids* (winner of the Costa Prize and shortlisted for the TS Eliot Prize) is composed exclusively of sonnets. Their canonical form is re-interpreted by Lowe thanks to a colloquial – when not slangish – register, irregular rhyme patterns and half rhymes. This "response to the English poetic canon" has characterised Black British poetry thanks to foremothers such as Una Marson (Lawson Welsh 2016, 182) and later authors like Patience Agbabi (Ramey 2004, 128-33; Lawson Welsh 2016, 190). Through it, Lowe deals with topics

such as identity, inter-ethnic relations, her own Caribbeaness behind her light-skinned features (alongside her trademark autobiographical and family memories). In the first part of the volume, she focuses on her experience as a teacher in multicultural London schools. The three poems closing this part compose a triptych on the fallout of 7/7 (Lowe 2021, 34-6; hereafter, references are given as K followed by page number).

"7/7" is also the title of the first sonnet, where Lowe describes the last minutes of a friend of hers before taking the train which would carry her to her death as a consequence of the notorious bombings. As if to magnify the momentous importance of this watershed for individual and collective worldviews, Lowe arrests the whole scene in a tableau:

Let's freeze her here, at the edge, pressed tight between
a young undertaker, say, and a ballroom dancer, who minutes later

can't save her life. [...]

Across the street, the flats where my friend has left a burning lamp,
a half-made bed. A single drop is midway falling from a rusted tap.
(K 34)

The second sonnet, "Ricochet", is worth quoting in full, in view of an in-depth textual analysis:

Four boys blew up three tube trains and a bus.
My old pal was stood beside a bomber.
The police shot a man they said had *Mongolian eyes*.
For days, friends searched the hospitals for her.
The wrong man they shot, they shot eleven times.
We'd heard a voicemail, her saying she was fine.

It was summer still when the kids came back.
Muslim boys in Nikes and thobes and skull caps.
Boyish beards that made them look like men.
Her face still flashed up on the television.
Two girls swept down the hall in full black burkas.
Moniza said a police van took her brother.
The papers called the bombers *British-born*.
(K 35)

As a collection, *The Kids* is criss-crossed with numerous intra-textual references; here the bombings in line 1 are again connected to Lowe's killed friend. Immediately after that, the sonnet traces a link with one emblematic victim of the fallout of the 7/7 bombings: Jean Charles de

Menezes, a 27-year-old Brazilian who was repeatedly shot in the head by the police in Stockwell tube station (notably, Lowe repeats “shot” thrice), two weeks after the bombings, because he was mistaken for a fugitive terrorist. His seemingly “Mongolian eyes” (l.3) were mentioned as a justification for such a cold-blooded institutional execution, which Vikky Bell describes as the result of a Lombrosian categorisation singling out the victim of an Agambenian state of exception, whereby the right to life is suspended and sovereign violence can result (Bell 2007, 1-4). This event represented a sinister omen of racial profiling: in this specific poem by Lowe, lines 7-12 shift the setting to her school and to her students of Muslim origins.

Ariane de Waal (2016, 6) highlights how the British media were flooded with a climate of suspicion and fear centred on the “racialized body carrying the rucksack on public transport”. In the weeks after De Menezes was killed, a photo of a service information board, supposedly taken at Notting Hill station and dated July 26th, circulated widely on the internet. The pictured “Notice to all passengers” read:

Please do not run on the platforms or concourses. Especially if you are carrying a rucksack, wearing a big coat or look a bit foreign. This notice is for your own safety. Thank you. (De Waal 2016, 12)

Even though the notice was proved to be a spoof, and in spite of its “polite coding” (13), De Waal aptly deems it significant of the kind of racial profiling dominating the post-7/7 atmosphere, exposing “the racial schemas that organise urban life” (2016, 12). In “Ricochet”, lines 7-12 focus on Lowe’s Muslim students, and on the inescapable question: how would they feel when reading that understated “if you [...] look a bit foreign”?

Lowe’s depiction of these schoolboys and schoolgirls stands out for its accumulation of details which implicitly point to the British Muslim community. In their article, Mark Featherstone, Siobhan Holohan, and Elizabeth Poole detect, in post-7/7 British media, a difficulty in reconciling multicultural principles and Islamic fundamentalism: in their attempt to distinguish good integrated Muslim from foreign-manoeuvred bad ones, they show a general tendency to Islamicise issues rather than applying socio-economic paradigms. If even some British-educated Muslims have fallen prey to radical fundamentalism, then, is the whole community potentially susceptible (Featherstone, Holohan, Poole 2010, 178-9)?

Such simplistic generalisations, which the scholars also identify in some speeches by Tony Blair (181-2), are mixed with vulnerability by Lowe in lines 7-12, where beards make boys “look like” grown-ups and a girl named Moniza is speaking about her arrested brother. This complex, disorienting climate is also reflected in the subtle stylistic facets of this sonnet. Structurally, in a collection markedly

characterised by a fluid colloquial tone enhanced by a massive presence of enjambments, “Ricochet” stands out for being made of self-complete lines all ending on a full stop – as if to convey the near-impossibility of shaping the frames of this traumatic event into a coherent story. Furthermore, this is the only truncated sonnet in the collection consisting of thirteen lines; in an email exchange with the present writer, Lowe explained that this structural choice gestures toward the traumatic disappearance of her friend.

Metrically, line 1 begins with a succession of seven stressed syllables; other similar devices in the rest of the poem (as in lines 2, 8, 11) all add emphasis to key images related to the tragic events. A related emphasis-raising effect is obtained phonetically through alliteration on [b], especially at the beginning and at the end of the sonnet (totalising fifteen occurrences); the repetition of the plosive consonant sound [b] echoes the bombings (and the keyword “bombers”) and hints at the ricochet of the title. It is a recurrence which may be deemed significant not least because it becomes a dominant sound-effect to the point that it may be said to replace the traditional use of rhyme, and because it culminates in the profiling label “British-born”. The final line is a regular iambic pentameter, thus enhancing through a canonical metre the mainstream view (“the papers”) being voiced.

As an example of the numerous intra-textual references in this collection, the following sonnet is entitled “British-born”, taking up the same image with which the previous sonnet ended:

And suddenly, new language – ‘British-born’ –
for kids who grew up on terraces in Leeds
or tower blocks in Bow, and at weekends tied
their bootlaces for footies on the lawn
and went to college to study Sports or Business
or Car Mechanics and spoke with accents thick
as Yorkshire mud or London bullet-quick –
yes blud! and *innit!* – and were as British as

a pack of salt-and-vinegar and no,
his teacher hadn’t noticed him withdrawing
and no, his mother hadn’t wondered who
he called at 2 p.m. in the blue-lit bedroom
of their bungalow – despite her scrubbing,
the words aglow on their garden wall: GO HOME.
(K 36)

Featherstone, Holohan, and Poole (175-82) repeatedly return to the contradictory effort, on the part of post-7/7 British media, to reconcile the fact that the bombers were British-born with the

convenient belief that the terrorist is always an external other, finally proposing an unconvincing image of the bad sheep manoeuvred by an evil foreign mentor. Not only does Lowe's third sonnet expose this mainstream discourse by emphasising the abruptness with which the label seemed to emerge ("And suddenly," line 1), an abruptness further strengthened by the two consecutive stressed syllables ("néw lánquage", line 1). I argue that it also undermines the racist signifying power of that very label: "British-born" gestures to the saying 'born and bred', subtly suggesting that these youths were only born and not bred, not really part of British culture (cf. Manzoor-Khan 80-1) – not to mention the biologically racial connotations of 'bred' being the participle form of the verb 'to breed'.

In ll. 2-8, Lowe dismantles the label through mention of these youths' dispossessed upbringing, sporting activities, studies, and eating habits; accents-wise, lines 7-8 are noticeable for the bitter irony in "bullet-quick" and the metrical vehemence of "yes *blud!*", an accent cluster and spondaic beginning of the line. Structurally, the volta after the caesura is clearly marked by a "no" (repeated in line 11) expressing an institutional and family neglect which culminates in the capitalised rejection of the closing "GO HOME" (its aggressiveness again emphasised by two consecutive stressed syllables). What home, one may ask, after a whole poem explaining that they were born *and* bred in Britain? Phonetically, the sonnet reverberates the consonance in [b] of the previous poem (with twelve occurrences), as if to re-echo the bombings and at the same time to hint at the subtextual presence of 'bred' in the title. A marked change may be noticed in the two closing lines, where a consonance in [g] culminates in a virulent "GO" – a rejection that pervades Moniza Alvi's volume, too.

3 Extremists, Murderers: Moniza Alvi's *Fairoz* (2022)

Born in Lahore in 1954 of a Pakistani father and a white British mother (Splendore 2014, 182), Alvi is today a renowned poet who distinguishes herself for writing about issues of power and identity in relation to the Black British context, while at the same time going well beyond such thematic concerns (Shehata 2017, 169). Her visionary surrealism is sometimes hard to relate to specific realms (King 2004, 307-8), and Lawson Welsh (2016, 187-8) identifies in her a typical example of how some "second generation" Black British poets moved away from the focus of the nation to concentrate on "imagined places". These two main aspects of her poetics converge in her recent volume *Fairoz*, described on its blurb as a "book-length poetry sequence [on...] an imagined teenage girl's susceptibility to extremism". Unlikely as it may seem, this challenging topic and

It was cold. It was raw.
 Their mother was a version
 of the Snow Queen.
 [...]
 How dried she looked
 when she looked in the mirror!
 She smiled her best smile

and the room behind her
 filled with snow
 which soon became hard-packed.
 [...]
 Half-blinded by flakes

the girls fell out into the garden.
 No snow there, but greyness
 and grit and the traffic

thundering on the ring road.
 ("Indoors", *F* 14-15)

The dreariness of the outside is enhanced by the alliteration in [g] and [gr], and the echo of "ring". In this context, Fairouz's frustration unsurprisingly becomes ever deeper, its slow erosion replicated by the alliteration in [sk] and consonance in [k]:

cold bore ice and more ice -
 thick sheets of it

to the hemispheres of the house.
 It scratched and scoured

the human core.
 ("Ice age", *F* 58)

This general condition provides a perfect terrain for an unexpected intrusion, whereby the fable-like veers towards the metaphysical:

The Devil enjoys 'I don't like my life.'

He echoes the words:
 'I don't like my life! I don't like my life!'

It's familiar to him - this chink.
 This fast-widening crack.
 ("In the morning", *F* 25)

The widening cracks, phonetically embodied by the vowel sounds becoming more open in the last line quoted above, will be the place where the Devil will sow the seeds that he calls “shrivel-the-soul” (cf. *F* 52). This is one of a group of poems in *Fairoz* which present a background confrontation between God and the Devil. It is a sort of morality-play scheme that may be considered a poetic translation (with possible caricatural implications) of an ideological process that de-politicises terrorism: in the words of Featherstone, Holohan, and Poole,

the presentation of a totally non-politicized struggle between good and evil is perfect cover for the generalized insecurity produced by neo-liberalism. (2010, 173)

In *Fairoz*’s case, her own insecurity at home and in society leads her to explore the Web as a safety valve and as the pursuit of an alternative socialisation:

it is the Internet which is perceived as being the most influential in radicalizing the young, described quite poetically in the *Daily Mail* as ‘bedroom radicalisation’

as Featherstone, Holohan, and Poole comment sarcastically (2010, 179). Significantly, Alvi depicts the internet as a populated environment:

Fairoz wanders the dark pathways of the internet.
The trees form tunnels over her head.

People jump out of the bushes
each with something to say.

They pounce.
It’s airless.

It’s a way of leaving home.
 (“In the present tense”, *F* 12)

Though sanitised (“airless”), it is a much-needed world in which to escape from her suffocating home. And when (at first virtually) she encounters Tahir and becomes fond of him, this is depicted by Alvi as if *Fairoz* were in a real outdoor place: “She’s there with him, out in the open” (“Questions in the wood”, *F* 20). She is clearly a victim to online recruiting:

TAHIR: What would you do for Allah?
He needs us, you know. They hate us here.

FAIROZ: Yeah, I know that. Most of them do -
they treat us like shit. We pray...

TAHIR: Praying is all very well. But we must
be braver than that. We owe it to Allah
as an act of faith.
(untitled, *F* 32)

This exchange shows how religious faith lies behind Tahir's request for violent action, but an even more effective bond is provided by a shared feeling of being hated and rejected. The ruthless "GO HOME" emphasised in Lowe's third poem is likewise received by Fairoz - first with incredulity, then with rage:

The first time she heard it
it took her a moment to take it in.

'Go home!' She was just by the house,
walking up the short front path.

She dropped her bag on her doorstep,
turned and picked up a stone.

But he'd already slid away.
He left his two poison words.
("Home", *F* 26)

Here, too, the nonsensical question - what home are these second-generation immigrants supposed to have in mind? - centres on "home" itself, as the title of the poem exemplifies. The contested notion of home has occupied centre stage in the debates around Black Britain for ages; Lauri Ramey considered it a founding one in her 2004 reflections on Black British poetry (Ramey 2004, 109-10), and it is dispiriting to notice how often it is still surfacing today. The context depicted by Alvi is part of the violence and insecurity spread by neo-liberalism on a worldwide scale, as Featherstone, Holohan, and Poole (2010, 172) write:

We want to suggest that the specific problem of contemporary (Islamicized) global terror emerged in response to the generalized anxieties produced by neo-liberalism and the consequent spread of the precariousness of everyday life through the capitalist economies.

In Alvi's volume, Fairoz's "two poison words" lead her to swear profusely (cf. *F* 27), while this common experience of exclusionary abuse offers Tahir a terrain for his recruiting purposes:

FAIROZ: The more you try to forget, the more
you can't forget... Yeah, that's what I think.

TAHIR: Yeah. When I was a kid our town was
mostly white and our window was smashed
so many times there was no point mending it.
When they banged on the door we hid upstairs.
Like we couldn't exist. I can't forget that.
(untitled, *F* 50)

The frustrating feeling embodied in "Like we couldn't exist" is channelled into a thirst for affirmation which translates itself into throwing back the same charge of extremism that has been levelled against them:

FAIROZ: Some fights are good fights. Yeah.

TAHIR: Yeah. Against the West. WESTERN extremists.
They won't say they are. The hypocrites! The shits!
Someone I know, their uncle was imprisoned, tortured by
westerners for nothing. They thought he was someone else.
They never apologised.

FAIROZ: They just say it's us! And

TAHIR: Listen - we were great once, way back. And we'll
be great again. We're global already you know.
(untitled, *F* 63)

Tahir's anecdote and jingoist slogan may easily be related not only to the liberticidal laws and practices operating after 9/11 and 7/7 (such as the CIA's extraordinary renditions). This results in an extremely polarised exchange of accusations which constitutes a fertile ground for a violent confrontation – in the playground, as recalled by Fairoz:

*That time in the playground blood-red voices
couldn't not hear them 'Murderer! Murderer!'
[...]
'You're all murderers!' words thrown
ducked threw back 'Murderers yourselves!'
couldn't deal with it not really not at all words
gouging we're all humans they're not should she*

*tell? Amma? the teacher? maybe no
no point what would they do? could make things
worse yeah an unfairness bigger than
("Who's there?", F 78; italics in the text)*

Through these "blood-red voices", an us-them discursive framework is affirmed where the other is "presented as a monstrous other incapable of reason" (Featherstone, Holohan, Poole 2010, 180, 173). This is powerfully reminiscent of Edward Said's famous words on "fundamentalism":

A word that has come to be associated almost automatically with Islam, although it has a flourishing, usually elided, relationship with Christianity, Judaism, and Hinduism. The deliberately created associations between Islam and fundamentalism ensure that the average reader comes to see Islam and fundamentalism as essentially the same thing [... even though it] defines a relatively small proportion of what actually takes place in the Islamic world. (Said 1997, XVI)

The outcome of those "blood-red voices" is inevitably Manichean, with counter-accusations of extremism flying across the playground. "We're all humans they're not", Fairouz thinks, without a reliable listening ear in which she can trustfully confide – "what would they do?". This deadlock paralyses Fairouz's (self)awareness, as hinted at by the stalemate in the morality-play subtext:

God held one hand of the argument
and the Devil, the other. They heaved
and strained but nothing ever

moved much. The two of them
locked in a tug-of-war.
The rope they couldn't drop.
("The contest", F 72)

The consonance in [p] in the last line may be seen as emphasising the need to drop that stifling rope. For her part, in the closing lines of "Who's there?" Fairouz strains to break that deadlock and humanise the individuals who compose the opposing "seething" blocks:

*And now long after and not so long after
looking at her hands her shoes and into
the chasm behind her eyes to see to see
who's there him her us 'Murderers!'
Murderers? no yes no who's there*

in the seething?

("Who's there?", *F* 78; italics in the text)

"Long after" signals a flash-forward, in the plot of Fairoz's parable. As her story developed along this poetry sequence, her estrangement from society and schooling led her to become apathetic: for example, a whole poem is interspersed with "O" as a sort of refrain, representing "The noughts | in the teacher's register" ("Her absences", *F* 47). After Tahir asked her to kill for Allah with the promise that she would reach Jannah (the believer's Paradise), and after a real marriage between them was arranged, he vanished. The volume does not specify what Fairoz's destiny will be. It is made clear that she has never taken part in violent actions, but what will the authorities do with her?

*She hasn't she didn't luckily she hadn't she did
just a bit not really more than a bit no a little
and she watched will the police?
[...]
what did she really think? it was
wrong not completely no yes violence like murder?
she has her life she's young not so young no
will they think she's young? responsible like guilty?
("Her whole life", *F* 90; italics in the text)*

Here the third-person point of view conveys both Fairoz's confusion and her painful attempts at self-awareness ("what did she really think?"). She finds herself in a position marked by uncertainty, very far from the (once again) polarised dominant narrations which characterise this phenomenon:

In the media constructions after the 7/7 attacks, it has been more necessary to mark out the 'good' and 'bad' Muslims. (Featherstone, Holohan, Poole 2010, 176)

Alvi's lines undermine this congealing narration by finally creating a Fairoz who strives to make distinctions *within* seething blocks, who has her misgivings,

She always, almost
always (especially later)
had her doubts -

They crept in like waves
[...]
Is there anything she'd like to say?
'I had my doubts. Yeah, doubts.

I'm telling you the truth
("What she'd like to say", *F* 93)

and who tries to envision a different life:

A star to watch over you
not just to watch you
a piercing star
if this could be true
if the beautiful ideas
could really be beautiful
and stay beautiful
("Over every soul there is a watcher", *F* 98)

4 Conclusion

The vocation of cultural studies has been to enable people to understand what is going on, and especially to provide ways of thinking, strategies for survival, and resources for resistance to all those who are now - in economic, political and cultural terms - excluded from anything that could be called access to the national culture of the national community: in this sense, cultural studies still has as profound a historical vocation as it ever had in the 1960s and '70s. But on the other hand, in relation to the mass education of students, both in higher education and elsewhere, cultural studies is, as an institutional form, very minor. But the humanities and the arts are not. And indeed the contestation that cultural studies was partly responsible for putting on the agenda has been taken into the humanities themselves.

(Hall 1990, 22)

In this seminal article, Stuart Hall highlighted the connections between Cultural Studies and the Humanities. Inspired by his reflections, the present analysis of contemporary Black British poetry is meant to be seen as yet another example of the manifold ways in which the Humanities have "taken into [...] themselves" the "contestation" expressed by Cultural Studies. The pages above have argued that the analysed poems by Lowe and Alvi perform a similar function of providing "ways of thinking" outside the frame of racist and Islamophobic profiling. Provide for whom, one may ask? The first to be "excluded", to use Hall's words, are again the victims of such profiling - Lowe's students and people like Fairouz.

Certainly, they are not the only ones. The "resources for resistance" would also benefit the general public, those who are increasingly involved in the exclusionary policies implemented by British institutions. In 2003 the Prevent programme was introduced as a

counterterrorism strategy and later made law in 2015, thus placing 500,000 civil servants under compulsory duties of surveillance and monitoring activities for purposes of national security. Among others, the signals that they should look out for include questioning issues of identity, faith, and belonging; being unable to discuss one's point of view; dissociating oneself from one's friends to join new ones; being withdrawn (Manzoor-Khan 2022, 64-6). On the one hand, Manzoor-Khan aptly observes that such vagueness could not but leave ample room for all sorts of stereotypes (66), increasing Islamophobic cases and related problems for British Muslims' mental health, sense of safety and trust in institutions (69-70). This phenomenon is to be placed within the frame of the psychological crisis characterising minority groups: in their 1996 conversations, bell hooks and Stuart Hall agreed how neglected this facet of the African diaspora was, whereby "the richness of their own subjective life" was (and still is? I ask myself) overdetermined by race and racism (hooks, Hall 2017, 99-109). In this light, focusing on Black British *poetry* allows one to delve deeper into this aspect, thanks to Lowe's and Alvi's lines.

On the other hand, with the Prevent programme we are dealing with signals so vague that they might well apply not only to Lowe's students and Fairoz, but to most teenagers regardless of their origins. It is perhaps the general public, then, who should be considered as the addressee of these appealing lines from the final pages of *Fairoz*:

*Could someone help her? she has this one life hers
she's an intelligent girl yeah more than quite intelligent
her whole life sometimes it's nothing though not nothing
("Her whole life", F 90; italics in the text)*

The general public should also be alert to the fact that institutional anti-extremism programmes like Prevent also monitor political ideas such as pacifism and support for Palestine, and so constitute a danger for political dissent and critical thinking at large (Manzoor-Khan 2022, 72-3). In other words, the war on terror can result in any individual being "excluded from [...] the national culture of the national community", to go back to Hall's words.

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Dehumanisation, Otherness and Animal Tropes in J.M. Coetzee's *Age of Iron*

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Abstract This paper aims to investigate J.M. Coetzee's *Age of Iron* (1990) from the perspective of the metaphorical connotations acquired by animal tropes in the narrative. It demonstrates how the elderly protagonist of the novel, Mrs Curren, uses animal imagery to define and categorise people she associates with otherness, particularly in relation to two groups: the racialised and marginalised 'victims' of apartheid, and the white supremacist 'perpetrators', including nationalist politicians and compliant white citizens. In both cases, these figurative devices contribute to a broader process of dehumanisation, highlighting the contradictions and limitations of the protagonist's liberal-humanist perspective and its entanglement with anthropocentric and Eurocentric biases.

Keywords Animal tropes. Victim. Perpetrator. Age of Iron. Apartheid.

Summary 1 Mimesis, Symbolism and Literary Representation in *Age of Iron*. – 2 Dehumanising the Other. – 3 The Beastly Face of the Perpetrator. – 4 Conclusion.



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1 **Mimesis, Symbolism and Literary Representation in *Age of Iron***

J.M. Coetzee's sixth novel, *Age of Iron* (1990), takes the form of a confessional narrative, a long letter, from an elderly white South African and former Classics professor, Elizabeth Curren, to her daughter, who now lives in the United States. In her account, Mrs Curren recounts the key events of her later years in apartheid South Africa: the discovery of her terminal cancer, her encounter with a homeless man named Vercueil, and her troubled relationship with two Black children involved in the armed struggle, Bheki and John. As she writes down her thoughts, she cannot help showing her discomfort with the current state of affairs. She describes the widespread violence that is tearing her country to pieces and the worrying subversion of traditional roles, as exemplified by the massive number of Black children who have taken up arms and mobilised against apartheid. At the same time, she rails against those who are leading South Africa into the abyss, the (white) nationalist politicians, whom she portrays as greedy and brutal, ready to use any means to maintain power and profiting by the white middle class's subservience and compliance.

Through Mrs Curren's narrative, the reader is plunged into a seemingly hopeless scenario in which the brutality of apartheid's last phases and its supporters is laid bare. *Age of Iron* is usually considered to be part of the second phase of J.M. Coetzee's literary career, referred to as the realist period. The novel moves away from the coded, ambivalent and allegorical modes of his earlier works – *In the Heart of the Country* (1977), *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980) or *Life & Times of Michael K* (1983) – belonging to the so-called early/allegorical period, and engages directly with history and factuality, specifically the violent years 1986-89, which Sheila Roberts defines as “[t]he worst years of the State of Emergency in South Africa” (1991, 34). In this respect, Susan VanZanten Gallagher notes that *Age of Iron* marks a dividing line within Coetzee's long-standing career, as it testifies to the author's turn to a more realistic form that distances the novel from any of his previous works (1991, 193). At the same time, together with the internationally acclaimed *Disgrace* (1999), *Age of Iron* acts as a bridge to the final stage of Coetzee's *oeuvre*, often described as the late/autobiographical-metaphysical period, in which the author's focus shifts from specifically South African concerns to broader, globally resonant themes.

And yet, despite its realist-mimetic imprint, *Age of Iron* is nevertheless interfused with a symbolic language in which metaphors, tropes and intertextual references abound. Coetzee's realistic portrayal of late apartheid-era South Africa is intricately woven into a complex metaphorical framework, adding layers of meaning

that extend far beyond a straightforward depiction of contemporary historical events. As Emanuela Tegla points out,

The disturbing dimension of the novel is generated not only by the narrative content [...], but also, to a considerable extent, by the language used. (2012, 968)

Over time, numerous scholars have emphasised the symbolic and metaphorical component of the novel along with its intricate web of intertextual references. Tegla herself, for example, stresses the centrality of the cancer metaphor in the narrative, underlining how the disease eventually transcends the realm of physical illness to become a figurative cipher for a decaying society and the deleterious effects of ethnic strife and despotic rule (968). Similarly, Michael Marais claims that

Mrs Curren's illness should be construed as a metaphor for the erosion of selfhood by the State's structure of power. (1993, 9)

Age of Iron therefore seems to be built on a metaphorical parallel between Mrs Curren's progressive decline, as she is consumed by her terminal disease, and the relentless collapse of South Africa under apartheid, seen as a collective cancer that is irreversibly dragging the country down into the abyss. At the same time, Marais reminds us that the novel's diegesis also rests on a palimpsest of befittingly reworked classical sources, such as the myth of the Gorgons, the Circe episode in the *Odyssey*, and especially Hesiod's references to the 'iron age' in his *Work and Days* (1993). On another level, Sheila Roberts (1996) and David E. Hoegberg (1998) note that *Age of Iron* appropriates some of the images and figures of Dante's *Inferno* to project them onto the nightmarish ambience of 1980s South Africa.

Against this symbolic and intertextual backdrop, this article delves into a relatively unexplored aspect of the novel: its use of animal tropes. Though rarely examined in depth, these figurative devices play a pivotal role in Mrs Curren's confessional narrative. Animal tropes and associations recur throughout her account, serving as a key lens through which she expresses and articulates her perceptions of those around her, particularly of certain forms of human otherness. Specifically, Mrs Curren directs these figurative vehicles towards two distinct groups of individuals: the racialised and marginalised 'victims' of apartheid; and the enforcers of the white supremacist regime, including white nationalist politicians and their accomplices among ordinary white South Africans – representative of 'perpetrators'.

Her use of imagery differs markedly between the two groups. When referring to the former group, animal tropes often emerge

as an almost unconscious, albeit extremely derogatory, mode of expression through which Mrs Curren processes her perceptions about certain individuals. In contrast, when applied to the latter group, the imagery is more intentional and critical, used as a tool to denounce the violence of the white supremacists and their cowardly accomplices by equating them with animals.

However, in both contexts, Curren's rhetoric involves a process of dehumanisation – a discursive strategy that strips individuals of their humanity and portrays them as non-human animals. Shaped by her position as a liberal white South African and as a supporter of the humanist creed, her language reflects a deeply anthropocentric worldview. In this context, animality is equated with debasement, lack of or loss of human dignity and a descent into a supposedly deplorable or brutal existence. When describing the non-Western victims of apartheid, this perspective intersects with an implicit Eurocentric bias, as her portrayals more or less unwittingly deprive these people of their human dignity by framing them as or 'other than' human, thereby reinforcing Western-centred racial hierarchies.

2 Dehumanising the Other

In the colonial world, animal imagery has long been used as a tool to dehumanise the Other. Colonisers have repeatedly portrayed the non-Western subject as not 'fully human', with a parallel resort to an animal imagery which was instrumental in depicting the latter as beast-like, cognitively underdeveloped, driven by instinctual impulses and physicality as opposed to reason, logic and self-restraint.

In his remarkable *The Wretched of the Earth*, Frantz Fanon already highlighted the central role of animal imagery in the coloniser's representation of the colonised ([1961] 1963, 42). More recently, Richard Barney has observed how

In general terms, the category of animal life long served European colonialism, for the five hundred-some years of its history, as a way of articulating the drastic difference that had appeared between Westerners and the non-Western natives whom they encountered. (2004, 18)

In his insightful collection of essays *White Writing: On the Culture of Letters in South Africa*, J.M. Coetzee himself outlined how, from the very beginning of Cape colonisation, parts of the Indigenous communities across South Africa – namely the Khoikhoi, re-named 'Hottentots' by the Dutch settlers – were expediently described as idle, lazy and essentially animal-like. He observed how

The charge of idleness often comes together with, and sometimes as the climax of, a set of other characterizations [...] What is common to these charges is that they mark the Hottentot as *underdeveloped* - underdeveloped not only by the standard of the European but by the standard of Man. (1988, 22; Author's emphasis)

Relying on a vocabulary packed with animal tropes, and a staunch rhetorical armoury, the European explorers and settlers set about projecting animal traits onto Indigenous peoples and addressing them as if they were not fully human, possibly a sort of missing link between the wild animal and the 'enlightened' man from the West.

Obviously, far from being neutral, the use of such a language is entangled in issues of domination. If it is true that "[h]uman classification through language is not value-free, indeed categorization [...] is a function of power" (Goatly 2006, 30), then animal imagery historically played a key role in the process of othering colonised people and served as a tool to hold power over them. Helen Tiffin notes that

The history of human oppression of other humans is replete with instances of animal metaphors and animal categorisations frequently deployed as justification for commodification, killing and enslavement. (2001, 33)

In a similar vein, the American philosopher Steven Best underlines how the dehumanisation, torture and abuse of Indigenous peoples by colonisers have always begun through linguistic discrimination,

[w]ith the denigration of victims as 'savages,' 'primitives,' and 'mere' animals who lack the essence and sine qua non of human nature-*rationality*. (Best 2014, 10; Author's emphasis)

Portrayed as bestial beings and seen as incapable of conforming to the moral, rational and social standards of Westerners, non-Western peoples were actually approached by colonisers as animals to be exploited or slaughtered (Best 2014, 10).

Clearly, the process of dehumanisation, or in our specific case the 'animalisation', of the Other emerged in the Western context long before the onset of colonialism. The roots of this derogatory attitude already lay in ancient Western civilisation, where animal imagery

was frequently employed to represent the perceived otherness of certain groups of individuals, including ethno-racial others.¹

In the modern era, this logic was reinforced by the consolidation of humanism and its darker, Eurocentric undertones. During the European Renaissance, the refinement of this ideological paradigm not only solidified the 'cult' of the Western subject, but also systematically enacted the exclusion and dehumanisation of those perceived as outside of it – specifically, the non-Western Other,² progressively represented as non/sub-human and animalistic. This laid the ideological groundwork for colonial domination.

Several postcolonial scholars have shed light on this issue. Robert J.C. Young, for example, recalls Fanon's argument that there is a strong connection between the rise of Western humanism and the systematic dehumanisation of non-Europeans (2004, 161) – a logic that would subsequently inform colonial ideology in a profound way. Similarly, Achille Mbembe asserts that, despite presenting itself as a universalist project, humanism has historically concealed ethnocentric and Eurocentric assumptions. Consequently, it has contributed to the construction of a 'non-human' – and often animalised – Other, whose racial and ethnic identity contrasts sharply with that of the European self (2019).

The dehumanisation of the Other through animal imagery is a recurring theme in J.M. Coetzee's work, as his fiction is replete with animal tropes and desecrating rhetoric designed to fulfil this function. For instance, in the author's first novel, *Dusklands*, the Indigenous inhabitants of South Africa, the San (derogatorily called 'Bushmen' by the European settlers), are equated by the main character Jacobus Coetzee to "dogs" and "baboons" (Coetzee [1974] 2004, 58). Similarly, the barbarian girl incarnating unfathomable otherness in *Waiting*

1 Regarding the depiction of ethno-racial otherness in Greco-Roman antiquity, zoomorphic associations were typically meant to portray 'barbarians' and certain peoples beyond the Greco-Roman world as animalistic or savage, as evidenced by numerous historical, chronicle and literary sources from the period. In his remarkable *The Invention of Racism in Classical Antiquity*, Benjamin Isaac suggests that in ancient Greece "People were considered bestial if controlled by feelings and passions rather than rational processes, and thus indulged in unnatural behavior. This is thought typical of distant foreigners and of pathological Greeks". ([2004] 2006, 199-200). Likewise, Emily Allen-Hornblower maintains that "The attribution of bestial characteristics to barbarians is pervasive throughout ancient sources (and beyond); they often point up negative traits which the Romans associated with a lack of civilization and social organization, such as irrationality and related forms of savagery" (2014, 688).

2 In *The Darker Side of the Renaissance: Literacy, Territoriality & Colonization* (1995), Walter Mignolo offers a reflection on the reasons and mechanisms by which Europeans began to systematically dehumanise non-European populations during the Renaissance, and in conjunction with the 'discovery' of the 'New World'. In doing so, he sheds light on the darker, more troubling, aspects of an era traditionally celebrated for its cultural and sociopolitical achievements.

for the *Barbarians* is compared to a “wild animal” (Coetzee [1980] 1999, 48) by the Magistrate, who hosts and intently scrutinises her in his home. In *Life & Times of Michael K*, the protagonist, a non-white gardener from Cape Town (possibly a Coloured man) who decides to devote his life to a respectful stewardship of natural resources and sustainable agriculture, is called “monkey”, among other things, by an Afrikaner farmer (Coetzee [1983] 2004, 87). In the same novel, the outcasts confined to the Jakkalsdrif relocation camp are described as “parasites” (90). Their fate, similar to that of others isolated in similar camps, is likened to “being shut up like animals in a cage” (88).

Parag Kumar Deka argues that such animal tropes in Coetzee's novels are often used by characters in positions of power, especially Europeans, to reinforce the stereotype of non-Westerners as bestial (2018, 66). This kind of rhetoric is clearly explained by Steve Baker in his reading of Keith Thomas's *Men and the Natural World: Changing Attitudes in England 1500-1800* (1983), when he remarks that certain societies, first and foremost the Western one, have appropriated the term ‘human’ and automatically relegated other ethnic groups to the status of inferior beings (Baker 1993, 79). If the Western subject would hold primacy over the realms of both nature and culture, the non-Westerner is conceived by the former as more instinctive, bound to the biological rather than the rational dimension.

And yet, while it provides useful insights, Deka's analysis could be expanded to provide a more nuanced and comprehensive interpretation. In Coetzee's novels, animal tropes are not confined to the rhetoric of overtly dominant or white supremacist figures; they also feature in the language of seemingly ordinary individuals who, knowingly or unknowingly, end up professing ethnocentric ideologies. One could argue that Coetzee uses these tropes to reveal the pervasiveness of a rhetoric of oppression that is deeply embedded in Western discourse. In this sense, it is no coincidence that such language constantly reappears in the utterances of white ‘liberal’ figures who ostensibly oppose the colonial status quo. Through this critique, Coetzee highlights the dangers inherent in Western, Eurocentric language, including its humanist strands, and fosters a sense of ethical awareness, urging readers to confront the epistemic violence inherent in animalistic labelling.

In *Age of Iron*, this dynamic is particularly evident in the character of Mrs Curren. A white elderly South African with a background in the humanities, Elizabeth holds firmly to liberal-humanist values. She thus strives to approach the reality of racial otherness in apartheid South Africa with empathy and intellectual depth. As such, the woman extends her sympathetic approach to Vercueil, the homeless non-white man who takes up residence near her home, treating him with genuine care. At the same time, she aligns herself with the young Black revolutionaries Bheki and John, who take refuge in her

house. In doing so, she positions herself in opposition to the police brutality she has witnessed firsthand.

Nevertheless, Mrs Curren's life trajectory is also testament to the contradictions inherent in her liberal-humanist ethical framework, along with the idiosyncrasies of the liberal subject living under apartheid, especially as far as the approach to otherness is concerned. Although she rejects the white supremacist state and frequently criticises the ethnocentric beliefs of her ethnic enclave, Elizabeth's actions appear to be deeply influenced by the social and cultural norms of the white world she inhabits – and which she never fully relinquishes. This becomes manifest when it comes to the language she uses. Throughout the narrative, the character frequently employs animal imagery to describe marginalised individuals from non-Western backgrounds, thereby perpetuating the very racist platitudes and clichés of contemporary white society she seeks to reject. This attitude highlights a contradictory tension between her liberal-humanist and supposedly universalist ideals and her concrete use of language, which seems to uphold ethnocentric and exclusionary ideologies. As such, it underscores the difficulty experienced by the liberal subjects – embodied here by the elderly Elizabeth – in fully emancipating themselves from their unwitting complicity³ in the mechanisms of apartheid and colonial exploitation, thus preventing any genuine identification with the Other.

Among the first persons that Mrs Curren portrays by using an inherently denigrating language in her confessional narrative are precisely the young Black boys who, at this stage in the history of apartheid, are boycotting schools and mobilising *en masse* against the white regime. From the outset, Elizabeth emphasises the anxiety and fear of attack that these young Black South Africans provoke in her. To express her discomfort towards them, she resorts to animal tropes, comparing them to predatory sharks: “It is the roaming gangs I fear, the sullen-mouthed boys, rapacious as sharks, on whom the first shade of the prison house is already beginning to close” (Coetzee [1990] 2010, 7). As is evident, this comparison serves to convey a sense of ferocity and voracity in a hyperbolic manner, dehumanising these young revolutionaries through zoomorphic allusions.

3 The theme of complicity, particularly in relation to the liberal subject, is central to *Age of Iron*. This motif appears primarily through the lens of the unequal relationships between white and non-white individuals within the context of apartheid, as well as between the rapacious and violent approach of humans to non-human animals. In this second sphere, *Age of Iron* anticipates the broader reflection that Coetzee would later develop in *The Lives of Animals* (1999), a metafictional, essayistic novella in which human complicity in the exploitation of animals, including mass slaughter in the food industry, is a pervasive concern.

Interestingly, the perception of young Black South Africans as threatening, predatory creatures not only echoes the use of animal correspondences against non-whites often employed in colonial discourse, but also draws a direct link between Mrs Curren's internal anxiety and Frantz Fanon's concept of the Black subject as a "phobogenic object" (Fanon [1952] 1986, 151), a catalyst for uncontrolled and irrational fear among whites. Indeed, Mrs Curren's description reveals that she is in the grip of this kind of irrational fear, perceiving that any contact or confrontation with them could bring about harm or danger.

Mrs Curren's derogatory approach is particularly evident in her relationship with Vercueil, the homeless man who takes shelter in her garage. Throughout the novel, the elderly woman portrays this figure as oscillating between that of a quasi-supernatural being, perhaps an angel or a messenger sent by God – and, quite ambiguously, an almost animalistic creature. As Louise Tremaine emphasises, it is this second representation of the character that carries greater narrative significance (2003, 590). The animalistic portrayal of Vercueil is particularly significant for this analysis, as it eventually frames the homeless as bordering on a sub-human existence akin to that of a beast-like creature. As for the subject matter, immediately upon his arrival, Elizabeth casts Vercueil in pejorative terms, as a "derelict" (Coetzee [1990] 2010, 3) who emits a disgusting smell. Elizabeth compares him to a carrion bird ("The first of the carrion birds, prompt, unerring", 5) and then proceeds to tar the whole population of the homeless with the same brush ("Flies, dry-winged, glazen-eyed, pitiless", 5). She thus equates Vercueil and people like him with scavengers, animals that feed on corpses. Such a metaphor recalls homeless people's forced habit of consuming leftovers and rotten food, so that their very nature appears to the woman as synecdochally rotten, as though they carried "contagions and infections in their blood" (5). Later in the novel, Vercueil is said to occupy one of the lower levels in the chain of being: "Not an angel, certainly. An insect, rather, emerging from behind the baseboards when the house is in darkness to forage for crumbs" (14).

As the narrative progresses, Mrs Curren persistently animalises Vercueil, fixating on his physical features. She describes his "horsy, weather-beaten face" (Coetzee [1990] 2010, 6) and explicitly compares him to an "old horse" (75). She mentions his "animal eyes" (11), "bird-eyes" (22), "chicken-eyes" (113), and states that his "eyes opened once, alert, like an animal's" (162). On another occasion, Vercueil is animalised via a comparison with an "old tom" (48). Similarly, Vercueil's hair in Mrs Curren's dream resembles "ugly rats' tails" (167).

These repeated references gradually strip Vercueil of his human identity, adding up to the figure of a hybrid, animal-like being illicitly

roaming the human realm. Thus, in a society where people are rigidly and obsessively classified according to their skin colour, physiognomy and alleged degree of evolution, Vercueil – whose ethnic roots and demographic status are never specified – comes to embody a blurred quintessence of an animal otherness, of what white conformist society wants to ignore and hide, as suggested by the echoes of the Afrikaans word *verskuil* (hidden).

As these examples demonstrate, Mrs Curren's language reveals a subtle yet pervasive form of epistemic violence. Despite emanating from a presumably emancipated and liberal woman, the frequent use of animal metaphors when referring to non-Western individuals reveals an unwitting reliance on paradigms rooted in historical structures of dehumanisation. In this context, animal metaphors do not serve as mere descriptive tools, but become potent instruments of marginalisation, used by the Western subject to affirm their own humanity by denying it to those constructed as the Other.

3 **The Beastly Face of the Perpetrator**

In *Age of Iron*, Mrs Curren's use of animal tropes to dehumanise the Other is not limited to the victims of apartheid; it also targets the 'perpetrators', the members of white South African society. True to her liberal-humanist outlook, the elderly narrator employs these figurative devices as a rhetorical and critical tool to decry and condemn two groups within the ruling white oligarchy. The first group comprises nationalist politicians – the 'true' perpetrators – those who orchestrated the regime's violence and sanctioned the beatings, killings and the elimination of anyone deemed a threat. The second group comprises ordinary white citizens – their accomplices, whom Don Foster describes as the "onlookers", characterised by acquiescence, silent complicity, and systematic privilege, passively accepting and profiting from apartheid and its brutal machinery (10).

In the novel both of these groups are presented through a vocabulary revolving around the animal world. As such, they undergo a metaphorical transformation in which they are stripped of their humanity and take on a bestial guise. This process is aptly encapsulated in a line spoken by the character: "Metamorphosis, that thickens our speech, dulls our feelings, turns us into beasts" (Coetzee [1990] 2010, 103) and which, although it is uttered in another context, strongly resonates with the theme at hand.

Needless to say, the depiction of white perpetrators as animals suggests a degenerative process in which these individuals are stripped of their humanity and take on dehumanised traits. From a humanistic perspective, this metamorphosis stands for a moral and existential decline – a fall from grace characterised by the loss of

human dignity. This process also echoes Aimé Césaire's assertion that colonisers undergo a form of symbolic animalisation when they unleash their intrinsic hatred and brutality on the colonised ([1950] 2000, 41).

However, this symbolic strategy also raises important ethical issues. While portraying perpetrators as animal-like figures is a familiar and rhetorically powerful trope in Western discourse, it ultimately reinforces an anthropocentric and derogatory worldview. Rather than offering an accurate etiological portrayal of animal behaviour, this strategy dehumanises individuals and devalues non-human animals by attributing negative human traits, such as cruelty and intrinsic violence, to the latter. It thus perpetuates harmful stereotypes, using animals as symbols of human moral failure and depravity.

Among the two aforementioned groups, the nationalist politicians are the primary targets of this imagery. Driven by an entrenched will to power and positioned as the main promoters of a racist war, throughout the narrative, these figures are increasingly portrayed by Mrs Curren as ravenous or ferocious animals. Initially, in an unsettling rhetorical twist, nationalist politicians are compared to *black locusts*:

They with their fathers and mothers, their aunts and uncles, their brothers and sisters: a locust horde, a plague of black locusts infesting the country, munching without cease, devouring lives. (Coetzee [1990] 2010, 28)

In the context of the novel, the choice of this particular insect is clearly deliberate. Locusts are notorious for their destructiveness, being capable of devouring whole acres of farmland and causing widespread famine. In Western tradition, locust imagery is often associated with the idea of a divine punishment, recalling the ten plagues of Egypt. Indeed, in the Bible, a plague of locusts is sent by the God of Israel to punish the Egyptians for cruelly subjecting His people to their rule. Portrayed as greedy and relentless, the biblical locusts consume all the fruit of the land, bringing death and despair among the Egyptians. In parallel, locusts are also charged with paradigmatic significance in (post)colonial contexts. Evan Maina Mwangi has shed light on the subject, outlining how locust imagery is often used in African texts to refer to colonialists (2019, 102). For example, in David Rubadiri's 'An African Thunderstorm', the phrase "a plague of locusts" is thought of in connection with the disruption brought about by Europeans upon their arrival (Mwangi 2019, 116). Similarly, in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, the arrival of colonialists is metaphorically linked to a swarm of locusts (Mwangi 2019, 117).

Interestingly, locusts are a recurring motif in Coetzee's early literary work, functioning both as concrete, physical presences and as symbolic, metaphorical figures. In their literal form, they are repeatedly mentioned by Magda, the protagonist of *In the Heart of the Country*, to emphasise their destructiveness (Coetzee [1977] 1982, 83, 84, 116). Conversely, a reference to these insects is used metaphorically in *Life & Times of Michael K* to represent (colonial) state violence. The specific reference is to police activity in Jakkalsdrif, a fictional relocation camp where a significant number of "undesirable" individuals are secluded. The police are portrayed as moving menacingly between the internees' tents, like a "swarm of locusts" (Coetzee [1983] 2004, 90), spreading fear and chaos, injuring residents and leaving destruction in their wake.

In *Age of Iron*, the locust metaphor operates on two levels: the symbolic and the structural. On a symbolic level, the locusts recall the biblical plague and their historical association with colonisers, paving the way for a parallel between white nationalists and a divine punishment. Structurally, the metaphor serves to expose the nationalists' and the regime's unbridled greed and relentless pursuit of power, pointing to a system based on pervasive extraction, impoverishment and systematic violence. The ravenous consumption enacted by locusts turns into a synecdoche for the brutal logic of apartheid, compared here to a swarm that advances blindly yet purposefully, destroying everything in its path in order to preserve white dominance. Through this imagery, Mrs Curren delivers a sharp critique of the regime's violence, its socio-economic and political destruction, as well as the deep moral decay it has produced. Apartheid, forged on rigid racist foundations that are as unyielding as weapons made of iron and as devastating as a horde of starving insects, appears to have blotted out a pre-existent order of things and killed hope.

The nationalists' predatory nature is reinforced by another element: Mrs Curren frequently employs language associated with the semantic field of consumption, particularly devouring, when describing the regime. This highly symbolic imagery – starting with the image of the horde of locusts as constantly "munching", "devouring" anyone who stands in their way – resonates throughout the text via other vivid images. At one point she claims: "What absorbs them [nationalist politicians] is power and the stupor of power. Eating and talking, munching lives, belching" (Coetzee [1990] 2010, 29). Politicians are subsequently compared to snakes lying in ambush for birds: "We watch as birds watch snakes, fascinated by what is about

to devour us" (29). ⁴ Finally, they are likened to "Boars that devour their offspring" (30). All of these images emphasise the relentless ferocity of nationalist politicians and their insatiable appetite for human life, reinforcing the portrayal of apartheid and colonialism as a perverse, vampire-like mechanism of greedy exploitation.

Like politicians, ordinary white South Africans are described with reference to the world of insects. Detached from the harsher side of reality, indifferent or blind to the suffering of others and obsessed with the pursuit of a comfortable life in a longed-for ethnocentric nation, they are actually reduced to a sub-human status. More specifically, Mrs Curren associates whites with grubs:

Swimming lessons, riding lessons, ballet lessons; cricket on the lawn; lives passed within walled gardens guarded by bulldogs; children of paradise, blond, innocent, shining with angelic light, soft as *putti*. Their residence the limbo of the unborn, their innocence the innocence of bee grubs, plump and white, drenched in honey, absorbing sweetness through their soft skins. (7; Author's emphasis)

In a similar way, she claims that

White as grubs in our swaddling bands, we will be dispatched to join those infant souls whose eternal whining Aeneas mistook for weeping. (92)

Drawing on the classical image of the unbaptised dead in *The Aeneid*, the passage suggests that white South Africans, enclosed in their cocoon of apartness, surrounded by walls and fences and looking towards a sheltered life of comforts, seem to be living in a limbo, a place out of time where they ward off the struggles that are instead an only too common feature of Black life.

⁴ The passage in question contains a clear intertextual reference to Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. In Conrad's novel, the protagonist, the sailor Marlow, reflects on his childhood fascination with maps. In particular, he recalls his interest in the so-called "blank spaces on the earth" – regions that had not yet been explored by Westerners – a definition deeply entrenched in Eurocentric colonial perspectives. Among these, Africa, described as a "place of darkness", particularly captured the boy's imagination. In the passage that Coetzee revisits, Marlow describes how, one day, he was drawn to a map in a shop-window, particularly the image of a winding, serpentine river in Africa. This vision aroused in him a strange, almost perverse fascination, which he later compared to the gaze of a bird fixated on a snake: "And as I looked at the map of it in a shop window, it fascinated me as a snake would a bird – a silly little bird" (Conrad [1899] 2005, 9). Marlow's sense of fascination, and his comparison of himself to a helpless bird mesmerised by the sight of a snake, closely parallels this passage in *Age of Iron*, where white South Africans – likened to birds – appear to be entranced by a hypnotic, almost fatal attraction to nationalist leaders, portrayed as snakes ready to devour them.

According to Emanuela Tegla, the grub metaphor is imbued with a double meaning in the novel. On the one hand, it alludes to the pernicious effect that white South Africans produce on their host country, South Africa itself, which they are consuming from within (2012, 969). Much like grubs feeding on the casing that encloses them, white people can be seen as 'devouring' South Africa, taking its wealth and appropriating its resources. On the other hand, according to Tegla, the image reminds one of the still immature stage of moral development characterising the white community, acting more like children than adults (969). As for the latter, like Tegla, Michael Marais points out that "For much of the novel insect imagery is used to suggest the liminal state of death-in-life in which white South Africans exist" and to account for their "threshold existence" (1993, 17). As the narrative unfolds and Mrs Curren gradually comes to terms with her inherited position as a white South African, she begins to compare herself to a moth or a butterfly, which, in a further twist, is now seen as an objective correlative for a different (and redeeming) kind of metamorphosis. In fact, she thus foreshadows her attempt to atone for the guilt of a life of privilege which deceivingly turned her away from everyday atrocities.

The brutality of the nationalist leadership and the passivity of ordinary white South Africans is again highlighted in a later scene, in which animal imagery plays a significant role. Here, Coetzee contrasts perpetrators and accomplices through the juxtaposition of two animal images that embody very different traits in the collective imagination, wild boars and sheep:

When I think of the whites, what do I see? I see a herd of sheep (not a flock: a herd) milling around on a dusty plain under the baking sun. I hear a drumming of hooves, a confusion of sound that resolves itself, when the ear grows attuned, into the same bleating call in a thousand different inflections "I!" "I!" "I!" And, cruising among them, bumping them aside with their bristling flanks, lumbering, saw-toothed, red-eyed, the savage, unreconstructed old boars grunting "Death!" "Death!". (Coetzee [1990] 2010, 79-80)

The contrast between a ferocious group of boars and a submissive herd of sheep in this passage is strongly reminiscent of George Orwell's *Animal Farm* (1945). In this well-known satirical fable, rich in animal symbolism and filtered through a political lens, a group of pigs seize control of a farm, only to betray their supposed ideals of equality and succumb to a despotic lust for power. Among their obedient and submissive servants are the sheep, the symbolic embodiment of unquestioning conformity. Similarly, in the passage, Mrs Curren deliberately plays on the almost total homonymy between the words 'boer' and 'boar', to initiate a process of symbolic transformation of

the Afrikaner nationalists into (wild) pigs. Just as in Orwell's work, she thus re-creates a dialectic in which these domineering animals take on the role of tyrannical masters over passive, docile ones.

Nevertheless, the Orwellian undertones in this passage are accompanied by other conceptual frameworks that further inform its meaning. The depiction of a divide between a ruling élite of wild boars – embodying the white Afrikaner nationalists – and a passive herd of sheep – representing ordinary white South African citizens – also recalls pioneering studies on the figure of the leader and on crowd psychology such as those of Sigmund Freud, William Trotter and Gustave Le Bon.

The boars' assertiveness and drive to dominate the sheep mirror Freud's observations on the figure of the (authoritarian) leader. According to Freud, such a figure possesses "a strong and imposing will, which the group, which has no will of its own, can accept from him" (1921, 21). In the specific case of *Age of Iron*, the boars' aggressive movement through the herd and the brutality of their actions seem to be intended to dominate the sheep, mobilise them *en masse* and direct their behaviour towards a single goal.

In *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, Freud identifies a key connection between the persuasive authority of the modern leader-figure and the assertive role of the father-figure in the primal horde. In pre-literate societies, he argues, social organisation was structured around this primitive ancestral group – an agglomeration ruled by a powerful patriarchal figure who, embodying traits of Nietzsche's *Übermensch*, exerted control over his children through strict authority and violence (Freud [1921] 1949, 93). Freud's conceptual framework, with its focus on the fraught dynamic between father and offspring in the primal horde, finds a powerful resonance in Coetzee's depiction of nationalist leaders as "Boars that devour their offspring" (Coetzee [1990] 2010, 30).

As is evident, the image of "Boars that devour their offspring" draws on the established semantic field of consumption, but it is also enriched with a multi-layered net of references. On the one hand, it evokes notorious episodes from mythology and religion, such as the Greek myth of Cronus, the son of Uranus, who, fearing his children might usurp his power, devoured them at birth; or the biblical curse described in the book of Ezekiel, in which God condemns the fathers of Israel to eat their own children as punishment for their disobedience. On the other hand, the image also evokes Freud's concept of the primal horde, and especially the perverse bond that existed between father and children in this ancient legion. In the horde, "all of the sons knew that they were equally persecuted by the primal father, and feared him equally" (Freud [1921] 1949, 95). Seen in this light, the relationship between white nationalists (as father figures) and their passive followers (as children) takes the form of

a disturbingly intimate and ambivalent familial bond, reimagined through a perverse, almost vampiric form of dependency.

Interestingly, the portrayal of perpetrators as animal-like figures, particularly those with pig-like features, resurfaces in post-apartheid South African art. In particular, this imagery is reflected in a 1996 visual artwork: Sue Williamson's *Cold Turkey: Stories of Truth and Reconciliation (De Kock Ready to Sing)*, which pivots around the gradual 'becoming beast' of apartheid crusader Eugene de Kock. Nicknamed 'Prime Evil', De Kock became world famous for the horrific tortures and murders he carried out as commander of Vlakplaas, a state headquarters created to sift, interrogate and ultimately eliminate Black revolutionaries. During the hearings coordinated by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission – the well-known non-judicial body set up by Nelson Mandela's government to shed light on gross human rights violations perpetrated in South Africa from 1960 to 1994 and possibly offer conditional amnesty in exchange for full disclosure (Mussi 2020, 2) – De Kock himself openly confessed to the atrocities he committed, fighting in defence of white supremacy.

In Williamson's work, a sequence of photographs of De Kock's face hanging on a photographic drying line is gradually joined by a close-up of a pig's snout. Through this figurative device, the perpetrator appears to lose his human connotations and take on beastly ones. Looking at the painting, the viewer is no longer able to distinguish between De Kock's humanity and inhumanity, with the oppressor being ultimately pervaded by a waft of animality.

In *Cold Turkey: Stories of Truth and Reconciliation (De Kock Ready to Sing)*, the artist symbolically showed how Eugene De Kock could epitomise the crushing cruelty of an apartheid regime only too ready to keep the mantle of leadership and thrive in psychological and physical violence. Echoing the transformation of nationalist figures into wild boars in Mrs Curren's account, De Kock's metamorphosis into a pig symbolises the perpetrator's descent into a subhuman condition as he unleashes his most violent and visceral impulses against non-white victims.

In contrast to the brutality of the nationalist leaders, ordinary white South Africans are portrayed by Mrs Curren as lacking individuality and unable to distinguish themselves. As such, they are symbolically represented as sheep. Their characterisation can be seen as embodying the key characteristics of a crowd mentality. Coetzee's use of the term 'herd' to describe ordinary white South Africans is particularly significant as it echoes key ideas from early studies on crowd psychology. In *Instincts of the Herd in Peace and War*, Trotter uses the concept of the "herd" to argue that "the individual isolated will be of no meaning, the individual as part of the herd will be capable of transmitting the most potent impulses" (1916, 29).

Trotter thus emphasises the mimetic nature of individual behaviour in crowds and the sense of power they acquire by being integrated into a collective agglomerate.⁵ Coetzee's portrayal is consistent with this viewpoint, as the white South Africans in the passage above seem to be completely depersonalised and to draw their strength from their homogenisation into a crowd, where collective interests prevail over the individual. As if subjected to what Le Bon terms "contagion" (Le Bon [1895] 2002, 7), they cannot help but imitate each other's behaviour.

Clearly, the sheep metaphor in the passage is far from neutral; it is imbued with a bitterly parodic tone. Through Mrs Curren's voice, the narrative actively dismantles white mythologies and apartheid narratives. In doing so, it delivers a scathing critique of white South Africans. Rather than hailing them as the worthy, civilised and enlightened masters of South Africa, as apartheid propaganda would have it, the narrative portrays members of the 'white nation' as submissive creatures incapable of acting of their own free will.

In this passage, Coetzee's symbolic choices underscore how, within the framework of the novel, even those complicit in the crimes of apartheid experience a loss of humanity. While metaphorically depicted as sheep – suggesting passivity rather than direct culpability for the regime's wolf-like atrocities – ordinary white South Africans are nonetheless implicated through their tacit acceptance of the nefariousness of its ideology and the brutality of a continued colonial domination. They are portrayed as obsessively preoccupied with preserving their privileged status, a fixation encapsulated by the repeated 'I' hypnotic mantra, a powerful cipher of their assertive selfishness and self-centredness. By suppressing their humanity, pursuing only their own interests and closing their hearts to the suffering of Black South Africans, they are ultimately portrayed as descending into a sub-human status.

4 Conclusion

In this analysis, I sought to demonstrate the pivotal role of animal tropes in J.M. Coetzee's *Age of Iron*. Specifically, I examined how the protagonist, Elizabeth Curren, uses these tropes as figurative devices to convey and project notions of human otherness, identifying a dual phenomenology in this type of rhetoric. The first relates to

5 Similarly to Trotter, although Le Bon does not use the term 'herd' explicitly, he argues that individuals in crowds relinquish their conscious selves to enter a new collective mind in which the individual point of view is conveniently or forcibly erased ([1895] 2002, 2).

Curren's portrayal of racialised and marginalised individuals, particularly non-white victims of apartheid, as animalistic. Here, we encounter a form of instinctive, almost unconscious animalisation through which the elderly narrator articulates her perception of these othered figures. I would argue that this dehumanisation is not merely a remnant of colonial rhetoric, but possibly a derivative of some of the most controversial foundations of Western discourse, including its humanist strand. Elizabeth – an elderly, liberal, retired professor who upholds the ideals of humanism – is a revealing figure. Her language demonstrates that the Western humanist ideology tends to create a distinction between an assumed Western humanity and a certain form of non-Western ethno-racial otherness, possibly expressed through animalising tropes. The latter phenomenology relates to the use of animal tropes in Curren's portrayal of the white perpetrators. In these instances, the animal trope is clearly employed for critical purposes. Curren uses this imagery to expose the violence and moral decay of these figures, symbolically transforming them into animals to highlight their inhumanity. However, despite this shift in purpose, the strategy remains ethically problematic. By linking animality to moral corruption, this figurative device perpetuates an anthropocentric and derogatory framework in which non-human animals become symbolic repositories for all that humans wish to disown. Consequently, this process reduces animals to convenient rhetorical devices intended to be degraded in order to expose the moral depravity of certain individuals – in this specific case, the white perpetrators of the apartheid years and their accomplices.

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Refugee Tales V: Migrants' Fragmented (Auto)Biographies and Wasted Lives in the Contemporary British Expulsive Environment

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Abstract This paper aims to shed light on fragmented migration narratives as portrayed in *Refugee Tales V* (2024) which mainly focuses on the United Kingdom's migratory policies. Besides depriving migrants, refugees and asylum seekers of their civil and human rights, these policies engender wasted lives for certain categories of human beings who are not allowed to stay in the United Kingdom. Ten years after the first walk of solidarity, the ethics of care, consideration and attention that start with the act of listening to stories of people who experience the reality of the British border institutions' immigration detention are still relevant.

Keywords Refugee Tales V. Act of listening. Host-hospitality-hostility. Awaiting. Wasted lives.

Summary 1 Introduction: The Gatwick Detainees Welfare Group and the *Refugee Tales* Project. – 2 Migrants' Fragmented (Auto)biographies. – 3 The Expulsive Environment and Wasted Lives. – 4 Conclusion.



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1 Introduction: The Gatwick Detainees Welfare Group and the *Refugee Tales* Project

This paper investigates migration narratives produced within British immigration detention centres. The intent at the core of these forms of narration, which started about a decade ago, is to give voice to human beings who are unjustly marginalised and confined. Besides being *personae non gratae*, their presence is perceived as a threat mainly to the current economic balance in the United Kingdom. In this paper, the analysis is limited to two (auto)biographies, which best represent both unwelcome, marginalised human beings and the current political and economic British context. Before discussing the two real-life stories, some background on the activist and political nature of the *Refugee Tales* project¹ is required.

The Gatwick Detainees Welfare Group (GDWG) is an organization that made itself known chiefly in online spaces and whose well-designed website gathers practical and legal information for migrants, refugees and asylum seekers, updated news, links to social media such as Facebook and X, along with other helpful contact channels. The GDWG was established in 1995

in response to the UK Immigration Services as they began to detain people at a small holding centre near Gatwick Airport.²

Thanks to their online presence, this non-profit organisation unapologetically announced its humanitarian and activist agency, and over the years, the GDWG has managed to reach migrants, refugees and asylum seekers with the main purpose of supporting them, especially during their time facing detention.

Seventeen years after GDWG began offering compassionate, unceasing support, their activities became particularly relevant when on May 25, 2012, during an interview with the *Daily Telegraph*, Theresa May pronounced the phrase “hostile environment” (Kirkup, Winnett 2012), asserting the government’s intent to create in Britain unwelcoming and dissuasive conditions for illegal immigrants. In 2014, in response to this new phase of British anti-migration policies, David Herd – poet, professor of modern literature, activist – and Anna Pincus – director of Gatwick Detainees Welfare Group – launched a wider campaign in defence of migrants’ rights which is

an outreach project of Gatwick Detainees Welfare Group inspired by the experiences of men held in immigration detention at Gatwick

1 <https://www.refugeetales.org/>.

2 Source available at <https://www.gdwg.org.uk/>.

and the work of the group in 20 years of visiting.³

Herd and Pincus expanded the GDWG's social and political commitment to support people affected by immigration detention by initiating another humanitarian activism project named *Refugee Tales*, which draws on Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* (1387-88) for inspiration.

Since 2015, "walks of solidarity", as defined by Herd (2016, 133), take place every summer. The walks, bringing together British citizens, migrants, refugees and asylum seekers, consist of hiking through the English countryside and sharing stories. The latter triggers two fundamental aspects of what might seem just a mere moment of trekking and talking in the English countryside: a) the aspect of visibility as emphasised by Lidia De Michelis (2019); b) the aspect of care, as emphasised by Lucio De Capitani (2023). While drawing parallels with Chaucer's English canonical literary work, De Michelis simultaneously acknowledges the project's qualities of

Summon[ing] and combin[ing] the world-making power of storytelling and the extraordinary bonding potential of walking in solidarity to reconfigure the English polity as a welcoming space of listening and 'appearance'. (2019, 27)

In conjunction with being visible is the act of care. As Lucio De Capitani emphasises, this annual event, besides raising awareness of immigration detention, confers a further meaning to the project which

walks the line (pun intended) between the political and the therapeutic: it provides forms of relief to refugees while also contesting and denouncing the systems that have caused them harm. (2023, 236)

In this sense, the ethics of care, consideration and attention that start with the act of listening to stories of people who experience the reality of the British border institutions' immigration detention are still important, especially from a therapeutic/psychological perspective. During the sharing of stories, the listener recognises and welcomes the teller as a human being, as if they are active and peer members of the same society. Even though temporarily, the teller is recounting and spending time in a productive way, which contrasts with the wasted time spent in that limbo known as the

3 Source available at <https://www.gdwg.org.uk/who-we-are>.

detention centre that only exacerbates their feelings of alienation, bewilderment and helplessness.

The act of storytelling is then turned into a collection of tales published by Comma Press, a not-for-profit, Manchester based publisher and development agency. Herd and Pincus have so far edited five volumes titled *Refugee Tales* (2016; 2017; 2019; 2021; 2024).

In 2018, the *Refugee Tales* project extended its original engagement and launched a campaign to call for an end to the practice of indefinite detention of migrants, refugees and asylum seekers in the United Kingdom. The aim of the project can be easily perceived in the following quote taken from Herd's essay "Calling for an End to Indefinite Detention: The Spatial Politics of Refugee Tales":

Refugee Tales is a civil society project that calls attention to the fact that the UK is the only country in Europe that detains people indefinitely under immigration rules, and which in so doing calls for that policy to end. The way the project makes its call is by sharing the stories of people who have experienced detention, and the way it shares those stories is in the context of a public walk. (2019, 15)

Walking outdoors freely and telling stories along the way are, for the organisers of the event, two complementary pursuits that underpin this project which combines a humanitarian and radical, oppositional politics. In a podcast for *The Guardian* Ali Smith – patron of the *Refugee Tales* – discusses the issue of migration in the United Kingdom and emphasises the importance of stories because

humans' ears are open, and they are, and because we can't resist and we won't resist because we are human and human story... at last that's what story does, that's why we always tell stories, stories are welcoming in and walking alongside. (2016, 00:00'47"-00:00'57")

In support of her statement, Smith quotes John Berger, who at a public event at the British Library some time earlier expressed his point of view on the current, great movement of people across the world, focussing on the significant role played by the storyteller:

I'm thinking about the storyteller and the storyteller's responsibility is hospitality, you invite someone into a story, you must look after the person who is listening to you, and you must also ensure the person's ears are open because of the hospitality, hospitality goes two ways. (2016, 00:03'05"-00:03'22")

Berger's thoughts on hospitality materialise in the storytelling that occurs during the walk in the English countryside organised by the *Refugee Tales* project. The improvised storyteller who walks freely on English land and across (in this case local) boundaries, verbalises thoughts, feelings and reminiscences of their past and present life at their own pace. In this manner, the teller of the story invites the audience to enter their own private sphere and reality. On this occasion, the "two ways" hospitality argued by Berger manifests itself. Through this process, what Herd defines also as "an exchange of information" (2016, 133), but also a trust-based relationship, emerges between the teller and the listener, in addition to making the teller feel included and recognised as a human being, even if only temporarily.

In 2020, despite the COVID-19 restrictions, the organisers and volunteers did not desist and "like all other large-scale public events, *Refugee Tales* 2020 [was] re-thought" (Herd 2021, 146). New media and digital technologies did allow the walk to take place:

instead of gathering in one location and collectively following a shared route, people walked where they could, drawn together across a three-day weekend by a series of online events: talks calling for A Future Without Detention. (Herd 2021, 146)

Whilst those were all anxious times lived in isolation due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the annual walk of solidarity moved online on the YouTube channel where the *Refugee Tales* community virtually gathered to "call for a future without immigration detention", and following Herd's suggestion, participants sent photographs of bridges intended as symbols of crossing boundaries and borders along with making connections:

If there is one good consequence of lockdown *Refugee Tales*, it is that this year at least, anybody can join in. [...] this year people are joining from across the world, joining in solidarity in the call for a future without immigration detention. In order that we can make that shared call vivid, please let us know via our website, where you are and where you are walking. And please, when you see one, take and send us a photo of a bridge. We are making bridges this year, and we are crossing borders. (Herd 2020, 00:05'58"-00:06'49")

At the end of the online event, as "the project plotted [walkers'] location on an online map" (Herd 2021, 146), the annual walk was done "in over twenty countries worldwide" (146). Further evidence of this crossing of physical boundaries and borders is given by the fourth volume, which is a collection of international tales gathered

during the border-blind COVID-19 pandemic. In the “Afterword” to the fourth volume of tales, Herd places emphasis on:

the act of sharing stories [that] cannot stop. And nor can the walking because, as the project walks, so in walking, it looks to reclaim the ground. The ground is solidarity to which the sharing of stories is crucial. The walk continues. Detention must end. (Herd 2021, 152)

Despite the GDWG and *Refugee Tales* project’s increased engagement and multiple forms of activism, the United Kingdom remains the only country in Europe that detains people indefinitely under immigration rules. Herd indefatigably persists in talking about the asylum process as a process that “symbolically dehumanises asylum seekers by restricting their ability to narrate their story on, and in, their own terms” (Hulme 2018, 141). Although Harriet Hulme reads the *Refugee Tales* project’s attempt as an act of “mimicking the structure of Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales*”, it may be read instead as a “means of a ‘rewriting’ of canonical stories” (Ashcroft, Griffiths, Tiffin, [1989] 2002, 96). The published volumes contain a “Prologue”, and differently from Chaucer’s prologue which “describes the physical and mental attributes of his tale-tellers, Refugee Tales turns the focus onto us, its readers, with a powerful poetic call for us to develop an ethical and hospitable response to the refugee crisis” (Hulme 2018, 141). Borrowing the Australian scholars’ reflections on postcolonial literature, the narrations collected in the published volumes represent an act of replacing the language. Relying on this textual strategy, migrants, refugees and asylum seekers develop into authors who unconsciously respond to the literary canon of the inhospitable host country.

As a matter of fact, the *Refugee Tales* project has managed to direct the audience’s attention to the matter of migration along with the atrocious detention system. Over the years, thanks to its digital visibility, the project has raised awareness about the British immigration detention system, reached an international audience and given rise to similar activist movements worldwide.

Thirty years after its foundation, GDWG continues to advocate for civil and human rights for migrants, refugees and asylum seekers who arrive at the UK borders seeking a dignified life which consists of working and being active, contributing members of British society. Similarly, eleven years after its appearance on the Internet, the *Refugee Tales* project continues to advocate for the end of indefinite detention.

2 Migrants' Fragmented (Auto)biographies

In this unceasing process of supporting detainees and calling for an end to the practice of indefinite detention of migrants, refugees and asylum seekers in the United Kingdom, both the GDWG and the *Refugee Tales* project have evolved, especially in terms of taking action and achieving widespread availability and dissemination, and the five volumes published so far testify to this political and humanitarian commitment.

The five volumes are characterised by an identical structure that partially emulates Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*: each volume contains a general "Prologue" that functions as a preface to every single edition; the titles of the stories shared during the walks provide a distinctive description of the protagonist; the "Afterword", which is one feature of the *Refugee Tales* that is not found in Chaucer's tales, provides updated information about current British and European social-political contexts and how they affect the mass-movements of people across the world; a recapitulation of the real-life experiences collected in each volume and the list of "Contributors" who generously participated in the processes of listening and writing.

The published tales may be defined as fragmented (auto)biographies. They include personal details and circumstantial accounts of events which are ultimately the fundamental constituents of the nonfiction literary genre of both biographies and autobiographies. What distinguishes the method of presenting these biographies is the co-production between the subject of the tale and an established writer, and this is clearly perceived in the subheading that reads "as told to". In this context, as Herd points out, a pure collaboration made of "a proper telling, a proper listening and a crafting of the tale as a consequence of that" (2016, 00:06'59") occurs. As these are biographies of human beings who fled their country of origin, and more importantly, may be vulnerable to the (British) authorities' retaliation, the storyteller's identity remains anonymous as do anyone and/or anything else that could lead to the subject's identification. Then, it is important to underline the fact that the transcribed real-life experiences are a far cry from transcribed real-life experiences, but are, instead, heavily mediated literary retellings. The stories collected and published so far have gone through a gradual process of change. As if to bear witness to the changes both the project and the annual walks of solidarity have gone through over the years, some individuals who have experienced detention and eventually have been granted permission to remain tell their stories as first-person testimonies. This change in authorship appears in the printed version with the subheading "as told by". *Refugee Tales III* marks the emergence of these first-person narratives. Nonetheless, anonymity is still crucial to the extent that in the third volume, for instance, six

out of nineteen tales are introduced with the subheading “as told by” followed by the teller-and-writer’s initials only. In the following editions, even though the number of first-person testimonies has not increased (five out of fourteen in *Refugee Tales IV* and three out of sixteen in *Refugee Tales V*), the teller-and-writer identify themselves by their full names.

Furthermore, the five volumes are characterised by specific keywords that distinguish each edition and, once again, these bear witness to developments in these political, humanitarian forms of activism working to reverse excessively harsh measures implemented by the British government to deter immigration. In *Refugee Tales V*, the tellers’ fractured realities, the sense of uncertainty, of feeling alien and abandoned are prominent in the descriptive frames of mind that characterise the sixteen human beings trapped in a limbo while waiting for an arbitrary decision made by immigration officials.

Britain indefinitely detains in custody human beings who are subject to immigration control, essentially turning them into untried/unconvicted prisoners. As GDWG and the patrons of *Refugee Tales* continue to emphasise, this is an administrative process without judicial oversight under immigration rules. Thus, migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers are considered and treated as felons, which places these individuals under immense levels of stress and seriously affects their mental health. The United Kingdom is one of the largest users of detention in Europe. People are held in detention centres known as “Immigration Removal Centres” (IRCs), Short-Term Holding Facilities (STHFs) and prisons, and the latter distinctly alludes to a criminal procedure. According to Home Office policy, detention must be used sparingly and for the shortest possible period. The reality, however, is that many thousands are held each year, and some for very lengthy periods. Being held in prison-like conditions without a time limit causes anxiety and distress especially in this context where most of the detainees already have traumatic backgrounds, and the psychological impact of being held is absolutely damaging. The number of Detention Immigration Removal Centres in the United Kingdom has increased over the years. They are scattered across the country, and the majority are run by private security companies and by the Prison Service. People in detention cannot leave and have very limited freedom of movement within the centres, and to make things more troubling, security levels are similar to those of prisons.⁴

Characteristics of British Immigration Detention may be found, for instance, in “‘The Friend’s Tale’ as told by Ridy Wasolua”, where the etymologies of host, hospitality and hostile versus stranger and estranged are at the core. His existence in the so-called ‘civilised

⁴ Source available at <https://www.aviddetention.org.uk/>.

and advanced' Western societies is marked by detention centres, deferrals and relocating from one detention centre to another. As the editors inform readers in their "About the Contributors" section, Wasolua "was detained in Colnbrook, Harmondsworth and for several years in Brook House" (Herd, Pincus 2024, 166). His tale is divided into fragments, arguably, so as to mirror his fragmented state of mind. Wasolua introduces himself by describing his first encounter with the host-and-hostile country:

The transition from the ship to the imposing building was a journey into the unknown. As we were led, one by one, with our handcuffs still binding us, a sense of unease settled in the pit of my stomach. (2024, 74)

Plausibly, this reminiscence evokes for attentive readers the time of the slave trade and hints at a parallel between uprooted Africans' arrival in the New World conquered by European countries and current migrants, refugee and asylum seekers' arrival in Western societies; they will realise that the two patterns are similar.

Later in his recounting, Wasolua provides the audience with a window onto another morally reprehensible reality when he describes in detail the first detention centre in which he was held:

The interior was a labyrinth of halls and rooms, each one cloaked in shadow and uncertainty. [...] as we were seated, one by one, a procession of procedures began – a series of measures aimed at extracting our identities and histories. Fingers pressed onto sensors, images captured, swabs taken [...] Metal doors, locks, and the stark reality of confinement painted a contrast to the vision of safety we had held. (74-5)

His confinement is characterised by isolation, the absence of visitors and "the silence of explanations" (76). Furthermore, the lack of solicitors who speak his language makes him feel estranged, out of countenance and suspended "between the past and the present" (76). After a series of interviews, he manages to convince the immigration official that his "actions were driven by the instinct for survival rather than any malicious intent" (77) and "the reality of [his] newfound freedom" leads readers to another fragment characterised, this time, by the disappointing awareness of having been manipulated and exploited by a stranger who allegedly happened to share his origin. Being free but alone in a foreign country with no means of support, Wasolua follows a stranger as a "leap of faith [...] a shred of hope" (78) that emanate from eventually speaking and communicating in the same language. However, later on, Wasolua finds himself trapped in yet another nightmarish reality, and the stranger's betrayal erodes

his sense of self, “leaving an indelible mark on [his] psyche” (81). Another fragment in his recounting is a long description of the time spent, once again, in detention:

the transition marked another step into the abyss, a continuation of the tumultuous journey that had marked my life. [...] The detention centre, with its barred windows and confined spaces, mirrored the entrapment of my spirit. [...] this was a place of limbo. (82)

Despite being surrounded by walls he defines as “both physical and metaphorical” (83), a sort of fellowship develops among detainees through “shared glances, unspoken understanding – that bridge[s] the gaps of language and origin” (83). However, these brief moments of solidarity do not compensate for his by now rooted sense of alienation, of “not belonging, of not being deemed worthy” caused by “the relentless series of trials [he] had endured” (83). Being continuously questioned exhausts his body and mind. He feels emotionally weak and helpless not only in front of his interviewers but also physically to the point of experiencing a sort of splitting: “it was as if I were a spectator to my own suffering” (84). The last fragment shared with his readers is about his release. From his arrival to his being granted leave to remain, the “pursuit of a better life” (88) has functioned as a beacon of hope and a source of strength. During the time spent in detention, Wasolua was not only afraid of having his claim rejected, but also anxious about how he would be able to survive in a new country if he were to be granted refugee status:

How could I reintegrate into society without resources, without a support network, without even the assurance of a roof over my head? (87)

However, such barriers can gradually crumble thanks to humanitarian organisations such as the GDWG and the *Refugee Tales* project. As a form of recognition, but, above all, solidarity with human beings forced to leave their country of origin for different reasons, Wasolua “has worked with Refugee Tales since it began” (Herd, Pincus, 166). He is an artist and filmmaker based in London, but, most importantly, he is a long-term participant in GDWG activism. For ethical, compassionate reasons he continues to stand by the principles of a humanitarian asylum policy along with taking sides with the fellow-human beings who suffer the reality of the British border institutions’ immigration detention. Through his artwork he aims at giving a different opinion on migrants, refugees and asylum seekers:

Refugees are hard-working people that just want to settle down and get on with their lives, but there’s barriers that need to be

crossed. We're going to keep working, breaking these barriers, and keep doing more videos to try to make a change.⁵

However, the release of individuals from immigration detention centres is not synonymous with integration and full recognition of civil and human rights. Issues of racism aside, as Herd proposes for consideration in his "Afterword" in volume V:

the person seeking asylum in the UK continues to be prohibited from working. That prohibition is itself environmental in that it denies any kind of productive relation to lived space, where such a prohibition can continue for years, not uncommonly over a decade. (150)

This banning gives rise to forms of undeclared work and consequent exploitation of the labour force. According to British rules, while seeking asylum, the individual receives "a statutory payment" of approximately five pounds a day on which an individual is asked to survive "for months and years" (151). Furthermore, contradictions in the British laws turn the hostile environment into an extractive environment. If human beings seeking asylum cannot work in the United Kingdom, they can work in British detention centres "for the deeply abusive payment of £1/hour" (150). As mentioned earlier in this paper, immigration detention centres are run by private companies and among them there is Clearsprings, which houses human beings seeking asylum and whose CEO, "Graham King, [in 2024] entered the UK rich list" (151). Unquestionably, this is a legal form of exploitation and simultaneously a modern form of slavery. The only difference between the time of the slave trade and the contemporary refugee mass-movements lies in the supposedly 'voluntary' aspect of their uprootedness.

3 The Expulsive Environment and Wasted Lives

As discussed by Toni Morrison in *The Origin of Others*, over the centuries, the Western world has exercised forms of political and economic control of large parts of the world, and it still has a hold on the black community worldwide. Since the end of the nineteenth century and more significantly since the 1980s, notwithstanding changes in Western political conditions, forms of control and pressure have not disappeared, and the African-American novelist detects them in the ongoing form of control known and understood

5 Source available at <https://www.gdwg.org.uk/voices-from-detention>.

as globalisation (2017, 96). Furthermore, according to Morrison's reflections on history, the current mass-movement of human beings who cross borders in search for better life conditions, along with those journeys made by migrants, refugees and asylum seekers, represent one of the consequences of Western, political and economic control. Human beings who flee their countries of origin for Western societies, besides asking for shelter, aspire to live in safety and dignity and to have a fresh start in life. Their being unwelcome and marginalised perpetuates unjust societies based on exploitation that benefits Western societies and their economic and political prestige (2017, 95).

Marginalisation keeps migrants, refugees and asylum seekers in a limbo that fosters forms of undeclared and underpaid work. These irregular labour arrangements make them vulnerable while their hardship remains, at the same time, invisible and mostly ignored by a public primed to fear newcomers through a steady stream of stories depicting hordes of migrant criminals and welfare abusers overrunning Western borders. The GDWG and the *Refugee Tales* project's political and social engagement, as well as their firm intent to broaden the general audience's awareness of matters and concerns that are under-reported in the mainstream narration of current migrations, represent a form of opposition to increasingly populist and right-wing contemporary concerns regarding mass migrations from non-Western to Western countries.

On these grounds, the genuine collaboration between migrants, refugees, asylum seekers and the founding members and authors behind the *Refugee Tales* project is decisive to enable the alternative storytellers to, at least, compete with and circumvent the narrative of present-day migrations depicted by the mainstream media. This is easily perceived, for instance, in "'The Thirteen Year Tale' as told to Hannah Lowe". As inferred by the title, Oliver – the storyteller – had to endure thirteen years of waiting for political asylum:

Your
thirteenth
year
in Britain,
you gain
asylum.
Detained,
you find
at last
a good solicitor,
who helps you
walks you
through
the door (39)

It may be argued that Lowe's poetic literary style suits Oliver's fragmented narrative, and her lines made of a single word or very short sentence fragments, as in the above extract, reflect the teller's disconnected reality.

This tale too is subdivided into fragments, and, in this context, the numbered sections represent the different steps in Oliver's journeys, namely both the journey undertaken from his "country - nameless for safety -" (32) and the journeys within the British borders due to his having been "*dispersed*" (33; emphasis in the original) and relocated from one detention centre to another. The first section functions as an introduction both to the tale and the writing style adopted by the writer-listener. This tale, in fact, is written in the literary form of a poem:

I look so small beside you, and you a giant -
having told me over lunch a story
so large and full of sorrow, misdeed and drama.
I wonder how to write what you have spoken?
A tale in which, at best, you are the broken
hero, and this country, where we live, an ogre - (31)

The inhospitable and brutish United Kingdom, compared to the mythical figure of a monstrous creature who in legends and fairy tales eats humans, seems to represent the hostile, expulsive environment described by Herd in his "Afterword". Oliver, the heroic figure, is confronted by the cruelty of the British border immigration detention, and the decade-long struggle to arrive at a final decision appears designed to wear down the hero's resolve.

During one of his numerous moments of bewilderment he quotes some lines from Warsan Shire's poem "Home" (2011): "*Now, home is the mouth of a shark*" (32; emphasis in the original) along with "*you only leave home when home won't let you stay*" (36; emphasis in the original). He left his wife and daughters behind, he hid himself "in the boot | of someone's car" (32), he crossed borders under "a stranger's name" (32), he went through "more interviews, more questions" (33) which eventually denied and rejected his first asylum application. The following years spent waiting for another decision to be made are characterised by the awareness of depending on arbitrary rules at the core of a "*points-based system*" that, from the claimants' perspective, involve an endless cycle of "*dispersal, port of entry, leave to remain, | PTSD. You're back where you began*" (34; emphasis in the original).

His next applications for political asylum are delayed and denied, "they give you weeks to leave. | You stay and claim the sofa. All day long" (34). Like Wasolua, Oliver too is in a limbo, his life suspended and lived in "the fear | of detention, deportation, counting pennies | for bread" (35). Oliver's description of his wasted life epitomises

Marc Auge's concept of non-places and, secondly, Giorgio Agamben's concept of "the state of exception" (2003, 23). Oliver's reclaiming of a sofa may be compared, borrowing Auge's words, to "the planet [where] refugees are parked" ([1992] 1997, 34) while waiting to be accepted and included in Western societies; whereas the British environment of immigration detention along with the societal environment that confines human beings like Oliver to its margins may be compared to the state of exception which is

neither external nor internal to the juridical order, and the problem of defining it concerns precisely a threshold, or a zone of indifference, where inside and outside do not exclude each other but rather blur with each other. (Agamben 2003, 23)

The arbitrariness of "a zone of indifference" (23) due to the British legal vacuum in immigration laws brings about a societal context where individual liberties, civil and human rights are denied to the so-called 'illegal' immigrants. This makes them vulnerable and disposable to the sovereign power of neoliberal and global markets' logics. Or, as Herd sustains in his "Afterword" in volume V:

The UK government has addressed the shameful reality of what Giorgio Agamben called the state of exception by making the exceptional state of detention the political norm. [...] Detention is being defined by being extended. [...] detention is being further hard-wired into the political process. (156)

This vicious circle only engenders and fortifies unjust and unfair Western societies and continues to reproduce patterns of exploitation and dehumanisation. It is as though colonialism has never ceased to exist, with the only difference being that in the 21st twenty-first century, forms of slavery, labour force exploitations and marginalisations are not perpetuated in the overseas dominions, but in the mother country.

In his "Afterword" in volume V, Herd proposes for consideration the shift *"From the Hostile Environment to the Expulsive Environment"* (2024, 149; emphasis in the original). Except for the virtual walk of 2020, as mentioned above, the walks of solidarity have been occurring yearly in southern England "where the organisation is based" (2024, 149). In contrast to the act of walking and sharing real-life experiences, which, much like the landscape where the walks take place, has remained unchanged since *Refugee Tales* was inaugurated, Herd does not fail to point out the ways in which the British political environment has changed for the worse. As the co-organiser of the project puts forth, "the hostile environment [...] picture[s] a territory that is generally unwelcoming" (2024, 150),

but in addition to being just unreceptive towards human beings who fled their country of origin, it has expanded and turned into a breeding ground for illegal forms of exploitation. As mentioned earlier, private companies such as Clearsprings foster the production of human waste. Twenty years after its first theorisation, this concept may also be applied to a certain degree to the reality of the British immigration detention system.

Developed by Zygmunt Bauman in *Wasted Lives: Modernity and Its Outcasts* (2004), this concept concerns how liquid modernity and globalisation, which prioritise flexibility, speed and consumption, marginalise those who are unable to adapt and conform to these constantly changing conditions by rendering them superfluous/redundant to the system's needs while also treating them as disposable or marginal. Bauman emphasises that the term 'wasted life' encompasses not only poverty or exclusion, but also the loss of meaning and personal value (2004, 5-6).

Within the context of the British immigration detention system, the so-called 'superfluous' population of outcasts is represented by migrants, refugees and asylum seekers, who find themselves trapped in a limbo wasting their time and life while waiting for an arbitrary decision to be made. In his work, Bauman provides a profound understanding of what it means to be an outcast or human waste, and his reasoning is still, sadly, pertinent today. In the wake of the 2020 global pandemic and the simultaneous migrant crisis, the lines have been clearly drawn between the essential and the non-essential; the citizen and the asylum seeker.

Furthermore, relying on the Polish-British sociologist's postulation, the spread of imperialist globalisation has created a lawless "frontierland", in which global solutions are to be found for local problems of overpopulation; and local solutions for the global problem of the large, displaced population of asylum seekers (Bauman 2004, 72).

In truth, Bauman's concept of wasted is one of the recurrent adjectives detectable in the real-life experiences collected in volume V and easily defined as a key word for the stories. Tellers, directly or indirectly via their contributors, phrase their feelings by employing this polysemic adjective. In so doing, language does externalise their actual distinguishing features. They are confined in detention centres in prison-like conditions, they are banned from having a decent life, they are deprived of civil and human rights. Eventually, this confinement results in a wasteful squandering of human capital as, reprising Wasoula's statement, "refugees are hard-working people".⁶

6 Source available at <https://www.gdwg.org.uk/voices-from-detention>.

4 Conclusion

What started as a hostile environment later developed into an expulsive environment which exacerbates and entrenches growing inequalities and problems of housing and food insecurity as well as the erasure of civil and human rights for large segments of the population. In this at first hostile and then expulsive environment, migrants, refugees and asylum seekers' lives are marked by precariousness, uncertainty, and enduring feelings of estrangement and not belonging. The active listening to their stories, which are based on real-life experiences, promotes trust, understanding, and empathy and, at times, inspires and motivates both the storyteller and their audience. Listening is an act of care. It requires active engagement but also requires a fierce passivity especially if the act of listening is approached through a phenomenological lens. In this sense the listener turns into a deliberate host who welcomes without preconceptions both stories and their protagonists. Arguably, the ability to receive is easier with strangers, and absorbing the Other comprises the work of navigating and shifting from stranger to friend. While it may be difficult in practice, during the democratic act of listening, the transmission and the reception must work in reciprocity and on a mutual level, this act dispenses with any form of hierarchy.

In a 2016 article for *The New Yorker*, musicologist Kerry O'Brien affirms that composer Pauline Oliveros dedicated her life to the art of listening as a form of activism. Indeed, Oliveros described the act of listening as a necessary pause before considerate and solicitous actions:

Listening is directing attention to what is heard, gathering meaning, interpreting and deciding on action.⁷

Oliveros' assertion vividly resonates in the *Refugee Tales* project and its annual walks of solidarity. In 2024, the annual walk of solidarity celebrated its tenth anniversary and:

to mark this moment the project will stage The Refugee Tales Festival of Walk – still calling for a future without detention, still calling, as an urgent first step, for an end to indefinite detention.⁸

If, on the one hand, last year's walk of solidarity was elevated to the artistic form of festival, which is a further sign of the evolution and

⁷ Source available at <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/listening-as-activism-the-sonic-meditations-of-pauline-oliveros>.

⁸ Source available at <https://www.refugeetales.org/walk-2024>.

development of this social, political and humanitarian project, on the other hand, it is deplorable that the call for the end of indefinite detention still needs to be demanded loud and clear.

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Investigating the Online Communicative Practices of an Indian Grassroots Environmental Movement Through Ecostylistics: The Case of #SaveHasdeoForest

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Abstract This study investigates the online communicative practices of the grassroots environmental movement #SaveHasdeoForest, in order to investigate their stylistic traits and communicative strategies. Through an integrated approach comprising ecostylistics, ecolinguistics, multimodal studies and postcolonial studies, the analysis shows that background knowledge about (post)colonial policies against the Indigenous peoples of India is necessary to fully decode the texts analysed; that multimodality, oppositions and translinguistic practices are major stylistic traits in the digital communication of this movement; and that engagement and persuasion are its main communicative functions.

Keywords Grassroots environmentalism. Indigenous peoples. Online communication. Ecostylistics. Ecolinguistics. Multimodality. Postcolonial studies.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 Socio-Historical Background. – 3 Theory, Methodology, Analysis and Discussion. – 3.1 Theory and Methodology. – 3.2 Analysis. – 3.3 Discussion. – 4 Conclusion.



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1 Introduction

Ecological and environmental matters are an arena where the fiercest conflicts take place. Ever since the 1970s, when it became clear that the ecological balance of the Earth's ecosystems was compromised, what should have been a swift and collective action to restore that balance became a site of clashes and disputes between environmentalists on one side and corporations and lobbies interested in preventing economic loss on the other (Rich 2019). Within this arena, the link between major social and historical forces, such as colonialism, capitalism, the current environmental emergency and environmental (in)justice has certainly *not* been as foregrounded by many social actors – e.g. governments in the Global North – as other, less controversial cause/effect relations (e.g. that between carbon dioxide and rising temperatures) have been. However, studies in Environmental Humanities exploring various aspects of this link have multiplied in the last two decades (e.g. DeLoughrey, Handley 2011; Huggan, Tiffin [2009] 2015; Nesmith et al. 2021).¹ Even though an exhaustive list of publications on this subject is beyond the scope of this article, it is important to point out that the disciplines that fall under the umbrella of the Environmental Humanities share a common interest in the “interpretation of texts” and in the exploration of such issues as “the entanglements of the Anthropocene with the history of colonialism and imperialism alongside forms of racial and social injustice that still structure global politics” (Bassi, Mason 2021, 9, 11).

For socially committed academic disciplines such as postcolonial studies, ecostylistics, ecolinguistics, critical discourse analysis and ecocriticism, to name a few, it is of particular interest to investigate relations of this kind and to disseminate information about them, even when – especially when – these are deliberately kept out of the spotlight outside academia. An interdisciplinary approach is necessary in the Environmental Humanities (see Bassi, Mason 2021; Stibbe 2021b), if we are to fully comprehend the multifaceted nature of relations so complex that they would be otherwise impossible to conceptualise. In line with this notion, this article provides a contribution at the intersection between ecostylistics, ecolinguistics, postcolonial studies and multimodal studies. Its aim is to investigate the link between the historical roots of current environmental threats in a postcolonial setting, environmental injustice and Indigenous activism. More specifically, the contribution will focus on the online communicative practices of the #SaveHasdeoForest campaign. This was launched by grassroots environmental activists as part of their fight against deforestation and nationalist policies of hostility towards

1 See also Adami 2025; Zurru 2024b.

minority groups and Indigenous peoples in the Chhattisgarh state in India. A corpus of 16 posts collected from the social platform X will be analysed through ecostylistics (Virdis 2022; Zurru 2017; 2024b), ecolinguistics (Fill, Penz 2018; Stibbe [2015] 2021a; Zurru 2022), postcolonial studies (Adami 2025; Adami, Roy 2023; De Capitani, Bassi 2023),² and multimodal studies (Pérez Sobrino 2017; Machin, Mayr 2023; Zurru 2024a),³ to explore their communicative strategies and stylistic traits. This will allow the article to a) contribute to the scholarship on ecostylistics by focusing on the link between (post)colonialism and environmental emergency, an area still fairly unexplored in the discipline; and b) investigate the communicative style of this specific campaign and compare it to the communicative style of the #SaveBuxwahaForest campaign previously analysed (Zurru 2024b), in order to trace possible intersections between different grassroots environmental movements in the Indian subcontinent.

Section 2 will provide readers with a brief socio-historical background of the campaign. Section 3 will focus on the theoretical and methodological framework and the analysis of data and discussion.

2 Socio-Historical Background

‘Adivasis’ is the collective name used to identify the many Indigenous peoples of India,⁴ who are part of the largest group of Indigenous peoples in the world, with over 84 million of them living in the subcontinent (Samson, Gigoux 2017). Adivasis have traditionally led lives deeply entrenched within the ecosystems they are part of, most specifically forest areas (Xaxa 2021, 53; Sahu, Prasad 2023; see also Rycroft, Dasgupta 2011), so much so that their relationship with and right to their ancestral land has been defined as a “marker of collective identity” (Sen 2018, 173). Encroachment on Adivasi land started during British rule, with the first laws regulating ownership and use of the forests being approved by the colonial government (Sahu, Prasad 2023; Suna 2024). As in any other colonial territory, the Indigenous peoples of India were among those most heavily repressed and/or erased during the Raj (Samson, Gigoux 2017). The term ‘tribal peoples’ – a term still controversial today – was used to represent Indigenous peoples as primitive, and to infantilise them to the point

² See also DeLoughrey, Handley 2011; Huggan, Tiffin [2009] 2015.

³ See also Ledin, Machin 2018.

⁴ See the section “Adivasis in India” at <https://minorityrights.org/communities/adivasis-2/>.

that a paternal control by the benevolent colonial ruler would be perceived as necessary (53-4). However, colonial forest management was more focused on economic profit than environmental protection, with agriculture, exploitation of mineral resources and construction of roads and railways on indigenous lands being a primary concern (Xaxa 2021, 53).

Once the postcolonial period started, Adivasis were kept on the sidelines of the nation-building process, due to their otherness with respect to the dominant groups who inherited the government of the newly born nation (Samson, Gigoux 2017, 53-4). As in many other Asian countries, the postcolonial Indian governments – especially the current one – have refused to acknowledge Adivasis' Indigenous status and legally refer to them as 'scheduled tribes', as they claim that every ethnic group without European descent is indigenous (53-4). However, various nation states and organisations have started to recognise that an integral part of indigenous identity is represented precisely by histories and ways of life that are noticeably different from those of other ethnic groups, including – but not limited to – their connection to the habitats that provide for them and that they protect and conserve (Samson, Gigoux 2017, 51; see also Natarajan 2021). Nowadays, most forest areas in India are nationalized, which has progressively deprived Adivasis of their rights to their land. Paradoxically, the alleged reason for state intervention has been to stop the destruction of forests by the Indigenous peoples.⁵ These claims are in stark contrast with sources proving that Indigenous peoples are the best conservationists (Hindou Oumarou 2024; Santiago 2025; Smith 2025), as demonstrated by the indigenous Amazonian forests being the last carbon sinks (Veit et al. 2023) and by many academic studies exploring and reporting on the link between Indigenous conservationism and thriving ecosystems (see Berkes [1999] 2018; Thornton, Bhagwat 2020).

The environmental campaign that was selected as a case study for this article can only be fully explored and comprehended within this historical context. Indeed, mainly due to the ideological stance of the current nationalist government, Adivasis have been consistently targeted in recent years (see Adami, Roy 2023b, 7-8), so much so that India's Supreme Court ordered the eviction of 8 million indigenous forest dwellers in 2019 on conservationist grounds, in violation of the 2006 Forest Rights Act.⁶ The eviction was not

5 See the section "Adivasis in India" at <https://minorityrights.org/communities/adivasis-2/>.

6 See the article "India's Indigenous Peoples Under Attack By Modi Government And Conservationists" at <https://www.survivalinternational.org/articles/India-indigenous-under-attack>.

enforced in the end due to political pressure, but other projects were approved, such as the coal-mining project in the Chhattisgarh state, spearheaded by the multinational conglomerate Adani Group, which the #SaveHasdeoForest campaign opposed. This project would have caused around 200,000 trees in Hasdeo Forest to be cut down and 20,000 indigenous dwellers to be displaced.⁷ An informal coalition of grassroots movements under the name of “Save Hasdeo Aranya Resistance Committee” launched a number of initiatives: an online environmental campaign, a march to the state capital and a tree hugging sit-in. After 18 months of constant activism, the coal-mining project was cancelled and the Goldman Environmental Prize, also known as the Green Nobel Prize, was won by Alok Shukla, who coordinated the coalition (Drury 2024). This grassroots environmental movement was fundamental in the fight against capitalist greed, nationalist hostility towards Adivasis, and the complete disregard for environmental protection. The communicative style of this successful campaign will be explored in Section 3.2, following an illustration of theory and methodology in Section 3.1.

3 Theory, Methodology, Analysis and Discussion

3.1 Theory and Methodology

As mentioned in the Introduction, the interpretation of texts is at the core of this contribution. However, since the texts in our corpus are multimodal texts in the context of online grassroots environmental resistance against deforestation, capitalist interests and the violation of Indigenous identity and rights, an interdisciplinary approach combining ecostylistics, ecolinguistics, postcolonial studies and multimodal studies is necessary.

The main theoretical and methodological framework informing this research is ecostylistics, which focuses on communicative, discursive, textual, linguistic and/or multimodal style(s) as indices of the ideological viewpoint of texts and of the way in which this ideological stance is shaped and communicated (Virdis 2022; Zurru 2017; 2024b). Ecolinguistics (Bortoluzzi, Zurru 2024; Fill, Penz 2018; Stibbe [2015] 2021a) provides a wealth of knowledge, both in terms of theoretical approaches and analytical methods, about the connection between language, dispositions and actions related to ecological and environmental matters, and about how reframing

7 See the article “India: Massive Coal Mining Expansion in Tribal Forests Green-Lighted” at <https://www.survivalinternational.org/news/12811>.

language usage can help reframe attitudes. Both disciplines shed light on how language and communication are pivotal in guiding people's perceptions of environmental issues, sometimes by erasing certain notions or people(s) from the narrative (Stibbe [2015] 2021a). Therefore, environmental (in)justice is a major theoretical interest in both fields, as is showing the potential of "new narratives to live by" (Stibbe 2024), such as Indigenous perspectives and knowledge. In this contribution, the main theoretical concern is showing how, through acts of resistance, people who have been slowly and steadily erased for centuries – during and after colonialism – are still forced to fight against injustice, while their lives, beliefs and conservation skills keep being ignored or even weaponised against them. On the contrary, Indigenous conservation knowledge is a fundamental source for transformative change, which many consider an important "new narrative to live by", and one of the keys for positive and effective environmental action. O'Brien et al. (2024, 5) state that "transformative change is urgent, necessary and challenging – but possible", if biodiversity is to be conserved and restored. The authors also point out that transformative change needs to be "systemic". This requires a shift in the status quo and a loss of benefits for certain groups in the short term – which has traditionally been the source of the conflicts between environmentalists and economically-focused parties, as discussed in the introductory section. Nevertheless, O'Brien et al. clearly assert that transformative change is inevitable, if we are to build an ecologically healthy and socially just society, and that it must necessarily include Indigenous and local knowledge (6).

This is in line with many voices within environmental studies that underline the unsustainability of the current status quo. These include the notion of "growthism" in ecolinguistics, or the idea that continuous growth is possible and desirable to such an extent that it is often encapsulated in the very language we speak (Halliday [1990] 2001, 196); the "cancer stage of capitalism" in political economy, which clarifies that capitalism will inevitably lead to "global ecogenocide" if left unchecked, as limitless growth in a limited system, such as planet Earth, cannot be realistically pursued (McMurtry 2015); or "degrowth communism" in philosophy, which underlines the incompatibility between degrowth and capitalism, as well as the urgent need to deescalate the capitalist obsession with unchecked growth and individuality (Saito 2023). The latter is perceived as so controversial by some that it was defined as "economically dubious and politically impossible" (Beam 2024). On the contrary, both ecostylistics and ecolinguistics encourage studies which showcase a counternarrative to the idea that alternative narratives to live by, such as transformative change and learning from Indigenous wisdom, are "economically dubious and politically impossible". By investigating the #SaveHasdeoForest campaign, this study shows

that certain stylistic and communicative strategies can contribute to successful grassroots activism fighting both environmental damage *and* environmental injustice. At the same time, this analysis also foregrounds the fact that Indigenous peoples in former colonies are still fighting to defend their habitats as both a source of livelihood and an integral part of their identity, which is a central aspect of postcolonial studies. Indeed, the dynamics of power and resistance which stem from the colonial enterprise are a major concern in postcolonial studies. More specifically, the reference studies of this contribution (Adami 2025; Adami, Roy 2023a; De Capitani, Bassi 2023)⁸ provide the theoretical background on colonialism and postcolonialism in India, and about Adivasi identity and struggles. These studies are pivotal in the exploration and understanding of the link between capitalism, colonialism and environmental injustice against Indigenous peoples – a link which is being explored in an ever-increasing number of studies. As demonstrated by Acemoglu, Johnson and Robinson, who were awarded the 2024 Nobel Prize in Economic Sciences, there is a direct connection between colonial history and the current disparity in economic prosperity among countries.⁹ Moreover, the inextricable link between colonialism, capitalism and the appropriation of Indigenous resources has been discussed in terms of “biocolonialism” by Whitt (2009). With this term the author explores a form of neocolonialism which “involves struggles over the politics of ownership – respectively, of spiritual knowledge, of human remains, of plant genetic resources and medicinal knowledge, and of human genetic resources” and “the intervention of western property law in a manner that privileges the already powerful and violates the sovereignty of indigenous peoples” (5-6). Along similar lines is Marya and Patel’s study (2021), which explores the effects of colonialism – starting with capitalism and supremacism – as “inflammation” of both society and the human body. In their view, colonialism has shaped societies structured on catastrophic trauma for both ecosystems and social systems, which has led to disastrous consequences such as slavery, genocide and ecocide. Studies that delve deep into the far-reaching effects of the colonial enterprise are, therefore, as timely and necessary as ever.

Multimodal studies (Kress, van Leeuwen [1996] 2021), including multimodal critical discourse analysis (MCDA; Ledin, Machin 2018; Machin, Mayr 2023) and multimodal metaphor studies (Pérez Sobrino 2017; Zurru 2022; 2024a) complete the theoretical and methodological framework, enabling us to analyse the texts selected

⁸ See also DeLoughrey, Handley 2011; Huggan, Tiffin [2009] 2015.

⁹ See the 2024 Nobel Prize Press Release at <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/economic-sciences/2024/press-release/>.

by focusing on all the modes used. Furthermore, these disciplines allow a critical exploration of the texts against the background of their wider socio-historical context and of the relations of power in the postcolonial Indian subcontinent, as well as of the discourse on grassroots environmentalism on social media. Indeed, social media have become one of the most important sites of contestation around environmental matters such as climate change, mainly thanks to the so-called “Greta Effect” (Mede, Schroeder 2024), so much so that the majority of environmental communication studies focus on social media more than any other digital platform (Díaz-Pont et al. 2020, 16). In addition, research shows that communication on social media reflects patterns of language evolution influenced by social dynamics typical of linguistic contamination and hybridisation (Di Marco et al. 2024, 8). After analysing three hundred million social media posts in English over 34 years and across eight social media platforms – including almost ten million posts about climate change on Twitter – Di Marco et al. conclude that a decrease in the length of the comments and a reduction in their lexical richness can be observed (8). This is likely linked to the overarching function of social media platforms – entertainment – which leads their algorithm to favour emotionally resonant and simplified language, which in turn enhances the possibility of content going viral (8). The counterpart to these processes of linguistic simplification is the increasing visuality and multimodality within social media communication, which leads to greater engagement (see Kanuri 2024; Li, Xie 2020) and which can also be detected within environmental activism on social platforms (see Zurru 2022; 2024b).

Finally, in terms of data collection, we followed the same procedure as in the companion study mentioned in the Introduction (Zurru 2024b). Indeed, as stated above, two of the aims of this contribution are to carry out an analysis of the texts collected from the #SaveHasdeoForest campaign and to compare the results with those obtained from the previous study, in order to ascertain whether common stylistic traits can be identified. Therefore, data were collected as follows:

- the posts were downloaded from the social media platform X on the same day, after being selected from the ‘top’ results for the main hashtags the movement used: #SaveHasdeoForest and #SaveHasdeo;
- only posts containing language-based text or language-based text in combination with still images were considered, as the meaning-making process in posts containing videos involves other elements (e.g. music), which require additional methodological and analytical tools;
- posts from corporate accounts were excluded, to avoid the possibility of greenwashing;

- posts from individual accounts that posted massively were excluded, to avoid individual voice(s) and/or style conflating with those of the campaign;
- identical posts which were posted multiple times were also excluded for the same reason;
- posts entirely written in a language unfamiliar to the analyst were excluded.

The result is a corpus of 16 posts. Data are analysed and discussed in 3.2 and 3.3 below.

3.2 Analysis

Each text analysed shows a multilayered communicative style with many linguistic, discursive and stylistic elements which are used on multiple occasions. Table 1 below summarises the categories identified in the whole corpus:

Table 1 Categories in the 16-post corpus

Category	Post number
Artivism	1, 2, 3, 6, 8
Humour	2, 12
Informative communication	5, 7
Multimodal figurative language	1, 2, 8, 15
(Verbal text + visual) multimodality	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16
Opposition	3, 8, 4, 5, 6, 13, 14, 15
Persuasive communication	1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 8, 9, 10, 11, 13, 14, 15, 16
Reference to Indigenous peoples	1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 16
Reference to non-human animals	5, 7, 9, 16
Translinguistic practices	1, 3, 6, 8, 9, 13, 16
Verbal metaphor	7, 10, 11, 13
Violent narrative	2, 3, 8

In consideration of space constraints, a detailed qualitative analysis of all 16 posts is not feasible. Therefore, the qualitative analysis will be carried out on a limited number of posts¹⁰ representative of the five most frequently identified categories: (verbal text + visual)

10 All the posts collected were posted by public accounts, which openly share content with the aim of encouraging engagement and fully retain its copyright. This also allows for these texts to be analysed within the remit of Fair Use. However, a decision was made not to show the icons – which often include the face of the author of the posts – and their handle, and to only quote their X name in the caption of each picture.

multimodality, persuasive communication, reference to Indigenous peoples, opposition and translinguistic practices.



Figure 1 Post 1 – shared by Tribal Army ©

Post 1 [fig. 1] is an example of (verbal text + visual) multimodality, persuasive communication, reference to indigenous peoples and translinguistic practices. In addition, it exemplifies the use of artivism and multimodal figurative language. Indeed, the verbal portion of the post makes an explicit reference to the plight of indigenous people and to their exceptional conservationist skills and resistance. The verbal message interacts with the picture, making it necessary to combine verbal text and visual to be able to decode all the layers of meaning created by the post. The visual is an example of artivism, or the use of art for activism, which has become increasingly important within environmental communication (see Rodriguez-Labajos 2022). A multimodal metaphonymy (Pérez Sobrino 2017), namely a combination of metonymy (A FOR B) and metaphor (A IS B) cued through different modes (e.g. verbal + visual), can be identified in the image: (CRYING WOMAN FOR) INDIGENOUS PEOPLES ARE (HUG FOR) PROTECTING (TREES FOR) HASDEO FOREST FROM (EXCAVATOR, CUT OFF TREES AND FACTORY FOR) ADANI. Indeed, the verbal reference to Indigenous peoples is historically linked to the image of the woman hugging a tree, a reference to the

Chipko Movement, an environmental movement of villagers of rural areas, particularly women, who operated in the 1970s and launched the practice of tree hugging for environmental protection, based on Gandhi's idea of non-violent resistance (Sadak 2024).

That the trees are those of Hasdeo forest and the threat is represented by Adani is, once again, clarified by the interaction between the verbal text and the image. Indeed, the hashtags used in this post are #StopAdani and #SaveHasdeo. The former is an example of co-creation of meaning and proliferation of hashtags within a movement on social media, a salient aspect of "hashtag activism" (Xiong et al. 2019), and it also clarifies that it is Adani specifically, and not deforestation in general, the Indigenous peoples need to protect Hasdeo forest from. The latter has an affiliation function (Zappavigna 2018; Zappavigna, Martin 2018), as it is one of the main hashtags of the campaign, behind which the activists in the movement rally, but it also clarifies the link with the trees portrayed in the visual art. Concurrently, the main hashtags clarify the wider context constraining the interpretation of these posts: these are not texts about environmental activism in general; they are about saving Hasdeo forest and supporting its ancestral dwellers in their acts of resistance. Interestingly, the hashtag #SaveHasdeo is also included, both in English and Hindi,¹¹ in the visual art, in the two posters at the feet of the woman. This is an example of the translinguistic practices within this movement. As discussed in Dovchin, Izadi (2023), translinguistic practices on social media in the Global South are far from exotic or unconventional, as they are often interpreted in the Global North. Rather, they are the result of linguistic hybridisation and multilingualism which, in the Global South, are almost always an effect of colonisation. Hence translinguistic practices are often ordinary and unremarkable in the Global South. They can, however, be used for specific purposes, such as activism on social media (Silva, Maia 2022), and to increase one's communicative potential (Dryden, Izadi 2023). Finally, the elements discussed clarify that the communicative style of this post is persuasive, rather than informative. The post aims at engaging the audience through the emotional response generated by the art and to persuade them to support the campaign by foregrounding the need to both protect the forest and support the fight of Adivasis.

11 Every verbal element which was not written in English was translated through machine translation and the translation was cross-checked multiple times through different sources to ensure its accuracy.



Figure 2 Post 4 – shared
by Kewal Kaiwartya ©

Post 4 [fig. 2] is an example of opposition, as well as reference to Indigenous peoples, persuasive communication and (verbal text + visual) multimodality. In this instance, verbal text and image support each other rather than interacting directly, as seen in Post 1. The verbal text uses parallelism (Leech 2008), or the repetition of the parallel structures “Save our heritage” and “Save Hasdeo”, to trace a connection between the forest and the author’s heritage, which, thanks to context, we can deduce is Indigenous heritage. Communicatively prominent is the use of the pronoun “we”, which recalls the notion of the forest being a marker of collective identity for Adivasis as discussed in Section 2. Parallelism is one of the strategies used to achieve foregrounding (Leech 2008) in communication, thus making the foregrounded notion especially salient. This connection is reinforced by hashtag proliferation, with the use of the hashtag #SaveHasdeo_SaveTribal in addition to the campaign hashtag #savehasdeoforest. The picture shows an oppositional information value based on a Given-New realisation in terms of composition (Kress, van Leeuwen [1996] 2021, 216-7): two opposed elements are juxtaposed horizontally, so that the left, Given element is presented as the starting point of the message which is already known, while the New element on the right is presented as the novel information recipients need to focus on. By contrasting the image of a lush green forest with desert land, the image presents the forest – which the hashtag at the bottom clarifies is Hasdeo forest – as the Given, “natural” element, and the desert, as the new, “unnatural” one. Overall, the post aims at persuading other users of the importance of the campaign by using verbal foregrounding

in combination with a visual of the consequences of deforestation. By doing so, the post appeals to users' understanding that what is at stake is both Adivasis' heritage and the safeguarding of the forest. The 'forest vs desert' opposition employed in this text is the most frequent opposition in the corpus (posts 4, 5, 13, 14) and, using Jeffries's (2010) terminology, is a conventional opposition, namely a type of opposition that is conventionally made, similar to, e.g., 'sea vs mountain'. However, the corpus also shows a number of unconventional – hence communicatively salient due to their creativity and unexpectedness – oppositions: human vs non-human animal, Adivasi vs government, Adivasis vs Adani.



Figure 3 Post 5 – shared by Neelam Ahluwalia ©

Post 5 [fig. 3] is a discursively rich text, as it is an example of (verbal text + visual) multimodality, conventional opposition, unconventional opposition, reference to Indigenous peoples, reference to non-human animals and informative communication. Indeed, even though the post encourages users to engage with the campaign thanks to one of the main hashtags and hashtag proliferation (#IndiaWithHasdeo), the verbal portion of the post focuses on providing facts and figures about the probable consequences for the forest, the Indigenous peoples, the climate crisis and the non-human animals in the

area. Interestingly, the last piece of information is presented as a verbal opposition (Jeffries 2010), namely “man-elephant conflict”, which is then reiterated in the visual, turning the ‘human vs non-human animal’ opposition into a multimodal one. The image shows a multilayered compositional structure: on the left-hand side is the same opposition analysed in Post 4, namely the conventional opposition forest vs desert with a Given-New realisation; on the right-hand side is an Ideal-Real oppositional information value (Kress, van Leeuwen [1996] 2021, 217): the top half portrays the “ideal” part of the message and the bottom half showcases the “real” part. In other words, the image clarifies that, in case of deforestation, there would barely be space for people, while, ideally, there should be space for both human and non-human animals in an untouched forest. This is a reference to the fact that Indigenous peoples and elephants in the Chhattisgarh state are competing for space in an increasingly smaller habitat (Derhgwawen, Mohan 2024), which is another aspect in the environmental injustice caused by capitalist enterprises such as this: not only do humans need to fight against Adani, they also need to compete with non-human animals, just like non-human animals need to compete with humans, when the actual threat to their survival is Adani.

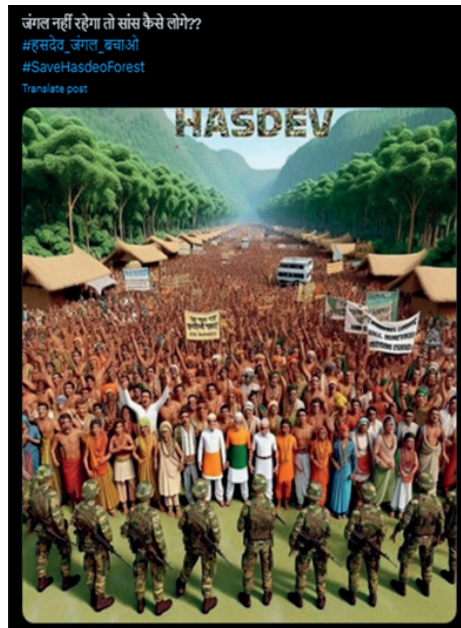


Figure 4 Post 6 – shared
by Manakdeep Singh Kharaud ©

Post 6 [fig. 4] is an example of (verbal text + visual) multimodality, persuasive communication, activism, translinguistic practices, reference to Indigenous peoples and unconventional opposition. The verbal portion of the text presents the main hashtag in both languages and the rhetorical question “How would you breathe without the forest?”, which is a reference to the ability of trees to create the oxygen humans need to survive. This verbal message is supported by the digital art, which shows the unconventional opposition ‘Adivasis vs government’: the Indigenous peoples – identifiable by their clothing and the signs which clearly mark them as protestors – are protecting the forest and facing a line of soldiers, metonymically representing Modi’s government and their authorisation of the coal-mining project. The use of activism in combination with verbal rhetoric gives rise to a persuasive style aiming at engaging the audience through emotional impact, thus amping up the communicative potential of the message conveyed.



Figure 5 Post 3 – shared by Siddhrajsinh.g ©

Finally, Post 3 [fig. 5] is an example of (verbal text + visual) multimodality, translinguistic practices, activism, reference to Indigenous peoples, violent narrative and unconventional opposition. The verbal part of the text shares the same message in both English and Hindi and criticises the anthropocentrism of the human-more

than human relationship. This message is then supported by three pictures. On the left-hand side is an example of activism creating the 'Adivasis vs Adani' unconventional opposition. The art shows a protestor holding a poster in the foreground and many other protestors in front of her facing excavators, a metonym for Adani. These are working in front of a forest which is catching fire – one of the few examples of a violent visual narrative in the corpus. The picture on the top right-hand side is the same one analysed in Post 6, which demonstrates that the creative collaboration within environmental activism on social media also involves sharing creative content by fellow environmental artists as a way to reiterate their message. Finally, the picture on the bottom right-hand side is a close-up of the face of an Indigenous woman. As in previous examples, the communicative style of this post is persuasive rather than informative, thanks to the combination of translingual language-based text focusing on the protection of the forest, activism and repeated visual reference to indigenous peoples at risk.

3.3 Discussion

The stylistic trait that is common to all posts in the corpus is multimodality. As summarised in Table 1, persuasive communication is also stylistically salient, while informative communication can only be identified in two posts (and in both cases verbal or multimodal figurative language is also used). Translinguistic practices are prevalent and characterise the communicative style of this movement, as does the reference to Indigenous peoples, which appears in a verbal, visual or verbal + visual format. Opposition is consistently used and, even though the conventional opposition 'forest vs desert' is the most frequently identified, three examples of non-conventional oppositions which require background knowledge to be decoded can be identified. Figurative language, either of the verbal or multimodal kind, appears to be part of the stylistic traits of the communicative practises of this grassroots movement, as does activism. Both are consistently used to increase the persuasive potential of the text. Finally, reference to non-human animals is also stylistically salient.

With respect to the #SaveBuxwahaForest campaign analysed in Zurru (2024b), a number of similarities and differences can be traced. The prevalent use of multimodal communication, figurative language, either verbal or multimodal, a persuasive communicative style and opposition are stylistic traits the two campaigns share. The #SaveHasdeoForest, however, shows a much greater focus on the environmental injustice suffered by Adivasis than the #SaveBuxwahaForest campaign. Interestingly enough, the latter is characterised by a continuous interaction with the #FridaysforFuture

campaign, which has a larger social reach and has been able to put significant pressure on governments and corporations. The #SaveHasdeoForest campaign does not exhibit a similar interaction with #FridaysforFuture. In the #SaveHasdeoForest campaign, the localised focus on support for Adivasis, in addition to the protection of the forest, is also identifiable in the use of translinguistic practices as a sign of identity, which are virtually absent from the #SaveBuxwahaForest campaign. This shows that, while the interaction between local and global environmental movements can be extremely successful, so can localised activism. Another difference is represented by the reference to non-human animals, which is more frequent in the #SaveHasdeoForest campaign. Finally, differences can also be identified in the type of opposition used. The style of the #SaveBuxwahaForest campaign is characterised by both verbal and multimodal opposition, and unconventional oppositions are predominant. The #SaveHasdeoForest campaign employs mostly visual oppositions, while only one instance of multimodal opposition has been identified, and verbal opposition is absent. Conventional opposition is more common, even though some communicatively salient examples of unconventional opposition are present in the corpus. Interestingly, in the #SaveBuxwahaForest campaign, most unconventional oppositions are of the 'forest vs diamond' type, since the forest was at risk because of a diamond-mining project. In the case of the #SaveHasdeoForest, even though the threat to the forest is represented by coal-mining, there is no reference to coal or use of forest/coal opposites in the corpus.

4 Conclusion

The analysis and discussion of the data have shown that some stylistic features are specific to the #SaveHasdeoForest movement, while some can also be found in the #SaveBuxwahaForest campaign, similarly aimed at protecting one of the biggest forests in India and its dwellers from a deforestation project for capitalist purposes (Zurru 2024b). This leads us to conclude that the online communicative practices of environmental grassroots activism in the Indian subcontinent might rely on a number of stylistic choices that are popular on social media, such as the use of multimodality and of verbal and/or multimodal figurative language, which have also been identified in larger environmental movements, such as #FridaysforFuture (see Zurru 2022). At the same time, Indian localised movements seem to integrate idiosyncratic characteristics within their communicative styles which require specific background knowledge for the interpretation of the texts, rather than a general one, such as the life conditions of Adivasi in the #SaveHasdeoForest campaign.

With regard to theory and methodology, this contribution has shown how fruitful it is for ecostylistics to engage with issues of environmental injustice, in term of enrichment of its interdisciplinary cooperation with disciplines it has not interacted with frequently so far, such as postcolonial studies, and of enlargement of its aims and scopes. Indeed, ecostylistic studies focusing on environmental injustice in postcolonial settings have the ability to collect data and spread awareness about timely matters such as the entanglements between colonialism, capitalism, environmental injustice and Indigenous activism in the Global South – a link that in the conflictual space of environmental communication is often denied and written off as ‘overreaching’.

With regard to limitations and future research, the data collected are adequate for a qualitative ecostylistic multimodal analysis, which requires a detailed analysis difficult to carry out in the space of an academic article with a larger corpus. However, in order to extend our conclusions, further data should be collected, for example by extending the data collection to related hashtags, e.g. #saynotomining, #indigenouspeople or #StandwithAdivasis. In addition, a future research path might also involve collecting data from different social media platforms than X, in order to investigate possible similarities and/or differences across platforms.

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Em torno do lusotropicalismo: a representação do outro na literatura colonial sobre a Guiné

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Abstract The article aims to highlight continuities and discontinuities in the representation of the colonial subject in works that won colonial literature prizes between 1926 and 1974. Works focusing on Guinean context will be considered here as illustrative for Portuguese colonial literature as a whole. The Salazar regime's colonial ideology is reflected in these works, which include fiction, poetry and essays. The theses of Luso-tropicalism were appropriated by official propaganda from the 1950s onwards. This doctrine provides a mystified reading of Portuguese colonial history, celebrating the supposed absence of racial prejudice and conflicts with indigenous populations. The present analysis aims to deconstruct this notion by examining the aesthetic of subalternisation that characterises earlier works and which is progressively obscured by a paternalistic gaze. However, this gaze never fully abandons the representation of the other as inferior.

Keywords Portuguese colonial literature. Guinea-Bissau. Luso-tropicalism. Colonial subject. Postcolonial Studies.

Resumo 1 Situação da literatura colonial portuguesa. – 2 O caso da Guiné. – 3 Missão 'civilizadora'. – 4 Conhecimento do outro. – 5 'Mestiçagem'. – 6 Entre exotismo e paternalismo. – 7 Conclusões.



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1 Situação da literatura colonial portuguesa

Este artigo¹ visa analisar as obras coloniais de temática guineense² premiadas nos concursos promovidos pela Agência Geral das Colónias (1926-1974)³ como amostra de tendências gerais inscritas na literatura colonial portuguesa, concentrando-se na representação do sujeito colonial que delas emerge. Tratando-se de concursos concebidos por um órgão da propaganda colonialista e que, portanto, ressentem de uma clara orientação ideológica, a seleção deste *corpus* visa refletir sobre as características principais das obras que durante meio século foram julgadas merecedoras de distinção, pelas diferentes maneiras de elas veicularem um imaginário colonial.

A chamada 'literatura colonial' portuguesa afigura-se como um assunto ainda pouco considerado tanto pelos estudos portugueses como pelos estudos africanos, um «campo de batalha abandonado» (Mata, Lugarinho 2021, 38) onde se enfrentam tensões que apontam tanto para a apologia do colonialismo como para a emergência das modernas literaturas africanas de língua portuguesa. A necessidade político-ideológica de frisar a suposta homogeneidade entre Portugal e as suas colónias levou a uma primeira sistematização da literatura colonial (ou 'ultramarina') enquanto extensão «no quadro geral da literatura portuguesa» (César 1971, 21). A conexão com a propaganda do Estado Novo⁴ é, entretanto, um aspeto incontornável da sua

1 A investigação para este artigo decorreu no âmbito do Projeto de I&D A *Literatura Colonial Portuguesa: Além da Memória do Império* (2022.06543.PTDC), sediado no Centro de Estudos Comparatistas da Faculdade de Letras da Universidade de Lisboa (CEComp), financiado por fundos nacionais portugueses através da Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia.

2 Escritos sobre a Guiné, na Guiné ou por autores que se assumem como guineenses. A oscilação entre essas tipologias é um dos desafios da teorização da literatura colonial e vinca o carácter problemático do recurso a categorias ligadas à nacionalidade. Por esta razão, e pelo facto de a literatura colonial estar vinculada a um olhar imperialista, neste caso português, entendemos, na esteira de Inocência Mata (2016, 91), como falaciosa a locução 'literatura colonial guineense'. Prefere-se, portanto, enquadrar a questão nos termos de obras cujo lugar fenotextual seja a Guiné, na senda do que foi proposto no tocante à «literatura colonial de inspiração bolamense» (Mata 1993-94, 200).

3 'Agência Geral do Ultramar' a partir de 1951 (doravante indicada como AGC/AGU) e 'concursos de literatura ultramarina' a partir de 1954.

4 Assinale-se, contudo, que a portaria 4565 que anuncia o primeiro concurso de literatura colonial foi publicada no *Diário do governo* a 9 de janeiro de 1926, portanto antes do golpe militar. Embora amplamente aproveitados pelos regimes seguintes, a AGC e os concursos foram ideados e surgiram ainda no contexto da Primeira República (Garcia 2011, 507), numa continuidade entre a Primeira República, a Ditadura Militar e o Estado Novo quanto à orientação colonialista do Estado Português. Continuidade que, por outro lado, certamente apresenta elementos de descontinuidade devidos a necessidades diferentes de conceber o enquadramento jurídico e administrativo dos territórios coloniais (como expresse, por exemplo, pelo Ato Colonial de 1930 ou pela Revisão Constitucional de 1951), como o presente artigo pretende evidenciar no tocante à evolução da estética literária de cunho colonial(ista).

legitimação e institucionalização (Noa 2002, 386): os concursos de literatura colonial visavam suprir a carência de obras literárias dedicadas ao mundo colonial e «despertar o interesse pelo património colonial» (Garcia 2011, 506). A participação popular e a atenção pelo império eram fomentadas no âmbito da construção de uma imagem nacionalista e providencialista de Portugal enquanto «imaginação do centro», nas palavras de Margarida Calafate Ribeiro, cuja pedra angular era

a mitificação da nação através da evocação do passado de que o presente império era herança e que em si reflectia a imagem da grandeza da pátria queurgia recuperar. (Ribeiro 2024, 127)

Por essa característica instrumental, várias apreciações da literatura colonial portuguesa em época pós-colonial (Ferreira 1989; Pires Laranjeira 1999; Trigo 1987) assinalam a ambiguidade da sua categorização. Por um lado, insiste-se na inconciliabilidade da sua visão imperial com os modernos sistemas literários nacionais; por outro, sugere-se a oportunidade de considerar a literatura colonial para uma melhor compreensão dos fatores que contribuíram para o desenvolvimento desses sistemas.

Mais do que configurar uma oposição irreduzível, trata-se, portanto, de um subsistema em trânsito, cuja situação se encontra em constante negociação. Assim, na perspectiva da teoria dos polissistemas de Itamar Even-Zohar, as relações da literatura colonial com os demais sistemas literários

podem ser percebidas num polissistema em que as interseções passam a serem maiores do que aquelas que costumeiramente são observadas [...]. Entretanto, [...] o polissistema não constitui uma continuidade entre sistemas diversos, mas a percepção da interseccionalidade em movimento contínuo de aproximação e afastamento entre os sistemas. (Mata, Lugarinho 2021, 33)

Por essa razão, pensar a literatura colonial através do prisma da nacionalidade e da historiografia literária apresenta mais do que algumas problemáticas, por veicular um olhar que privilegia tanto a pertença exclusiva duma determinada obra ou de um *corpus* de obras dentro de um determinado sistema (e não de outro) como a insistência nos mecanismos de influência e divergência, continuidades e descontinuidades, como motor da evolução do sistema literário. Tal enfoque tende muitas vezes a desconsiderar a interferência de fatores extraliterários e a existência de interseções que, como no caso da literatura colonial, permitem situar determinadas obras em trânsito e em oscilação entre dois ou mais sistemas literários.

2 O caso da Guiné

O caso guineense apresenta elementos de complicação, também devido ao papel secundário desempenhado pela língua portuguesa nesse cenário cultural (Augel 2007, 79). Mais do que outros sistemas literários africanos, as categorizações periodológicas da moderna literatura guineense tendem a considerar a literatura colonial em termos de alteridade ou anterioridade. Ao colocar numa oposição não-dialógica os dois sistemas, Manuel Ferreira considera esse tipo de literatura

o capítulo menos expressivo do espaço literário africano de expressão portuguesa. Praticamente até antes da independência nacional não foi possível ultrapassar a fase da literatura colonial. (Ferreira 1989, 89)

No contexto das comemorações dos Descobrimentos portugueses no fim dos anos 1990, Fernanda Cavacas e Adónio Gomes dedicaram um volume à literatura guineense, em que há não apenas uma tentativa de inventariar a literatura colonial e de discutir as suas fronteiras (Cavacas, Gomes 1997, 27-32), mas também a consideração da sua potencialidade dinamizadora, embora restringida à conflitualidade para com uma literatura nacional que surgiria «como reacção» (52). Ensaio mais recentes insistem numa rígida demarcação do sistema literário nacional (Augel 2007; 2019; Secco 2019), excluindo, portanto, do seu horizonte a literatura colonial.

De uma outra perspetiva, Odete Costa Semedo problematiza as balizas entre a escrita pré- e pós-colonial, convocando para o debate textos «de inspiração guineense, mas, obviamente, com grande cunho ideológico colonial» (2011, 28). É, entretanto, na proposta do historiador Leopoldo Amado que se encontra uma atenção para com a literatura colonial não só no seu devir histórico a partir do século XIX, mas também como conjunto de textos cuja posição perante a «literatura nacional» apresenta ambiguidades e oscilações:

A Literatura Colonial não depende da realidade habitual e do contexto em que foi produzida uma vez que dela se separou e continua a viver depois de esta ter morrido. Isto é tanto mais verdade quanto é certo que, na obra literária, o «assunto» é de tal modo elaborado que não subsiste como valor puramente humano, sujeito a qualquer juízo prático. O «assunto» extingue-se para renascer noutra esfera. É exactamente tendo em conta este postulado que atribuímos à Literatura Colonial uma importância particular no que concerne ao seu relacionamento com a Literatura Nacional. Com isto, não pretendemos inferir que a Literatura Nacional nasceu directamente na sequência da Colonial. Somos

da opinião que, efectivamente, são duas coisas distintas, mas que se articulam por elos histórico-culturais e linguístico. (Amado 2013, 28)

Os discursos veiculados por esse tipo de literatura, portanto, acabam por moldar um imaginário que ultrapassa as fronteiras periodológicas, constituindo um dos pontos a partir dos quais irradiam dinâmicas de conformismo ou divergência internas ao sistema. Estruturada a partir da convergência entre os fatores «literário» e «político-ideológico» (Noa 2002, 55), a literatura colonial participa de uma construção simultânea do ‘si’ e do ‘outro’, tanto criando como questionando estereótipos e modelos identitários. Com tais premissas, interessa considerar continuidades e descontinuidades na atribuição dos prémios de literatura colonial/ultramarina como fator de legitimação ideológica; em particular, a apropriação das teses lusotropicalistas de Gilberto Freyre por parte do regime, embora numa «versão simplificada e manipulada» (Castelo 2011, 139), impôs a partir dos anos 50 uma tentativa de refiguração e ocultação de discursos anteriores, também a nível estético-literário.

Os concursos da AGC/AGU premiaram no total apenas onze obras de temática guineense pertencentes a vários géneros. Trata-se das narrativas *Auá: novela negra* (1934) e *A revolta* (1942), de Fausto Duarte, e *Guinéus* (1963), de Alexandre Barbosa; dos relatos de viagem *África: da vida e do amor na selva* (1936), de João Augusto Silva, e *Terra ardente: narrativas da Guiné* (1948), de Norberto Lopes; da coletânea de poemas *Baga-baga* (1966), de Armor Pires Mota; e finalmente dos ensaios referentes a várias disciplinas *História da Guiné: 1418-1918* (1939), de João Barreto, *Monjur: o gabú e a sua história* (1949), de Jorge Velez Carço, *Estudos sobre o tifo murino na Guiné Portuguesa* (1951), de João Tendeiro, *Usos e costumes jurídicos dos fulas na Guiné portuguesa* (1958), de Artur Augusto da Silva, e *Panaria cabo-verdiana e guineense* (1969), de António Carreira.⁵

3 Missão ‘civilizadora’

A *História da Guiné*, de João Barreto, pretende explicitamente «abranger todo o passado histórico da província de Guiné» (Barreto 1938, 451). Essa totalidade considera o português como ator principal da história, enquanto as populações autóctones aparecem, de acordo com uma tendência generalizada na historiografia portuguesa anterior a 1974 (Henriques 2020, 23), como meros figurantes desprovidos de

⁵ As datas entre parêntesis referem-se ao ano da premiação. Era frequente obras inéditas serem galardoadas antes da sua publicação.

individualidade com os quais o colonizador interage, geralmente de maneira conflituosa. Na magnificação em chave heroica dos feitos da história colonial põe-se entre parêntesis a precariedade que marcara a presença portuguesa nesses territórios (Amado 2013, 18). Veja-se o prefácio de Leite de Magalhães, governador da Guiné de 1927 a 1931:

São quasi cinco séculos de actividade lusíada nos mares e terras africanas que perpassam nestas linhas [...], mostrando o esforço ingente da Raça na conquista e defesa e construção duma das parcelas (e a mais idosa) do seu Império. (Barreto 1938, 7)

Por outro lado, põe-se a tónica na hostilidade das populações africanas para com o colonizador. Os portugueses teriam sido capazes de manter a soberania

numa região das mais inhóspitas [*sic*] do globo, vencendo a hostilidade permanente das populações indígenas, resistindo à acção mortífera do clima e combatendo as ambições dos Estados estrangeiros. (10)

Porém, ao lado do relato das guerras contra as populações locais pelo controlo do território, observa-se a consideração, igualmente recorrente, de que as relações entre portugueses e indígenas teriam estado fundamentadas na amizade recíproca:

A tranquilidade resultava mais da boa amizade com os chefes indígenas do que propriamente de uma política de força e do prestígio das armas. (332)

O africano, apresentado sempre de maneira homogênea e indistinta,⁶ é tratado, igualmente sem distinções e, portanto, contraditoriamente, ora como inimigo belicoso, ora como amigo cordial. Emerge assim, pelo avesso, também uma imagem do colonizador português que oscila entre aspetos militaristas e paternalistas, típica da historiografia colonial (Henriques 2020, 94-8), permitindo relativizar até a escravatura, considerada um «mal» não «no regime em si, mas sobretudo na forma por que ela era praticada» (Barreto 1938, 294).

Essa ‘exceccionalidade’ da colonização portuguesa, alicerçada no espírito missionário, encontra-se de maneira análoga em *Terra*

6 Cabe assinalar que tanto essa categorização genérica de ‘indígena’, como a sua subalternização biológica e cultural e a necessidade, numa ótica paternalista, da sua ‘proteção’, estão presentes na própria legislação colonial da época, a partir do Ato Colonial de 1930. Tais dispositivos jurídicos também contribuíram para ‘construir’ e veicular um determinado olhar sobre o outro que se reflete nas obras aqui em apreço.

ardente. O relato da viagem de facto traduz-se numa apologia do então governador Sarmento Rodrigues, continuador do trabalho de

transplantação da nacionalidade para outros climas e outros espíritos [...] – síntese admirável de uma obra colonizadora que, acima do seu aspecto material, se impõe sempre pela humanidade dos processos e pela nobreza das intenções. (Lopes 1947, 8)

Apesar dessas premissas, contudo, na narração encontram espaço de forma igualmente contraditória o relato dos «episódios sangrentos que ilustraram a história de Bissau» e a experiência da segregação entre a «povoação europeia» e o «chão de papel» (24-5). Os vários aspetos culturais dos nativos que Lopes descreve e avalia, principalmente os seus hábitos higiénicos e a sua aptidão ao trabalho, contribuem ainda para a estereotipação do africano, que continua a ser retratado a partir de categorias etnográficas que o objetificam e o infantilizam:

Aos nativos da Guiné procurou dar-se uma visão facilmente compreensível da acção civilizadora dos portugueses em todos os continentes, chamando-os ao mesmo tempo a colaborar na obra de progresso e de engrandecimento da comunidade de que fazem parte. (130)

4 Conhecimento do outro

Apesar da sua preocupação com o espírito ‘amigo’ e ‘adaptável’ ao trópico dos colonizadores portugueses e da sua tentativa de apresentar o africano como parte da comunidade imperial, essas obras ainda não insistem explicitamente nos ideais da «reciprocidade cultural», da «miscigenação» (Castelo 2011, 109) e da invenção de um ‘povo multirracial’ numa ‘nação pluricontinental’ que marcam o discurso lusotropicalista. A suposta benevolência do colonizador é antes uma faceta da missão ‘evangelizadora’, mais tarde ‘civilizatória’, que subentende uma visão racista enraizada na tradição científica oitocentista (Bethencourt 2015, 364-91) em auge em Portugal até pelo menos o fim da Segunda Guerra Mundial (Matos 2006, 139). O próprio Barreto, médico de profissão, seis anos antes de escrever a *História da Guiné*, colaborara numa pesquisa antropológica sobre as populações guineenses que, apoiando-se metodologicamente na craniometria, assinala a existência de «influências mixtas – a mestiçagem», elementos «reveladores de influências superiores» ao lado de «características das raças inferiores» (Barreto, Lima, Mascarenhas 1932, 22-3). Visava-se contribuir com bases frenológicas para classificações preexistentes das várias componentes étnicas da população colonizada, cujos critérios de catalogação correspondiam

a determinadas oposições caracteriais e categorizações como, entre outras, «índole boa/má», «trabalhadores/preguiçosos», ou ainda «‘costumes’ incompreensíveis» (Matos 2006, 169). Por sua vez, *Monjur*, de Velez Caroco (1948), também se apoia em considerações antropométricas para operar distinções entre as populações que toma em consideração.

Apesar da sua reconhecida importância documental na recolha da tradição oral (Amado 2013, 25), a hierarquização racial permanece no horizonte de *África: da vida e do amor na selva*, cujo autor considera que «imensas multidões bárbaras esperam ainda os portugueses que as hão-de civilisar» (Silva 1936, 165). A dicotomia civilização/barbárie corrobora os *clichés* da incompreensibilidade mútua entre o colonizador e o colonizado, o que, porém, não impede o autor de instalar-se como porta-voz do africano. Assim, o seu olhar é estruturado a partir da sua suposta condição pré-moderna, indicando em categorias pré-rationais as únicas ferramentas cognitivas que estariam ao seu alcance: «os brancos, são gente misteriosa, de grandes manhas e feitiços» (63). Vice-versa, para o branco o negro é sempre «impenetrável» (151).

Essa ‘impenetrabilidade’ justifica a produção de saberes coloniais. Nas obras ensaísticas premiadas pela AGC/AGU, a alteridade coincide com o objeto de conhecimento, estando muitas vezes implícitas as considerações valorativas acerca da população local. O regulamento dos concursos a partir de 1954 proporcionou uma maior representatividade de trabalhos de cunho etnográfico e folclórico. A criação do prémio Frei João dos Santos, destinado a ensaios sobre «temas relacionados com o conhecimento do homem», visava contribuir para a promoção do

estreitamento das relações culturais entre a Metrópole e as províncias ultramarinas: porque estes Concursos não deixarão, por certo, de promover o melhor conhecimento mútuo na medida em que a literatura estabelece o diálogo entre irmãos dispersos por quatro continentes. (*Boletim Geral das Colónias* 1954, 112-13)

Entretanto, esse interesse revela também uma razão pragmática. O conhecimento aprofundado dos vários aspetos culturais das populações colonizadas era, de maneira geral, um instrumento que visava reforçar o domínio sobre as próprias (Gallo 1988, 167).

Já num contexto marcado pela adoção do prisma lusotropicalista, a retórica lusocêntrica da ‘missão civilizadora’ não se esgota, mas se transfigura no esforço de «associar» em vez que «assimilar» a alteridade numa espécie de «assimilação recíproca», tendo em consideração «os desastres recentes nos domínios coloniais franceses e ingleses» (Silva 1958, 7). No prefácio à obra de Artur Augusto da Silva, o próprio Marcello Caetano afirma depender

de uma inteligente compreensão do mundo africano o êxito da missão que cabe aos europeus de fazer vencer a distância de milênios que separa esse mundo do tempo actual. (Silva 1958, s.p.)

Quanto às obras de João Tendeiro e António Carreira, dedicadas a assuntos mais técnicos e setoriais, dificilmente podem informar sobre a representação da alteridade, excetuando a referida função pragmática. Por relatarem experiências laboratoriais, os *Estudos sobre o tifo murino* apenas se preocupam com a população africana quando se debruçam sobre os fatores sociais das epidemias. Entretanto, não são apontadas como prejudiciais só as condições de vida da população nativa em Bissau, mas também os seus hábitos, considerados anti-higiênicos:

Aqueles bairros, constituídos por verdadeiras palhotas feitas para indígenas, são habitados por uma mescla de elementos civilizados e não civilizados, vivendo numa promiscuidade a todos os títulos reprovável, em particular sob o ponto de vista da higiene e sanidade. (Tendeiro 1950, 39)

5 ‘Mestiçagem’

Ao contrário de toda a retórica lusotropicalista da ‘predisposição’ e da ‘adaptabilidade’ do português ao meio tropical (Castelo 2011, 35), João Augusto Silva descreve a Guiné como uma «terra maldita, paiz do ódio» (Silva 1936, 26), espelho da imagem tradicionalmente associada à África como «degrado ‘metafórico’ do ser moral e social» (Ribeiro 2024, 77). De facto, a brutalidade da sociedade colonial e os maus-tratos infligidos à população autóctone são reconduzidos a esse processo de perversão induzido pelo meio, ao ‘esquecimento’ de que

os portugueses dos séculos de quinhentos e seiscentos, se alguma coisa fizeram, se um império colossal conquistaram, foi isso, mais que à força das armas, à custa de uma política de sábia infiltração diplomática. (Silva 1936, 28)

É também reforçada a necessidade de aumentar a presença de mulheres europeias nas colónias, vista a inconveniência das uniões entre portugueses e africanas, ideia por sua vez fundamentada na referida hierarquização entre as ‘raças’. A «falta enervante de mulheres brancas» é apontada como uma das causas da corrupção do colono, que «desvairado pelo desejo» se vê obrigado a «procurar, em último recurso, a fêmea negra» (26). A população mestiça que resulta dessas uniões é igualmente encarada como mais um entrave para uma política colonial eficaz; tais considerações não deixam de

ter um lado involuntariamente cómico quando, poucas linhas à frente, o autor admite que, uma vez acostumado com os hábitos da terra, ‘se casou’

simultaneamente com três mulheres fulas e uma mandinga, seguindo e observando a velha usança que obriga à poligamia todo o homem viril, praticando reverente as cerimónias rituais, consegui identificar-me com o viver dessas gentes bárbaras. (29)

Também para o protagonista de *Negro sem alma*, de Fausto Duarte, inicialmente o contacto «com as negras opunha-se aos seus preconceitos de homem civilizado», para mais tarde ceder perante as tentações da «carne pecaminosa» (Duarte 1935, 12). Embora tacitamente admitida como desvio da norma, fisiológico e totalmente masculino, a relação interétnica permanece demonizada a nível retórico e aos olhos da moral comum, apoiando-se na geral aceitação e difusão das teorias eugenistas. O coronel Roma Machado, nas suas *Recordações de África*, outro exemplo de obra premiada pela AGC em 1930, procura definir nesses termos os traços caracteriais que o «povo português» teria ‘herdado’ do «cruzamento» de «diferentes raças»:

Encontra-se ainda da Estremadura para sul [...] o cruzamento com o sangue moiro, que fêz juntar à nossa grei, entre outras características boas, do ramo sul, o fatalismo, a manha, o receio, e a mandriice [...] – e êste foi dos melhores, dando indivíduos mais finos e mais brancos, mas muitos com o sangue dos salaios ou moiros antigos da Estremadura e arredores de Lisboa, sobretudo, e cujo cruzamento não foi tão bom. Mas o pior de todos foi o cruzamento com o sangue africano preto, felizmente muito pouco, pois êsse é, de todos os cruzamentos de brancos com não brancos, o que tem dado indivíduos mais fracos, anémicos e tuberculosos; cruzamento que é necessário a todo o custo evitar, com a ida para a África de muitas mulheres brancas. (Roma Machado 1929, 14)

Apesar da insistência no ‘sangue’, em dados biológicos, como veículo de determinados traços culturais e aptidões que determinam a ação histórica, defende-se o contrário da valorização lusotropicalista da ‘miscigenação’.

6 Entre exotismo e paternalismo

Os romances do cabo-verdiano Fausto Duarte, publicados entre os anos 30 e 40, dão ao sujeito africano um relevo e um protagonismo narrativo que naquelas décadas só são igualados pela obra de Castro Soromenho. Numa conferência proferida em 1934, no contexto da primeira Exposição Colonial Portuguesa no Porto, Duarte procura dar uma direção programática para a produção literária das e sobre as colónias, uma das poucas tentativas coevas de (auto)definição desse campo. Contrariando as tendências então em auge, o autor prega uma literatura que saiba dar destaque ao elemento autóctone para além da representação uniformizadora e pejorativa até então proporcionada:

É necessário antes o contacto directo com a sua mentalidade, perscrutar-lhe a vida e compreender-lhe as superstições. (Duarte 1934b, 9-10)

A palavra «superstições» é, contudo, reveladora. Esses princípios espelham-se na sua produção literária desde *Auá* até *A revolta*, em que a brutalização do africano cede o lugar à tentativa de aproximar-se da sua interioridade e da sua dimensão psicológica, operando um corte decisivo em relação à estrutura (estereo)típica do romance colonial. Em vez de a ação ser dinamizada pelo europeu que vai à África, em *Auá* desenvolve-se inteiramente no território guineense, com um movimento de ida e volta que de Bissau leva para o interior. As personagens de *Auá* pertencem todas ao meio nativo, diferenciando-se pelo seu maior ou menor grau de ‘assimilação’ na sociedade colonial e nas incompreensões mútuas engendradas por esse estatuto (Duarte 1934a, 56), colocando-se muitas vezes criticamente face à presença colonizadora. Em *A revolta*, a ficcionalização da história abandona o lusocentrismo e detém-se na vivência das populações africanas no contexto das guerras de resistência, encenando um confronto «entre as diferentes identidades da Guiné» (Amado 2013, 24).

Todavia, mais do que a suposta procura de uma identidade guineense apontada por alguns críticos (Pinto Bull 1985, 323), essa produção parece ser ainda marcada pela tentativa de ‘conhecer’ o outro a partir de categorias exógenas. À caracterização das próprias personagens não deixa de corresponder uma certa fixidez estereotípica subjacente, de forma geral, ao discurso colonial (Bhabha 1994, 66), principalmente em *Auá*. Não se altera substancialmente a visão de um mundo atravessado pela linha de corte da ‘civilização’; a variedade de etnias que convergem em Bissau é condensada numa imagem que reduz a pluralidade a uma dicotomia:

Os fatos de linho branco dos civilizados que atravessavam a rua, contrastavam com as matizes dos trajes indígenas. (Duarte 1934a, 169)

Nem se subverte a perspectiva a partir da qual a terceira pessoa narrativa observa o mundo ‘tradicional’, reconstruído a partir de generalizações que resvalam para o discurso etnográfico:

O fula, essencialmente devoto, quer pela tendência natural, quer em resultado da educação, vê Deus em todo o Universo. São fiéis aos seus usos, o que caracteriza a sua origem. (46)

Conectando-se com o *topos* colonial do africano como ser irracional, o narrador reforça essa ideia recorrendo à naturalização, ao carácter ‘essencial’ de tais ‘superstições’ que procura compreender. O predomínio do universo pulsional, de resto, é destacado para situar essas personagens no mesmo plano da natureza, dum «solo ainda virgem de culturas» (21), como evidencia o paralelismo na representação da tensão erótica entre, por um lado, Sori e Farmará e, por outro, um casal de bovinos (76-7). Reconduzidas sempre ao seu grupo étnico, Auá e as demais personagens femininas são caracterizadas estereotipicamente a partir da sua sensualidade e da sua volúpia.

A *revolta*, por sua vez, apresenta um discurso relativamente mais neutro, permitindo apreciar uma evolução no estilo representacional de Fausto Duarte, que, contudo, por vezes deixa transparecer o mesmo olhar informado pelos preconceitos da época e da sua condição social (Amado 2013, 23). Com efeito, numa digressão de sabor ensaístico, a apologia do colonialismo português dá voz a uma retórica populista que transforma a ‘simplicidade’ num fator de ‘adaptabilidade’:

O povo com o seu natural espírito de aventura, a sua credulidade ingénua por vezes, sincera sempre, generoso no triunfo, alegre nos revéses, que, tendo carpintejado navios na Ribeira das Naus tripulou-os, [...] e foi depois em terra soldado, sertanejo, mercador e o primeiro a penetrar com a sua simplicidade o segrêdo da alma indígena. Porque trouxera consigo o seu espírito cívico cedo se adaptou ao ambiente. [...] Mau grado o sobressalto constante em que vivia – temor de sua vida e fazendas – conseguiu cativar o preto que, tendo-o observado de comêço com desconfiança, se sentiu atraído para a órbita da simpatia que dêle irradiava. (Duarte 1945, 291)

Tanto o africano como o português ‘popular’ são sujeitos à mesma infantilização. A assimilação é referida como uma dádiva que o ‘bom’ colonizador oferece ao colonizado, de acordo com a ideia da

‘missão civilizadora’ anteriormente referida. A recriação ficcional dessas relações por parte de Fausto Duarte, então, prefigura tanto as disposições do Estatuto do Indígena de 1954 como em geral o discurso lusotropicalista:

O que salvou o nativo, fôsse êle o mais atrasado dos homens, foi a ignorância do povo aliada à sua índole facilmente impressionável com o sofrimento do seu semelhante. Desconhecendo as teorias de inferioridade de raças, os axiomas de antropologia e as doutrinas de colonização pelo massacre dos vencidos, o homem do povo, ao mesmo tempo rude e sentimental, ao vê-lo de perto entregue a uma vida primitiva, sentiu acordar na sua alma lembranças de um passado igualmente doloroso. Sendo o infortúnio pedra de toque da amizade, o colono, humilde e justo, pródigo de afectos, estendeu a mão leal ao nativo e assimilou-o. Seguindo o que lhe ditava a inspiração, integrou-se espontâneamente na fraternidade humana que é a suprema lei da vida. E porque lhe faltasse a mulher branca para lhe perfumar a existência de proscrito esqueceu agruras nos braços da negra, que se lhe entregou com a docilidade de animal imbele. Fizera-se assim a transfusão de sangue, e, através da mescla, do cruzamento sem qualquer preconceito de côr, conseguira o colono, o homem do povo, adaptar-se ao meio, orgulhoso de ver que o filho se inclinava para o pai e lhe copiava as qualidades. (292-3)

O mesmo paternalismo que caracteriza os textos de Fausto Duarte observa-se no prefácio que, já em tempos lusotropicalistas, Alexandre Barbosa escreve aos contos coletados em *Guinéus*, «doze meninices literárias» em que o deslumbramento pela natureza exótica inclui homogeneamente os «costumes e factos simples da vida também simples dos autóctones» (Barbosa 1962, 8). A escolha arcaizante do título corresponderia ao desejo de remontar ao «ancestralismo português nas suas relações com os povos de cor» (9), povos que, tal como em *Auá*, constituem o objeto do olhar do narrador.

Apesar das intenções, porém, essas narrativas ainda conservam todas as feições da construção do outro como ser constitutivamente irracional, preguiçoso e fadado à submissão. Ainda recorre o termo «civilizado» como oposição, naturalizada na semântica da obra, a «indígena». A «superstição e normas feiticistas» (66) presidem a certas atividades económicas fundamentais, como a caça, enquanto as prescrições religiosas e os vícios são apontados como a causa do mau aproveitamento dos recursos agrícolas (48-9). Arfan, protagonista do conto «Corrida patética», destaca-se da sua comunidade por apresentar qualidades consideradas antitéticas em relação ao mundo africano:

O seu temperamento é avesso à ociosidade, à monotonia quotidiana de quase todos os beafadas do Quinará. [...] O seu pensamento fixa-se em algo que tem de enfrentar ou já enfrentou. Pensará na inferior condição da sua tribo? (27)

Faz-se assim uma apologia da ‘assimilação’, assente nessa diferença perante a «ancestral preguiça de muitos da sua raça» (98). O «bom produto da civilização lusitana» e o «bom exemplo para todos os nativos» (108), contudo, são sempre apresentados como exceção que só toca o indivíduo; a ‘assimilação’ reduz-se a poucos traços que acabam por marcar ainda mais a diferença e até a ridicularização do africano. A «metamorfose» do protagonista no conto homónimo é descrita como um percurso ‘civilizador’, mas, de facto, afigura uma regressão: Abú Camará

repeti[a] que fora para lá «em bruto» e que saíra metamorfoseado. Além das coisas da tropa aprendera a falar e a rabiscar menos mal o português – «Já leio o livro da terceira sem pestanejar» – dizia. Passara a lavar-se, vestir-se e a comer com garfo e colher como os civilizados. (82)

O domínio elementar do português, inclusive, tinha sido evidenciado também em *Auá* na reprodução de uma carta de Malam (Duarte 1934a, 13): o ‘assimilado’ pode atingir apenas os traços básicos, rudimentares, de um mundo ao qual continua a permanecer estranho, apesar de o servir maquinalmente. Alguns dos hábitos que se carregam dessas marcas ‘civilizacionais’ ecoam as descrições de *Terra ardente*:

Procura-se difundir entre os nativos preceitos higiénicos que hão-de contribuir para a sua dignificação, como o uso da colher e do garfo, que há pouco se iniciou nos serviços militares. (Lopes 1947, 142)

As míseras recompensas que cabem a Abú por desempenhar um bom serviço reforça, tal como o seu deslumbamento face a elas, a sua infantilização:

Um chapéu, uma camisa, um talher e uma escova de dentes e, por fim, – oh, suprema aspiração! – foi-lhe designada uma *longa* para usar quando fosse licenciado. (Barbosa 1962, 84)

Infantilizado e, de certa forma, desumanizado, Abú até perde o seu nome para se tornar «o 818, soldado indígena» (83) como consequência da ‘assimilação’ e da integração no exército. Contudo, toda a alienação do sujeito que transparece nesse conto parece

involuntária: o narrador acompanha com favor e até alguma simpatia o desempenho do protagonista, que acaba como porta-bandeira, «o pano verde-encarnado, símbolo da sua pátria» (85), ou da perda da sua identidade.

«Granadas não dão pão | e a gente morre mais cedo» (Mota 1967, 62): marcados pela experiência de uma guerra retratada sem exaltação, mas também sem questionar a sua legitimidade, é nos poemas de Armor Pires Mota, finalmente, que se encontra uma expressão mais vívida do ideário lusotropicalista. Perante a nudez da vida, o eu lírico parece colocar-se no mesmo patamar do seu camarada de armas negro:

(Ontem, morreu um negro na primeira linha,
meu irmão de alma verdadeira,
sim, um negro de ombros largos,
sol a jorrar vermelho nos dentes
e arma debaixo do corpo varado,
a defender ainda o seu metro de terra...)
(47)

Esse espírito de fraternidade constitui um dos fios condutores da coletânea,

Nossas mãos juntas, negro leal,
(e a tua tem uma cicatriz!)

têm seiva igual
e sangue da mesma raiz
(13)

O encontro entre o branco e o preto recorre na superfície textual condensada em várias imagens, reforçando a sua compenetração através de alternâncias cromáticas com base em elementos concretos, como as «mãos negras, de veludo, | e brancas por dentro», o

Menino negro que nasceu branco e igual
a todos os meninos do mundo
(15)

Ou ainda «gatos negros, brancos, negros-brancos» (34). Todavia, esse sentimento é apenas em relação ao 'assimilado', ou ao africano que, por sua vontade ou não, combate ao lado dos portugueses. Mesmo assim, não deixa de revelar uma inferiorização latente desse 'outro' quando, no «Poema de irmãos», é feito um convite paternal, «senta-te à minha mesa» (20). Essa «mesa», que metonimicamente remete à ideia de 'casa', 'lar', pertence sempre ao branco, a presença do

negro é apenas uma concessão; a irmandade não consegue disfarçar completamente uma hierarquização:

Sou o teu irmão mais velho,
sou negro também dentro de mim!
(21)

7 Conclusões

Nas obras que foram premiadas pela AGC/AGU antes de 1954 prevalecem visões abertamente estigmatizadoras do africano, antipódicas para com o ideário lusotropicalista, as quais, porém, convivem com elementos que justificariam a sua legitimidade, tais como a retórica da 'bondade' e da 'excepcionalidade' do colonialismo português. O olhar que estrutura as obras mais recentes, por sua vez, é só superficialmente alterado através de declarações explícitas e reconhecíveis que se encaixam no discurso lusotropicalista e que porventura terão influenciado a apreciação dos júris. Atentando para as suas técnicas de representação emerge com mais clareza o permanecer de visões que se põem em contradição com o lusotropicalismo e que o discurso oficial não consegue abafar completamente.

Os casos de *Auá* e *Guinéus*, como se viu, são exemplares, podendo apontar para uma tendência geral inscrita na literatura colonial portuguesa. Embora escritos em épocas diferentes, apresentam um tratamento substancialmente análogo do colonizado, que é sim sujeito 'da' narrativa, mas também sujeito 'ao' narrador, ao seu olhar, ao seu julgamento e à sua capacidade de interpretação e recriação do real. A representação do africano ocorre invariavelmente através de categorias fixas e de matriz eurocêntrica, sejam elas expressão de um certo paternalismo ou de uma explícita estigmatização. A construção *a priori* do protagonista procede do geral para o particular, por diferenciação. Num primeiro momento o olhar detém-se, analogamente ao do etnógrafo, na observação de uma coletividade em que diferenças e caracterizações individuais se apagam, para a seguir recortar a partir das qualidades atribuídas a esse grupo homogêneo determinadas figuras que se destacam e adquirem o protagonismo. Toda a sua caracterização passa assim pelo filtro da excepcionalidade com relação ao seu meio de origem, coincidindo muitas vezes com o estatuto de 'assimilado'.

A adaptação e apropriação das teorias de Gilberto Freyre, portanto, não determinaram um corte nítido nas dinâmicas de representação da alteridade e da identidade. Tanto o seu carácter irreal(ista) como a sua incongruência com relação à realidade política, económica, administrativa, social e laboral do colonialismo português têm

sido amplamente demonstrados no terreno historiográfico e da história das ideias. O que neste lugar se procurou frisar é a sua incongruência, presente em concretizações também literárias, com relação ao discurso colonial então em auge, ao qual o lusotropicalismo pretendia sobrepor-se, fornecendo uma interpretação sistemática e também retrospectiva das relações entre os portugueses e os outros povos. As tensões que atravessam o imaginário colonial, espelhadas na própria literatura colonial, permitem então complexificar a questão, identificando, por um lado, os pródromos que favoreceram a implantação do ideário lusotropicalista e, por outro, as resistências que não conseguiu disfarçar, num discurso marcado pela ambiguidade, também interna aos próprios textos.

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Lorna Goodison *Dante's Inferno* *A New Translation*

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Review of Goodison, L. (2025). *Dante's Inferno. A New Translation*. Manchester: Carcanet Classic, 224 pp.

Lorna Goodison's *Inferno* is a monumental and majestic work that has required years of research, writing, processing and re-writing. Her project is to translate the whole Canticles, *Inferno*, *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*. Since she is also a visual artist, Goodison accompanies us with her own drawings throughout the narrative, beginning with the book cover image, and her self-portrait, which introduces the First Canto.

She began working on Dante's oeuvre with *Inferno*, Canto XV "Brunetto Lattini" [sic], published in *Travelling Merci* (2001) then *Inferno*, Canto I in *Oracabessa* (2013), *Purgatorio*, Canto XII in *After Dante: Poets in Purgatory* (2021), and *Inferno*, Canto V in *Il Tolomeo. A Postcolonial Studies Journal* (2023).

In the 2013 version of *Inferno*, Canto I is dedicated to Derek Walcott, Lorna Goodison's mentor.

And when I saw him in that terrible place I cried out
help me do pity me whoever you may be
whether living man or a May Pen duppy do help me.



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by Goodison, L. *Il Tolomeo*, 27, 199-202.



He answered me: I am not a man though one I was.
 I come from good parents my father was an artist
 my mother a schoolteacher I was born after Victoria
 [...]
 I am a poet, painter and playwright founder of the finest
 band of thespians ever collected in the Caribbean.
 maybe not just there but anywhere actors tread the boards.
 [...]
 Are you Sir, the great fountainhead of inspiration
 from whom such a river of creativity flowed?
 I asked of him — my head in respect due-bowed low
 (*Oracabessa*, Carcanet 2013, 19)

So, it is not a May Pen Duppy, an often malevolent spirit or ghost, but Derek Walcott himself, who would take the place of Virgilio, that accompanies Goodison in her descent. ("You were my guide and mentor and it is from your example /that I have crafted this style"). However, in her final version of *Inferno*, Lorna Goodison introduces us to Louise Bennett, also known as Miss Lou, as her Virgilio.

Presenting her new version of *Inferno*, on the website of the Publishing House Carcanet (17 April 2025), Goodison stated that "though I began the journey with my friend and mentor Derek Walcott as my guide, I became increasingly aware that the true guide I needed to accompany me could only be Louise Bennett, aka Miss Lou. And thus it was that she and I set off down the road pocked with pit, pot and sinkhole".¹

And when I see her in that wretched place, I plead
 'Help me do! Pity me, whoever you may be,
 living somebody or May Pen Duppy, do help me!'

She: 'I did alive one time, but now mi not living.
 Me come from good parents. My father was a baker
 me mother was a dressmaker and I was born when King

George siddown pon him throne. Me was a little gal
 pickney when I wish upon a star fi the gift fi write
 poetry that praise mi people inna wi own Jama tongue
 [...]

'Are you Miss Lou, the great fountainhead of Inspiration
 from whom the Hope River of creativity flows?'
 So I asked her — my head in respect due-bowed down. (9)

¹ <https://carcanet.substack.com/p/dantes-inferno-lorna-goodison>.

Louise Bennett was a strong advocate for the use of Jamaican patois, or Creole, in any literary production, poems, novels or plays, strongly opposing the theory that patois was a derivation of Standard English. An advocate of Jamaican patois as Nation Language, she promoted programs for children so that they would learn their heritage and language. It is not surprising then that now Goodison chooses Miss Lou as her guide.

Nevertheless, the choice of Miss Lou is not determined solely by her strenuous defence of Nation Language. Miss Lou, as Goodison recalls, is also the one who wrote about Marcus Garvey, the Black Nationalist and Pan-Africanist leader, pivotal for exposing racism and calling for the independence of Black people worldwide.

You are the one who wrote how Marcus Garvey
travelled till he reached the land of the ancestors (13)

Goodison then utters her insecurity and her fear of not being worthy of taking the journey. She feels she is not as important as Garvey, or Nanny, the fierce military leader of the Maroon who became a symbol of unity for her people, nor even Bob Marley, who sang in the language of the people: “Why is me must go?/Who says so? I am not Garvey, Nanny, nor Marley” (14).

To which Miss Lou replies: “is like yu soul downpress by cowardice... / You must get release from fear.” Thus reassuring her that it was “Miss Bea” [Beatrice] who summoned Miss Lou to take the poet down that journey through the crossing.

Just as Dante in the XIV century had used the language of his people, the Tuscan vernacular, and not the Latin, so Lorna Goodison uses the Jamaican patois to describe the descent into the underworld. However, while Dante adopted the *terza rima*, rightly called also *rima dantesca*, Goodison, though keeping the structure in tercet, and resorting at times to Standard English, uses the free verse, adding a special flow to the narrative.

As Goodison and Miss Lou walk the perilous circles of *Inferno*, and enter Limbo, she encounters Derek Walcott, among many other great non-Christians writers such as Homer, Horace, Ovid, Lucan and Kamau Brathwaite – reminding us how the great works of the past bear on our present, and shape our future.

In Dante’s work, the corruption, the thirst for power of Popes, official figures, noble houses, and the imperialism of Florentine prominent families – and their divisive stances – are laid bare for the readers. His characters were actual and known people, and some were still alive at the time he wrote the *Commedia*.

Goodison’s characters, as she shows throughout all of her ‘translations’ are, for the most part, both representations of the sins and corruptions of today’s Jamaican society and of the brutality and

violence of colonisation and slavery brought by the conquerors who roamed the coasts of the Caribbean.

If a one could gather up all of the murdered one
who toiled in the blood and sugar soil of the Caribbean,
whose lives were sacrificed from the time slavery began,

the blood that was shed down through the centuries when
Jamaica was one big slave plantation
that began to change only after the decline of sugar cane,

and piled them up with ones we now honour as heroes,
the countless captured, beaten, raped, hanged,
tortured and buried in unmarked graves and boneyards [175]

Goodison soars so high that, right now, in the panorama of literature, not only Caribbean, it is difficult to find somebody who could match her mastery and profundity. Her verses reach a superb level of beauty and she makes every image so strong that you can see and hear each character talking in their own Nation Language, in their own accent, distinct from the Poet's own.

She warns us, once again, that history is bound to repeat itself and the task that awaits the Poet is to acknowledge the past and expose its ruthlessness. This determination is also present in the other Cantos she has transported to the Caribbean, like Canto XII of *Purgatorio*.

Her choice of using Jamaican patois for her transposition of Dante's *Inferno* is crucial and fundamental. She has made for Jamaican language what Dante did for the Italian language, what other Caribbean writers have tried to do, and often failed. She gave Jamaican language its due dignity and its rightful place in the world. Now, there is no coming back.

The Poetics of Water in a World in Crisis

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Review of Monaco, A. (2025). *Water Stories in the Anthropocene. Anglophone Climate-Change Fiction*. London; New York: Routledge, 191 pp.

In recent years, the role of water and aquatic environments in cultural discourse on climate change and the Anthropocene has gained such prominence that a distinct transdisciplinary field of studies has emerged under various labels ranging from ‘Blue Cultural Studies’ to ‘Blue Humanities’, ‘Aquatic Humanities’, ‘Hydrohumanities’, ‘Hydro-Criticism’, and ‘Blue Ecocriticism’. Blue Humanities scholars like Steve Mentz, Serpil Oppermann, Elizabeth DeLoughrey and Astrida Neimanis have argued for both the material and symbolic centrality of water, highlighting not only its ecological value, but also its social, cultural, and political implications and meanings.

Placing itself within this broad critical debate, Angelo Monaco’s *Water Stories in the Anthropocene. Anglophone Climate-Change Fiction* discusses contemporary narratives in English that foreground water not merely as a hydrological resource or a fictional backdrop, but as a material and symbolic element bringing into play local and global politics, scientific knowledge, ethics, cultural heritage, identity formation and sense of belonging in an era of climate crisis.

The book’s first chapter, “Water Scarcity and Drought”, addresses a relatively under-explored issue within the thematic realm of the Blue Humanities, which has mainly focused on excess water phenomena such as sea level rise, floodings, and tsunamis. In his discussion of Karen Jayes’s *For the Mercy of Water* (2012), Paolo Bacigalupi’s *The Water Knife* (2015) and Cynan Jones’s *Stillicide*



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(2019), Monaco highlights how the three novels thematise the social, economic, and political causes and implications of water scarcity in different parts of the world, unveiling the relationship between water shortage and “processes of hydrocolonialism, capital accumulation and technological advancement” (28). Monaco combines different theoretical perspectives to illustrate the complex entanglements of climate change, (neo)coloniality, resource inequality, and gender issues in the case studies examined in this section. He uses the paradigm of intersectionality and Stacey Alaimo’s concept of transcorporeality to explore Jayes’s representation of the interconnectedness of human bodies and landscapes in a wasteland afflicted by drought, neocolonial violence, and gendered oppression. Furthermore, he draws on Astrida Neimanis and Rachel Loewen-Walker’s notion of *weathering*, and Irene J. Klaver’s idea of water as a relational entity, to investigate *The Water Knife*, a novel that deals with ecological collapse, climate migration, and power inequality. Discussing the ethical and sociopolitical meanings of arcologies, an emblem of the ideology of “technosalvation” (Gifford 2011, 293), Monaco points out how Bagicalupi’s work “blur[s] the border between utopia and dystopia” (Monaco 2025, 46). His analysis of *Stillicide* focuses on Jones’s use of rhythm, onomatopoeias, repetitions, assonances, personifications and polysemy to create transcorporeal sensory patterns and express “a fusion of the human and the nonhuman” (51).

The second chapter, “Flooding and Deluge” revolves around Amitav Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide* (2004) and *Gun Island* (2019), and Sarah Moss’s *Summerwater* (2020), identifying the theme of vulnerability as a common thread in the three novels. In his reading of *The Hungry Tide*, informed by Sten Pultz Moslund’s notion of *landguage*, Monaco underlines how Ghosh uses language to evoke the changeable qualities of places shaped by the alternation of ebb and flow, and to represent cultural encounters resulting in hybrid and fluid identities. *Gun Island*, a novel that dramatizes climate migration and uncanny environmental disruptions, is interpreted as an example of Ghosh’s representation of the planetary and multi-species scale of flooding phenomena. In his investigation of *Summerwater*, which is based on Jane Bennet’s view of the natural world as *vibrant matter*, Monaco discusses the relationship between the human and the geological time scales, and the polyphonic coexistence of human and animal voices in a microcosm eroded by incessant rain.

In the third chapter, Monaco reads fictional wetlands as hybrid and unstable landscapes disrupting binaries like life/death and nature/culture, and interprets them as ideal metaphors for geological transformations, palimpsestic historiographies, traumatic memories, and fluid subjectivities. Exploring Graham Swift’s *Waterland* (1983) through a psycho-geographical lens and using Karen Barad’s notion of *intra-action*, he highlights “the association between wetlands and

melancholia" (105), and the influence of water on the "human capacity to narrate stories" (107). In his reading of Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland* (2013), he focuses on the themes of diaspora, loss, displacement and trauma – both environmental and personal, linking the water cycle of the marshy lowland to fluctuating identities, grief, and recovery. Discussing Alexis Wright's *The Swan Book* (2013), Monaco deals with postcolonial trauma, slow violence, Aboriginal cosmologies and Indigenous futurism; drawing on Barad's relational ontology, he explains how the polluted swamp depicted in the novel is not only a place marked by historical violence and ecological vulnerability, but also a site of "biocultural values" (120) that supports life, collective memory and intra-species connections.

Chapter 4 explores seas and oceans as relational and storied spaces. In this section, Monaco examines three novels in which seas are portrayed as metamorphic living beings that, like human beings, undergo ecological transformation and trauma. His axiological perspective seems to align with Oppermann's idea of a "coextensivity of human realms and the seas" (2023, 3). In his analysis of Ben Smith's *Doggerland* (2019), informed by Pramod K. Nayar's concept of *ecoprecarity* and Rob Shield's notion of *bare nature*, Monaco maintains that the North Sea is represented as an archive of ruins and memories, "a physical site and a domain of imagination [where] various forms of precariousness materialise and converge" (139). Combining Glissant's archipelagic thought with Bennet's idea of nature as *vibrant matter* in his reading of Monique Roffey's *Archipelago* (2012), he underlines how this novel turns a journey across a seascape marked by the scars of (neo)colonialism and globalisation into a process of self-discovery, identity formation, and emotional healing. Finally, his investigation of Nnedi Okorafor's *Lagoon* (2014), sheds light on the interplay of Africanfuturism and Blue Eco-fiction in the representation of the seascape as a "fertile ground for the emergence of fluid identities" (162) and multispecies agency.

Water Stories focuses on the eco-political, cultural, and aesthetic values of literary waterscapes and aquatic bodies. Based on Blue Humanities, Cultural Studies, Material Ecocriticism, Trauma Studies, and Ecofeminism, Monaco's thought-provoking book investigates works of literature that feature water-related events and waterbodies to analyse the relationship of these phenomena and entities with climate change, and the ontological crisis of the Anthropocene. Furthermore, drawing on Eco-Narratology, Monaco demonstrates how the thematization of water imageries in times of ecological crisis often results in narrative fragmentation, linguistic erosion, shifting focalisation, and non-linear temporality. In his view, these formal devices contribute to disrupting the anthropocentric and deterministic paradigms embedded in Western epistemologies and

metanarratives. Addressing issues such as nonhuman otherness, the interplay of planetary and local scales, and the transcorporeal entanglements shaped by fictional waterscapes and waterbodies, *Water Stories* unveils the potential of literature to contribute to what Oppermann defines a “relational aqueous ontology” (2023, 10). This eco-ontology embraces democratic, anti-speciesist principles, and envisions pathways towards positive ecological change.

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Adriano Elia, Serena I. Volpi ***Blacknology. Black Literature, Culture, and Technology***

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Review of Elia, A.; Volpi, S.I. (2025). *Blacknology. Black Literature, Culture, and Technology*. Limena: Libreria Universitaria, 137 pp.

As one of the rare academic endeavors to tackle Black Studies in Italy, the volume presented here stands out as a successful effort to provide scholars and students with a comprehensive overview of the cultural production by the Black diaspora. And it does so, as indicated on the book cover, by exploring the intersection between Black culture and technology – hence the title, *Blacknology* – in a wide array of texts, cultural movements, media productions, and literary genres, across a time span of forty years, from the early 1980s up until today. In a time when digital technology is rapidly morphing from an advantageous tool in the hands of humans into a “potentially threatening” (8) power structure owned by just a handful of individuals, reading and understanding how the Black community sought to appropriate historically repressive technologies, own them, and transform them into emancipatory cultural productions is of capital importance. In this sense, Adriano Elia and Serena I. Volpi’s efforts successfully provide the reader with a diachronic and synchronic overview of their object of study, offering a comprehensive, rich, and detailed view of it. The volume consists of four chapters, the first two written by Adriano Elia, the last two by Serena I. Volpi.

Chapter One, titled “Race, Techno (logy), Literature: *The Third Wave* and *The Parable of the Sower*” is a compelling journey through the complex layers of Afrofuturism, with its ties to techno music and



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literature. Aptly defined as “an interdisciplinary cultural movement” (11), Afrofuturism ultimately succeeded in utilizing speculative fiction as a tool to challenge the prevailing narratives about race in the Black Atlantic. Elia’s chapter investigates how the roots of techno as a music form and as a cultural movement in Detroit lie deep into futurologist Alvin Toffler’s work, and particularly into his concept of technocracy as “a societal or governing structure guided by a privileged group of technical specialists who establish production frameworks for a predominantly unskilled consumer class” (14). In this sense, the pioneering of techno as a music genre by the Black community in Detroit constitutes a form of rebellion against the misuses of technology, particularly in its dangerously antiecological developments. What is of interest here is how Black DJs and music producers, as early as 1980, demonstrated an ecological concern, expressing it through the creative use of the same technological tools and language that, in their view, posed a threat to the human-environment equilibrium. This renegotiation of meaning is one of the overarching themes of the whole book, and a strategy that Black culture has always put upfront to affirm its identity: from the reappropriation of the n-word, to the daring experimentations with media language in newer, cutting-edge creative agencies such as Dave Free’s and Kendrick Lamar’s PgLang, which is an acronym for Program Language.

In Chapter 2, Elia continues to explore the ties that bind technological advancement and music by exploring Hip Hop as a technological form of enfranchisement and its connections with literature. Convincingly, Elia ties the formal aspects of rap music to the concept of secondary orality by Walter J. Ong, underlining how hip hop culture, “as a fusion of oral, written, and digital modes of communication, epitomizes Ong’s notion of postliterate orality [...] a contemporary version of African diasporic oral traditions” (39). In this sense, Elia sees sampling as the natural evolution of such oral traditions when they handle technological innovations; just like rhymes, storytelling, and verbal battles, the manipulation of musical texts by the isolation and reworking of breakbeats contributes to enhancing the process of meaning-making within the culture, in a manner that is in perfect continuity with the improvisational deconstructions of jazz. On the verbal side of the hip-hop spectrum, the chapter explores the contributions of Gil Scott-Heron and the Last Poets group to the emergence of the culture.

Serena I. Volpi’s section opens with Chapter Three, titled “Slaves and Robots: Narratives of Progress, Scientific Racism, and Their Legacies”, where the scholar aims at contextualizing “contemporary discussions around technology within a history in which scientific progress and technological advancements, presented as exclusively Western traits, are often not considered in relation to the notions of race and civilization” (56). Volpi’s anthropological lens offers a compelling view on the history of the racialization of technological

progress as white exclusivity, and in doing so, the author revisits the argument from the 1800s, when World Fairs would often concur in building such a narrative, frequently resorting to the dehumanization of colonized people. She then reviews Franz Boas and W.E.B DuBois's anthropological theories and their respective stances towards modernity and technology, to then tie their criticism towards uses of technology "that was of detriment to the human" (70) to *Genetic Automata* (2019-2023), a series of video installations by British artists Larry Achiampong and David Blandy. In her analysis, Volpi productively focuses on how the work poses questions on the tight link between eugenics, transhumanism, and racial exploitation for scientific advancement, as was the case with the subject of *Genetic Automata II* and Nnedi Okorafor's 2015 novel *The Book of Phoenix*, namely Henrietta Lacks, "an African-American working-class woman affected an aggressive form of cervical cancer whose cells were taken without consent at Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore" (77).

Finally, Volpi dedicates the last and final chapter to Benjamin Zephaniah's literary work as *Bildungsromane* tackling the relationship between music and technology against the backdrop of young adult literature. She highlights how different technological forms in Zephaniah's novel take center stage in the narrative dynamics depicting the protagonists' struggle with their racial identity: "from music, hip hop in particular, to the media, from social networks to cyber-protests, passing through literacy itself as a form of technology" (103).

Before concluding this brief and, in fact, incomplete overview, it is necessary to acknowledge that conveying the vastness of the ground covered by Elia and Volpi in their work is a challenging task for a reviewer. Yet, it is indeed possible to identify a few research avenues and groundwork questions that the book opens up for subsequent works to explore. But before isolating those, we have to give a note of merit to the authors for having struck the perfect balance between readability for students and research innovation for scholars. In this sense, the presence of QR codes linking up to actual playlists and multimedia for the works cited in the books is undoubtedly innovative, enriching, and original. Even more so when the book ends up addressing topics such as the connection between the Black body, robots, and slavery; alterity and identity as redefined by technological advancements and the appropriation of those by marginalized communities; and, therefore, culture as a technological form but also as a disguising mechanism to unlock the depotentiation of colonial discourse. In this sense, and with all the necessary cautions and typological differences, resorting to sci-fi, aliases, costumes, absurdist narratives, and spiritual imagery can be seen as a common denominator not just for the representation of the Black experience, but also as a conceptual thread uniting the cultural practices of self-affirmation sought out by many marginalized communities.

Kathleen Gyssels *Hommage à Lilyan Kesteloot.* *Bruxelles, 25 juin 2021*

Silvia Boraso

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Compte rendu de Gyssels, K. (2023). *Hommage à Lilyan Kesteloot. Bruxelles, 25 juin 2021*. Bruxelles : Académie Royale des Sciences d'Outre-Mer, 122 pp.

Lilyan Kesteloot, chercheuse belge native du Congo, demeure une figure essentielle dans le champ des études africaines et postcoloniales. Formée à la philologie romane, elle consacre sa thèse – publiée en 1963 sous le titre *Les écrivains noirs de langue française : naissance d'une littérature* – à l'émergence des voix littéraires noires dans l'espace francophone. Femme blanche œuvrant, dès les années 1960, pour l'institutionnalisation de la littérature africaine d'expression française, notamment aux côtés de Léopold Sédar Senghor, Kesteloot s'impose comme une médiatrice entre les continents, une « passeuse infatigable » (8) des cultures et des savoirs. Enseignant au Sénégal, elle conjugue la rigueur philologique à une ouverture culturelle exemplaire, incarnant, selon Kathleen Gyssels, « l'interdisciplinarité et le multiculturalisme » (5). Son parcours n'échappe toutefois pas aux limites d'une réception marquée par une certaine misogynie (7), qui contribua à marginaliser sa voix dans un champ longtemps dominé par des figures masculines.

L'ouvrage *Hommage à Lilyan Kesteloot* entreprend de restituer toute la portée de cette œuvre pionnière et d'en renouveler la lecture. Les contributions rassemblées y interrogent la fécondité de son approche critique, la pertinence de sa méthode comparatiste ainsi que la dimension éthique de son engagement intellectuel. En



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revisitant ses travaux sous l'angle de la transmission, du dialogue interculturel et de la reconnaissance des voix féminines, ces études contribuent à réaffirmer la place centrale de Kesteloot dans l'histoire des littératures africaines francophones et dans la constitution même de leur légitimité académique.

Le volume s'ouvre sur la contribution d'Ari Gounongbé, « *La Négritude et ses "tralalas" chez Lilyan Kesteloot* » (13-20), qui propose un regard à la fois biographique et critique sur la trajectoire de la chercheuse. Biographe de Kesteloot, Gounongbé s'attache à éclairer certains aspects demeurés discrets de sa vie, interrogeant notamment les silences qui entourent l'absence de Léon-Gontran Damas dans *Les grandes figures de la Négritude - Paroles privées*, ouvrage qu'il avait co-édité avec elle. En restituant ces zones d'ombre, il esquisse le portrait d'une intellectuelle à la fois exigeante et profondément humaine, marquée par une expérience intime de la complexité coloniale. Gounongbé souligne que chez Kesteloot, le lien à l'Afrique ne relève pas d'un « sentiment de culpabilité », mais bien d'un sentiment de « responsabilité », sentiment qu'« elle partageait avec la jeunesse des années cinquante qui militait pour la décolonisation » (18). Cette responsabilité, à la fois morale et scientifique, traverse son œuvre entière, conférant à son engagement critique une dimension éthique et politique singulière.

Le texte suivant, signé Hans-Jürgen Lüsebrink, « *Croisements et échanges : un hommage à Lilyan Kesteloot* » (21-3), élargit la perspective en mettant en lumière l'apport considérable de la chercheuse à la reconnaissance du patrimoine oral africain. Lüsebrink rappelle l'« intérêt infatigable, jamais démenti, de Lilyan Kesteloot pour l'épopée traditionnelle et ses éditions érudites, menées en coopération avec des collègues africains, de l'épopée bambara de Ségou, de celle de Soundjata, et des contes et mythes wolofs » (22). Par cette exploration savante de la tradition orale, Kesteloot a su établir un pont entre la recherche philologique et l'anthropologie culturelle, inscrivant les récits oraux dans l'histoire littéraire africaine à part entière.

La contribution de Ken Bugul, « *Prise de parole chez les femmes* » (25-6), s'inscrit dans la filiation directe de l'engagement de Lilyan Kesteloot pour la reconnaissance de la parole orale africaine et de ses vecteurs féminins. Dans ce texte bref mais dense, l'écrivaine sénégalaise, autrice du *Baobab fou* (1982), retrace l'histoire des mouvements de libération et de prise de parole des femmes en Afrique subsaharienne, depuis les voix issues des « castées » traditionnellement assignées aux prises de parole publiques jusqu'aux mobilisations contemporaines, telles que le mouvement #MeToo. Bugul souligne la persistance d'un combat multiforme pour la visibilité et la légitimité de la parole féminine, inscrivant son propos dans la continuité du travail de Kesteloot, qui avait ouvert

la voie à une réflexion sur la place des femmes dans la production et la transmission littéraires africaines. Ce dialogue implicite entre critique et création témoigne de la vitalité d'un héritage intellectuel que Kesteloot a contribué à rendre possible.

Dans l'article suivant, « *Kesteloot et Bugul, deux championnes des littératures africaines* » (27-43), Morgan Faulkner met en parallèle les trajectoires de la chercheuse belge et de l'écrivaine sénégalaise afin de souligner leur rôle commun dans la promotion des littératures africaines, qu'elles soient orales ou écrites, précoloniales, coloniales ou postcoloniales. Faulkner rappelle que, pour Kesteloot, « la vitalité d'une tradition littéraire dépend nécessairement de l'accessibilité de son corpus auprès du public, la littérature orale ayant précisément l'avantage d'être accessible. Il est donc intéressant de constater que ce même corpus oral est difficile d'accès pour le public francophone international » (28). Faulkner analyse cette tension entre l'ouverture et la marginalisation, observant que « la diffusion des œuvres littéraires en Afrique se voit complexifiée par les conditions de vie et les dynamiques de privilège » et qu'elle « rencontre encore d'autres défis dans les pays dits "du Nord", où les œuvres africaines occupent souvent, selon Bugul, une place marginale » (34). Dans cette perspective, le spécialiste met en valeur la démarche de Bugul, qui « crée des liens entre auteurs "du Sud" et d'autres auteurs du monde dans une tentative d'ouverture du champ littéraire africain », contribuant ainsi à un humanisme renouvelé où la littérature devient un espace de réciprocité et de reconnaissance (35).

La réflexion se poursuit avec l'étude de Kathleen Gyssels, « *Kesteloot et Zobel, du terrain aux tissures afro-caribéennes* » (45-61), qui inscrit la chercheuse dans un réseau plus large de relations et d'affinités intellectuelles transatlantiques. Dans une première partie d'inspiration biographique, Gyssels revient sur les liens familiaux de Kesteloot avec l'ancien Congo belge, éclairant les fondements d'une sensibilité à la complexité des identités coloniales. Elle insiste sur l'importance des anthologies dans l'œuvre de Kesteloot, qu'elle considère comme un « genre fondamental pour qu'une littérature émergente se consolide et devienne un repère » (49), capable de rassembler des auteurs et des genres différents en un espace commun de reconnaissance. En rapprochant Kesteloot de Joseph Zobel, Gyssels adopte une approche intersectionnelle, attentive aux croisements de voix, de langues et de territoires. Ce dialogue entre l'Afrique et les Caraïbes révèle la profondeur d'un projet intellectuel qui visait, chez Kesteloot, à faire de la littérature un terrain de rencontres, un espace d'écoute et de résonance entre les mondes.

Dans son étude intitulée « *Lilyan Kesteloot et la parole libérée dans un triangle du savoir : la problématique du voyage intérieur et extérieur* » (63-81), Claude Giscard Makosso propose une lecture

originale des entretiens télévisés accordés par Kesteloot, qu'il érige en espace d'exploration de soi et de médiation intellectuelle. À travers ces archives audiovisuelles, il s'attache à retracer les voyages, à la fois géographiques et spirituels, qui ont façonné la pensée de la chercheuse. Makosso montre comment cette parole publique, d'une grande clarté réflexive, permet non seulement de comprendre le parcours de Kesteloot, mais aussi « d'éclairer les œuvres d'écrivains africains comme Cheikh Anta Diop, Aimé Césaire [sic] et Senghor » (75). En ce sens, l'article met en évidence un « triangle du savoir » où se croisent l'expérience biographique, la critique littéraire et la pensée politique.

L'article de Serigne Seye, « *Lilyan Kesteloot et les écrivains sénégalais : de Léopold Sédar Senghor à Pape Samba Kane* » (83-94), examine quant à lui la relation privilégiée que la chercheuse entretient avec le Sénégal, à la fois terre d'adoption et espace de recherche. Si cette approche peut sembler paradoxale pour une intellectuelle qui a œuvré toute sa vie en faveur d'un panafricanisme politique et littéraire, la catégorie nationale devient ici un instrument d'analyse permettant de saisir la dimension intime de son enracinement. Seye met en lumière les « relations très familières » que Kesteloot entretenait avec les poètes et intellectuels sénégalais (85), rappelant que « Senghor a été sa porte d'entrée symbolique et intellectuelle au Sénégal » (87). Ce lien personnel et intellectuel confère à sa démarche une densité affective rare, révélant une chercheuse qui n'a jamais séparé l'étude des textes de la rencontre avec les hommes et les cultures qui les portent.

L'avant-dernière contribution du volume, intitulée « *Chantiers interrompus : inédits, archives (in)explorés* » (95-103), réunit un texte de Mamadou Ba consacré à la dimension archivistique de l'héritage kestelootien. À partir de l'analyse d'un tapuscrit inédit – celui qui ne fut pas intégré comme sixième chapitre à *Les grandes figures de la Négritude* (2007) – Ba met en lumière la richesse et la complexité du legs laissé par la chercheuse. Les annotations manuscrites au stylo-bille, présentes sur ce document, témoignent du lien intime et durable qu'elle entretenait avec l'Afrique, « son continent de cœur » (101), mais aussi d'une attitude intellectuelle marquée par la retenue, la rigueur et une certaine humilité, « motivés par un souci de réserve, de discrétion et de pudeur » (101). En rendant accessibles ces fragments et ces traces, l'article souligne la nécessité d'une relecture des archives de Kesteloot comme lieu vivant de transmission et de réflexion sur la mémoire des études africaines.

Le texte suivant, signé Fantah Touré et intitulé « *Si chère Lilyan* » (105-12), prend la forme d'un hommage personnel et émouvant. Dans cette reconnaissance écrite, Touré exprime « un lien affectif fort et peut-être une filiation » avec celle qu'elle considère comme une guide intellectuelle et spirituelle (110). À la dimension critique du

volume s'ajoute ici une tonalité mémorielle et affective : Kesteloot n'y apparaît plus seulement comme chercheuse ou médiatrice, mais comme figure inspiratrice, dont la générosité et la disponibilité ont marqué plusieurs générations de chercheurs et d'écrivains africains, illustrant combien l'héritage de Kesteloot dépasse le cadre strict de la recherche pour s'inscrire dans une véritable communauté intellectuelle animée par une profonde affinité humaine.

Le volume se clôt sur un entretien historique avec Léopold Sédar Senghor, réalisé en 1974 à Amsterdam (115-22), qui vient sceller l'hommage par un retour aux sources mêmes de la Négritude. Ce dialogue entre le poète-président et la critique rappelle la profondeur intellectuelle et la réciprocité du lien qui unissait Kesteloot à Senghor, ainsi qu'à toute une génération d'écrivains engagés dans la construction d'une pensée africaine moderne. En refermant le recueil sur cette conversation, les éditeurs affirment la continuité d'un échange entre l'Afrique et l'Europe, entre mémoire et critique, entre parole poétique et analyse savante, qui fait de cet *Hommage à Lilyan Kesteloot* non seulement une célébration, mais aussi une réactivation vivante de son œuvre et de son esprit.

Marlene L. Daut, Kaiama L. Glover **A History of Haitian Literature**

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L'ouvrage collectif *A History of Haitian Literature*, dirigé par Marlene L. Daut et Kaiama L. Glover, se donne pour ambition de proposer ce que ses éditrices présentent comme « potentiellement la première histoire globale de la littérature haïtienne publiée en langue anglaise ». Il s'inscrit dans un contexte de dynamisation notable des études haïtiennes dans le monde académique anglophone, phénomène signalé dès l'introduction du volume, où les directrices observent que « nous assistons, en effet, à une forme de renouveau des études consacrées à la littérature haïtienne ». Si, depuis le milieu du XIXe siècle, chercheur.se.s, écrivain.e.s et critiques ont produit un corpus substantiel de réflexion sur la tradition littéraire de l'île, relayé par de nombreuses synthèses et anthologies dans l'espace francophone, aucune entreprise de synthèse d'une telle ampleur n'avait encore été menée en anglais, lacune à laquelle cet ouvrage entend remédier.

L'objectif du volume est double. Il vise, d'une part, à retracer l'histoire longue des lettres haïtiennes en soulignant les continuités et les reconfigurations entre la période coloniale de Saint-Domingue et la production postrévolutionnaire ; d'autre part, à rendre compte de la pluralité linguistique, générique et médiatique qui caractérise cette tradition. Les contributions, sans se limiter à un cadre chronologique ou thématique rigide, conjuguent approches



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historiques, théoriques, esthétiques et politiques, et prennent en considération un large éventail de formes – du roman et de la poésie au théâtre, à la chanson, à la presse, à la radio et aux pratiques performatives. Les éditrices rappellent ainsi que, au XIX^e siècle, la littérature constitua un espace décisif de confrontation symbolique, dans lequel les écrivains haïtiens affirmèrent la dignité, la légitimité culturelle et l'autonomie intellectuelle de leur jeune nation, faisant de la production littéraire un lieu central de réflexion sur l'histoire, la souveraineté et l'appartenance collective.

Le volume s'ouvre sur l'article de Laurent Dubois, « Literature as Loot. Jean Fouchard's Search for the Roots of Haitian Culture », consacré à l'apport fondamental de Jean Fouchard dans la compréhension des continuités culturelles entre Saint-Domingue et Haïti. Dubois met en lumière le rôle central du théâtre, de la performance et des pratiques scripturaires des personnes réduites en esclavage et affranchies, insistant sur la nécessité d'une lecture holistique de l'histoire littéraire haïtienne.

Les deux chapitres suivants approfondissent cette réflexion sur les arts du spectacle. Grégory Pierrot, dans « Theater in Early Independent Haiti », analyse la production théâtrale des premières décennies de l'indépendance, en montrant comment le théâtre fut à la fois un lieu d'expérimentation esthétique et un instrument de formation politique et sociale. Henry Stoll, avec « "So all the world may know it" : The Literary Value of Nineteenth-Century Haitian Song and Opera », élargit le canon littéraire en examinant la chanson et l'opéra comme matrices de la poétique haïtienne du XIX^e siècle, soulignant la capacité des auteurs haïtiens à réinvestir et transformer des formes héritées de la tradition révolutionnaire française.

La presse et la culture périodique occupent une place centrale dans plusieurs contributions. Chelsea Stieber, dans « Civil War, Guerre de Plume, and the Emergence of Early Haitian Periodical Culture », étudie la presse haïtienne du début du XIX^e siècle comme espace de conflits politiques et de débats intellectuels fondateurs pour la littérature nationale. Linsey Sainte-Claire, dans « Haitian Writers and the Forging of a National Voice through Periodicals in the Twentieth Century », prolonge cette analyse au XX^e siècle en montrant comment les revues littéraires participèrent à l'élaboration d'une voix nationale plurielle. À cette réflexion sur les médias s'ajoute celle de Laura Wagner, « Radio Haïti-Inter », qui met en évidence le rôle décisif de la radio comme relais littéraire et politique, notamment sous la direction de Jean Léopold Dominique.

Un ensemble substantiel de chapitres est consacré à la poésie, au romantisme et à l'émergence du roman haïtien au XIX^e siècle. Marlene L. Daut, dans « History, Politics, and Revolutionary Romanticism in Charles Hérard-Dumesle's *Voyage dans le nord d'Hayti* (1824) and the Anonymously Published *L'Haïtiade* (ca. 1826) », analyse

l'articulation entre romantisme et militantisme révolutionnaire. Mary Grace Albanese et Claudy Delné revisitent respectivement le romantisme haïtien du « Cénacle » et le premier roman haïtien (*Stella*, d'Émeric Bergeaud, publié en 1859) en soulignant leurs tensions idéologiques. Bastien Craipain, Amy Lynelle, et Marie-José Nzengou-Tayo proposent quant à eux des relectures critiques du roman et de la poésie de la fin du XIX^e siècle, en intégrant les enjeux de civilisation et de désenchantement qui y sont propres. Frenand Léger complète cet ensemble par une réflexion structurante sur les causes du développement inégal de la littérature en créole.

Les contributions consacrées au XX^e siècle interrogent étroitement les rapports entre littérature, politique et idéologie. Nadève Ménard examine la production littéraire durant l'Occupation américaine, tandis que Sophie Maríñez analyse les représentations littéraires des relations haïtiano-dominicaines. Les chapitres de Valerie Kaussen, Yves Chemla, Jean Jonassaint et Martin Munro reviennent sur les figures majeures de l'indigénisme, du marxisme et de l'exil, en accordant une place centrale à Jacques Roumain et à la question de la migration.

Les dernières sections du volume accordent une attention soutenue aux écritures contemporaines, aux questions de genre et aux esthétiques de la résistance. Kaiama L. Glover (« *The Zonbi as Episteme* »), Cécile Accilien, Alessandra Benedicty-Kokken, Natalie M. Léger, Marie-Denise Shelton, Régine Michelle Jean-Charles et Nathan Dize explorent, chacun à leur manière, les figures du vodou, du corps, de l'érotique, du trauma et de l'archive, montrant la vitalité et la complexité de la création littéraire haïtienne contemporaine, tant en Haïti que dans la diaspora.

En proposant un compte rendu en français de *A History of Haitian Literature*, il s'agit de mettre en lumière l'importance majeure de cet ouvrage pour le lectorat francophone. Ce volume constitue une ressource précieuse pour les étudiant.e.s et les chercheur.se.s souhaitant appréhender les orientations contemporaines des études haïtiennes dans le champ académique anglophone. Par l'ampleur du corpus mobilisé, la pluralité des perspectives et la rigueur des analyses proposées, il offre un observatoire privilégié des manières dont la littérature haïtienne est aujourd'hui interrogée, enseignée et renouvelée au-delà de l'espace francophone. À ce titre, il contribue à renforcer le dialogue translinguistique et transdisciplinaire indispensable au développement et à l'internationalisation des études haïtiennes.

Xavier Garnier et al. *Littératures africaines et écologie*

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La publication des actes du congrès de l'APELA (Association pour l'étude des littératures africaines), tenu à l'Université Cheikh Anta Diop de Dakar du 2 au 4 novembre 2023, s'inscrit dans un moment particulièrement fécond pour les études littéraires africaines et les humanités environnementales. Placé sous le thème de « la contribution des littératures africaines à la prise de conscience d'une urgence écologique globale » (« Introduction », 5), l'ouvrage collectif interroge la manière dont les écritures du continent participent à la formulation d'un autre rapport au vivant, à rebours des paradigmes dominants hérités de la modernité occidentale. Au cœur des préoccupations rassemblées dans le volume se dessine un double enjeu : d'une part, réaffirmer la capacité des littératures africaines à produire des diagnostics critiques sur la crise écologique mondiale ; d'autre part, mettre en lumière leur potentiel d'invention conceptuelle, esthétique et sensible dans un contexte où les visions hégémoniques s'avèrent insuffisantes pour répondre aux perturbations systémiques en cours. Il s'agit notamment de rompre avec une conception « verte » typiquement occidentale, qui postule l'existence d'îlots de nature prétendument intacts, séparés des sociétés humaines et investis du fantasme d'une pureté originelle.

À cette approche conservationniste, dont l'histoire est souvent solidaire d'entreprises d'expropriation et d'invisibilisation des



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populations locales, les contributeurs et contributrices opposent l'épaisseur de cosmologies africaines fondées sur la continuité du vivant, la porosité entre humains et non-humains, ainsi que la reconnaissance de formes de connaissance non réductibles au modèle scientifique occidental. Dès lors, la réflexion proposée par cet ouvrage, telle que l'explicite la conférence inaugurale de Felwine Sarr qui ouvre le volume, met en exergue la pertinence d'une écopoétique et d'une écopolitique du Sud global, où les littératures deviennent des espaces privilégiés pour reconfigurer les imaginaires, revisiter les ontologies et reconsidérer les conditions mêmes de l'habitabilité du monde.

La première section, intitulée *L'Afrique au risque de la biosphère*, s'ouvre sur la réflexion de Sylvie Brodziak, qui interroge « la capacité de la fiction à affronter la crise écologique » (35). Son analyse du roman *Puissions-nous vivre longtemps* (2021) d'Imbolo Mbue, présenté comme une « pétrofiction » (35) emblématique de l'essor des humanités énergétiques depuis le colloque fondateur de « Pétrocultures » en 2012 (36), met en avant la puissance critique de la littérature face au capitalisme extractiviste « spoliateur des ressources et destructeur des territoires en Afrique » (35). Brodziak montre comment le texte de Mbue contribue à édifier un véritable « habitat narratif » (36) pour une communauté mondiale de lutte écologique, en inscrivant la fiction dans une dynamique de résistance et d'actions potentiellement radicales (36). L'enjeu central consiste à « réinterroger la question de la propriété de la terre en situation de colonialité » (37), afin de dévoiler les continuités historiques entre prédation coloniale, racisme environnemental et pratiques biocidaires de l'industrie globale, souvent relayées par les élites locales (38).

Dans le deuxième article, Fabiola Obame poursuit cette exploration des vulnérabilités écologiques en analysant trois récits contemporains de survie et d'errance : *Pétroleum* de Bessora, *Géotropiques* de Johary Ravaloson et *Cycle de sécheresse* de Cheikh C. Sow. Elle y montre que, lorsque « la terre maternelle est porteuse de mort » (49), l'exil s'impose non comme une option mais comme un réflexe vital, « le seul moyen de survivre » (49, 53). S'appuyant sur la pensée de Felwine Sarr, Obame identifie dans ces textes les symptômes d'une « fracture environnementale » issue d'une manière « altéricide d'habiter l'espace » (52). La dégradation écologique ne provient pas seulement de milieux fragilisés, mais d'une « fracture relationnelle » (53) qui redouble les inégalités sociales et condamne les populations marginalisées à l'inhabitabilité.

Poursuivant l'examen des imaginaires africains du désastre écologique, Pierre Leroux propose, dans son article « Récits de l'entropie : évocations d'un monde qui meurt », une lecture croisée de *La Maison de la faim* de Dambudzo Marechera et de *Mzingile* d'Euphrase Kezilahabi. Il inscrit ces œuvres dans une tradition

littéraire où « l'évocation d'un monde en train de disparaître est un lieu commun de la littérature ethnographique » (59), faisant notamment écho aux inquiétudes exprimées par Claude Lévi-Strauss. Leroux montre que cette thématique trouve en Afrique une résonance particulière, tant la « rencontre avec l'homme blanc » y est fréquemment perçue comme un « élément déclencheur de l'entropie » (59), à l'instar du motif de *Tout s'effondre* de Chinua Achebe. Les deux récits analysés se distinguent ainsi par une représentation des lieux qui « s'oppose [...] à toute approche romantique » et qui fait de « la déliquescence du lieu un enjeu majeur du récit » (61). Marechera comme Kezilahabi élaborent des cartographies instables, fracturées, où l'effondrement des repères spatiaux accompagne celui des structures sociales traditionnelles, instaurant une reconfiguration radicale des espaces vécus.

Dans une perspective complémentaire, Khadr Hamza examine les « zones urbaines » comme foyers d'urgences écologiques dans trois romans dystopiques africains : *Barzakh* de Moussa Ould Ebnou, *Utopia* d'Ahmed Towfik et *Moxyland* de Lauren Beukes. Son article montre que « les représentations des urgences écologiques en Afrique [...] sont construites autour des zones urbaines du continent » (74), où les espaces naturels – pourtant au centre des imaginaires environnementalistes occidentaux – se trouvent « effacés de l'horizon » au profit de mégapoles saturées de violence, de pollution et de technologies oppressives. Ces environnements urbains « invivables » fonctionnent alors comme matrices de sociétés dystopiques, dont la dégradation écologique n'est qu'un des symptômes parmi d'autres : elles révèlent simultanément les inégalités sociales, les formes de surveillance néolibérale et les fractures politiques qui structurent les vies africaines contemporaines.

L'article successif, signé Alioune Diaw, se distingue en s'intéressant à une écriture poétique de la résistance écologique, à travers le poème d'Amadou Lamine Sall consacré au projet controversé du port de Ndayane. Diaw interroge « comment la parole poétique fonctionne-t-elle comme une parole d'alerte », comment elle renouvelle « la figure du poète engagé » et ce qu'elle révèle de « la posture ambiguë du poète face au président de la République » (88). La poésie, « mise au service d'une cause à la fois personnelle et collective », parvient à « confondre lyrisme et argumentation » sans sacrifier la densité esthétique du texte (89). Le poème devient ainsi un espace où se tissent mémoire, indignation et responsabilité, révélant la puissance de la création littéraire pour troubler l'ordre politique et contester les projets destructeurs qui menacent les territoires sénégalais.

Dans une étude consacrée à « la (re)prise de conscience environnementale dans la poésie et le slam sénégalais », Aliou Seck et Papa Bocar Ndaw proposent une analyse des nouvelles formes d'engagement littéraire au Sénégal. Ils observent une

« exacerbation du sentiment de nature chez les poètes », tandis que « les slameurs dotent leurs productions musico-littéraires d'une dimension politique et idéologique » visant à inviter prioritairement le public sénégalais « à un changement de paradigme dans sa relation avec le cadre de vie et le vivant » (105). S'appuyant sur un corpus poétique constitué notamment de Marouba Fall, Amadou Lamine Sall et Amadou Élimane Kane, les auteurs montrent que la nature y occupe « une bonne place », non plus comme simple décor, mais comme un véritable actant au sein de « ce que Césaire appelait "le jeu du monde" » (107). Le slam, de son côté, apparaît comme une forme esthétique singulièrement réceptive à l'urgence écologique, ce que les auteurs nomment, dans le sillage de Lawrence Buell, un « slam environnemental » (113-14). Ancré dans l'expérience vécue, nourri du quotidien et des indignations du slameur, ce genre fait de la dénonciation des violences écologiques une exigence tacite qui oriente la création comme la performance. Cette sensibilité poético-politique prend parfois la forme d'un « slam solastalgique », marqué par « une angoisse poignante et un fort sentiment de dépaysement ou d'exil intérieur » (116-17).

L'article de Nicolas Treiber, qui clôt cette première section, adopte une perspective plus historique en proposant une « généalogie d'une conscience planétaire problématique » à partir de l'œuvre de Cheikh Hamidou Kane. Treiber met en lumière, dans *L'Aventure ambiguë*, les modalités d'une « écopoétique négative », définie comme la représentation d'un rapport à la nature articulé à la scénographie de son propre délitement (119). Cette sensibilité, encore discrète dans le premier roman, devient plus explicite dans *Les Gardiens du temple* (1995), où se déploient des interrogations plus directes sur la dégradation des milieux, la responsabilité humaine et l'avenir du monde vivant. En reconstituant les étapes de cette évolution, Treiber montre que Cheikh Hamidou Kane s'inscrit dans une réflexion anticipatrice sur la fragilité de la planète, inscrivant son œuvre – souvent lue à travers le seul prisme de la tension entre tradition et modernité – dans le champ plus large des humanités environnementales.

La deuxième partie de l'ouvrage, consacrée aux formes de *Résilience et résistances écosystémiques*, s'ouvre sur l'article de Serigne Seye, qui analyse deux romans contemporains : *Congo Inc.* d'In Koli Jean Bofane et *Crocodile-Ville* d'Abdoulaye Élimane Kane. Seye montre comment ces œuvres interrogent les tensions entre modernité et tradition en matière d'écoresponsabilité, rappelant que celle-ci « fait partie intégrante des sociétés africaines traditionnalistes » qui avaient su maintenir un équilibre entre exploitation et préservation des ressources (139). Dans ces deux récits, personnages et institutions s'efforcent ainsi de promouvoir des comportements responsables, parfois hérités des cosmologies locales, susceptibles

de contribuer à la sauvegarde des milieux naturels. Les intrigues s'inscrivent dans un contexte où les ressources deviennent l'enjeu d'un conflit opposant « les tenants de la modernité » aux défenseurs d'une certaine tradition, antagonisme qui structure « la prise de conscience écoresponsable » (140). Seye met en lumière la complexité de cette opposition : alors que chez Bofane, la modernité, incarnée par Isookanga et la « boulimie extractiviste et consumériste » qui l'accompagne, apparaît comme une menace directe pour la forêt et ses habitants (151), chez Kane elle peut comporter « une dimension avantageuse » dans la perspective d'une transition écologique rendue possible par les avancées techniques (151).

Dans un tout autre registre, Abdoulaye Diouf propose une lecture écoféministe du roman *Douceurs du bercail* d'Aminata Sow Fall. Son analyse met en évidence la manière dont le récit convoque « des symboles de pouvoir empruntés à la nature (la terre, le fleuve par exemple) pour faire ressortir l'intelligible féministe du roman » (p. 153). En s'appuyant sur le « régime de la pastorale » à l'œuvre dans le texte, Diouf montre comment Sow Fall articule les règnes végétal et humain dans une « mise en écho-éco-poétique » (154) qui fait du milieu naturel un espace de résonance, de solidarité et de résistance. Cette écopoétique féminine et postcoloniale révèle la puissance subversive d'une écriture qui pense la libération des femmes à travers une symbolique de la terre, revalorisée comme matrice de puissance, de mémoire et de justice.

C'est également une poétique de la résistance qui se trouve au cœur de l'article de Coudy Kane, consacré à l'œuvre d'Amadou Élimane Kane et à ce qu'elle nomme « l'écopoétique de la renaissance africaine ». En analysant la tétralogie poétique du poète sénégalais, Kane souligne la centralité d'emblèmes naturels tels que « le baobab, le palmier, le flamboyant et le tamarinier », dont la présence, perceptible dès les titres, révèle une « préoccupation particulière » pour les figures végétales constitutives de l'imaginaire africain (169). La personnification de ces arbres joue un rôle essentiel dans la construction d'une écopoétique allégorique : elle manifeste à la fois une attention profonde au monde vivant et une volonté de résistance esthétique face aux forces qui menacent les écosystèmes comme les identités culturelles.

La deuxième partie se clôt sur un ensemble de contributions qui élargissent encore le spectre des résiliences et résistances écosystémiques en Afrique de l'Ouest, en revisitant des formes esthétiques aussi diverses que la poésie senghorienne et le théâtre-forum. Denis Assane Diouf propose d'abord une relecture écopoétique du « Royaume d'enfance » de Léopold Sédar Senghor, en montrant comment le poète explore les multiples façons de percevoir et d'habiter l'environnement naturel qui structure son imaginaire originel. Le poème senghorien se donne en effet comme un espace de

cohabitation syncopée entre visible et invisible, audible et inaudible, sensible et intelligible, où le sujet lyrique fait l'expérience d'une immersion totale dans un écosystème qui modèle ses émotions et ses formes d'expression. Diouf rappelle ainsi que cette poésie ne peut se comprendre sans la matrice agrosylvopastorale qui la fonde : chez Senghor, être poète revient à être paysan ou pâtre, à dialoguer avec la terre, les arbres, les animaux, et à laisser la nature fournir l'armature même du langage poétique.

En contrepoint de cette écopoétique lyrique et fondée sur la mémoire, Claire Dutrait explore une autre modalité de création écosystémique : le théâtre-forum, mobilisé dans le cadre d'un projet arts-sciences-société sur le front d'industrialisation de Dakar. Les deux pièces analysées, issues de résidences de science participative, interrogent la relation entre habitants, pollution et dispositifs de mesure de la qualité de l'air. La première pièce se présente comme un théâtre de sensibilisation, mettant en débat la confiance accordée aux capteurs déployés près des fonderies locales ; la seconde, jouée lors des restitutions des données, instaure des mini-forums où les communautés discutent collectivement « quoi faire » face à des résultats partiels mais révélateurs. Dutrait montre que cette forme artistique, loin d'être un simple médium pédagogique, constitue une pratique écopoétique à part entière : elle crée les conditions d'une assemblée hybride, en articulant vécus, savoirs scientifiques et expériences sensibles, et en transformant le public en collectif d'action capable d'imaginer des modalités concrètes pour « mieux respirer et mieux vivre » dans un contexte urbain menacé.

Enfin, l'entretien avec Mamadou Diol (metteur en scène de la troupe Kaddû Yaraax et acteur-clé du projet) approfondit cette réflexion en donnant accès aux coulisses de la création théâtrale engagée dans la zone critique. Il met en lumière les responsabilités spécifiques du théâtre-forum : bien se situer dans un territoire social et écologique précis, bien dire pour traduire fidèlement les préoccupations des habitants, et bien faire pour susciter des dynamiques collectives dépassant la seule représentation.

La troisième partie (*Nouvelles alliances minérales, végétales et animales*) s'ouvre sur une réévaluation de la portée écopoétique d'œuvres qui, *a priori*, ne thématisent pas directement l'environnement. Catherine Mazauric montre en effet que *De l'autre côté du regard* de Ken Bugul et *Les Veilleurs de Sangomar* de Fatou Diome témoignent de formes subtiles d'interactions entre humains et non-humains, mobilisant des cosmovisions non dualistes où le vivant ne se laisse pas réduire à des catégories strictement biologiques ou naturalistes. Mazauric propose un cheminement en trois « stations » : le deuil, compris comme espace de transition où la porosité entre les mondes intensifie les relations avec les forces environnantes ; les lieux, investis comme nœuds écosystémiques

participant à l'économie narrative ; et surtout les eaux, actant central qui articule les circulations entre visible et invisible, humain et non humain, vivant et non vivant.

Marie Pernice poursuit cette exploration des imaginaires non anthropocentrés en étudiant les « zones souterraines sensibles » mises en scène par George Makana Clark et Wilfried N'Sondé. À partir de *The Raw Man* et de *Femme du ciel et des tempêtes*, elle analyse comment les fictions contemporaines investissent le sous-sol africain, à la fois morcelé par les logiques extractivistes et recomposé par l'écriture sous la forme d'un écosystème souterrain connecté. Aux espaces excavés, discontinus, ravagés par la fragmentation minière, répond ainsi progressivement une vision holiste où se relient temps, matière, vivants et non-vivants. L'imaginaire des profondeurs devient alors un lieu de résistance aux représentations productivistes du continent qui fait émerger un autre rapport au minéral, susceptible d'articuler mémoire géologique, historicité traumatique et possibilité d'alliance interspécifique.

Avec l'article de Sara Buekens, la réflexion se déplace vers une « esthétique du déchet » développée dans la littérature des îles de l'océan Indien, particulièrement chez Jean-Luc Raharimanana et Ananda Devi. Dans des contextes insulaires marqués par une urbanisation rapide, une accumulation massive de détritiques et un accroissement des inégalités sociales, les auteurs entreprennent une véritable réhabilitation du déchet comme figure littéraire et politique. En exhibant sa matérialité brute, ils lui restituent une place dans l'espace social et symbolique, et engagent une opération de sensibilisation où le rebut devient révélateur des fractures contemporaines. Raharimanana et Devi se réapproprient ainsi le vocabulaire de la déchéance pour le détourner : le déchet cesse d'être stigmaté pour devenir prisme critique, révélant l'emprise de la pollution sur les corps, les paysages et les imaginaires.

L'article d'Éloïse Brezault prolonge cette attention aux formes artistiques qui réinventent les relations entre corps, matières et milieux, en analysant les performances afrofuturistes des Kongo Astronauts. À partir du concept de « brutalisme » développé par Achille Mbembe pour penser les logiques nécrophages et extractives qui pèsent sur les corps africains, Brezault montre comment les KA élaborent une « corporalité autre » qui constitue une résistance possible à ces forces de destruction. Les corps-performers, assemblés à partir de déchets électroniques, d'objets recyclés et de fragments de matérialités industrielles, rendent visibles les silences qui entourent l'exploitation minière du Congo. Ces artefacts sculptent une mémoire qui n'est pas seulement politique, mais aussi écologique et manifestent les stratifications toxiques laissées par les industries globales du numérique, faisant émerger une nouvelle conscience du lieu.

Avec Mamadou Faye, la réflexion se recentre sur le végétal et son statut poétique dans les univers de Léopold Sédar Senghor et d'Aimé Césaire. L'étude met en évidence la manière dont les deux poètes mobilisent les plantes, arbres et forces végétales comme partenaires métaphoriques, révélateurs d'une intériorité et d'une vision du monde où le végétal incarne un véritable agent ontologique. Chez Senghor, la personnalité du baobab, du fromager ou du rônier structure une poétique de la filiation et de l'enracinement ; chez Césaire, les métamorphoses végétales participent d'une dynamique de révolte, de démesure et de renaissance. Faye montre ainsi que le végétal n'est pas seulement motif ou décor, mais opérateur de pensée : il permet de reconfigurer les rapports entre histoire coloniale, subjectivité noire et monde vivant.

L'analyse menée par Marion Coste autour des *Fables du moineau* de Sami Tchak explore pour sa part la polyphonie des vivants et la manière dont le texte déconstruit l'hégémonie du point de vue humain. Dans ce récit où animaux, humains et entités non humaines coexistent dans une continuité narrative, Coste souligne l'importance d'un régime discursif fondé sur la prédation : être dévoré ou dévorer devient un principe structurant des relations interspécifiques. La polyphonie des vivants indique alors une écopoétique du lien, fondée sur l'interdépendance et la co-constitution des existences, qui décentre le regard humain au profit d'une compréhension plus large des dynamiques du vivant.

Enfin, Jamie Herd propose une lecture de *Cacophonie* de Ken Bugul en termes de « sur-vie » et de soin de l'avenir, à partir de la triade éthique « prendre soin des personnes, prendre soin de la terre, prendre soin de l'avenir ». S'appuyant sur sa thèse d'« Écrire pour nourrir », Herd analyse la manière dont Bugul articule relations de voisinage, pratiques quotidiennes et attention aux formes mineures du vivant - « chats, cafards, orchidées » - pour esquisser une écologie du soin engagée. Herd lit ainsi *Cacophonie* comme un texte où la survie matérielle et la survie symbolique se croisent, produisant une écopoétique de la vulnérabilité et de la résistance, attentive aux fragilités du quotidien autant qu'aux horizons politiques plus larges.

Clara Silva, Marco Piazza *Amílcar Cabral educatore e attivista. Idee per la resistenza postcoloniale;* Filomeno Lopes *Amílcar Cabral. Un ponte fra Italia e Africa*

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Recensione di Silva, C.; Piazza, M. (2024). *Amílcar Cabral educatore e attivista. Idee per la resistenza postcoloniale*. Prefazione di F. Elísio. Roma: Carocci e di Lopes, F. (2024). *Amílcar Cabral. Un ponte fra Italia e Africa*. Prefazione di F. Falappa, postfazione di R. Mancini, con un'intervista a F. Bertinotti. Roma: Castelvecchi.

Fatta eccezione per una raccolta di saggi curata da Livia Apa nel 2020 per i tipi di Ombre Corte, le due monografie recentemente pubblicate in Italia interrompono un prolungato silenzio editoriale, che non ha potuto non comportare una diffusa ignoranza – in particolar modo tra le generazioni più giovani – su quello che rimane uno dei più straordinari intellettuali e leader rivoluzionari espressi dall'Africa nel XX secolo. Clara Silva, Marco Piazza e Filomeno Lopes appaiono pienamente consapevoli dell'esigenza di dover muovere da tale vuoto di conoscenza e, in tal senso, pur proponendo letture critiche approfondite e originali del pensiero cabralino, non si sottraggono all'onere di un indispensabile esercizio di alta divulgazione culturale. Da questo punto di vista, è legittimo considerare *Amílcar Cabral*



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educatore e attivista e Amílcar Cabral. Un ponte fra Italia e Africa, pur nella differenza delle interpretazioni e degli obiettivi dei rispettivi autori, due libri necessari, auspicabilmente utili a restituire ad Amílcar Cabral, nel centenario della sua nascita, quella centralità nel Novecento, anche italiano, che i decenni a cavallo tra XX e XXI secolo sembrano avergli sottratto.

Il volume di Clara Silva e Marco Piazza si prefigge, in tal senso, di riscoprire l'attualità di Cabral, valorizzando in particolar modo la riflessione pedagogica e il pensiero critico del dirigente del PAIGC. Dopo aver sinteticamente presentato altri aspetti (l'operato come agronomo, l'attività poetica, l'azione politica e diplomatica) di una figura poliedrica – che non a caso, Filinto Elísio, nella prefazione che apre il volume, considera «fra tutti i leader politici suoi contemporanei [...] quello dalla personalità più complessa» (Silva, Piazza 2024, 12) –, Clara Silva si concentra sulla «singolare visione pedagogica» (47) di Amílcar Cabral – di cui non manca di sottolineare le convergenze con la pedagogia di Paulo Freire –, partendo dalla premessa che «indagare la dimensione pedagogica del pensiero e dell'azione di Cabral significa [...] rileggere l'intero suo operato alla luce di un'intenzionalità trasformativa ed emancipativa, fondata sui principi non negoziabili di libertà individuale e di autodeterminazione di ciascun popolo» (47-8). Silva giustamente mette in evidenza come, nel pensiero cabralino, la dimensione educativa acquisti un ruolo chiave nel processo di emancipazione di un popolo alienato da secoli di dominazione coloniale. Come scrive l'autrice, il leader del PAIGC è, infatti, «convinto che l'uscita dall'assoggettamento coloniale sia un processo che passa inevitabilmente attraverso la riappropriazione da parte dei popoli colonizzati di tutto ciò che è stato loro sottratto, a cominciare dalla storia e dalla cultura» (51). La proposta dell'intellettuale capoverdiano e guineense, tuttavia, non si esaurisce nel mero recupero della tradizione precoloniale e presuppone la ripresa 'selettiva' dei soli elementi tradizionali compatibili con la nuova cultura scaturita dalla rivoluzione. Esemplare in tal senso, come ricorda Silva, la creazione, nel 1964, della scuola pilota di Ratoma e di tante altre successivamente aperte nelle zone liberate, con l'obiettivo di «andare oltre i modelli coloniali eurocentrici ed elitari e allo stesso tempo offrire un'istruzione alle fasce della popolazione escluse dal sistema educativo» (58). La centralità della cultura nel processo di liberazione nazionale ritorna anche nel capitolo in cui Marco Piazza propone una lettura filosofica del pensiero di Cabral. Lo studioso italiano si sofferma sull'influenza del Marxismo e del materialismo storico, in permanente dialogo con il positivismo evoluzionistico, sottolineando però come tale struttura portante del pensiero cabralino passi attraverso un rigoroso processo di adattamento alla realtà locale, tale da piegare i modelli di pensiero occidentali alle esigenze del contesto in cui la lotta di liberazione

viene realizzata. Questa esigenza di pensare, selezionare e adattare i modelli alle specificità del contesto appare il contributo più originale e forse l'aspetto maggiormente valorizzato dall'attenta analisi di Marco Piazza e Clara Silva. In tal senso, così come la tradizione locale va recuperata selettivamente, anche i modelli teorici di derivazione marxista elaborati per le società europee richiedono un assimilazionismo critico, tale da scongiurare un'applicazione pedissequa (e inefficace) alle società africane che hanno subito l'assoggettamento coloniale. La necessità di adattamento dei modelli di pensiero alla realtà locale non condiziona, in ogni caso, la portata globale della riflessione teorica cabralina – che Marco Piazza riconduce all'interno della tradizione neumanista, richiamando, però, anche la centralità del *Cabralism* negli studi in lingua inglese sul marxismo classico africano e il rinnovamento ermeneutico proposto dai più recenti lavori di Reiland Rebaka. In tal senso, gli strumenti teorici originalmente (ri)elaborati da Cabral trasformano culturalmente la lotta del suo popolo, facendone il «tassello di un movimento storico e culturale più ampio, votato a rivendicare il diritto alla libertà, alla dignità e alla piena personalità giuridica di ogni essere umano sul pianeta» (75). Nell'analisi dei due autori di *Amílcar Cabral educatore e attivista*, la rivoluzione politico-pedagogico-filosofica di Amílcar Cabral costituisce, quindi, una proposta alternativa e ancora valida di emancipazione e di sviluppo, tanto più in un contesto come quello contemporaneo, caratterizzato, come scrive Marco Piazza, dall'insostenibilità del modello di crescita proposto dal capitalismo. La valenza pedagogica del pensiero di Cabral, così come il suo pensiero filosofico, si configurano, infatti, secondo Clara Silva e Marco Piazza, come un'attualissima educazione alla resistenza, «che vale non solo per i due popoli a favore dei quali Cabral ha diretto il suo impegno, quello guineano e quello capoverdiano, ma anche per tutti i popoli dell'Africa lusofona, e idealmente, per cerchi concentrici, di ogni nazione del mondo» (90).

Il ritratto filosofico di Cabral proposto da Filomeno Lopes muove dalla medesima constatazione dell'attualità e dell'urgenza del magistero cabralino, di cui anche in questo volume viene affermata la portata universale. *Amílcar Cabral. Un ponte fra Italia e Africa* è, però, soprattutto, una riflessione sulla grave crisi di leadership democratica che l'autore individua in Africa (in particolar modo nella deriva autoritaria che, da decenni, caratterizza la Guinea Bissau) e in Occidente. Il modello cabralino, che l'autore del volume ricostruisce in termini filosofici, funziona qui soprattutto come termine di paragone, per evidenziare il degrado politico dell'attuale classe dirigente. In tal senso, l'obiettivo di Filomeno Lopes è provare, sulle orme di Cabral, a «ripensare, filosoficamente, sentieri per un'educazione integrale alla leadership futura» (Lopes 2024, 16), formulando una lettura del legato cabralino a partire dalla diaspora africana e in

dialogo con la Scuola filosofica di Macerata (dialogo che nel volume trova espressione nelle pagine firmate da Fabiola Falappa e Roberto Mancini). Quello di Filomeno Lopes è uno studio appassionato e dolente, che esprime un'ammirazione incondizionata per il leader capoverdiano e l'amareggiata repulsione per l'attuale classe politica. Il modello di Cabral (ma anche di Nelson Mandela, Kwame Nkrumah, Patrice Lumumba e Thomas Sankara) – leader corale ed esemplare, imitabile e, al tempo stesso, inarrivabile – appare oggi ignorato da governanti che, agli occhi di Lopes, hanno opportunisticamente tradito l'ideale di 'vita vera' dei grandi leader, privilegiando le ragioni della forza e dell'odio, nonché «l'arte di vincere senza avere ragione ma in modo legale» (43). L'analisi di Filomeno Lopes si pone programmaticamente in una prospettiva diasporica (afroitalotopia, nella definizione dell'autore) e, in questo senso, il volume non si limita a evidenziare il 'tradimento' operato dalla comunità bissa-guineense ma rivendica l'efficacia della teoria e della prassi cabraline anche per la società italiana (di cui Lopes non manca di ricostruire gli stretti legami intessuti in passato con il dirigente del PAIGC), oggi ingannata da politiche migratorie inconcludenti e disumane, che hanno portato negli anni a una violenta e ingiustificata chiusura culturale nei confronti del continente africano. Considerando «il movimento demografico, il razzismo sistemico, la crisi di leadership, la povertà antropologica, strutturale e culturale e la crisi ecologica, come maggiori sfide per il secolo XXI e di conseguenza le maggiori sfide per 'un'arma della teoria' politica integrale per l'Africa, l'Italia e il resto dell'Europa» (247), l'afroitalotopia individua in Cabral un modello di governo alternativo alla cultura della paura e della sicurezza – che invoca la chiusura dei porti, in nome di un sovranismo miope. Per tradurre l'esempio cabralino in prassi politica e, così facendo, operare un indispensabile salto qualitativo nel dialogo culturale tra la diaspora africana residente in Italia e la società italiana, Filomeno Lopes auspica la convocazione di una conferenza nazionale sovrana sulla cittadinanza. Attraverso un dialogo a poli molteplici di matrice pienamente cabralina, tale conferenza permetterebbe, secondo Lopes, di «ridefinire ed elaborare un nuovo contratto sociale e culturale che rispecchi veramente la costellazione antropologica reale dell'attuale società italiana» (233), consentendo di dare finalmente spazio al «nuovo che nasce come patto corale» (237). Nella sua critica agli attuali governanti, così distanti da leader che «hanno saputo creare un sogno, un pensiero vivente, un ideale di speranza politica e culturale per i rispettivi Paesi e popoli» (61), come Clara Silva e Marco Piazza, anche Filomeno Lopes richiama la centralità della cultura nel progetto politico di Amílcar Cabral. Una cultura indispensabile per una leadership rinnovata e indisponibile a negoziare i propri ideali che, oggi come allora, dovrebbe assumersi l'onere di liberare l'Africa dalla paura e l'Italia dalle sue nefaste illusioni identitarie.

Nota biobibliografica

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« Que belle est la vie » : en mémoire d'Anthony Phelps

Silvia Boraso

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Anthony Phelps s'est éteint le 11 mars 2025, laissant derrière lui une œuvre majeure qui marque durablement la littérature haïtienne et francophone. Né en 1928 en Haïti, il s'affirme très tôt comme poète, romancier et conteur. Au tournant des années 1960, il devient l'une des voix essentielles du groupe *Haïti Littéraire*, qu'il contribue à animer de 1960 à 1964 et dont l'influence irrigue profondément la vie culturelle de Port-au-Prince. Contraint à l'exil en 1964, il s'installe à Montréal, où il trouve un espace nouveau pour prolonger et renouveler son œuvre.

Au Québec, Phelps multiplie les pratiques artistiques : narration de films, journalisme à Radio-Canada, participation à des projets théâtraux et télévisuels. Poète de la voix autant que de la page, il réalise une quinzaine de disques de poésie et publie une trentaine de livres – poésie, romans, nouvelles – traduits dans plusieurs langues. Invité de nombreux festivals internationaux, il incarne, par sa diction et par son écriture, une parole diasporique qui n'a jamais cessé d'interroger l'exil, la mémoire et le rêve. Son apport à la littérature a été couronné par diverses distinctions, notamment le Prix de Poésie Casa de las Américas, Cuba (deux fois), le Prix insulaire Ouessant (2012) l'insigne de Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres (2014), le Grand Prix de Poésie de l'Académie française (2017), le



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Prix Carbet-Institut du Tout-Monde et le Grand Prix de Poésie de la Société des Gens de lettres (2018).¹

À cette trajectoire s'est ajoutée, au fil des années, une relation précieuse avec *Il Tolomeo*. La collaboration entre Anthony Phelps et notre revue s'amorce en 2000, avec la publication de trois poèmes inédits – « Colibri », « Magicien » et « Guitare ». Dès lors, l'« Aîné caraïbe », selon la belle formule par laquelle il aimait se présenter, revient à plusieurs reprises dans nos pages. Nous accueillons ainsi, en 2010, l'ensemble des « Textes choisis pour une lecture vénitienne », accompagnés de leur traduction italienne, ainsi qu'un entretien mené par Anna Zoppellari dans le numéro monographique consacré à Haïti (*Il Tolomeo*, XIII, 2). En 2012, de longs extraits de son roman inédit *Chiffonniers de l'Exil ou Quand des nouvelles jouent au roman* paraissent dans notre revue (*Il Tolomeo*, XV, 1-2). Plus récemment, nous avons publié l'intervention prononcée à l'université de Bologne en 2000, dont la version française demeurait jusqu'alors inédite (*Il Tolomeo*, XXI, 14-21), et le poème « Petite recette politiquement convenable », tiré de son échange épistolaire avec notre Directeur, Alessandro Costantini (*Il Tolomeo*, XXV, 23-24).

Peut-être est-ce en suivant cette « petite recette » que nous saurons lui rendre l'hommage le plus fidèle. Avant de goûter au cocktail composé de vin, de cognac et de chocolat qu'il nous a transmis, il nous faudra – comme tout bon Haïtien le sait – laisser tomber sur le sol quelques gouttes d'alcool, perpétuant par cette libation offerte à la terre la présence de celui qui, par-delà l'exil et l'écriture, nous a appris « Que belle est la vie, / transgressant les interdits des eunuques / et la banalité du quotidien des sépulcres blanchis » (*Il Tolomeo*, XXV, 24).

Silvia Boraso
Au nom de toute l'équipe du *Tolomeo*

¹ Pour tout approfondissement, voir la notice biographique de l'auteur dans le site *île-en-île* : <https://île-en-île.org/phelps/>.

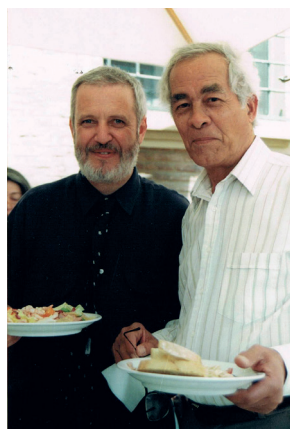
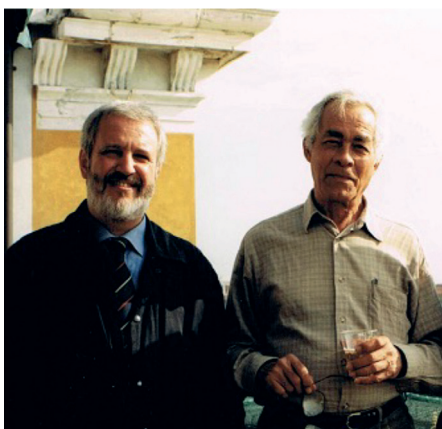


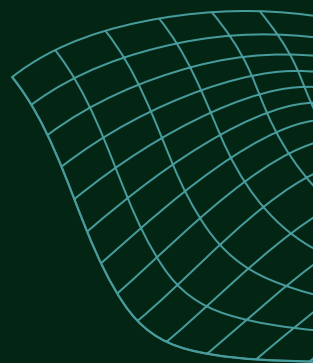
Figure 1 A. Phelps (à droite) et A. Costanti (à gauche), à l'Université de Venise, le 16 octobre 1999

Figure 2 A. Phelps (à droite) et A. Costanti (à gauche), à Bologne, le 27 mai 2000

Figure 3 « Le Poète, le professeur, l'étudiante ». De gauche à droite, D.-L. Fachinetti, A. Phelps et A. Costanti au festival Incroci di civiltà (Venise, le 20 mai 2010)

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