

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Nous mourrons tous, The Haitian Revolution goes Underground

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In a lengthy 1967 interview held in Havana with Rene Depestre, Aime Cesaire may have made one of the most unintentionally misleading claims regarding the Haitian revolution when he declared that “the first Negro epic of the New World was written by Haitians.” Curiously, this interview was never published in French but within a few years became widely available in English in the Anglophone Caribbean and the United States where the words “first negro epic” would have a powerful emotional impact. Paul Breslin in his pursuit of literary representations of the Haitian revolution excuses Cesaire’s choice of the word epic by saying that he used it “in a colloquial sense.” However, I would like to take Cesaire at his word, as it were, and gauge the impact of the word epic on our reconstruction or “unsilencing” of the Haitian past.

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Je consentirais volontiers à croire que je suis un écrivain de la rue où je suis né à Port-au-Prince, la rue de l'Enterrement, appelée aussi, tenez-vous bien... rue de la Révolution, eh oui je suis né sous le signe de ce gag-là. N'empêche, c'est à partir de ce bout de rue que je vois un peu de notre planète.¹

Jean Claude Charles, *Enracinement*

Back to the Future

In a lengthy 1967 interview held in Havana with Rene Depestre, Aime Césaire may have made one of the most unintentionally misleading claims regarding the Haitian revolution when he declared that, “the first Negro epic of the New World was written by Haitians.”² (Césaire, 1972: 74) Curiously, this interview was never published in French but within a few years became widely available in English in the Anglophone Caribbean and the United States where the words “first negro epic” would have a powerful emotional impact. Paul Breslin in his pursuit of literary representations of the Haitian revolution excuses Césaire’s choice of the word epic by saying that he used it “in a colloquial sense.” (Breslin, 2008: 223) However, I would like to take Césaire at his word, as it were, and gauge the impact of the word epic on our reconstruction or “unsilencing” of the Haitian past.

In using the word “epic” to describe the Revolution in his conversation with his Haitian interlocutor, Depestre, during an official stay in revolutionary Cuba, Césaire may have felt compelled to resort to celebratory triumphalist language to describe Haiti’s complicated political origins. Whereas it is a commonplace to use grandiose terms to describe the period from 1791–1804 in Saint Domingue, this essay argues that, given the massive impact of this period of upheaval on the Haitian imaginary, we should not trust the heroic rhetoric to which many resort but look elsewhere for evidence of historic opacity that resists narration. Arguably, Jacques Roumain’s iconic novel, *Gouverneurs de la rosée*, can be read as a Haitian dream text that re-enacts the liberatory dream of country’s revolutionary past but one in which the figure of the protagonist’s mother, tellingly named Délira Délivrance, remains defiantly opaque. The extent to which she is an embodiment of seismic convulsion that haunts the Haitian collective imagination becomes apparent later in the way which the upheaval of the 2010 earthquake is narrated. What we have is not a disaster narrative that aesthetically attempts “to transcend the moment” as Mark Anderson argues in *Disaster Writing, The Cultural Politics of Catastrophe in Latin America*. (Anderson, 2011: 22) The figure of the dust covered zombie in the rubble helps us to connect two convulsions which resist narrative mastery. The underworld and revolutionary change, darkness and light

¹ “I would willingly consent to the belief that I am a writer from the street where I was born in Port au Prince, Interment Street, which was also called, brace yourself ...Revolution Street, yup, I was born under the sign of that joke. Whatever, it is from that insignificant street that I see some of our planet.”

² The interview also appeared in *Savacou*, June 1971, 71–80.

seem uncannily intertwined as in Charles' opening epigraph. It is worth noting that the most prominent advocate of unsilencing the Haiti revolution, Michel Rolph Trouillot, never argued for seeing it as a New World Epic. If anything, he warned against the dangers of representing the space of disorder 1791–1804 in grandiose and heroic terms. He described this tendency as an “unfortunate” romanticizing of the revolution in the face of racist denigration and specifically discredited a self-serving use of the past by the Haitian elite to justify “their claims to power.” (Trouillot, 1995: 105) In the conclusion to his much-cited essay “An Unthinkable History”, he reminds us that, “the historical process is always messy, often enough contradictory.” (107) For Trouillot this was a revolution without a script. As opposed to later anticolonial revolutions in Latin America, Africa and Asia all of which were scripted by radical ideologies, the Haitian revolution was “not accompanied or preceded by an explicit intellectual discourse.” (88) Though he does not develop this idea, he introduces indirectly the notion that this was a radical experience of an irruption into modernity or *modernité vécue* (“lived modernity” to use Edouard Glissant’s terminology) which caused all certitudes to collapse producing the capacity for radical self-invention. (Glissant, 1997: 435–443)

Haitian revolutionaries were not overly restricted by previous ideological limits set by professional intellectuals ... they could (therefore) break new ground – and, indeed, they did so repeatedly. (Trouillot, 1995: 89)

Trouillot seems on the threshold of making a case for a time when the challenge to an old order produced a proliferation of possibilities that resist being resolved in terms of a neat synthesis. The disorder provoked by chaotic revolutionary forces is arguably best described by what Glissant termed in *Soleil de la conscience* as the moment of being born into the world, “un temps d'ouverture chaotique, de pressentiment anarchique de l'histoire...de saisie vertigineuse de clartés.”³ (Glissant, 1956: 16) This is the Haitian revolution as primordial chaos not “first new world epic”.

There is a curious omission in Paul Breslin’s exhaustive survey of twentieth-century narratives of the Haitian revolution and similarly in many other attempts to study literary representations of the Haitian Revolution, such as Phillip Kaisary’s *The Haitian revolution and the literary imagination*. (2014) Neither considered that the seismic reverberations of the Haitian revolution were so intense and difficult to sum up that they could haunt narratives that were not ostensibly historical or did not explicitly refer to the revolution. From this perspective, I would like to argue that the most thoroughgoing attempt to come to grips with the Haitian revolution is Jacques Roumain’s *Gouverneurs de la rosée* (“Masters of the Dew”, 1946). The critic who gets closest to this approach to this iconic novel is Valerie Kaussen who in her *Migrant Revolutions* perceptively remarked that Roumain’s vision “can be viewed as the ghost of the missed revolutionary dream of the St Domingue slaves, and, in returning to Haiti from the sugarcane plantations of Cuba, Manuel in a sense goes back to the future.” (Kaussen, 2008: 122) She is right in sensing that the novel is a revolutionary dream text, a reading of the novel completely missed by Haitian commentators on Roumain’s novel. Two of the most notoriously prominent and detailed Haitian reactions to the novel are Jean Claude Fignole’s misguided *ad hominem* critique *Sur “Gouverneurs de la rosée”* and Jean Dominique’s passionately written response “*Délire ou Délivrance*” which both appeared in 1974. They both treat the text as a product of an *indigéniste* rendering of Haitian peasant reality. Such a socio literary approach misses the fact that the novel is not about agrarian reform but an imagined re-enactment of the coming hope of transformation in a society. Manuel’s lengthy stay in Cuba is a brutal plunge into a lived transnational modernity which performs, to quote Kaussen again, “a demystifying function, reviving the historical memory of slave uprising that lies congealed in the forsaken land of Fonds Rouge.” (Kaussen, 2008: 127) Roumain’s novel is a postcolonial re-enactment of the memory of the Haitian Revolution.

In *Gouverneurs de la rosée*, *le rêvé* (the dreamt) and *le réel* (the real) are inextricably bound together. As in any dream text multiple enigmatic narratives coexist. For instance if it is a envisioning of “the missed revolutionary dream of St Domingue” the novel’s final scene is the script for the eruption in the present of the liberated agency of the oppressed and the land cleansed of the nightmare of the past. Little critical attention has been paid to the light-filled plain at the end of the novel which is only superficially about new found peasant solidarity. The novel closes with a successful coumbite through which the peasants create an irrigation canal bringing water to the village. Manuel has been killed but his blood is not shed in vain as the sweat of collective peasant labour gives new meaning to his sacrifice. This is an enactment of the deferred revolutionary dream. As much as anything else, it is a staging of utopian civic space whose open inclusiveness is precisely what is lacking in a Haiti where the dream of revolutionary change has been denied and politics have moved indoors, into the authoritarian world of the national palace. Roumain’s novel never mentions the capital nor the palace but they both cast a long symbolic shadow over rural Haiti.⁴ The novel conveys a speculative vision of a future unknown in the face of the stifled potential for change in the present. Nationalism and indigenism were political dead ends by the forties and the U.S. Occupation had so disrupted rural Haiti that the complete isolation of the peasantry was very unlikely. In the wake of failed ideologies a poetic, utopian imaginary emerges and for Roumain the role of literature was to imagine alternative futures. Future promise for Haiti is embodied in the symbolic pregnancy of Manuel’s widow Annaïse.

³ “A time of chaotic opening, of anarchical premonition of history ... of a dizzying grasping for flashes of illumination.”

⁴ It is common to accentuate the closed nature of the world of Fonds Rouge in critical commentary on the novel. For instance, the most recent example is Celia Britton’s chapter on the novel in *The Sense of Community in French Caribbean Fiction*, (2008: 26).

The luminous plain of revolutionary possibility is the antithesis of can also opposed to what might be called the passage of darkness that makes a new consciousness possible for the revolutionary protagonist. Another strand of the narrative is connected to the workers' camp in which Manuel stayed while in Cuba, which is presented as an infernal underworld into which he must descend or perhaps is thrown by the forces of global capitalism. He emerges a changed man and explains to the inhabitants of Fonds Rouge shortly after his return two that the land belonged to the Americans over there and that there were no peasants but workers. "J'ai laissé des mille et des milles d'Haïtiens du côté d'Antilla. Ils vivent et ils meurent comme des chiens." (43)⁵ In the underworld of these *bateyes* for migrant workers, Manuel learns worker solidarity in a space outside of notions of private and public, rural and urban, citizen and alien since the camps are temporary sites for the displaced, perhaps not all that different from refugee camps. To compensate for the state of limbo in which these migrant laborers find themselves there is a profound sense of community and solidarity. In his crucial conversation with Annaïse, Manuel tells her:

Je vais te raconter: dans les commencements, à Cuba, on était sans défense et sans résistance; ... et il y avait pas mal de mésentente entre nous: on était éparpillé comme du sable et les patrons marchaient sur ce sable. Mais lorsque nous avons reconnu que nous étions tous pareils, lorsque nous nous sommes rassemblés pour la *huelga*...(86)⁶

Through Manuel's experience in exile, Roumain makes a connection between displacement and self-invention. The workers camp in Antilla is not so much a place of loss, but a chasm from which a radical newness emerges.

The *batey* is essential to Roumain's origin myth and arguably an avatar of the Glissantian abyss. Glissant imagines the Middle Passage as an abyss, a site of radical displacement, as opposed to mere transplantation or exile. It is the basis for his investment in a theory of traumatic consciousness in which the slave ship becomes a "mothering abyss" (*gouffre-matrice*). Manuel's experience in the *batey* is akin to being thrown into the underworld of the slave ship. It is the extreme displacement and institutional terror of the workers camp that establishes the ground for a radically new and modern consciousness to be born. Forced to cohabit, to forge new worker alliances and to ultimately challenge the prevailing power structure Manuel lives a moment of quintessential global modernity. The politics of rural redemption in *Gouverneurs de la rosée* is anchored in the abysmal underworld of the *batey* where all past certitudes collapse and the dew of a new consciousness is secreted. In a deft fusion of the political, the religious and the poetic, Roumain's protagonist has been made to enter the underworld of US capitalism and return to preach a gospel of new beginnings to a community incapable of even imaging a future beyond the unlivable present. Manuel is not so much the prodigal son but a version of Orpheus whose song is perpetuated after his death by Simidor Antoine, who is the peasant musician leading the *coubite*. It is all summed up in the images of the luminous plain, the silvery blade of water and the pregnant widow at the end of *Gouverneurs de la rosée*. A future is waiting to be born as an old order had lost its legitimacy but the length of this richly symbolic gestation remains unclear.

Haitian novels in the decades following the appearance of Roumain's *Gouverneurs de la rosée* are marked by the "ghost of the missed revolutionary dream" and in particular seemed obsessed with utopian romance of Roumain's narrative. Writing the sequel to Roumain's novel or variations of the protagonists and the plot can be found in the fictions of Jacques Stephen Alexis, René Depestre and Franketienne just to name a few. Joan Dayan, in her feminist defense of the writing of Marie Chauvet, pointed to the prevalence of the epic mode and the "idealization of mastery" in politically engaged novels by men in the 50s and 60s. "Chauvet exposes the *illusion* of change, so much a part of both the political strategy and the romanticism of writers like Roumain and Alexis." (Dayan, 1995: 89) She goes further to connect these heroic narratives to Duvalier's authoritarian regime.

Chauvet questions the apparently endless making of heroes in Haitian history: the cult of the founder, the father, the protector who betrays or is betrayed. She proves how damaging the cult of the hero is, how the image of a savior plays into the totalitarian designs of the dictator. (89)

In so doing she anticipates David Scott who, without referring to the Haitian imaginary, critiques the desire to clear up the messiness of Haitian history by creating neat, historical romances. He insists in *Conscripts of Modernity*, his perceptive reading of CLR James' *The Black Jacobins*, that historical narratives are shaped not only by the archive but by "the ways in which the expectation of – or longing for – particular futures helps to shape the kind of problem the past is constructed as for the present." (Scott, 2004: 31) He furthermore urges that the "Romantic mode of emplotment" for understanding the Haitian revolution be abandoned. Roumain's novel certainly allowed for the creation of narratives of historic romance and heroic protagonists but this is, however, not the only story in Roumain's dream text.

The pregnant Annaïse is not alone on the hill overlooking of the luminous display of peasant solidarity that brings the novel to a close. She is accompanied by another figure who is also present both at the beginning and the end of the novel – Délira Délivrance. There is every reason to believe that Roumain was fascinated by this figure and that he based her on the

⁵ "I left thousands and thousands of Haitians over there in Antilla. They live and die like dogs." (43)

⁶ "At first in Cuba, we had no defense and no way of resistance... there were plenty of misunderstandings among us. We were scattered like grains of sand and the bosses walked on that sand. But when we realized we were all alike, when we got together for the *huelga*..."

mother of Charlemagne Péralte (1886–1919). They are both literally, in the case of Péralte, and symbolically, in the case of Manuel, mothers of crucified sons. In 1930 Roumain undertook what he called a *pèlerinage*, a pilgrimage, to find Péralte's mother. The attention paid to her hands in this description suggests strongly that she was the prototype for Délira.

La voici dans le cadre de la porte, toute menue en son austère robe noire. Le visage est calme et triste sous les cheveux blancs.

Ses mains longues et fragiles sont de celles qui doivent bien se joindre pour la prière. Tout à l'heure, elle nous dira combien elles furent meurtries par l'effroyable labeur des corvées et quelles souffrances elles savent quand elles se portaient tremblantes sur son corps brisé, comme pour le protéger contre une trop grande souffrance. (Roumain, 1930: 1)⁷

Délira's hand in the dust opens the novel – indeed she seems almost an extension of her hands and an emanation of the dust of her surroundings. She is the quintessential *moune andeyo*, a ghostlike representative of those who would never benefit from Haiti's revolutionary epic. In contrast, her husband is lost in nostalgia for a lost rural paradise and her son in a relentless pursuit of a new future. In a sense, she falls outside of the narrative's sweeping allegory and is beyond the reach of Roumain's political parable. The tendency is to see her as simply the zombified incarnation of dust, decay and absolute despair but Manuel's mother is the most impenetrably opaque character in the novel and one who resists being recuperated symbolically. Roumain has the courage to create a figure that remained irreducible and impenetrable in the face of a universalizing, systematizing and ultimately reductive ideology. The author, in Glissantian terms, consents to her opacity and, as in the case of William Faulkner's refusal to penetrate or explain the black characters in his fiction. To the question why do these characters fascinate, Glissant replies, "Précisément pour leur négativité révélatrice: pour l'impossibilité où se trouve l'auteur, qui les a créés, d'aller au fond de leurs motivations... autrement dit l'incapacité de Faulkner à cerner ce personnage est positive." (Glissant, 1997: 170)⁸ Délira has arguably the same positive negativity. With Délira Délivrance's hand pressed against Annaïse's pregnant belly two incomplete stories come together – one which can be narrated in terms of the dreams of an heroic past and another one that resists narration since it is rooted in a revolution without a script. In the promise of a bright future, Délira is a mere shadow but this emanation of the underworld or the Glissantian abyss persists. This is not the world of her son who has to be reminded by his father to care about the underworld and the dead. This is another kind of knowing which is at the heart of the epic narrative. Ideologically Roumain was drawn to the light even if he seemed to acknowledge disruptive zones of opacity which would allow this narrative to travel, to be shared. For others shadows are a preexisting condition, in whose impenetrable density they have invested imaginatively.

Société de poussière

Mackandal: Nous halons les mers, d'Afrique en Amérique. Nous le portons avec nous. Comme une femme en couches qui pourtant bêche au soleil, Elle tient la main sur son ventre et elle plante un bon coup dans la terre Et son enfant lui monte dans la, tête elle ne voit plus l'horizon, elle chavire!⁹

E Glissant *Monsieur Toussaint* A1, Sc 2

In his 1961 preface to *Monsieur Toussaint* Glissant distinguished his play from the more conventional historical works of CLR James and Aimé Césaire on the Haitian Revolution by declaring that his play was not "d'inspiration politique." (Glissant, 1998: 9) This was his way of saying that he was not going to respond to the idea that the revolution was "the first negro epic of the New World." Instead, his themes would be deportation and the Middle Passage. He was going to relate the figure of the imprisoned Toussaint and the Haitian Revolution to "un temps d'ouverture chaotique" (a time of chaotic openings) and to the Atlantic crossing. It is no coincidence that the first maroon who enters into dialogue with Toussaint, Mackandal, should keep repeating in the play "Nous halons les mers. Nous le portons en nous" (We drag the seas with us). This phrase opens up the Haitian revolution to Glissant's myth of origin and mark the father of the revolution as a 'fils de l'abîme' (son of the abyss).

Toussaint's cell in *Monsieur Toussaint*, inevitably recalls the hold of the slave ship, by means of the skylight that sheds light dimly on the stage and the pacing sentry above. For Glissant, this dungeon is Toussaint's "matrice, un moule, qui t'expulse pourtant. Enceinte d'autant de morts que de vivants en sursis."¹⁰ In this sea-borne 'non-monde' Toussaint

⁷ "Here she is, framed in the doorway, tiny in her austere black dress. Her face is calm and sad under her white hair. Her long fragile hands are the kind that must be joined in prayer. Soon, she will tell us how they were bruised by the terrible labour of the corvee and what suffering they knew when they were hung trembling on her broken body, as if to protect it from an even greater suffering."

⁸ "Precisely because they are tellingly impenetrable: because of the inability of the author, who created them, to get to the core of their motivations ... in other words Faulkner's incapacity to make sense of this character is positive."

⁹ "We drag the seas from Africa to America. We carry him with us, like woman with child who still toils under the sun. She holds her hand on her belly and digs hard into the land. And her child goes to her head, she no longer sees the horizon, she falls over."

¹⁰ "A matrix, a mold which nevertheless expels you. Pregnant with as many dead as living on reprieve."

converses with specters of the dead and the living “on reprieve”. It is perhaps no coincidence that the dead are, according to Haitian popular belief, all sea creatures, *ambaglo*. In *Une nouvelle région du monde* (2006) Glissant made the slave ship analogy explicit:

...Le fort du Joux près de Pontarlier où fut jeté Toussaint Louverture et où il mourut de faim et de froid, j’imagine toujours ce château comme un bateau naviguant les contreforts du Jura et battant de son étrave les houles des forêts noires. (Glissant, 2006: 151)¹¹

The whole thrust of the play transforms Toussaint from founding father to renegade mariner and the fortress in the Juras into a slave ship on the Atlantic. When the rebel Macaia summons Toussaint—“Come along. We will go down the paths unknown to the living. Macaia the rebel is calling on Toussaint. Come don’t walk backward on the road of your life”—Toussaint is not interested in “the paths unknown to the living” and he responds angrily, “Leave me alone! I am starting my work all over. I will cross the seas again in the other direction.” (Glissant, 2005: 48) For Glissant, Toussaint’s recrossing the Atlantic represents the revolutionary’s ultimate escape from the prison house of imperial narrative and his challenge to Macaia to accept the abyss of the ocean is an undeniable subtext of Haiti’s ‘epic’ revolution.

Glissant’s play by its very title avoids the heroic mode and is located in the spectral world between living and dead, dream and reality. In more ways than one, Toussaint is thrown down into the prison in the Juras. Perhaps it is also important to remember that the 1961 version of the play was conceived in generic ambiguity – it was a performance for voices and not for theatrical staging. An avatar of the mythical zombie, Glissant’s disembodied Toussaint combines the unthinkable and the transgressive. He can never return to the world of the living (from which he was deported) nor can he be immobilized by death. He is doomed to perpetual errancy in the service of a new revolutionary consciousness. In a sense, he has acquired the same *négativité révélatrice* (revealing negativity) that clings to Délira who wanders in the margins of Roumain’s narrative. Their fates are not tied to a redemptive revolutionary project but are rhizomatically linked to an earlier starting point – the radical displacement and dispossession of the abysmal darkness of the underworld of the middle passage during which a new kind of knowing was born in the face of utter incomprehension.

In *Silencing the Past* Michel Rolph Trouillot argues that respectful commemorative literature which sanitizes the past can be as effective a form of silencing as a more conventional refusal to acknowledge historical events. He also felt that Haitians were particularly prone to being defensively celebratory with regards to the Haitian revolution. This is no longer the case as North American commentators seem now the ones who are apt to be too respectful of the epic and heroic dimensions of Haitian history. Indeed, we can almost speak of a new US Occupation – this time of Haitian studies – in which the past is unsilenced heroically as, for example, in the novels of Madison Smart Bell. Paradoxically, we have in the work of Dany Lafèrière someone who casts a skeptical eye on the glorification of the past and is drawn to the underside of *le réel haïtien* (the Haitian reality). In the very first work of his *autobiographie américaine, L’odeur du café*, he gently mocks the legendary general Capois-la-mort at the battle of Vertières. An account of the general’s bravery in “Leçon d’histoire” (History Lesson) is immediately followed a section called “Le balai” (the broom) where the child gleefully re-enacts the general’s feats on a broomstick wearing his grandfather’s hat in front of his taciturn but indulgent grandmother. (Lafèrière, 1991: 119)

It is in the following novel *Le goût des jeunes filles* that Lafèrière’s interest in politics and the world of the undead becomes explicit. As a fugitive from the Duvalier regime the young narrator goes into hiding in a house across the road where he lives, Miki’s residence, which is functionally a brothel for Duvalier’s macoutes. The proximity of this hiding place to his mother’s house means the narrator occupies a shadowy parallel world, both inside and outside the Dictator’s world. He has the feeling of being like the undead:

J’ai l’impression d’être déjà mort. Dans un cercueil vitré. Je vois tout. Je comprends tout. Je ne peux pas parler. Je peux faire bouger mes lèvres, mais on ne m’entendra pas. Je suis de l’autre côté des choses. Du côté de l’ombre. (Lafèrière, 1992: 114)¹²

Surprisingly, the universe of the undead in Miki’s house is one of intense sensation and absolute disorder as opposed to tidy orderliness of that of the narrator’s mother and aunts. He is not revolted by the sensorial excess. On the contrary, he relishes it “Une odeur de parfum, de sueur et de foutre mêlés a failli me jeter par terre. Je reste quand même un bon moment à respirer tout ça, bien fortement.” (Lafèrière, 1992: 102)¹³ It is in this chaotic shadowy space that he happens

¹¹ “The fort du Joux close to Pontarlier where Toussaint Louverture was thrown and where he died of hunger and cold and I always imagine this fortress as a ship sailing along the foothills of the Jura, its bow plowing through the surging waves of the black forest.”

¹² “I have the impression of being already dead. In coffin with a glass opening. I see everything. I understand everything. I cannot speak. I try in vain to move my lips, but no one will hear me. I am on the other side of things. On the shadowy side.” It is perhaps no coincidence that the corpse as narrator features in recent Haitian fiction, as in Makenzy Orsel, *L’ombre animale* (2016) and Yanick Lahens, *Bain de Lune* (2014).

¹³ “A smell of perfume, of sweat and sperm, all mixed together, almost threw me to the ground. I nevertheless spend a while breathing it all in very deeply.”

on a book of poems by Magloire St Aude who embodies the poetic voice of the zombie. He literally tries to enter the world of the undead in order to get closer to St Aude. “J’essaie de voir combien de temps je peux rester sous l’eau sans respirer. Un peu plus d’une minute. Plus de six minutes, c’est un autre univers qui m’attend. Un initié du vaudou peut passer plus de trois jours sous l’eau. Saint-Aude vivait à la frontière de ce monde.” (Laferrière, 1992: 31)¹⁴

In the novel *Pays sans chapeau*, recounting the narrator’s return to Haiti, Laferrière plays on the double meaning of the *revenant* in French. He is both the returnee and the ghost occupying the in-between space of the zombie, what he calls the ‘territoire de bizango’. He connects this novel of return with Roumain’s novel by having the narrator’s mother, Marie, invoke Manuel’s mother, Délira, by repeating “Nous sommes tous morts” (We are all dead) – a variation of the opening lines of *Gouverneurs de la rosée*. Haiti is indeed a land of the undead, that is a *pays sans chapeau* (a land without hats) since, as the Creole saying goes, no one is buried wearing a hat. The disorder is reminiscent of Fonds Rouge before Manuel’s redemptive return – impenetrable and excessive. It is as if Miki’s house had been extended to the entire capital city, “Ce qui frappe d’abord c’est cette odeur. La ville pue.” (Laferrière, 1996: 62)¹⁵ Attempts by scientists, anthropologists and linguists to do provide an explanatory narrative are fiercely ridiculed in the text. It is as if Roumain’s iconic text were rewritten but this time from Délira’s perspective. The dust in which she is embedded is now ubiquitous. “Cette fine poussière sur la peau des gens qui circulent dans les rues. Cette poussière soulevée par les sandales des marchandes ambulantes, des flâneurs, des chômeurs, des élèves des quartiers populaires, des miséreux, danse dans l’air comme un nuage doré avant de se déposer doucement sur le visage des gens. Une sorte de poussière de talc.” (Laferrière, 1996, 63)¹⁶ This sequel to Roumain’s text extends Délira’s story and re-reads death, dust and opacity in a banal, material way as opposed to Roumain’s symbolic rendering in his earlier text. The figure of Délira and this vision of a *société de poussière* is destined to return in a dramatically tragic fashion in narratives of the Haitian earthquake. For instance, Yanick Lahens says explicitly that the survivors are like zombies. “Nous nous sommes *DESOUNEN*, dans une sorte d’hébétude. Des zombies. ... J’hallucine comme la plupart des gens. Je ressens des secousses qui n’ont pas lieu.” (Lahens, 2010, 36)¹⁷ Délira’s cry “nous mourrons tous” acquires a terrible relevance on 12th January 2010. The ‘revenant’ becomes the ‘survivant’ as Laferrière like Lahens witnesses the convulsion with his own eyes. Like the ‘revenant,’ the ‘survivant’ is a phantom who lives beyond the cataclysm. Thrown into this ‘non-monde’ he occupies the space of the abnormal and the unthinkable. Tellingly Laferrière, like Lahens, cannot turn this extreme experience of collective death into a fictional text. Only an essay, made up of a series of fragmented tentative diary entries, is possible. The dust covered pedestrians of *pays sans chapeau* return vividly and tragically in *Tout bouge autour de moi* as emerging “sous une pluie de poussière” (under a rain of dust). The sense of being thrown into a disorienting world of chaos is intensely relived by the author. The shaky “table bancale” (wobbly table) of *Pays sans chapeau* is now the destabilizing trembling of the earth itself as the migrant worker camp of the ‘bately’ in *Gouverneurs de la rosée* becomes the tent city for the displaced. Furthermore, Laferrière draws a parallel between the present upheaval and the revolution as well.

Le Palais National cassé. Le bureau de taxes et de contributions détruit. Le palais de justice détruit. Le système de communication détruit. La cathédrale détruite. Les prisonniers dehors. Pendant une nuit, ce fut la révolution. (Laferrière, 2010: 43)¹⁸

This is Laferrière’s quintessential space of disorder that we inhabit precariously, both politically and territorially. All survivors are limbo citizens, almost ghostly in this space of the undead. The earthquake harks back to another older plunge into the abyss, the founding absence of the Glissantian chasm from which all continuity, linearity and filiation are obliterated. The one image that haunts Laferrière from beginning to the end of the diary in that of impenetrable endurance. Délira’s ghost haunts this dust-covered cataclysm and it returns in the shape of the mango vendor, mutely obstinate, her back to the wall.

La première image que je vois sur la route qui mène à Pétion-ville c’est une marchande de mangues assise le dos contre un mur. Une dizaine de mangues étalées devant elle – son commerce. Je suis tellement impressionné par un pareil courage. (Laferrière, 2010: 47)¹⁹

¹⁴ “I try to see how much time I can remain underwater without breathing. A little more than a minute. More than six minutes and it’s another world waiting for me. A vodou initiate can spend more than three days under water, Saint-Aude lived on the frontier of such a world.”

¹⁵ “What first strikes you is this smell. The town stinks.”

¹⁶ “This fine dust on the skin of the people circulating in the streets.... This dust stirred up by the sandals of the peddlers on foot, the strollers, the unemployed, the pupils from poor neighborhoods, the downtrodden, dances in the air like a golden cloud before settling softly on peoples’ faces. A kind of talcum powder.”

¹⁷ “We are stripped of our souls, in a kind of daze. Like zombies ... I hallucinate like most of the people. I feel aftershocks which never happen.”

¹⁸ “The National Palace collapsed. The tax and pension office destroyed. The courthouse destroyed. The communication network destroyed. The cathedral destroyed. Prisoners on the loose. In one night, the revolution had come.”

¹⁹ “The first image I see on the road leading to Petionville is a mango vendor sitting with her back against the wall. Ten or so mangoes spread out in front of her – her livelihood. I am so impressed by such courage.”

The earthquake of 2010 has as much as anything shaken up Haitian narrative forcing to the surface figures and events that have resisted symbolic recuperation in the past. Manuel's heroic revolution gives way to the dust covered rubble of Délira's world. The deferred dream represented by Annaïse awaits deliverance. Délira, in all her revealing opacity, spawns new narratives.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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