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Agnant's *La Dot de Sara* and Gisèle Pineau's *L'Exil selon Julia***

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Remembering and experiencing the land in exile

In Marie-Célie Agnant's *La Dot de Sara* and Gisèle Pineau's *L'Exil selon Julia*

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In novels that stage migratory pathways, the exploring characters can perform circulation through different channels and processes, without necessarily operating a physical movement. A geographical and a corporeal process exist, but even when the concrete, physical exploration stops, it is somehow also both lived, experienced, reconstructed and imagined differently through the body and through corporeal exploration. In this paper, I argue that embodied memory can circulate through points of entanglement without any process of movement physically occurring, and these points of entanglement can all be observed interacting in the body of the migrant. For instance, sensations enable the characters to travel through space and time, by connecting them to specific memories.

In both Marie-Célie Agnant's *La Dot de Sara* (1995) and Gisèle Pineau's *L'Exil selon Julia* (1996), the protagonists are middle-aged Caribbean women who migrated to Canada and France respectively, to help their children raise their own children. Agnant's protagonist Marianna leaves Haiti to help her daughter Giselle raise baby Sara in Montréal. Pineau's protagonist Julia is removed from her home in Guadeloupe by her son, Maréchal, and her daughter-in-law, Daisy, who are worried about Julia's abusive marriage. She then takes care of her grandchildren in their new home in France, and forms a particular bond with her

granddaughter Gisèle. The sensation of exile is present in both novels, as Marianna and Julia struggle to live without their respective islands of origin. However, an embodied process of memory and sensorial recollection will allow them to experience the land that they have lost, and will enable them to transcend spatial limitations by transporting them to a sensorial and memorial plane that connects them to their lands of origin. As the two women navigate their new spaces, they find and create correspondences between Haiti and Montréal, and between Guadeloupe and France, thus bridging the gap between here and there, and between then and now. I have split this presentation in two parts: first, I'll talk about the acts of exploration that the two main characters carry out in their exiles, and how they negotiate and cope with their situation of displacement. Then, I will develop the question of memory as it comes attached to land, and how the memories in question allow their explorations to transcend space and time.

COPING WITH EXILE

The transition to a different space and a different language is difficult for memories to survive, and especially for memories to fully represent what the actual experience of the home country was. As the migrants navigate their new space, memory can become fickle and difficult to control, but it remains a crucial point of the migrants' experience and their process of agency reclaiming. In Agnant's novel, Marianna's exile is said several times to have started the day her granddaughter Sara was born: "Sara était surtout le baume pour panser la blessure de mon déracinement. Ce déracinement avait le même âge qu'elle." (Agnant 27) It is very clear from the beginning of the novel that Marianna identifies her situation as exile. There is no clear end date on her stay in Montréal to help her daughter Giselle with young Sara, and it becomes more evident as Giselle tells her mother that she should sell the house in Haiti to buy one in Montréal.

Mais tu ne retourneras pas là-bas [...], comment penses-tu pouvoir te réadapter à la vie aux Mombins? [...] Il y a des chemins que l'on ne refait pas à l'envers, tout comme il y a de ces choses que l'on ne choisit pas

de faire, mais qui se font, arrivent ainsi, comme si nous n'y étions pour rien ou comme si une main invisible faisait aller des aiguilles, tissant autour de nous des filets qui ne sont rien d'autre que le fil de notre existence (Agnant 62-63)

These questions of adaptation to the new space ring especially true to the character of Marianna, who has a very hard time adapting to Canada, and longs for Haiti during her whole stay. However, as soon as she does return, many years later, being back in her homeland leaves a strange taste in her mouth: “J’ai l’impression de ne plus être moi-même, plutôt une sorte de momie qui a été emballée, protégée depuis vingt ans de je ne sais quelle tempête, rescapée d’un étrange voyage.” (Agnant 165) She therefore compares her long exile in Canada to a strange voyage that isolated her from who she really is, and as she rediscovers her own home country, she notes that she doesn’t quite recognize it any longer: “Je ne reconnais presque plus les rues, ce pays aussi a peut-être perdu toute trace de mon souvenir.” (Agnant 170) Marianna has to re-learn how to explore her own land, now almost foreign to her, but she also has the clear feeling that the land itself does not recognize her either, thus making her an outsider in the place where she always thought she belonged.

In Pineau’s novel, exile takes a different form for Julia than it does for other Guadeloupeans in France, who associate their home island to memories of slavery and violence, while Julia feels the need to go back. In her article entitled “Emancipating Narratives: the Diasporic Struggle Reframed in Pineau’s *L’Exil selon Julia*”, Mary Jo Muratore mentions the stark contrast between Julia’s relationship to exile, and that of other Antilleans she crosses paths with: “In their quest for full assimilation, Guadeloupeans are prepared to make whatever sacrifices deemed necessary. Most unflinchingly agree to discard whole components of their identity in their quest to pass for French.” (Muratore 4-5). Indeed, when mentioning the older generations of Antilleans who live in France, Pineau’s novel poetically compares their

attachment to their home island to a loose rope that hangs between the two lands without pulling too hard: “Tous les atours de France [...] ne dessouchaient pas l’amour de leur Guadeloupe. Sans le vouloir vraiment, ils laissaient pendre une corde lâche, entre eux et le pays natal.” (Pineau 29) According to this analogy, there is a loose rope that ties them to Guadeloupe, since they metaphorically always have one foot there, and it can manifest in multiple ways. For instance, it can appear through nostalgia, or through speaking Creole in public. Another prominent embodiment of this rope specifically for Maréchal and Daisy’s family is the packages sent by Daisy’s mother, and which continue to nurture the bond between Gisèle’s family and Guadeloupe. The Antillean migrants that little Gisèle knows in France toe the line between assimilation of their new space, and constant nostalgia:

Pour dire vrai, les grandes personnes balançaient sans cesse entre l’ivresse qui éclôt de chaque retour et la renaissance qui doit accompagner l’exil. Ils parlaient du Pays avec amour, nostalgie et dépit...Ils l’aimaient, oui, mais d’une manière équivoque, comme un amour de jeunesse qu’on n’arrive pas à oublier même s’il n’a pas donné de fruits.
(Pineau 29)

Although these migrants are aware that their home island is not exactly as they remember it, as Agnant’s Marianna experiences it firsthand, they keep nurturing the loose rope that ties them to it.

Julia herself is acutely aware of this dichotomy and split identity that comes with the migratory enterprise: “Endurer ce manque, le pomponner ou le couvrir, c’est souffrances assurées et soupirs. C’est habiter Là-Bas, habité par le Pays.” (Pineau 121). Julia feels homesick when in France, and she realizes that remembering her home comes hand in hand with suffering and a sense of uprootedness. However, she has strategies to reminisce, and she lives draped in her memories, that she tends to with her imagination: “Parer ce manque-là, c’est pour [Julia]

panser sa nostalgie avec des souvenirs raclés au socle de la mémoire. Rêver et vivre le voyage du retour. Éternellement, jusqu'à l'usure." (Pineau 121-122). It is clear that Julia can only endure her exile with a continuous hope for a return, since her life in France is not at all satisfying. Not only is the country hostile to Julia, but the language is as well. A similar process occurs as well for Agnant's Marianna, who has trouble adapting to French language. Indeed, Sara speaks French with her mother and Haitian Creole with her grandmother. Together, they mapped the Haitian hometown: "Ensemble, nous avons tracé une carte de l'Anse-aux-Mombins" (Agnant 68). The two women can carry out an exploration of Haiti, while remaining static in Canada, through Julia's memories.

Indeed, the memory building process necessitates a strong creative process in the form of imagination, as well as the creolization of the new space and language in order to express the migrants' experience. Therefore, the act of recreating or reimagining memories through imagination or reminiscence is an example of creolizing exploration. Instead of purely exploring the space in the form of a displacement, the migrant women in these two novels explore their own experiences of migration and exile through an inwards reflection.

MEMORY AND TRANSCENDING TIME AND SPACE

Indeed, Marianna's exile in *La Dot de Sara* is very much punctuated with the question of the unknown and the lack of memories in Canada:

Je m'en allais ainsi, sans but, par ces rues dont je ne connaissais rien du passé, ces rues où je me sentais étrangère, habitée par une autre histoire, une histoire écrite et contée dans une langue dont on ne connaissait pas la musique ici. Qu'est-ce que je fais, je me disais, à marcher sur ces trottoirs qui ne reconnaissent pas les hésitations de mes pas? (Agnant 80-81)

In the whole first half of the novel, she does not want to explore Montréal, because it evokes nothing for her. However, as soon as she meets an old friend of hers from her old town in Haiti, Chimène, she begins to see a different reality. Marianna doesn't know her way in Montréal, but Chimène does. What Chimène relies on is her ability to connect with others and to communicate while exploring the city, even when she is in an unknown place: "Je trouve toujours quelqu'un pour me dépanner dans la rue. Si je n'avais pas appris à me débrouiller, je serais devenue carrément folle, parce que je ne peux pas rester enfermée dans la maison tout le temps." (Agnant 84) Little by little, she teaches Marianna how to let go of her fears, and this is when Marianna's experience of Montréal starts to collide with her memories of Haiti. As Marianna explores the Rue St Laurent, she realizes that her senses are helping her connect with her home island, and reminisce in order to create a hybrid version of her experience in Canada: "Plus que la rue, ce sont les odeurs qui me parlent de la vie, du soleil, le marché de poissons qui m'offre l'odeur de la mer." (Agnant 57-58)

In a similar way, Julia's memories of Guadeloupe enable her to re-explore her home island without needing to physically move, since these connections are made through her imagination: "Imaginer la vie qui va, sur l'autre bord de mer. Désamarrer son esprit d'ici-là, tourner volant. Laisser sa peau-France sur la couche. Et s'en aller, les ailes ouvertes au vent." (Pineau 123). Julia indicates that she wants to shed the skin she is using in France, to let go of her bodily envelope in order to soar and let her soul move back to where she belongs. Julia wonders how it feels to be able to "enjamber" both banks of the ocean, but on some level, she already has. She can only truly realize her trajectory when she explores and appropriates her new space. However, before she is ready to explore, depression holds her back, and takes the shape of constant homesickness: "Elle est là, sans être là. Son esprit peut retourner mais son corps ne suit pas." (Pineau 123) Once again, we see that Julia views her body as an obstacle to her happiness, not only because it is aging and imposing, but mostly because it is material and

prevents her spirit from going wherever it wants. Instead, she lets her senses wander, and she remembers multiple episodes of her previous life, namely through smells, taste, and touch, as when she remembers the flowers she was not allowed to touch when she was a child, for instance. Literary critic Molly Enz notes the significance of storytelling in the process of remembrance and memory: “Although [Julia] is illiterate, she keeps her country’s image alive through her gift for storytelling. By recounting the history and images of Guadeloupe and bringing it to life, she grounds her grandchildren’s “memory” of the country.” (Enz 93). In fact, not only does she achieve an exploration of her home island through her recollections, she offers her grandchildren the opportunity to explore it by proxy as well.

However, it is important to state that these processes of remembrance do not replace the feeling of being in one’s homeland for these characters, and the absence of certain aspects of their lives can be enhanced by the memories recreated in the contact zone. In *Remembering*, philosopher Edward S. Casey discusses the different processes at play in body memory, namely the ways in which one is reminded of simple habits or well-known surroundings once they are no longer present. He defines the concept of body memory as such: “Body memory alludes to memory that is intrinsic to the body, to its own way of remembering; how we remember in and by and through the body” (Casey 147). He uses the example of his favorite writing chair being so familiar to him that, if the cushion disposition is slightly altered one time, he will feel like a different person, more awkward, less comfortable in his own body, without necessarily realizing why at first. This idea can be applied to different types of changing surroundings, and can certainly be said of the process of migration: “it is often in a suspension of such a basic and taken-for-granted operation [...] that we are reminded of how pivotal and presupposed body memory is in our lives.” (Casey 146).

In *L’Exil selon Julia*, a specific sense is used to try to recreate memories but falls short: the sense of taste, as the characters attempt to cook Guadeloupean recipes while in France.

Gisèle, for instance, remembers Guadeloupe through a particular taste of a dessert that her mother cannot recreate in France: “qu’est-ce que Man Bouboule mettait dans sa crème-caco qui fait que celle de manman n’a jamais eu ce goût spécifique, qu’on garde sur la langue, qu’on cherche infiniment, qui ouvre des pays de vanille et muscade?” (Pineau 170). This shows that, although Gisèle cannot find the same taste in France, her body still remembers the original senses it went through, but cannot achieve the representation of the sensorial activity when she is away from Guadeloupe. Both Julia and Gisèle have very acute sensorial memories that reactivate a connection with Guadeloupe, but also trigger a sense of homesickness. These memories unlocked by senses do not only pertain to food, but they also appear when little Gisèle plays hide-and-seek. The Creole sentence that gives the start to the game, “An nou pétey” (Pineau 198), gives her the same blissful sentiment as her other sensorial memories from Guadeloupe: “Mon coeur bat un peu plus fort. Une pointe aiguë le traverse de part en part et je me souviens de la crème-caco de Man Boule. Même bonheur, même conscience du petit rien qui comble et emplit jusqu’à débord.” (Pineau 198). Gisèle, through a specific Creole expression that evokes her childhood, relives happy moments linked to her grandmother’s food, and can thus travel through time and space thanks to the multiplicity of her identity. A similar process occurs to her mother, Daisy, who cannot wait to go back to Guadeloupe, as she associates the island to herself as a young woman, and therefore the physical and geographical trip allows her to transcend time and go back to an earlier time by activating her memories. She has a different association to the Creole language than that of her children, who link it to the bliss of childhood, although their first language remains French:

Fait étrange, ses enfants veulent ressembler à ceux d’ici. Ils s’efforcent à parler créole. Mais l’accent parisien ne les quitte pas. Dans leur bouche, les paroles s’enlisent et s’arrachent. Daisy ne leur a pas enseigné le créole. Pour quoi faire? C’est seulement dans la colère qu’il lui

échappe, pour intimer silence, faire taire l'insolence, ou commander patience. (Pineau 209).

Creole is, for Daisy, the language of her muscle memory, her strong feelings, her uncontrolled anger, and it comes out from a place of repressed feelings when she lets go. What it represents is almost sensorial, as another link to where she is from.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, the relationship between land, memory, and exploration of the new space is one that transcends space and time to give the explorer a possibility of appropriating their new land, all the while keeping a strong relationship with their hometown. The concept of exile is very present in both novels here, as a process that can alienate the characters from where they come from as well as from their new space. However, by going through the process of memory linked to senses, culture, or language, the characters can bridge the gap between here and there, and between then and now, thus complexifying and potentially creolizing their rapport to their new space.

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